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Exploring the Middle Eastern American College Student Experience: Discrimination, Adjustment, and Coping

Sheila Modir Maryam Kia-Keating

Middle Eastern American (MEA) college students in the United States navigate normative developmental changes related to peer relationships, academic achievement, and college adjustment, often while facing discrimination, stereotyping, and racial profiling. We interviewed 25 MEA first-year and second-year college students about their perceived discrimination experiences and the influence of those experiences on their college adjustment. We present a theoretical model on MEA students' college adjustment in the context of discrimination across socioecological domains, including societal, campus community, and relational levels, both inside and outside of the university experience. Implications for future research and support services for MEA college students are discussed.

Racial and ethnic minorities who experience perceived discrimination are likely to suffer from detrimental mental health consequences, including depression, anxiety, stress, and reduced self-esteem (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Notably, for racial/ethnic minority college populations, experiences with hate crimes, discrimination, and racism are significant factors that tend to negatively impact academic, occupational, and long-term economic outcomes (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). The dropout rate of racial/ethnic minority students at US colleges is significantly higher than those of their White counterparts and is attributed,

at least in part, to the impact of perceived discrimination (Bowman, Hurtado, Locks, & Oseguera, 2008; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Lynch & Engle, 2010a, 2010b).

Although Middle Eastern Americans (MEAs) have experienced a significant amount of overt discrimination in the United States, including hate crimes, which spiked after September 11, 2001, there is a dearth of research on this population (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee [ADC], 2015). Instead, there has been a plethora of messages relayed through numerous forms of media conflating violence, extremism, and terrorism with Middle Eastern identities, and an almost absent discourse connecting positive characteristics with MEAs, or emphasizing the Middle Eastern roots of many notable MEAs in the public eye (e.g., Steve Jobs, Donna Shalala, Elias Zerhouni, Christiane Amanpour, Pierre Omidyar). In fact, MEAs are largely invisible, with the exception of examples of violence in the media (Shaheen, 2009). It is worth considering what the impact of this socioecological context is for MEA college students who must find a way to contend with the repercussions of these predominantly violent examples, while developing a positive sense of self in a society that regularly depicts people of their descent in unfavorable ways. We addressed the limited research in this area by examining MEA college students' perceived

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discrimination experiences, their ways of coping, and how these experiences influence their college adjustment process.

MIDDLE EASTERN AMERICANS

The Middle East region is composed of both Arab countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen) and non-Arab countries (Iran, Israel, and Turkey; Schwedler & Gerner, 2008). Since the 1890s, Middle Easterners have immigrated to the United States and the population has steadily grown (Schwedler & Gerner, 2008). Estimates suggest that approximately 5 million MEAs reside in the United States; however the exact numbers are unknown as the U.S. Census Bureau taxonomically categorizes MEAs as Caucasian or White (Tehrani, 2009; Wiltz, 2014). This categorization limits the ability of MEAs to identify as a distinct racial group and, further, to receive protected rights as a minority group within the United States (Tehrani, 2009).

Due to race being the predominant categorization method for taxonomy in the U.S. Census, using ethnicity can aid in adding greater detail about a group when needed (Richeson & Sommers, 2016). Because the literature uses *race* and *ethnicity* interchangeably, we use the term *race/ethnicity* to be inclusive in this article.

Middle Eastern Americans and Perceived Discrimination Experiences

Research on MEA college students and their perceived discrimination experiences is limited, but significant incidents associated with violence are sometimes noted in the media. For example, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, three MEA college students were shot and killed by a White male neighbor, an incident suspected to be

motivated by race and religion (Tapper, 2015). The aftermath of this specific experience and others like it has yet to be studied empirically and systematically, but such examples illustrate the discrimination that MEA college students contend with inside and outside of college.

While the literature extensively describes the mental health consequences and poor college adjustment outcomes of racial discrimination on African American, Latino/a, and Asian American populations (e.g., Hwang & Goto, 2008; Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006), few studies have examined the effect that discrimination may have on the mental health of MEAs. Moradi and Hasan (2004) found that perceived discrimination was associated with higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of self-esteem for Arab American adults. In another study, researchers found that in comparison to other ethnic minority groups, Arab Americans reported higher levels of depression and anxiety symptoms, hypothesized to be related to sociopolitical factors, including racial profiling and discrimination (Amer & Hovey, 2012).

