Social Dynamics and Identity: Family, Gender and Community Organization

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When I was asked to write a section for the *Encyclopedia of American Social History* on Middle Easterners in America, I was allotted twenty-five double spaced pages. As I looked through the table of contents to see what other areas were covered, I saw that one European group, the Dutch Americans, had the same number of pages as I had. "But I have five language groups and numerous nation-states," I protested, and I also mentioned that the Armenians had been completely left out. The editors hadn't included them in Europe or the Middle East or anywhere else. So they gave me a few more pages if I would add the Armenians. But their real solution was to tell me to cut out the historical and social conditions of the areas they came from. As an anthropologist, of course, I couldn=t do that. "If that's what you want," I told them, "get somebody else." I ended up writing it - but I did get the host country conditions in. Those of us who have lived in the Middle East, worked and studied there as well as in the U.S., recognize the importance of

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connections: how much overlaps, how much is brought here, how much is changed.

Since I know the Detroit area best and it is a significant community of at least a quarter of a million Arab Americans, I will be drawing on it for examples as I discuss family and gender among Arab-Americans.

The Arab community is not monolithic. When people speak in the name of the Arab community you have to ask who they are, what their agenda is, what their social organization is. Identities vary, and people have multiple identities. You can be from Egypt and be a Christian or a Muslim as well as from this family or that family and from this college or that. Identities also change. The culture and language of an ethnic group can change while ethnicity persists. One doesn't have to speak Arabic to be an Arab-American; many generations don't. One can go from wearing shorts to long dresses. In Dearborn, Michigan, I've seen a generation that wore shorts have to give them up when a lot of Muslim Evangelists, as I'll call them, moved into the community. Women may go from being very secular to being very scarved. Names change. It may be from Mike to Mohammad, or Mohammad to Mike - which ever seems beneficial at the time.

Ethnic subdivisions can be relatively unimportant until crises occur, and then the crisis can move people in new directions. Today, as Muslim Arabs receive so much attention in this country, many Christians Arabs in the Detroit area are distancing themselves by wearing large crosses. I've seen them as big as six inches.

But there is a culture and a general history that the Arabic-speaking doctors in the suburbs share with the very poor peasants who emigrate from Yemen. Arabs are well aware of the contributions of Muslim and Arab scholars during the five centuries in which their institutions constituted one of the world's main intellectual centers. Although American history books do not reflect it, Arabs know how the Muslim and Arab contributions – in fields such as medicine, science, literature, chemistry, math - laid the basis for the Western scientific revolution.

They also know about the 150 years of Western colonialism that dominated the Middle East and the Cold War, and about American policies of globalization that supported the wealth of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. They know those policies have not been about justice for Palestinians, Iraqis or Southern Lebanese. And so the information in the minds of the Arab-Americans is dramatically different than that of most other Americans.

The dynamics of ethnic relations are important to an understanding of the communities. As has been mentioned, the early immigrants came from Lebanon. They settled into patterns to which later communities more or less adjusted. Lebanon, like Afghanistan, is a mountainous area, and geography has a strong influence on culture. The Lebanese state has always been weak, while religious, kinship and regional groups have had significant autonomy. Sometimes they coexist, sometimes they are in conflict. But these religio-ethnic groups have had general territorial bases and although many of their members have migrated to cities such as Beirut, they have a general territorial base in the cities as well. The groups are highly endogamous, meaning there is great pressure to marry within the group. That affects the social dynamics of the group because those who try to marry out, especially women, may suffer negative consequences. The highly endogamous and somewhat stratified religious ethnic groups of Lebanon created some of the settlement patterns and the interaction patterns for groups here.

The stratification pattern they brought with them is reflected in Detroit. The Shia were looked down on by the Catholics, and they don't live together

here. In Detroit, the Catholics went to work at the Chrysler plant and the Shia worked for the Ford Motor Company. Then they disbursed according to where those companies went, so for example, Lebanese Muslims now live in Dearborn. When Ford moved to Dearborn, they too went to Dearborn.

Not all groups were similarly separated. As in Lebanon, the Christian Greek Orthodox and the Muslims got along better together and lived together in Detroit for quite a while before Ford and the Muslims moved out to Dearborn. The Orthodox Christians expanded in another direction, but remained separated from the Catholic Christians. Later Muslim immigrant groups that came from Yemen and Palestine, as well as immigrants fleeing the Lebanese civil war and southern Iraqis who came as a result of the Gulf War, all came to the Dearborn area. It became a depot for Muslim immigrants. Lebanese Christian immigrants joined their co-religionists in their areas of settlement; Christian communities with more recent increases in their populations, such as the Coptic or Chaldean Christians, established new areas of settlement. The Iraqi Chaldeans are Catholics who speak a different language. They have become more Chaldean than they were in Iraq. They've resurrected the written language, which wasn't used much in Iraq except by the clergy.

