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Identity and Ethnic/Racial Self-Labeling among Americans of Arab or Middle Eastern and North African Descent

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ABSTRACT

The identity of Americans of Arab or Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent has been relatively understudied within the U.S. racial landscape. Given that the U.S. Census categorizes individuals of MENA descent into the “White” racial category, it is unclear the extent to which Arab/MENA Americans believe they are an ethnic minority in the United States. The current study surveyed 146 individuals of Middle Eastern and North African descent to answer two primary questions: 1) Would you call yourself an Arab or Arab American? 2) Do you consider yourself a minority in the U.S.? Findings indicated that 84% of the current survey participants consider themselves an ethnic minority and 51% are comfortable with the Arab American label. In addition, open ended responses were analyzed to determine the reasons participants answered yes or no to the aforementioned questions. Several themes emerged for each question based on endorsement including the accuracy of the Arab label, and Arab pride, among other themes. In addition, many felt that they were an ethnic minority in the U.S., specifically mentioning experiences with discrimination and lack of representation. Implications of study findings will be discussed.

KEYWORDS

Arab; Middle Eastern/North African (MENA); racial identity; ethnic minority; racial/ethnic self-labeling

The racial and ethnic identity of Americans of Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African (MENA) descent is a relatively understudied topic that has garnered greater attention in recent years. Although the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) catapulted those of Arab/MENA descent into the spotlight, this group has been a part of the American racial fabric since early immigration beginning in the 1890s. However, very little is known about this community compared to other ethnic minority groups in the United States. Individuals of Arab/MENA descent have occupied a precarious position in the U.S. racial landscape given that they are simultaneously invisible due to lack of recognition as an ethnic minority by the federal government while also being hypervisible due to experiences of discrimination (Awad et al., 2019, Naber, 2000). Currently, individuals of Arab, Middle Eastern and North African descent are categorized under the White racial category on the U.S. Census. Although some authors have examined the idea of whiteness within the MENA group (e.g., Abdulrahim, 2008; Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007; Samhan, 1999; Tehranian, 2009), very few studies explicitly ask individuals in this population about racial and ancestral identity and labeling. The current study sets out to examine how individuals of Arab/MENA descent identify in terms of ancestry and ethnic minority status.

The Middle Eastern and North African designation includes individuals of Arab descent as well as those that do not typically identify as Arab. Individuals of Arab descent typically claim ancestry in any one of the 22 Arab League countries. The MENA designation includes all of the Arab League countries and Iran, Turkey, and sometimes Armenia. The MENA label is considered the most inclusive term because it includes non-Arab countries and non-Arab ethnic groups within the MENA region. A majority of Arab Americans have ancestry from Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, and Somalia (Arab

American Institute, 2018). Arab Americans also have ancestry from Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Given the issues with racial categorization and recognition, it is difficult to get an accurate count of Arab/MENA individuals in the U.S. Despite these limitations, the Arab American Institute Foundation (2018) estimates that there are approximately 3.7 million Arab Americans residing in the United States.

Experiences of Arab/MENA Americans

Unfortunately, common experiences for ethnic minorities in the United States often include being thought of as an “other” compared to Whites, in addition to experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Despite not being recognized as an ethnic minority group in the United States, a significant proportion of Arab/MENA Americans report experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination by outgroup members. The resulting prejudice and discrimination tend to manifest on individual, institutional, and societal levels (Awad & Amayreh, 2016). Individual forms of discrimination toward individuals of Arab/MENA descent include the use of racial epithets (e.g., “camel jockey,” “sand nigger,” or “towel head”), microaggressions that result in othering, invalidating experiences, or social exclusion among others (Awad & Amayreh, 2016; Awad et al., 2019; Ibish, 2001, 2003). Examples of institutional manifestations of discrimination for this population include the enactment of policies that result in disparate impact such as the USA PATRIOT Act, which resulted in many civil liberty violations and detainment of “suspicious” Arab and Muslim individuals with no probable cause (Alsultany, 2012). Discrimination and prejudice at the societal or cultural level are typically all-encompassing and hard to recognize. One common example of societal or cultural prejudice toward Arabs is best conceptualized by the idea of Orientalism, which refers to the idea that Arab and Middle Eastern cultures are dangerous, uncivilized, and exotic (Said, 1978). These orientalist ideas about Arab/MENA individuals are oftentimes perpetuated through negative media portrayals (Alsultany, 2012; Shaheen, 2003). The discrimination and prejudice experiences of Arab/MENA Americans are similar to the experiences of other recognized ethnic minority groups in the United States (Awad et al., 2019) calling into question the current federal categorization of this group as racially White.

One issue that complicates experiences of discrimination for Arab/MENA people is the conflation of Arab/MENA and Muslim identities for this group. Oftentimes, individuals use the terms Arab and Muslim interchangeably assuming that all Arab/MENA individuals are Muslim and most Muslims are of Arab/MENA descent (Awad et al., 2017). In reality, and in the U.S. in particular, Arab Americans make up approximately 25% of the Muslim population in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2017). In fact, the majority of Arab Americans identify as Christian (Amer & Kayyali, 2016). However, the vast majority of Arab/MENA Americans report experiences of discrimination regardless of religious identification (Ibish, 2001). Given the conflation between Muslim and Arab/MENA identities, it is not surprising that Islamophobia is experienced by both Muslims and Christians (Awad et al., 2019; Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011).