It is important to gain a better understanding of MEA students' perceived discrimination experiences, as well as their efforts toward coping and resilience. Moradi and Hasan (2004) described how Arab American adults who experienced perceived discrimination reported a lowered sense of personal control, which in turn was associated with mental health symptoms. The researchers noted that participants' sense of control could be regained by sharing their experiences with others and participating in larger scale advocacy projects. Cultural resources (e.g., ethnic identity, religious coping, and religious support) can be effective in decreasing psychological distress and promoting psychological well-being for Arab American adolescents (Ahmed, Kia-Keating, & Tsai, 2011).

DEFINING COLLEGE ADJUSTMENT

The developmental period of late teens and early twenties is defined in the literature as emerging adulthood and is characterized as a time of newfound independence, identity exploration, and educational pursuits. Entering college has been identified as an important time of transition for many young adults (Arnett, 2000). This transition to a unique academic realm can consist of adjusting to the social, academic, and emotional demands of a new institution. The adjustment process is empirically defined as *college adjustment* and has been cited as an important factor in the retention rate of the more than 17 million college students in the United States (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016; Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence and departure has been an influential theory in college adjustment literature. Tinto's model underscores the importance of a student's social and academic assimilation to college as a means of successful integration within the university and an ultimate goal of graduation. According to Tinto, *social adjustment* is the student's ability to integrate into the campus social environment through forming relationships and joining college-based organizations. On the other hand, *academic adjustment* is defined by how well the student does in the academic environment and the student's motivation to learn. In addition to these two components, researchers Baker and Siryk (1989) identified a third component that has been equally influential in the adjustment process called *emotional adjustment*: the psychological well-being of the student throughout their college transition. Hence, social, academic, and emotional domains have been found to be reliable predictors in identifying retention and dropout rates within the college student population (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

It is important to note that the process of adjusting to college may not come easily to all students, especially to those of racial/ethnic minority groups. Researchers have found that minority college students often experience a unique set of challenges, such as discrimination, harassment, and racism, which can interfere with their transition to college (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013). These perceived discrimination experiences have been known to impact the students' social, academic, and emotional adjustment (Carter et al., 2013), along with challenging their sense of belonging within their university (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). According to Cabrera and colleagues (1999), a negative racial climate and the psychological stressors that are associated with discrimination can also be attributed to ethnic minority students' inability to persist and ultimately their dropping out. Given these findings, it is essential for researchers to study how discrimination can be a barrier to successful college adjustment in order to reduce dropout rates, improve students' mental health, and facilitate their positive integration into college (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Unfortunately, for the MEA population, there is limited data on their dropout and persistence rates due to being grouped under Caucasian/White in university demographics, and thus the impact of the racial climate on their transition to college is unclear.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty-five MEA undergraduates participated in this study. The participants in the sample: (a) were at least 18 years old (mean age of 18.7 years); (b) self-identified racially/ethnically as MEA; (c) were first-year or second-year undergraduate college students at a public university in California; and (d) consented

to being interviewed in English. The sample consisted of 7 men and 18 women. Of the 25 participants, 15 were first-year and 10 were second-year students who were selected for this study based on the college adjustment literature identifying this period as a critical time in the adjustment process when students are most likely to drop out (Tinto, 1993). The sample size was determined by the research aims, as the study served to provide a foundation of research for an empirically marginalized community. All interested and qualified participants were interviewed in order to provide a platform for this community's voice to be heard. Table 1 provides the participants' pseudonyms and further demographic characteristics of the sample.

Procedure

This study was a part of a larger study on the MEA college adjustment experience and was approved by the university's institutional internal review board. Recruitment for this study was conducted through flyers posted on campus, through social media, and on campus televisions in community spaces. In accordance with the grounded theory data collection principles, recruitment concluded when theoretical saturation was reached and no new information emerged from the interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Participants received a \$10 gift card to the university bookstore as an incentive for their participation.

Interviews were conducted individually in English, lasting 60–90 minutes, and were audio recorded with participants' consent. Participants first completed a self-report demographic questionnaire and then a semi-structured interview. The interview questions were generated based on key topics identified within the college adjustment literature (Tinto, 1993), as well as questions focused on their perceived discrimination experiences. The semistructured questions focused on racial/

ethnic identities, perceived discrimination experiences, college adjustment—including academic, social, and emotional domains—and coping strategies. The interview concluded with debriefing questions exploring participants' experience of the interview and an opportunity to ask questions.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory methodology was utilized to generate a theoretical understanding of MEA college adjustment in the context of discrimination. Specifically, constructivist grounded theory recognizes the social context, the researcher, and the interactions between the researcher and the participants (Charmaz, 2006). Together, the researchers' perceptions and participant's voice are represented in the theory that is generated.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded through MAXQDA, a software program designed for analyzing qualitative data. The coding process included all members of the team, and careful steps were taken at each level of coding to incorporate all perspectives and refine codes accordingly. Charmaz's (2006) recommendations for constructivist grounded theory included three coding phases: initial, focused, and theoretical. Initial coding was comprised of a line-by-line analysis and labeling of the actions and the events in each segment of the data. The first interview was coded individually and then examined by our research team to ensure consistency among codes that were utilized. Codes such as "being labeled as terrorists" and "feeling invisible" emerged consistently in the data. Focused coding was the second phase, during which we reexamined the initial codes to identify the most significant or common ones, which captured central themes. Focused coding led to categories of societal, campus community, and relational discrimination, which went beyond the description of the participants' words and

