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Santa Barbara

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

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology

by

Sheila Z. Modir

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September 2017

The dissertation of Sheila Z. Modir is approved.

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June 2016

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

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by

Sheila Z. Modir

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Let the beauty of what you love be what you do.” -Rumi

There are countless people in my life that have provided me with the support, encouragement, and platform that I have needed to be able to accomplish my goals of doing what I love. I truly value being a clinical psychology graduate student, clinician, and researcher and I am incredibly grateful to have had the privilege and the opportunity to fully immerse myself in work that I genuinely enjoy.

I must first acknowledge my husband, Jeffrey Kashou, my parents Bagher and Mehri Modir, and my brother Shaheen Modir. Jeff, you deserve an honorary doctorate for being such an incredible teammate through my journey of graduate school. I am eternally grateful for your unconditional love and unwavering patience throughout this process. Mom, dad, and Shaheen, thank you for being my biggest supporters since day one. I would not be here today without you and I hope you know that my achievements are very much yours.

As an Iranian American, I am part of a collectivistic culture and can attest that it not only takes a village to raise a child, but also to support a graduate student in pursuing their dreams. Thus, I am thankful for my husband’s family, my family in Iran, and my closest and dearest friends, all whose collective support has been steadfast and felt profoundly.

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expertise to my research endeavors. Their feedback and advice has helped shape this project and I am very grateful for their guidance.

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DEDICATION

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

-Nelson Mandela

When I first put out a call for participants, I did not expect to receive so many responses from students who were interested in this study. Many of them shared with me how they rarely came across a study that was recruiting for Middle Eastern American participants and they could not believe that someone was interested in hearing about their experiences. I can only hope that this study did their experiences justice and has taken a first step in promoting further understanding of this population. Thus, I dedicate this to my participants for their time, integrity, and powerful stories, as well as to all of the Middle Eastern Americans across the U.S. that have shared similar experiences.

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Project Description: Reports of prejudice and discrimination against Middle Easterners have increased since the events of September 11th, 2011. Following September 11th, the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee confirmed over 700 violent acts toward Arab Americans within a period of two months after the tragedy (Ibish, 2003). Little is known about how Middle Eastern American undergraduates contend with these experiences, and how their strategies for coping with discrimination are related to their college adjustment. In the current study, 25 Middle Eastern American first- and second-year undergraduate college students participated in in-depth interviews focused on experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, coping, and college adjustment. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using grounded theory. The research aimed to provide valuable information to inform and guide prevention and intervention efforts.

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First Year Experiences Survey

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ABSTRACT

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

by

Sheila Z. Modir

Experiences of perceived prejudice and discrimination are prevalent in the Middle Eastern American community (Arab American Institute, 2015), and these rates have only increased since September 11th, 2001 (Rousseau, Hassan, Moreau, & Thombs, 2011). However, little is known about how such experiences influence the Middle Eastern American emerging adulthood population, despite the importance of this critical developmental period (Arnett, 2000). Given past findings that discrimination can negatively impact ethnic minority college adjustment across social, academic, and emotional domains (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013), it is important to understand the interrelationships of discrimination experiences, coping, and college adjustment specifically for Middle Eastern Americans.

The current study explored experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, coping, and college adjustment through in-depth interviews with 25 Middle Eastern American first-year and second-year undergraduate college students. Participants were recruited from a public university with a mean age of 18.72 and a sample of 7 men and 18 women of diverse

Middle Eastern heritage. Of the 25 participants, 15 were first-year undergraduate students and 10 were second-year undergraduate students.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using grounded theory. This process allowed for the in-depth exploration and theory generation that is particularly important when conducting research with a population underrepresented in the literature. Specifically, constructivist grounded theory was selected in order to acknowledge the values, beliefs, and biases of the researcher as potentially influential parts of the research process.

Study findings resulted in a theoretical model of how discrimination influenced college adjustment across multiple socio-ecological levels: (a) societal: climate and context, (b) community: discrimination and sense of belonging, (c) relationships and self: family, peers, and coping, and (d) individual: college adjustment. Results suggested that discrimination experiences were critical components to consider in the matter of Middle Eastern American students' college persistence, and the findings carried a number of clinical implications for working with these college students on an institutional, interpersonal, and individual level.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Perceived discrimination is associated with mental health consequences for ethnic minorities in the United States (U.S.) (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). The detrimental psychological responses can include depression, anxiety, perceived stress, and reduced self-esteem (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). Middle Eastern Americans experience a significant amount of discrimination in the U.S., especially since September 11th, 2001 (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2008). However, there is a dearth of literature on this population (Moradi & Hasan, 2004). In particular, we know very little about these experiences during emerging adulthood. In fact, experiences with hate crimes, discrimination, and racism are significant factors that impact college experiences and are related to academic, occupational and long-term economic outcomes (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010). The dropout rate of minority students at U.S. colleges is significantly higher than those of the ethnic majority and is attributed, at least in part, to the impact of perceived discrimination (Bowman, Hurtado, Locks, & Oseguera 2008; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Lynch & Engle, 2010). Thus, these issues are of great importance in developing a full understanding of mental health for Middle Eastern Americans college students.