The racialization of Arab/MENA Americans

The current U.S. Census race and ethnicity question subsumes those of Arab/MENA descent under the White category despite the notion that many in this group currently do not believe that “White” is an accurate racial label. Given that White supremacy and hegemony dictated who was accorded rights in the U.S., some traditionally nonwhite groups fought to be fully included in the American landscape by arguing that they should be considered White. Historically, the White racial designation of this group is partly a result of early legal battles that involved Arab/MENA Americans along with others (e.g., Pakistanis, Japanese) fighting to be considered racially White by the U.S. government. Given that until 1956, only those who were considered White or Black could be granted citizenship (Gualtieri, 2004), fighting for the White racial designation was an imperative step to obtain the full right of citizenship before 1956 in the U.S. The most significant example of this fight for citizenship for Arab/

MENA Americans involved George Dow, a Syrian immigrant, who fought and won the right to be labeled as racially White in 1914 (Cainkar, 2016; Naber, 2008). Given the current climate and the racialization and sustained prejudice toward Arab/MENA Americans, many in this community have now shifted gears toward fighting for recognition as a nonwhite ethnic minority group.

The racialization of Arab/MENA Americans as nonwhite in the United States began in earnest during the media coverage of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war where Israelis were portrayed as heroes and Arabs as barbaric (Cainkar, 2009; Suleiman, 1999). Many Arab/MENA Americans were shocked at the negative rhetoric and media portrayals characterizing Arabs and Middle Easterners as backwards, primitive, and brutal during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war (Cainkar, 2009; Naber, 2008; Suleiman, 1999). The social and structural exclusion of Arab Americans continued into the 1970's, cementing the notion that Arab Americans were an "other" and no longer a "marginal" White group but rather one whose experiences are more characteristic of ethnic minorities (Cainkar, 2016). When the attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) occurred, Arabs and Muslims globally were held responsible for the attacks, which is arguably evidence that they were racialized and seen as a homogeneous group prior to the attacks (Cainkar, 2009, 2016). Although many believe that the discrimination and "othering" of Arab Americans started after 9/11, many scholars contest this idea, noting that the process of racialization started long before the attacks of 9/11 (e.g., Naber, 2008). However, the 9/11 attacks served to mobilize scholars and advocacy groups to fight for nonwhite racial recognition by the U.S. government.

The fight for ethnic/racial recognition

Scholars and activists have fought for a separate MENA or Arab category on the Census but have been thwarted in their quest for several reasons. In 1993, a congressional subcommittee tasked with oversight of the U.S. Census called for public comment about the existing race and ethnicity categories to prepare for the 2000 decennial Census (Samhan, 1999). Political leaders and scholars working with the Arab and Middle Eastern communities decided to submit proposals to include a separate category. However, both the Arab American Institute (AAI) and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) submitted competing proposals to be considered by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). AAI proposed disaggregating Middle Eastern and North African from European to differentiate White groups from one another, and purposefully did not advocate for adding MENA to the existing ethnic minority groups. ADC on the other hand, submitted a proposal requesting a specific "Arab-American" category that was similar to the Hispanic category given that it was considered a linguistic identifier of ethnicity. Because two different proposals addressing issues with the same population were submitted, OMB called for further research to examine the specific population needs as it relates to the census (Samhan, 1999). As a result, any chance that Arab or MENA individuals would be counted accurately in the 2000 decennial census was lost.

AAI and ADC did not give up the fight for a separate racial/ethnic category on the U.S. decennial census. However, it was not until after the 2010 Decennial Census that the inclusion of a separate MENA or Arab category gained traction. During the 2010 census data collection, over 1 million individuals wrote in an Arab or MENA ethnicity under the "some other race" option. At such point, the Census Bureau hired an Arab ancestry expert to help the organization get an accurate count of this population. With the help of this hired expert, the U.S. Census started to reach out to community leaders, scholars, and activists from the MENA group to help with the efforts of creating a separate MENA category. These efforts culminated in the approval of the 2015 National Content Test (NCT) where permutations of a MENA category were tested with a large representative group of MENA participants (Jones & Bentley, 2017). Findings of the NCT indicated that when a MENA category was available, MENA respondents were more likely to report as only MENA and less likely to report as MENA within the White category. However, when no MENA category was available, MENA respondents were less likely to report as only MENA and instead reported their MENA identity within the White category. These findings suggest that the inclusion of a MENA category allows MENA respondents to more accurately report their MENA identities (Jones & Bentley, 2017).

Ethnic/racial self labeling

Scholars have suggested that racial/ethnic self-labeling among ethnic minorities often holds meaning that reflects how these individuals understand themselves and their perception of how others see them (e.g., Anglin & Whaley, 2006; Ghee, 1990; Malott, 2009). Although scholars have noted the overlap between ethnicity and race, it is important to understand how these concepts differ. According to Cokley (2007), “ethnicity refers to a characterization of a group of people who see themselves and are seen by others as having a common ancestry, shared history, shared traditions, and shared cultural traits such as language, beliefs, values, music, dress, and food.” (p. 225). Race refers to the categorization of a group based on perceptions of biological or physical features such as skin tone and hair texture (Cokley, 2007). Most scholars have acknowledged that race is not a coherent biological construct but rather a social construction based on the perception of biological or inheritable traits of so-called racial groups (Cokley, 2007; Smedley & Smedley, 2012). The concepts of race and ethnicity are both important elements in the ethnic/racial self-labeling of ethnic minorities.

Ethnic/racial labeling has been examined in several groups including African Americans, Latinx and Asian American populations (e.g., Ghee, 1990; Kiang, 2008; Malott, 2009; Speight et al., 1996). In psychological research, preferences in ethnic/racial labeling has been linked to self-esteem in Asian Americans (Kiang, 2008), racial socialization in African Americans (Anglin & Whaley, 2006), and ethnic identity exploration in Latinos and Asian American ethnic groups (Cheon et al., 2018; Malott, 2009). It is important to understand how Arab/MENA individuals identify along ancestral, racial, and ethnic lines given that self-labeling has implications for important psychological outcomes.