TABLE 1.
Self-Reported Participant Demographics (N = 25)

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Age	Year	Sex	Religion	Generation ^a	Future Occupation
Alex	Biracial Iranian	19	First	Male	None	Second	Chemist
Ali	Lebanese	19	Second	Male	Muslim	First (age 1)	Physician
Bahar	Iranian	18	First	Female	Agnostic	Second	Unknown
Ben	Israeli	19	Second	Male	Jewish	Second	Speech Therapist
Deena	Palestinian	18	First	Female	Atheist	Second	Academia
Elina	Armenian	19	Second	Female	Christian	Second	Physician
Erin	Biracial Israeli	18	First	Female	Atheist	Second	Teacher
Firuzeh	Iranian	19	Second	Female	None	Second	Social Worker
Jasmine	Iranian	18	First	Female	Jewish	Second	Physician
Kimia	Iranian	19	First	Female	Agnostic	Second	Biomedical Engineer
Lily	Iranian	20	Second	Female	Agnostic	Second	Lawyer
Melody	Biracial Iranian	19	Second	Female	Spiritual	Second	Physician
Minha	Pakistani	19	First	Female	Muslim	First (age 6)	Lawyer
Mohammed	Egyptian	18	First	Male	Muslim	Second	Lawyer
Nadia	Lebanese	19	Second	Female	Catholic	First (age 17)	Physician
Navid	Iranian	19	Second	Male	Atheist	First (age 5)	Physician
Nicole	Palestinian	19	First	Female	None	Second	Teacher
Noora	Algerian	18	First	Female	Agnostic	Second	Psychology
Nusha	Iranian	19	First	Female	Baha'i	Second	Lawyer
Sami	Lebanese	18	First	Male	Christian	Second	Lawyer
Sanaz	Iranian	19	First	Female	Atheist	First (age 12)	Physician
Shima	Iranian	19	Second	Female	Muslim	First (age 3)	Physician
Talia	Israeli	19	First	Female	Jewish	Second	Business
Tariq	Syrian	18	First	Male	Atheist	Second	CIA
Zaina	Syrian	19	Second	Female	Muslim	Second	Physician

^a Age moved to US.

were analytical categories. Finally, theoretical coding ascertained significant categories in the data that generated a theory. These recurring concepts were brought together to create a conceptual model of college adjustment for MEA students in response to discrimination.

Trustworthiness

Constructivist grounded theorists believe that researchers can be subjective participants in the research process and, therefore, should acknowledge their values, beliefs, and biases as potentially influential parts of the research process (Charmaz, 2006). Our positions were as insider researchers (i.e., studying our own community) and thus, there was a balance between the potentially helpful aspects of subjectivity, with awareness over potential biases in interpreting the data (Charmaz, 2006). Fisher (2012) suggested that one way researchers can manage potential biases that may emerge is to consult with their colleagues. Our research team thus included a college student from the MEA community, a non-MEA college student, and three research professors with expertise in qualitative analyses.

Additionally, supplemental data were collected in a number of ways to establish trustworthiness, including (a) keeping track of events that were occurring both globally and locally related to the Middle East that may have impacted participants' responses, and (b) keeping an audit trail of all documents related to the research design. Dependability was achieved through the use of the same semistructured interview protocol for all participants. Credibility was maintained through iterative questioning, asking for clarifications when interviewing, and using direct quotes from participants to highlight findings. Memo writing was an integral component of trustworthiness and was done through taking notes and diagramming following each interview in order to record

ideas and capture biases that may have emerged (Charmaz, 2006).