Egypt has quite a different ethnic mix. Approximately ninety percent of Egyptians are Sunni Muslims, living in very compact, densely populated areas along the Nile and the Delta. Egypt has always had a strong state structure, and it doesn't lend itself to the same kind of local autonomy as Lebanon. The

American Arab community might be very different if the early arrivals here had been Egyptians.

These various Detroit groups seldom interact on a day to day basis. Several organizations, particularly among the more educated classes, have memberships that cross these lines and interact on special occasions. These include the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, the Arab American University Graduates, professional groups among doctors or lawyers, and regional clubs such as the Syrian Club. ACCESS[1], a community organization, also has professionals from different religious groups. An exception to the community based interaction model is the Palestinians. Muslim and Christian Palestinians live in different areas but interact more often in their common national struggle against Israel. The interaction is not always social, as marriage is still endogamous, but it is political.

The pattern of immigration is equally important. For example, Lebanese immigrants formed large communities, which gave relatives a place to come. In 1982, during the war in which Israel attacked Beirut and invaded south Lebanon, large numbers of immigrants arrived in the established Dearborn area communities of kin. Communities such as Bint Jubail and Tibnine have thousands of members living in close proximity. The Yemeni, on the other hand, came in a pattern termed “recurrent” migration, meaning they come for a few years, go back to Yemen, then come again. Many are single men, and the single men and the family-based Middle Eastern communities really don’t get along. Lebanese tend to look down on the Yemeni. There is some

stratification even within these communities. Earlier arrivals feel pride in knowing the U.S. system and call newer immigrants "boaters." And class also separates the professionals in the suburbs from the auto workers in Dearborn.

Many of the post-World War II immigrant groups are made up of poor Muslims, while others come from the professional classes. Yemeni come from one of the poorest countries in the world. Very recent southern Iraqi immigrants arrive in dire condition. They were treated badly by the Iraqi government after a failed U.S.-sponsored attempt to topple Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War of 1991, and were then left to languish in Saudi Arabian detention camps. Many were so badly violated physically that ACCESS set up a torture treatment center. Although they have a variety of educational and job experiences, some of the children missed out on schooling, and schools find they need to separate them from other students.

Religious institutions are an important aspect of group identification. Linda Walbridge's sensitive study of the different mosques in Dearborn[2] refers to "The Battle of the Head Scarves Over the Different Mosques," because how much of your hair you can show indicates the different values of the different communities.

Another indicator of community dynamics is the size of the community. Dearborn, which once had about six thousand people, now has twenty-five thousand. That has created greater community pride and means, for one thing, that the men don't always have to send back for wives. For another,

community members play public roles, for example on school boards. This year, one member of the community is running for mayor.

One major difference between American Arabs and many other ethnic groups is that the continual conflicts in the Middle East result in a constant flow of immigrants. Other ethnic communities, such as those from Poland, had a period of immigration that almost ended because of the difficulty of getting out under Communist regimes. The Michigan Muslim Arab community, however, has been re-Islamized because of the values brought by new immigrants arriving from the Middle East.

But it is individuals who arrive, whether or not they're in groups, and their particular characteristics also are involved when it comes to identification and assimilation. Did they come as teenagers, babies, elderly; are they doctors, peasants; do they know English? There=s also the local context of interaction. What=s the nature of the area you're in? Are you in a primary community like Dearborn, where you can find mosques and restaurants and your neighbors are all Arabs, or are you scattered in the suburbs where your neighbors aren=t like you? Right now, after September 11, there=s disagreement about which is better. Some say they feel safer in the primary communities because people there were like them. On the other hand, they felt that there they were easily targeted. A few students in non-Arab communities have gotten into trouble. Recently, for example, three Chaldeans were expelled from school. One guy got into a fight when somebody called him a terrorist, and his cousins jumped in - as they would do in the Middle East, with its big kinship

groups. They ended up, three of them, beating up the one guy who called him a terrorist. In their defense, they said, “We thought his cousins or his relatives or friends would join him.” It may have been a weak excuse but it reflected the culture.

