RACIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION OF ARAB AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS: MOVING BEYOND INVISIBILITY

A dissertation submitted
by
Nina Monan Shoman-Dajani
to
Benedictine University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in
Higher Education and Organizational Change

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This dissertation has been accepted for the faculty
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I am truly grateful to have the support of amazing colleagues at Moraine Valley Community College who have sincerely shown an interest in wanting to learn more about the Arab American population. I am confident my research will be useful as we not only assist our Arab American students, but also all of our students who are struggling to be seen and heard.
DEDICATION

For my children, Mona, Salah al-Dean (“Dino”), and Jabreel.

And to all the students struggling to be recognized.

Stay strong and remain proud of your roots.

To my father, Sam Shoman, may he rest in peace. He taught me to always

speak the truth, fight for justice, and stand up for the voiceless.

His legacy is honored through this work.
PREFACE

This study and the results discussed in my dissertation are the compilation of research that was gathered during fall 2015. Although the dissertation process was at moments exhausting, it was at the same time, extremely fulfilling, rewarding, and exhilarating. As I conducted each one-on-one, in-depth interview with the participants, I immersed myself in their stories, listened attentively, and felt extremely grateful and privileged to have access to the personal experiences they shared with me. As I compiled and analyzed my data, I felt an immense sense of accomplishment from my ability to make a new contribution to education research—specifically, to provide higher education with an in-depth look at the racial identity construction of Arab American college students. Although there were many similarities in the stories I heard from my participants, each individual was unique and articulated their lived experiences in the style, tone, and language they felt fit best. All participants were candid, did not shy away from answering questions, and were fully engaged during the interviews.

As an Arab American myself, there is no doubt that I felt a connection on a personal level to my research. I often felt misunderstood as an Arab American Muslim college student, especially during my undergraduate years. I found this research to be somewhat cathartic because I was able to relate to many of the stories I heard in my interviews. Even though I attempted to bracket my personal beliefs during the interviews, I felt the emotions of both happiness and sadness, and at times, the frustration of my participants as they shared their personal stories. I could feel their pride as the
students articulated their fondness for their Arab heritage and was moved by their commitment to helping their local communities.

As an administrator in a community college that happens to serve a very large Arab American student population, I knew my research focus was needed, and it is my hope it will be utilized to better serve our students over the long term. My Arab American background influenced my research topic choice, but was not my only motivation to conduct a study on Arab American college students. There were several factors that I considered and various influences that inspired my research. As a student of higher education and organizational change, I of course wanted to make a contribution to education research that would fill a void. Knowing there is very little research on Arab American college students, I felt that my topic was timely and much needed.

I was also motivated by many of the Arab American students I worked closely with as the club advisor to the Arab Student Union (ASU) at Moraine Valley Community College. Prior to the completion of my dissertation, I served as the club advisor to ASU for six years. I worked with dozens of motivated Arab American students as well as recent arrivals from various Arab countries to plan events on campus that ranged from panel discussions on social and political topics, to cultural events that ranged from fashion shows to film festivals. The students cared deeply about challenging the stereotypical negative images of Arabs and Muslims in the media and in U.S. popular culture. Semester after semester, year after year, regardless of their gender, family country of origin, religious beliefs, the students bonded and often referred to each other warmly as “ASU family.” My colleagues often asked me questions about the Arab American community and from the attendance at workshops I held that focused on
getting to know our Arab American students and the communities from which they came, I knew there was great interest in the topic.

As a mother of three children who are being raised to be proud of both their American and Arab heritage and one day will be college students (God willing), I knew the results of this study had the kind of longevity that would still be useful even when my young children enter higher education. Although they are too young to realize it, my children provided me with bountiful motivation to complete this study. This is a study that I believe sheds light on the thousands of Arab American college students who journeyed to U.S. higher education in decades prior and will continue to shed light on the Arab American college students who will continue to enter U.S. higher education institutions in the decades to come.

There is certainly room to expand on the discussion I provide in this study. More studies are needed to better understand the racial identity construction of Arab Americans and on the various topics related to the Arab American community in general. Several voices in this study clearly advocate for recognition of Arab American college students. Whether that recognition will be evident on college application forms or in student support services will be up to each individual institution; however, I am confident that the results of this study will influence positive structural changes in colleges and universities that are aiming to better serve Arab American college students.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the racial identity construction of Arab American college students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the Chicago metropolitan area. This study addressed the central question: How do Arab American college students construct, understand, and live their racial identities, and how does the college experience inform these constructions, understandings, and lived realities? Approached with a phenomenological lens, this qualitative study focused on the lived experiences of the participants. The research sample included 14 college students who attended either a community college, a public university, or a private faith-based university. The data gathered were analyzed through a theoretical framework which explores Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory and Chickering’s theory of college student identity development. The combination of the two theoretical perspectives assists in understanding the racial identity formation as well as the college student experience in this study. Five major themes emerged from the data collected: (a) I am Arab American; (b) Pride Starts at Home—Planting the Seeds of Arab American Identity; (c) Growing Up in a Post-9/11 World—Feeling Different; (d) “We’re not White”: Checking a Box That Does Not Fit; and (e) College: Reinforcing Arab American Identity. The research collected in this study provides the foundation for the Arab American Identity Formation Model, a new racial identity model introduced in the final chapter. This model introduces a framework to better understand the phases of Arab American identity development.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

_Record! I am Arab . . ._
— Mahmoud Darwish (n.d.)

This study focuses on the racial identity construction of Arab American college students enrolled in higher education institutions in the Chicago metropolitan area. Although the college experiences of various subpopulations have been studied extensively in education research, there is scarce research on college students of Arab descent. This study focuses on the central question: How do Arab American college students construct, understand, and live their racial identities and how does the college experience inform these constructions, understandings, and lived realities? This question is approached using the phenomenological qualitative research method.

Background to the Study

Arab American students come from diverse backgrounds with distinct experiences. However, higher education institutions do not have specific data on this population as a result of the institutions adopting the same federal race categorization used in the U.S. Census that designates Arab Americans as “White.” The categories for race used by the U.S. Census Bureau were influenced by the 1978 policy directive No. 15 issued by the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Samhan (1999) explained how this directive set standards for four race categories: American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and White (p. 214). Directive 15
defined White as a category that “included persons originating in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa” (Samhan, 1999, p. 214). Cankar (2015) explored the complexity of this categorization further: “Yet if race is a social construction, then the social meaning of skin color is not fixed, and the possibility remains for new groups to face negative treatment as well as groups once treated negatively to ‘become White’” (p. 12). The definition offered by Museus, Vue, Nguyen, and Yeung (2013b), in their research on Southeast Asian American identity, provided a frame of reference during this study on Arab Americans: “Racial identity [is] a sense of collective identity that is based on the notion that the individual shares a common heritage or experience with members of a specific group [in this case, Arab Americans]” (p. 47).

Because students of Arab ancestry do not have an option to identify themselves as such on college applications, they are expected to opt for the category assigned to them by the federal government and adopted by the institution. If students are unsure of what box to check and ask for assistance, they are directed to check “White,” or perhaps “other” if that category exists, or they can opt not to answer the question at all. As students check the federally designated category assigned to them on the college application, the institution they are applying to counts them as “White.” As a result, we do not have an accurate count of total enrollment, retention, and graduation rates of Arab American students attending U.S. postsecondary institutions because this is not data that are tracked by institutional research departments.

In the U.S., the categorization of Arabs and North Africans as White is an imposed status that does not fit the experience of this population and has also negated affirmative action opportunities for this population. The case of Mustafa Hefny is one
example. Hefny is of Egyptian descent and self-identifies as Black, yet feels that his right to identify as a minority has been stripped by the U.S. government. In interviews, Hefny has articulated that his lived experiences in this country are that of a Black male and his categorization as White negates his heritage. Hefny has fought the U.S. government to reclassify him as Black since the 1980s, arguing that his classification as a White male takes away his “black pride, black heritage, and strong black identity” (Zafar, 2012, p. 1). Hefny has argued that he has lost out on university positions designed for minorities because the government categorizes him as White (p. 1).

As Joseph (1999) pointed out, “to be white has been understood historically to mean being of European extraction. . . . Phenotypically, Arabs range from black to blond and blue eyed” (p. 259). Cainkar (2015) described the Arab American population:

[They are] immigrant and native-born persons living in the U.S. who claim ancestry in one or more of the 22 (including Palestine) Arabic-speaking countries of North Africa and southwest Asia. They are the Arab World diaspora living in the U.S. Significant Arab migrations to the U.S. began in the 1880s and have continued in a series of waves ever since. As with other non-European immigrant groups who benefitted from the removal of racial bars (Asia) and country quotas (Arab World), post-1965 Arab immigration to the U.S. is the largest of these waves and also the most internally diverse. (p. 4)

The diversity that exists among Arab American college students reflects the general diversity that exists among all students on college campuses. Arab American college students are both traditional high school graduates and returning adult college students; they are from various countries and religious backgrounds. In addition, Arab American college students may be first, second, or third generation from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, some from conservative families, others from liberal families, and some may speak a second language.
Arab American Students: White or a Minority?

In a sense, the categorization of Arabs as White creates a domino effect of issues for higher education institutions. The lack of collected, quantifiable institutional research data makes it virtually impossible to track the success or failure of Arab American college students. A 2011 report published by the American Council on Education (ACE) addressed the importance of supporting students of color and emphasized that “our academic institutions must continue to strive to reflect the complex mosaic that is the American population” (Kim, 2011, p. i). The purpose of the report is to help higher education institutions improve services for minoritized groups, an urgency that is apparent in the publication. Typical of achievement studies focused on the gaps of students of color in higher education, the report only includes information on African American, Hispanic, Asian American, American Indian, foreign students, and a category called “race/ethnicity unknown.” The mosaic that the introduction of this ACE study refers to is missing a call for studies on other subgroups within higher education such as Arab American students. While the ACE report includes statistics on White students, it ignores the subcategories that exist within the White classification (Kim, 2011, pp. i–1).

On campuses having sizeable populations of students of Arab descent, this information could be particularly useful in creating and maintaining student success interventions, facilitate student programming and outreach efforts, and for general data purposes. In addition, although students of Arab descent are categorized as White, many times their experiences are more closely aligned with students of color. Reflecting on the more than 100 years of Arab immigration to the U.S., Cainkar (2008) observed that “their social status has changed from marginal “White” status to a more subordinate status that shares
many features common to the experiences of people of color” (p. 46). Abraham and Shryock (2000) noted:

The term “Arab American” generates the same patterns of allegiance and ambivalence found among other “special populations” whose names stand for and must often create, entire communities: Latinos, Asians, African Americans, Native Americans, and now even gays and the disabled. To become a community of this sort, a group must be distinguishable. (p. 41)

Institutional research data on the racial and ethnic make-up of educational institutions can be misleading and overall inaccurate when subgroups within the “White” category are not recognized. One case in point is that of Fordson High School in Dearborn, Michigan. According to the *U.S. News & World Report* (2015) on education, a publication that gathers statistical information from the government and publishes it to provide snapshots of U.S. educational institutions, the 2012–2013 data show Fordson was 96% White. In addition, it is important to note that 72% of these students were eligible for the free lunch program, and 76% were considered “totally economically disadvantaged” (p. 1). However, in a piece published by a Dearborn, Michigan native, University of Michigan student, and Fordson alum, the demographic lens was more accurately described: “I attended Fordson High School, a school that is over 95 percent Arab American, and an overwhelming majority of that statistic includes first-generation Americans from the south of Lebanon” (Fadlallah, 2014, p. 1). The combination of the economically disadvantaged statistical information published by *U.S. News* and Fadlallah reporting that 95% of the students at Fordson were Arab American is the reality that remains invisible when only looking at federally designated race categories. In Fadlallah’s (2014) reflection on her high school experience, she lamented:

While the student body at Fordson High School—the largest public school in Dearborn—is overwhelmingly Arab-American, our teachers do not reflect this
demographic. Most of the teachers at Fordson are white. Let me be clear: Their race is not the problem, but the often lower than low expectations of us—rooted in racism, imperialism and bigotry—is the problem. (p.1)

If Fadlallah’s experience and views are shared by other students, then there is evidence of a disconnect between the way in which Arab American students perceive themselves in comparison to those who they truly see as White. The lack of understanding among educators who work in schools that serve a large Arab, and many times Muslim, population is common. Cainkar (2006a) reviewed Sarroub’s (2005) book on the author’s two year study of Yemeni American girls and their experience of being Muslim in a public school. Cainkar pointed out that even though the school had a large Arab population, most teachers were ill-equipped to offer these students supportive understanding and assistance with navigating the identity challenges of being Yemeni and American because they had little knowledge of Yemeni community norms and of Islam.

The issue of Arab Americans being counted as White is not a stand-alone dimension that if resolved by creating a category for people of Arab, Middle Eastern, or North African descent on the census, all is solved. In order to fully understand the racial construction of Arab Americans, it is important to build the connections between how their race categorization has resulted in the “invisibility” of a population that might be in need of specific services, yet is unidentifiable in the homogeneous category of “White.” The non-identification on official documents of this population has created, for higher education institutions that have adopted the same federal categories as the U.S. Census, a ticket out of addressing the needs of this population. On some campuses, Arab American students are literally visible “everywhere,” yet invisible in demographic data reports. In
an article published about the proposed “Middle Eastern and North African” or “MENA” category that may appear on the 2020 census form, Aidi (2015) asserted:

Race and racial categories are fluid social and political constructs; groups can experience racial shifts over time. In the United States, nonwhite groups have in the past attained a white status. For example, the Irish, who were once categorized as nonwhite, attained white status in 1878, and Arab Muslim immigrants became officially white in 1943. Similarly, whites can become nonwhite racial minorities, as happened with Pakistani- and Indian-Americans in 1978. But racialization is not only a top-down process driven by state policy; grass-roots social movements can also lobby for new categories or the elimination of old ones. (para. 4)

Regardless of their connection to the experiences of people of color, Arab American students are many times not targeted for extra support by minority student achievement programs or multicultural student affairs departments because technically they lack the “minority student” classification. Not only are these students not included in traditional discussions about the needs and services for minorities in higher education, but they are excluded from these discussions in other settings as well. This is explained by Cainkar (in press): “Arab Americans were largely excluded from organized discussions of racism and racial discrimination, and they were absent from the content of multi-cultural education, tolerance trainings, and textbook treatments of American racial and ethnic groups.” Unless there are advocates for the Arab American student population on college campuses, or active Arab student organizations, this population falls easily under the radar and thus may miss out on opportunities for academic and social support to navigate their college experience.

In addition to the lack of data, higher education professionals may lack cultural understanding of students of Arab descent; this lack of understanding negatively impacts the attempts to successfully address the needs of this student subpopulation. Scholars
who have tracked the experiences of other student subpopulations, particularly minority students, have also pointed to gaps in services due to the misunderstanding of certain groups. In an analysis of misunderstood Asian American college students, Wong (2013) contended that “a lack of understanding of Asian American racial and ethnic identities often leaves Asian American students without adequate support or resources” (p. 87). Wong also stated that there is an assumption that students of “different Asian backgrounds” all have similar experiences; this is “problematic” because this leads to misunderstanding of the varying experiences of the ethnic subgroups within the Asian subcategory (p. 91). In line with this statement about Asian Americans, I would argue that the lack of understanding about Arab Americans and in this case, the lack of understanding about Arab American students, has resulted in a lack of support and resources for them as well. Bayoumi (2008) focused on Arab Americans in their 20s living in Brooklyn, New York post-9/11 and described the complexity associated with being young and Arab American:

For young Arab Americans today, to be young is more complicated, for it means you are living a paradox. On one hand, the older generations look hopefully to you with the belief they you will produce a better world for yourself, for your family and community, and for your nation. On the other, the culture at large increasingly spies you with mounting levels of fear, aversion, and occasionally outright hostility. Today’s young Arab Americans often live uncomfortably between these expectations. (p. 6)

Studies such as this researcher’s create a space for Arab American college students to reveal their experiences, which may be closely aligned with the Asian American students in Wong’s (2013) study or with the youth in Bayoumi’s (2008) research.

Scholars who have focused on studies related to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), notably the work of Museus, Maramba, and Teranishi (2013a),
pointed out that the AAPI student population has been ignored in higher education research and policy and this has contributed to their status as the “most misunderstood population in higher education” (p. 1). In the meantime, this lack of knowledge regarding AAPIs results in an environment in which policy makers and higher education researchers and practitioners are unprepared to adequately serve this student population. This predicament facing AAPIs in higher education is one that is shared by other student subpopulations, such as students who identity as Arab American. The reference to invisibility made by Museus et al. (2013a) was drawn from Ellison’s (1952) novel, *The Invisible Man*, to describe the AAPI student experience, and this reference has also been used by scholars of Arab American studies as well (Naber, 2000, p. 37).

Ellison (1952) famously wrote: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (p. 3). Arguably, Arabs living in the U.S. went from being invisible to being a group that has “heightened visibility” in the post-9/11 era. Nonetheless, because Arabs lack recognition as a separate group with their own race/ethnic category on the U.S. Census, they continue to be ignored, without that “official” federal recognition, as anything other than White. Saliba (1999) remarked that while Arab Americans resist invisibility, “it is unclear how long we will inhabit this space of ambiguity that often excludes us from both mainstream and marginalized groups” (p. 316). Defining the “race” of Arab Americans over the last 100 years has taken on different meanings depending on the point in history; after all, as stated by Omi and Winant (2015), “racial identity is a slippery thing” (p. 3).

Being White provides an association of privilege that Shryock (2008) explained: To be unmarked, or to be marked as “white,” implies that full rights and protections of citizenship are securely possessed by you, that you must be treated
as an individual, that your actions do not reflect on the status of others in your group, and that the status of your group does not determine how you should be treated as an individual. (pp. 107–108)

This is followed by a discussion on the power of this public ideology that has made its way into “the mainstream and makes racialization part of its continual (re)formation” (p. 108). Shryock (2008) dissected the “visibility” argument by noting that “the argument that ‘visibility’ (in the form of an official, nonwhite mark) can bring tangible benefits to Arab Americans, whereas “invisibility” as pseudowhites will bring only abuse and insignificance, is compelling” (p. 105). Shryock (2008) further broke down this message into simple terms:

Arab Americans are a minority group in the United States. We are defined as white, but this is not our real status. We have more in common with people who are defined as nonwhite, and we should receive the same legal protections (and the same gestures of respect, inclusion, and multicultural tolerance) they receive. (p. 105)

It is not uncommon for racial classification in the U.S. to be contested. Omi and Winant (2015) highlighted the ongoing debate over the classification of Arab Americans:

Arab Americans, currently classified as “white” have argued for a distinctive category to capture forms of discrimination exemplified by the hate crimes and profiling that have occurred as a result of the “War on Terror” and continuing political instability in the Middle East. (p. 123)

Omi and Winant (2015) pointed out that Taiwanese Americans have also lobbied for a separate category which would not fall within Chinese under the AAPI category. The motivation behind both examples, according to Omi and Winant (2015), is fueled “in large part by geopolitical transformations that affect how groups see themselves as well as how they are viewed by others” (p. 123). A detailed discussion on the categorization and racialization of the Arab American community is presented further throughout the remainder of chapter one and throughout chapter two.
Nature of the Problem

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, White refers to a person “having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as ‘White’ or reported entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian” (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011, p. 3). Federal designation of Arab Americans as “White” has resulted in a lack of accurate data on this population. Arab Americans are categorized as White; however, their lived experiences have been described as “not quite White” (Samhan, 1999, p. 209). The lived experiences of the Arab American community are influenced by the historic political climate in the U.S. and this is well documented by various scholars (Bayoumi, 2008; Cainkar, 2002; Kadi, 1994; Naber, 2000; Suleiman 1999). In 1999, Saliba published the essay “Resisting Invisibility: Arab Americans in Academia and Activism” and following the events of September 11, 2001, Naber (2008) contended that Arab Americans have shifted from being “invisible citizens” to “visible subjects” (p. 2). Cainkar (2015) further explained:

Race matters to the Arab American experience because perceptions of their racial status have defined their access to opportunities and flavored the character of their daily life experiences, at times in a mostly beneficial way (such as 100 years ago) and at other times (more recently) in a highly negative way. (p.9)

The categorization of Arab Americans as White by the federal government plays a role in the issues that arise for this population in other sectors such as higher education. When administrators of higher education institutions adopt the federal race categories for data collection, they forfeit the ability to collect important demographic data on Arab American students that would allow institutions to track the progress and needs of this population. This creates a barrier for educators who would like to pull readily available
data on the true demographics that are represented within their institutions. As pointed out by Samhan (1999),

the need to comply with federal guidelines in most cases defines the way in which nonfederal entities and even nongovernmental ones relate and attend ethnicity. For the most part, diversity programs in organizational and public culture are framed principally by official minority categories (including women), which tend to overlook sub-groups now classified as white. (p. 219)

In order to adequately address the needs of Arab American students in higher education, studies such as this one are needed to provide educators with a better understanding of this student subpopulation.