FINDINGS

MEA College Students' Perceived Discrimination Experiences: Societal

Being Labeled a "Terrorist." Nearly all participants described experiences of being labeled a terrorist by peers or community members. Frequently, participants described these comments as having been said in what was interpreted as jest. Participants explained how the word *terrorism* had been conflated with their culture and racial/ethnic background for as long as they could remember, and to be branded in this negative way was a common experience that they viewed as unavoidable. Many of the participants did not blame their peers or members of the community for labeling them as terrorists, but instead directed responsibility to the current political climate, US society's lack of knowledge about the Middle East, and the media for continuously perpetuating this stereotype. Several participants expressed feelings of frustration, sadness, and anger about this perception of their community and attributed it to past (i.e., the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack) and current (i.e., Islamic State of Iraq and Syria killings) sociopolitical events, which served as catalysts that changed how society perceived them. Melody (19) stated: "A lot of people just associate everything bad, in terms of terrorism, with Middle Easterners."

Many participants also expressed confusion and frustration as a result of being referred to as terrorists, despite being American-born, in addition to being identified categorically as Caucasian. Navid (19) described: "It kind of sucks because it's not our fault, and I don't understand why they always just blame us if it's a Muslim extremist. There are other things White people have done, but nobody goes up

to White people and blames them for doing that. It's kind of sad and it sucks."

Vilified as a Result of Stereotypes Perpetuated by the Media. Participants described frequently seeing and being affected by negative depictions of their community in the media. Several participants described how the association of MEA with terrorism was exacerbated by the media's promotion of stereotypes and continued portrayals of the MEA culture as evil and made up of thieves and villains. A few participants highlighted their frustration with the overemphasis in the media on images of war and religious extremism, rather than the beauty and history of the Middle East.

Similarly, participants noted that MEAs were often limited to roles of villains in movies. Sami (18) noted: "Movies like *American Sniper* just ruin it for us . . . just the fact that there's so many efforts to make us 'the other' instead of trying to unify us." Many participants pointed to the consequences of the media's portrayals and how, although, it may just be a movie, the audience walked away with these negative images of MEAs. Ali (19) highlighted how generalizations and negative portrayals of MEAs could increase hate crimes toward the MEA community:

I just want people to know the real Middle Eastern people and how great we are, but when people see the media I feel it just adds to the generalization. . . . These generalizations are affecting a lot more people across the US, like in the Chapel Hill shooting.

Participants described how society's perception of the MEA community directly influenced their college experience as they contended with politically charged racial slurs on campus, such as "Osama bin Laden's your grandpa" and "You're a terrorist." Tariq (18) described his fear of his peers turning against him whenever a terrorist attack occurred by "laying the blame on the local Middle Eastern

student instead of ISIS." Sanaz (19) described how society's perspective of her culture has changed the way her peers on campus view her as an individual: "People associate me, as an individual, with the political events. . . . There's more to my people, my country, and me, than politics."

MEA College Students' Perceived Discrimination Experiences: Campus Community

Invisible and Ignored on College Campuses. The participants noted that in the media and in society at large, MEAs were often under scrutiny and explicitly labeled as terrorist, but while on their college campuses, they described their community as invisible and ignored. Participants expressed frustration that when they needed to be paid attention to and provided with services, they were grouped as Caucasian/White, treated as a majority group, and not given such services. A common example brought to light during the interviews was the university offering housing options that were clustered by racial groups. According to many of the participants, the university's effort was intended to enhance a sense of community among racial/ethnic minority groups, however as Noora (18) described, MEAs were grouped in the Caucasian dormitories: "You don't have all the communities in the dormitories. Where are the Middle Easterners?"

The participants also described that feeling invisible and ignored meant that their campus community knew little about their race beyond the stereotypes that were perpetuated by the media. In fact, the words "ignorant" and "ignorance" were consistently used during interviews to describe the dominant culture's understanding of MEAs. This *cultural ignorance* was defined as their community's lack of knowledge about the Middle East, which typically led to questions or statements that were offensive and/or prejudiced. Several

participants pointed to the current political climate, the news and media as often the sole sources of learning about the Middle East, and the lack of formal education in US schools about the Middle East, as contributing factors of cultural ignorance. To illustrate, Nadia (19) described how she came across cultural ignorance of this sort on her first day of school when her peers asked her if she rode a donkey as a form of transportation when she lived in the Middle East. When Ali encountered cultural ignorance, he thought: “I am coming to a really great school, people are educated here, they’re really smart and they know right from wrong. I assumed and I was just a little naïve.”

A majority of the participants explained that the reason behind conceptualizing these comments or stereotypes as ignorant was because it lessened the impact of these remarks. Instead of receiving these remarks as negative and intentional, they were seen as uneducated and uncultured, and as a result, less hurtful. Kimia (19) said: “Honestly, I think they’re just ignorant when they say it and they don’t mean it in a bad way.”

