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LIVING IN AND BETWEEN “TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS”: ARAB
AMERICAN WOMEN, IDENTITY, AND THEIR INTERETHNIC
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Samar Dababneh

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Due to the growth of Middle Easterners living in America, examining interethnic romantic relationships among Arab American women is vital. The primary objective of this study is to achieve a deeper understanding through in-depth respondent interviews about the Arab American woman’s interethnic romantic relationships, familial relationships, and platonic relationships specifically, to discover her use of identity negotiation and management with use of thematic analysis. The pressure for an Arab American woman to find a partner based on parental guidelines creates this notion of living “two separate worlds,” thus, affecting the negotiation of her multiple identities. While some Arab American parents were more open to the idea of their daughters marrying interethnically, several parents were opposed to the idea, for the fear of losing their Middle Eastern culture. Specifically, the data revealed that Arab American women who date interethnically portray their multiple identities, depending on the people by whom they are surrounded. Additionally, the interethnic romantic relationship not only affects the enactment of the Arab woman’s identities, but her partner’s identities as well.

LIVING IN AND BETWEEN “TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS”: ARAB AMERICAN
WOMEN, IDENTITY, AND THEIR INTERETHNIC
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

SAMAR DABABNEH

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2015

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AMERICAN WOMEN, IDENTITY, AND THEIR INTERETHNIC
ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Sometimes it can all make you crazy because you can't get out. I have so many worlds, and every world is a whole other world. But in your mind they're totally separated, but then they're all there in your mind together. You get to a point that you are about to explode. –From an interview by a Middle Eastern female on identity. (Naber, 2006, p. 96)

Romantic relationships within mainstream America compared to romantic relationships within the Middle Eastern culture have vastly different connotations. One parallel among individuals from the American and Middle Eastern cultures is that more and more individuals from various ethnic backgrounds living in the United States are becoming romantically involved with a partner outside of their ethnic background. According to The U.S. Census Bureau, “Interracial or interethnic opposite-sex married couple households grew by 28 percent over the decade from 7 percent in 2000 to 10 percent in 2010” (2012). There are even more interracial or interethnic unmarried couples in comparison to interracial or interethnic married couples. Although there is a notable amount of interethnic couples in America, some couples face discrimination from certain members of their in-group or out-group. Despite interethnic couples experiencing negative reactions from third party members, no research has revealed a higher divorce

rate within interethnic couples over married couples from the same ethnic backgrounds. Despite this, “Overall divorce rates are higher for couples who married out than for those who married in – but here, too, the patterns vary by the racial and gender characteristics of the couples” (Wang, 2012). Although, this statistic only considers interracial marriages between Caucasian and African American couples, some couples in interethnic romantic relationships may develop tension based on conflicting ethnic differences.

Although the Arab population within the United States is small in comparison to other cultural groups, of the 316 million people in the United States, the number of Middle Easterners living in the United States is vastly expanding. According to the 2000 U.S Census Bureau there was an estimated “1.2 million Arabs in the United States in 2000, compared with 860,000 in 1990 and 610,000 in 1980.” Since the data were collected nearly 15 years ago, the Arab population has certainly escalated. In 2012, the U.S Census Bureau reported that, “Those who identified as having Arabic-speaking ancestry in the U.S. grew by more than 72% between 2000 and 2010.” Now, nearly 2 million Middle Easterners live in America. In this present study, the terms “Arab” and “Middle Eastern” are used interchangeably. Specifically, “Arab” and “Middle Eastern” refer to individuals whose heritage can be traced to any one of the 22 Arab countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Somalia, Djibouti, Comoros, Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania (Mango, 2012).

The terms intercultural, interethnic, interfaith, or interreligious relationships, according to Remennick (2009), “refer to a host of situations, including partners one of whom belongs to the hegemonic majority and the other comes from a minority group, or

both come from two different minorities, or one is a recent immigrant of the same or different ethnicity” (p. 719). An intercultural couple, as defined by Silva, Campbell, and Wright (2012) refers to two individuals who are romantically involved and differ in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and language. Baldwin, Coleman, González, and Shenoy-Packer (2014) would limit intercultural couples to those of different cultures, describing intercultural communication as when culture “impacts the communication between two or more people enough to make a difference” (p. 5). Other types of intermarriage might be interreligious, interracial, or interethnic. For this paper, I will discuss more specifically, Middle Easterners dating those of other groups “interethnic,” rather than “interreligious.” Middle Eastern women, both Christian and Muslim who date outside of the Arab community may receive similar reactions from in-group members, based on ethnic origin alone. In addition to this, Middle Easterners in the United States who might choose to date across ethnic lines reaches to more perspective participants.

Due to the increased numbers of Middle Easterners living in the United States, their opportunities to date outside of their culture is enhanced. At the same time, the rigid and strict standards placed by parents on Middle Easterners, makes it even more of a challenge for them to date interethnically. The lack of acceptance by family members and members of the Arab community that Middle Easterners who date interethnically may experience is especially problematic for Middle Eastern females. For most Middle Eastern parents, dating is considered forbidden and unnecessary for their children to take part in. However, due to Western influences on dating, some Middle Eastern parents may allow their son or daughter to date an individual within the same culture and religion as long as the partner is “marriage material.” This may be because, first-generation Arab

American parents generalize the term “Americans” as being vastly different than their own culture. Naber (2006) conducted in-depth interviews of Middle Eastern females. One particular participant discussed her parents’ view on Americans: "If you go to an American's house, they're smoking, drinking... they offer you this and that. But if you go to an Arab house, you don't see as much of that” (p. 95). Most Middle Eastern parents, regardless of their religious beliefs, intend for their children to marry within the Arab culture. In general, Middle Easterners use the term “American” broadly as a way to describe an individual in the United States from an ethnic descent other than that of the Middle Eastern culture. For example, currently in Armenia, “dating is permitted and even actively encouraged by parents if the person their child is dating is considered suitable, that is, he or she is of Armenian origin, is from a good family, and is serious about marriage” (Monger, 2013, p. 28). For some Arab families, the permission for their children to date is similar to that of Western dating norms, except that the number one criterion for their child’s partner is to be within the same ethnic background as they. This essentially hinders Arab Americans from the initiation of romantic relationships outside of their ethnic group due to the strict set of criteria that Arab parents look for if the child is permitted to date.

A common dating norm within the Arab culture requires a woman and man to be open about being a “couple” once the two are engaged. In order for a romantic relationship to be taken seriously, a societal norm among Middle Easterners is that a couple must be engaged to be married, making dating the equivalent of engagement in the American culture. Then, during the engagement process, which usually lasts no more than two years, the couple has the opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper

level. The idea of having a girlfriend or boyfriend is considered unsuitable by first-generation Middle Eastern parents because the only romantic relationship their children are ever involved in is the union of marriage. Arab Americans do not want their daughters to date outside of the culture, fearing that their own culture and the purity of their daughters will be diminished. Young Arab Americans, themselves, may feel the pressure to stay true to their Middle Eastern roots, while trying to adhere to mainstream American culture. Predominantly, the pressure that women are faced with is much greater than that faced by Arab men. This is because there is an understood expectation that premarital sex should not occur in any circumstance. Thirty-five years ago, Rubeiz (1979) summarized some of the pressures faced by Middle Easterners who seek to date interethnically and found that “women more than men are expected to withhold from sexual activity until the union of marriage.” This notion is still prevalent today; research suggests that, for individuals engaged in premarital relationships that “do not lead to marriage, the psychological, emotional and social consequences tend to be greater for females than for males” (Farahani, Cleland, & Mehryar, 2011, p. 30). There are double standards placed on male and female sexuality that emphasizes “the importance of virginity for young women’s marriage prospects” (p. 30).

Most Middle Easterners believe that romantic love occurs once in a lifetime, and that the loved partner will be the individual’s spouse. In her study, Kaya (2009) conducted interviews of women living in Irbid, Jordan. She examined this notion and articulated that “love is a serious, though involuntary, commitment for an Irbidi girl” (p. 261). She relates, “Several girls speculated to me that women can fall in love just once in

their lives” (p. 261). This idea of falling in love once is part of what makes American dating norms unacceptable in comparison to Arab beliefs regarding love.

Various communication scholars have examined intercultural dating, but there is little to no research evaluating Middle Eastern women and interethnic romantic relationships. The large population of Middle Easterners that live in America makes it crucial to look at Middle Easterners’ romantic involvement in order to gain a richer understanding of modern day, American dating culture. As noted above, the vast majority of Christian and Muslim Middle Easterners living in the United States are expected to marry within the Arab culture. Because the “Christian Arab is generally more Westernized” compared to the Muslim Arab, Christian Arab Americans are more inclined to bend the cultural rules because the restrictions placed on them by religious standards are much less restrictive than a Muslim individual’s standards (Rubeiz, 1979). This makes Middle Eastern Christians feel more similar to American individuals, based on having only cultural differences instead of both religious and cultural differences.

First-generation Middle Easterners consider their Arab cultural expectations more of a norm than American expectations; however, a second-generation Arab American may feel a great deal of tension regarding American and Arab dating norms. Despite this cultural expectation, there is a notable increase in the amount of Middle Easterners becoming romantically involved with partners from various other cultures within the U.S. For example, Ajrouch (2004) examined identity formation among second-generation Arab Americans and concluded, “Arab American girls occupy a precarious position in that conforming to Arab cultural values constitutes a deviation from dominant cultural norms in the United States, yet conforming to dominant cultural norms likely challenges

Arab cultural values” (p. 388). The immense pressure that is put on the female to find the “right” man may ultimately lead the woman to conceal her romantic relationship from her family, having a completely separate life with her romantic partner as opposed to her family members.

The struggle for a Middle Eastern woman to maintain her Arab familial customs and cultural roots in dominant U.S. culture is magnified when she enters into a romantic relationship with a non-Middle Eastern individual. While the Middle Eastern woman may struggle to maintain her identity, her non-Middle Eastern partner may also try to ease into the Middle Eastern identity, while he attempts to maintain his own cultural identity. Britto and Amer (2007) examined cultural identity patterns and familial contexts among Arab Muslim young adults in America. They reason, “One of the critical tasks in cultural identity formation is navigating between the immigrant home culture and the more mainstream culture” (p. 138).

Growing up as a second-generation Jordanian Christian, I remember feeling different from the rest of my classmates at school. I was expected to stay away from my male classmates and to make sure my friends were only females. As the years progressed, my mother continuously reiterated to me that I should not “hang out” with boys because it might ruin my image. It was required of me not to date until I miraculously found the one Middle Eastern Christian man that I was destined to marry. Although this type of constraint employed by family members was challenging to overcome in some instances, I was never deterred from achieving professional, personal, and social goals. The expectation for me to stay true to my cultural upbringing, while attempting to fit in with my non-Arab friends became a constant battle between two identities.

The constant struggle with negotiating identity that a Middle Eastern woman and her romantic partner may experience results in either relationship turbulence or solidification, making this field of study vital to investigate. Within this qualitative study, I conducted in-depth interviews of females who are romantically involved with an individual who has an ethnic background other than Middle Eastern descent. I specifically wanted to explore the communication that the Middle Eastern woman has with her partner, as well as her family members regarding the possibly “forbidden” relationship. In the midst of conducting my research, I wish to bring about awareness of this communicative issue and provide directions for new research for communication scholars. Principally, researchers within the field of interpersonal, intercultural, and family communication may benefit from my current study, increasing the level of interest regarding Middle Easterners, identity, and romance. Overall, with the little attention communication scholars have given to Middle Eastern women engaging in a committed interethnic romantic relationship, my ultimate goal is to provide a valuable contribution to such a relevant and emerging topic, with implications for future studies. I accomplished this by means of an in-depth interview study of the dating experiences of interethnically dating Middle Eastern women. While we might presume that Middle Eastern women may struggle with dating in America due to rigid rules placed on them, without creating a platform of scholarship for Middle Eastern women and their romantic relationships, it is difficult for us to truly know and understand their lived, romantic experiences.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The previous chapter discussed Middle Eastern women, their interethnic romantic relationships, and their various identities. Though not all Arab American women withhold their interethnic romances from in-group members, the examination of interethnic relationships is crucial for family, intercultural, and interpersonal communication research. Little communication scholarship has analyzed Middle Eastern culture. In this chapter I will discuss previous research pertaining to the various roles of Middle Eastern women, intercultural dating/marriage, and the theoretical framework of Communication Theory of Identity with elements of Identity Management Theory.

Middle Eastern Women and Identity

The expectations constituted for a Middle Eastern woman set by Arab societal norms may make her feel an intense amount of pressure. The Arab American woman must adhere to these expectations of who she should be and how she should behave based on two clashing identities. Exclusively, a Middle Eastern woman living in contemporary United States may experience dissonance regarding fulfilling the role of an American woman, while also maintaining the Arab female role. Kaya (2009) discusses this notion of private and public spheres as it relates to Middle Eastern women and contends, “Specifically, many local observers have feared that women in public space would form

sexual or love relationships outside of the bounds of conventional courtship and marriage” (p. 253). Since an Arab woman is expected to fall in love with her Middle Eastern partner, she may potentially need to deliberate what she should publicly reveal versus what must remain confidential regarding her interethnic romantic relationship.

Arab Family Identity

Kaya (2009) interviewed women from Irbid, Jordan, about their motives for using Internet cafés to initiate possible romances. She sought to discover how these women present their identities online versus in public spaces by examining online discussions between male and female students attending Yarmouk University. She then conducted semi-structured interviews with some of these Irbidi females. The results revealed that the concept of space is relevant for Arab women, who often have restrictions against being romantically involved with an individual without the intent to marry him. In Internet cafés, a computer that essentially shields them from having physical contact with their online partner guards these individuals from being in an intimate relationship. Kaya notes that engaging in a computer-mediated relationship in comparison to a face-to-face relationship decreases feelings of commitment for both men and women. This media outlet allows some Arab women to chat with males without serious intentions regarding marriage, while allowing some Arab women to find a serious relationship leading to a possible marriage. Interestingly, Kaya found that numerous women users of the Internet café lied about their ethnicity if the partner was not from the same Middle Eastern country in order to match their country of origin to that of the Internet partner.

In her book, Joseph (1999) discusses identities among Arab families and describes the familial self and the individualized self. She explains, “The familial self is sustained

by mirroring throughout life, by observation of traditional responsibilities, and by modes of cognition that are highly contextual” (p. 5). “The individualized self,” on the other hand, “is an autonomous, individuated, separated self with relatively self-contained outer ego boundaries adapted to societies organized around contractual and egalitarian relationships and valuing rational, self-reflective, and efficient modes of cognition” (p. 5). The “self” of a Middle Eastern is influenced by two major constituents: American society and norms, and Arab cultural and familial norms. The developing notion of “self” that emerges when an Arab woman dates a non-Middle Eastern male may create uncertainty regarding cultural, familial, and individual identities. Mango (2012) utilized discourse and content analysis of focus groups with five participants in one focus group and six participants in the second focus group. Her focus was to look at first-generation Arab Americans and how they negotiated their “the Arab woman” identity. All participants labeled themselves as “Arab” and “American.” Results revealed that the participants struggled with relating to their Arab ethnicity while living in America.

Private versus public identities. Kaya (2009) writes, Middle Eastern women have various social identities outside of the home, and their social and private worlds can be vastly different. The “private domestic realm” and “external social world” of Middle Eastern women that Kaya describes add to the explanation of the multitude of identities that Arab women possess. Within the “private domestic realm,” an Arab woman dating a non-Middle Eastern partner may feel the need to withhold information regarding her romantic relationship until she is ready to marry him. Conversely, her “external social world” is the identity that she enacts to her family members. Kaya contends that within

the public sphere women from traditional Arab American families do not reveal individual identities.

While Arab women may possess conservative and non-sexual public identities, their private identities must also be conservative and non-sexual. Regarding the private sphere, Kaya (2009) discusses rules or norms that Middle Eastern women must obey: “protection of women’s sexual privacy and the construction of respectful relationships between relatives” (p. 255). Maintaining respectful relationships among family members is fundamental for Middle Easterners, thus making a “private romantic relationship” a challenging, but necessary, secret to keep. Additionally, because familial relationships ultimately construct an Arab woman’s identity, Kaya explains that these identities are “dependent on the behavior and identities of their kin” (p. 259).