**Purpose and Scope of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the racial identity construction of Arab American college students enrolled in postsecondary institutions in and around Chicago, Illinois. Racial identity construction of Arab American college students is explored by examining the issues associated with the lack of accurate data on Arab American college students and by providing an opportunity for Arab American college students to speak about their lived experiences in college that have influenced, or not influenced, the construction of their racial identity. The researcher addresses how Arab American college students construct, understand, and live their racial identities. This study provides an opportunity for Arab American college students to share their thoughts on how their experiences in the college setting have influenced the construction of their identity.

Wong (2013) provided a replicable research model in her study on the racial identity construction of Chinese American and Filipino American undergraduate students that challenges the assertion that Asian American students are a monolithic,
homogeneous group. Wong (2013) maintained that while some Asian American students consider the “model minority” stereotype to be positive, others did not (p. 89). One can argue that those who fit in the “White” category are also a monolithic, homogeneous group. However, this researcher’s study of the racial identity construction of Arab American students challenges their institutionalized White racial status and allows them to define their racial and ethnic and identity based on their lived experiences as college students.

**Research Questions**

The central research question that drives this study is: How do Arab American college students construct, understand, and live their racial and identity and how does the college experience inform these constructions, understandings, and lived realities? Related questions to consider throughout the duration of this research study include:

1. How does the *racial* identity of Arab American students influence their college experience?
2. What lived experiences do Arab American college students say contribute to the way they identify themselves?
3. Does the *college* experience influence the way Arab American students construct their racial identity?

**Social Significance**

There are various factors that contribute to the social significance of this study. The lack of research on college students of Arab descent means that faculty, staff, and administrators have had to be creative in meeting the needs of this population, if they are attempting to do so, because many times they do not have an accurate or even a general
understanding of the needs of Arab American students. In higher education institutions having a significant number of Arab/Arab American students, faculty and staff of Arab descent are often called upon to educate, interpret, and familiarize their colleagues with the norms, traditions, and culture of a group that is not uniform in most ways, despite the shared characteristics.

In chapter two of this study, a review of literature focuses on the historic experience of Arab Americans in the U.S., with a large focus on how Arab Americans have been racialized as a monolithic group. The review of literature includes a discussion about how Arab Americans have been treated as “other” but simultaneously have been categorized as White. The review of literature references the work of anthropologists, sociologists, educators, Arab American institutions, and the U.S. Census as it pertains to the historical experiences, racialization, and identity development of Arab Americans. This overview sets the foundation needed to better understand the Arab American college student population. Because the topic focus on Arab American college students is one that has not been the focus of prior researchers, the literature review provides references to studies conducted on other student subpopulations as a means of comparison to the Arab American student experience.

Chapter three discusses the methodology of the study. As a qualitative research study, the method of in-depth interviews is addressed, along with the process by which participants were recruited. This chapter also discusses the data collection process, provides a list of the interview questions, and explains how the data were analyzed. Chapter four provides an analysis and interpretation of the study data. The final section,
chapter five, includes the summary, conclusions, and recommendations for future studies as well as suggestions for improving higher education institutional policies and practices.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*Despite the fact that Arabs have lived in America for more than a century and despite their major successes, they are still struggling to be accepted in American society.*

— Michael Suleiman (1999, p. 16)

There is a lack of literature on Arab American college students enrolled in both the public and private sectors of U.S. higher education. However, scholars of Arab American studies have published extensively on the history of Arab Americans in the U.S.; the identity, racial status, and “invisibility” of the Arab American community; and the negative perceptions of, the stereotyping of, and the discrimination endured by Arab Americans. This literature, along with research conducted on other student subpopulations, provided a solid foundation for a study that examined the racial identity construction of Arab American college students.

**The Arab American Community**

In order to understand the racial identity construction of Arab American college students, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the how the Arab community in the U.S. has historically been racially identified and how this categorization has impacted, or not impacted, their experiences. Research on the Arab American community has increased over the last few decades with the work of scholars such as Suleiman (1999), Naber (2000), Cainkar (2006b), and Kayyali (2006), among others,
setting the foundation for contemporary Arab American studies. Previous Arab American research focused on immigration patterns, U.S. Census categorization, the racialization of Arab (and Muslim) communities, as well as on the discrimination that Arab Americans have experienced before and after September 11, 2001.

Arab Americans are one of the fastest growing populations in the U.S., with the populations who identify as having Arab ancestry doubling since 1980 when the Census Bureau initially measured ethnic origin. Between 2000 and 2010, the population in the U.S. who identified as “having Arabic-speaking ancestry in the U.S. Census grew by more than 72%” (Arab American Institute Foundation [AAIF], 2012, p. 1). Although there is not currently a specific category for Arab Americans on the U.S. Census, some information is available to the public based on the American Community Survey’s (ACS) ancestry question and from the U.S. Census Long Form data. In an ACS brief published by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2013, Asi and Beaulieu (2013) stated: “While the Arab population is a distinct ancestry group, it is also a heterogeneous one, composed of many groups with different ethnic origins originally from the Middle East and North Africa” (p. 1). The most commonly used definition of “Arab” includes people who share the common language of Arabic. The nations that have historically belonged to the Arab League share Arabic as their national language and include: “Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen” (Naber, 2008, p. 5). The largest groups of both native- and foreign-born Arab Americans in the U.S. highlighted in Asi and Beaulieu’s (2013) brief were people of Lebanese, Egyptian, Syrian, Palestinian, Moroccan, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Yemeni heritage (p. 2). Although
the U.S. Census Bureau estimated there were 1.9 million Arab Americans living in the U.S. in 2010, studies conducted by the Arab American Institute have estimated that the actual number is over 3.5 million (AAIF, 2012, p. 1).

Arab Americans are not only diverse in country of origin, but also diverse in religious beliefs. Although the American public may assume that the majority of Arab Americans are Muslim, this is a misconception. Arab Americans are not religiously homogenous, rather many may identify with Sunni or Shia Islam, Eastern Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Assyrian Catholic, Coptic, and Roman Catholic Christianity, or Judaism (Cainkar, 2006b).

**Arab Americans, Identity, and the U.S. Census**

As Naber (2000) suggested, “scholars, writers, and activists have labeled Arab Americans as the ‘invisible’ racial/ethnic group” (p. 37). The historical case of Arab Americans in the U.S. is complicated in part because in the early 20th century, Arabs fought to be viewed as White in order to keep the right to U.S. naturalized citizenship. Arabs immigrating to the U.S. in the late 1800s and early 1900s “were called Asians, ‘other Asians,’ Turks from Asia, Caucasian, ‘White,’ Black, or ‘colored’” (Suleiman, 1999, p. 12). The U.S. stance on the racial status of Arab Americans was inconsistent and they “continued to be challenged and to feel insecure about the naturalization status until the period of 1923 to 1924” (Suleiman, 1999, p. 7). The “term ‘Arab’ refers to a pan-ethnicity” (Read, 2013, p. 613) and as Naber (2008) described, “the term ‘Arab’ is contested” (p. 5).

Cainkar (2009) argued that there are remarkable differences between the “overall Arab American experience in the first five decades of the twentieth century” and the
decades that followed (p. 73). The relationship Arab Americans have with “the box” they are expected to check according to the federal race designations is somewhat complex if one considers the historical evolution of the Arab American experience in the U.S. Cainkar (2006b) further elaborated on how historical events have also influenced the Arab American narrative:

The formation of Arabs as a unique racial group (distinct from white) was a socio-political process with timing and purpose different from historic American racism, leaving many Arabs in the position of having no racial category (box) that makes sense. Arabs were in the midst of the process that rendered them non-white after the categories of race—White, Black, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Native American had been set. Arab claims-making over the past few decades for a special category had been declined by the Census Bureau. Although largely rejecting the concept of the racial box, Arabs know that in a racially constructed society thinking inside the box matters (p. 268).

The inconsistency throughout history of how Arabs have been categorized and viewed in the U.S. has meant that “Arabs in America have had to wrestle” with the identity in which they belong, “especially as they encounter bias and discrimination” (Suleiman, 1999, p. 11). In the West, Arabs have been romanticized, demonized, and misrepresented as mysterious people who are uncivilized. Such misrepresentations have been reinforced by the media in the West. Shaheen (2012) well documented these misrepresentations:

The Arab-as-villain motif is present throughout the entire history of Arab images in U.S. popular culture. Subsequently, over time, these pervasive, persistent images helped create and enforce prejudicial attitudes towards Islam, Arabs and Muslims, resulting in a narrow view of the Arab and specific U.S. domestic and international policies. Over the years, the absence of positive, realistic images has also helped nurture suspicion and prejudice. As a result, inaccurate and demonizing images of the Arab have been with us for more than a century, impacting everyone from children to teens to adults. (p.18)

The historical experience of Arab Americans as a racialized group is nothing less than complicated due to a status assigned that does not really fit their experience. Cainkar
(2006b) emphasized: “As neither white, nor non-white, Arabs accrue neither the benefits of whiteness nor the protections of minority status” (p. 267). Most Arab Americans would not identify with the historical experience of the dominant White status that is associated with the racial category. The “historical, social, political, cultural, and economic dominance” of White people has contributed to racism and oppression in the United States; this is well documented and discussed by racial and ethnic identity development theory (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 71).

A common theme re-emerges in literature on the Arab American population as a people who are diverse and misunderstood yet have been reduced to the simplified category of “White” by data keepers. The defining moment when the status and treatment of Arab Americans in the U.S. changed may have been September 11, 2001. Naber (2008) noted that “many scholars have compared the backlash against Arab immigrant communities after the attacks on September 11, 2001, to Japanese internment during World War II” (p. 19), while Cainkar (2009) argued that Arab Americans were racialized “long before the 9/11 attacks as a unique set of persons from a specific place of origin who share a cluster of negative traits that promote violence and hatred” (p. 72). Naber (2000) further clarified that “particularly since the Gulf War, violence, racism, and discrimination against Arab Americans have rapidly increased” (p. 57). The U.S. foreign policy decisions of the last few decades have no doubt had an impact on the Arab American community. Cainkar (2015) described the transformation of the Arab American experience:

Starting in the 1970s, Arab Americans across the U.S. began to be perceived as and experience treatment as people of color. With these changes in experience, Arab Americans came to understand their place in the racial hierarchy and racial identity differently, although again with complexities and variations. Arab
Americans once fought in an organized manner to be recognized as Whites, as with the 1914 Dow naturalization case and now many Arab Americans struggle to be recognized as an ethnic minority group. (p. 9)

Researchers studying the historical evolution of the U.S. Census and how race categories were designated must keep in mind that the establishment of the U.S. Census was a tool of White privilege. Based on the racist ideology associated with the U.S. Census race categories, the American Civil Liberties Union was motivated to petition for the exclusion of the race question in the 1960 survey (Samhan, 1999, p. 213). As mentioned in chapter one, although this action did not come to fruition, it was the civil rights laws of the 1960s that would be used in the U.S. in the decades to follow.

Naber (2000) stressed that the racializing system used in the U.S. “reinforced by the U.S. media, has racialized Arab Americans according to a unique and contradictory process, resulting in their white but not quite racial/ethnic status” (p. 56). For the last two decades, the Arab American community, along with Arab American organizations, scholars, and activists have advocated for a category on the U.S. Census that would separate those of Arab descent as a non-White racial/ethnic group. Following a series of meeting with researchers and advocates, in 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau proposed a new box known as “Middle Eastern and North African” or “MENA” for the 2020 U.S. Census (Beydoun, 2015, p. 1). A recent report published by Al Jazeera stated:

The box, if adopted, would allow Arab Americans to dis-identify as white . . . In addition, the MENA American box would be supplemented with a fillable box, which would allow Arabs to specify their identity along nationality (Lebanese or Moroccan) or broader ethnic terms (Arab). (Beydoun, 2015, p. 1)

The push to add such a category to the U.S. Census began in the 1980s. However, as mentioned by Aidi (2015),
[the campaign began] picking up steam in the last decade in response to government policies in the “war on terrorism.” The bureau has considered Americans of Middle Eastern and North African descent white since the 1920s and has repeatedly rejected appeals for minority status citing the 1997 Office of Management and Budget (OMB) guideline that defines white as “a person having origins in the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.” (para. 1)

Although Arabs who arrived in this country in the early 20th century rallied to be seen as White to protect their rights, they did so with the focus on gaining the right to become citizens of the U.S. These early immigrants could not predict how this categorization would socially and politically impact the waves of Arabs that followed and the generations born in this country. While early immigrants sought to be counted as White so as to have access to the privileges of the dominant group, the experiences that characterize the lives Arab Americans then and in the future did not always match the category they were assigned. As mentioned previously, the federal race designation of “White” used to categorize Arab Americans has meant the vast majority of public institutions have adopted this same categorization. As a result, Arab American students face the dual challenge of “invisibility” while also being “hyper-visible.” For Arab American college students, the college application may have been the first time they were directed to check a box for their race. Confronted with such a situation, students of Arab heritage, like many other students, may be confused, unsure of what box to choose, and unaware that the federal government categorizes them as White. Participants in this study were able to articulate their thoughts on how they negotiate the race categorizations they are confronted with and their actual lived experiences as Arab Americans.

Although Arab Americans are not officially recognized as minorities by the federal government, scholars have asserted that the Arab American experience is more closely
aligned with people of minority status than “White” due to the historical “anti-Arab racism” that has existed in the U.S. Naber (2008) used the term “anti-Arab racism” as a way to describe the following:

Arab American marginalization within the context of U.S. histories of immigrant exclusion (e.g., the history of Asian exclusion, anti-Mexican racism, and Japanese internment) in which the racialization of particular immigrants as different than and inferior to whites has relied upon culturalist and nationalist logics that assume “they” are intrinsically unassimilable and threatening national security. (p. 31)

Although it should be mentioned that the Arab American experience is unique and “also differs from that of traditionally subordinate groups: African American, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans,” there is no denying they are a “negatively stigmatized group” (Cainkar, 2008, p. 50). This assertion by Cainkar (2008) is articulated in the responses of the participants in this study that are shared in chapter four.

What We Know (and Do Not Know) About Arab Americans and Higher Education

In general, Arab Americans have a higher education level than the American average. Based on the 2007–2009 ACS three-year estimates and the research of the AAIF, 89% of Arab American adults have at least a high school diploma. Data compiled by the AAIF (2015) also revealed that,

45% of ten Americans of Arab descent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 27% of Americans at large; 18% of Arab Americans have a postgraduate degree, which is nearly twice the American average of 10%. Of the school-age population, 12% are in preschool and kindergarten, 56% are in elementary or high school, and 32% are enrolled in college or undertaking graduate studies. (p. 1)

Higher education institutions are mandated to report to state and federal agencies specific information about their campuses and the populations they serve. For example, institutions that are receiving federal financial aid funding are required to report specific
information to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) described IPEDS as follows:

It is a system of interrelated surveys conducted annually by the U.S. Department’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). IPEDS gathers information from every college, university, and technical and vocational institution that participates in the federal student financial aid programs. The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, requires that institutions that participate in federal student aid program report data on enrollments, program completions, graduation rates, faculty and staff, finances, institutional prices, and student financial aid. (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015, “What is IPEDS,” para. 1)

The IPEDS information is used in multiple ways:

IPEDS provides basic data needed to describe—and analyze trends in—postsecondary education in the United States, in terms of the numbers of students enrolled, staff employed, dollars expended, and degrees earned. Congress, federal agencies, state governments, education providers, professional associations, private businesses, media, students and parents, and others rely on IPEDS data for this basic information on postsecondary institutions. (NCES, 2015, “How is IPEDS Used,” para. 1)

The NCES/IPEDS clearly states that postsecondary institutions “MUST give students and staff the opportunity to self-report their race and ethnicity” (NCES, 2015b, para. 1).

Appendix A displays the outline for IPEDS categories and requirements. There is a specific format that race and ethnicity must be reported to IPEDS. Figure 1 shows the directives that can be found on the NCES/IPEDS website:
What is especially important to note is the second to last bullet point that clearly states that “Institutions MAY collect subcategories of the 6 race and ethnicity categories” (NCES, 2015b, para. 5). If institutions chose to do this, then they could collect information on students of Arab descent under the White category and government agencies, colleges, and universities, and the public at large would have access to much more detailed and accurate information. Samhan (1999) noted:

The confusion created by federal classification as it related to Arabs is not limited to subjective identification and ethnic preference. School administrators are frequently unclear about where to place immigrant students from the Middle East, because most foreign born children fall in the nonwhite categories that assist in reporting and outreach efforts. (p.219)
Studies related to race and identity of college students, especially those that identify the participation of Arab American college students, helped inform this inquiry by providing background information on the population this study targeted. One such example was a study on the salience of racial identity in higher education institutions. The researchers, Hurtado, Alvarado, and Guillermo-Wann (2015) observed:

The racial dynamics change as the number of particular racial/ethnic groups grows on college campuses that are becoming compositionally diverse. While we expect Blacks, Latina/os, and American Indians to have high racial salience, and the results confirm this in the case, other groups are often erringly overlooked in the racial dynamics on campus. (p. 147).

In Hurtado et al.’s (2015) study, students were asked how often they think about their race/ethnicity and 61.1% of Arab American respondents responded that they “Often/very often” think about their race/ethnicity. Although the Arab American student population was a small percentage of the participants in the study, it is important to note that they were included as a distinct group as were other minoritized groups and that their responses reflect a consciousness about their racial identity that needs to be addressed. Table 1 displays the results for this question in Hurtado et al.’s study.
Hurtado et al. (2015) observed:

White students tend to think more often about their race at four-year colleges (22.1%, $n = 1378$) than at community colleges (13.5%, $n = 712$), but even so, they are least likely to think about their race. In sum, students from Arab American, Asian American, American Indian, Black, Latina/o, and Multiracial backgrounds are spending more time thinking about race than their White peers regardless of institution type. (p. 141)

Considering the few quantitative studies focusing on minoritized students in higher education that include a separate category for Arab American students, I believe this researcher’s study is significant to this field of study because it created a space for such responses to be collected from Arab American students and an opportunity to build on the data collected.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Our role is to widen the field of discussion, not to set limits in accord with prevailing authority*

— Edward Said (1979, p. xxiii)

The data gathered were analyzed using a theoretical framework that explored Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory and Chickering’s theory of identity development. The combination of the two theoretical perspectives assisted in understanding both the racial identity formation as well as the college student experience in this phenomenological study. This chapter provides an outline of theoretical perspectives and their connection to this study and also discusses the methodology, participant selection process, and plans for data collection.