Additionally, the participants attributed their peers’ lack of knowledge about their racial group to the fact that there were not many MEAs on campus. They noticed that many racial/ethnic minority groups that were largely represented on campus held large-scale events that promoted their race and culture, in turn educating their peers and dismantling stereotypes. However, the small population of MEAs on campus led to fewer cultural events, fewer opportunities for learning about their community, and an increased sense of invisibility, leaving MEAs feeling ignored and their sense of belonging on campus challenged. Shima (19) described how she felt like an “outsider,” especially when her friends of other racial/ethnic minority groups mentioned the number of culturally related organizations they were a part of: “I think it’s those times that I

feel [being an outsider] the most, and . . . I wish I had something like that.”

MEA College Students’ Perceived Discrimination Experiences: Relational

Peers: A Double-Edged Sword. A majority of the participants described how the perpetrators of discrimination were often their friends or an acquaintance within their social circles; however, like Zaina (19), they chose to interpret their friends’ comments as jokes:

My friends always make jokes, like really racist jokes. I know they’re just joking but they always do it. My two guy friends will make these jokes, like “Oh we better watch out for you [Middle Easterners]. You’re going to come do something to us.”

Interestingly, a dilemma these participants faced was that the same peers that made these jokes and were the perpetrators of discrimination were also the participants’ friends, and thus, often served as a main source of support. A majority of the participants described seeking the support of both same-ethnicity and different-ethnicity peers after experiencing discrimination because they were usually the first available people after they experienced discrimination (i.e., living in the dormitories) and participants felt truly understood by their peers.

Family’s Fears and Messages of Caution. Despite typically being far from home, the participants’ families continued to play a critical role in their sense of belonging in college and their understanding of discrimination. Some participants, like Sami, described how their parents discouraged them from expressing their MEA background, especially at school, in order to protect them from discrimination: “My parents always told me, ‘Don’t be that Arabic at school, don’t get involved, just always have your opinions to yourself,’ because

they're afraid that people are going to beat me up or discriminate or something like that." Tariq likewise reflected: "It's a joke my mom makes every time [the media reports] that something bad happened, like 'No way, it better not be one of us this time again,'" recognizing the potential negative fallout when a perpetrator is reported by the media as having Middle Eastern roots.

MEA College Students' Responses to Discrimination

Coping: Risk and Protection in the Context of Racial Discrimination. Coping took place within the relational level of participants' socioecological systems, as they endorsed using both external and internal sources of support in the face of discrimination. In terms of social support, participants identified their families, peers, and cultural organizations as primary systems that they relied on. Other forms of coping that emerged included educating others, getting used to the discrimination, avoiding topics related to race due to fear of backlash, and efforts toward achieving model minority characteristics.

A majority of the participants ($n = 18$) described becoming an "educator" or "representative of the Middle East." Ali illustrated how he educated others:

You have to step in and be like: Listen, this is how we actually are. And I don't know what you have been told, but this is coming from a person who is from there. And you know me, you know how I am, you know that I'm not like those [terrorists] at all.

All of the participants grew up in a post-September 11th world when discrimination toward MEAs increased rapidly. Thus, for many of them these discrimination experiences, such as stereotypes and generalizations, had been ongoing for years. Several participants identified coping by "getting used to

the discrimination," like Nadia: "I'm used to it. People talk so much about it and we hear so much stuff on the news." The process of getting used to the discrimination appeared to be gradual for many of the participants. Erin (18) explained further: "I got a lot of terrorist jokes and in the beginning it started to bother me, but in the end it didn't. When I look back I don't know if I was exactly comfortable or if I just got used to it."

Upon further exploration of this form of coping, many of the participants endorsed feelings of sadness, irritation, and frustration as a result of "getting used to" the discrimination. This form of coping did not appear to protect them from feeling the emotional impact of the discrimination, but rather from responding to it which could draw additional attention to their racial group and lead to unsafe or threatening interactions. Although Shima used this form of coping, she also noted that it could be potentially problematic and harmful for her community. She explained how many MEAs have learned to ignore discrimination in order to cope, but this has resulted in discrimination becoming an "ignored problem." According to Shima, this led the MEA community to not notice, be aware of, or consider what they experienced as discrimination per se, because they had been preoccupied with actively ignoring it. Indeed, a potent fear of backlash was prevalent throughout the interviews. A majority of the participants expressed fear of retaliation, isolation, and rejection for being MEA, for discussing the conflict in the Middle East, or for being vocal about discrimination.

Finally, multiple participants described how being considered a model minority—in other words someone who is an exceptional student and citizen, and working to substantiate that—was actually a form of coping for them. In the face of the current political climate, participants described how MEAs are still viewed as successful people in the

community and stereotyped as model minorities by going on to higher education and holding prestigious occupations. These participants described how the image of MEAs being successful in the United States helped them keep going and work harder in the face of discrimination experiences.