Arab women and romance. Though Kaya (2009) presents the perspectives of women living in the Middle East, she argues that Arab women living in America have similar dating ideologies. For an Arab woman living in the Middle East, the quest to find her spouse is potentially less strenuous than that of an Arab American woman. This is because an Arab woman residing in the Middle East is surrounded by a large number of Arab males, thus increasing her chances of finding a non-forbidden romance. Kaya remarks, “Although concerns of respectability are no less important in Jordan, the women have found a means of preserving their reputations while actively pursuing romance” (p. 253). Kaya’s notion of Arab women and their need to “preserve their reputation” perfectly integrates with the various roles that Arab Americans must negotiate.

A Middle Eastern woman’s sexuality may not be revealed and should remain protected until the union of marriage. Naber (2006) explores the binary identities within

Arab American ideals regarding gender and sexuality. For the purposes of the current study, the term “sexualized” or “sexuality” is defined as “virginity, followed by demands of an idealized Arab womanhood that together, constituted the yardstick that policed female subjectivities (p. 92). She claims that an Arab woman’s cultural identity is far more gendered and sexualized in comparison to that of an Arab man. Here, the sexual act itself is not the focus of this particular definition, but the Arab woman simply going against Arab dating ideals or norms categorizes her as more sensuous and focused on sexual activity. An Arab woman who goes against Middle Eastern “dating” norms is seen as promiscuous despite the number of romantic or sexual partners she has had. An Arab woman who decides to date a non-Middle Eastern man may publicly amplify her chances of damaging her “public” identity that most first-generation family members construct for her. The preservation of one’s reputation begins with the first-generation Arab Americans, meaning that a woman who dates or marries a man outside of the Middle Eastern culture ultimately impugns the reputation both of herself and of the entirety of her family. For example, Kaya (2009) mentions one of the responses from a participant regarding being seen in public with her boyfriend, “Even if I don’t care about my own reputation, I should think about my mother’s” (p. 270). Here, the respondent does not feel the need to preserve her own reputation, but rather that of her mother.

Arab American women who choose to follow American dating norms “undermine Arab womanhood, and one’s cultural identity becomes a cultural loss” (Naber, 2006, p. 88). The overtly negative connotations attached to being romantically involved with an individual from a different cultural background from the perceptions of most first-generation Middle Easterners potentially sanctions Arab American females to ask

themselves if dating is worth the risk of rejection among highly valued family members. Britto and Amer (2007) describe that, when familial and societal cultures are in conflict with one another, it becomes more difficult for the Arab woman to foster a sense of cultural identity. The decision that a Middle Eastern female has to make regarding remaining true to Arab “dating” norms or following American dating norms may delineate her identity.

Familial relationships. Family members who attempt to establish an Arab female’s identity thereby categorize Middle Eastern women, placing these women into either sexualized or un-sexualized roles. Naber (2006) describes this concept and claims that “this family strategy deployed a cultural nationalist logic that represented the categories ‘Arab’ and ‘American’ in oppositional terms, such as ‘good Arab girls’ vs. ‘bad American(ized) girls,’ or ‘Arab virgin’ vs. ‘American(ized) whore” (p. 88). Normally, when a Middle Eastern female is called “so American,” this means that she is associating herself with drinking and dating norms that most Americans expect to be true according to their cultural norms. In this case, the term “American” thus becomes negative, despite the generally positive implications of being labeled American.

An Arab American woman’s relationship with her family has much to do with how she constructs her own identity. According to Britto and Amer (2007), an individual’s family upbringing is crucial in the development of one’s identity. When an Arab American woman shares a strong relationship with her family, she feels a stronger sense of how she should construct her identity in order to avoid disappointment from family members. For Arab American women, “deciphering the interplay between the characteristics of familial context and cultural identity formation is a challenge because

of the complexities inherent in family ecologies, socialization processes, and cultural adaptation patterns” (Britto & Amer, 2007, p. 138).

Intercultural Dating/Marriage

Intermarriage and interethnic dating. Scholars have looked at various types of unions including interfaith, intercultural, and interethnic marriages. It is important to understand the various inter-relationship (dating, marriage, etc.) contexts, which include intercultural, interethnic, interfaith, or interreligious (Baldwin et al., 2014). Remennick (2009) notes, “In line with growing social diversity, terminology has also evolved: The adjective ‘intercultural’ is increasingly used as more inclusive alternative to ‘interracial,’ especially in non-American contexts” (p. 719). Furthermore, some scholars use the terms interethnic and intercultural interchangeably. Within this study, I focused primarily on the labels of interethnic, intercultural, and interreligious relationships in order to describe Middle Eastern women and their romantic relationships.

Although I am examining Arab American females and their intercultural romances, the label “Arab” as opposed to “American” has vastly different implications that were previously discussed. The union of marriage between individuals of different ethnic groups introduces an even wider range of concerns in comparison than those experienced by a non-married interethnic couple. Scholars interested in such relationships have looked at variety of issues, including dating and mate selection, communication, and opposition toward the relationship.

Mate selection. The majority of research regarding intermarriage involves the assessment of how couples manage conflict. Specifically, Roer-Strier and Ezra (2006) mention, “The overriding impression among most writers is that intermarriage creates

problems both for families and for society as a whole ” (p. 41). Most researchers specializing in the field of psychology and sociology examine intercultural/interracial couples and the problems that may arise from such romances focusing on mate selection. Most communication scholars seek to discover reasons or motives of individuals entering an interethnic romantic relationship. Harris and Kalbfleisch (2000) apply two theories to describe reasons behind the formation of interracial romantic relationships. The structural theory deals with considerations of a person’s demographics (i.e., socioeconomic status, residence, education) and mutual attraction that are clear motives behind entering such relationships. The racial motivation theory assumes that one person may find a potential partner’s racial difference to be physically attractive, ultimately provoking him or her to initiate a romance.

Cultural differences in communication patterns. Graham, Moeai, and Shizuru (1985) argue that because intercultural couples may have varying ideologies regarding marriage, they may experience problems. In addition to interethnic couples having conflicting ideals of what the union of marriage is, interethnic couples may also struggle with how to effectively raise a child based on such conflicting ideologies. Remennick (2009) echoes the idea that the addition of children and their identity bring about conflict within intercultural marriages. Additionally, Moriizumi (2011) notes, “Investigating how couples negotiate with each other around the important family topics may contribute to identifying emergent patterns of their relational and cultural identities” (p. 90).

Looking at interethnic relationships within the field of communication allows scholars to discover not only the type of relationship that intercultural couples share with one another, but the communicative patterns and behaviors they may utilize. During

possible disagreements, these couples must find ways to negotiate the partners' ethnic and relational identities. In their qualitative study, Seshadri and Knudson-Martin (2013) interviewed interracial couples to discover the foundation of their relationships and how they efficiently handled negative stereotypes based on their interracial relationship. The authors observed, "What it means to live within an intercultural/interracial marriage is created as partners interact with each other within larger family, community, and societal contexts" (p. 44). Fundamentally, researchers' examination of interethnic romances is valuable within the field of communication; their findings suggest that some couples integrate each other's cultures within their everyday lives, while some couples choose to leave two cultures separate (Seshadri & Knudson -Martin). Specifically, their results revealed that cultural differences were not central to couples' arguments and that couples pursued each other for support when disapproval from a family member became apparent.

Some researchers that have examined intercultural marriages have considered the ways such couples manage conflicts. Baldwin et al. (2014) state, "The research on cross-cultural differences in conflict has looked at everything from brothers and sisters to romantic partners to workplace conflicts, often with the issues in the conflicts being the same" (p. 280). Despite the conflict at hand, interethnic couples may handle conflict differently based on partners' own cultural norms. Hughes, Baldwin, and Olaniran (2013) mention that within a marriage, couples' differences regarding race or religion may influence the way they handle conflict. Specifically, interethnic married couples are highly "interested in passing on their own cultural and religious set of values, beliefs and practices, thereby causing conflict between the adults, as well as inner conflict among the

children when dealing with their own identity” (Ezra & Roer-Strier, 2009, p. 3).

For example, Reiter and Gee (2008) looked at intercultural couples and the maintenance strategies they used to handle conflict and stated that “open communication and topic avoidance play important roles in relational maintenance and have not been examined enough among intercultural and interreligious marriages” (p. 541). They looked at couples’ support for a partner’s cultural and religious beliefs in relation to satisfaction, commitment, and relationship longevity. Based on their quantitative results, Reiter and Gee concluded that open communication and acceptance regarding cultural differences and similarities is one of the most effective ways for couples to preserve the relationship. Additionally, the results indicated that individuals who discuss issues pertaining to cultural differences within the relationship have less relationship distress. Second-generation Arab Americans may have a stronger tendency toward open discussion than first-generation family members.

While Reiter and Gee (2008) examined how couples manage cultural differences, Harris and Kalbfleisch (2000) assessed the influence that race plays within interactions and the motivating factors that influence various communicative behaviors. Their primary goals were to examine racial identity of a romantic partner and the dialogue used in seeking an interracial date as these pertained to possible motives for entering the interracial relationship. What these scholars found was that race did have an influence in the communicative language used when an individual is planning to ask out a member from the out-group. Participants answered open-ended questions about their views on being romantically involved with an individual of a different racial background. The participants that would not date individuals outside of their race had an ultimate fear of

receiving negative backlash from their parents and society. Although, this study was conducted nearly 15 years ago, the examination illuminates current study. Familial and societal pressures may still contribute to one's fear involving dating/marrying a partner of a different cultural/ethnic background.

Opposition to the relationship and the Romeo and Juliet Effect. Graham et al. (1985) assessed the perceived problems of intercultural, intracultural, and intrareligious married couples living in Hawaii, specifically investigating internal and external factors affecting couple satisfaction. They interviewed Caucasians, Blacks, and Hispanics with a spouse from a different ethnic/cultural background sharing the same religion (all participants were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). Their findings revealed that intercultural couples reported significantly more external problems such as family members, friends, and members within the community, whereas same-culture marriages reported problems over differences in things such as childrearing and time with friends.

Graham et al. (1985) describe the problems associated with intercultural marriages and note that most problems consist of rejection and discrimination, and the rejection from family members or other members within the culture may generate conflict among couples. According to previous findings, some married couples are assumed to have more relational turbulence in comparison to interethnic dating couples. More recently, Remennick (2009) notes that isolation can occur when individuals marry outside of their group, thus risking their status in regards to family members and other members of society. At the same time, Seshadri and Martin (2013) note that, when there is disapproval from a family member, couples confided in each other for support. This may

be especially true for an Arab woman dating an interethnic partner. She may have the ability to keep the relationship a secret, if she knows family members will reject such a relationship. By contrast, when an Arab woman wants to marry her interethnic partner, unless she elopes, her family members will need to acknowledge her decision to wed and may either accept or reject the union.

Based on their findings and on previous literature, Graham et al. (1985) describe the “Romeo and Juliet” effect as something that occurs when couples receive disapproval from parents, therefore increasing the feelings of love and attraction partners have for one another. Graham et al. argue that this attraction also impedes on having healthy and long-lasting relationships. Racin and Dein (2010) also employed the application of the Romeo and Juliet effect. Due to the inherent conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, they argue, individuals who are romantically involved with one another embody negative stereotypes among in-group members within the same culture or religion. Although a Middle Eastern Christian woman who becomes romantically involved with a man from a different culture but the same religion is prohibited by most family members, Racin and Dein go on to explain that in Israel if one of the partners is not willing to convert to the other’s religion then the partners must travel to a different country to marry. Because Arab women have the freedom to marry their partner regardless of his ethnic or religious background in America, Racin and Dein’s interview study of 29 Israeli-Jewish Israeli women dating Muslim men suggests that interethnic and interfaith relationships may face more severe circumstances in Israel.

Middle Easterners and interethnic romances. In a quantitative study, Rubeiz (1979) asked Middle Eastern students at a university in Lebanon to report their dating history. Despite the study being conducted in 1979, the results have modern relevance in terms of Middle Eastern women's roles in society, their romantic and familial relationships. Even at the period of time, dating was not considered rare among college students since they were living on a college campus, away from their parents. Particularly, "as many as 37% had dated over 30 times during their college years; 14% had dated 15-30 times; 13% had dated 6-14 times; 30% had dated less than five times; and 5% had not dated" (Rubeiz, 1979, p. 58). Despite this dating frequency, premarital sex was unacceptable for women but not men. Both male and female participants (49% of them) said that premarital sex for women is wrong. Rubeiz (1979) mentioned that although guidelines were set by parental figures for women, these women were willing to go against such rules by dating men who were not approved by family members. Since most students moved back to their homes with their parents upon completion of graduation many of the college students terminated their relationships.

Racin and Dein (2010) were predominantly concerned with assessing interfaith romantic relationships by conducting interviews of Israeli Jewish and Arab Muslim couples from the perspective of the female partner. The ongoing national and religious conflict between Israelis and Palestinians makes such romantic relationships exceptionally prohibited among family members and societal contexts. Racin and Dein add to Remennick's (2009) argument regarding marriage outside of the "group" and reason that "those who date or marry outside of their respective culture often confront pressure from their own group due to the group's conviction that choosing someone from

a different background is disrespectful or a rejection toward their own culture” (Racin & Dein, 2010, p. 298). Remennick (2009) also discusses interfaith marriages between individuals from Islam and Judaism. She notes, “In Israel, interethnic marriages do not indicate the demise of ethnic communities but rather their re-definition and reinforcement via emergence of pan-ethnic categories” (p. 721). Racin and Dein (2010) note that in Israel, Islam allows men to marry women of other faiths as long as the women convert to Islam, but does not allow women to marry outside of their faith. The results of Racin and Dein’s study indicated that some participants chose to join an interfaith marriage due to having feelings of resentment towards their family members. Additional results revealed that some participants wished to convert their religion based on issues pertaining to their own religious identity. Similar to the results derived from Seshadri and Martin’s (2013) study, Racin and Dein (2010) also found that some couples developed positive growth within their marriage due to outsiders’ negative reactions.

Grewal (2009) examines the notion of identity for Muslim Arab Americans and their spouse selection: “Children of immigrants test the boundaries of what constitutes an eligible spouse by drawing on religious sources that challenge their parents’ ideologies of color and racial prejudices” (p. 325). Grewal (2009) describes similarities between second-generation Arab Americans and notes that American-born children of immigrants often have different archetypes from their parents regarding what makes up the ideal spouse.

In Grewal’s (2009) study of 90 second-generation Arab and Desi Muslims, participant comments suggest intra-racism among individuals within the same cultural and religious backgrounds, Arabs are considered to be White in comparison to Desis,

who typically have darker complexions. The female participants admitted that it would be more of a challenge for them to marry partners with darker complexions. One respondent disclosed:

I think marrying out of [your] race is fine when other people do it...but I never could because I am too cultural... I want my culture to be carried on to the future generations and...both parents have to have the same culture for...[your] kids to be pure Desi” (p. 336).

Here, the underlying theme is re-examined; the need to preserve one’s ethnic identity may overtake the desire for an individual to marry outside of his or her culture.

Throughout these studies and interviews, we can see that one overarching theme that influences everything from conflict styles to one’s own identity in the relationship, from relation to family to how to raise children, and how each of these choices impact dating partner/mate selection, is the issue of cultural identity.

Communication Theory of Identity

Overview. The communication theory of identity (CTI) looks at the connection between identity and communication, thus making this a practical theoretical framework to guide my current research pertaining to Middle Eastern females and interethnic romances. The integration of communication and identity begins with the symbolic meanings ascribed through social interaction. Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger (2005), discussing identity and communication, note that “identity is formed when relevant symbolic meanings are attached to and organized in an individual in various situations through social interactions, a perspective adopted from identity theory” (p. 262).

Additionally, individuals confirm or disconfirm identity categories based on social interactions they create for themselves (p. 261).

Assumptions of CTI. Hecht and Choi (2012) explain that “CTI presents a more comprehensive or synthetic view of identity, integrating community, communication, social relationships, and self-concepts while locating identity in all these layers” (p. 139). This view resonates with one of my central arguments: Middle Eastern females living in the United States must balance their familial, religious, educational, and occupational facets of their lives, while struggling with the decision to date men outside of their culture or stick to the cultural norms regarding dating/marriage. The authors of CTI developed the following theoretical assumptions (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 263):

1. Identities have individual, social, and communal properties.
2. Identities are both enduring and challenging.
3. Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual.
4. Identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation.
5. Identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning.
6. Identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities.
7. Identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings, and labels.
8. Identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication.
9. Identities are a source of expectations and motivations.
10. Identities are emergent.