On September 11th, 2001, terrorists attacked the United States, targeting the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (CNN, 2015a). Approximately 3,000 people were killed in these attacks orchestrated by a terrorist organization in the Middle East called al Qaeda (CNN, 2015a). The events of September 11th were pivotal in the lives of Middle Eastern Americans as prejudice, discrimination, and harassment toward them increased (Bushman & Bonacci, 2004). In a study examining discrimination experiences before and after September

11th, it found that discrimination toward Arabs had occurred before September 11th but increased by 15% after September 11th (Rousseau, Hassan, Moreau, & Thombs, 2011). In fact, the discrimination increased rapidly with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reporting a 1,600% increase in hate crimes against Muslims and Middle Eastern Americans within a one-year period following September 11th (Serrano, 2002). The discrimination had become so prevalent in New York City that the Commission of Human Rights formed the 9/11 Discrimination Project to assess and survey the Arab, Muslim, and South Asian community (Gatling, 2003). The project confirmed the prevalence of this problem with approximately 69% of the respondents reporting having experienced one or more discriminatory incident post September 11th (Gatling, 2003). Correspondingly, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) (2008) reported 700 violent crimes across the U.S. within the first few weeks of September 11th. After September 11th, it was found that Arab Americans were the most discriminated against group in the United States, when compared to African American, Asian American, and Hispanic-American groups (Bushman & Bonnaci, 2004).

The ADC Legal Department has also documented multiple cases of Arab Americans being unnecessarily detained, assaulted, beaten, and even shot during the years following September 11th (ADC, 2008). In 2004, a pregnant Arab American woman was walking home when a man verbally harassed her, called her a terrorist, and then proceeded to beat her unconscious. In 2005, an Iranian American boy was repeatedly bullied at school with racial slurs and physically attacked by peers twice in a one-month period. In 2006, an Arab American man was shot and killed in front of his family by a man who was yelling racial slurs at him in a Middle Eastern restaurant. In 2007, an 11-year-old Arab American girl was

choked, repeatedly harassed, and called a terrorist by classmates. Most recently, in 2015, two Arab Americans were detained from boarding their flight because passengers were uncomfortable with them speaking Arabic (ADC, 2015). Horrific attacks and incidents of harassment such as these have continued to be documented for over 14 approximate years since the attack (ADC, 2015). Following September 11th the ADC (2008) noted an annual increase in discrimination as the political relations between the U.S. and the Middle East worsened.

Racism is defined as the “beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation” (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999, p. 805). One aspect of racism is perceived racial or ethnic discrimination, which is when an individual is treated unfairly based on their race or ethnicity (Clark et al., 1999). In recent years, discrimination has evolved from overt racism (i.e., calling out racial slurs) to covert racism (i.e., asking an ethnic minority if they speak English). These subtle forms of racism are called microaggressions and may seem harmless, but instead communicate messages of inferiority to people of color (Sue et al., 2007). Regardless of how the message is delivered, the impact of the message can make a difference on the individual’s well-being. Pascoe and Richman (2009) reviewed 110 studies on discrimination and health and found that individuals that had experienced discrimination reported poorer mental health symptoms. The mental health outcomes they found included some of the following symptoms: posttraumatic stress, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and a decrease in life satisfaction (Pascoe & Richman, 2009).

While the current literature extensively describes the mental health consequences of racial discrimination on African American, Latino, and Asian American populations (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006; Prelow, Mosher, & Bowman, 2006), few studies have examined the effect that discrimination may have on Middle Eastern Americans' mental health. In 2004, researchers Moradi and Hasan were among the first to report that perceived discrimination was associated with higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of self-esteem for Arab Americans. Since then other studies have emerged to corroborate these findings. A study conducted by Hassouneh and Kulwicky (2007) examined the impact of discrimination and other stressors on the mental health of Arab American women and found that 67% of the female participants reported that discrimination after September 11th had impacted their mental health. In a more recent study on Arab Americans conducted by Amer and Hovey (2012), researchers found that in comparison to other ethnic minority groups, Arab Americans reported more symptoms of depression and anxiety and attributed this to discrimination and harassment post-September 11th.

As noted, there is a great need to address the mental health concerns of the Middle Eastern American population through empirical research (Moradi & Hasan, 2004). Additionally, the few studies that have been conducted have solely focused on Middle Eastern American adults (Amer & Hovey, 2012; Hassouneh & Kulwicky, 2007; Moradi & Hasan, 2004), where college students, who typically experience significant transitions as emerging adults (Arnett, 2000), have been empirically neglected. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the possible psychosocial consequences that perceived discrimination has on Middle Eastern American college students. The study will explore how racial discrimination can be a barrier to successful college adjustment across social, academic, and

emotional domains. Additionally, the study will seek to understand how Middle Eastern American college students have been coping with these experiences of discrimination.