How Discrimination Influences the MEA College Adjustment Process: Social Adjustment

Seeking Friends in Cultural Organizations. The participants described social adjustment to college as composed of finding a supportive social network, forming new friendships, and being involved in different campus organizations. Shima explained that after experiencing discrimination it made her want to hang out with other MEAs because she found “strength in numbers.” Sami shared that once he joined cultural organizations he felt much more at ease socially and was able to be himself:

Whenever I’m with the White kids I feel like I’m always defending myself, so that dictated for me to hang out more with the Lebanese or Arabic students, because we had that cultural connection and I was just at ease being myself. It’s kind of hard to be yourself 100% of the time with people that think you’re different from them, because a lot of the time I’m just tired of trying to educate people.

Many participants mentioned student-run cultural organizations and clubs within the university that were crucial in helping them feel a part of the campus. A majority of participants (19 out of 25) had some involvement with a campus cultural or religious organization. Bahar (18) described: “It’s like a whole new world I have now. It’s really cool to be a part of.”

How Discrimination Influences the MEA College Adjustment Process: Academic Adjustment

Using Discrimination Experiences as Motivation to Succeed. Participants identified academic adjustment as related to their motivation to succeed academically and pursue their career goals. Participants described that being strong in academics and choosing traditionally prestigious career paths meant that they could counter certain negative stereotypes. In fact, 9 participants were studying to become physicians, 5 aspired to be lawyers, and 3 were interested in teaching and academia, among other career paths.

In contrast, Nadia, who was an international student, was completely discouraged by the university’s racial climate and had already requested to transfer to another university at the time of the interview. She described a number of reasons for transferring, including not feeling like she fit in with the other students, not finding other Lebanese students that she could connect with, and feeling the full impact of discrimination by her peers. She shared that she had also considered dropping out of college completely and moving back to the Middle East: “Last quarter I just couldn’t do it anymore. I called my mom and I was like ‘I’m done with this whole thing.’”

Lily (20) found that her career path in international law was heavily influenced by her racial/ethnic background and the current perceptions of the Middle East:

I’ve always seen myself as someone who just wants to educate myself on [the Middle East], more in order to educate others in terms of exactly what this picture is, not what the media paints the picture as, but what really is the story behind the Middle Eastern culture and the experience itself.

Similarly, many participants saw themselves as representatives of the Middle East and wanted to advance their education to bring about change and break stereotypes globally. It was also meaningful and helpful for many of the participants to take courses in the Middle East Studies program to further their knowledge about their race. Many participants described forming friendships with other MEAs in class, enhancing their social adjustment.

How Discrimination Influences the MEA College Adjustment Process: Emotional Adjustment

A “Plot Twist.” Participants described their emotional adjustment to college as the way they felt on campus after they experienced discrimination there. A range of responses was reported, from feeling frustrated by their peers’ images of the Middle East to feeling determined to change the current perception. Erin expressed feeling proud: “I have something that they feel like they need to discriminate against.” Bahar stated: “I definitely felt really hurt to the core when it was happening, because it was something that was so out of my control. I didn’t do anything. I was being judged for nothing of my own fault.”

Although many participants described ignoring offensive remarks or identifying their peers with cultural ignorance, they also reported feeling sadness, anger, and frustration. In addition to dealing with these feelings, a few

participants described feeling uncomfortable expressing their emotions because they would get judged for it, especially feelings of anger. They described not wanting to be seen as “angry Middle Easterners,” because that was how the media already portrayed them and consequently, it was unsafe and fulfilled a stereotype when they expressed it.

The wide range of emotional reactions to discrimination compounded to influence the participants’ overall college adjustment as well as their academic and social adjustment. The participants described often feeling tired of the stereotypes and misconceptions about their racial group and using the discouragement as fuel to become a lawyer to fight injustices or a doctor to demonstrate their intelligence. Their friendships also changed as they chose to be around people they felt safer with and accepted by. They surrounded themselves with people who enhanced their sense of belonging while distancing themselves from those who made them feel like outsiders. Noora described her adjustment process as a “plot twist,” where instead of feeling saddened by the discrimination, she internally made efforts to recall the beauty of her culture and remained “positive and prideful.” Overall, many of the participants echoed Noora’s sentiments, describing pride and opportunities for growth from these emotional experiences of perceived discrimination.