The various propositions listed above accurately pertain to Middle Eastern women and their need to balance conflicting cultural and relational identities. Although the previously mentioned assumptions do not explicitly state that an individual possesses multiple and overlapping identities, Collier and Thomas (1988) provide an additional assumption regarding CTI and note that “persons negotiate multiple identities in discourse” (p. 107). Thus, in relation to my current study some overlapping identities of these women include American, Middle Eastern, and female, as well as religious identities.

The first assumption, that each identity has “individual, social, and communal properties” signifies these multiple genres of identities that Middle Eastern women must maintain (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 263). Jung and Hecht (2004) explain that these multiple identities are related to one another: “One can be both parent and lawyer; teacher and follower; lover and member of hate group.” They add that “a relationship, itself, can be a unit of identity” (p. 267). These overlapping identities may lead the individual to negotiate her various identities that become salient through day-to-day interactions. For instance, “When people place themselves in socially recognizable categories, they confirm or validate through social interaction whether these categories are relevant to them” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 262).

The notion that “identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning” also applies to Middle Eastern women and intercultural dating. The Middle Eastern identity versus the American identity becomes a recognized and understood identity for her rather than an individualized postulation of one’s identity. For example, Hecht et al. (2005) note that “culture and society provide two interpretive lenses for individual understandings of

the self” (p. 258). The strong influence that society and culture have on the construction of one’s identity provides meaning to what makes up an “Arab American woman.”

Collier and Thomas (1988) discuss the fifth assumption listed above and explain that a subjective or avowed identity is the way an individual sees her own identity, while a person’s ascribed identity is the way others (in-group or out-group members) view her identity. An Arab American woman dating interethnically may identify more strongly as Middle Eastern when she is educating her partner about Arab norms and customs. After describing how multiple identities work together, the breakdown of separate identities will be discussed.

Layers of identity. Hecht et al. (2005) describe four specific layers of identity that make up communication theory of identity. They explain that the four layers within CTI are interconnected and are not separate entities. These four components are the personal, enactment, relational, and communal layers of identity. The personal layer deals with an individual’s self-concept that is constructed by relational messages, specifically as self-concept relates to a particular group identity. During the enactment layer, identities are established through social interactions, roles, behaviors, and symbols. The relational layer indicates that identities emerge when one negotiates with individuals within various relationships. At this stage, the romantic partner of the Middle Eastern female may begin to incorporate identities that the female holds and vice versa. Finally, within the communal layer, identities arise from social groups or communities by group members sharing membership characteristics and collective memories.

According to this theory, identities are “emergent” (assumption 10) at all levels, but especially at the enactment and relationship levels—that is, one’s communal identity

becomes relevant or “salient” in a communication and relational context (Hecht et al., 2005). For example, when a Middle Eastern woman is attending a family gathering, she enacts her female, Middle Eastern identities from the various situations in which she is placed. Her American identity may be enacted when she is in public spaces such as at work or school. Collier and Thomas (1988) explain, “When individuals identify with cultural groups they are able to manipulate and understand systems of symbols and beliefs and are able to enact culturally appropriate and effective behavior with members of that group” (p. 113).

Hecht et al. (2005) use the term *interpenetrated* to describe the four layers of identity and note, “These layers match each other but sometimes are contradictory” (p. 262). Applied to Middle Eastern American women, the need for Middle Eastern American women to be a part of the “in-group” of both American and Arab cultural identities may ultimately create a sense of dissonance for these women. Naber (2006) describes the particular focus of her study as “the intersection of two contradictory discourses: Arab cultural re-authenticity and hegemonic U.S nationalism” (p. 89). She also mentions, “The theme of sexuality permeates many Arab immigrant families’ engagements with the pressure of assimilating to a series of racial and cultural discourses on Arabness and Americanness” (p. 89). These two conflicting identities impact individuals’ personal identities: The Arab American woman feels as though she is living a double life. In Naber’s qualitative study, one respondent describes her struggles with living in America as a Jordanian Christian woman and mentions, “I finally met an Arab Christian man who I love, and I thought the double life and the lying could be resolved”

(p. 95). In reference to the previously mentioned layers of identity, various identities work together in accordance with or contradictory to the “Arab American woman.”

Identity gaps. The construct pertaining to contradictory identities among the four frames shifts the focus to identity gaps. Jung and Hecht (2008) describe this concept: “Different frames of identity are sometimes consistent with each other and/or seen as working together, but at other times, tension or differences exist between and among them” (p. 314). The intrinsic discrepancies between the four layers of identity demonstrate the multiple identities of an Arab American woman. The phrase, “two-worlds,” that Naber (2006) discusses echoes with the concept of identity gaps. There can be gaps between any two of the layers, with some gaps including more than two layers. Hecht et al. (2005) note, “The personal-relational identity gap refers to discrepancies between how an individual views him or herself and his or her perception of how others view him or her” (p. 269). Jung and Hecht (2004) describe personal-enacted identity gaps as incongruities among an individual’s view of oneself and the identities the person reveals through various interactions. For Middle Eastern women, their reputation among in-group members is essential, thus it would be problematic if their intercultural relationship created a gap between their personal and relational identities. Specifically, these avowed and ascribed identities will establish possible identity gaps.

Previous research. CTI offers a unique perspective that other communication theories may not: “The communication theory of identity developed out of a line of research investigating ethnic differences in communication as well as describing the nature of intra- and interethnic communication” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 261). While ethnic identity is a crucial element within CTI, the initial interpretation authors sought to

understand pertained to African-American individuals and their relationship between the various identities and the implementation of their daily interactions (Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Ribeau, Baldwin, & Hecht, 2015). The role that ethnic identity plays within CTI is fundamental for intercultural communication scholars. For example, Hecht et al. (2005) discuss the notion of ethnic labeling which “focuses on group membership and is typically measured utilizing a checklist of ethnic terms or labels” (p. 264), although the label one chooses for self is linked to specific thoughts, feelings, and norms of behavior (Collier & Thomas, 1988).

According to Hecht et al. (2005) ethnicity “distinguishes different ways in which people conceptualize themselves as group members and/or the degree to which these memberships are salient to their own identity” (p. 264). When an individual maintains a strong sense of ethnic identity while in a committed interethnic romantic relationship, he or she develops a constructive way of handling conflict. CTI deals with what it means to act appropriately and effectively as a member of a group. This can be manifested in any type of communication context. For example, Ting-Toomey et al. (2000) found, “Asian Americans with weak cultural identity use an avoiding conflict style more than other ethnic groups, whereas Latino Americans with a weak cultural identity use neglecting more than other ethnic groups” (p. 73).

Ethnic identity is a pivotal construct in the current investigation. The applicability of ethnic identity is demonstrated in a study conducted by Urban and Orbe (2010). These authors used CTI as their theoretical framework and assessed identity negotiation regarding immigrants living in the U.S., primarily through the concept of identity gaps. Urban and Orbe (2010) conducted 17 interviews, with eight women and nine men

originating from 16 different countries. Participants were asked to describe their emotions pertaining to their immigration process. Results indicated that although fitting into American society was a challenge for most participants, they described that shifting into American culture was vital. As it applies to identity gaps, within the personal and enacted frame participants felt forced to maintain their own cultural identity while attempting to join the American identity. Urban and Orbe suggested that based on the findings there was a clear gap between the relational and communal layers of identity. The participants felt a stronger connection with their country of origin, but were still able to call America their home. Although Urban and Orbe did not assess intercultural relationships, their results demonstrated the struggles of assimilation. For example, the theory seems especially appropriate for Middle Eastern females living in contemporary United States who are also expected to maintain their cultural (ethnic) identity, while trying to fit into American cultural (dating) norms.

Identity Management Theory

While the application of CTI is crucial for the analysis of findings in the current communicative study, elements of identity management theory or IMT are also applicable. Identity management theory assumes that relational identity development within an intercultural relationship between both partners can be continuously changing depending the intensity of the relationship (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). For the purposes of the current study identity is defined as “self-conception-one’s theory of oneself” (p. 112). Existing research suggests that individuals engaged in romantic relationships will not maintain some of the identities they had prior to entering the relationship. Cupach and Imahori (1993) state that “ongoing interaction drives the development of a relationship,

and relationships profoundly affect the definition of each partner's identity" (p. 113). An individual's self-concept or identity constantly undergoes alteration based on previous experiences or relationships. Thus, "the very construction of a relationship is a function of the extent to which individual identities merge and become interconnected" (p. 113).

One particular identity that Cupach and Imahori (1993) define is cultural identity, which refers to identification based on various "social groups, including, ethnic, racial, social-economic, occupational, and gender" (p. 114). The scholars argue that "as a relationship becomes more intimate and a partner more significant, an individual's self-definition increasingly takes into account the understandings of the evolving relational culture" (p. 113). While cultural identity refers to various elements pertaining to one's social group, my focus within cultural identity is primarily on one's ethnic identity. Cupach and Imahori define relational identity as an identity that primarily deals with the development of interpersonal relationships. They note, "As interpersonal relationships evolve and develop, relational partners formulate a relational identity" (p. 114).

The importance of maintaining and preserving both relational and cultural identities is heightened when we consider interethnic romantic relationships in comparison to ethnic romantic relationships. Lee (2008) highlights this notion: "The importance of forming a shared identity within the relationship between members is supported by several interethnic studies and in cross-gender relationship research" (p. 52). Interethnic relationships make preserving both relational and cultural identities crucial because partners in a romantic couple may try to assimilate to each other's culture, in hopes of still maintaining their own ethnic identities. Cupach and Imahori

(1993) argue that an individual's relational identity is not exclusively crafted by the individual him/herself (p. 116).

Lee (2008) examined intercultural friendships by use of interviews, particularly assessing the three stages of IMT, initial encounter, interaction, and involvement. Lee's (2008) assessment of intercultural friendships and IMT is particularly critical to look at when considering interethnic relationships across the board. Lee (2008) concluded that while IMT aids in the understanding of the formation of identity among intercultural friendships, the theory fails to assess the transition from one relational stage to the next.

Research Questions

An Arab American woman must negotiate identities regarding her familial, romantic, and social contexts that ultimately determine such identities. A Middle Eastern woman's interethnic romantic relationship is important to examine. Often times conflict negotiation is the central focus regarding intercultural research; however, Khatib-Chahidi, Hill, and Paton (1998) suggest that "what can seem like a marriage between dissimilar people to outsiders is often viewed by the couple as a marriage between partners who are more alike than different" (p. 52). Individuals who are romantically involved with a partner from a different ethnic background are likely to be "more assertive, adventurous, open-minded, and differentiated from their families of origin" (53). Certain Arab American women in interethnic relationships are in opposition with family members, while other Arab American women can openly discuss their interethnic romances with family members. Based on the varying familial and relational roles that Middle Eastern women maintain, we must gain a richer understanding of Middle Eastern women and interethnic romantic relationships with the application of CTI and IMT.

Specifically, it is important for us to learn about Middle Eastern women involved in interethnic romantic relationships by achieving a larger understanding in accordance to the Arab woman's identity as informed by the CTI and IMT. The research questions are as follows:

RQ₁: How do Arab American females negotiate their personal and cultural identities within dominant U.S. culture?

RQ₂: How do Arab American women preserve their reputations before family members while being in a committed interethnic romantic relationship?

RQ₃: What considerations do Arab American females in a relationship with non-Middle Eastern partners make when deciding to publicly disclose the romantic relationship?

RQ₄: In what ways do Arab American women experience discrepancies between their personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities?

Conclusion

Although extensive research has been employed pertaining to interethnic romantic relationships, little to no research has specifically examined Middle Eastern women who date non-Middle-Eastern men. With such a growing diversity of Middle Easterners residing in mainstream America it is essential to better understand intercultural romances of people from various countries of origin. In this present study, I focus on the relationships of Middle Eastern women and their romantic partners, family members, and other individuals that may influence the women's multiple identities. In the following chapter I will describe the qualitative methods used in order to achieve these objectives.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Arab American women and their romantic relationships are highly under-researched. Due to the high number of Middle Easterners who have migrated to America, such relationships merit our attention. In the previous chapter, my main focus was to explain communication theory of identity and elements of identity management theory in order to set a foundation for this research study. The chapter also explained the role of Middle Eastern women within American and Arab society, specifically focusing on those who are in interethnic romantic relationships. Additionally, intergroup (intercultural, interethnic, interreligious) marriages and dating among various ethnic groups were covered. The primary objective for this study is to discover what role an Arab American woman's committed interethnic romantic relationship plays in the manifestation of her multiple identities, and how she negotiates sharing information about the relationship with certain in-group members.

Participants

The 15 participants I gathered for this research study were from various Middle Eastern countries and were living in America. I recruited Middle Eastern females from various countries. This included participants ranging from Middle Eastern backgrounds such as: Jordanian (5), Palestinian (3), Lebanese (2), Saudi Arabian (1), Algerian (1), Syrian (1), Syrian/Armenian (1), and Syrian/Jordanian (1). In order to develop the widest

understanding of cultural “dating” norms across the board it was ideal to find participants from various Middle Eastern countries. This goal required me to pursue maximum variation sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or a sampling of the widest array of individuals within a given shared trait of interest (interethnically dating Middle Eastern women). In terms of age, the participants ranged from 21 to 35 years old. Since my focus is on committed, monogamous interethnic relationships for the Arab American female, there were no restrictions placed on exclusively interviewing dating or married participants. In determining the interethnic romantic relationship, I asked participants to discuss their most prominent interethnic romantic relationships. Participants that were currently single were asked to discuss their more prominent interethnic romantic relationship and the possible motives behind the break up. Of the 15 participants, 4 were currently in an interethnic relationship, 4 were married interethnically, 3 were single, 2 were engaged interethnically, and 2 were currently dating Arab American men, but discussed their past interethnic relationships.

In order to collect participants, I utilized a snowball sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), since the participants needed for my study were required to be Arab American females engaged in a past or current interethnic romantic relationship. Participants who have terminated the relationship and participants who are currently involved in an interethnic romance had interesting insight to the role of ethnicity, and surrounding friend and family networks in interethnic relationships of Arab American women.

First, I sent out an email (See APPENDIX A) to individuals who may have known a large Middle Eastern population living in the U.S to help in the recruitment of participants. Since I fit the role of an Arab American woman, I relayed the message to

members within communities then pass on the message. The email asked them to forward my information to anyone they may know who might wish to volunteer as a participant in my study. Provided the participants meet the criteria, the individuals receiving the invitation then gave the necessary information to whomever they wanted. Most importantly, I did not directly ask friends or acquaintances to take part in the study in order to avoid coercion.

Data Collection

The design of this study is qualitative in form, because I wanted to find information about the personal experiences of Middle Eastern women, their concepts of identity, and their openness with their family members regarding their interethnic romance. The interviews should provide researchers with a richer understanding of people's lived experiences and many qualitative scholars utilize interviews as their primary method in order to:

Understand their perspectives on a scene, to retrieve their experiences from the past, to gain expert insight or information, to obtain descriptions of events that are normally unavailable for observation, to foster trust, to understand sensitive relationships, and to create a record of communication that can subsequently be analyzed. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 3)

Because I am examining Middle Eastern women and their interethnic romantic relationships, qualitative research can provide a richer understanding of relationships and cultures, as well as an understanding of the "self" of the participants (Tracy, 2013). An autoethnographic focus—one in which the researcher is a member of the group being studied, is helpful in this case. According to various scholars (e.g., Tracy, 2013), an

autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing that connects the analysis of one’s identity, culture, feelings, and values to larger social issues” (p. 6). To put it simply, “auto” refers to personal experiences and “ethnography” refers to the narration of culture (Baías, 2014).

By using interviews for the study, along with elements of an autoethnography, I wish hoped to gain a better understanding of why some Middle Eastern women may feel the need to disclose or hide their interethnic romance, and of the various identities they must manage. Conducting an autoethnography is a way for researchers to “understand and appreciate the standpoint of a story teller” (Bochner, 2012, p. 162). While conducting interviews provides the researcher with enriched and descriptive data, utilizing elements of an autoethnographic method allows researchers to “realize there may be no better way to come to terms with how we want to live and what we can understand and say about how others live than to listen to and converse with their stories” (p. 162). The use of autoethnographic methods during the interviews implies that I utilized self-disclosure when necessary, in order to better connect with my participants. Although I used my perspectives during some points of the interview process, the categories were derived based on the participants’ responses.