Middle Eastern Americans in the United States

Middle Easterners have immigrated to the United States since the 1890s (Schwedler & Gerner, 2008), yet there remains a paucity of research on this population. This is surprising considering the number of Middle Eastern Americans in the U.S. today. The 2011 American Community Survey estimates 1.8 million people of Arab descent residing in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011); however, the Arab American Institute (2010) provides an estimate of over 3.5 million Arab Americans. It is important to note that these numbers only capture the Arab American population and not the Middle Eastern American population. The Middle Eastern American population includes not only Arab Americans, but also people from Northern Africa and Western Asia (Schwedler & Gerner, 2008). It has been estimated that adding the non-Arab population would increase the total of Middle Eastern Americans in the U.S. to 5 million (Wiltz, 2014).

The discrepancy between the reported population totals is due to the U.S. Census Bureau taxonomically categorizing Middle Eastern Americans as Caucasian or White. This categorization is not only the cause of different reported population totals, but also important for the following reasons:

Information on race is required for many Federal programs and is critical in making policy decisions, particularly for civil rights. States use these data to meet legislative redistricting principles. Race data also are used to promote equal employment opportunities and to assess racial disparities in health and environmental risks. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013, para. 3)

Census data is highly influential in the distribution of \$400 billion of federal funding which has previously been used for a variety of services for ethnic minorities, including tracing employment discrimination and providing translators in government offices, hospitals, and voting booths (Wiltz, 2014). Considering this, the categorization of Caucasian limits Middle Eastern Americans ability to identify as a distinct racial group or receive protected rights as a minority within the U.S. (Abdulrahim, 2009). Additionally, the label of White/Caucasian also interferes with the research process, as it can be difficult to gather demographic information from a group that can identify as either Middle Eastern or Caucasian. In recent years, Middle Eastern Americans have been advocating to be classified as a separate racial group on the U.S. Census (Abdulrahim, 2009). However, in the meantime they continue to lack statistical visibility in the U.S.

Perceived Discrimination on College Campuses

Over the years, research has demonstrated the prevalence of perceived discrimination on college campuses (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Prelow et al., 2006). In a 1993 survey on the frequency of African American college students' experiences with racism, approximately 89% reported experiencing verbal prejudice while at their university (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Over a decade later, researchers Prelow, Mosher, and Bowman (2006) found that 98.5% of African American college students reported experiencing both overt and covert forms of discrimination during a one-year period in college. These studies show that the frequency of discriminatory events on college campuses has not declined over the years. Biasco, Goodwin, and Vitale (2001) conducted a study on college students' asking how often they were experiencing discrimination on campus. The results indicated that 15% reported experiencing it daily, 21% reported weekly, and 18%

reported monthly (Biasco, Goodwin, & Vitale, 2001). The study also found that ethnic minority students experienced discrimination from various people on campus, including their professors, campus police, and same-age peers (Biasco, Goodwin, & Vitale, 2001).

Researchers Smith, Roberts, and Smith (1997) investigated experiences of racial discrimination longitudinally by surveying college students for over a 42-month period. They found that over time incidents of discrimination increased but were disguised through subtle expressions, such as microaggressions.

Although the research on Middle Eastern American college students and their experiences of discrimination is limited, there have been several notable incidents of discrimination against this group during the past few years. In North Carolina, three Palestinian college students were called terrorists and beaten by the college football team (Arab American Institute, 2008). At the University of California, Santa Cruz a lecturer publicly labeled members of the Muslim Student Association and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) as students who have “ties to terrorist organizations” (De la Vega, 2013, para. 2). More recently, prior to departure, a passenger on a plane reported feeling uncomfortable having an Arabic college student from the University of California, Berkeley on board because he was speaking Arabic on the phone to his uncle (Hassan & Shoichet, 2016). He was subsequently removed from his flight and interrogated by the FBI for hours, only to be placed on another flight later because he was deemed to not be a threat (Hassan & Shoichet, 2016). Finally, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, three Muslim college students were shot and killed by a White male neighbor, which many suspect was motivated by race and religion (Tapper, 2015). The sister of one of the victims, Dr. Suzanne Barakat, spoke about the portrayals of the shootings on CNN (Tapper, 2015):

I would like to highlight [...] had roles been reversed and the man was Muslim, was of Arab descent, was of South Asian descent, this would have immediately been labeled an act of terror. I haven't heard anyone use the term terrorist here, but why the double standard? He has terrorized our families. He has terrorized our lives. He has terrorized our community, locally, nationally, and internationally, and it's time that people call it for what it is.

Most recently, there has been a growing debate around the labeling of community violence depending on the race of the individual. When a White male shot and killed 9 African Americans in a church, the news was quick to label the shooter, along with other White male shooters that have committed similar acts of violence, as mentally ill with potentially inadequate access to mental health resources (Butler, 2015). However, when crimes are committed by African Americans or Middle Easterners, the labels of "thugs" and "terrorists" are widely utilized by the mainstream media, perhaps, to emphasize that their actions may be "motivated purely by evil intent instead of external injustices" (Butler, 2015, para. 2). While White suspects have typically been described as "lone wolves" (para. 3) when committing mass murder, similar crimes committed by African Americans and Middle Easterners are seen as collectivistic, and as a result their entire racial group is blamed (Butler, 2015). The Washington Post and other news sources have begun conversations about society's labeling of certain acts of violence and the implications these labels could have (Craven, 2015; Dastagir, 2015). Unfortunately, the aftermath of these specific experiences and others like it have yet to be studied empirically, but they serve as illustrative examples for the aforementioned studies' findings regarding discrimination toward the Middle Eastern American college student population.