**Racial Formation Theory**

Racial formation theory was the theoretical perspective utilized to better understand the racial identity of Arab Americans. Cainkar (2015) argued:

The process of racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994, 2015) is the theoretical construction that best captures the Arab American experience over the past few decades. Simply put, Arab Americans, who once largely benefitted from the perquisites of whiteness, became non-White as a result of social processes taking place over an extended period of time that defined them as different from and inferior to Whites. Omi and Winant called such processes “racial projects,” which emerge from the actions and power of dominant groups to define and spin narratives about social groups in order to convince others of a group’s status. (p. 8)
Researchers focusing on race and identity must first recognize that the definitions of race and ethnicity do not stem from biological notions, but rather from socially constructed definitions based on the heritage of an individual and influenced by “white domination of racial and ethnic minorities” (Evans et. al, 1998, p. 71). Omi and Winant (2015) asserted that racial formation is “a synthesis, a constantly reiterated outcome of the interaction of racial projects on a society-wide level” (p. 127). Racial projects vary in size and scope and according to Omi and Winant (2015),

they include large-scale public action, state activities, and interpretations of racial conditions in political, artistic, journalistic, or academic fora, as well as the seemingly infinite number of racial judgments and practices, conscious and unconscious, that we carry out as part of our individual experience. (p. 127)

Race has been used as a tool to create hierarchy, “defining who was a ‘better’ human being, meriting more freedom and social goods, and who was socially inferior could be denied opportunities, and be monitored and ostracized” (Cainkar, 2015, p. 8). In reference to the Arab American historical experience in the U.S., Cainkar (2006b) contended that at one time, “they benefited from a range of rights that were available to whites and denied members of groups ascribed as nonwhite; they later experienced a reversal of this status through processes highly similar to racial formation” (p. 25). Arab Americans have been labeled under a host of various racial and ethnic categories. According to Saliba (1999), “Arabs are labeled Caucasian, Asian, Afro-Asian, non-European, Semetic, Arab, black, or ‘of color’ as racial formations shift with political struggles” (p. 316).

Shryock (2008) explained the “inability to fit Arabs into a snug racial straightjacket” and attempted not to suggest that Arabs are “free agents” in terms of race. Shryock (2008) also pointed out that “racial formations are real, and the protections and
privileges of racial democracy, American-style, are distributed along lines that frequently exclude Arabs and Muslims” (p. 112). In explaining the struggle for Arab Americans to find meaning in their identity in the U.S., Jamal (2008) described the othering of the Arab American experience: “Arabs neither are seen as white nor are they granted and officially defined minority status; rather, they stand outside all racial demarcations in an ambiguous, precarious position of Otherness compounded by existing policies and perceptions” (p. 321). There is a powerful dynamic within the American-made racial hierarchy in which Arab Americans cannot be quite squeezed into it. In discussing the otherness of Arab Americans, Jamal (2008) further commented: “Regardless, then, of the boxes Arabs check—whether white, black, or other—their racialization, which has resulted in a perception of Otherness, is real” (p. 321). The racial formation of an Arab American identity in the U.S. cannot be separated from the internal and external influences of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. The analysis provided by Naber (2012) syncs with the explanation provided previously in this chapter by Omi and Winant (2015) on racial projects that influence racial formation. Referencing the stories of the Arab American participants in her research in the San Francisco Bay Area, Naber (2012) articulated the power dynamics that have historically influenced the Arab American experience in the U.S:

Their stories reveal how the logic of U.S. empire as they take on local form in the everyday lives of Arab diasporas in the United States, are entangled in multiple forms of power such as the structures of religion, class, gender, sexuality, and immigration, as well as the changing realities of U.S. immigrant and racial politics. The stories of Arabs in the United States becoming a diaspora of empire take place in the context of the local and global realities of imperialism, displacement, and economic neoliberalism and across a spectrum of accommodationist, civil rights, and anticolonial/anti-imperial politics. (p. 60)
Naber’s (2012) analysis accurately sets the backdrop in which studies on the Arab American community take place. The experiences shared by participants in chapter four are lived realities that reflect this backdrop.

**Identity Models**

Existing theories and models of racial and identity development are not specific to the Arab American experience and as research evolves on Arab Americans, new frameworks will emerge that better explain that identity experience. Racial and ethnic identity development theory has evolved over the last few decades, as noted by Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999):

Models and theories of racial and ethnic identity development have rapidly multiplied in the last two decades as the “melting pot” framework has given way to acknowledgment of a racially and ethnically diverse U.S. population. Most identity development models and theories trace their roots to either the psychosocial research of Erik Erikson (1959/1980), the identity formation studies of Marcia (1980), or the cognitive structural work of Jean Piaget (1952). Curiously, all identity models focus on the psychosocial process of defining the self; some also acknowledge the cognitive complexity of the self-definition process (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Helms, 1993). The traditional models in both categories (psychosocial and cognitive structural) are stage models in which growth occurs linearly in a stepwise progression, whereas contemporary models describe racial and ethnic identity as a process that occurs over a lifetime. (p.41)

Wong notes, “racial formation theory conceptualized race as a social construct dependent upon immediate social and historical contexts” and “emphasizes the effects of dominant racial discourses on constructions of race as power shifts and struggles position groups differently” (2013, p. 88). Furthermore, Chávez and Guido-DiBrito argue (1999):

Racial and ethnic identity are critical parts of the overall framework of individual and collective identity. For some especially visible and legally defined minority populations in the United States, racial and ethnic identity are manifested in very conscious ways. This manifestation is triggered most often by two conflicting social and cultural influences. First, deep conscious immersion into cultural traditions and values through religious, familial, neighborhood, and educational
communities instills a positive sense of ethnic identity and confidence. Second, and in contrast, individuals often must filter ethnic identity through negative treatment and media messages received from others because of their race and ethnicity. (p. 39)

In addition, there are several racial identity models that have been introduced to explain the racial identity formation of non-White groups. Cross’s Nigrescence Stages and Identity Model which was introduced in 1971 and revised in 1991 and again in 2000 is one such example. According to Worrell, Cross, and Vandiver (2001), “Nigrescence Theory (Cross, 1971) has played a role in the conceptualization of African Americans’ racial identity for the last three decades” (p. 201). According to Cross (1995), Nigrescence is a “resocializing experience” (p. 97). Table 2 summarizes the stages of the Cross’s Nigrescence Stages and Identities.
Table 2

*Cross’s Nigrescence Stages and Identities*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Identity</th>
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<tr>
<td>1971 original model</td>
<td>Pre-Encounter</td>
<td>Pro-White/Anti-Black</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encounter</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Immersion-Emersion</td>
<td>Anti-White/Pro-Black</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Internalization</td>
<td>Humanist</td>
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<td>Internalization-Commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>1991 revised model</td>
<td>Pre-Encounter</td>
<td>Assimilation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encounter</td>
<td>Anti-Black</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Immersion-Emersion</td>
<td>Anti-White, Intense Black Involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internalization</td>
<td>Black Nationalist, Biculturalist, Multiculturalist</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000 expanded model</td>
<td>Pre-Encounter</td>
<td>Assimilation*, Miseducation*, Self-Hatred*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encounter</td>
<td>Anti-White*</td>
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<td>Immersion-Emersion</td>
<td>Intense Black Involvement, Black Nationalist*, Biculturalist, Multiculturalist Racial, Multiculturalist Inclusive*</td>
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<td>Internalization</td>
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*Subscale included in the Cross Racial Identity Scale.

Note. Table is from Worrell et al., 2001, p. 202.

As illustrated in the Table 2, there are “multiple identity clusters at each stage” (Worrel, et al., 2001, p. 201). When the theory was revised in 1991, the model served as “the impetus for the development of the Cross Racial Identity Scale [CRIS]” by Vandiver et al. (2000) (as cited in Worrell et al., 2001, p. 201). Items on the CRIS are shown in Appendix H. Researchers have introduced new models to better articulate the experiences of specific groups because they found that existing models did not fit.
On such example is the Southeast Asian American Identity Model. Museus et al. (2013b) found that previously introduced stage models that attempted to explain Asian American identity were limited. For instance, one example these researchers provided was Kim’s (1981) (as cited in Museus et al., 2013b) Asian American identity model that consists of five progressive stages: (a) Ethnic Awareness, (b) White identification, (c) Awakening to Social Political Consciousness, (d) Redirection to Asian American Consciousness, and (e) Incorporation (p. 52). Museus et al. (2013b) proposed a model of Southeast Asian American (SEAA) identity that consists of five processes (as opposed to stages or phases). These researchers preferred the use of the term “processes” instead of the term “stages” because they share the view that there are “factors that shape SEAA identity development as distinct but interconnected and interactive processes, as opposed to separate levels within the same process” (Museus et al., 2013b, p. 55). While Museus et al. (2013b) recognized that SEAAs consist of various ethnic groups that “have distinct histories, languages, cultures, and communities,” they also recognized commonalities:

They share important historical and social contexts. Thus we aggregate SEAAs to begin a dialogue about identity formation among this population, but we are aware that identity development processes may differ among various SEAA ethnic groups, just as they might vary across SEAAs with different generational statuses. (p. 56)

The five processes that make up the SEAA identity model are: (a) Enculturation to Ethnic Cultures, (b) Acculturation to the Dominant Culture, (c) Awareness of Oppression, (d) Redirection of Salience, and (e) Integration of Dispositions. Like the critique made by Museus et al. (2013b) regarding previously established Asian American identity models, I found that although already established identity development models provide a foundation to describe the experience of various racial groups, they were
limited in their scope and lacked the inclusion of the Arab American identity formation experience. The racialization experienced by Arab Americans came later than recognized minority groups and, therefore, current identity formation models do not apply. Identity models applied to the Arab American community must take into account the historical transformation of the Arab American experience in the U.S. The historical Arab American experience is unique in that it is greatly influenced by national and international policies and politics and trends. Cainkar (2006) noted:

The general profile of the Arab experience in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century displayed more social, political and economic incorporation than that of racially excluded African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and Latinos. It was also vastly better than Arab American experiences over the past thirty years, for substantial evidence indicates a widening social distance between Arab Americans and all other Americans. This social distance has been created and reproduced by institutions of power (external to Arab American communities), is measurable, and is manifested in government policies, mainstream cultural representations, public perceptions and attitudes, discriminatory behaviors, physical insecurity, and social and political exclusion. (p. 243)

**College Student Identity Development**

When studying the identity development of college students, it is helpful to review Chickering’s (1969) theory of psychosocial development. Chickering recognized that identity establishment is one of the main developmental issues college students encounter. In the revised theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) (as cited in Evans, et al., 1998), seven *vectors* (tasks) are established which contribute to the psychosocial development during college years. One of these vectors is called *establishing identity*:

[This vector addresses] differences in identity development based on gender, ethnic background, and sexual orientation. Identity includes comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, a sense of one’s social and cultural heritage, a clear self-concept and comfort with one’s roles and lifestyle, a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant others, self-
acceptance, and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration. (Evans, et. al., 1998, pp. 39–40)

Chickering’s theory is relevant to this study as it pertains to identity development of college students of Arab descent because it recognizes that the environment of college students may influence their identity development. According to Chickering (2015), establishing identity also includes reflecting on one’s family of origin and ethnic heritage, defining self as a part of a religious or cultural tradition, and seeing self within a social and historical context. It involves finding roles and styles at work, at play, and at home that are genuine expressions of self and that further sharpen self-definition. It involves gaining a sense of how one is seen and evaluated by others. (p.1)

Widely used in student affairs since its introduction in 1969 and since its revision in 1993, Chickering’s theory “has served as the foundation for extensive research as well as practical application” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 39). The integration of racial formation theory and student development theory serves as a holistic theoretical framework for the study of racial identity construction of Arab American college students.

Methodology and Data Collection

Qualitative methods were employed in this study. A qualitative method lends itself well to a study that focuses on the lived experiences of the participants. This study followed a phenomenological approach. According to Creswell (2012), “a central phenomenon is the key concept, idea, or process studied in qualitative research” (p. 16). Duncan (2013) reflected on phenomenology: “Phenomenology allows the researcher to explore the symbolism, the words, and experiences that give meaning to living. Phenomenologists are challenged to describe the lived experience in a manner that portrays person-world intimacy” (p. 237). Phenomenological research “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon.
Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2006, pp. 57–58). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) described phenomenology as “a methodological (theoretical) perspective aimed at generating knowledge about how people experience” (p. 19). They specified that “experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions: how the experience is lived in time, space, and vis-à-vis our relationships to others, as well as bodily experience” (p. 19). The German philosopher, Edmond Husserl is closely linked with the European philosophy of the early 1900s that phenomenology can be traced back to. However, it was a colleague of Husserl by the name of Alfred Shultz who introduced phenomenology to American sociology. Shultz was specifically interested in how experiences were processed by individuals on a daily basis. Phenomenologists utilize multiple methods when researching the lived experiences of individuals, including in-depth interviews and observations (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2001, p. 19). Ulysse and Lukenchuk (2013) described the “phenomenological process to uncovering the structures of consciousness,” and stated that this “can be compared with an archeologist excavating a prehistoric site” (p. 23). In this phenomenological study, the researcher allowed participants to reflect on how they had constructed their racial identity based on their lived experiences; it also allowed for them to articulate their unique experiences through their own interpretations.

In-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Arab American college students attending postsecondary institutions in the Chicago metropolitan area. One-on-one interviews are a “popular approach in educational research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). When conducting a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a set of questions that guide the discussion (see Appendix B); however, the
interview was based loosely on those questions, allowing researcher-participant dialogue to flow naturally. According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), “semi-structured interviews also allow individual respondents some latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or importance to them . . . [so] the conversation flows more naturally, making room for the conversation to go in unexpected directions” (p. 102). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to provide opportunities for the interviewees to discuss experiences and events that were relevant to the research.

One strategy that the researcher was able to utilize during the research process was that of “insider status.” As an insider who possesses similar status characteristics as the participants, the interviewer has the ability to “obtain cooperation and rapport with the situation to expedite understanding” (Hesse-Biber & Levy, 2011, p. 116) between the researcher and the respondents. In addition, “the researcher, with regard to these matched characteristics, is an insider in that he or she is familiar with the respondent’s group situation” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 116). The insider status is an advantage in qualitative research where trust building is important in order for the interviewees to feel comfortable as participants.

Participant Selection Process

This study’s research sample consisted of 14 college students, male and female, who self-identified as Arab American. Arab American college student participants may trace their heritage to any of the 22 Arabic-speaking nations discussed in chapters one and two of this study. Students were selected through contacts with student organizations on three college campuses. In order to ensure the diversity of the college sector the participants came from, student organizations from a community college, a four-year
private institution, and a four-year public institution were approached for this study. The colleges/universities chosen were based on their location in the Chicago metropolitan area and their accessibility to the researcher. Students were selected through contacts with Arab American student organizations on college campuses (see Appendix D). The names of these student organizations were not identified in this study so as to protect the anonymity of the participating groups. In order to have a participant sample that included students who were active in student organizations as well as not active, for every student who participated and was involved in one of the student organizations, I asked for a referral for a participant who was not active, thus using snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was utilized because participants could also refer other college students for participation in the study. In addition to snowball sampling, purposeful sampling took place in order to select individuals who were experiencing the central phenomenon. Purposeful sampling “is a qualitative sampling procedure in which researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 626). This study included both male and female college students who identified as Muslim, Christian, or other religious group.

Once initial contact was made with the potential participants and, with their permission, contact information was received, I e-mailed them a letter inviting them to participate in the study and a copy of the Informed Consent Form. The invitation letter (see Appendix E) explained the study and also described the criteria a participant must meet in order to participate. Once the student agreed to participate, I then set up an interview time and location that was mutually agreed upon, and a follow-up e-mail was sent confirming the time and location (see Appendix F). Before the interview,
confidentiality procedures and the informed consent form (see Appendix G) were reviewed, and then the student completed a 19 question background information questionnaire (see Appendix C). After the background information form was collected, the audio-recorded face-to-face interview began immediately thereafter.

**Method of Data Analysis**

After each interview, a memo was immediately completed by the researcher so as to document the collected data. The memo process the researcher undertook was a journaling process that allowed the researcher to process and reflect on the interview experience. The interviews with the participants in this study were transcribed; this was followed by coding that facilitated the process of data analysis and then summarizing the data into main themes. A summary of the themes that emerge in the study is provided in the results section in chapter four and is informed by the inclusion of participant quotations extracted from the interviews.

The identities of all participants were protected by replacing their names with pseudonyms. Although the institutions the students attended were not the subjects of the research, if a participant mentioned the name of an institution or the names of anyone associated with specific institutions, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the institutions and other persons.

Several of the questions on the background questionnaire corresponded with the questions asked during the semi-structured interviews. Utilizing two methods to collect data allowed for triangulation to occur. Triangulation is a method used to “check the validity of research findings . . . using two different methods to get at the same research
question and looking for convergence in the research findings” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 51).

The semi-structured interviews that took place with the 14 participants ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes and were all audio recorded and transcribed. Interview transcriptions for all 14 participants resulted in a document that was over 250 pages long. Throughout the interviews, field notes were taken to document participant demeanor, tone of voice, facial expressions, and behavior. After each interview, a memo was created in addition to the field notes to document initial impressions of the data collected during the interview. The memo is a journaling process that allows the researcher to reflect on the interview experience. Memoing also allows the researcher to be reflexive as the research is being conducted. The importance of memoing is well documented by sociologist David Karp. As noted by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011),

[Karp stressed] taking stock of where you are in thinking about your project by writing down your ideas about how your data do or do not fit together. . . . Memoing also functions to help researchers become more reflexive about their own personality and how it may impact what they are researching. (p. 123)

After the interviews, I compared the answers on the questionnaire to the answers I reviewed in the transcripts and found parallels. None of the students interviewed contradicted the answers they gave during the interview with the answers they gave on the questionnaire. In addition to the direct quotations provided during the interviews, selected information and quotations provided from the questionnaires were also included in the results section. Five major themes emerged and are summarized in this chapter.

Each transcribed interview was thoroughly reviewed twice for dialogue accuracy and then coded for major themes. During the review and coding process of each transcript, comments were entered in the right-hand margin on each document; these
comments served as a quick reference for reviewing the participants’ critical statements specific to identity construction. In addition, the quotations from the participants that stood out were highlighted and color coded (yellow=revisit quote; green=consider for inclusion; aqua blue= must include in chapter four). After the 14 transcribed interviews were reviewed with comments and quotations were color coded, a separate document was created containing all of the participant quotations and the comments I made on each original transcript. From this 61 page document, about nine themes emerged that were later condensed into five major themes with subtopics integrated within the theme.
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

_I will always be me_
_With my roots planted firmly_
_American with Palestinian ancestry_
_Planting seeds for hybrid ideology_
_In lands of productivity_

— Remi Kenazi (2008)

Research Procedures

As described in chapter one, this study examined the racial identity construction of Arab American college students. Through a phenomenological lens, this qualitative study focused on the central research question that guided this study: How do Arab American college students construct, understand, and live their racial identities and how does the college experience inform these constructions, understandings, and lived realities? Related subquestions that were considered throughout the duration of this research study included:

1. How does the _racial_ identity of Arab American students influence their college experience?

2. What lived experiences do Arab American college students say contribute to the way they identify themselves?

3. Does the _college_ experience influence the way Arab American students construct their racial identity?
This study’s research sample consisted of 14 college students, male and female, who self-identified as Arab American. The participants in this study traced their heritage to Palestine, Jordan, Syria, or Yemen and identified as Christian or Muslim. The college students who participated were enrolled in three different postsecondary institutions: a public two-year community college; a public four-year college; or a private, faith-based, four-year, degree-granting institution.

**Participant Demographics**

A total of 14 participants participated in this study. Eight students identified as female and six as male. All participants were currently enrolled in a higher education institution in the Chicago metropolitan area. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 26 years old, with the majority of the participants falling between 19–23 years of age. Although all of the participants identified as Arab American on the background questionnaire, they were also offered the opportunity to provide on the questionnaire a country to which they traced their Arab heritage. Eight of the participants traced their heritage to Palestine, three to Syria, two to Jordan, and one to Yemen. Eleven of the participants identified as Muslim (Sunni) and three as Christian (Greek Orthodox). This configuration resembles the Arab American demography of the Chicago metropolitan area (Cainkar, 2006b). Of the 14 participants, five were currently attending a community college, four were enrolled at an urban public institution, and five were enrolled at a private, faith-based institution. Two of the students were enrolled in graduate programs. The participants were not interviewed in any specific order.