Being directly connected to my participants in some way, I wished to create a positive experience for all respondents. In the previously mentioned study, because Mango (2012) is an Arab American, she had the advantage of establishing rapport within the focus group interviewees. In hopes of creating a positive atmosphere, I made my participants aware of possible similar cultural identities that we may share, resulting in participants being as open and detailed as possible in responses.

Procedure

The method I used was in-depth interviews concerning elements of personal experiences of participants. I conducted interviews until redundancy was evident (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Specifically, redundancy involves the repetition of themes regarding participants' responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), that is, collecting and analyzing data until a point that additional data collection and analysis yields no new themes.

Additionally, each interview was conducted in a one-on-one context lasting about 30 to 60 minutes, allotting participants ample time to discuss their thoughts. Due to the open-ended type of questions (See APPENDIX C) I asked during the interview, I wished to utilize respondent interviews. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011) respondent interviews are "conducted to find out how people express their views, how they construct their actions, how they conceptualize their life world, and so forth" (p. 179). Interviews were conducted in the participant's home or private room, or via video Internet chats through means of Skype or FaceTime. I allowed participants to choose the location of the interview in an attempt to make participants feel as comfortable as possible during the interview process.

Interview protocol

In order to begin the interview process, participants read and signed an informed consent statement (See APPENDIX B). The informed consent provided information to participants pertaining to confidentiality, research topic, and latent risks involved with participation of my study. The consent form also included my contact information in case any participants had further comments, questions, or concerns regarding the interview. Once the participant was aware of the research goals and the potential risks, the semi-

structured interview began. Semi-structured interviews provide participants ample time to respond to questions, while allowing supplemental questions, if necessary (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This technique enables the interview to be more conversational in nature, rather than the interviewee feeling that her responses must be planned and forced.

I employed an interview guide (See APPENDIX C) when asking questions to the participants. Thus, I had the desired questions, while still having the freedom to discuss issues in different orders between interviews or follow up on questions, based on each respondent's comments. I asked both non-directive and directive questions. Non-directive questions allowed me to gain more personal, unique responses from each participant. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011) a non-directive question provides the participant freedom to describe her experiences at the start of the interview and at other points of the interview process. A specific non-directive question that I included in the beginning the interview is a grand-tour question permitting "subjects to tell the interviewer how something in their scene or life experience- an activity, an event, a friendship, their career-has transpired" (p. 202). A typical grand-tour question in this case would be to ask my participants to walk through their most recent interethnic relationship from the beginning to now, noting any key issues that have come up. This permitted participants to describe varied responses based on extended periods of time experienced throughout their lifetime. Because I wanted to discover the type of relationship my respondent has with her romantic partner, while maintaining her various identities, asking this form of question allowed me to better understand "rituals, routines, procedures, or socialization paths" regarding her interethnic romantic relationship (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 202). I

followed the grand-tour question with directive questions, including those that ask more directly about comparisons, causes and effects, aspects of experiences, and so on.

Specifically, the main line of questions guiding the interviews is as follows. First, I asked my participants introductory questions, in hopes to learn more about their hobbies, education, career, social life, and family life. Next, I transitioned into the identity section, where I asked the participants what types of identities they have to maintain in order to appease their families and partners. Questions pertained to the length of the romantic relationship and length of time since the break-up. For partners that previously dated interethnically, I inquired about factors that may have contributed to the break up. Then, I asked more personal, open-ended questions dealing with the role of cultural difference in current or past romantic interethnic relationship/s. Although conflict negotiation was not the primary topic guiding my investigation, interviewing partners that broke up due to cultural differences may provide insight to the role of culture and family in response to the relationship. If the participant was not yet married, a specific topic question dealt with the respondent's future plans with her partner. This way I could discover more detailed reasons as to why participants date interethnically.

Data Analysis

Each respondent interview was digitally audio-recorded, and I kept all audio files on my password-protected personal computer. I transcribed each interview to ensure accuracy of interpretation of participant comments. Most importantly, in order to protect my participants' privacy I provided each respondent a pseudonym.

In order to understand how relationships between the categories reoccur, I conducted a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis by definition is "identifying, analyzing,

and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Simply put, I sought to discover repetitive themes across responses; a theme as defined by Boyatzis (1998) is “a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (p. 5). Additionally, I applied Owen’s (1994) criteria while examining interview responses by using repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness. Repetition refers to finding key words or phrases that are frequently mentioned, while recurrence involves assessing meaning within the words or phrases that the participants employed. Finally, forcefulness pertains to the participant’s vocal inflection, pitch, rate, volume, or emphasis that she placed on specific words or phrases. After looking at Owen’s (1994) criteria, I employed the methods of unitizing and categorizing in order to cultivate a systematic way to develop themes based on the interviews. Based on CTI and IMT, I looked for various categories within the assumptions of the previously mentioned theoretical implications. Specifically, I selected units that pertained to the expression of the participant’s identity. The theories were used to simply guide my research and not synthesize the results.

The specific steps I took during the process of thematizing responses was to unitize and to categorize. Initially, the process of unitizing consists of separating general responses into more basic components. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that by breaking down the responses into smaller units means that themes are “expected to emerge from the inquiry” (p. 203). Specifically, I sought idea units that would provide relevant data aimed at answering the research questions listed above. Then, I utilized categorization by regrouping the units along similar themes. By regrouping units into similar themes relevant to the research questions, I applied domain analysis. Domain

analysis “involves a description of a given category of meaning or domain through a relevant semantic relationship” (Baxter, 1991, p. 245). Spradley (1979) explains that creating categories of meaning within data permits the researcher to look for Xs that are kinds of Y, causes of Y, effects of Y, parts of Y, reasons for doing Y, and ways to do Y.

In addition to using domain analysis it was necessary to take the inductive approach in order for my “research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). Utilizing domain analyses provided me with a richer understanding of Middle Eastern women’s perceptions of identity holistically. As a researcher, this experience offered a general understanding of various Middle Eastern women across the board, expanding my knowledge regarding the subject matter that might be limited by my own personal experiences. More importantly, the goal of my study is to expand awareness for scholars involving such an under-researched topic.

Specifically, for research question one, I looked for units pertaining to identity negotiation and management for Middle Eastern women. For research question two, I looked specifically at how Arab American women create specific identities in regards to their familial expectations. For research question three, I thematized responses based on women self-disclosing or leaving their relationship a secret among certain groups of people. Finally, research question four provided me with responses based on the notion of identity gaps.

Conclusion

In conclusion, conducting semi-structured interviews along with using elements of autoethnographic qualitative methods allowed me to understand and develop possible

themes for Middle Eastern women and their interethnic romances and management of their multiple identities. Essentially, this method granted me a holistic understanding of my participants' experiences, by authorizing them to describe and explain their own stories. By performing a thematic analysis, I sought to organize themes that emerged consistently throughout the interviews pertaining to identity management and a Middle Eastern woman's interethnic romantic relationship. The following chapter will present the findings that are in accordance with the research questions.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In the preceding chapter, I discussed my methodology by specifically highlighting information regarding my in-depth interviews. The 15 interviews I conducted lasted roughly between 30-60 minutes. Once I transcribed all 15 interviews verbatim, I coded responses into significant themes. Within this chapter, I will discuss the emergent themes in order of my four research questions. First, I will discuss the Middle Eastern woman's portrayals of her cultural identity.

Portrayal of Personal and Cultural Identities

The goal of research question one was to discover how Arab American women identified themselves within Mainstream United States, with their personal and cultural identities. Collier and Thomas (1988) described that when identities are avowed, their importance in relation to other cultural identities intensifies. Avowed identities pertain to how an individual claims a specific identity in interactions through certain behaviors. For example, a woman who identifies more with her American identity over her Middle Eastern identity may potentially be adhering to American dating and social norms. Although ascription is not a component of research question one, how others view and portray one's identity is valuable to discuss in regards to this research question. In this section, I will discuss the various ways my participants revealed notions of avowed or ascribed identities.

Avowal/Intensity

As previously stated in the review of literature, a person's avowed identity refers to how an individual sees herself by the behaviors utilized to claim one's own identity. Some various ways these women presented having avowed or ascribed identities was through their circle of friends (being around more Americans versus being around more Middle Easterners), their following American dating norms over traditional Middle Eastern dating norms, the knowledge of the Arabic language, and the contrast between Arabs and Americans.

American identity. Aya discussed how she views herself in relation to her Arab versus American identity. Although she identifies as both Jordanian and American, she feels closer to the American identity, based on the people she associates with. Aya's need to be more "Arab" is minimized, because she identifies so strongly as American.

I relate with both cultures. The food and music, I have always been exposed to. Sometimes the Arabic culture is a little stricter and I don't agree with any of that stuff. So I identify more with the American culture, because that is what I have grown up with. Most of my friends are not Arabic; now at my job there are Arabs that work there so I can relate with them.

When Aya's mother mentioned to her the importance of learning how to speak Arabic, her response was, "I do not have time to learn." Here, she is content with not knowing the Arabic language, and therefore, will continue to identify as more American in comparison to her Jordanian identity in some sense.

Although Suad is currently in a romantic relationship with her partner from the African American descent, she discussed a past romantic relationship. In this instance,

Suad was dating an individual while she was living in Jordan for a study abroad program. In this circumstance, Suad felt less Lebanese and more American since her ex-partner has lived in the Middle East his entire life:

Most recently I was with someone who was Arab. I met him in Jordan, he is Jordanian, Jordanian. It was cool to be in a relationship where English is not the main language spoken, and there were things you didn't have to explain, but it put into such sharp relief your own Americanness.

By being engulfed in the Middle Eastern culture, Suad felt her ethnic background was enhanced. Despite her efforts to be more Middle Eastern, her ex-partner's Arabness outweighed her own Arabness, thus, making her American identity surpass her Arab identity.

Unlike Aya and Suad, Rea tried to immerse herself with more Middle Easterners, in hopes to find a Middle Eastern man to become romantically involved with. She discussed her struggle of finding a potential Middle Eastern partner:

But I also want to be happy for the rest of my life. I am not saying that Muslim, Arab men suck; I have never met someone that I want to be with. And I know that my junior and senior year of college I wanted to give it a chance, so I joined the Arab student association to see if I can expand my circle. I have so many friends but they are not Arab or Muslim, and I don't have a problem with that, but I felt maybe if I surround myself more I can find someone that fits the standards of my father.

Rea's experience resonated with the majority of my participants' views on dating or marrying partners from the Middle Eastern descent. Most women reported not being

opposed to finding Arab men to be romantically involved with because it would have been easier when thinking about their families, but they simply fell in love with someone who is not of the Arab background.

Middle Eastern identity. Women who identified very strongly as Middle Eastern either described their strong ethnic pride, their knowledge of the cultural background and language, or their need to educate non-Arabs about the Middle Eastern culture. Rea stated:

My roots where I come from, my family—that is a big part of who I am. I am very passionate about what I do, about everything. My first time I went to Palestine was two summers ago; it was very important for me to go. I went with my parents. It was me, my mom, and dad. That trip was really important for me. One, because I met family that I've never met before. It was really cool to see my mother interacting with her father; it was a really cool thing for me to experience.

When asked about her own identity, Cara described one particular way she actively contributed to her Middle Eastern identity. She described that she is,

in one word- Palestinian. Everything I do I think of the organization that I fundraise for, which is the PCRFB. And I think of when I go back overseas, how my family is doing, so everything I do does portray to the fact, "Hey I am a Palestinian." You know, I engrain it in all my friends' faces and the Palestinians and non-Palestinians, my fiancé knows way too much about Palestine. That would be how I would describe myself culturally, everything I do relates back to it.

She also discussed the importance of instilling pride regarding her Palestinian identity

into her children, “One thing I say is when I raise my kids it is important for them to know that they are Palestinian and not anything else.”

Layla, who is Lebanese, is currently dating a Middle Eastern partner, but previously dated interethnically. She had a different experience in that she felt more Middle Eastern, but others did not initially think of her as Middle Eastern. She said, “So I always see myself as more Middle Eastern even though I don't look it, my friends wouldn't normally consider me Middle Eastern until they really got to know me and my culture.”

Areej, who is married to a man of Mexican descent, described her ethnic pride and stated that she and her family

have always done everything the Middle Eastern way because guys don't really have a preference. For example, our kids were baptized the Middle Eastern way, communion was the Middle Eastern way. We have parties and always end up having belly dancing. In fact, tomorrow night we are going to see our favorite Middle Eastern comedian. We are very Middle Eastern. And my kids are very proud to be half Syrian. I think they are more proud to be Middle Eastern than Mexican.

Both/neither. In some instances, women felt both American and Middle Eastern at the same time, or neither based on their surroundings. Areej mentioned, “I always remember that, just like I'm a mom, he has parents, I have parents. We are not both Middle Eastern; we are not both Mexican. We do have arguments but it is not over our cultures.”

Suad remarked:

Identity is a funny thing, especially with someone who has a multiplicity to your identity, so if you are Arab American or any other hyphenated American you sort

of pick and choose what you want to display at a given moment. It also depends on the situation. There are times when I can be Lebanese and be very good at being Lebanese, and there are times when I can be very American and good at being American.

In accordance with research question one, the responses above indicate that several participants who did not identify as strongly as Middle Eastern, still valued their multifaceted or overlapping identities. An individual's relational identity is not merely constructed by the individual herself, but with the addition of how other individuals view her identity (Cupach & Imahori, 1993).

Ascription

Although ascription is not an apparent component in answering research question one, how others see one's identity has much to do with the way an Arab woman represents her identities, thus making this a crucial area of investigation. While an avowed identity pertains to one's identity that is obtained throughout her various interactions, an individual's ascribed identity relates to the identity given by others (Hecht et al., 2005). For example, if a Middle Eastern woman identifies very strongly as Middle Eastern, but her Middle Eastern friends tell her she is not Middle Eastern enough, she may have conflicting identities based on the competing images of what makes up the Middle Eastern woman. The Middle Eastern woman's identity is a combination of her own interpretation of her identity and more importantly, the identity that others designate to her based on societal interpretations.

Not religious enough. Some women described that although their parents instilled in them their Christian or Muslim faith throughout the years, they did not let their religion dictate life decisions. While these participants still followed their religion, in some

sense they felt they were not as religious as their parents or other family members. Although religious beliefs are not the focus of my study, it is crucial to discuss varying views regarding this notion in order to better understand intercultural relationships holistically.

Rea indicated that,

Islam is a beautiful thing, but in terms of organized religion, I don't feel for it too much. Religion pushes people apart instead of bringing them together. I would never tell my dad that I feel this way. For my dad, it was very important, "Okay, you are going to get married," but he told my sister who married outside the culture and religion he [her husband] needed to convert. He did convert and learn about the religion. That forced my father to change a little bit.

She reiterated to the fact that after her sister married interethnically, her father is more open to the idea of interethnic relationships. Layla also discussed this concept and said, "Religion-wise, he always wore a cross. I believe in the Christian faith as well. We both weren't super religious, but is important to both our families."

Not Middle Eastern enough. Women who mentioned not being Middle Eastern enough compared themselves to other Middle Easterners. When asked about how many family members knew about Cara's living arrangements with her fiancé, she said, "I would say about 98% of them do not know because I come from a very conservative Middle Eastern background, and here I am the black sheep that's out doing whatever." Another reason women did not feel Middle Eastern enough was based on not knowing the language. Aya, mentioned, "My mom wishes I knew how to speak more Arabic and that I cared more about learning. It would be cool to learn how to speak it fluently, but I don't have time for it." Aya also compared herself to other Middle Easterners and stated:

Well, I have always lived here. We would go to Jordan once in a while for summer vacations and stuff. Compared to others, I don't know a lot about the culture. I don't know how to speak Arabic. Arab people that I know usually can speak Arabic. I feel like I'm not fully into the culture as most people would be.