Few empirical studies have examined how individuals of Arab and MENA descent racially or ethnically identify. One study, conducted in Dearborn, Michigan by Ajrouch (2004), examined what it means to be Arab in a sample of Muslim Lebanese and Palestinian immigrant youth. One dominant theme that emerged from Ajrouch’s (2004) focus group analysis was that adolescents in the sample tended to distinguish their identity from “White” citing differential experiences from those they see as “American Whites.” In another study, ethnographic methods were utilized by Cainkar (2008) in metropolitan Chicago, where she interviewed 102 Arab Muslims and asked about their racial identification. Specifically, she asked participants “Do you think Arabs are White, non-White, or What?” (p. 60). The majority of responses reflected the theme that Arabs were nonwhite based on their adverse experiences in U.S. society. Using the Detroit Arab American Study (DAAS) data set, Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) found that Lebanese and Syrians and those who are Christian were more likely to check “White” on a racial demographic form and be less comfortable with the term Arab American compared to Yemini and Iraqis. The current study expands upon these findings by broadening the sample to both Arab/MENA Christians and Muslims outside of the Detroit Metropolitan area. Further, this study sets out to understand why individuals may or may not be comfortable with the Arab American label and if they specifically believe if they are a minority group within the United States.

The current study

The purpose of this study is to explore ancestry and ethnic minority status identification in a group of Arab and Middle Eastern and North African individuals in the United States. Given that there was a failed attempt to add an Arab/MENA racial/ethnic category to the U.S. Census (Samhan, 1999) based on disagreements about what this group should be called, it is important to examine 1) to what extent individuals with MENA ancestry are comfortable with the Arab label and 2) to what extent they see themselves as a minority in the U.S. Further, this study sets out to understand the reasons *why* they choose to identify or not with being Arab or an ethnic minority.

Methods

Participants

The sample consisted of 147 individuals (97 women and 50 men) of Middle Eastern or North African descent. The age of the participants ranged from 15 to 65 ($M = 29.37$, $SD = 9.86$). About 50% identified as Christian, 45.6% identified as Muslim, 2.7% identified with another religion, and 2% did not respond. The largest proportion of participants reported being of Egyptian descent ($N = 63$) followed by individuals of Palestinian descent ($N = 31$). However, the sample reported ancestry from a variety of countries as well (i.e., Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, and United Arab Emirates). In terms of highest education level achieved, approximately 4% reported high school, 9% some college, 2% associates degree, 21% bachelor's degree, 12% reported obtaining a master's degree, and 21% reported achieving a doctoral degree or equivalent. In regards to socioeconomic status, the majority of the sample (42%) reported being middle class, 12% reported their SES as working class, 34% reported upper middle class and 10% considered themselves upper class. The majority of the sample reported being an American citizen (73%) and first generation (i.e. born in a country outside the US, 54%). Approximately 33% reported second generation status (i.e. born in the United States and parents born in a different country), and only 2% reported being third generation (i.e. both they and their parents were born in the United States with grandparents born in a different country) and approximately 11% did not respond to the question.

Procedure

Given the difficulty with accessing this ethnic group, snowball sampling methods were employed to recruit as many participants as possible. Study restrictions included U.S. residency and identification as Arab or Middle Eastern. Participants were given the option to complete the survey online or in paper format. Further, to obtain as many participants as possible, recruitment efforts consisted of contacting churches and mosques with a large proportion of Arab/Middle Easterners, posting on Arab American academic and social group listservs, and contacting Arab American advocacy groups. After reading an informed consent form, participants completed a demographics form and a series of open-ended questions pertaining to their identity via an online survey.

Instruments

Participants were given a demographic questionnaire and asked to indicate their religion, gender, socio-economic status (SES), generational status, and number of years residing in the United States. Furthermore, they were asked to complete two open-ended questions. Specifically, participants were asked "Would you call or refer to yourself as an Arab or Arab American?" and "Do you feel that your group is a minority group in the United States?" They were then asked "Why or why not?" Participants were then given open-ended prompts to provide support for their answer.

Coding and analysis

A total of 146 participants responded to the Arab label inquiry, while 143 answered the minority question. Participants were categorized into those who identify as Arab or Arab American and those who do not. Thematic coding was utilized to analyze the open-ended responses for each group. Responses for the minority question were also analyzed using thematic analysis. Several participants responded to the open-ended prompts without answering the initial research question. Based on the response in the open-ended question, responses were back-coded into the correct category. Thematic analysis was employed in the current study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three members of the research team were trained on thematic analysis and then analyzed the open-ended responses by engaging in an iterative process of reading responses providing initial codes and rereading until

codes were assigned into themes. These codes were then collated into possible themes, which were reviewed in relation to one another and the overall data set. Themes are presented within each question based on participant responses. For example, the Arab question themes are presented based on whether or not they agreed with the Arab label and the ethnic minority question is organized based on whether or not they perceived themselves as an ethnic minority. Two raters, independent of the research team, had a 95% agreement with the original coders. Disagreements were resolved by the first author.

Results and discussion

This section will discuss the themes that emerged from the two question prompts related to Arab identity and ethnic minority status. Overall, 51% of survey respondents would refer to themselves as an Arab American and 84% of all respondents consider themselves a minority. The open-ended responses were coded and resulted in several themes. Some participants' responses fell into more than one category, so the aggregate of the responses to each theme will not equal 100%.