Table 3 provides general information about the participants including their age, gender, family country of origin, religion, and sector of the college they were currently
attending. The table provides a snapshot of the diversity of the participants, and although there were certainly commonalities that united many of the participants, they all had unique life experiences that contributed to how they constructed their Arab American identity.
Table 3

*Participant Demographic Data*

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Participant Profiles

Profiles are provided as an introduction to each research participant. This background information was collected from the participant background questionnaire. The participants were asked: (a) if they identified as Arab American; (b) if they considered themselves part of a specific religious group and if so, which one; and (c) if they grew up in the Chicago area. Several other general questions related to family and college were also included.

Maya

Maya was one of the two graduate students who participated in this study. She was the U.S. born daughter of Syrian immigrants, both of whom completed medical school in Syria before moving to the U.S. She was one of six children and was born and raised in Illinois. Maya identified as Arab American and as Muslim. Maya was 26 years old and was currently pursuing her master of arts degree in the teaching of high school English at a public university in Chicago. She was not currently involved in extra-curricular activities on campus because she wanted to focus on her studies; however, she was active in several student organizations as an undergraduate.

Alia

Alia was a 24-year-old community college student who traced her heritage to Palestine, although both of her parents were born in Jordan. Alia was born in the U.S. and spent the majority of her life in the Chicago area, but lived in Jordan from age 7–10 years old. Alia was currently majoring in child care and was pursuing a career as a preschool teacher. Alia worked on campus and was involved in on-campus student activities.
Lara

Lara was 19 years old and identified as Arab American and Muslim. She was born in the U.S. and traced her heritage to Palestine and Jordan. She grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and was currently pursuing her bachelor of science in neuroscience degree at a public university in Chicago. While she was enrolled full time at the university, she was also taking a class at a community college to finish her general education requirements. Lara was currently active in student organizations on campus.

Sarah

Sarah was a 23-year-old student who was completing her medical school pre-requisite courses at a community college and a public university. She held two bachelor’s degrees, one in Islamic studies and one in Arabic studies. Sarah traced her heritage to Yemen, where she was born. She arrived in the U.S. at age five and grew up in a neighborhood that she described as being “predominantly White/Latino.” Sarah identified as Arab American and Muslim. At the time, Sarah was not involved in on-campus activities, although she stated that she tries to check in with some of the student organizations once in a while.

Nader

Nader was a 23-year-old, U.S. born Arab American college student who traced his heritage to Palestine. He was the son of a college educated mother who was born in the U.S. and a father who was born in Palestine. He grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and was attending a private, faith-based university in Chicago where he was pursuing a degree in business administration. Nader identified as Muslim and was involved in campus activities.
Zayn

Zayn was a 20-year-old community college student who identified as Arab American and Muslim. He traced his heritage to Palestine and Jordan. Both of Zayn’s parents were born in Palestine. His family lived on the north side of Chicago for a few years and then moved to another location in the Chicago metropolitan area. He was pursuing a degree in nursing and was actively involved in student organizations on campus.

Naser

Naser was 22 years old and identified as Arab American and Muslim. He was of Syrian heritage and was completing his bachelor of arts degree in political science. He grew up in the southwest suburbs of Chicago and, at the time of the interview, resided in the northwest suburbs with his family. He moved away for college to a public university in Illinois about two hours away from home, and returned to complete his final semester at a public institution in Chicago. He planned to move to Washington D.C. after graduation. At the time, Naser was not involved in student activities.

George

George was a 21-year-old student attending a private faith-based university in Chicago. He identified as Arab American and grew up in the Chicago metropolitan area. George traced his heritage to Jordan and identified as Christian. His mother was born in the U.S. and his father was born in Jordan. Both of his parents were college educated. George was pursuing a degree in finance. George was not involved in student activities at the time of the interview.
Nisreen

Nisreen was a 23-year-old Arab American Muslim student enrolled in a community college where she was pursuing a degree in elementary education. She was born in the U.S. and grew up in Chicago in a predominantly Latino neighborhood on before moving to the suburbs with her family in her late teen years. Nisreen’s family moved out of the area due to rising issues with gangs in the area. Her father was born in Jordan and her mother in Palestine. Nisreen traced her heritage to Palestine and her parents were both college educated. Nisreen was not involved in student activities at the time of the interview.

Linda

Linda was a 22-year-old student at a private, faith-based university and was majoring in communication science and disorders with a minor in psychology. She identified as Antiochian Orthodox Christian and Arab American or Middle Eastern. Linda’s parents were both born in Jordan, and she was born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago. She was the first in her family to attend college and was very active in student organizations on her campus, including Arab American student groups and campus organizations related to her major. She also served as a student mentor.

Dean

Dean was an 18-year-old freshman at a private faith-based university in Chicago. He considered himself Arab American and identified as a Muslim. Dean traced his heritage to Palestine where his father was born. His mother was also of Palestinian descent but was born and raised in the U.S. He grew up on the north side of Chicago and also lived
on Chicago’s south side; he eventually moved to the southwest suburbs of Chicago where he completed high school. Dean was a pre-dental student majoring in bio-chemistry and was involved in student activities.

**Omar**

Omar was a 19-year-old second-year college student at a private faith-based university. He was majoring in chemistry. Omar was Muslim, identified as Arab American, and traced his heritage to Palestine where he was born. He moved to the U.S. at age five and was the first in his immediate family to attend college. Omar was involved in student organizations on his campus.

**Dina**

Dina was a 22-year-old graduate student pursuing her doctor of pharmacy degree at a public university in the Chicago metropolitan area. She identified as Arab American and Muslim. Dina traced her heritage to Syria where her father was born. Her mother was born in the U.S. and both of her parents were college educated. Dina grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and spent a lot of time around the Syrian community in her neighborhood.

**Shireen**

Shireen was a 19-year-old community college student pursuing a degree in sociology. She traced her heritage to Palestine and Jordan and identified as Greek Orthodox. She grew up in the far south suburbs of Chicago and was one of very few Arab American students the school district where she was enrolled as a child. Her father and older siblings had all completed college. Shireen identified as Arab American as
well as with the term White; both of her parents were born in Jordan. At the time, Shireen was not involved in student activities.

**Thematic Analysis**

Each interview with the participants began with an initial discussion of how they preferred to be recognized in terms of their racial identity. Then, the interviews quickly entered a zone of personal storytelling, an opportunity for each student to define how their Arab American identity had developed and what factors influenced how their identity had been shaped. The semi-structured interview format was appropriate because it provided a roadmap for the discussion. This format also provided opportunities for the participants to gather authentic thoughts, pausing when needed and taking their time to indulge in childhood stories as well as recount memories from college classrooms, hallways, and dorms. During the interviews, the students shared stories of travels to Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen. The impressions left on them from their travels were most evident as they warmly smiled and spoke of adventures with cousins, visits with grandparents, and the times of peace prior to some of the ongoing conflicts in the region. Summer visits “back home” ranged from a couple of weeks to a few months. Such positive experiences—in light of negative encounters with racists at the local grocery store or in the laundry mat, endless questions from classmates, family expectations to uphold pride in their Arab heritage, among several other factors—all intermingled to create in each participant a sense of Arab American identity that was not identical but very much similar to that of the other participants.

The participants in this study attended higher education institutions of various sectors, did not all identify with the same religious group, had parents who were from
several different Arab countries, ranged in age from 18–26 years old, and were brought up in various suburbs and city neighborhoods throughout the greater Chicagoland area. Although some of the participants had never visited the native country of their parents or grandparents, other participants enjoyed the luxury of travelling to the Middle East every summer and were immersed in the Arabic language and cultural heritage of their families. While several of the participants grew up in the suburbs of Chicago and were exposed to the sizable Arab American population that resided there, others reflected on childhoods with no exposure to Arabs except for their own family members.

Despite such differences, the similarities in life experiences and the themes that contributed to their racial identity construction were strikingly similar. The students all spoke of the influence of their family upbringing on how they shaped their Arab American identity. After the first few interviews, it was clear that family, especially the parents of the participants, was a factor in their identity construction. In addition, other common themes emerged that I had not anticipated and were reiterated in every single interview—the impact of September 11, 2001 being the most notable. Considering that the age of the participants in 2001 ranged from 4–12 years old, it was interesting to hear that the events of 9/11 were considered an experience that they all believed impacted their identity as Arab Americans. These themes are discussed in further detail later in this chapter.

In the sections that follow, I focus on the lifelong process of constructing Arab American identity. I present how the participants in this study were socialized to believe they were different and how they handled the negative consequences of being an Arab in America. These experiences had all influenced the racial identity construction of the
participants in ways that will certainly stay with them as they continue to grow and develop.

The personal experiences shared by the Arab American college students in this study articulated the marginal racialized status that Arabs in the U.S. have become accustomed to due to the dominant terrorism discourse which conflates “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” together (Naber, 2008, pp. 278–279). Study participants based their feelings of marginalization on their treatment by others, the consistent stereotypical negative images of Arabs and Muslims in the media, and racial profiling endured in public. Such experiences send messages to Arab Americans that are internalized and contribute to how they shape and construct their racial identity. As observed by Chávez and Guido-DiBrito (1999), “these messages make it clear that people with minority status have a different ethnic make-up and one that is less than desirable within mainstream society” (p.39). What was powerful about the testimony shared by the participants in this study was that despite their internalized understanding that “Arab American” or “Muslim” is a less desirable status in the U.S., they were steadfast in their pride in their Arab (and American) heritage and shared a common resilience in their approaches toward dealing with the negativity associated with their identity.

Throughout each interview, the participants in this study reflected on both college and pre-college experiences to describe moments, events, and various influences that contributed to how they had shaped and constructed their identity as Arab Americans. The participants reflected on their childhoods, their trips overseas during summer vacations, and the weekend Arabic school their parents enrolled them in. They smiled during stories of childhood memories; spoke of their faith, prayer, and church
celebrations; and their love for their culture. The interviews provided a safe space to discuss times of fear, specifically as children attempting to make sense of the post-9/11 world, the playground bullying, the ignorant and hateful comments they calmly walked away from, the countless questions they had to navigate in the classroom from peers and professors, and the many times they were put in a position to defend their faith, their traditions, or simply the way they dressed. The participants openly shared moments of distress they believed were the result of simply being Arab American. Despite any of the negative life experiences the participants had, they honored their Arab heritage and did not shy away from speaking about their lives as Arab American college students. As young adults reflecting on their upbringing in an Arab household, most with parents who were immigrants or were first generation in the U.S., it was apparent many of the participants were attempting to negotiate their Arab heritage and their American values.

The following section summarizes the major themes that emerged from this study. Table 4 provides a list of the themes that will be discussed.
Table 4

_Five Themes in the Study_

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**Theme I: I Am Arab American**

Chapters one and two of this study provide the foundation for understanding who is considered Arab American in the U.S. How Arabs have historically identified has evolved in the last century, with the political dynamic—both domestic and foreign— influencing the Arab American identity along the way. As explained by Cainkar (2009),

> Arab Americans were once seen as White, although often marginally so, and as such, they benefited from a range of rights that were available to whites and denied to groups ascribed as non-white; they later experienced a reversal of this status through processes highly similar to racial formation. (p. 65)

The participants in this study had only known the era of the reversed status which Cainkar referred to. Through their lived experiences, they had shaped their identities as Arab Americans. These experiences were documented in the interviews I conducted and
through the background questionnaire each participant filled out. The students answered a question on the background questionnaire that asked if they identified with the term “Arab American”; the answers were all affirmative, but the written responses varied when the participants were asked to explain why or why not:

Nisreen: “Yes, I identify myself as an Arab American. First, I’m Arab because that’s what my parents are. I’m American because I was born and raised on this land.”

Dina: “Yes, even though I was born in America, I identify strongly with the culture of my ancestors and parents. I enjoy the fact that I can have two cultures I can relate to.”

George: “I do identify with the term Arab American. It is who I am and I am proud to be one. I was born and raised in this country with a strong foothold on our Arabian [Arab] traditions.”

On the background questionnaire, students were asked: “Is there a category that best describes your race? If so, what is it?” The answers to this question varied. The participants all responded that they identified as Arab American when asked: “Do you identify with the term Arab American?” However, when provided with the opportunity to respond to whether there is a category that best describes your race and if so, what it was, the participants had varied answers:

George: “The best category that describes my race is Arab American.”
Linda: “Middle Eastern.”
Sarah: “Middle Eastern/Arab/Arab descent.”
Lara: “Arab American or Arab.”
Dean: “Arab American. It shows that I am truly American with an Arab origin.”

The participants were also asked: “To which country do you trace your Arab heritage?” This question allowed students to share the specific country they, or their parents, or grandparents may have been born in. Students were also able to list more than
one country; for example, several students listed Palestine and Jordan, although their lineage was traced to Palestine. The answers to these questions confirmed that the students in the study felt connected to their Arab heritage, and they recognized one or more Arab country as part of their heritage:

Dean: “Palestine.”
Sarah: “Yemen.”
Lara: “Palestine and Jordan.”

The maturity and political awareness that is needed to digest the complexity of race discussions in the U.S. is a process that many people develop throughout their lifetime. However, for these Arab American college students ranging from ages 18–26, their level of understanding about the complexity of where Arab Americans “fit into” the dominant race structure of the U.S. was truly impressive. Their comprehension of the negative dominant discourse surrounding Arab Americans (9/11 thrust them into a spotlight they did not invite) was based not only on their own personal experiences, but also on the discussions of and exposure to their Arab heritage from their family that helped balance the negativity with positive experiences that brought them closer to their Arab roots. Although many of the participants admitted they were still struggling with discrimination and racism and often were confronted with a barrage of ignorant questions, they still found comfort in being of Arab descent. They were proud; they were firm in their beliefs that they added diversity to their college campuses and to this country; and they were serious about making positive and lasting impressions on those around them—at that time, on their classmates, professors, and local communities and perhaps in the future, on a larger scale. The next theme focuses on the influence of family on the racial identity construction of the participants.
Theme II: Pride Starts at Home—Planting the Seeds of Arab American Identity

Every one of the 14 participants in this study mentioned the influence of family in shaping their Arab American identity. Although there was not a specific pre-planned question about family (there was a general question about family education on the questionnaire), during each interview, the students gave credit to their parents for instilling a sense of pride in their Arab heritage. The parents of the participants (regardless of whether mother/father was U.S. born or not, divorced/married, college educated/not college educated, or Muslim/Christian) were major influences in the formation of their Arab identity. After all, it was the parents who decided if their child should go to weekend Arabic school, attend mosque or church services, take visits overseas to meet family, speak Arabic at home, or participate in cultural events. All of these experiences contributed to the identity development of the participants and during the interviews, references to parents and other family members naturally came up as the students shared pre-college and college experiences. Their identities were shaped with every trip overseas (referred to as “back-home” by most Arab Americans), the sound of the mother tongue of their parents or grandparents (Arabic), during holiday celebrations at church or the mosque, while watching Arabic satellite television shows at home, and when attending Arab cultural events such as festivals and fundraisers. Nader described his pride in being Arab American and Palestinian, which he attributed to the cultural experiences in which he was immersed growing up:

I just feel comfortable. I’m confident in myself in general, just myself as a person. Not a lot of things can bog me down. That bleeds into my identity as a Palestinian, as an Arab. I’m just proud to be something. I’m not going to complain. Whether I was white, black, brown, yellow, whatever color it is, it doesn’t matter. That’s just who I am.
Over the times, there are good things that occurred. I can remember being the only Arab kid in class. I was bilingual. I spoke Arabic at home, not as often; mother doesn’t speak it; it’s not her native tongue. She took me to Arabic classes. I had a tutor; I learned how to read and write. I still practice today. I think the trips overseas really help me identify with my identity. Going to Jordan, going to Palestine specifically; I love Palestine. Going to Jordan, to Turkey, going to different areas in the region really opened my eyes, made me proud of being Middle Eastern. Then there was... high school, in some of my social studies classes we do projects. Whenever I got the opportunity to talk about being Arabic. It was my identity; it’s what separated me, made me more unique than the others.

I asked Nader if he always felt a sense of pride and comfort in sharing his Arab heritage with others and he responded: “Yeah. There was never a hesitation to; I think mom would smack me upside the head if I ever hesitated.”

Like his peer Nader, George also attended a private, faith-based university in Chicago; however, in contrast, George was of Jordanian descent and was Christian. Despite the difference in his parent’s country of origin, and his religious beliefs, it was clear that George and Nader both grew up in households where their Arab heritage was celebrated. George commented in this regard:

First of all, it’s who I am. I’m proud to be an Arab American from Jordan born in the US. You know what I’m saying? My family is from Jordan. I was born here but, again, I was raised with a strong presence of the Arab traditions. I was raised within Arabian presence, I guess. Again, it’s who I am. I’m proud to be one. It’s just there.

The seeds of pride were also certainly planted at home for Dean as well. His mother, an elementary school teacher who was born and raised in Chicago, taught him that he should never shy away from telling others he is Arab American and Muslim. She also told him that if he was confronted with questions about his identity, he should gladly answer them; it is an opportunity to educate others about the Arab and Muslim American
community. When asked if he felt comfortable with his identity as an Arab American, Dean responded:

Yeah. My mom, actually, always taught me. . . . She’s like; “Always make sure everyone knows you’re a Muslim, you’re Arab American, and where you’re from, so you can help everyone. Show them where you’re from. Show them you're proud, and if they have questions, better.” I feel like Arab has a negative connotation to it. Everyone's like, "Arab—negative,” you know? We want to change that. She said it starts with everyone.

Dean shared that his mother wears hijab, and she has encountered racist parents who did not want their children in her classroom. She had experienced her share of bigotry, and Dean viewed his mom’s example as a natural educator as one he wants to follow when confronted with questions about Arabs and Muslims.

As a graduate student studying pharmacy at a public institution in Chicago, Dina was accustomed to being around people of diverse backgrounds, and also was active on her college campus and in the community. She was brought up in a household where her Syrian roots were reinforced with annual summer trips to Syria, large family gatherings, and Arabic language classes. She had developed a comfort level with her Arab identity which she admitted had evolved through the years. Despite her connection to her Arab heritage, Dina admitted that sometimes, she wishes she was “just regular.” Dina’s testimony was frank, and her response was an example of how carrying an Arab American identity in the U.S. could sometimes be overwhelming, especially for a Muslim woman who wears hijab. Her insight on the topic was most interesting in that she spoke to the obligation of representing the Arab and Muslim community in a positive light—her academics being just one way. Dina reflected on this:

Yeah, so I feel like as I’ve grown older I’ve learned; I’ve looked at it a lot more, because you start to understand it more and you start to understand your parents a little bit more. I feel like I’ve gotten closer to my parents as I’ve gotten older.
Their culture and my being Arab . . . Probably, there can be times where I’m like, oh my God I wish I was just regular, like not Arab because things would be so much easier. But then again like it’s kind of nice that I have this background because when I’m doing things, even like as a Muslim or even as an Arab, when I’m doing things and I’m succeeding at school and whatever it is. I kind of almost feel like yeah well I’m representing these people or I’m representing Islam. I don’t know, it keeps me going; it’s like I kind of feel like I try to do my best always because of who I’m representing.

Sarah, a participant who traced her Arabs roots to Yemen, gave credit to her geographic location as a resident in the southwest suburbs (with many Arab neighbors) for instilling a sense of pride in her identity as an Arab American. Having grown up on the north side of Chicago in an area where her family was the only Arab family in the neighborhood, she had a frame of reference in which to compare her current geographic home and for her, there was a sense of appreciation for having access to the Arab American community in the southwest suburbs. Zayn spoke about the importance of learning Arabic at a young age. His parents enrolled him in Arabic school on the weekends from age five to 12. Zayn credited his parents for instilling pride in his Arab culture and for supporting him throughout his youth:

They just try to raise me right and raise me not to forget your culture . . . we would both speak English and Arabic at the same time at home because they want me to be successful in both fields. They just supported everything I really did.