Different than other Americans. While almost all of the participants mentioned being able to relate to the Arab and American identity, several women indicated feeling different than other Americans in certain circumstances. While Tia is Algerian and American, she has lived in Algeria for most of her life. Tia provided an example of when she experienced feeling different than Americans:

My non-Arab friends do not really get me, it's really hard for to them to understand me in a deep way. Friendship is defined differently here than back home, I feel. It's really rare for me to find a friend with whom you can talk when you are not well, someone with whom you really share more than just going out and having fun.

Although Suad has lived in America her entire life, she stated, "When immigrant families move, they hold on to their values tighter. I didn't have as much freedom as my American friends. I didn't consider dating; I wasn't allowed to sleep at friend's house." Rea described a similar childhood experience in more detail:

I wanted to go to friends' parties. I had a certain curfew, I would come home, wait for my parents to go to bed and sneak out, and my friends did, too. That side of me my parents didn't know at all, like I want to sleep over so-and-so's house but don't want my parents to know, or, "Yeah I have a boyfriend and my parents can't know." I have to understand that there are certain things my friends can do

around their parents, like bringing home a boyfriend for a dinner, but I can't do that.

Some women expressed feeling different from other Americans based on physical appearance. For instance Jackie explained that her friends, "Thought of me as a little separate because I always had different rules in my life. I was the Jordanian princess or their exotic friend, just not a regular American friend. I always had something extra going on." While Jackie expressed feeling different from her American friends based on her Arab complexion and strict parental rules, the differences she specified were fairly positive opinions. Contrary to Jackie's story, Rea discussed feeling different based on her Middle Eastern background by mentioning an ex-partner:

In terms of being a non-popular race in the U.S. my ex-boyfriend, the Whitest of any White Southern person you could be, so we were polar opposites. His family was extremely religious but extremely Southern Baptist. And I was not okay with them, because I am a brown girl. He had to hide his identity with his family too. They expected a White, southern Baptist girl, and I wasn't that at all. He had to hide that from his parents.

Layla described being fairer skinned than most Middle Eastern individuals; however:

In the summer I looked more Middle Eastern because I was tanner, so I stood out like a sore thumb there. Everyone is blonde-haired and blue-eyed. They would always be like, "What are you?" They couldn't figure me out. The look on their faces when I'd say I am Lebanese. You could see the stereotypes racing through their minds.

Preservation of Reputation

Research question two pertained to the strategies that Middle Eastern women utilized in order to maintain a positive relationship with family members while being in a committed interethnic relationship that their parent may disapprove of. While not all women needed to conceal their interethnic romances, some women conveyed various reasons they have concealed their romantic relationship from family members. These women declared the importance of maintaining a reputable standing with family members as a form of compensation for taking part in a relationship that family members may not otherwise agree with.

Strategies

A particularly large domain in accordance with this research question has much to do with how Arab American women strategize ways to preserve a respectable reputation from family members. Themes I gathered were, concealing the relationship, defiance or “just saying no,” purity/values, serious discussion with family members, and utilizing a female name in place of using a partner’s name to maintain the closeted relationship. While not all women struggled with disclosing their romantic relationship to parents, only 4 of the 15 participants described not having gone through a difficult experience when sharing with their parents their interethnic romance. Due to this, women who were either honest or secreted with their parents about their romantic relationship still felt the need to keep their parents content.

Relational concealment. An overarching theme among this particular research question was that most women felt the need to conceal their romantic relationship in order to maintain a positive relationship with family members, in order to avoid receiving

negative responses from family members. While a few participants explained that, once they revealed their romantic romance to their parents, the reaction was much more positive than they imagined, some participants described receiving negative feedback from family members in the past, thus making it worthwhile to conceal their relationship until marriage was in the near future.

Often, my participants reasoned that even disclosing information to me was a difficult task to do, since they were accustomed to keeping their romantic relationship a secret to some Arabs and family members. Cara stated, “I recently moved out and I now live with my fiancé. Shhh don't tell anybody.” Although, I fit the role of an Arab American female, Cara still joked about the fear of disclosing personal information to me. Particularly, she mentioned the number of extended family members who know about her living arrangements and she mentioned, “It is two cousins that know out of one thousand. All of my close friends know. So you are a stranger that I am telling, which I never do.”

Petra, described her very closed-off relationship with her mother. After she sat down with her parents and revealed that she was dating an individual outside of the Middle Eastern race, it led to a huge argument. Her parents were furious with her and demanded that she terminated the relationship. Petra explained that she told her parents that she broke off the relationship, even though she did not. She then admitted that although telling her parents “blew up in her face,” she felt that there was a large weight lifted off her shoulders. Following the break up Petra needed to conceal her sadness and explained,

I get home, park my car, and cry. I said to myself that I cannot go inside yet. I have to run upstairs and go to my room. A lot of times that is what I do. I just go straight to my room. You can't just be at ease in front of my parents.

Although Petra was no longer in a romantic relationship, she suppressed any emotions pertaining to the relationship from her parents based on their negative reactions regarding the news.

Cara described her experiences before getting engaged to her fiancé. Her fiancé is Polish and Christian, while Cara is Palestinian and Muslim. Primarily because of this, Cara did not initially reveal her romantic relationship to family members until their relationship become more serious:

Not a lot of Arab girls will admit this, but I dated since I was in college. When I first started dating, it was all sorts of races, and I hid that. When I got a little older, then everyone was like, "Okay you need to get married," and I am like, "Okay, I am talking to someone," and that was only if I was dating someone Arab.

Although Cara described being a very open individual, she concealed her romantic relationships when the partner was not Middle Eastern.

Defiance. Another strategy that some participants used to maintain a positive relationship with family members while dating interethnically was by being defiant or, simply put, saying "no." Olivia has been married for three years. She described the initial struggle, and her position of defiance, when she first revealed to her parents that she is dating an individual from the Italian ethnic background:

My parents and my image of myself go together other than the relationship that

they wanted for me, but I will say I stopped being a people pleaser and do what is best for me. So, I try not to do what my parents want me to do, but what is best for me.

Cara described her experience after revealing to her mother that she was dating someone outside of the Arab community and rationalized the negative feedback she initially received and explained, “It was a battle that I chose to fight because I knew in the end, no matter what, my mom was not going to let me go. She’s not going to not talk to me because I am dating him.”

Purity/values. Many of the Middle Eastern women conveyed that, although they are following “American” dating norms, they still remain true to Middle Eastern values and beliefs regarding romantic relationships. Similarly, Stella articulated that, despite her concealed romantic interethnic relationship for six years:

I still hold my values very high, and just because I am dating a non-Arab doesn’t mean I have lost my values. My parents believe that you simply can’t date a non-Arab and keep your culture and values, but I beg to differ.

Rasha, a Muslim, Saudi Arabian woman, described her experience with her past interethnic romance. She indicated that one of the biggest issues with the relationship was her non-Middle Eastern partner’s expectation regarding sex:

We had problems with my limits about sex. He could have it [sex] with any other woman if he dated an American, but by dating me, I just can’t do it. That was strange for him. He didn’t get it and said, “I cannot believe this is how you think about it.”

Since Rasha and her partner at the time had different views on premarital sex she emphasized that,

After him, when it comes to American people I want to try to keep it as friends. The expectations in relationships are higher than mine. Specifically, when it comes to sex. This is not something I can do. So I try to avoid being in a relationship so I don't hurt someone or do something I don't want to. What I like about the guy I am in a relationship with now, he is also Arab so he understands what my limits are and why I can't do certain things, even if he is so liberal—he has lived here since 2001. When you are under pressure and need to explain things all the time why you can't do those things, it affected my relationship.

Jackie, a Jordanian Christian woman, is currently engaged to an individual who is Irish. She recalled a past relationship with someone who was half Middle Eastern. She described that, maybe because he was half Arab, she would receive acceptance from family members if their relationship became prominent. She described how several years ago:

I was in a rebellious stage. The one guy who was Arab/Irish. I lost so much trust for him, we only dated for a month and it was I didn't trust him. He was saying things like, if we didn't sleep together it wasn't going to work out.

Serious discussion. Ruba, who is Syrian and Jordanian, has been married for two years, to her husband who was born and raised in Russia and moved to America when he was 12 years old. She has a very open and honest relationship with her parents. Contrary to the majority of the women I spoke with, she revealed to her parents about her interethnic relationship a month after dating her partner and said, “ If I did something

wrong, they would explain to me what I did wrong. We actually talked about things, so I felt open to telling them everything about my life.”

Parallel to Ruba’s story, Olivia discussed her relationship with her family members quite early on in the relationship. She described her relationship with her boyfriend, now husband, and knew that he was the one she was going to marry fairly early on in the relationship. Since she felt so strongly about her partner, she felt it necessary to tell her parents early on in the relationship. Olivia stated, “I was really honest with them, that we have gotten to know each other, and that I have really strong feelings for him. They met him, then okayed that we continued the relationship.”

Cara mentioned her experience and explained that, when she initially told her mother about her interethnic relationship, she was furious with her and did not speak to her for months, but

[when] I brought him over, she saw that respect with one other guy that was Arab, but that guy later on cheated on me. She was really surprised by the respect that he gave her. She looked at me when he left and she had said that's the respect that Arabs give to others. She goes, “I am not for this but I like him a little bit more.” Eventually she warmed up. And now she loves him more than me.

Although Jackie did not disclose her relationship to her parents until four years into the relationship, when she previously had discussions with them regarding interethnic relationships she told them, “Even if I wasn't going to marry an Arab guy I should get the support if I was marrying an Arab guy.”

Changing partner’s name. A common, unexpected theme that emerged from some of the responses was that the participant used a female name as a code name in any

mention of her partner. Some women mentioned using a code name when being around their family members, while others felt the need to use a code name with me. This notion resonates with the idea that some Middle Eastern women keep their romantic relationship undisclosed from most family members and strangers. Jackie reaffirms this idea:

I had to lie constantly about where I was going, what I was doing, when it was innocently going to see a movie with my boyfriend. I had to say I was going to see a movie with Julie. So that was the biggest challenge, not being truthful.

While Jackie used code names when discussing her whereabouts to her parents, Petra used a code name to describe her partner to me. The code name she used was a female's name. She used the same female name throughout the entire interview when she discussed her male partner. Even though Petra was aware the interview was completely confidential, her decision to give her partner a code name may imply that because she has been accustomed to concealing her partner's name at home, she felt it necessary to do the same during the interview.

Parental Reactions

There were various responses from parents after the revelation of her interethnic relationship. The three major types of parental reactions shared by my participants that will be reviewed include, parental denial, parental obstruction, and parental approval.

Parental denial. The majority of my participants who indicated to their parents that they are in an interethnic romantic relationship conveyed that their parents acted as though their daughter's partner is a friend, told their daughters that they do not want to hear about the relationship, or simply acted as though they never heard the news regarding the relationship. The motives behind parental denial can be attributed to their

fear of their daughter losing her Middle Eastern culture.

Eva, for example, described her experience after she disclosed her relationship to her parents:

It has been hard for my mom. She gave him the cold shoulder when she first met him. She thinks this is a fling that isn't going to last. My dad thinks he is great for me. My mom is the hardest to win over, not that I need to, but she is very difficult to impress.

Here, the belief that Eva's romantic relationship is merely a fling could be a form of denial.

Although Ruba's mother now accepts and loves her now son-in-law, she initially did not take the news lightly regarding her daughter's relationship:

My mom didn't speak English to him for a couple of years. It was hard for her, because he wasn't Middle Eastern. She was cold with him and warmed up to him five to six months into the relationship. It was always understood to be a no. If my mom even saw me talking to a boy, she would get so upset.

Olivia's experience was also initially difficult for her parents to accept. For instance, her father's reaction perfectly embodies this idea of a parent needing to minimize the seriousness of the daughter's romantic relationship in hopes that the relationship would not lead to marriage. She uttered:

My dad was not happy at all; he was really pissed about it. So it was a lot of fighting in the beginning. My dad took it really likely thinking that it would fizzle out. To him he would just say, "Your friend." I am like, "Okay, if that's what you want to call it." It was like that for a long time, he didn't want to accept it.

Petra explained her frustration with her parents not accepting American norms as much as they should since living in America for several years:

Usually, with Arabian parents the mom is more laid back, but no no no no. She is one thousand times stricter than my dad. Our relationship is like, you want to tell her stuff, but you can't because it is not acceptable. Just like when I told them that I was dating someone. They just don't accept it, and they need to change.

Jackie's experience perfectly embodies a parental reaction starting with denial and ending with acceptance. Specifically she described that it took her mother:

about a year to accept the fact that I was dating someone and he wasn't going anywhere. So on her birthday she said by herself, "I want to meet him." I said, "Today?" And she said, "Yes." So I text him and said, "You are meeting my mom today." And he said, "Great, when and where?" I told him when and where, and he was there with the biggest flowers I have ever seen.

These themes echo those of Henry, Biran, and Stiles (2006). Based on responses to qualitative interviews, they found similar themes. Their responses revealed that most Middle Eastern parents found ways to preserve their Arab culture, and were less open to embracing the American lifestyle in regards to maintain their Arab culture. The themes that emerged based on their study were perceived openness to the American culture and parental preservation (staying true to their Arab culture).

Parental obstruction. While some parents chose to avoid the topic all together, other parents felt the need to intervene in hopes of their daughter terminating her relationship. While Petra's account was more extreme than some of the other interviewees, her story speaks to Arab women that may have shared similar experiences.

Petra hoped that her parents would approve of her relationship with her African American boyfriend. She stated that, "I decided that there is no reason why I should have to lie to them, I know they won't accept it, but they are my parents." She recommended for other Middle Eastern women,

Maybe don't tell them until you are 100% sure, because I am not with him anymore. Once I told them, I had to get a second phone. They tracked my phone. My dad got his number, and was, like, "Is this for business?" I had to lie about that! So I had two phones."

She specifically described her encounter with her parents after she disclosed her relationship to them:

When I told him the truth it blew up in my face, then a week later they said, "We want you to tell us everything so that we can help you do the right thing and change your mind to do the right thing." "Well I am sorry, no. If I believe in something different than you it is okay." He said something, like, "You have to practice?" I said, "Practice, what? He said, "Agreeing with us." I'm, like, "No!"

Cara's mother had a similar confession to that of Petra's parents. Although Cara's mother currently approves of the relationship, it took her some time to warm up to her partner. Cara explained that in the beginning,

It was really tough. My mom was a bitch, she made my life hell for four months, at least for the fact that he was not Arab or Muslim. There were times where she would come out of her room crying, saying, "He is forbidden to come to this house! To hell if you think you are going to continue a relationship with him."

And one day I brought him over.

Parental approval. While some participants indicated receiving negative feedback after revealing their interethnic romantic relationship to their parents, it is important to discuss the positive reactions from parents.

Areej, who is Armenian and Syrian, has been married for ten years. When describing the process of telling her parents about her boyfriend of eight years, she reminisced:

I asked my husband to call my parents to come over to ask for my hand, because we were talking about getting engaged after six years of dating. And I'm like, "If you don't do this, they won't accept you; this is part of our culture." He calls them to ask if he can come over for my hand, and they were very nice to him, they said, "Yes, you could come over."

Areej then recollected how she felt after her parents were clearly open and accepting about the large request:

I was honestly surprised, because I thought that I was going to get disowned and I was going to be like this is where we cut our ties. So he came over and my mom confessed that she had always secretly known that he was my boyfriend, and she was just crazy about him, and of course we could get married. They all said yes and it wasn't an issue. It's not what I was expecting. My mom has four son-in-laws and out of the four son-in-laws, my husband is her favorite.

Layla, who is Lebanese, is currently dating her Middle Eastern partner who is Chaldean. Throughout the interview, she discussed the differences between dating her ex-partners from ethnicities outside of the Middle Eastern culture, and dating her current Middle Eastern partner. When asked how much her parents liked her non-Middle Eastern

ex-partners, she used her current relationship to describe her past interethnic relationships:

The moment they met my [Middle Eastern] boyfriend, it was totally different. My dad was trying to play golf with him, like the son he never had. My mom was saying he looks so much like our family. He fits in our family. My grandpa loved him. That meant a lot more to me because he fit so much better and I started to value that more.

Jackie mentioned that although it took her parents time to warm up to her fiancé, once they got to know him, his character proved that he was a suitable match for their daughter. Since Jackie's partner is open to learning about the Middle Eastern culture, she noted:

My mom at first was very skeptical about the whole thing and was afraid to trust him. It is like she has known him for years at this point. She appreciates that he appreciates the culture and respects him as a person for that. Same with my dad, he can have amazing conversations with him that he could never have with us about certain politics that we may not know a lot about, but my fiancé does.