Defining College Adjustment

The developmental period of late teens and early twenties is defined in the literature as emerging adulthood and is characterized as a time of newfound independence, identity exploration, and educational pursuits (Arnett, 2000). Entering college has been identified as an important time of transition for many young adults (Arnett, 2000). This transition to a unique academic realm can consist of adjusting to the social, academic, and emotional demands of a new institution. The adjustment process is empirically defined as *college adjustment* and is described as a “multifaceted process by which students acclimate to the environment associated with an institution of higher education” (Hicks & McFrazier, 2014, p. 57). The adjustment process is particularly influential to a college student’s persistence in school and has been cited as an important factor in the retention rate of the U.S.’s 21 million college students (Tinto, 1993; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Vincent Tinto’s (1993) model of student persistence and departure has been an influential theory in college adjustment literature. Previous models have stated that students’ retention and departure from the university was based on their internal attributes and flaws that impeded on their persistence and success (Rose & Elton, 1966; Waterman, Geary, & Waterman, 1974). However, Tinto’s model underscores the importance of a student’s social and academic assimilation to college as a means of successful integration within the university and an ultimate goal of graduation (Tinto, 1993). Tinto recognized students’ individual characteristics upon arrival to the college (i.e., gender, race, high school grade point average), but found that the external demands of social and academic integration were equally influential to students’ commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1993).

According to Tinto (1993), social adjustment is the student's ability to integrate in the campus social environment through forming relationships and joining college-based organizations. On the other hand, academic adjustment is defined by how well the student does in their academic environment and is assessed through their grades and their motivation to learn. In addition to these two components, researchers Baker and Siryk (1986) identified a third component that has been equally influential to the adjustment process called "emotional adjustment" (p. 32). They defined emotional adjustment as the psychological well-being of the student throughout their college transition (Baker & Siryk, 1986). Hence, social, academic, and emotional domains have been found to be reliable predictors in identifying retention and dropout rates within the college student population (Gedres & Mallinckrodt, 1994).

It is important to note that the process of adjusting to college may not come easily to all students, especially to those of ethnic minority groups. Researchers have found that minority college students often experience a unique set of challenges, such as discrimination, harassment, and racism, which can interfere with their transition to college (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2013). Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) conducted a campus-wide study on African American, Latino/a American, Asian American, and White students to assess their experience of the campus racial climate. The results indicated high levels of racial tension on campus across the ethnic minority racial groups. African American students reported the highest level of discrimination, followed by Asian American and Latino American students. White students reported little to no experience of racial discrimination. This discrepancy in campus discrimination experiences among the minority students and the

White students can be indicative of the additional challenges that minorities face while adjusting to college.

These experiences of discrimination have been known to impact the students' "academic, social, personal-emotional adjustment, and attachment to college" (Carter et al., 2013, p. 97). Specifically, experiences with discrimination have led to feelings of detachment from the university (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). According to Cabrera et al. (1999), a negative racial climate and the psychological stressors that are associated with discrimination can also be attributed to ethnic minority students' inability to persist and ultimate dropout. Given these findings, it is essential for researchers to study how discrimination can be a barrier to successful college adjustment in order to reduce dropout rates, improve the mental health of the students, and facilitate a positive integration into college (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Perceived Discrimination and College Adjustment

The graduation gap between the White students and the ethnic minority students has become more pronounced over the years. Considering this, researchers have taken a particular interest in understanding the minority graduation rates and the challenges these students face that threaten their prosperity. In the past 40 years, the percentage of Latino/a American college students has increased by 10%, African American college students by 5%, and Asian American college students by 4% (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While there has been an increase in the enrollment of ethnic minority students in U.S. colleges, research continues to reveal that these students are more likely to drop out than their White peers (Cabrera et al., 1999). Across the U.S., 60% of White students graduate with a bachelor's degree compared to 49% of Latino/as and 40% of African Americans (Lynch &

Engle, 2010a). Approximately 300 universities in the U.S. reported less than half of their African American student population graduating with a bachelor's degree (Lynch & Engle, 2010a). Nationally, 80% of universities reported a gap between the White graduation rate and the Latino/a graduation rate (Lynch & Engle, 2010b). Research has identified racial discrimination as a significant predictor in these low graduation rates (Ancis, Sadlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera et al., 1999). In an effort to better understand the relation between perceived discrimination and college adjustment, the sections below will explore the empirical literature on the impact of discrimination on the various domains of adjustment.