Linda shared a sentiment that many other first generation college students could relate to. Despite the support of her family and the values and pride in her heritage that were instilled in her, there were some things that she simply could not turn to her parents for help with when it came to college. In light of this, Linda expressed the importance of having Arab American friends she could connect with:

Just being able to relate to someone. Being able to talk to somebody about something that maybe a White person wouldn’t really understand. I’m currently applying for grad school right now and my parents . . . Since I’m first generation,
they don’t really understand the whole competitive aspect and what the GRE is. It’s hard to explain that. Having another student who has that same kind of problem . . . It's nice to identify with them.

As a graduate of a private, Catholic, all-girls school having very few Arab American students, Linda explained that attending her university gave her the opportunity to meet other Arab American college students like herself. She found comfort in knowing that she could turn to them for support and they would know exactly what it felt like to have parents who did not understand the complexities of applying to graduate programs.

Despite the comfort the participants felt at home, they were well aware that the reality of the world outside was one that could be far from comfortable for Arab Americans. Each participant shared moments of discomfort—much of which they attributed to anti-Arab and anti-Muslim backlash post-9/11. Theme III, in the next section, discusses these post-9/11 experiences in detail.

**Theme III: Growing Up in a Post-9/11 World—Feeling Different**

When I began this research study, I set out to determine how Arab American college students constructed their racial identity and the ways in which the college environment may have influenced how this identity was shaped. Early in my research, shortly after the first few interviews, I realized that much of what contributed to the racial identity of each student was shaped *before* entering college. An event that was voluntarily brought up by each participant was the horrific events of September 11, 2001 (9/11). Although the participants were only between the ages of four and 12 years old at the time, the issues they, their family members, and the Arab community in the Chicago metropolitan area faced following the 9/11 events, greatly influenced the early onset of feeling *different* and *othered*, terms that carry the message “You are not one of us.” I was
moved by the stories the students told in one interview after the next—the discrimination they faced as children, losing friends, vandalized homes and cars, bullying—all a rude awakenings for children who had nothing to do with the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. I did not have a question that in any way referenced 9/11 on the questionnaire or during the interview; however, when asked if the students ever felt different (what different meant to them was left to their interpretation), the students often mentioned that it was after 9/11 that they realized that they were not “just American.” Their Arabness was thrust front and center and their reality was that, as children and for the years to follow, they would have to explain, defend, answer, and educate others about what it meant to be Arab and or Muslim, even if they were non-Muslim.

Zayn spoke about how he grew into the understanding that he was different:

Before college, I think, elementary school, I was too little and too ignorant to know what was going around me but when I entered middle school, I start getting that understanding of more of how my parents felt or how my older sister felt and . . . I mean, just coming out to events like parent-teacher conferences or awards night, you have that stare from everybody, like, you're sitting in the middle and everyone’s looking at you; your mom/s wearing a scarf.

You’re just different. You’re not categorized as White. People look at you as different. It just made me feel different. Like I said, I was ignorant in elementary school, so I was blindsided by that. Entering middle school and high school opened my mind towards that and definitely not a comfortable state, especially because it had such a high White population and not Arabic population and, especially, anything you did, you were judged on; that’s why you try to be on point with everything.

Zayn was reflecting on defining moments where clearly his identity as an Arab American was being shaped, even if he did not realize it at the time. The students in this study interpreted current day discrimination against Arabs and Muslims as a result of 9/11; however, as Cainkar (2009) noted, stereotyping and discrimination of Arabs and Muslims preceded 9/11.
The events of 9/11 were mentioned by students regardless of their gender, age, or religious affiliation. As Lara discussed what had shaped her identity, she mentally traveled back to her childhood and that day she also blames for placing Arabs in America in a negative light:

I remember that when I was younger . . . 9/11, when that happened, I would think that people were more afraid to say that they were Arab, just because of what happened and whatnot. For me, it was a different story. When I grew up I would still say I was Arab, and it would get kind of awkward when they would be talking about 9/11 in class. You would feel like some people are looking at you. I mean, it's usually not intentional, but I would still try to tell them that I'm Arab. You would want to speak out, just to let them know that not all Arabs are the same, or not all Muslims are the same, so they can tell the difference.

Through these stories, I realized that the students were carrying around the weight of events and issues to which they had no connection. Regardless of their disconnection to the events of 9/11, others still connected them to these horrific acts of violence. Like many Arab Americans living in the U.S., they felt stereotyped, were sometimes paranoid, and often they felt they had to explain that Arabs and Muslims are not bad. This is weight that has been carried around since they were children and there is no sign that that weight will be lifted anytime soon. The reality that the participants and other Arab Americans live in is one that is shaped by national and global politics.

Several of the participants made comments about Arab Americans being associated with terrorism; this is an unfortunate reality for youth who had not even had a chance to graduate college and join the workforce and a daunting label to have to live with as a young person living in the U.S. Zayn remarked: “I think, after 9/11, we were just categorized as being terrorists” (Zayn, personal communication, 2015). Some of the students spoke of the backlash they and their families dealt with after 9/11. When Nader was asked if there were any experiences he had that helped shape his identity, he
automatically referred to 9/11. This event was a topic that reoccurred in his answers and it was clear that the events of 9/11 resulted in experiences Nader, at least as a child, might have been able to avoid if it had never happened:

Yeah. I mentioned earlier, 9/11. I hate to keep talking about 9/11 but it was an important period. It was the first, when it happened, the first couple weeks were really hard. We got people attacking our home. We lived in Homer Glen. It was very heavily non-colored out there. Now it’s a lot different... when that happened, people bashed in our car windows; we had a car sitting outside, a truck sitting outside, red, white, and blue that said go home. I was 9 years old; I think 9 or 10. My friends were non-Arab, the day after, the week after suddenly couldn’t hang with me. We couldn’t go down the street and hang out like we usually, I would see them playing and they straight up told me: “Our parents said we can’t play with you.” I’m like you, okay, “I get it.” I was very quick to understand it.

The participants in this study made it evident they were well aware that having personal experiences with prejudice, discrimination, and hate acts, and their marginalization in mainstream society does not mean these experiences are formally recognized by the local, state, or federal authorities. Because Arab is not recognized by the federal government as a distinct racial minority group, hate crimes against them are not properly categorized and recorded. When hate crimes have been reported to the police, the victim has often been recorded as White.

**Hijab.** Sometimes the participants were with family members when verbal attacks took place. By witnessing the discrimination, which was not necessarily directed at them, participants were indirectly affected. Such experiences influenced how they shaped their identity as “different” or as an “outsider” in this country. Omar, a student who attended a private, faith-based university in Chicago, recalled his mother’s fear of leaving her home following the events on September 11, 2001:

Yeah, I definitely pride myself on who I am and it’s just because I’m so in tuned with my culture that I love it so much. Sometimes I do feel... Actually I’ve never had a moment in my life where I haven't said that I was Arab or Palestinian,
but I know my mom faced a lot of criticism in her life when she first came to America wearing the hijab. We came a few months before 9/11, so five months later after that incident . . . I just remember my mother being under a lot of stress. She didn't want to leave the house because she was scared, and she didn't have a job for such a long time until it settled down after two years.

Omar was not the only one who endured such experiences with his mother. Alia shared an account of a verbal attack against her and her mother as well. She also made a point to mention that this happened on more than one occasion. Alia shared the hateful words that were spewed toward them: “Get out of our land; get out of America; go back to your country!” It was like, ‘What? What did we do to you? We have rights like you have rights.’ There's a lot that happened.”

The stories that Omar and Alia shared were consistent with the data collected by Cainkar (2009) and published in Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11. Based on the study’s data, Cainkar found that the backlash against Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 was gendered with Muslim females who wore hijab, thus serving as the easy targets of anti-Arab/anti-Muslim bigotry. Cainkar (2009) explained: “Arab/Muslim women reported experiencing hate encounters at twice the rate of men” (p. 230). The data from my study indicate that the participants who wore hijab also reported being on the receiving end of negative or ignorant comments more than my male participants, with male participants like Omar confirming such experiences by sharing what his mother, who wore hijab, endured. The participants in my study reaffirmed Cainkar’s (2009) conclusion:

I argue that rather than violence or terrorism, the threat of women in hijab rests in perceptions that these women openly, even proudly, conform to a set of prescriptions and values that are interpreted as un-American, a meaning imputed to them by messages diffused throughout American culture. As perceived adherents to an un-American way of life, American women in hijab are easily
transformed into enemy aliens who can be commanded by neighborhood
defenders to “Go home.” (p. 30)

The stories shared by the participants in my study were not uncommon in the southwest
suburbs where the majority of them lived. As discussed, even the males in my study
witnessed or were aware of the backlash against women who wore hijab, such as their
mothers. Furthermore, “common American understandings of the meaning of hijab laid
the groundwork for constructing women who wore hijab as a foreign cultural threat that
required outcasting after the 9/11 attacks” (Cainkar, 2009, p. 234). The next section
discusses other post-9/11 experiences of my participants.

Fear and attempts to blend in. There were a variety of experiences the student
participants shared that conveyed how the post-9/11 era influenced them or their family
members. Some participants described how family members attempted to protect
themselves from anti-Arab sentiments by simply lying about their Arab identity. Shireen,
one of the female Arab American students who also identified as Greek Orthodox, shared
that she recalls her older siblings referring to themselves as Greek instead of Arab
American after 9/11. Her family did not live in an area where there was a substantially
large Arab American community and she was singled out as one of the few Arab
American children in her elementary school—a memory that she spoke of with disdain.
When Shireen revealed that her older siblings told others they were Greek, I asked if they
did this out of fear:

Yeah, definitely fear and people are not being educated about it. I never like felt
they were Greek; I knew they were lying. To me that was always funny but I
think . . . what it made sense to me why they did that is when I started learning
about it and how people like Muslim Americans would try to build their places of
worship, or they would try to buy land, or homes, and people would refuse them
out of fear. I think I understood from that perspective of why they did it, but I’ve
never once been ashamed [of being Arab American].
During our discussion of the pre-college experiences that had shaped his identity, Naser could not help but mention 9/11. His insight differed to an extent in comparison to the other participants. He spoke of how that event motivated Arab Americans and Muslim Americans to get more involved on a local and national level and to take the initiative to better educate the community at large about who Arabs and Muslims *really* were. Naser recognized that discrimination against the community could sometimes be based on physical features that are typically associated with Arabs; however, as a fair-skinned, blonde male, he had not experienced direct discrimination, stating: “I am a White-passing male. I do not carry the faith in the way that other people do visibly. Like my dad, he has a beard, or even a Sikh person with a turban” (Naser, personal communication, 2015). Naser tried to search for something positive:

9/11 was that. . . . It is hard to not mention that one. That mobilized the community in a way that like made us really cognizant of the fact that we were Muslim and different and it is problematic. It had its pluses where it made the community want to be more civically engaged. I participated in Get Out to Vote volunteering and stuff. At the same time . . . Islamophobia is a thing. It is real. Some incidents happen. Chapel Hill being the worst kind of example.

The Chapel Hill event mentioned by Naser took place on February 10, 2015. Three Arab American Muslim college students, Deah Shaddy Barakat, his wife Yusor Mohammad Abu-Salha, and Yusor’s sister Razan Mohammad Abu-Salha were murdered in a single attack in the home of Deah and Yusor by their neighbor. Deah was a second-year student at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill School of Dentistry. Yusor was a North Carolina State University (NCSU) graduate who was planning on entering the UNC dental school, and Razan was a NCSU student majoring in architecture and environment design. This event is known as one of the most horrific hate crimes
perpetuated against Muslim Americans in recent years. Such an event signals to not only Arab American and Muslim American college students, but to all Arab and Muslim Americans that their safety is a concern while such violent hatred is alive and well in the U.S.

The themes that have been discussed thus far provide information as to how the participants shaped and constructed their identity as Arab Americans. The participants in the study all felt a sense of legitimacy in their responses to be identified based on their own terms. I did not experience hesitancy when questions were asked about how they identified themselves. Moreover, the participants were vocal about how they do not identify themselves. In the next section, the opposition to the current racial categorization as White is discussed by the participants in this study from the perspective of a college student.

Theme IV: “We’re Not White”: Checking a Box That Does Not Fit

As discussed in chapters one and two, prior research has found that the Arab Americans living in the Chicago metropolitan area do not recognize “White” as a racial category which fits them (Cainkar 2009). In Jamal’s (2008) analysis of previous surveys conducted in the Arab American community on identity and race classification, the author concluded that “even though the U.S. census continues to classify Arab Americans as ‘white,’ a solely ‘white’ designation may not capture the diverse and complex ways that Arab American individuals experience ‘race’” (p. 319).

The college students interviewed for this study on racial identity construction were asked how they generally respond to questions regarding race when confronted with them on questionnaires, applications, and other documents. Although the majority of the
participants stated they generally check the “White” category, they also stated they do so because that is what they were told to do by an authority figure (teacher, administrator, and in some cases, a parent). However, the students acknowledged that they do not feel that this category accurately represents them, and they sometimes select for the “other” option, if it is provided, and if given a space, they write in Arab American or Middle Eastern. One student went so far as creating a box for herself when filling out a job application, checked it off, and wrote in “Arab American,” which she believed was a more appropriate description for her racial identity than the options provided.

On the participant background questionnaire, the students were asked if they identified with the term “White”: Do you identify with the term “White”? Why or Why not? The students were asked the same question during the interview. The answers on the questionnaire ranged from a few words, to a full paragraph. Some of the answers are provided here to show the commonality in their responses, although these commonalities were stated in various ways:

Omar: “Hell no. Because I’m simply not.”

Naser: “No. I am White passing, but “White” as a context and racial construction and experience is not something I identify with at all.”

Lara: “No. Because I am not “White.”

George: “I would have to say no. I do not identify myself with the term White. I feel there should be a separate category for Arab Americans.”

Linda: “No. I do not consider myself White because as an Arab, I am not treated as I am “White.”

Sarah: “No. White is a construct. White for me is a European construct. It’s a way to blend Arabs with the majority and not recognize who we are as a community and what we stand for.”
While some of the participants were adamant that a box for “Arab American” should be available to check on applications and other documents, others felt comfortable with “Middle Eastern.” Frustration was one emotion that was evident during the discussion with Lara about how to handle race questions on paperwork:

It still annoys me when I have to do applications and I usually don’t want to click “White.” I want to click “other,” but not all applications let you choose that. It’s just annoying, because I’m not White. If they’re trying to see how many different nationalities are in the United States, like not everyone’s White and America[ns] know that. If they really wanted to get a count of the different people here, you would think that they would be equal.

Along the same line of thinking but specific to college applications, Dina reported the following:

When I was applying to undergrad they tell you, yeah you may not think you're White or like, yeah, I’m Middle Eastern, but they’d always tell us to fill out the White box because that’s what they consider us to be. They consider us to be white; they don’t necessarily have just a box that's for a Middle Eastern person. That actually would get me really angry because, yeah, I understand like the color of my skin may be white and that might be the easiest way to explain a whole group of people to them, but I think we deserve our own box. A lot of times if there is an “other” [category], I would choose that. I’d put “other” and then I’d put Middle Eastern because I do think that that needs to be recognized. . . . I do think that having a box that says Middle Eastern, or Arab, or whatever it is, having people check that off is really important because that’ll add to the diversity of the school itself.

Dina’s reference to having a space on a college application to identify one’s heritage is an example of how limiting the race/ethnicity categories on a college application to those only required by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) produces inaccurate data on the actual diversity of the student body. Underestimating the diversity on a campus can influence strategic planning, budgeting for departments who service specific student populations, college marketing efforts, and college services to name a few.
The students seemed very aware that their heritage certainly adds to the diversity of the country and of course to the diversity of college campuses. Some of the participants referred to marketing campaigns on their college campuses that promoted and celebrated the diversity of the student body, but also saw such marketing as shallow when they did not see a place for them to document their heritage on a college application. Dina challenged the notion that higher education institutions truly care about diversity and accurate racial demographic data:

I think we need a separate box, that’s my major thing. Just to add to the diversity of the school. If they’re going to consider us White then . . . A lot of schools claim, oh we want our school to be diverse. Okay well why don’t you add more boxes so that people can check off what they, themselves, identify with? Because I think self-identification is very important as well. If you identify yourself as a certain race, that’s important and that should be important to the schools to help diversify.

Nader discussed how identifying with the racial category of White would mean you would also benefit from White privilege, which he did not. He expressed the clear contradiction between institutionalized policy and human reality. Like several of his counterparts in this study, Nader recognized that while he did have some White friends, he did find comfort being around other Arab Americans and minority students:

No, I don’t feel White. I guess I could give you a whole rant about White privilege and whatnot, but I think we’ve overplayed that in this country. All different races have complained about White privilege. . . . It’s there; to keep it short, it’s there. I don’t feel it. I don’t get any privilege. I don’t feel a sense of comfort when I’m in a room with non-Arabs, non-colored people. I feel more comfortable with the minorities than I do with the decreasing majority of White people.

The image that comes to mind when the students were asked if they considered themselves “White” was not how they saw themselves. Although some of the participants acknowledged that race was a social construct and they were aware that
racial categories have been much debated, there was agreement that “White” was associated with European, not Arab, Middle Eastern, or North African. Lara described how she handles the race boxes she sees on applications and shared what “White” meant to her:

I sometimes end up putting “other,” but not all applications let you do that. I think there should be a box for Arab-Americans, just because we shouldn’t be under the box that’s “White” ‘cause we’re not necessarily White. I mean, from my point of view, I just feel like White goes with Europe or Caucasian. I just think that I’m not White.

Some of the participants stated that they were well aware that phenotypically they may be considered “White,” but identifying with this term carries a larger meaning to which these participants did not relate. This is explained by Dean:

Because, I guess, my skin tone is lighter, everyone always says, “You’re White,” or “You look White,” but I know . . . I don’t really get White privilege, especially when I’m with my mom, because my mom wears a headscarf, because we are Muslim, and once they see me with her they know. They’re like, “Oh, they’re Arabs.” When someone sees my ID and they’re like, “Oh . . . They see my full name, they’ll go: “That’s an Arab name.” They’re like, “Oh, you looked White.” I was like, “Well, I'm sorry. What do you want me to say?” Then they start asking questions. Where are you from? Where are you going? This, this, and that. It’s things like that.

Among the participants, there was a common sentiment that “White” refers to people who are of European descent. To be labeled as “White” was inaccurate to students like Sarah who believed the history of Arabs should be taken into account when being racially categorized:

I feel like people generalize White to be mostly people who are from the European places . . . We have a rich history and we are colonized people. For us to say that we are White, no we’re not. Just because we’re colonized doesn’t mean you forget this history that we had and this culture that we have.

That’s the beauty of this country, that you’re not just supposed to be White. When I think of White, I think of European. Linguistically we're not European.
Culturally we’re not European. Historically we’re not European. For us to be called White, I don’t think that does the Arab community justice.

During my interview with Dean, a freshman in college, he expressed that although he might “pass” as “White,” he certainly saw a difference in treatment once some discovered he was Arab American. Dean believed a category like “White” generalizes too many people and as he confronted race categories on paperwork, he many times was confused about to what to check. Dean also raised the question about why a box for Arab Americans does not exist in the first place:

I feel like we shouldn’t generalize everyone. I feel like what's the difference if we were to put Arab American? It’s another box and it’s not like we’re a small minority. We’re a good amount of people, so I feel if we were to put Arab American it would be easier to check studies . . . I feel it would be a lot easier for Arab students, because at the time I didn’t know if I was to put Asian, if I were to put white, or check “other” and put Arab American. I feel like it’d be a lot easier on people . . . Why isn’t there a box for us?

If the Office of Management and Budget recognized Arab Americans as a distinct minority group, or short of that, if this population was provided with the opportunity to identify itself as such on the census, in surveys, and on other forms, then this would provide the Arab community with an opportunity to better advocate for much needed services in areas where they are concentrated. As Shryrock (2008) noted,

Arabs do not belong to a pan-ethnic/racial identity that is officially marked as alternative to “white” by federal authorities and can serve, in ways sanctioned by law, as a site of compensation for discrimination, protection against civil liberties abuses, and access to special zones of inclusion and representation. Without a label of this sort, mainstreaming is more difficult to achieve because Arab Americans who live in areas of whiteness and embody its styles . . . must constantly “pay” for their association with Arabs who are stigmatized as Other without benefit of a label that gives “Other Arabs” access to compensatory programs. (p. 104)

**Race and ethnicity categories in higher education.** In higher education institutions, advocacy may be in the form of distinct student support services, customized
retention efforts, and community outreach programs. Studies focused on the Arab community in the Chicago metropolitan area have found that Arab Americans do not identify with the categorization of “White.” For students who do not identify as “White” and feel strongly that their Arab heritage should be recognized, it may be disheartening to not have documented acknowledgement as such in the public sphere. For example, because colleges and universities typically base demographic questions on their entrance applications on federal reporting requirements, soliciting more detailed demographic information, such as subcategories for White on the race question, are not generally included.