For individuals who answered "yes" to the "Would you call or refer to yourself as an Arab or Arab American?" question (N = 74), three primary themes were identified (See Table 1). They consist of *Culture and Identity* (e.g., participant reported being Arab is part of their identity, ancestry, cultural practices, and language), *Born and Raised Arab* (e.g., participant stated that they were born, and/or have lived in an Arab country or in America) and *Pride in Being Arab* (e.g., participant reported pride of their Arab background). For those who answered "no" to the Arab-label question (N = 72), four primary themes were identified. The themes were *Ancestral Country or Region Specific Preference* (e.g., participant preferred to be labeled by country or region, e.g., "Kuwaiti"), *Arab as Inaccurate* (e.g., participant explicitly stated that they are not culturally or ancestrally Arab or the label is inaccurate), *Arab is Muslim and Arab Invasion* (e.g., Arab identity means one is Muslim or participants referred to the Arab invasion of their ancestral homeland), and *Negative Connotation of Arab* (e.g., participant believed the Arab label is negative and does not want to be associated with it).

Table 1. Frequencies of study themes for the question, "Do you consider yourself Arab or Arab American?"

Arab-Identified (n = 74)	Theme	Example Quote	n	%
	Culture and Identity (e.g., being Arab is part of their identity, ancestry, cultural practices, and language)	"Because my origin root is Arab and all my family is Arab"	32	43%
	Born and Raised Arab (e.g., participant states that they were born, and/or have lived in an Arab country or in America)	"Born and raised in an Arab country but spent most of my life in the U.S."	13	18%
	Pride in Being Arab (e.g., proud of their Arab background)	"Because I am proud of being an Arabic person"	10	14%
Non-Arab Identified (n = 72)				
	Ancestral Country or Region-Specific Preference (e.g., prefers to be labeled by country or region, Kuwaiti)	"Because more specifically, I am from Kuwait, therefore I prefer being called Kuwaiti."	26	36%
	Arab as an Inaccurate Label (e.g., participant explicitly states that they are not culturally or ancestrally Arab or the label is inaccurate)	"I am Chaldean. I am neither an Arab or an Arab American." "I am an Egyptian, a descendant of the Pharaohs."	23	32%
	Arab as Muslim/Arab Invasion (e.g., Arab identity means one is Muslim or participants refer to the Arab invasion of their ancestral homeland)	"Arab usually means Muslim." "I relate being an Arab to the Arab Invasion,"	13	18%
	Negative Connotation (e.g., believes the Arab label is negative and does not want to be associated with it)	"I don't like the word 'Arab' because it has a lot of negative background."	5	7%

For the question “Do you feel that your group is a minority group in the United States?” several themes were identified (See Table 2). For those who endorsed a minority status (N = 119), three themes were identified. These themes include *Numerical and Ethnic Minority* (e.g., participant believed that Arab/MENA individuals are a numerical minority or an ethnic minority similar to other nonwhite groups), *Discrimination/Negative Public Perceptions of Arab/MENA* (e.g., participant reported experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment and negative perceptions of Arabs/MENA), and *Underrepresentation* (e.g., participant reported that their group is not well represented in leadership, media or government). For the minority of individuals who denied a minority status (N = 24), two themes were identified. These themes included *Adequate or Large Numbers* (e.g., there are a lot of Arabs or those from their ethnic group in the U.S.) and *Similar to Other Americans* (e.g., focused on being like other Americans or an assimilationist perspective to warrant their own minority group or minority rights).

Arab identified

Approximately 51% of the individuals who provided a response listed that being Arab is part of their identity. Adhering to the Arab culture or having Arab ancestry was the most common reason to endorse an Arab label. The most common theme for Arab identified individuals was *Culture and Identity* followed by *Born and Raised Arab* and *Pride in Being Arab*. Quotes reflecting each theme are presented below.

Culture and identity

Approximately half of the individuals who provided a response listed that being Arab is a part of their identity and that adhering to Arab culture or having ancestry is a reason to endorse an Arab label. Included in this theme are participants who reported that they would call themselves Arab/Arab American because they speak the Arabic language. For example, one participant stated, “I speak Arabic and identify with ‘Arab’ culture”, while another stated, “Because I am an Egyptian and I speak Arabic fluently, being called an Arab-American is what best describes me.” Many scholars have documented and discussed the importance

Table 2. Frequencies of study themes for the question, “Do you feel that your group is a minority group in the United States?”.

Minority-Identified (n = 119)	Theme	Example Quote	n	%
	Numerical and Ethnic Minority (e.g., believes that Arab/MENA individuals are a numerical minority or an ethnic minority similar to other nonwhite groups)	<i>“Because people are thinking of us differently, they consider us as “different” than them because we aren’t Americans or “white” so this is why I would consider our group as a minority group.”</i>	63	53%
	Discrimination/Negative Public Perceptions of Arab/MENA (e.g., experiencing discrimination or unfair treatment and negative perceptions of Arabs/MENA)	<i>“There is discrimination that is obvious, even if it is selective” OR “Arabs are not well perceived in the states”</i>	24	20%
	Underrepresentation (e.g., group is not well represented in leadership, media or government)	<i>“Due to their underrepresentation by the leaders.”</i>	9	8%
Non-Minority Identified (n = 24)	Adequate or Large Numbers (e.g., there are a lot of Arabs or those from their ethnic group in the U.S.)	<i>“There are so many Arabs around . . . although I don’t know many of them, but I know that there are so many here and there!”</i>	10	42%
	Similarities to Other Americans (e.g., a focus on being like other Americans or an assimilationist perspective to warrant their own minority group or minority rights)	<i>“Because I consider myself American”</i>	5	21%

of language for the retention of culture (e.g., Salim Sehlaoui, 2008). Language retention is especially important for those who immigrate to non-Arabic speaking countries. Parents may invest in outside resources to ensure that their children retain their Arabic language because of the firm belief that it is a core part of their Arab culture and identity (Salim Sehlaoui, 2008).