Considerations

Research question three regarded participants' descriptions of the decision to publicly reveal their interethnic romance to their parents, friends, or other family members. Many of the women kept numerous considerations in mind. Women who decided to disclose their romantic relationship to parents were in a long-term interethnic relationship, had cultural/future parenting similarities with their partners that their parents would value, or had an honest relationship with their parents. Some women also chose to

remain discrete regarding their romantic relationship due to disappointment from parents and parental expectations and rules.

Relational Disclosure

Long-term commitment or marriage. The larger number of participants mentioned that the only time a Middle Eastern woman should disclose her interethnic romance to her parents is when she is certain that her relationship will lead to marriage. Some women mentioned that if an Arab woman chooses to “date around,” that is acceptable, but it is encouraged that she should not tell her family members about the partner unless she sees the relationship being long-term. Jackie illustrates this:

If you are going to do it, make sure it is going to be long term. Don't waste your time trying to date someone because you think they are cute. It is going to be a huge battle with your family, most likely. So find someone you see yourself moving forward with.

Similarly, Rea mentioned:

Yes, I date outside of the Arab community and I always have. At this point I have to be smart about it. If I am going to be in a serious relationship with someone outside the race, it is going to be serious and I am probably going to want to marry them. Versus, oh, this is just, fun.

Cultural/childrearing similarities. Although some women indicated being apprehensive about disclosing their relationship to family members, their rationale for finding the courage to tell their parents was due to the partner's ethnicity being quite similar to the Middle Eastern ethnic background. Some women described that their partners' parents immigrated to the United States as well, making their story quite similar

to each participant's story. Cara said:

There are a lot of similarities, with the way we think. His parents were born overseas as well. His mom was born in Germany, and his father was born in the UK. They left because of the Holocaust, so there are a lot of similarities there. There is a level of respect that we have where I don't see a lot of Americans having.

Some women mentioned that their partners' family is also tight-knit and family oriented, much like the ambiance of their own family. Eva stated, "We are very family-oriented. We are both passionate about our culture, and we both speak two different languages." Olivia also described that her Jordanian family and her partner's Italian family have some commonalities: "They are very family oriented, always together. A lot of the cultural things, like respect for elders, they have those same qualities. I don't see that big of a difference."

Although Suad sees more differences between her Lebanese background and her partner's African American background, she described the similarities that she and her partner shared based on American societal expectations:

There are similarities in a way that we both feel in American society. African Americans feel that they have to work a bit harder, like Arab Americans. The general public doesn't view Arabs as White, so there are similarities in the positions that our cultures occupy in American society. [That] my parents didn't date and divorce isn't really a thing for Arabs, whereas single parenthood is more common in African American society. My parents instilled in me to work really

hard [and] that nothing is promised to you. Society tends to disadvantage a minority.

While Suad discussed clear cultural differences, these particular similarities may provide motives for her to disclose the relationship to family members.

Cara had discussions with her husband regarding their views on how they would raise their children and said, “When we have kids we are going to take them to Arab school and Polish school—so we talked about religion, how we are going to raise our kids. We even talked about our views on abortion.” Although Layla mentioned not following the Christian faith as much as her family members, she explained that having the same religion as her partner is important. She shared:

I know I want to be with somebody that is Catholic, because I know that is how I want to raise my children. When I was in the relationship with him (Jewish ex-partner) I never thought about it at the time, but I knew in the large scheme of things, I would never end up with him. I will obviously be with someone that is Catholic, but I don't know how much of it affected me during the relationship.

Open relationship with parents. Some participants discussed how having an open and close relationship with their parents motivated them to disclose the relationship. In this instance, these women felt more comfortable sharing personal information such as their interethnic romance. Although parental reactions varied, the open communication made the relationship much less difficult for parents and other family members to accept. Tia described her open relationship with her parents and said her father is:

Very open-minded; he was the one who wanted me to come study in the United States. He has high hopes for us to be accomplished, independent women. Not the

kind of father who had the goal for us to get married first, he always wanted us to study first.

She then mentioned that her mother “was always telling us to never depend on the man. They have had friends from other cultures, from other ethnicities. So they always were very open to me being abroad or even meeting or having a boyfriend.” Tia goes on to explain that when her mother and father wanted to get married, it was a struggle for their families to accept it because they were from different parts of Algeria. She explained that, at the time, if one wanted to marry someone from a different community within the same country, it was looked down upon by family members. Tia noted that:

They both experienced what it is like for them to have parents who did not want them to be together. My mother’s mother, she actually kicked her out because she wanted to marry my dad. Her personal experience has a lot to do with her being understanding and open-minded.

Aya explained that she was nervous to tell her parents but mentioned that being upfront with her parents was the best decision she has made for the relationship. She stated, “I let them know what was going on and said, ‘Hey I really like this guy and we are dating.’ When it became more exclusive I just told them. They were okay with not knowing him until then.” Even though Aya’s parents had a more positive reaction than those of other participants, their being content with not knowing Aya’s partner still signifies a level of secrecy or concealment.

Olivia expressed her open relationship with her parents and said that they were “definitely very strict with us, but it was structured, and we have an open relationship. So I would go to my parents for just about anything, and they would hear me out. So I am

lucky with that.” Similarly, Layla explained that she tells her parents just about anything in regards to her romantic relationships and friendships. When asked how her parents feel about her dating interethnically she answered, “I don't think they would care, but I do see a level of how much more they love my current boyfriend who is Chaldean. They are so much more inviting of him compared to other people.” Despite Layla’s parents being accepting of her romantic relationships, the noticeable difference she saw when her parents interacted with her now Middle Eastern boyfriend versus her previous non-Arab partners is notable to discuss. This may signify that for Middle Eastern parents who are more accepting of their daughter being in an interethnic relationship, they still feel more comfortable if she were in a romantic relationship with a partner from the same ethnic background.

Relational Secrecy

Some women decided to keep their romantic relationship a secret from their parents either because their experience with disclosing relationship information to them resulted with a negative response, or because participants had never disclosed their romantic relationship to their parents with fear that the response will be negative. Within this domain, the themes disappointment/disapproval from parents and parental expectations/rules will be applied.

Disappointment/disapproval. The fear of losing one’s culture has much to do with parents being disappointed or disapproving of the romantic relationship their daughters are engaged in. Some respondents described hiding their romantic relationship in order to avoid disappointment from parents. For example, Petra discussed the first time she decided to tell her parents about someone she was dating: “The one I just told them

about, which was a year and a half ago—that was the first one I told them about, and never again will I do that though unless I am sure.” Rea revealed her own concerns:

I understand why my dad is the way he is. I never think poorly of my father, I admire him so much; I get emotional talking about it. He has spent his whole life working his ass off, to make sure that we can live a life we want to live. It is hard because I always want to make sure to make him happy. And I feel like maybe the one thing in my life that will not make him happy that is so huge to him is maybe I won't be with a Muslim, Arab man, and that is hard. It's important for me to make my parents happy. And it is such a big thing to my father, is the religion and making sure we are with an Arab man that is Muslim and I just don't know if that is going to happen and that is hard.

Despite Petra receiving a negative reaction from her parents after revealing her relationship to them, she felt an extreme amount of relief at the same time. She expressed:

It was awful! But when I was done I felt so good. I could cry right now—it was almost like a weight lifted. You are not them, you are your own person and you are going to live your life. Of course, you want them in it but if they are going to be difficult... then. Even though it was awful it was the best thing ever. I need to do what I think is right. To be honest, I am not wrong. And neither are they because that's what they think. They don't understand that everyone is an adult. And you are going to have your own opinion. So you can't control people, but it was really good afterwards. It made me view everything better, focus better.

Parental expectations/rules. An apparent reason for Arab women needing to conceal their romantic relationship is based on certain rules placed by the parents and Arab societal expectations. Specifically, Nour mentioned:

Even as a Christian Arab, it is frowned upon to date, since the culture doesn't agree with it, especially with one from a different ethnicity. Some other things that were different between us was scheduling times to hang out. I wasn't allowed to be out late, and he would prefer to meet later.

Similar to Nour's remarks, many other women indicated that the strict rules set by their parents affected their romantic relationship. Often, the partner was unable to understand these limitations, causing relational turmoil. Areej related, "My culture did play a big role because I had to be home early. It was more limiting. I would say I was going to my sister's house, but really I was going to hang out with my boyfriend."

Areej expressed that she has:

A traditional Middle Eastern family, very strict. There's no dating before you get married, let alone anyone outside would try and respect my wishes about when we could meet and how often. I think that the hardest part of it all was the secrecy. He couldn't meet my family, and it was all lies, and it took a toll on the relationship. Most of them were about the secrecy. He pressured me to tell my family about him so that he could meet them and said stuff like, if I loved him then my family should know. He was also under the impression that my family would be okay with us being together, which wasn't the case.

For some parents, the importance of their daughters sharing the same religion as their partners was a larger expectation than their daughters finding partners of the same

country of origin. One example Rea expressed is that:

I want to make sure whoever I am with in the future is definitely someone I want to be with. Regardless of their race or their religion. Versus my parents, that will always be important to them so I need to act like it is important to me too.

Suad also described her parent's expectations regarding her romantic partner and said her parents:

Would prefer someone who is Arab, but more importantly someone who is Christian. If I found a White guy who is Christian, they would be more okay with that than an Arab guy who is Muslim. A lot of times Arab society is pretty racist, so if I were to find someone who is darker skinned than me they wouldn't like that. They probably wouldn't like that I was with a Black man now. There are classist and racist elements to it. It's just how they were raised so I try not to go into, "Why are you like this?"

When Cara stated her husband's ethnic background she said, "Mexican, which is already, Ahh! I wanted to date a Black guy...I never did, if my mom found out she might kill me, that's how racist the Arab culture is, it is unfortunate." While not all participants mentioned racism, the few that did had quite similar feelings towards this notion. These participants did not think any differently of their parents' character, but rather used their upbringing as a way to find reasons for this belief. Suad opened up about her views on the expectations required of her:

Sometimes I wish I had White, American parents who don't care, and say, "Find whoever you want." I feel like the parameters are so strict on who my family will be cool with, so it is exhausting. I have chosen not to think about it to be one

hundred percent honest. It is my life and if it ever comes down to my parents being really angry with me, I hope I would be able to have good enough perspective and accurate weight on different factors and think what is worth it and what is not.

Although Olivia initially struggled with receiving acceptance from her parents regarding her interethnic relationship, she explained that,

It is different now, because they accepted everything, where they see my point. Earlier on in my relationship they had this other image of what my life should look like, and I had another image. It was very hard to make them understand what they wanted from me was not what I wanted for myself.

In sum, several women decided to disclose their romantic relationship to their parents based on the participants' image of their parents being open and accepting regarding the revelation. Unless a participant wished to become engaged, her need to tell her parents about the relationship was minimized, unless she had a very open relationship with her parents. Women who kept their romantic relationship concealed from family members or certain friends did so based on the fear of receiving negative responses from family members or friends.

Identity Gaps

When I asked my participants what makes up their identity, the central idea of research question three, almost all of them took quite some time thinking about how to craft their particular response. This is primarily because, based on certain interactions with other individuals, a person's identity is constantly changing, which pertains to IMT

(Cupach & Imahori, 1993). The final research question seeks to identify various identity gaps based on personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities.

Personal Identity

Within CTI, Hecht et al. (2005) describe that the personal layer deals with the thoughts and feelings one has about one's own identity, specifically as it regards membership in a particular group, based on a particular group identity. In reference to the personal layer of identity, the "I am not a whore" justification and the comparison of Arabs versus Americans will be applied.

"I am not a whore." In contrast to the idea of long-term commitment, some women made mention of themselves not being a whore, stating that this perception has much to do with "Arab dating norms." Based on the responses, the "I am not a whore" justification did not have much to do with the physical act of sex itself, but rather the assumption that an individual could make involving an Arab woman making mention of more than one previous partner. Kaya (2009) discussed the concept of Arab women needing to maintain a wholesome image while being in a committed romantic relationship. Simply put, some of the participants have followed American dating norms, but they emphasize that this does not indicate that they are promiscuous in any way. With the Arab culture being rigid regarding expectations concerning romantic love (Kaya, 2009), some participants felt following American dating norms might lead to a degrading or judgmental response from others. This is an important issue within the Arab-American culture that merits further discussion.

Cara mentioned the "I am not a whore" justification twice during the interview process. When she mentioned that she had to conceal information from other Arabs, she

used this justification: “I am not saying I was a big slut or anything, but a lot of people take that as that.” She also used this form of rationalization when asked what her previous partners’ ethnic backgrounds were. She said, “I dated, a couple Egyptians, I am going to make myself sound like a whore. I’ve dated a Palestinian, Jordanian, and Montenegro, a lot of Arabs, another White guy. I’ve dated a total of three to four White guys.” Petra’s perception of what others thought of her had more solid evidence: “My mom thinks I lie about everything. She thinks I am the biggest slut in the world.” Petra expressed that she is not a whore, but her mother thinks she is because she follows American dating norms. This idea also rings true to Naber’s (2006) description of the Americanized whore versus the Arab virgin. (p. 88).

American versus Arab. While most women identified as both Arab and American, there were times when one of the participants felt a clear distinction between the two cultures. Areej discussed her family and her husband’s family at holiday gatherings,

My in-laws, they were born in this country. They are very Americanized, which is different from us. Christmas is kind of—not awkward—but you know, Caucasians want to drink alcohol, and Middle Easterners want to drink tea, with men and women sitting in separate rooms. But they are all good sports because they try to make each other happy.

Cara remarked:

I think it’s important to be American, but at the same time you got to keep your culture. I’m still an Arab, and he is still Polish. The difference is he grew up a lot more Americanized than I have. One of the big differences with us is that it is

really important for him to keep his culture, but it is especially important for me to keep mine. I look at race differently than he does because Polish is White, and he's never gone through any oppression or any sort of negativity, because he is White, and I have because I am Arab.

Two separate worlds. Much similar to Naber's (2006) results based on her 30 interviews, the notion of Arab American women dating outside the culture live "two separate worlds" resonated in some of my participants' responses. The concealment of a romantic relationship took a toll on most of the respondents' day-to-day lives. For instance Stella mentioned:

My parents and most of my family members know nothing about my personal life, only my sisters. It's almost as if I am living a double life, it is quite often hard to juggle, but it has become the new norm for me. After so many years I have grown so used to it, which is kind of sad, but I don't think about it as often as I used to. I have tried to be open, but often I am judged or scorned about my decisions, so I no longer have the energy to try. I choose to live two lives to avoid any trouble and stress.

Although Stella does not like that she must live two separate lives in front of her family versus her friends, she feels as though it is necessary to continue with this strategy in order to remain in a romantic relationship with her partner, and remain in good standing with her family members, more specifically, her parents.

Nour discussed this notion as well; she explained to me that she must enact who her parents want her to be, versus enacting who she truly wants to be:

I saw my boyfriend once at a restaurant when I was at a family dinner. I had to

pretend like I didn't know him because of my family's strict no-relationship rules. I basically just try to be what my family wants me to be and show them who they want to see. On my own time, I'll be who I want to be. It's hard for me to balance the two. I think that is because a part of me is always hidden from my family.

Rea explained that she lived "two separate worlds" especially when she was younger and living with her parents:

Growing up, I did have two different identities. My parents, they didn't know a fourth of the life I really lived. I did really well in school, and I was president at everything, really tried to be the best at what I was doing with everything and that was the strong worth ethic that they built within us.

Jackie experienced a similar situation, where she felt that she was living two separate lives when her family did not know about her romantic relationship. She recalled:

Until my fiancé was brought to light, I feel like I was living two different lives. So I think they view me the same that I view myself now, for sure. I definitely had to hide a part of my identity when I was dating my boyfriend. I had to hide it in front of my parents, my friends; my best Arab friend did not know we were dating until after three years. Super hard to keep separate, but I felt like I needed to keep separate. I felt I was doing something wrong in the beginning and I shouldn't have, but I felt super comfortable talking to my White friends about it because it is no big deal them, it is just another relationship.