Social adjustment. Many researchers have identified social support as an integral component of the college adjustment process and retention of students (Prelow et al., 2006; Schwitzer, Griffen, Ancis, & Thomas, 1999). The factors that account for successful social adjustment can include: forming peer relationships, participation in campus organizations, and establishing a support network (Tinto, 1993). However, experiences of discrimination can hinder the social adjustment process. Research conducted by Prelow et al. (2006) found evidence for the social support deterioration model that states that after an individual experiences trauma, similar to discrimination, they isolate themselves or their social support withdraws from them (Barrera, 1988). Prelow et al. (2006) surveyed African American college students and found that after experiencing discrimination, some of these students expected to be further socially rejected on the basis of their race and withdrew from their peers in order to protect themselves. In contrast, another explanation was that the social support withdrew from the victim because they may have believed that they did not know how to respond and be helpful after a discriminatory event (Prelow et al., 2006).

Other studies have found similar findings where direct perceptions of discrimination were associated with social isolation and feelings of segregation from their peers (Schwitzer et al., 1999; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 2003). These results are troublesome for the college adjustment process as peer relationships can be critical to the transition and provide the student with the emotional support necessary for a successful adjustment (Tinto, 1993).

Academic adjustment. In addition to discrimination impacting social adjustment, research has found that it could also negatively impact the students' academic commitment and performance. In a longitudinal study on Latino/a college students, researchers found that discrimination experiences on campus were correlated with maladaptive coping behaviors, such as isolating from peers and the campus community (Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006). The data also highlighted that academic performance was dependent on the Latino/a students' sense of connection with their peers and the campus. Thus, when they experienced discrimination, they felt disconnected and isolated, and this undermined their academic performance.

Researchers Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) investigated the impact of minority status stress (i.e. racism, discrimination) and other ongoing stressors for college (i.e., finances, family troubles) on academic adjustment. Their sample consisted of minority undergraduate students whose academic performance was measured by their cumulative grade point average (GPA) at the end of their first year. The results found that minority status stress was associated with lower GPAs. Notably, the study found that other life stressors did not influence the students' academic performance in the same way that minority status stresses did. These results underscore the negative outcome that perceived discrimination

could have on a minority student's academic adjustment to college. According to Levin, Van Laar, and Foote (2006) and Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993), racism experienced in college settings by minority students has been shown to impede on their academic advancement and achievement.

Emotional adjustment. Research on college adjustment has historically focused on academic and social integration of college students as significant factors in their persistence and success in college; however, recent research on the subject has shown that emotional adjustment and mental health play significant roles in the transition process as well (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Kitzrow, 2003; Prelow et al., 2006; Swim et al., 2003). A student who is emotionally adjusted to college is one that is not experiencing psychological distress or symptoms to the point of impacting his or her academic or social functioning (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Kitzrow, 2003). Unfortunately, students who have experienced discrimination are more susceptible to psychological problems.

Researchers Hwang and Goto (2008) examined the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health in Asian American and Latino/a American college students. The results indicated that both minority groups experienced similar psychological reactions to discrimination including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. The findings also reported a discrepancy between the younger students and the older students with the younger students endorsing higher levels of psychological distress after experiencing discrimination. This finding demonstrates how the first and second year of college is critical in the college adjustment process and how younger students' are more susceptible to mental health problems when faced with a stressor such as discrimination.

The psychological impact of discrimination has also been correlated with strong emotional responses from college students. The research has found that negative emotional responses have been known to be precursors to mental health symptoms later on (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). In a daily diary study involving African American students, researchers found that the students reported anger as their primary emotional response to discrimination (Swim et al., 2003). The study also found that the students reported feeling uncomfortable and unsafe in their campus community after experiencing discrimination. These feelings were reported to persist despite the discriminatory incident being over and later manifested into psychological distress for the participants (Swim et al., 2003).

Middle Eastern Americans and college adjustment. The research consistently reveals how deleterious racial discrimination can be on the mental health and well-being of a college student. A student may be unable to achieve academic success (Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006) or form healthy peer relationships due to symptoms of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety associated with the discrimination experience (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Prelow et al., 2006). Adjustment and retention may subsequently be impacted when a student is suffering from psychological distress associated with perceived discrimination.

Although the current research is limited in examining the Middle Eastern American student's college adjustment, prior research has consistently found that perceived discrimination is: (a) prevalent in the Middle Eastern American community (Arab American Institute, 2010), (b) negatively impacts mental health (Pascoe & Richman, 2009), and (c) has potential implications for college adjustment and student retention (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, a greater understanding of the discrimination experiences of ethnic minority groups like Middle Eastern Americans in settings such as college campuses is needed.

Resilience and Protective Factors

The research on discrimination has primarily focused on the negative consequences it can have on the mental health of minorities. However, due to its persistence across college campuses it is important to also identify ways that students can be resilient and mitigate the experience of a discriminatory incident. The process of *resilience* has been defined as “good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development” (Masten, 2001, p. 228). In studies of perceived discrimination and resilient outcomes, researchers have identified a number of protective factors that contribute to the reduction of the psychological distress students may experience after discrimination. Personal control and cultural resources are the two that have been specifically examined for Middle Eastern Americans in the face of discrimination (Ahmed, Kia-Keating, & Tsai, 2011; Moradi & Hasan, 2004). Social support will also be discussed as a protective factor; although it has not been directly observed with Middle Eastern Americans, it has proven to be effective among other minorities and has been included within this paper.