Some participants focused on the term Arab or Arab American reflecting their personal identity. For example, one participant noted, “To be called an Arab is part of my identity”. Another participant stated that they prefer the term Arab American because it reflects their identity while also acknowledging that they have also acculturated to American culture,

I like to be called Arab-American especially because I feel Arab will always be a part of my culture and identity, but I've lived here almost of my life and my culture has conformed more in the American point of view.

Another participant simply stated comfort with the Arab American label as a reflection of culture, “I am comfortable with the distinction. I think it accurately captures my cultural identity.”

Other participants specifically mentioned their ancestry or family connection to Arab countries. For example, participants indicated that they identify as Arab because, “All my ancestors are Arabs” or “My family comes from the Arab world” and others combined the notion of language, ancestry and culture, “Yes, because that’s the category or term that’s used the most, and I consider myself Arab because my family speaks Arabic and comes from the Arab world.” As noted by many scholars, ethnic/racial self-labeling is an important aspect of identity that tends to reflect ancestry, heritage, and culture. These participants believe that the term Arab or Arab American is an accurate reflection of their identity and this was the main reason stated for their preference for this term.

Born and raised Arab

Not surprisingly, a direct connection with an Arab country was given as another reason for identification by approximately 18% of the participants who endorsed the Arab American label. Individuals categorized into this theme explicitly wrote about being born and/or raised in an Arab or MENA country, endorsing comments such as “I prefer to be called Arab because I was born in an Arab country,” “Because I was born and raised in the Middle East,” and “I’m an Arab and an American . . . born and raised in an Arab country but spent most of my life in the U.S.” Individuals in this category emphasized the fact that they were either born or raised in an Arab/MENA country, and this was the main reason they identify as Arab or Arab American. Arab Americans who are born and or raised in an Arab country tend to have a strong connection to their ethnic or ancestral identity. This connection can also occur for second and third generation Arab Americans who may journey back to their ancestral homeland and connect to it in a deep and meaningful way that can be as deep and meaningful as those who were born and raised in the country (Fadda-Conrey, 2014),

Pride in being Arab

Some of the participants not only believed that Arab was an accurate label to describe themselves, but also stated that they were proud of their Arab ancestry and heritage, which was the third most common reason for adherence to the Arab or Arab American label. For example, this statement from a participant included both the theme of Culture and Identity and Pride,

To be called an Arab is part of my identity, and denying what I am as an Arab is like denying who I am, so it’s part of [me] even if it causes prejudice, I will still call myself an Arab.

Another participant wrote, “Even if it causes prejudice, I will still call myself an Arab,” indicating strong ethnic pride. Some participants explicitly stated pride in their responses, such as this participant, “I am proud to be an Arab. It will be a dishonor for me and my family not to be called an Arab.” Participants in this category expressed their passion and pride for their Arab American identity. Scholars have argued that ethnic pride is an important element of a positive ethnic identity (Barry et al., 2000; Neblett et al., 2012) and social connectedness (Atkin & Yoo, 2021). Future studies should examine how ethnic pride strengthens ethnic identity in Arab/MENA Americans.

The three themes identified for those who endorsed the Arab or Arab American label to some extent show that Arab American identity is a strong pan-ethnic designation that extends the pan-Arabism of the 1950s and 1960s to the U.S. context. Diverse groups of Arab Americans have embraced the Arab pan-ethnic label not only because it is reflective of their identity but also because it may be a tool for political mobilization. The Arab American Institute (AAI) and the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) are examples of pan-ethnic Arab American nonprofit organizations that have promoted a pan-ethnic Arab identity with the purpose of increasing the visibility, political engagement, and civil rights for Arab Americans.

Non-Arab identified

The other half of participants responded that they would not call or refer to themselves as Arab or Arab Americans. Responses were coded into four recurring themes. The four themes consisted of MENA Region Specific Preference, Arab as Inaccurate, Arab is Muslim and Arab Invasion, and Negative Connotation of Arab. Example quotes for each theme are presented below.

MENA region specific preference

The most commonly cited reason given for not referring to themselves as Arab or Arab American was the participants' preference for their specific region or country of origin as their preferred label. For example, participants responded that they would not call or refer to themselves as Arab or Arab American "Because more specifically, I am from Kuwait, therefore, I prefer being called Kuwaiti," and "I usually don't because Egypt is in North Africa. I usually say I'm North African, from Egypt." The tendency to identify ethnically or nationally is especially common in immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa who may perceive that these specific ethnic labels will be received more positively than the "Arab label" (Shryock, 2008).

Arab as inaccurate

The second most frequent reason given by participants for rejection of the Arab label was that it was seen as an inaccurate descriptor of their identity. Participants either simply noted that they were not Arab or specifically focused on how their heritage, ancestry, and ethnoreligious background was not technically Arab. Some participants focused primarily on nationality or ethnic group labels such as, "I consider myself American of Egyptian descent," "I am Iranian American," and "I am Egyptian." These participants specifically mentioned an ethnic group with no elaboration.

Some participants mentioned their ethnoreligious or ethnic ancestry as being distinct from an Arab identity. One participant simply stated, "I am Coptic Egyptian, Not Arab," another participant wrote, "I am Chaldean. I am neither an Arab or an Arab American." Others elaborated by explaining that even when some groups speak Arabic, it doesn't mean that they identify as Arab,

I am not Arab. I am a Babylonian descendent. Babylonians are not Arab. We are from the Middle East, but Arabs speak Arabic. That is their primary language. We only speak Arabic because we have to be flexible with Iraqi society and know the language because most of the Middle East is Arab.