In this circumstance, Jackie was living "two separate worlds" in front of her parents and some friends. She felt that in front of her American friends, she was able to be completely

herself, but when conversing with her Arab friends she felt the need to hide her relationship, even to her best friend. This idea resonates with the theme in relation to research question four, which sought to discover the various discrepancies Arab American women may have faced between their personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities. Within the communal identity Jackie felt as if she would receive judgment from other Arabs based on her relationship status.

Enacted Identity

While the enacted component of identity (CTI, Hecht et al., 2003) is crucial when examining Middle Eastern women engaged in interethnic relationships, clear examples of enactment also appear in the above themes of the personal level of identity. A person's enacted identity is how he or she portrays an identity within interactions. Specifically, the domain of avowal (as discussed above) relate to the enacted identity. Echoing Collier and Thomas (1988), some Arab women surrounded by other Middle Easterners have a tendency to enact "culturally appropriate and effective behavior with members of that group" (p.113). Enacted identity is really about how one expresses an identity with anyone, particularly outside of ongoing relationships. Therefore, since my focus is on negotiation of identity between family, friends, and partners, this aspect of identity did not receive much attention from my participants.

Relational Identity

As mentioned in previous chapters, one's relational identity is constructed by the negotiation between individuals within various types of relationships (Hecht et al., 2003). In this section, partners' self-concept and the reputation of parents will be examined.

Partners' self-concept. While many women struggled with their identity while needing to conceal their romantic relationship from family members or friends, their partners also struggled with their identities. Specifically, the partners felt self-conscious because of the Arab women's secretive relationship. Almost all of my participants mentioned that their partner never had to conceal their romantic relationship from family members. Because of the partners' clear difference of openness, they shared before family members, this took a toll on the perception of themselves. Before Olivia got married, her partner struggled with this issue:

It was hard for him in the beginning. He said, "I don't know what I have to do to prove that I am good enough." There were times he would say, "Why do I have to do that it makes no sense?" And I am like, "You just got to do it."

Areej and her partner also struggled with this issue when their relationship was a secret from her family members:

He would only be disappointed that he couldn't come have dinner at my house and have dinner with my parents. His fear was that I was always going to get an arranged marriage with someone else.

When asked how much Areej's parents knew about her personal life before she got engaged, she responded:

They knew zero percent. That was an issue for us because my husband is Mexican, and he thought I was ashamed of him. But I would just tell him that where I'm from you don't bring your boyfriend home, you bring home one guy, the guy you're going to marry. I know it sounds crazy, but now that he's with me for so long he understands.

This response resonates with the aforementioned study conducted by Kaya (2009): For a Middle Eastern female in particular, it is understood for her to marry the man she brings home to meet her family. Because of this, most of my participants concealed their relationship unless they knew marriage was in the near future with the partner. Rea explained this further,

With my ex, it was like certain things weren't fair. He wanted to spend Thanksgiving with my parents, and I am like, "No that can't happen." If he was at the level where he deserved it, then I would be like, "Fuck it I don't care what he is," but that was something we argued about.

Since Rea understood that her partner was feeling doubtful about himself due to the concealed relationship, she found ways to handle the difficult circumstances and said, "My siblings and I make sure to go out of our way to make whoever's significant other feel comfortable, because we knew the parents couldn't be a part of it, but you do have us that care about you." Rea, was one of several participants who indicated this. Some participants felt comfortable sharing their romantic relationship with their siblings in hopes that it would compensate for the partner not knowing their parents.

A few years into the relationship, Jackie's partner broke up with her from fear of her family never knowing or approving of their relationship. She described how, during that brief period of time, "I tried to explain it was going to work when he was convinced it wasn't. His best friend was saying all Arab girls end up marrying Arab guys so I wouldn't waste your time." In this circumstance, Jackie's fiancé allowed an outsider's point of view determine his relationship outcome with her. Jackie also described,

He got so scared and thought we were not going to work out. So out of being

scared he broke up with me. The break up lasted two days. His mom spoke to him and said, “I have never seen you more miserable in your entire life; you have to get back with her.” It was a secret and he felt guilty, but he stayed patient for a very long time, but in the end it was worth it. And I explained to him, “I know my family, I know they are strict, but they know I wouldn't bring home somebody who wasn't worth it.”

Petra described her struggles with maneuvering ways to spend time with her partner, while living at home with her parents:

I stayed the night at his place once, but I had to say it was a friend's house. That was kind of a problem though—not having your family be okay with it. I explained it to them from the beginning, “Look, I can't get out much.” The time is normal for you to spend with a partner is probably at night, and I can't do that. They don't realize it until months down the road that they don't like it. As much as they think they can handle it, they can't. So not getting the approval and feeling like they aren't worth it, things like that.

Reputation of parents. In accordance with previous literature, reputation is a prominent theme for these participants from Middle Eastern families. Middle Eastern women who date interethnically still may desire acceptance from family members. Much of the negative parental reaction regarding their daughter's interethnic romances has to do with Arab dating expectations. This form of disapproval traces back to other Arabs, thinking negatively of their daughter, and especially of her parents. Stella's experience is an adequate example of this particular theme. She mentioned that her parents:

are very against it when it comes to their own children, they accept it of others

but often do not agree with it or condone it. They just think it complicates things and are worried about the well-being of their children and often do not want to be judged.

Cara described that proximity had much to do with what her mother deemed to be inappropriate for her reputation or not, “My mom would say in the end, ‘Whatever you do reflects on me.’ I live up North, but in the South side I would hide a lot of what I do because I didn't want a bad reputation.” Cara later described that she was more concerned to preserve her mother’s reputation since she does not care about what other Arabs think of her based on judgments alone. Thus, this sense of pressure placed on Arab American women is another reason why some choose to keep their romantic relationship separate from their family life. Respectively, Jackie noted that once she exposed her secret to her parents, “It scared them, more so because of what they thought of what people may think of them. They always worried that people are going to say something and that this person is not going to come to your wedding.”

Communal Identity

Finally, individual identities arise from social groups or communities as group members share membership characteristics and collective memories (Hecht et al., 2003). The two apparent themes that were derived based on my responses were judgment from other Arabs and judgment from other Americans.

Judgment from other Arabs. While some participants were primarily concerned about judgment from their parents regarding their interethnic romantic relationship, many women indicated that they were more cautious with disclosing personal information around their Arab friends to avoid judgment from members of the Arab community. Cara

described an experience with this outside of her romantic relationship,

When I go have a drink with a friend at a local bar and an Arab sees me there. I am the one that is going to get bashed on; I didn't hide because I was afraid. I just didn't want to go through the crap that goes with it.

Jackie described her comfort level with her Arab friends in contrast to her American friends:

I am definitely more comfortable talking to my American friends because I feel less judged. Though I trust my Arab friends, and I go to them if I ever needed them for anything, but, at the same time, I don't want them to look at me in a weird light.

Judgment from other Americans. Similar to research question one's ascription domain, some participants felt different from other Americans (non-Arab), thus making them feel judgment from Americans. In reference to the "two separate worlds" theme, Stella expressed:

My American friends know about my personal life, but not all of them know I live a double life. I keep that very private because I do not want them to judge me or my family. I do not want them to think differently of my family or myself.

Although Stella indirectly felt judged, her feelings of embarrassment indicate that she felt different than most of her American friends who are open to their parents regarding their romantic partners.

Suad's response revealed a different type of experience. She discussed her thoughts regarding her romantic involvement with Caucasian men and stated, "I never felt one hundred percent comfortable with White men. I always feel like I am exoticized

by a White man. I always feel self-conscious with my ethnic background in relation to his. Indirectly, my cultural background affected it.” In this case, Suad felt judged by her American partner, rather than being judged for dating her partner.

On the other hand, Layla described feeling judged by other Americans based on her physical location:

I came from a town in Michigan where everyone is Middle Eastern. I noticed a change when I moved to the west coast. They would look at my family and I differently. I would put up a protection mode. I had to defend myself or my culture more to my non-Arab friends.

Rasha felt judgment from other Americans based on stereotypes regarding Saudi Arabian women. She articulated:

I don't like the Western descriptions of us because we don't drive and do other things. They think I am very different and independent. Most of my friends say, “I think you should stay here, Saudi Arabia is not a great place for you.” Someone told me the other day, “I wish you would fall in love with someone here so you can stay here.” I told them, “Who are you to say this?” I hate the stereotype, but this is what they think of me.

Based on my transcribed results, more evidence suggests that Middle Eastern women feel more judged by American (non-Arabs) than by other Middle Easterners. This may be due to the fact that despite these women have varying differences in values and religious beliefs, American dating norms is drastically different than Arab dating norms. Even though all 15 participants identified with the both American and Arab cultures,

women sounded particularly defensive when making mention of other Americans stereotyping them.

Conclusion

Based on the transcriptions and analysis, it is evident that the importance of familial relationships was a large contributor to the respondents' decision in disclosing their interethnic romantic relationships. These women continue to struggle with issues of identity based on societal expectations from the Arab and American communities, reflecting identity themes described in CTI. Arab women engaged in interethnic relationships not only experience the need to manage their various identities, but potential restraints in the relationship greatly affects their partners' notion of identity as well. Reasons such as long-term commitment, cultural similarities, and open relationship with family members were prominent motives behind the women's decision to disclose the relationship. In the following chapter, I will review the emergent themes, as well as provide practical and theoretical implications for future research.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to address the scarcity of scholarly research examining Middle Easterners, particularly Middle Eastern women in interethnic romantic relationships. Due to this, I focused on Arab American women who have been romantically involved with or are currently in a romantic relationship with a partner outside of the Middle Eastern descent. Based on the sparse research that has been conducted regarding Middle Easterners and their romantic relationships, there are several facets within this matter of intercultural and interpersonal research that must be studied further. This study particularly aids in the foundational efforts to create more discourse regarding Middle Easterners living in contemporary United States.

Since my research emphasized various Arab American women's accounts regarding their familial, platonic, and romantic relationships, I felt it necessary to conduct one-on-one interviews in order to obtain the most detailed responses possible. Based on this, I conducted 15 interviews with Arab American women who were currently or previously involved in interethnic romantic relationships. Through the use of qualitative research, I was able to better understand different stories and perspectives. Even though I am a Middle Eastern female following Arab and American principles, hearing other women speak about their unique experiences demonstrates that not all Arab American

women have similar struggles. Every woman has a different story to tell. I will begin this chapter by providing more in depth interpretations of comments in relation to the research questions. Then I will describe strengths and limitations to this study, and finally I will assess the various possibilities for future research.

Discussion of Research Questions

“I Identify with...”

In response to research question one, most participants embraced their Middle Eastern cultural identity, while adhering to their American identity as well. Surprisingly, most women did not let in influences from their partners' identity into their everyday lives. Ruba on the other hand, created a term to describe her and her husband's interethnic relationship. Her use of the term “Ukrabian” is used to define her Arabian origin and her husband's Ukrainian ethnic background. Although Berry's (2004) acculturation strategies did not motivate the research questions in chapter 1, these strategies emerged as relevant when discussing this particular research question. The four components in regards to cultural assimilation are pluralistic, marginalized, bi-cultural, and assimilated. Several participants such as, Cara, Rasha, Rea, Areej, and Tia identified more strongly as Middle Eastern than American, categorizing them as pluralistic. A marginalized person identifies very lowly with both the Arab and American culture. None of my participants were considered marginalized. Assimilation refers to someone who identifies less as Middle Eastern and more American (Petra, Eva, and Aya). Finally, the bi-cultural component regards someone who identifies very strongly with both cultures. Several women described identifying as both Arab and American. Alternatively,

Ruba and her husband's use of the term "Ukrabian" signify that she identifies with various cultures at the same or different points of time.

In relation to CTI, participants indicated portraying multiple and overlapping identities. Several participants also described their various identities that become more or less salient in different situations (Jung & Hecht, 2004). For example, Suad's previously mentioned response regarding being very good at being American and Lebanese based on who she surrounds herself with indicates that at times, she will be more American or be more Middle Eastern. Her response regarding the need to pick and choose which identity she will portray not only resonates with CTI's assumption that "identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning," but this pertinent idea also connects to the assumption that "identities have individual, social, and communal properties" (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 263). Based on the transcribed data, Arab American women portray their personal and cultural identities primarily through the presence of others.

"I Hate When My Parents are Upset with Me"

Research question two established that messages brought forth by family members regarding interethnic romances are a major contributor in the ways a participant preserves her reputation from the Arab community. Women made choices to conceal their relationship, hold on to their Middle Eastern values, defy their parents, or have discussions with parents regarding their interethnic romances. Parental reactions also played a large role in how the participant preserved her reputation in front of other Arabs. Based on Kaya's (2009) qualitative research regarding Irbidi women using Internet cafés to find potential romantic partners, she explained that her participants found ways to preserve their reputations while being in a committed romantic relationship outside of

marriage (p. 253). Kaya's findings and the findings of my study, indicate that the significance of a woman's reputation is a concern for herself and of the entirety of her family. For example, Cara mentioned, "My mom would say in the end whatever you do reflects on me." Here, Cara does not feel the need to preserve her reputation, but rather that of her mother. This was a significant finding that emerged through several of the responses. Thus, the focus of preserving the woman's reputation was more of a concern to preserve her family's reputation rather than her own. In the aforementioned literature, Britto and Amer (2007) explained that an Arab woman might struggle with claiming her cultural identities based on familial and societal cultures being in conflict with one another. Although this research question does not focus on the Arab woman's identity, she may need to conceal aspects of her identity in order to maintain a positive reputation for family members; however, this idea might also provide a new understanding of relational identities in terms of CTI.

"I Think I Should Tell Them"

The responses in accordance with the third research question revealed the type of relationship that parents had with their daughters. Specifically, participants' responses exhibited reasons as to why they felt the need to conceal the romantic relationship versus needing to profess the relationship to parents.

The assumption that "persons negotiate multiple identities in discourse" (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 107) relates to the various ways that Arab American women negotiate their identities when deciding to disclose the romantic relationship to others, more specifically, their parents. After the disclosure of a romantic relationship, women may reveal a new part of their identity that has been hidden for years.

Although the focus of my study was largely assessed through CTI and elements of IMT, family communication literature also provides insight in this area of research. For example, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) discuss McLeod and Chaffee's (1972, 1973) Family Communication Patterns Theory. This theory should be applied to future research regarding Arab Americans and their interethnic romances. This model demonstrates "how families create a shared social reality through the process of coorientation and the subsequent reformulation of the model as a theory of interpersonal behavior" (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, p. 51). Specifically, family types, determined by conversation orientation and conformity orientation, are highly applicable for understanding this particular research question.

Initially, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) outline four domains of family types. Families that fit under the consensual domain are both high in conversation and conformity. What this means is "parents are very interested in their children and what the children have to say, but at the same time also believe that they, as parents, should make decisions for family members and children" (p. 57). Pluralistic families are low in conformity and high in conversation orientation. In this case, parents do not feel inclined to control their children's decisions and are open to hearing their children's opinions despite conflicting views. Protective families involve parents focusing more on being an authoritative figure rather than leaving room for open discussion. Finally, laissez-faire families do not experience in-depth discussions and also do not value placing a strict set of rules on their children. Based on my participants' responses, the participants most likely have a consensual family or protective family type. Being high in conformity was a vital asset across several of the responses, since some participants revealed that their

parents did not want their children to lose their Arab culture. While some participants never felt the need to conceal their relationship, several of my participants detailed specific reasons for hiding the romantic relationship from parents, which links back to the various family types that Koerner and Fitzpatrick discuss.

“What Culture Do I Identify More with? It Depends.”

Regarding research question four, the concept of identity gaps within CTI (Jung & Hecht, 2008) revealed that there were clear distinctions between both the Arab and American identities for most participants, depending on the context. Many participants responded with “it depends” when answering various questions pertaining to their cultural identity. Meaning, that women exposed a specific identity based on the context of her surroundings. Most women mentioned not having arguments with their partner regarding cultural differences, despite previous research findings. Particularly, a culture-related argument that participants indicated having with their significant other had more to do with the relationship remaining closeted, and not so much on clear cultural or traditional differences. These findings are in accordance with Seshadri and Knudson-Martin’s (2013) study, which revealed that cultural differences were not central to intercultural couples’ arguments.