The race and ethnic categories in IPEDS (see Appendix B) are prime examples of where colleges and universities get their race/ethnicity category directives. However, IPEDS also does not prohibit utilization of more categories for data collection as long as when reports are submitted, the data are in the specified categories IPEDS uses. The rigidness of existing higher education application question thus produces data that are not detailed and not reflective of the true institutional demography.

Thoughts on MENA. During each interview, we discussed the possibility of the U.S. Census adding an ethnic category in 2020 called Middle Eastern or North African (MENA). According to the Arab American Institute Foundation (2016),

the creation of a coherent ethnic category for the MENA region will have a positive impact on the treatment and services available to members of the Arab American community. The undercounting of Arab Americans has served as a barrier to representation, education, health, and employment for the community. (p. 1)

While the majority of the participants felt positive about adding such a category, which would provide the opportunity for Arab Americans to be counted, several students felt
that MENA was too large of a category and they did not understand why there just could not be a category for Arab Americans.

A few students commented that they felt Middle Eastern should be a stand-alone category and that partnering it with North African would be too broad of a category. Maya, a graduate student at a public university in Chicago who was studying education, recognized that early Arab immigrants to this country advocated to be counted as White; however, she also felt that this categorization did not accurately fit the Arab American population in the U.S. now:

I understand the push for it. It was very purposely done, like the history behind that was very [intentional], then so it makes sense. We aren’t White; we are people of color; our narratives in the United States are not the same as a White person so I think it’s important, and I’m glad to see the push of questioning Arab identity within the scheme of the American narrative, so I'm all for it. I know a lot of people are always like, “Oh” . . . they’re filling out these questionnaires before they can take an exam, and they kind of get stuck on that one question, so . . . It used to not bother me; but I feel like as I’m growing up more and becoming more aware of identity politics, it makes sense that there is a need there, especially because the Arab world is so diverse.

Maya proceeded to breakdown the large MENA category and reflected on how diverse the subgroups really are within MENA. The proposed category would not only include Arab countries that range from Saudi Arabia to Palestine to Algeria, but also Iran, Turkey, and Israel. She recognized the complexity of creating such a category, but also felt it was unfair and complicated “to just have everyone compartmentalized and put in White,” which is how the category currently stands (Maya, personal communication, 2015). Maya felt the White category was too broad and included too many subgroups, including ones that she did not believe should be counted as White, such as Arabs. The issues Maya brought up are also debated among scholars, government agencies, and Arab
American organizations that have worked collaboratively and independently to see change regarding how Arab Americans are counted on the U.S. Census.

**Theme V: College: Reinforcing Arab American Identity**

For students, college can be a transformative experience. College not only gives students access to higher education within a classroom setting, it also provides a bastion of opportunities outside of the classroom. College has the potential to expose students to diverse points of view and experiences, political justice movements, new social situations, great opportunities, and other experiences that they would have never encountered had they not been on a college campus. Such exposure may happen in the classroom, in the hallways, in meetings for student clubs and organizations, during athletic, cultural, or political events, during student run rallies, as well community sponsored events on campus. Linda described how some of the classes she took in college had helped her develop her identity:

I think I’ve always maintained the same type of, I guess, pride as an Arab American. I've just learned how to . . . What’s the word . . . I guess I just educated myself more on just the whole topic of being Arab American. I took a communications class that was in regards to intercultural communications, so dealing with other people and diversity in the workplace and in school. I also took an Arab media class, so I kind of learned about the misconceptions about Arabs in the community. I think those actually helped me kind of shape what Arab American is like.

**A desire for a sense of belonging.** Despite the chances to be involved on campus—from athletics to students clubs—the students in this study expressed a desire for a sense of belonging that stemmed from their life experiences of being *othered*. I received the impression from many of the students in my study that simple respect and the expectation that they are not defined by typical Arab stereotypes was all that they...
wanted. College is hard enough to navigate without the added pressure of defending who you are.

The participants in this study all shared experiences they had that they felt contributed to how they shaped their racial identity. Several of them spoke about the pride they have in their Arab heritage and college giving them a place to educate others about their Arab roots. Omar spoke about college providing him with the opportunity to develop how he articulated his sense of pride in his Palestinian heritage. He also found allies on campus who he described as “also oppressed.” During the interview, Omar explained this chance to connect with other students:

I came into college feeling prideful, but also I couldn’t articulate verbally or mentally why I like being so prideful. It comes down to the idea that it’s my heritage. It comes down to the idea that I’m different and I like feeling different, specifically because I look different . . . specifically because so many people try to make you feel bad for being different. . . . [College] it’s helped fuel my pride in the way that I have learned so much and I have become so angry, not the bad kind of angry, towards my oppressors, that I’ve met other people who are oppressed that it has just strengthened my resolve as a social justice activist.

The solidarity that Omar found on his college campus with other students who have faced prejudice, oppression, injustice, and discrimination helped him cope with his alsoed experiences. He recognized that students from other marginalized communities had similar experiences. As an activist who was vocal about the occupation of Palestine, he found comfort in finding ways to unify with other activists on his campus, specifically within the Black Lives Matter movement.

Being in a state of feeling different was not always a situation that was considered negative by study participants. Several of the students articulated that their non-White status was a benefit, regardless of the associated territory. Nader stated that he did feel
different than others on his college campus; however, he was able to see this difference as something positive to share:

Yes, but not in a negative way. College is supposed to bring diversity and have people meet people they wouldn’t normally meet in their micro communities or the communities, whatever you want to call them. Yeah, I feel different but I feel different in an empowering way. We get to interact with all different types of people. There’s just so much growth that can be achieved.

Nader’s ability to recognize the positive opportunities for growth and a chance to connect to students from various communities was quite impressive. Based on the data collected from the participants and their responses regarding being confronted with questions based on their heritage, it was clear that the spotlight of being Arab American was hard to escape as they pursued their college education. In the next section, the students explain how they dealt with the questions they were asked and how they rose to the task of creating a better understanding of the Arab and Muslim community, sometimes voluntarily and other times, involuntary.

**Student ambassadors for creating understanding.** Being Arab American on a college campus comes with territory that a student does not necessarily solicit themselves as they attempt to balance their academic and social activities, maintain good standing in their classes, and explore the various activities on campus. This unsolicited territory is most often attached to students who may physically display features that the status quo associates with Arabs—dark hair, tan skin, a beard for a man, hijab for a woman. Some students can blend in and may not be physically viewed as an Arab, but then their Arabic names may give them away. In the context of the higher education environment, the unsolicited territory means that classmates, professors, staff, or administrators expect students to be prepared to answer questions at any time and any place about their status as
an Arab (and/or Muslim), regardless if the questions are invited. Because negative images of Arabs in the media in the U.S. have stirred suspicion of this community, it is not uncommon for Arabs and Muslims to be placed in situations where they must defend their communities, their heritage, their faith, and sometimes even apologize for tragic events to which they had no connection.

However, with that said, this unsolicited territory is many times welcomed by students in college who themselves are continuing their process of self-discovery, and they do not mind being bombarded by questions, even ignorant ones. At least this seemed to be the common belief among most of the participants in this study. The participants described how they tried their best to educate their fellow students, as well as faculty and staff, about what it means to be Arab American and or Muslim and Christian Arab Americans.

The students interviewed openly discussed the comments and questions they often received that they attributed to their Arab American identity. When confronted with questions, they graciously answered, maintained their composure, and understood that many times it was not malicious intent, but rather curiosity and an eagerness to learn about others that sparked such conversations on their college campuses. Questions ranged from superficial inquiries about drinking alcohol and attending parties to questions about religious beliefs and cultural practices. Alia, a Muslim community college student, provided some examples of this:

They will be asking me about the hijab and if you drink, why don’t you drink, if you pray, and why don’t you pray . . . They’ll ask me are you allowed to have a boyfriend. . . . Can you smoke? What can you do? Why can’t you do what we do, technically. They do ask me that.
When confronted with specific questions about Islam, Alia admitted that sometimes she does not know the answer, but does attempt to research for the answer or will call her mother for back-up. Ali generally would stop the conversation:

[I’ll say,] “One minute, wait up. Let me hit up the Internet or let me call my mom, one minute. Let me make sure I’m saying this right to you.” Because I don’t want to give them the wrong answer because I don’t want them to think, oh, this person said this; that doesn’t make sense.

Alia expressed her attempts to not misguide those who were asking questions. In order to protect her identity as an Arab and Muslim, she ensured others that she was a reliable source for their inquiries by searching for correct information. Although Alia did not wear hijab, she was still often questioned about it and was asked why she did not wear it. The Western obsession with Muslim women who wear hijab often plays out in the media because Orientalist views still dominate much of the rhetoric on major news outlets and in U.S. popular culture. Shaheen (2012) asserted:

Degrading images of Arabs are a slanderous aspect of popular culture’s history; they have been virtually unchallenged for more than a century. As a rule, Arab women have been projected as mostly mute and submissive figures: belly dancers, bundles in black, and beasts of burden. Arab men surface as villains: Bedouin bandits, sinister sheikhs, buffoons, and gun wielding “terrorists.” (p. 15)

George, a male Christian student in this study, admitted he was even asked questions about hijab. There was consensus among the participants that non-Arabs who asked them questions did not generally understand the difference between Arabs and Muslims, or Arab Christians and Arab Muslims. Some of the participants shared stories of being put on the spot at inopportune times to answer questions about their dress. Dina recounted an awkward moment when she was asked about her hijab:

This one kid asked me, he was like, oh so why do you wear that hijab? Then I told him, I was like, oh it’s part of my religion. I guess they confuse culture and religion because he believed that because I'm Arab, like my father forced me to
wear it. It was in front of a group of students, like we were working on a project. I’ll admit it might have been inappropriate for him to bring it up at that time because we were working on a project . . . Like, whatever, if you want to ask me a question maybe another time would be better, but I took it as an opportunity to try to separate like okay this is our culture and this is the religion. I’m not wearing this because my dad forced me to; I’m wearing it because I wanted to and because I’m a Muslim and not everyone has to wear it and things like that. I take it more as a learning opportunity, but yeah, I feel like just wearing the scar in general when I do go to school, people know automatically where I come from, or they assume automatically that I’m Arab. It just so happens that I am an Arab.

Regardless of the discomfort that such a question imposed on her, Dina utilized the moment to educate her classmates. This was a common practice of the other participants as well—*keep calm and educate on*. Dina kept an open mind about answering questions because she felt like it was an opportunity to share with others who she is. She related another situation that serves as a typical example of the impromptu moments that subconsciously reinforce the Arab American identity and is a reminder that despite your comfort with yourself in a classroom with students from various backgrounds, it is not uncommon to be *othered*. Dina reflected on her identity:

I enjoy being an Arab American and even though people have questions and they may be ignorant at first, I’m always happy to talk to them about it and answer their questions because feel like it's important to know who I am and where I came from.

Omar admitted that it could be physically and emotionally taxing to be confronted with questions about Arabs and Muslims:

Lately, it’s affected me to such an emotional level where it causes me so much stress that I do feel it physical. I feel physically and emotionally exhausted from just constantly having to worry about all the problems, all the different kinds of questions that I’ll get whether they mean well or don't mean well with the questions. I’m just tired. Sometimes I just want to sit back and be White.
Regardless of the intention behind the questions, Dean agreed that responding defensively or aggressively would not be the correct way to handle the situation. Dean offered his perspective:

I feel like you shouldn’t respond with anger, especially. I feel like a lot of people don’t know what’s going on and they only hear a certain amount of things . . . when it comes to things like that I always respond calmly and understand where people come from that maybe don’t know as much.

The Christian participants in this study believed that questions about Arab culture, traditions, political issues, or about Islam opens the door to have an educational conversation about Arab Christians. There is a common assumption that all Arabs are Muslim and although the majority of Arab Americans in the U.S. are actually Christian, this is a little known fact among the general public. Linda was sometimes asked why she did not wear hijab and that led to discussions about Muslim and Christian Arabs. She admitted that most questions she was confronted with were about hijab and Arab marriage practices. Linda invited such discussions:

I actually like these discussions, to be honest, because some people just don’t know. If you let them know, they learn something new. I’m not very defensive about it. I’m just like, “Oh. Well, being Middle Eastern or being Arab is kind of more of like an ethnicity or like a heritage or a background, whereas being Muslim or Christian is an actual religion. . . .” I don’t mind it sometimes when people ask. I try to just approach it in the nicest educational way possible. . . . It’s not that, I hate to sound like I’m saying, “Not all Arabs are Muslim or not all Arabs are Christians,” that type of a thing, because it’s not necessarily a bad thing; I just want people to know that there is a difference.

Linda remarked that her best friend was Muslim and she did hang out with Muslim Americans so she did not blame other students for assuming she was Muslim considering her main group of friends was Muslim. George also encountered the same ignorance about Christian Arabs:
The first thing is people are amazed when I tell them that I’m Christian. They’re like, wow, you’re Christian. I thought you can only be Muslim if you’re Arabian. I was like, really, okay. I can’t blame them. I try to teach them and I try to educate them. I’ve been asked that a lot.

Among the participants in this study, there was a common sense of accomplishments that accompanies educating the public about Arab Americans. Education was a chance to dispel myths about their community and take ownership of the situation by turning it to an opportunity to communicate the positive aspects about Arabs and the Middle East. George mentioned that he had many conversations with his peers and his professors about his Arab heritage as well as his trips to Jordan:

People most of the time, honestly, when they hear Middle East, they think of what they see on TV. They think of this barren land, all these broken-down buildings. It’s just desert. It’s such a horrible place to be but after I talked about my experiences and sometimes when it’s just like me and the instructor talking, everybody around is just listening. They’re just amazed, just being, wow, those places actually exist. I don’t know. When I educate them like I tell them how great it is and how pretty it is, how beautiful like how nice the people are, the hospitality, it shines new light on the whole topic.

Some participants expressed that they were often confronted with questions about issues overseas, such as the conflict in Syria or in Palestine. Several of them had fond memories of visiting the “homeland” and were aware that although they knew the beauty of the Middle East in a way that others may not understand, answering questions and having discussions about topics related to conflict also opened doors to honor the rich history of their ancestors while also serving to educate fellow Americans. Naser articulated this well:

We can be ambassadors for our community in a way. . . . That there is no incongruity between this part of my identity and this part of my faith and this part of my citizenship and so on and the fact that my identity sort of strengthens my sense of citizenship because I don’t take it for granted. I never have a problem with it. Growing up, it is funny because I always wanted people to know I used to go to Syria every summer. That always strengthened my identity. Every summer
I would go... I spoke Arabic at home and then my Arabic would improve when I went to interact with my friends there and I would spend 2–3 months every summer. I basically would say that I spent my childhood in Syria because childhood happens in the summer. I was there all the time and so I was fortunate enough to go there every summer and I wanted people to know about Syria and now, sadly, when they know about Syria... When they think Syria, they think of it in this negative sense. They think of ISIS and they think of the civil war and now I don’t want to have to hear Syria on the news anymore because I know it’s always negative and I look forward to the day that that changes.

Personal accounts like this one offered by Naser exemplify the reality in which many Arab American college students operate. As Arabs and also as Americans, they must negotiate the multiple dimensions of their identity. Even though they are American, the love for their families’ countries of origin was very strong and several of the participants spoke of honoring and representing Palestinians, Syrians, Yemenis, and Jordanians in a way that provides a voice for those populations—one that is seldom heard in the West. Although this role can be challenging, as demonstrated by the testimony of the participants, the challenge is always welcomed as an obligation to educate others about who Arab Americans really are.

Throughout chapter four, I discussed the results of this research study which focused on the racial identity construction of Arab American college students. Five major themes emerged from the results of this study: (a) I am Arab American; (b) Pride Starts at Home; (c) Growing up in a Post 9/11 World: Feeling Different; (d) We’re not White: Checking a Box That Does Not Fit; and (e) College: Reinforcing Arab American Identity. The 14 participants in this study were candid as they recounted detailed stories from their adolescence and their college experiences. Based on the results of this study, it was clear that the participants were comfortable with their Arab American identity. Several of the students expressed that they could serve as ambassadors of change by
being open to answering questions about Arabs, Arab Americans, and Islam. They thought that they could help change the negative perception of Arab Americans in the U.S. by simply sharing who they are and by representing themselves well on campus and in the community.

Chapter five explores these themes further by offering an expanded analysis of these results and introduces the Arab American Identity Formation Model. In addition, the limitations of this study are discussed along with recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A lot of Arab Americans, they grew up here and do not have a clue about what their culture is about and what it is like back home so I feel like the people that have that insight should share it with everybody so that when they all grow up, it's like a snowball effect. You don't want your culture or anything to fade away. You just want to keep teaching the younger generation of our culture so that they could teach their kids and not forget about who they are when they grow up and not be known as the same person. (Zayn)

This quotation from the study participant named Zayn demonstrates the passion young Arab Americans feel for their Arab identity. As a researcher and educator, one of the reasons I embarked on this study of Arab American college students was not only to fill a void in the research, but also to provide insight for those who hope to have a better understanding of Arab Americans, particularly those in college settings. Higher education institutional personnel know very little about the Arab American student population on their campuses because detailed data are not usually collected on this population and because it is typically categorized as “White.” However, despite the lack of data, there is no doubt that Arab American college students are becoming more active on college campuses and thus increasing their visibility. This trend was emphasized by Samhan (1999): “In higher education, the dual visibility of Middle East studies departments and organized Arab student groups has provided its own opportunity for inclusion in multicultural structures” (p. 220). Although Middle Eastern/Arab studies programs are not a particularly new development in higher education, offering Arab
American studies is a new development. The recent increase in studies on Arab Americans and the eventual founding of the Arab American Studies Association has provided a space where scholarship on Arab Americans can be shared, debated, and discussed.

Research on Arab American college students is new to the field of higher education research. Studies like this one on the racial identity construction of Arab American college students provide higher education practitioners with a better understanding of the diversity of the Arab American students they may work with as well as an opportunity to learn more about how students shape and construct their identity. The responses of the participants in this study show that these college students felt that their Arab identity is their race. This is also in line with other studies on Arab Americans in which Arabs have been studied as a “racialized ethnic group” for many years (Cainkar, 2006b, p. 248). Scholars of Arab American studies may consider Arab American an ethnic identity while others may consider it a racial identity. Nevertheless, “racialization and racial identity formation should be seen as unfolding and ongoing processes for Arab Americans” (Cainkar, 2008, p. 51). In the interviews, study participants referred to their families’ countries of origin (Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, or Syria) as they discussed family trips overseas and family traditions, signaling that they felt a connection to their family country of origin. There was agreement among the participants that the best way to describe their identity was Arab American, although it was unclear when they started to specifically identify as Arab American. It was apparent, however, that by college, they did identify as Arab American. Cainkar (2016) researched high school age Palestinian youth regarding identity and found:
Palestinian is who you are, but Arab American is what you are. It is an identity that provides an anchor to a social place in American society where one can find belonging. Being Arab American offers a specific structural positionality that is comprehensible to oneself and others. It is a pan-ethnic, racialized identity that embraces non-whiteness while conferring a coherent social position in a racially organized society. Being Arab American reconciles all sorts of contradictions that being Palestinian American cannot in the US. (p. 46)

Cainkar’s analysis emphasized that while Arab American youth certainly feel a connection to their families’ countries of origin, their identity as Arab Americans is solidified at a young age.