Another participant specifically mentioned that speaking Arabic does not necessitate an Arab identity, "I have cultural affinities with Arabs and speak Arabic, but I don't think this identity really describes me." These findings support the notion that not all of those from Arab-speaking countries or with ancestry from countries that are part of the Arab League identify as Arab. Joseph (1999) pointed out that many individuals that hold ancestry in Arabic-speaking countries tend to be labeled as Arabs regardless of whether or not they personally identify as Arab. This automatic labeling as Arab is especially problematic for those Middle Eastern or North African groups that claim an ancestry that is considered distinct from Arab. For example, the Copts emphasize that their presence in Egypt preceded the arrival of Arabs in 641 A.D. (Pennington, 1982).

Arab is Muslim and Arab invasion

The third most mentioned reason for rejecting the Arab label referenced an association between “Arab” and Muslims. Participants provided a rationale that linked Arab identity or the Arab label with being a member of the Muslim faith, expressing an interest in distinguishing themselves from Arab Muslims. One participant explained “I prefer Egyptian American; Arab connotes a Muslim background to me.” Similarly, a number of participants also discussed a perceived link between Arabs and the Early Muslim Conquests in the 7th century, which included, but was not limited to, much of Northern Africa and the Middle East. These participants often referred to it as the “Arab Invasion.” One participant combined both the notion of Arab as Muslim and the Arab conquest in the following response,

I prefer plain old “Egyptian”. Arab to me has a very Muslim connotation. It connotes the whole Muslim culture. So, for someone to call me Arab is like someone calling me Muslim. That’s not a problem, I wouldn’t mind it if I was Muslim. But I am not, and as such, I prefer to be called just Egyptian. When I hear the word Arabs, I think of Arabia and foreigners to the land of Egypt. I just immediately think of invaders when I think of ‘Arab’, for the people who came and invaded the land of Egypt and took it over by force.

For a subset of participants, Arab and Muslim cultures are closely related and it is important for them to differentiate themselves from the current “Arab” population in their ancestral country. This was especially true for participants from Egypt. Another participant wrote,

I don’t consider myself Arab at all since Egypt has been occupied by the Arab Muslims, and those Egyptians who refused to convert to Islam and remain Christians have no blood relation with the Arabs. Yes they change[d] our language to Arabic but that does not mean we are Arabs.

It is important to note that these statements made by participants focused primarily on believing that Arab means Muslim and relating this to the Arab invasion of Egypt. Many of the participants that mentioned these connections did so as a matter of fact and did not necessarily indicate negative bias toward Arabs or Muslims. This theme may reflect the myriad messages non-Arab MENA individuals may receive from family and social networks. Many Coptic Egyptians, for example, are socialized from a young age to understand their ancestral roots with an emphasis on pre-Arab or pre-Islamic Egyptian Christian culture. The case of Egypt is a very complex one given that historically, so many different groups have attempted to claim the country. Coptic Egyptians in particular are especially proud of their ancestry as descents of ancient Egyptians and they tend to express this sentiment (Pennington, 1982).

Negative connotation of Arab

The fourth and final theme that was identified for individuals who did not prefer the Arab or American label was Negative Connotation of the term Arab. One participant commented, “I don’t like the word ‘Arab’ because it has a lot of negative background.” Another mentioned, “When you hear Arab, you think terrorist.” Another participant specifically connected the negative connotation to events occurring in the Middle East,

I don’t like the word Arab. I’d rather be called Egyptian because that’s what I am. I feel like people would look down on those who are Arab especially because of all the drama happening in the Middle East right now.

One Coptic Egyptian participant referred to the conflation of Arab and Muslim and talked about wanting to distance themselves from the Arab label stating,

I wouldn’t refer to myself as an Arab or Arab American. My reasoning for this is the fact that those who are not of Middle Eastern decent don’t realize that there are Middle Easterners that are Christian. When I tell someone that I’m Egyptian, although I wear a cross around my neck, they automatically assume that I’m Muslim and they probably think of all the terrorism and craziness that the Muslims are behind. So usually when someone asks what nationality I am I tell them that I’m an Orthodox Egyptian.

This participant has also conflated Islam with terrorism in their reasoning for wanting to distance themselves from the Arab American label demonstrating that some MENA Christians may also espouse anti-Muslim sentiments and conflate Arab with Muslim.

Approximately half of the participants did not endorse the Arab or Arab American label. Overall, participants gave several reasons for not espousing the Arab or Arab American label with inaccuracy being the most common theme in this category. These findings are especially important given that past attempts to add an Arab or MENA racial/ethnic category to the U.S. Census have failed due to lack of consensus on an appropriate pan-ethnic term to describe this population (Samhan, 1999). Although a minority of individuals (7%) who did not endorse this label expressed negative sentiments or noted negative connotations with the Arab term, many of the individuals simply believed that the term Arab was not ancestrally accurate for their ethnic group. Therefore, lack of endorsement of the term is not necessarily an indicator of anti-Arab sentiment. One participant noted that even though they do not typically identify as Arab, they may do so in certain contexts where political mobilization and solidarity is needed. Specifically, they stated,

Depends on the situation, when/where. I volunteer with at least two Arab American organizations and I say I am Arab American in that context because I identify with the people I serve. But I also do not deny my Armenian roots and I am as likely to say I am Lebanese. I feel comfortable in most Middle East communities, we have so much in common when we can bypass our petty issues.

This quote provides some support to the notion that sometimes Arab or Arab American identity is situational. Witteborn (2007) found that individuals may vacillate between pan ethnic labels such as Arab American to more ancestral specific labeling (e.g., Iraqi, Egyptian, Palestinian) or to religious identities (e.g., Muslim, Chaldean, Coptic) based on context.