Data analysis led to the development of a theoretical model that depicts the role

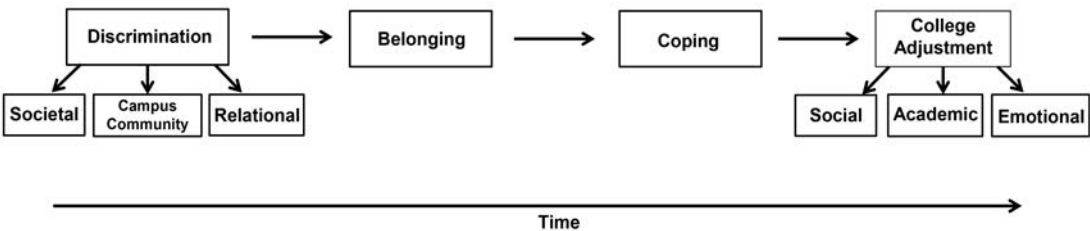


FIGURE 1. Model of MEA College Adjustment in Response to Discrimination

of multiple socioecological levels within which discrimination influences the MEA college adjustment process (Figure 1). The model begins with the MEA college student experiencing multiple levels of discrimination. The first level of discrimination is societal, focusing on the current political climate and the media's portrayals of MEAs and their impact on the individual college student. The second level involves the college campus community the student is a part of and how they are treated within it. The third level reflects their relationships with their peers after experiencing discrimination, along with the messages students received from their families about discrimination and their sense of belonging as a MEA living in the United States. After experiencing these multiple levels of discrimination, the MEA students' sense of belonging is challenged and they respond to the discrimination by coping in a number of ways. The way they cope and respond to the perceived discrimination influences their college adjustment process—socially, academically, and emotionally. When analyzing the data, we viewed each of these systems as influential factors in the adjustment process as the students did not remain constant while experiencing discrimination, but instead were dynamic individuals moving through time with experiences taking place within their sense of belonging, family life, peer groups, and communities simultaneously.

DISCUSSION

Given the rise in discrimination toward MEAs in the United States, particularly in the past two decades, and its potential detrimental impact on physical and mental health in this population, our investigation addresses issues of concern for psychologists (ADC, 2015; Pascoe & Richman, 2009; Rousseau, Hassan, Moreau, & Thombs, 2011). There is

a dearth of research examining discrimination and MEA college adjustment. The data from our study contributes to the development of a theoretical model that demonstrates how perceived discrimination toward MEA students begins on a broader societal level and continues through the campus community and relational socioecological levels, both inside and outside of the university experience.

The findings point to multiple socioecological levels of discrimination, starting with the political climate and the media's portrayals influencing the MEA discrimination experiences. The participants expressed that the one-sided, negative portrayals of the Middle East in the US mass media influenced both the public and their peers' perceptions of the region and the MEA population. Many participants were forced to face regular, pointed questions from peers asking them if they supported terrorism; implicit in these questions was a sense of mistrust and deep division focusing on improbably extreme differences instead of recognizing commonalities and connection. Previous researchers have found that greater levels of media exposure after September 11, 2001, was related to increased prejudiced behaviors toward Arabs, bringing into question ethics and responsibilities for mass media (Persson & Musher-Eizenman, 2005). The participants expressed concern that the media rarely, if ever, portray any positive images of MEAs and instead, do more to increase stereotypes that seem to influence hate crimes.

Participants expressed a sense of exclusion and lack of integration on campus at the community and relational socioecological levels. Fostering a racial climate that can influence the students' sense of belonging on campus is an important task for universities (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Research on racial/ethnic minority college students has found that the need to belong, to feel included, and to be a part of a community is associated with positive

longitudinal outcomes, including satisfaction and commitment to college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Racial/ethnic minorities who have been historically stigmatized, stereotyped, and discriminated against tend to question their belonging more often than the majority group. A chronically challenged sense of belonging could lead to detrimental consequences, including undermining students' academic performance and physical health (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

A majority of the participants described experiences with peers' cultural ignorance as derogatory and off-putting. In the face of these discrimination experiences, MEAs endorsed various forms of coping similar to other racial/ethnic minority groups, including reaching out for social support after experiencing discrimination (Ahmed et al., 2011; Prelow et al., 2006; Wei, Yeh, Chao, Carrera, & Su, 2013) or educating others in order to dismantle stereotypes (Fleming, Lamont, & Welburn, 2012). Participants also described other reactions to discrimination, including attempts to get used to discrimination, and striving to become a model minority in order to disprove negative stereotypes. Research on MEAs corroborates getting used to the discrimination as a form of coping, as this community has been found to resign when confronted with discrimination, perhaps to avoid backlash or to maintain a sense of belonging in the community (Marvasti, 2005). This response could have detrimental implications, such as people continuing to stereotype them because they perceived MEAs as not being harmed or affected by it.