**Summary of the Problem**

Higher education institutions tend to gather demographic race information on its applications by adopting the same race categories designated on the U.S. Census. Because the federal designation of Arab Americans is “White,” it is difficult to collect accurate data on this population because Arab Americans are not granted a separate category. Although Arab Americans are categorized as “White,” their lived experiences have been described as “not quite White” (Samhan, 1999, p. 209). This qualitative study provided an opportunity to explore the racial identity construction of Arab American college students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in the Chicago metropolitan area. Racial identity was explored under the pretext that race is a social construct and the study participants shared their lived experiences prior to entering college as well as college-related experiences that solidified their Arab American identity.

**Discussion of the Findings**

Through a phenomenological lens, this qualitative study focused on the central research question: How do Arab American college students construct, understand, and live their racial identities, and how does the college experience inform these
constructions, understandings, and lived realities? Subquestions that were considered throughout the duration of this research study included:

1. How does the racial identity of Arab American students influence their college experience?
2. What lived experiences do Arab American college students say contribute to the way they identify themselves?
3. Does the college experience influence the way Arab American students construct their racial identity? And if so, how?

These guiding questions shaped the interview questions. The analysis of the participants’ interview responses surfaced five themes that are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Major Themes Emerging From Participant Interviews

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<th>Theme I.</th>
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<td>Pride Starts at Home</td>
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<td>Theme III.</td>
<td>Growing up in a Post-9/11 World: Feeling Different</td>
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<td>Fear and Attempts to Blend in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme IV.</td>
<td>“We’re not White”: Checking a box that doesn’t fit</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Thoughts on MENA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme V.</td>
<td>College: Reinforcing Arab American Identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student Ambassadors for Creating Understanding</td>
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</table>
The students in this study candidly shared the lived experiences that influenced the construction of their racial identity. Despite the negative experiences that some of the study participants shared with me, which they believed were the result of their Arab identity, they displayed grace in the face of racial slurs and hateful targeted incidents. While they did not deny internalizing the othering they experienced, many of them expressed motivation to set a “good example” so as to change the negative image of Arabs (and Muslims) in the U.S. When asked how he responds to negative comments about Arab Americans, Zayn stated:

I want people to recognize me as being good, polite, and respectful whether it's work, school, at home, in the neighborhood. You represent your community; you represent yourself; you represent your culture and your background, so I feel like if you respond indirectly of truly accomplishing your goals and really succeeding in life, people will look at you differently. That's how I respond.

Some of the students hoped to make a lasting impact on their college or university by being active with student organizations. Omar viewed his involvement in student organizations as a privilege he should not take for granted:

If not now, when? If not us, who? I really take it to heart that I’m active in these things because it's not just for me. To say that it's for my pride only is really selfish. It's because I have a voice in America that my family in Palestine doesn’t have. Anyone in Palestine doesn’t have. I have to acknowledge . . . I want White people to acknowledge their privilege, which means that I also have to acknowledge my privilege as a Palestinian in America. Meaning, I have the power. I have the utilities and the accessibility and the connections to make a change so it’s important for me to make that step. I can’t turn my back and say, “White Americans need to acknowledge their privilege,” and then, in turn, do nothing for my community.

Omar felt passionately about making a difference, stating: “I want to make an impact. I want to come back and see this is the specific impact that I was a part of.” Omar’s motivation to make a positive impact, to utilize the space he has at his university to be part of a bigger movement, was certainly influenced by his motivation to educate others
about who he truly is. I asked Omar “Have you ever had any negative experiences because of who you are?” and his response was: “Yeah, most definitely. The first obvious one is because of my religion. I’m automatically equated with being a terrorist.”

As a Muslim, Omar acknowledged that being confronted with questions about his faith can be mentally exhausting. He was open and did not mind answering questions but there did come a point where he got tired and thought to himself:

“Oh my God, just Google it.” But then, I’m stuck in this middle point where I’m like if they Google it, 50 Islamophobic articles are going to come up. That's another thing that I have to deal with, the responsibility of explaining myself and my lifestyle and why I'm not out to destroy the world.

As discussed in chapter four, for Arab American college students, responsibilities on campus extend beyond just successfully completing academic work. Handling unsolicited invitations to discuss their faith and defending their Arab heritage while insisting they are as American as their classmates, became a part of their college experience whether they liked it or not. The attempts of the participants in this study to live “normal” lives, let alone have a “typical” college experience, seemed impossible due to their Arab American identity. Cainkar (2006b) provided a perspective on this struggle:

One need only view television and film representations, consult public opinion polls, or spend time among Arab Americans, who strive to lead normal lives in the context of ever-present stereotypes and hostile images to establish their current subaltern position. Negative perceptions of Arabs have been so widely held as to have created measurable harmful impacts on the character of the Arab American experience. (p.246)

Regardless of the negativity associated with being Arab American, the participants spoke about negative experiences as though they were a call for advocacy. The students were motivated to teach others about their Arab background and identity and clarify negative assumptions about Arabs and Muslims. Cainkar (2016) reflected on this:
As a racialized identity, being Arab American holds the potential for resources and solidarity to mobilize with others who share a similar positionality, as well as the capacity to be who one is on one’s own terms. It is an identity that allows each person to assert his or her Americanness and Arabness with pride. Why now? For some time Arabs have been cast by others as the antipode to whiteness, but never as vehemently as in the era of the post-September 11 war on terror. These post-September 11 generation youth experienced that social position intensely, and have decided to occupy and defend it. (p. 46)

The term “Arab American” solidified unity among the students in this study. Regardless of their gender, their religious background, which college they attended, or their age, all participants rallied around this term as an identity they were proud of. However, this is not to say that their lived experiences were not unique. The next section explores the diversity among the participants.

One Size Does Not Fit All

This study provides a snapshot of the Arab American college student experience. Because the participants were students attending three different post-secondary institutions, an important takeaway is that regardless of the sector of the institution (community college, public university, faith-based university), their experiences were similar in nature. One of the most interesting outcomes of this study is that despite the number of variables (gender, religion, family country of origin, age, college sector), the students had common life experiences and common college experiences that influenced how they constructed their identity as Arab Americans. However, regardless of the similarities of their experiences, the diversity that also existed among the participants should still be taken into account. The complexity of the experiences each student lived should not be simply discounted as a “typical” or “standard” Arab American student experience. For example, the experiences of the females in the study who wore hijab were not the same experiences of the male participants who were not readily recognized
as Arab or Muslim. Although the latter group can sympathize with the former and had also witnessed the discriminatory treatment of some of their mothers who wore hijab, male and female experiences are not the same, nor are those of persons who are easily marked as Arab or Muslim and those who are not. The main point here is that although we need categories to conduct social scientific and other analyses, and we live in a society in which people are categorized by race, gender, education, faith, socioeconomic background, and so on, thus rendering the categories socially meaningful, we must not essentialize these categories and neglect the complexity that exists within them.

Although all of the participants were comfortable with their identity as Arab Americans and were proud of their heritage, not all of them felt that it was necessary to limit themselves to Arab American friends. Omar made a point to share the diversity within his close circle of friends:

Yeah, my main friend group right now consists of my friend [Greg], non-Arab, but he became Muslim because of me. My friend [Katy], Polish. My friend [Tom], a trans-male. He’s transgender. My friend [Doug], he’s Asian, and my friend [Cynthia], she’s Black. I have a very diverse friend group. No Arabs, besides me . . . so my friend group is diverse, but I’m the Arab.

During the interview process, some of the participants also made a point to distinguish their identity as Arab American from their attitudes toward various issues by stating that although they are of Arab descent, they might not necessarily have the same perspective on social or political issues as other Arabs, such as their parents. Omar tried his best to articulate this:

I identify with Arab values; I identify with Muslim values, but I also do have Western thinking. I think I’m very much more and I’m not saying . . . I feel much more liberal but I’m not saying that’s a Western . . . That’s exclusive to Western thinking. I’m liberal by Western terms so I'm pro-LGBT; I identify as an intersectional feminist. I’m just very out there and I make it known that I’m out there, and I make it known that I’m accepting to every community because . . . A
lot of that stems back to the fact that my family and I were refugees. We are Palestinian ... We are part of the Palestinian diaspora.

Here we see Omar negotiating his Arab and American identity. He is balancing “both sides” and also attempting to explain his perspective on specific societal issues in terms of how his stances fit into “Western” or “Arab” values. This struggle may not be unique to Arab Americans, but may also exist in other ethnic, minority, or immigrant communities.

**The Disconnect of Existing Identity Models**

Although existing racial identity formation models set a foundation on which new identity models can be built, and some researchers have attempted to utilize ethnic identity theories to address Arab American identity formation, there is a disconnect with these approaches that must be addressed. The Arab American population is one that has reaped the benefits of “White” status in the past, and transitioned from being “invisible citizens to visible subjects” (Jamal & Naber 2008). The racialized status of Arabs (and Muslims) in the U.S. is not recognized by previous racial identity models and the discussion of how Arab Americans form their identity is also absent in these identity models. Theories of ethnic identity are not applicable to the Arab American experience because as Naber (2008) pointed out

approaches to Arab American studies that refer to Arab Americans as an “ethnic/cultural” group while ignoring the realities of anti-Arab racism and the structural inequalities that shape Arab American experiences illustrate the limitations of ethnicity theory. (p. 30)

I addressed the “one size does not fit all” issue previously in this chapter and it is crucial to point out once again that by no means is the Arab or Arab American population a monolithic group. Arab American life in the U.S. has been studied in detail by several
scholars referenced throughout this research project; however, identity development
analyzed through the lens of a higher education practitioner is a new approach which I
aim to contribute to Arab American studies research and to higher education research. It
is extremely important to create a discourse in which scholars from various disciplines
can participate by reviewing, analyzing, and contributing to the conversation about the
continuous identity formation process of Arab Americans. Therefore, I propose a new
identity model, which will be explained in the following section.

**Arab American Identity Formation Model**

The participants in this study discussed the factors that influenced, shaped, and
constructed their Arab American identity. They provided detailed accounts of events,
candidly revisited pre-college and college experiences, and spoke bluntly and
passionately about their Arab American status. Based on my analysis, I created a model
of Arab American Identity Formation. This model is not set in stone, and because it is
based on this study of 14 participants, there is certainly room for modification.
Nonetheless, this model is an attempt to provide a “quick guide” to understanding Arab
American identity formation. This model takes into consideration the external influences
that impact the racial identity formation of Arab Americans as described by Cainkar
(2006). This model can also be used to discuss the identity of other racial groups,
although I am not suggesting it is applicable to all racial groups.

There are four phases in the Arab American Identity Formation Model (AAIFM).
These phases do not necessarily need to be followed in a specific order, nor do all Arab
Americans enter or exit each phase. It is important to note that this model may not be
applicable to Arabs who were not born in the U.S. or arrived as adults. Some Arab
Americans may stay in a specific phase for a prolonged time (perhaps several years), while others might skip the phase completely. However, based on this study, each student participant has entered each of these phases or is emerging towards the final phase. Figure 2 graphically displays the four phases of the identity formation model.

![Figure 2](image)

*Figure 2.* Arab American identity formation.

Table 6 compares and contrasts the AAIFM to the Cross Model of Psychological Nigrescence, pointing out differences in approach. It should be noted that Cross’s model has been revised several times (1971, 1991, and 2000) and Table 6 reflects a general description of each stage from the 2001 model. In addition, while the AAIFM describes *phases*, Cross uses the term *stages*. This table is intended to provide a comparison to another identity model that may reflect some similarities to specific phases in the AAIFM but falls short of addressing the complexity of Arab American identity experience.
A Comparison: Arab American Identity Formation Model and Cross Model of Psychological Nigrescence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Phase or Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shoman-Dajani (2016)</td>
<td>Foundational</td>
<td>In this phase, individuals learn “who they are” through exposure to familial norms and cultural traditions, customs, or practices that are coded by their parents as Arab. These may come in the form of meals, a mode of dress, expressions of values, and celebratory practices and may include exposure to the Arabic language. They are aware of the norms that surround their Arab identity but do not usually share them outside of the home. This phase would typically take place during childhood/early adolescence when individuals may not have the vocabulary or comfort level to articulate their Arab identity to non-Arabs outside the home. This phase is considered foundational because it is the phase which introduces the individual to their Arab identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross (2001)</td>
<td>Pre-encounter</td>
<td>In this stage, there are multiple identities: Assimilation, Miseducation, and Self-Hatred (Worrell, et al., 2001, p. 202). Social and political structures cause self-hatred or assimilation and, therefore, individuals devalue their identity. African Americans in this stage may have “thoughts or actions” which “are pro-white and anti-black” and may feel being “low-salience (race-neutral, where being black does not play a significant role in life) to anti-black” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 74).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoman-Dajani (2016)</td>
<td>Realization/</td>
<td>Distinct experiences outside of the home emerge to create a feeling of discomfort or otherness when in a White-dominated environment. Such experiences may be in the form of anti-Arab racism directed at individuals or towards a family member or friend they are with who experiences the encounter (racial slur, hate crime, violence, or micro aggressions that are blatantly anti-Arab). This is not a phase that individuals “grow out of”; however, coping skills developed over time may shield one’s self from the physical or mental impact of such negative experiences. Some Arab Americans will attempt to negotiate their Arab and American identities and may struggle to “fit in”—conforming to the space they are in at a particular moment and adapting to their environment as they are surrounded by Arab family members and again as they enter spaces dominated by non-Arabs. Some individuals may isolate themselves from either the Arab or American identity—essentially “picking sides”. The realization and awareness of Arab American identity is developed further than the foundational phase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross (2001)</td>
<td>Encounter</td>
<td>This is an event an individual experiences as an <em>encounter</em> (Cross, 1995) “that shatters an individual’s current identity and worldview” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 74). The encounter may be one encounter or multiple encounters. There are two steps in this stage: “(1) undergoing an encounter and (2) being affected by it in a powerful way” and the “encounter may be positive (for instance discovering African American historical or cultural information previously unknown) or negative (for example, racist acts against the individual)” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 75). After a period of self-discovery, this stage results in an energized effort to “take action to seek information about, and affirmation of, a new black identity” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 75).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoman-Dajani (2016)</td>
<td>Transformative</td>
<td>During this phase, some individuals may experience an epiphany about their identity as an Arab American, or the transformation may be a prolonged process. They also come to feel comfortable with their identity and this may be triggered by a positive or negative experience, perhaps an experience in a college setting, or even by reading an article or watching an inspirational performance. A positive experience may be listening to an inspirational speech by an Arab American or advocate for the Arab American community. A negative experience may be being called a racial slur. Regardless of the positive or negative experience, the encounter itself is what motivates a sense of Arab American pride, which could come in the form of defending one’s heritage or identity or gaining a sense of comfort with one’s Arab American identity. Transformation may happen as the individual becomes more socially or politically aware, through an academic experience or from the influence of peers. This phase may happen over the course of several months, years, or simply in one day. The individual has evolved to secure contentment with one’s Arab American identity—surpassing the centralized or realization/awareness phase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross (2001)</td>
<td>Immersion-Emersion</td>
<td>The two identities corresponding with this stage are Anti-White and Intense Black Involvement (Worrell et al., 2001, p. 202). In this third stage, the old identity is left behind and an individual experiences two phases. The first phase “involves total immersion into blackness while withdrawing from other groups, particularly whites” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 75). The second phase “highlights a progression out of a dualistic reactionary mode into a more critical analysis of the new black identity” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 75).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoman-Dajani (2016)</td>
<td>Assertive</td>
<td>During this phase of Arab American identity formation, an individual has passed through all three other phases and intentionally shares his or her Arab American identity with others regardless of the setting (when appropriate). Visually, Arab Americans in this phase do not shy away from sharing</td>
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</table>
their Arab American identity with others. This phase is based on the individual’s interpretation of his or her Arab American identity. They may create an environment that is symbolic of their Arab heritage—decorating their home or office with materials that signal their affinity for their Arab heritage or country of family origin. Although it is not necessary to be surrounded by or befriended by other Arab Americans to be in this stage, some individuals in this stage will actively seek to be involved and participate in activities that are specific to the Arab/Arab American community. In this phase, the individual is outspoken about issues that affect the Arab American community and may also serve as an advocate for the community. Individuals may also challenge notions of the “traditional Arab culture” they were taught in the foundational stage. Like Cross’s Internalization stage, the individual may find varied modes of expression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross</td>
<td>Internalization</td>
<td>The fourth and final stage includes the following range of identities: Black Nationalist, Biculturalism, Multiculturalist Racial, and Multiculturalist Inclusive (Worrell et al., 2001, p. 202). This stage “marks the beginning of a resolution between the old identity and the new black worldview,” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 75). Previous feelings of hostility subside and “a more pluralistic perspective” emerges, while still maintaining black identity (Evans et al., 1998, p. 76).</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The coding in which parents interpret Arab cultural traditions for their children in the foundational stage is similar to what Naber (2012) refers to as “the politics of cultural authenticity, a process by which middle-class Arab diasporas come to herald particular ideals as markers of an authentic, essential, true, or real Arab culture” (p. 63). When examining the AAIFM, it is important to recognize that the interpretation of what it means to be “Arab” and “American” inside and outside of the home is influenced by external factors. Interpretations of Arab cultural practices must also take into account that enforced norms and traditions inside the home are many times shaped by what is happening outside of the home. Historical and political circumstances, both within the U.S. and overseas (i.e., U.S. led War on Terror) may influence how Arab Americans
conceptualize their culture and identity. In her research on second-generation young Arab American adults in the San Francisco Bay Area, Naber (2012) found that “dominant U.S. discourses about Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East” shaped how her participants articulated “internal Arab differences.” As they simultaneously discussed “Arabness in terms of an authentic, unified Arab culture and community,” they also referenced “internal communal differences based on nation of origin and religion” (p.65).

Creating a model of Arab American identity formation provides a reference point that scholars, researchers, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff can use when attempting to better understand the Arab American community. There is certainly room to elaborate on the Arab American identity formation experience by expanding on this model. It is my goal that future researchers will find this model to be a catalyst for discussions that further examine the Arab American experience as unique from other racial groups.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations of this study is that it focused on a student sample that was taken only from the Chicago Metropolitan area. In order to draw broader conclusions, future research should expand the sample to include other geographic areas. In addition, the majority of the study participants grew up in or lived at least a part of their lives in the southwest suburbs of Chicago where there is a significant presence of Arab Americans. I suggest further research on Arab American college students that includes a sample of students who did not grow up in an area with a sizable and visible Arab American community. This type of study would provide a comparison group for exploring the
relationship between racial identity construction and the presence or absence of an Arab American community.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of extensive discussion on how involvement in specific Arab or Muslim student organizations influences the college experience of the students. Although this study was not focused on how student activism influenced racial identity construction, several of the students pointed out that their involvement in specific clubs and organizations did strengthen their connection to their Arab heritage. In order to protect the identity of this study’s participants, the student clubs and organizations they were involved in were not disclosed. However, future researchers may want to focus on how student activism on campus shapes, influences, or solidifies the construction of racial identity.

**Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

In higher education, national discussions among college administrators, advocates, and educators in recent years have focused not only on providing broader access to college, but on retaining and graduating students at higher rates. Typically, on college campuses, institutional research data are analyzed so as to draw conclusions about student demographics and pinpoint students who are most at risk to fail or who are most likely to succeed. However, since demographic data are compiled from the application information provided by students, statistics can only be run on the data available. As discussed in chapter one, demographic data are not readily available on Arab American college students because they are categorized as White. What is still unclear is whether Arab American college students are thriving or failing in college. If higher education institutions are serious about retaining students and supporting their
completion by offering support in the form of student success and retention interventions, then these institutions need to be able to accurately identify the diverse student populations on their campuses. Based on the feedback provided by participants in this study, students would appreciate it if they were institutionally recognized for the diversity they bring to campus.