Minority status

The second main question posed to participants inquired about their perceived minority status in the United States. The majority of participants (84%) who responded to this question believed that their group was a minority group in the U.S. Three themes were identified: Numerical and Ethnic Minority, Discrimination and Negative Public Perception of Arab/MENA, and Underrepresentation. Quotes reflecting each theme are presented below.

Numerical and ethnic minority

The most frequent reason that participants gave for believing they were a minority in the United States was related to being a numerical and ethnic minority and not White. One participant stated, “[We are] not considered as a common race in the USA,” and another stated, “We are not the majority in religion or ethnic heritage.” Some participants specifically referred to their ethnic group being a numerical minority. One Lebanese participant simply noted, “[There are] little Lebanese around,” and other participants stated, “There are not many Egyptians” and “Because not that many Chaldeans are in the States, but we are growing rapidly and hope to continue our heritage forever.” Other participants noted that their specific ethnic group was a minority within the larger Arab/MENA designation. One participant stated, “The Coptic community is a minority of a minority.”

Participants also specifically mentioned how their ethnic group was not White and oftentimes stated that they are different from White Americans. Some comments included, “We are minorities in the US because we aren’t ‘White,’” and “Anyone who isn’t considered White or American, without any hyphens, is a minority in this country.” Some participants specifically mentioned that despite the lack of recognition as an ethnic minority on the U.S. Census and other important institutions they are not White,

Even though Arabs are considered to be White under the us race classification system, we are a minority in need of government protection. I often feel that I identify more with other ethnic minority individuals than I do with Euro-Americans.

Other participants emphasized racial comparisons and discrimination as main factors in labeling themselves as part of a minority group, such as “not being White,” which is a “common race in the U.S.” and “looking different,” which leads to “being treated differently.” Some respondents who endorsed

the rationale for a minority identity status mentioned that being perceived as different and having different cultural practices from the rest of mainstream society leads to discrimination and underrepresentation. Specifically, one participant who reflected the themes of Numerical and Ethnic Minority and Negative Public Perception of Arabs/MENA stated,

Because we have a small population density; there is a lot of prejudice and discrimination against our group; we have been singled out as the “Other”; we don’t share some of the majority culture’s values, behaviors, traditions, and worldviews; often we do not look like the White majority (facial features, skin color, dress style); many of us don’t share the majority group’s religion (e.g., Copts or Muslims).

Discrimination & negative public perception of Arabs/MENA

The second most common theme that was identified for those individuals who endorsed a minority identity was the experience or awareness of discrimination toward Arabs/MENA Americans. Respondents noted unequal treatment, “Arabs are not treated as equals in the U.S.,” and participants also described the lack of opportunities and privileges, “We are discriminated against, presented with fewer opportunities, and we have to work tremendously harder than those around us [to] achieve things others take for granted.” Participants also detailed their experiences of being seen as suspicious, “You still see in the eyes of others when they look to you as somebody different and may be more suspicious about your intent.”

Other aspects of discrimination endorsement concerned participants’ perceptions of themselves and members of their ethnic group as an oppressed minority group, where one individual simply stated, “[We are] an oppressed group.” Other participants cited racist experiences recounting “racism” experiences, and being “constantly on the defensive since 9/11.” One particular participant noted the racism and negative perception of Arabs/MENA as it pertains to U.S. policies, stating, “Racism experiences against Arab. Bias US policy in favor of Israel against Palestine.” In fact, about a tenth of respondents reported negative perceptions from the general public, due to the media or 9/11, as reasons for their endorsement of a minority status. For example, one participant stated, “Arabs are not well perceived in the states,” while another wrote, “Because people are thinking of us differently, they consider us as ‘different’ than them.” The experience of discrimination for these individuals may have strengthened their identity as ethnic minorities, which supports the rejection-identification theory (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Underrepresentation

The final theme identified for those who endorsed a minority status is Underrepresentation. Approximately a tenth of participants spoke of the underrepresentation of their group in public and political domains as rationale for their identification as a minority. One participant noted that their minority status was “due to their underrepresentation by the leaders.” Another participant noted, “Because we are overlooked, under supported and underrepresented.” One participant expressed the desire for more activists focused on Arab/MENA in the United States and abroad, “I think we need to have more social activists that shows who we are that will also affect us in the USA and also in Egypt.”

The majority of participants in the study expressed their endorsement of a minority status. Many of the identified themes are those that are reflected in the current social science literature pertaining to the ethnic minority status of Arab/MENA Americans. Previous research has demonstrated that the discrimination experienced by this population is consistent with other oppressed ethnic minority groups (Awad & Amayreh, 2016; Awad et al., 2019; Cainkar, 2009; Ibish, 2001; Naber, 2008). Issues such as persistent “othering” (Cainkar, 2016) and negative media portrayals have been documented with Arab/MENA populations in the U.S. (Alsultany, 2012). Participants also noted the lack of representation of Arab/MENA individuals in positions of power and leadership further reflecting feelings of alienation and exclusion.

Non-minority status

A small minority of participants in this study (16%) did not perceive their group to be a minority in the U.S. Participants who rejected a minority status did so for two main reasons. These themes included Adequate or Large Numbers, as well as being Similar to Other Americans. Quotes reflecting each theme are presented below.

Adequate or large numbers

Many of the responses categorized within this theme reflected perceptions of high population numbers. These participants' perceptions of their group's numbers were opposite to those who endorsed a minority status. For example, participants made statements such as, "I know plenty of Egyptians" and "There are so many Arab around . . . although I don't know many of them, but I know that there are so many here and there!" another person emphatically wrote, "There are billions on Muslims and Arabs out there! Everywhere!" Despite actual available population statistics that reflect the opposite of the aforementioned sentiments, these participants perceived large numbers of their particular group in the United States. One possibility for the misperception of large numbers of Arabs in the United States may be the overrepresentation of negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in mass media (Alsultany, 2012).