Additionally, participants endorsed striving to become a model minority in order to combat the terrorist stereotype. In fact, research has demonstrated that for racial/ethnic minority groups, like Asian Americans, being labeled as model minority can have the contradictory effect of serving to invalidate

their perceived discrimination experiences or the inequalities they have faced (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009). In our study, many participants did express positive feelings about hearing comments related to the intelligence of MEAs, associating them with the MEA cultural value of education and achievement, rather than consciously experiencing them as negative.

Finally, while these findings demonstrate some of the challenges MEA students face as they adjust to college, there were also some protective factors and various forms of coping that seemed to serve as buffers to discrimination and other negative experiences. Consistent with previous findings, MEA participants tended to turn to cultural resources, including cultural and religious organizations, in search of social support, particularly after experiencing discrimination (Ahmed et al., 2011). The majority of the participants described being inspired to action as well. They saw their role as an educator in their scholastic community and subsequently, pursued academic goals oriented around breaking stereotypes. Participants also expressed a range of emotional reactions to their perceived discrimination experiences; indeed some participants described difficulty expressing their emotions publicly—for fear of confirming stereotypes—and instead chose to internalize their feelings and avoid issues that triggered anger.

IMPLICATIONS

These findings offer a number of potential implications focused on discrimination, sense of belonging, and community-building on college campuses. At the institutional level, the recognition of discrimination as an influential part of the college adjustment process for MEA students is a critical first step. It is arguably beneficial to allow MEA students to identify themselves as MEA, because their voice and

unique needs are rendered invisible when they remain solely grouped in the Caucasian racial category. Obtaining a more accurate number of MEAs on campus also helps inform programming and services, outreach efforts to MEA student groups and cultural organizations, and university staff training on discrimination and college adjustment. These kinds of activities offer the opportunity to help support and enhance MEA college students' sense of belonging on campus.

Additionally, content of coursework can enhance belonging and increase knowledge. Several of the participants in our study mentioned that taking Middle East Studies courses helped them feel connected with their racial group, while further educating them about their cultural roots. Like the mass media, educational content can influence the community and societal levels of MEA's social ecology. For example, if universities ignore MEAs altogether, they are left invisible; if universities provide coursework and academic talks focused only on histories of political conflict, they leave MEAs vulnerable to stereotypes, views limited to negative global events, misassumptions, and bias. Research has found that students who were knowledgeable about their racial/ethnic group were able to use that knowledge as a buffer against discrimination later on (Brondolo, ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009). Universities should consider how they can support educational opportunities for the benefit of both MEAs and their peers, most of whom have little exposure to or knowledge about this demographic population.

At the interpersonal level, social support interventions (Mattanah et al., 2010) can enhance the college adjustment process, as it did for the MEA participants in our study. Participants also expressed a desire for counseling groups to be able to express their feelings about their discrimination experiences with others in a safe and supportive

environment. Further research is needed to identify effective group counseling strategies for MEA students on campus. Previous research on MEAs has found that belonging to a cultural organization can serve as a protective factor (Ahmed et al., 2011; Shammass, 2009), and the participants in this study also endorsed this as helpful to their social adjustment process.

At the individual level, MEA students may not initially realize or identify certain experiences as discriminatory, such as their process of getting used to the discrimination or simply categorizing it as cultural ignorance; however, they may carry the effect of the experience with them into their social circles and academics later on. It is recommended that researchers explore and assess the multiple socioecological levels of lifetime perceived discrimination experiences.

This study contributes to the limited research on the perceived discrimination experiences, coping styles, and adjustment process of first-year and second-year MEA college students at a public university. It is important to note that this study was conducted in a region of the country where MEA and other racial/ethnic minority students are relatively prevalent, and their experiences may differ from the discrimination experiences of MEAs in other universities across the US, especially in areas where the MEA community is small among a population that is more homogeneous. The sample in our study consisted primarily of female students, and although we attempted to capture a wide range of racially and ethnically diverse MEA college students, not all MEA backgrounds were represented in the study.

CONCLUSION

Greater attention to the MEA population is warranted in mental health research, given the unique stressors they face in terms

of sociopolitically related discriminatory experiences. Developing a tool to measure the unique elements of MEA experiences based on the theoretical framework and the multiple socioecological levels of discrimination that emerged from this study would be useful for future research. Researchers might address the impact of the coping styles endorsed by the MEA college students (e.g., getting used to the discrimination) on retention rates for this community, as well as other academic and

mental health outcomes. Community-based participatory research illuminating effective systemic and individual-level factors for MEA populations can help to identify protective and promotive factors and to ensure their psychosocial well-being, mental health, and college adjustment.

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