If retention and completion are strategic priorities, then collecting accurate data on students is important and connects to the national completion agenda. Possessing accurate data would provide the opportunity to conduct outreach to the Arab American student population and the Arab American community. Detailed data would allow for tracking studies of Arab American college students and thus provide institutional research departments with the ability to develop reports that identify students who are struggling and in turn, allow student services staff to provide support. This support may be in the form of academic advising, counseling, mentorship programs, and other creative outreach efforts. This study fills a void in the research and provides insights on a group of students that higher education scholars and practitioners know little about. I believe that higher education administrators, faculty, and staff who serve a sizable population or even a few students of Arab descent on their campuses will find this study enlightening, beneficial for planning, and practically relevant to their work.

**Recommendations**

Based on the data collected, it was evident that the events of 9/11 and their aftermath had traumatic consequences for Arab American youth. The trauma sustained by some of the study participants as a result of discriminatory and racist encounters they or their family members experienced during this period is a part of their lives that was
never really addressed by professional counseling or therapy. The students who experienced negative encounters coped by remaining resilient. They successfully completed high school, were in college (some would graduate soon), and all had career plans. They all had grit. However, what about students who may not have had family support or the internal motivation to forge on after such negative encounters? This question may be an area for future research: Are there Arab American youth who are suffering or have suffered from post-9/11 trauma that is preventing them from completing high school or college? Perhaps the trauma is not related to 9/11, but is the result of anti-Arab racism. This kind of study will be difficult to conduct until we have sufficient accurate data on Arab American students at all levels of education.

Further studies on Arab American college students should explore the policy implications surrounding the lack of racial demographic data collected at higher education institutions. What are the implications of not being able to identify large student subpopulations on a college campus? How can students and institutions benefit from more accurately collected demographic data? Should institutions wait until the U.S. Census Bureau expands its race/ethnic categories before college application race/ethnicity categories are expanded to provide more diversified options? Are there post-secondary institutions that resist identifying a large Arab American student population on their campus? If this proves to be the case, what are the reasons? In addition, given the racial and ethnic polarized political climate in the U.S., the historical racialization of Arab and Muslim Americans, and the rise of Islamophobia, it is imperative that education researchers examine how such an environment impacts college campuses and Arab and Muslims students. These are some of the questions that need to
be explored if researchers are interested in how racial identity influences campus policies, student services, retention, and completion.

This study provides a framework for other studies on racial identity construction to replicate. Within the context of higher education, student support services staff—counselors, advisors, mentors, student success/engagement coaches, on-boarding/admissions staff, and administrators—should take into account how Arab American college students shape their identities as well as the factors that influence their identity formation, and then examine the Arab American identity formation model as new programming is created, outreach efforts are planned, and student engagement/retention efforts are expanded. Workshops offered to faculty, staff, and administrators that are aimed at cultural competence should include information about the Arab American student population, especially on campuses where there are sizable populations. Workshops may include information about how Arab cultural values may influence student behavior and they may address common misperceptions of Arabs and Arab Americans. Curriculum should also be expanded to include courses or lessons that enhance learning by exposing students to the contributions made by the Arab American community; doing this will foster an environment of intercultural understanding and dispel negative stereotypes about the Arab community.

The call for official recognition of Arab Americans on the U.S. Census should not be underestimated. The support for the MENA category that will include Arab Americans was clearly affirmed by the students in this study. In order for structural institutional change to take place, accurate data are needed to make evidence-based decisions. Higher education institutions must evaluate how student demographic data are
collected and attempt to be as precise as possible prior to the creation of new policies and
procedures that are put in place with the intention of better supporting students.

Concluding Reflection

I sensed comfort among the study participants, having met many of them for the
first time in an office, a classroom, or a café; they recognized that I was sincere in my
intention to discuss and share their stories. I could certainly relate to the comments of
Naber (2012) regarding connecting to the participants in her study on Arab Americans in
the San Francisco Bay Area: “There were many times when interlocutors lost sight of my
position as researcher. Such familiarity was a great honor; they saw that I was someone
interested in the textures of their lives” (p. 21). I listened attentively as the students
confided in me about college experiences that they dared not tell their parents. I also
heard stories of classroom experiences that should have been reported to college
administrators. I remained professional and mindful as I bracketed my own emotions and
balanced the fragile researcher-subject reality of the circumstances. I smiled and nodded
as they shared childhood stories and reminisced nostalgically about visiting Syria,
Palestine, Yemen, and Jordan. I was internally filled with varied emotions—excitement
from the research and ease at which each interview started and concluded, at times
disturbed by the constant reminder of the common negative encounters Arab Americans
faced. At the same time I was inspired. The inspiration came from how these students
took negative encounters and turned them into positive energy. Despite the
discrimination many of the students experienced growing up, their motivation to keep
calm and educate on did not subside. Their determination to counter the stereotypical
images of Arabs and Muslims by setting a “good example” and reaching out to other communities was quite impressive.

I know from my own experiences of offering workshops and facilitating events in higher education settings, that staff, faculty, and students are eager to learn more about Arab Americans. It is through research like this study and studies conducted by scholars associated with organizations such as the Arab American Studies Association, that knowledge on Arab Americans can be shared and built upon. After completing this study, I am more convinced than ever that higher education leaders, policy makers, staff, and faculty can benefit greatly from using and learning from studies like this one to more effectively relate to and support Arab American students on their campuses.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

IPEDS: DEFINITIONS FOR NEW RACE AND ETHNICITY CATEGORIES
## Definitions for New Race and Ethnicity Categories

### Race/Ethnicity (new definition)
Categories developed in 1997 by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) that are used to describe groups to which individuals belong, identify with, or belong in the eyes of the community. The categories do not denote scientific definitions of anthropological origins. The designations are used to categorize U.S. citizens, resident aliens, and other eligible non-citizens. Individuals are asked to first designate ethnicity as:

- Hispanic or Latino or
- Not Hispanic or Latino

Second, individuals are asked to indicate one or more races that apply among the following:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

### Hispanic or Latino
A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.

### American Indian or Alaska Native
A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) who maintains cultural identification through tribal affiliation or community attachment.

### Asian
A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian Subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Malaya, Malaysian, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thai, and Vietnamese.

### Black or African American
A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa.

### Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

### White
A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

### Nonresident alien
A person who is not a citizen or national of the United States and who is in this country on a visa or temporary basis and does not have the right to remain indefinitely. Note: Nonresident aliens are to be reported separately in the places provided, rather than in any of the racial/ethnic categories described above.

### Resident alien (and other eligible non-citizens)
A person who is not a citizen or national of the United States but who has been admitted as a legal immigrant for the purpose of obtaining permanent resident alien status (and who holds either an alien registration card (Form I-551 or I-151), a Temporary Resident Card (Form I-888), or an Arrival-Departure Record (Form I-94) with a notation that conveys legal immigrant status such as Section 207 Refugee, Section 208 Asylee, Conditional Entrant Parolee or Cuban-Haitian). Note: Resident aliens are to be reported in the appropriate racial/ethnic categories along with United States citizens.

### Race/Ethnicity unknown
The category used to report students or employees whose race and ethnicity are not known.

https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/reic/definitions.asp
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. When you are filling out an application and are confronted with questions about race, such as the questionnaire you just filled out, what box do you usually check?
   a. Why do you choose this box?

2. Some Arab Americans have contested their categorization as White and there are discussions that Arab Americans should be categorized separately...what are your thoughts on this subject?
   a. There is a possibility that in 2020, the U.S. census will be starting a new category called MENA (Middle Eastern/North African) which would include Arab Americans, what are your thoughts?

3. Do you feel “White”? Why yes or why no?* (People learn who they are through interactions with others and they learn the behaviors and attitudes associated with an identity.)*

4. Have you ever felt different from the people around you at on your college campus?*
   If yes, in what way?

5. Have you had any negative experiences because of who you are?*

6. When people usually ask you where you are from, how do you respond? And why?

7. Do you feel comfortable with your identity as an Arab American? If not, why?

8. Can you think of any experiences in college where you were made aware of your Arab American identity by others around you?

9. Are there any college related experiences that you believe have helped you shape your identity as an Arab American?

10. Have you ever been approached by a college professor, staff member or student and asked questions about your race/ethnicity? If so, can you share what happened?

11. Can you describe any experiences you had before college that you believe have influenced how you identity yourself? (Experiences may come from pre-college education, home, neighborhood, cultural exposure, etc.)

12. Have you ever experienced anything on campus that you believe was the result of you being Arab American?
13. What kind of activities are you involved in on campus?

14. Can you tell me about your friends on campus? Do you spend a lot of time with other Arab American college students?

15. Are you involved in any campus clubs or organizations that are for Arab American students? Why or why not?
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Appendix C

Participant Background Information

1. Age________
2. Gender _____
3. Do you identify with the term “Arab American”? Why or why not?
4. Do you identify with the term “White”? Why or why not?
5. Is there a category that best describes your race? If so, what is it?
6. To which country do you trace your Arab heritage? Can be multiple.
7. Do you consider yourself part of a specific religious group? Yes or No
   a. If yes, please specify: ____________
8. Were you born in the U.S.? Yes or No
9. If no, at what age did you arrive to the U.S. and from where?
10. Did you grow-up in the Chicago area? If so, where? If not, where?
11. Did you grow up in an Arab community? Or in an area where there were many Arab families?
12. When people ask you where you are from, how do you generally answer?
13. Current college/university you are attending:
14. Reason(s) for choosing this college/university:
15. How many semesters have you completed in college?
16. What degree are you currently pursuing?
17. Are you the first in your immediate family to attend college? If not, who else in your immediate family has attended college?
18. Are you currently involved in any on-campus extra-curricular activities? (such as student clubs or organizations, athletic programs, etc.)
APPENDIX D

INTRODUCTORY LETTER TO STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS
Appendix D

Introductory Letter to Student Organizations

Attn: <name of student organization>

I am writing to invite your members to participate in a study that I am conducting as part of my dissertation research with Benedictine University located in Lisle, IL. This study is about the racial identity construction of Arab American college students and is titled: Racial Identity Construction of Arab American College Students: Moving Beyond Invisibility. The benefit of students participating in this study is the opportunity for them to share their lived experiences in order to provide a better understanding of the racial identity construction of Arab American college students. If students agree to participate, we can meet at a location of their choosing.

I am reaching out in an effort to recruit potential participants in this study and should members opt to participate, they would contribution to this study by participating in an interview. There will be complete anonymity and confidentially regarding the participation of student identity in this study. The interviews will be recorded and then transcribed by me using a transcription software. The transcripts will be kept in a locked safe at my house. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. At no time following the research will the name of any person or institution participants mention be used in the printed materials submitted to Benedictine University or any other entity. All information collected in this study will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used for each participant in the study. The anonymity of participants will be kept for all presentations regarding this research. Participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice. Consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress participants might have as a result of participation. All participants will receive a copy of the consent form.

Each interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. There are no risks associated with this study, and participants are free to decline to answer any question. All transcripts and records of the audio recorded interview will be kept in a locked
cabinet in my home for seven years after the study and destroyed following this time period. The computer files for this study will be kept on a secured server.

I would appreciate if you can please share this invitation with the members of your student organization and if they agree to participate, they can contact me via e-mail. I will e-mail them an Introductory Letter and Informed Consent Form. I will collect this form prior to conducting the interview. A modest gift card will be provided to each student following the interview session in appreciation for participation.

To participate and/or if your members have any questions regarding this study, please feel to free to contact me now or at any point during this study at *****@***.***. Potential participants may also contact my dissertation director, Dr. Louise Cainkar at *****@***.***.

Sincerely,

Nina Shoman-Dajani
Doctoral Student
Benedictine University
APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER
Appendix E

Participant Invitation Letter

Dear <student>,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting as a part of my dissertation research with Benedictine University located in Lisle, IL. This study is about the racial identity construction of Arab American college students. The benefit of participating in this study is the opportunity to share your lived experiences in order to better understand the racial identity construction of Arab American college students. If you agree to participate, we can meet at a location of your choosing.

There are no risks associated with this study, and participants are free to decline to answer any question. There will be complete anonymity and confidentiality regarding your participation and identity in this study. Your interview will be recorded and then transcribed by me using a transcription software. The transcripts will be kept in a locked safe at my house. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. At no time following the research will your name or the name of any person or institution you mention be used in the printed materials submitted to Benedictine University or any other entity. All information collected in this study will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used for your name in the study. Your anonymity will be kept for all presentations regarding this research. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. Your consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress you might have as a result of participation.

The interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. All transcripts and records of the audio recorded interview will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home for seven years after the study and destroyed following this time period. The computer files for this study will be kept on a secured server. If you agree to participate, I will provide you with an Informed Consent Form for you to sign. I will collect this form prior to conducting
the interview with you. You will receive a copy of the consent form. A modest gift card will be provided following the interview session in appreciation for your participation.

If you agree to participate and/or have any additional questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me now or at any point during this study at *****@***.***. You also may contact my dissertation director, Dr. Louise Cainkar at *****@***.***.

Sincerely,

Nina Shoman-Dajani
Doctoral Student, Benedictine University
APPENDIX F

PARTICIPATION E-MAIL CONFIRMATION
Appendix F

Participation E-Mail Confirmation

Dear <student>,

I am writing to thank you for agreeing to participate in a study that I am conducting as a part of my dissertation research which is titled: Racial Identity Construction of Arab American College Students: Moving Beyond Invisibility. The purpose of this e-mail is to confirm the interview meeting date, time and location. The interview will take place on (date), at (time) and we will meet at (location).

If this information is incorrect, or you would like to suggest an alternate time, date and location, please contact me at *****@***.*** or (***-***-****). I will also contact you by phone the day before your interview to confirm our plans to meet.

There are no risks associated with this study, and participants are free to decline to answer any question. There will be complete anonymity and confidentiality regarding your participation and identity in this study. Your interview will be recorded and then transcribed by me using a transcription software. The transcripts will be kept in a locked safe at my house. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. At no time following the research will your name or the name of any person or institution you mention be used in the printed materials submitted to Benedictine University or any other entity. All information collected in this study will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used for your name in the study. Your anonymity will be kept for all presentations regarding this research. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. Your consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress you might have as a result of participation.
All transcripts and records of the audio recorded interview will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home for seven years after the study and destroyed following this time period. The computer files for this study will be kept on a secured server.

The interview will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. I have e-mailed you an Informed Consent Form for you to review and I will also have available for you to sign onsite as well. I will collect this form prior to conducting the interview with you. A modest gift card will be provided at the end of the interview session in appreciation for your participation.

If you have any additional questions regarding this study, please feel to free to contact me now or at any point during this study. You also may contact my dissertation director, Dr. Louise Cainkar at *****@***.***.

Sincerely,

Nina Shoman-Dajani
APPENDIX G

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Appendix G

Informed Consent Form

Racial Identity Construction of Arab American College Students:
Moving Beyond Invisibility

I, Nina Shoman-Dajani, invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for my dissertation research as an Ed.D. candidate in Higher Education and Organizational Change at Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois.

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study which is focused on Arab American college students enrolled in higher education institutions in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. This study will focus on the central question: How do Arab American college students construct, understand, and live their racial identities? The main source of data for this study will be collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants will be asked to fill out a background information form prior to a 60–90 minute audio recorded interview. The interview will be transcribed using transcription software and a complete transcript will be provided to you to review for accuracy, if you request.

There are no risks associated with this study, and participants are free to decline to answer any question. The benefit of participating in this study is the opportunity to share your lived experiences in order to better understand the racial and identity construction of Arab American college students. There will be complete anonymity and confidentiality regarding your participation and identity in this study. Your interview will be recorded and then transcribed by me using a transcription software. The transcripts will be kept in a locked safe at my house. The interview will help me gain data to use in my study. At no time following the research will your name or the name of any person or institution you mention be used in the printed materials submitted to Benedictine University or any other entity. All information collected in this study will be kept confidential and a pseudonym will be used for your name in the study. Your anonymity will be kept for all presentations regarding this research. Your participation is voluntary and you may
withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. Your consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress you might have as a result of participation. You will receive a copy of the consent form.

All transcripts and records of the audio recorded interview will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home for seven years after the study and destroyed following this time period. The computer files for this study will be kept on a secured server.

If you have any questions or concern about your participation in this study, you may contact me at time by calling (***) ***-**** or via email at *****@***.***. By signing this form, I consent to participate in this study and certify that I have read this form and understand it completely.

I consent to participate in this study

Name: ____________________________
Signature: _________________________
Date: _____________________________

I give my permission to record this interview

Name: ____________________________
Signature: _________________________
Date: _____________________________
APPENDIX H

ITEMS ON THE CROSS RACIAL IDENTITY SCALE
Appendix H

Items On the Cross Racial Identity Scale


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>As an African American, life in America is good for me. (Filler)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>I think of myself primarily as an American and seldom as a member of a racial group. (PA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Too many Blacks “glorify” the drug trade and fail to see opportunities that don’t involve crime. (PM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I go through periods when I am down on myself because I am Black. (PSH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>As a multiculturalist, I am connected to many groups (Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Whites, Jews, gays &amp; lesbians, etc.). (IMCI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>I have a strong feeling of hatred and disdain for all White people. (IEAW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>I see and think about things from an Afrocentric perspective. (LA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>When I walk into a room, I always take note of the racial make-up of the people around me. (Filler)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>I am not so much a member of a racial group as I am an American. (PA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>I sometimes struggle with negative feelings about being Black. (PSH)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>My relationship with God plays an important role in my life. (Filler)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Blacks place more emphasis on having a good time than on hard work. (PM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>I believe that only those Black people who accept an Afrocentric perspective can truly solve the race problem in America. (IA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>I hate the White community and all that it represents. (IEAW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>When I have a chance to make a new friend, issues of race and ethnicity seldom play a role in whom that person might be. (Filler)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>I believe it is important to have both a Black identity and a multicultural perspective, which is inclusive of everyone (e.g., Asians, Latinos, gays &amp; lesbians, Jews, Whites, etc.). (IMCI)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
17. When I look in the mirror at my Black image, sometimes I do not feel
good about what I see. (PSH)
18. If I had to put a label on my identity, it would be “American” and not
African American. (PA)
19. When I read the newspaper or a magazine, I always look for articles
and stories that deal with race and ethnic issues. (Filler)
20. Many African Americans are too lazy to see opportunities that are right
in front of them. (PM)
21. As far as I am concerned, affirmative action will be needed for a long
time. (Filler)
22. Black people cannot truly be free until our daily lives are guided by
Afrocentric values and principles. (IA)
23. White people should be destroyed. (IEAW)
24. I embrace my own Black identity, but I also respect and celebrate the
cultural identities of other groups (e.g., Native Americans, Whites, Latinos,
Jews, Asian-Americans, gays & lesbians, etc.). (IMCI)
25. Privately, I sometimes have negative feelings about being Black. (PSH)
26. If I had to put myself into categories, first I would say I am an Ameri-
can, and second I am a member of a racial group. (PA)
27. My feelings and thoughts about God are very important to me. (Filler)
28. African Americans are too quick to turn to crime to solve their
problems. (PM)
29. When I have a chance to decorate a room, I tend to select pictures,
posters, or works of art that express strong racial-cultural themes. (Filler)
30. I hate White people. (IEAW)

31. I respect the ideas that other Black people hold, but I believe that the
best way to solve our problems is to think Afrocentrically. (IA)
32. When I vote in an election, the first thing I think about is the candidate’s
record on racial and cultural issues. (Filler)
33. I believe it is important to have both a Black identity and a multicultural
perspective, because this connects me to other groups (Hispanics, Asian-
Americans, Whites, Jews, gays & lesbians, etc.). (IMCI)
34. I have developed an identity that stresses my experiences as an Ameri-
can more than my experiences as a member of a racial group. (PA)
35. During a typical week in my life, I think about racial and cultural issues
many, many times. (Filler)
36. Blacks place too much importance on racial protest and not enough on
hard work and education. (PM)
37. Black people will never be free until we embrace an Afrocentric per-
spective. (IA)
38. My negative feelings toward White people are very intense. (IEAW)
39. I sometimes have negative feelings about being Black. (PSH)
40. As a multiculturalist, it is important for me to be connected with indi-
viduals from all cultural backgrounds (Latinos, gays & lesbians, Jews,
Native Americans, Asian-Americans, etc.). (IMCI)