Personal control. Moradi and Hasan (2004) conducted a seminal study on the effects of perceived discrimination on the Arab American population. They were interested in how personal control, defined as control or mastery of a situation, served as a mediator between perceived discrimination and psychological distress (Moradi & Hasan, 2004). Previous research on other minority groups has found that the lack of personal control the target feels after experiencing discrimination has been associated with an increase in psychological distress (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998). Branscombe and Ellemers (1998) found that those who are discriminated against feel as though they have no control over the actions of those who perpetrate the discrimination. The potential deleterious effects of discrimination can be

mitigated if the target of discrimination felt in control of the situation (Branscombe & Ellemers, 1998).

Moradi and Hasan (2004) reported that Arab Americans who had experienced perceived discrimination reported a lowered sense of personal control, which in turn was associated with mental health symptoms. The implications of these findings suggest that although the victims may not be able to control a random act of discrimination, instead they may be able to empower themselves and regain their control by sharing their experience with others and participating in larger scale advocacy projects (Moradi & Hasan, 2004).

Cultural resources. Researchers Ahmed, Kia-Keating, and Tsai (2011) found that cultural resources served as protective factors against perceived discrimination for Arab American adolescents. The authors identified cultural resources as the following: ethnic identity, religious coping, and religious support. Ethnic identity is defined as identifying with or belonging to an ethnic group. Religious coping refers to participation in religious practices of a particular cultural group. Correspondingly, religious support refers to seeking support from members of the religious community. The findings indicated that these cultural resources were effective in decreasing psychological distress and promoting psychological well-being for Arab American adolescents.

Previous research has corroborated these findings and has found these resources to work in alleviating the psychological distress of discrimination through the process of increasing cultural and religious pride (Brondolo et al., 2009). Research on racial socialization has found that strong identification and knowledge about an individual's religious or ethnic group can serve as a buffer from the pain of being targeted against (Brondolo et al., 2009). In other words, the targeted individual can experience discrimination

as an affront against an entire ethnic group rather than a personal attack (Brondolo et al., 2009). This awareness and understanding can decrease the level of harm to the target's self-esteem (Brondolo et al., 2009). These findings underscore the significance of cultural and religious values as protective factors during times of distress.

Social support. Social support is defined as a network of people that offer care and comfort during times of distress (Brondolo et al., 2009). Specifically for individuals that have experienced discrimination, their social support can provide them with feelings of safety and a place where they can communicate their experiences with others. After experiencing discrimination, research has found that when victims share their experience with members of their own race, they feel more aligned with their ethnic identity and are able to be validated by others who may have had similar experiences (Brondolo et al., 2009). In addition to this, socializing with their social network can serve as a distraction from the discriminatory event and help them create more meaningful experiences in college (Brondolo et al., 2009).

In a study by Swim et al. (2003), 68% of female African American college students reported seeking comfort from their social support after experiencing discrimination. This study suggests that more than half of the participants found solace in reaching out to others instead of internalizing the experience (Swim et al., 2003). In another study, Asian American male college students reported using their family as a source of support after experiencing discrimination (Wei, Yeh, Chao, Carrera, & Su, 2013). Specifically, family support was associated with a decrease in the psychological distress experienced after a discriminatory incident (Wei et al., 2013).

For Middle Eastern Americans, a study on Arab American community college students found that an overwhelming majority of their social network were people of same

ethnicity and that the students found comfort and safety within their same-ethnic peers (Shammas, 2009). Belonging to an ethnic-group organization has been found to be helpful in connecting a student to his or her campus community (Brondolo et al., 2009). Specifically, they can serve as a safe space for students when they feel that the campus is hostile after experiencing discrimination.

Gaps in the Literature

The empirical literature has provided a substantial amount of evidence that discrimination continues to occur on college settings and has a significant impact on the adjustment process of college students. Considering this, the review of the literature identifies a significant need for further research to be conducted on the Middle Eastern American college student experience with discrimination. There has been no specific study on this topic with college students, however there is limited research on Middle Eastern American adults that demonstrate considerable psychological distress after experiencing discrimination.

Since racism and discrimination continue to be ongoing within the college settings, it is also important to know strategies for coping. Research on resilient outcomes and protective factors have identified a few methods that have been found to be effective in mediating the mental health consequences that are associated with discrimination, however there continues to be a paucity of research on Middle Eastern Americans coping. This study seeks to capture the prevalence of discrimination for this minority group, the impact that it has on their college adjustment, and the range of consequences that stem from these harmful actions.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this exploratory study is to develop a theoretical foundation to understand how incidents of perceived discrimination influence the Middle Eastern American students' adjustment to college and how they are able to cope with these experiences. By utilizing a grounded theory methodology, this study provides researchers with descriptive and nuanced experiences of this population and aims to discover an empirically grounded theory. Finally, where there continues to be a deficiency in the psychological literature is on Middle Eastern Americans and the intent of this study is to add to this gap for a community that has been empirically marginalized and continues to experience discrimination.