Similar to other Americans

A few individuals who did not endorse a minority status believed that their group was similar to other Americans and they tended to promote an assimilationist perspective. One individual stated that they were not a minority "because I consider myself American" and another person emphatically stated, "What is my group? I'm an American, period end of sentence." This participant appeared to also espouse a racial colorblind perspective by seemingly questioning the importance of ethnic or racial group membership (Neville et al., 2013).

The individuals who did not believe that their group was a minority either perceived that there were large numbers of their group members in the U.S. or espoused a primarily American identity. Although there were only five respondents in the current study that promoted an American identity, research has shown that ethnic minority groups may espouse assimilationist attitudes (e.g., Sellers et al., 1997) where their ethnic/racial identity is not salient.

Summary and conclusion

Findings from this study expand the research base by providing reasons why individuals of Arab and/or MENA descent may or may not espouse the Arab American label or perceive themselves to be a minority in the United States. Given that controversy over the Arab American pan-ethnic designation resulted in failure to include an Arab or MENA category on the U.S. Census (Samhan, 1999), it was important to understand why the Arab American label is so divisive. Results from the current study indicate that espousal of the Arab American label was split almost exactly in half. Half of the participants in the study endorsed the label whereas the other half did not. This study was one of the first to investigate the reasons why individuals may or may not choose to be referred to as Arab American. Espousal of the Arab American label was primarily a reflection of their culture, identity, ancestry, and pride in their group. These findings were consistent with the ethnic identity literature that posits that ethnic/racial self-labeling is an important reflection of identity for ethnic minority populations (e.g., Ghee, 1990; Kiang, 2008; Malott, 2009; Speight et al., 1996).

The primary reason that individuals did not espouse an Arab American label is that it was not accurate in terms of identity, heritage and ancestry. These participants in particular tended to identify with non-Arab Middle Eastern or North African ethnic groups such as Coptic Egyptian, Chaldean, Babylonian, or Iranian. Other reasons that are related to Arab being an inaccurate label included believing that the term Arab equates to Muslim, and that the label connotes a lack of acknowledgment

that some specific ethnic groups preceded the arrival of Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa. A smaller minority of participants who did not espouse the Arab label did so due to the negative connotation of the term Arab. Based on the findings from this study, it is suggested that using a more inclusive term, like MENA, will allow for more accurate population counts.

This study also found that the majority of participants endorsed a minority group status. The primary reasons given by respondents reflect themes found in the literature pertaining to the ethnic minority status of Arab/MENA Americans (e.g., Awad & Amayreh, 2016; Awad et al., 2019). Many participants cited reasons such as being a numerical minority, having ethnic minority status, experiencing prejudice and discrimination, “othering” and negative portrayals of Arabs and Middle Easterners, and underrepresentation in leadership and government. Scholars and activists have been arguing for recognizing the ethnic minority status of Arab/MENA but have struggled to successfully convince the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to change the race reporting standards to include an Arab/MENA category. There has been some traction in the last 10 years by the Census Bureau to consult with Arab/MENA scholars to help accurately count this population. There was briefly some hope when the Census Bureau launched the National Content Test (NCT) to test a MENA category. The NCT showed that the majority of those who fall into this category will choose a MENA check box (over the White racial category) when available (Jones & Bentley, 2017). Given the results of the 2015 NCT, the Census Bureau recommended to OMB that a MENA category be added to the race/ethnicity question. However, stalling tactics employed by the Trump administration resulted in missing the Census operational deadline for the decennial census and the MENA category was not included. Results of this study support the idea that Arab/MENA Americans are an ethnic minority although some people may fear a separate Arab/MENA category for reasons other than inclusion and recognition. For example, some scholars have argued against a separate racial category because they fear tracking and further discrimination but not because they think a nonwhite category is inaccurate (e.g., Hassan, 2002).

The study findings also reflect the socially constructed nature of race and how racial and ethnic labeling may shift based on the zeitgeist of the times. When racially identifying as White accorded occupants of the United States rights and privileges (e.g., citizenship, land ownership), immigrant groups that were labeled as nonwhite fought to be considered White. Early Arab immigrant groups such as the Syrian and Lebanese were part of the ethnic minority groups that argued for the rights of U.S. citizenship. In current times, the majority Arab/MENA groups are fighting for recognition as an ethnic minority group given the significant discrimination and othering that occurs for this population (e.g., Ibish, 2001). Further, the lack of recognition by the U.S. government precludes imperative data collection needed to identify and address disparities in health, education, and the workplace for Arab/MENA Americans.

There are some limitations in this study that should be noted. The study sample was obtained through snowball sampling and may be more reflective of individuals who are comfortable with online survey technology, those who have access to the internet and those who have obtained higher education levels. Further, the sample was predominately Egyptian and Palestinian and may not be fully representative of the diversity within the MENA region. Given the lack of recognition as an ethnic minority group by the government, it is very difficult to obtain random or representative samples of Arab/MENA Americans. Despite these limitations, this study significantly contributes to the literature by elucidating the reasons why Arab/MENA individuals differ in their personal adherence to the Arab label. This study presents data that supports the heterogeneity and diversity of this group in terms of ethnicity, ancestry, and religious affiliation. Further, study findings add additional support for recognizing the ethnic minority status of this population. The majority of individuals in this study, regardless of Arab label endorsement, believe that the Arab/MENA population in the United States have experiences consistent with other minority groups. It is our anticipation that findings from this study can provide a deeper understanding of ethnic/racial self-labeling of Arab/MENA populations, with the hope that this group will be eventually officially recognized by government and institutions and officially integrated into the U.S. ethnic/racial landscape.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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