The living in “two separate worlds” theme is a large indicator regarding Middle Eastern women having inconsistencies between their various identities. This notion resonates with Naber’s (2006) study in relation to identity gaps. Specifically, Hecht et al.’s (2005) personal-relational identity gap (discrepancies between how an individual views herself and her perception of how others view her) is an accurate description of the participants’ identity conflict, based on my transcribed data. Based on my findings, the

gaps between the personal, enacted, relational, and communal identities have much to do with the hidden romantic relationship and one's fear of being judged. The immense pressure most participants felt in order to fit the role of the Arab woman and the American woman indicates various discrepancies among the four layers of identity.

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

Strengths and Limitations

To begin, the 15 interviews I conducted is a sufficient sample, because, after the first 10 interviews, I was able to reach redundancy with out new categories of additional data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In addition, the participant pool had wide variation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as participants came from countries ranging from, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Armenia, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia. In addition their country of origin, five women were Muslim and ten women were Christian. An additional strength in regards to my participants involves the variety of their romantic relationships statuses. I had a range of women who were married, dating, engaged, single, and women who were previously in an interethnic romance, but are currently dating Arab American men. Essentially, these participants become an avenue for future research regarding similarities and differences between Arab women dating American versus Middle Eastern men.

A clear strength relies heavily on my role as a researcher. Since I am a Middle Eastern woman who follows a set of guidelines to maintain a positive relationship with family members, while also following American traditions and dating norms, this sanctioned participants to be as comfortable as possible throughout the interview process. While the purpose of each interview was to focus on the interviewee, I disclosed personal information when the moment felt appropriate. This way, the rapport I established before

and during each interview (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) permitted participants to not feel judged based on their responses regarding their romantic relationship statuses. The only indication that a participant felt apprehensive to disclose information to me was the revelation of her partner or ex-partner's name. One possible limitation of an autoethnographic approach is that researcher biases may have prevented me from seeing beyond cultural realities I might take for granted. To address this limitation, I asked each participant to explain her story as if I were not a Middle Eastern female. Thus, I was less likely to make assumptions, and more likely to review the transcriptions in a logical and open-minded fashion.

Although there were several strengths within my study, there were also some clear limitations. First, some participants indicated that their partner or husband was their first serious romantic relationship. Although their responses were just as valuable, a woman who married her partner she dated for several years has differing experiences than a participant who has dated several partners in order to find the most suitable man for her. The complications that these two types of participants experienced may be extremely different. For example, one woman who married her boyfriend of several years eventually received the acceptance and respect from her parents after marriage, due to the serious associations attached to the term "husband" as opposed to "boyfriend." Women who disclosed their relationship to family members, but terminated the relationship shortly after, created dissonance for family members, who considered her decision to date as a way of going against their cultural norms.

Furthermore, an additional limitation lies within the interview protocol. In relation to parental reactions in regards to the relational disclosure from children, there was not a

clear question asking for the specific revelation experience. Although some similar responses emerged in response to questions such as, “How much do your parents know about your personal life” or “Tell me about the relationship you have with your parents,” a clear, concise question asking women to explain the disclosure experience may have led to an even clearer understanding of the specific self-disclosure event regarding the revealing of the relationship to the family. An additional limitation within the interview protocol regarded the age of the participants. Although the focus of the current study did not have much to do with the participant’s age, asking for age would allow researchers to consider the level of variation in the sample. In accordance with this, I did not ask a specific question pertaining to the Romeo and Juliet Effect, nor did elements of the Romeo and Juliet Effect emerge from the transcribed data. However, if there were concise questions in the interview protocol catered to this notion, my findings could have aided to a more holistic understanding of the Romeo and Juliet Effect.

Future Research

There are a number of implications for researchers to explore in regards to Middle Easterners and their interethnic relationships. First, although the social identities of Middle Eastern women and their romantic relationships have seldom been assessed, looking also at Middle Eastern men in interethnic relationships may provide advantageous results. New research may suggest that the double-standard that previous scholars have discussed regarding women having a more difficult reaction from family members for dating outside of the culture may or may not apply to Middle Eastern men who date interethnically. Furthermore, future researchers should consider conducting a longitudinal qualitative study examining Middle Eastern women who are dating

interethnically. Although such research requires a large time commitment, this form of research will provide scholars with more consistent understandings of Arab American women's lived experiences during an extended period of time.

Based on the findings in regards to participants living "two separate worlds," these women were putting on performances for family members, friends, and their partners. Due to this, Goffman's (1955) Face Negotiation Theory is especially applicable when studying Middle Eastern women, their closeted interethnic relationships, and the relationships with their family members. The term "facework" refers to communicative strategies that individuals use in order to maintain a positive image within social interactions (Ting-Toomey, 1988). In the current study, the participants who received negative reactions from family members after disclosing their interethnic romance potentially lost face, and because of this, needed to find ways to preserve their reputations. Particularly, for the women who used female code names in place of their male partners' names, deception was a way for participants to save face.

Additionally, leading up to the moment when a participant decides to disclose her interethnic relationship to family members, the act of concealing the romantic relationship can be applied to Communication Privacy Management Theory. Communication Privacy Management Theory deals with "individuals' motivations for constructing metaphorical boundaries around their private information, including cultural criteria and disclosure risks" (Brummett & Steuber, 2015, p. 24). Since a large number of participants indicated that they hid their interethnic romantic relationships from family members at some point in their lives, the application of Communication Privacy Management Theory is crucial for future implications.

Not only should communication scholars conduct one-on-one interviews with several Middle Easterners in interethnic romances looking particularly at identity, but researchers should also consider interviewing the woman's partner and parents. While understanding the identity negotiation that Arab Americans face while being in an interethnic romance is crucial, understanding the views from the partner and parents' perspectives is just as vital in our understanding of this topic of research. Particularly, future researchers examining Middle Eastern women and their parents' views on their interethnic romantic relationship must use theories from family communication literature. Specifically, McLeod and Chaffee's (1972, 1973) Family Communication Patterns Theory should be applied to future research regarding Arab Americans and their interethnic romances, as noted above. This model demonstrates "how families create a shared social reality through the process of co-orientation and the subsequent reformulation of the model as a theory of interpersonal behavior" (p. 51). Much similar to the application to research question three of McLeod and Chaffee's (1972, 1973) Family Communication Patterns Theory, other scholars should consider using these ideologies to guide their research.

While Middle Easterners are highly underresearched, the exploration of other immigrant families and their second-generation children assimilating into American norms is also warranted. Researchers should consider examining individuals from specific ethnic backgrounds, rather than examining various ethnicities within the same study. Similar to the platform of my study, communication scholars can conduct numerous studies pertaining to interethnic relationships from the perspective of participants from similar cultural regions. Results that are more in-depth in nature, such

as a focus on interviewing participants from one particular culture, will provide researchers and audiences with a stronger understanding of each culture holistically. Much scholarship has examined African American individuals who have dated or married a partner from a different ethnic background than their own (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000). It is imperative for scholars to open a wider range of research pertaining to various cultures, including, but not limited to: Middle Easterners, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and European-Americans. For instance, Racine and Dein's (2010) study of Israeli-Jewish women dating Arab-Muslim men is a worthy platform for communication scholars interested in examining intercultural relationships geared toward a more specific pool of participants. In sum, the continuation of research on Middle Easterners is imperative, but it is also crucial for researchers to expand research regarding individuals from other underrepresented ethnic origins as well.

Summary

As a qualitative research project focused on intercultural research, especially in regards to under-researched and marginalized groups, this examination of interethnic relationships among Middle Eastern women is extremely valuable. This avenue of research will not only will provide researchers with new information within the field of intercultural and interpersonal communication, but it also provided me with information that I was blind-sided with based on my personal preconceptions. I had assumed that I would find that the women would share similar experiences; however, the qualitative research method use of storytelling allowed me to grasp that Arab American women have gone through their own unique experiences, including how each woman encountered her familial and romantic relationships. Similarly, Mango (2012) emphasized the importance

for Arab American women to tell their stories in their own words. This reiterates that, although quantitative methods are beneficial, in regards to this field of research, qualitative methods must also be utilized for future research.

In doing this project, I sought out scholarly research as best as possible, based on the limited studies of Middle Eastern women, their identities, and their interethnic relationships. The experiences of this particular group of individuals is insightful for other Middle Easterners, as it will help them to understand the variety of experiences of interethnically dating Middle Eastern women, and for non-Arab Americans to help them better understand the way that such women often must move back and forth between the two cultures. While previous research and my study revealed commonalities based on empirical findings, it is difficult to truly assess Arab American women and the influence that their interethnic romances may have on facets of identity and familial contexts simply based on the scarcity of this research.

Although not all women indicated needing to conceal their romantic relationship from family members for quite some time, most participants concealed their romantic relationship. The fact that women feel the need to closet a romantic relationship solely for cultural or religious differences is disheartening. Despite the various reasons that such scholarship must continue, the growth of this type research may encourage Middle Eastern women to be more open about themselves, and may encourage family members to accept this form of cultural adjustment. In regards to Middle Eastern parents, Areej described that they are “the nicest most loving and caring parents. The way that they think is just part of their culture, but they are very open. You would be surprised at how open they can be because they love their kids so much.”

The changing ethnic and multi-cultural face of the United States ensures that the beauty of intercultural relationships will continue to transpire. Studying such a relevant, yet under-researched topic is extremely vital. The continued study of this particular topic will benefit Arab American parents by helping them to be more open to the concept of interethnic romantic relationships. It may also provide Middle Eastern women with a boost of confidence to disclose their relationship to their parents. Not only will intercultural, interpersonal, and familial scholarship on Arab American women benefit Middle Easterners, but it will also be helpful for individuals from all countries of origin engaged in intercultural romantic relationships.

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APPENDIX A

EMAIL MESSAGE/FACEBOOK MESSAGE

TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

Dear Prospective Participant,

As a graduate student in the School of Communication at Illinois State University, I'm conducting a qualitative study about the Middle Eastern women and their interethnic romantic relationships under the guidance of Dr. John Baldwin as part of my Master's Thesis. With a large number of Middle Easterners living in America, examining interethnic romantic relationships and identity is vital within the area of study pertaining to intercultural communication. I would greatly appreciate your participation in this study. Your participation would be in the form of a one-on-one confidential interview.

In order to participate in this study, you must be at least the age of 18 but no more than 35 and be currently in or have had an interethnic romantic relationship. If you choose to participate in this study, please contact Samar using the information provided below to set up a meeting location and time. This interview is expected to last between 30-60 minutes. This interview will ask you to respond to a series of questions relating to your identity, your interethnic romantic relationship, and your relationship with your family. The interview will be audio recorded on the interviewer's laptop, which is encrypted and password protected; however, we can do the interview without audio recording if that is your preference.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and anything you answer during the interview will remain completely confidential. There is no penalty for choosing not to participate in this study. Furthermore, you have the right to decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or adversely affecting your relationship with Samar, Dr. Baldwin, or Illinois State University.

To move forward with participating in this study, please contact Samar Dababneh by phone at 708-238-4674, or by email at sdababn@ilstu.edu

Thank you for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. John Baldwin in the School of Communication at Illinois State University. I am inviting you to participate in a research study to understand identity management for a Middle Eastern woman in an interethnic romantic relationship as part of a Master's Thesis. To participate, you must be between the ages of 18 and 35 years old, Middle Eastern, and either currently be in or have been in an interethnic romantic relationship.

I am requesting your participation, which will involve an interview regarding an Arab American woman's identity negotiation while taking into account influences from family members, her romantic partner, and societal expectations. The interview should take between 30-60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded on the interviewer's laptop, which is password protected, and your audio file will not contain any identifying mark. Still, you may feel uncomfortable being audio recorded; if you do, we can proceed with the interview without the audio recording, and the researcher will summarize the interview from her memory after the session.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty (it will not affect your relationship with Samar Dababneh, Dr. John Baldwin, or Illinois State University). You can refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer. Your responses are completely confidential. To ensure your confidentiality, we will not reveal any names, organizations, or anything else that identifies any participant. If you have chosen to have this interview in a public place, the interviewer cannot guarantee that anyone overhearing the conversation will maintain confidentiality.

We believe there are minimal risks associated with participating in this project, though you may feel some discomfort discussing your romantic relationship experiences. If you would like to see a professional to discuss any discomfort, you may, at your expense, contact a counselor of your choice. You will receive no compensation for this study. However, your participation will help extend literature in intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, and family communication, providing valuable information for educational purposes.

Your signature below indicates that you are voluntarily making a decision to participate in this research study and have read and understood the information presented above. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Please direct any questions and/or comments to Dr. John Baldwin (jrbaldw@ilstu.edu) or to me (sdababn@ilstu.edu). For questions regarding your rights as a research participant you are encouraged to contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics and Compliance Office: Phone: 309-438-2529, Email: rec@ilstu.edu, <mailto:researchoffice@illinoisstate.edu>

Thank you for your assistance.
Samar Dababneh
Graduate Student
Illinois State University, School of Communication
Sdababn@ilstu.edu

Please Print Name

Please Sign Name

Date

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE / QUESTION PROTOCOL

I. Demographic Questions

1. Are you ready to begin?
2. Is it okay with you that I audio record this interview?
3. What is your age?
4. What gender do you identify with?
5. What is your ethnic background? (If you are from more than one country of origin please describe)
6. If you attended college/graduate school, where was the facility located in proximity to where your parents live?
7. Have you ever lived on your own or did you live on your own before getting married?

Transition: Now I am going to start by asking some basic questions about your ethnicity, education, and career. Please keep in mind that if this interview is focused on the discussion of a previous partner, then think back upon these questions and respond to the best of your knowledge.

II. Identity Questions

1. Give me a brief history regarding your cultural background possibly starting with when you or your parents immigrated to America?
1. How would you describe yourself?
 - a. What makes up your identity?
2. How would your parents or family members describe you?
 - a. How much does your family know about your personal life?
 - b. How does your family's perception of you differ from your view of yourself?
3. How would your close (non-Arab) friends describe you?
 - a. How much does your non-Arab friends know about your personal life?
 - b. How does your non-Arab friends' perception of you differ from your view of yourself?
4. Describe an instance in which you needed to hide a certain identity based on the person or people you were surrounded by.
 - a. Who were you with?

5. How do you balance being the Arab woman your family wants you to be and the Arab woman you want to be?
 - a. What inconsistencies do you see in who your family wants you to be versus who you want to be?
 - b. What inconsistencies do you see in who your partner wants you to be versus who you want to be?

Transition: For these next questions, think about your current or past interethnic romance(s). When answering these questions, consider an interethnic relationship you had with a partner that was the most serious relationship, if your past interethnic relationship was more serious than a more current interethnic romance please answer questions based on your previous partner.

III. Interethnic Romantic Relationship Questions

1. Describe your partner's cultural or ethnic background.
 - a. What are some similarities or differences between your ethnicity and your partner's ethnicity?
2. How long have you and your partner been dating/married?
 - a. Where did you and your partner meet?
3. If you have dated more than one individual please describe their ethnic backgrounds.
 - a. How many intercultural relationships have you been in?
4. Walk me through your most recent interethnic relationship from the beginning to where you are now, noting any key issues that came up.
5. How much does your partner's ethnic background play a role in his life?
 - a. How much does your partner try to include your ethnic background into his life?
6. Describe your partner's relationship with his family.
 - a. Describe your relationship with your partner's family.
 - b. Describe the relationship your partner has with your family.
7. If you are not married, how much does the concept of marriage come up in conversation with you and your partner?
8. If you could make any recommendation to women in intercultural relationships, what would it be?

Transition: For these next questions, think about various ways you, your family, society, and your partner sees you.

IV. Family Questions

1. How would you describe the relationship with your parents?
2. Describe the type of parenting style your parents utilized when you were younger, and how they are as parents now.
3. What are your parents' views on you dating an individual from a different ethnicity?

- a. What kinds of messages did they share with you or about you about dating this person?

V. Supplemental Questions if the Interview is About a Previous Partner

1. How long ago did you and your partner break up?
2. In your opinion, what factors contributed to the termination of your interethnic relationship?
3. How sudden was the termination of this specific relationship?
 - a. Please describe where you saw the relationship going prior to the break up.
 - b. How has you and your former partner's ethnic backgrounds influenced the motive to initiate a break up.
 - i. How did your family and friends react to the news regarding your break up?
4. Have you and your former partner had arguments regarding cultural differences?
 - a. If so, what were some of the arguments specifically about?
 - b. How would the issue get solved?

Closing question: Is there anything else that you would like to say about any of the things that we have discussed?