Research Questions

In order to examine how Middle Eastern American students described their experiences of perceived discrimination while in college, the following research questions were investigated:

1. What are Middle Eastern American college students' perceptions of discrimination (that they witness or experience)?
2. In what ways do Middle Eastern American college students relate their lived experiences of discrimination with their college adjustment process?
3. In what ways do Middle Eastern American college students cope with their experiences of discrimination?

CHAPTER II: METHOD

Participants

The current study included 25 Middle Eastern American first and second year college students who attended a public research university in Southern California. The participants were individually interviewed on their experiences of discrimination, its influence on their transition or adjustment to college, and how they have coped with it. For this study, the mean age of the participants was 18.7. The sample consisted of 7 men and 18 women. Of the 25 participants, 15 were first-year undergraduate students and 10 were second-year undergraduate students. Their generational status included one international student, five first-generation students (born outside of the U.S.), and 19 second-generation students (one or more parent was born outside of the U.S.). The ethnic composition of the participants recruited was 36% Iranian, 12% Lebanese, 12% Palestinian, followed by smaller percentages of other ethnicities. See Table 1 for additional information about the participants' demographics.

The participant criterion related to year in school for this study was based on the college adjustment literature (Tinto, 1993). The reason first and second years were selected was because it had been identified as a critical time for transition and adjustment, as well as a time when college students were most likely to drop out (Tinto, 1993). The term Middle Eastern American includes participants from the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (Schwedler & Gerner 2008). Two of the participants were from Pakistan and Armenia, but self-identified as Middle Eastern American and were

subsequently interviewed for the study. A total of 27 participants were interviewed, but 2 of the participants did not meet qualifications as a first or second year undergraduate and their data was removed from the study leaving a final total of 25 participants.

The study took place on a public research university campus. Currently, the undergraduate student population is 38% White, 27% Latino, 21% Asian, and 5% African American (UCSB Campus Profile, 2016). The percentage of Middle Eastern American students is unknown due to Middle Easterners taxonomically considered White or Caucasian on university demographic forms.

Table 1

Self-reported participant demographics (N = 25)

No.	Name*	Ethnicity	Age	Year	Gender	Religion	Generation
1	Sami	Lebanese	18	First	Male	Christian	Second
2	Jasmine	Iranian	18	First	Female	Jewish	Second
3	Mohammed	Egyptian	18	First	Male	Muslim	Second
4	Deena	Palestinian	18	First	Female	Atheist	Second
5	Bahar	Iranian	18	First	Female	Agnostic	Second
6	Noora	Algerian	18	First	Female	Agnostic	Second
7	Tariq	Syrian	18	First	Male	Atheist	Second
8	Erin	Biracial (White-Israeli)	18	First	Female	Atheist	Second
9	Nicole	Palestinian	19	First	Female	No religious affiliation	Second
10	Kimia	Iranian	19	First	Female	Agnostic	Second
11	Alex	Biracial (Iranian-Russian)	19	First	Male	No religious affiliation	Second
12	Talia	Israeli	19	First	Female	Jewish	Second
13	Nusha	Iranian	19	First	Female	Baha'i	Second

14	Minha	Pakistani**	19	First	Female	Muslim	First; moved to the U.S. at the age of 6
15	Sanaz	Iranian	19	First	Female	Atheist	First; moved to the U.S. at the age of 12
16	Shima	Iranian	19	Second	Female	Muslim	First; moved to the U.S. at the age of 3
17	Zaina	Syrian	19	Second	Female	Muslim	Second
18	Ben	Israeli	19	Second	Male	Jewish	Second
19	Ali	Lebanese	19	Second	Male	Muslim	First; moved to the U.S. at the age of 1
20	Melody	Biracial (Iranian- European /American)	19	Second	Female	Spiritual	Second
21	Navid	Iranian	19	Second	Male	Atheist	First; moved to the U.S. at the age of 5
22	Elina	Armenian**	19	Second	Female	Christian	Second
23	Firuzeh	Iranian	19	Second	Female	No religious affiliation	Second
24	Nadia	Lebanese	19	Second, Inter- national student	Female	Catholic	First; moved to the U.S. at the age of 17
25	Lily	Iranian	20	Second	Female	Agnostic	Second

*Names have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

**These participants are not demographically considered Middle Eastern, however self-identified as Middle Eastern.

Recruitment for this study was conducted in multiple ways: (a) flyers posted in areas with high student traffic, such as a center dedicated to cultural clubs and organizations on campus; (b) social media, primarily Facebook groups; and (c) on campus televisions in the

dormitories and dining halls. The flyer used for this study advertised for students that were interested in being interviewed on the following topics: academics, social life, family, culture, experiences with discrimination, and coping with stress. The flyer also stated that participants would receive a \$10 gift card to the university bookstore as an incentive for their participation (See Appendix A for flyer).