The nature of ethnic relations in the general area is another important factor. Detroit, for example, has a dominant African-American community, and most local African-Americans stereotype Arabs as small shopkeepers with whom they don’t get along because they view Arabs as monopolizing the local food stores and gas stations. In fact, it is Chaldean Catholics who have a near monopoly on local food stores, and they are now proclaiming, “We’re not Muslims and we’re not Arabs.” This is confusing to many African-Americans, who continue to think of almost all Arabs as shopkeepers, and who are prevented by black-white segregation from meeting Arab members of other classes. Detroit is in fact the most segregated city in the United States. It has no real system of rapid public transportation and people from different groups don’t knock against each other in subways or food stores; they’re spread out. Other urban regions of the U.S. would have a different ethnic mix and different ethnic and class relations.

Finally, a few words about family and gender in the Arab-American community. Family certainly is the key Arab-American social institution. Its extended nature means members are raised and continue to socialize as members of a group. There are clear rules of etiquette and hospitality, including the very positive one of supporting members of the group - quite

different from the sort of small nuclear or one parent families which are common in America, and more like families from India and other parts of Asia. Relatives take up a lot of time, emotion and money. They offer much support and sometimes a lot of discord. In the suburbs, friendship creates fictive kin groups which can substitute for extended biological families in providing extensive visiting, hospitality and support.

Family is an important part of Arab American identity. In the U.S. industrial capitalist society, individual achievement is often stressed more than family or group achievement. When meeting somebody in the U.S. we often ask them to identify themselves by the job: AWhat do you do?@ In the Middle East the first question often will be about what family, village or region you=re from. Andrew Shryock makes an interesting statement:

> The cohesiveness of Arab immigrant families derives from a world view in which human society beyond the realm of kinship, filled as it is with non-relatives, strangers and unreliable institutions, is construed as amoral and fundamentally dangerous: as a domain in which one=s resources and affections are drained away from the 'loved ones, in-laws and kin' (habaayib, wa nasayib, wa garayib) who truly deserve them.[3]

"Amoral" is value laden, but there definitely are pressures on young people to socialize with their relatives, not to live alone, not to travel far away from college, etc. Some Arab-Americans can't believe that, for example, elderly Americans actually choose to live in Florida. They assume their families have pushed them out. Similarly, a non-Arab youth might ask, AWhy do you go to

the movies with your cousin, not your friends?" The Arab youth answers, ABut my cousins are my friends."

Muslim and Christian Arab families both have the same general family organization and rules, which often are incorrectly characterized as Islamic. These family and marriage patterns have been very influential for migration, and so we find kinship clusters in the U.S. A man might say with pride that he=s brought thirty-six families here since he immigrated in the seventies. Many family networks will extend to Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean. When I ask my students how many people are in their families, the answer frequently is something between fifty and two hundred people.

There are conflicts between genders in many Arab-American families. Since mothers are responsible for their children=s behavior, the mother-daughter relationship can be very stressed if daughters feel they don=t want to follow the family traditions. Lara Hamza writes of her life:

> My emerging divided identify troubled and confused me. My family life increasingly appeared foreign to me and I longed to fit with the majority. This displaced loyalty made me resent not only my Arab heritage but much later, to my misfortune, my family life as well.[4]

She mentions arranged marriages in a culture of individual choice. Only later, she says, she came to appreciate the value of a philosophy that emphasizes the unit over individual choice. The American female dilemma of work in the paid workforce and work at home sometimes is a little harder for Arab-American women because they are responsible for continuing the family

chores and hospitality. They also get more family help, however, from mothers, grandmothers, aunts.

Arab-American families are patrilineal, which designates descent from the father's side, as well as patriarchal, meaning conferring male power, responsibility and privilege. Patrilineality defines social relations, inheritance, joint economic operations, occasionally one's defense group, and control over female sexuality. Women continue to belong to their fathers family after marriage. In the Middle East, they usually carry their fathers name. Their fathers and brothers can be a defense against their husbands – significantly more so than is the American norm. But recent studies of domestic violence suggest that the pattern may be breaking down in the U.S., with men not as protective of women family members after they marry.

Patrilineality defines whom you trust and loan money to. Kin corporations in Detroit are not understood by the surrounding and often exploited black population, which has historically been deprived of chances of capital accumulation. In a class I team-teach for social workers, one of the African-American students asked, AHow do we get that patrilineality so we can own our stores in our neighborhoods?"

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[1] The Arab Center for Economic and Social Services.
[2] Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam* (Wayne State University Press, 1997).
[3] Andrew Shryock, "Family Resemblances: Kinship and Community in Arab Detroit," in Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock, eds., *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (Wayne State University Press, 2000), p. 588.
[4] Lara Hamza, "Coming Home," in *Arab Detroit*, op. cit., p. 392.