Sampling Method

Traditionally, grounded theorists utilized theoretical sampling to select their participants (Charmaz, 2006). Theoretical sampling allowed the researcher the flexibility of entering the field repeatedly to gather data and to follow a new direction if necessary. However, current ethical review boards and funding agencies require more explicit standards of sampling (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012). Thus, other sampling procedures such as purposive sampling, departed from the original grounded theory, but were adopted by grounded theory researchers (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012). When sampling purposively, subjects were selected based on certain characteristics of the population that the researcher was interested in (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012).

In this study the type of purposive sampling used was criterion sampling, which meant that the researcher selected cases based on the participant identifying as the following: first- or second-year Middle Eastern American undergraduate, and attending the major university where the research was being conducted. When necessary, the researcher used a snowball sampling method where initial interviewees identified other participants they knew that fit the sampling criteria (Frost, 2011). The sample size was determined by the research aims, as the study served to provide a foundation of research for an empirically marginalized

community. Thus, the researcher interviewed all interested and qualified participants, during a 4-month time frame, in order to provide a platform for this community's voice to be heard.

Procedure

Email Screening

Potential participants contacted an email address that was included at the bottom of the recruitment flyer. Once the participant emailed and expressed their interest in the study, the researcher would email them back reminding them about the qualifications for participation (i.e., first- or second-year undergraduates and self-identified as Middle Eastern American) and a brief description of the topics that would be discussed during the interview. If the participant was still interested, they could email back and discuss scheduling options. Participants that did not meet qualifications were thanked for their interest, but informed they were not eligible.

Consent Process

The consent form was the first paper that was given to the participants when they arrived for their interview (See Appendix B). They were informed of the procedures of the interview, including that the interview would be audiotaped and transcribed. The participants were assigned a number and later on in the data analysis process, they were given a pseudonym for confidentiality reasons. The participants were told that they had the right to decline answering any specific questions and/or could leave at any time and still be fully compensated. No participant declined answering any questions and all 25 participants remained for the entire interview and also indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed again if necessary.

Measures

Quantitative

Demographic questionnaire. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire to track age, ethnicity, education level, and current housing situation (See Appendix C).

College adjustment scale. A three-item scale ranging from 1 (*no adjustment*) to 5 (*well adjusted*) was used to assess the participant's adjustment to college (See Appendix C). The items were the following: "How well have you adjusted academically?" "How well have you adjusted socially?" "How well have you adjusted to being away from your family?" The interviewer would refer to this information later during the interview when asking the participants about their college adjustment.

Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS). The REMS (Nadal, 2011) is originally a 45-item microaggressions scale that measured subtle statements and behaviors that could communicate messages of inferiority to ethnic minority groups (See Appendix D). For this study, 40 of the items were used. The items that were not included in the study's modified version of the scale were related to employment and/or were deemed not relevant for college students by a team of research assistants and the primary researcher. The wording for the scale was also changed slightly to be relatable to college students. For example, the original scale item asked "An employer or co-worker was unfriendly or unwelcoming toward me because of my race" and this study's version of the item replaced "employer or co-worker" with the word "peer."

The participants responded yes or no to the statements listed on the scale (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). A few examples of items on the scale that were not modified included: "Someone told me that all people in my racial group are the same" and "I was told that people of color do not experience racism anymore" and "Someone avoided eye contact with me because of my

race” (Nadal, 2011, p. 2). The original full 45-item scale was found to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.93$ for the general population; $\alpha = 0.91$ for Latino/a American population) (Nadal, 2011). This scale has been used with other ethnic minority groups, including Latino/a American and Asian American populations (Nadal, 2011), but has not been used with Middle Eastern Americans.

The REMS was administered immediately prior to the interview in an effort to prime participants’ memories regarding discriminatory experiences they have experienced during their time in college. According to Oyserman and Lee (2008), priming is helpful as “concepts, procedural knowledge, and goals cued by the first task (prime) carry over to the subsequent tasks” (p. 313). With previous experiences on racial microaggressions primed, the participants’ minds were activated on this topic during the interview and they were able elaborate further on their experiences. The interviewer also used this questionnaire as a reference for probing further on specific experiences around discrimination.

Qualitative

Semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol can be viewed in Appendix E. The content of the first four participants’ interview helped refine the final protocol, particularly around questions regarding discrimination. Constructivist grounded theorists rely on interviews as a way of understanding the participants’ experiences, feelings, and behaviors in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Charmaz, 2006). The grounded theory interview questions tended to range from open and flexible to focused and detail-oriented (Charmaz, 2006). The interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. The primary purpose of the interview was to gain an

understanding of how Middle Eastern American students adjusted and coped to their transition to college after experiencing discrimination.

The interview questions were generated based on the literature related to college adjustment. According to Tinto's (1993) interactional model of student persistence and departure, the more students were socially and academically integrated into college, the more likely they would be successful with their studies in order to pursue graduation. Therefore, the interview protocol questions that explored adjustment focused on social integration and academics. Research has also found that mental health plays a significant role in adjustment to college so participants were also asked about psychological distress after experiencing discrimination (Kitzrow, 2003). At the end of each interview, the interviewer thanked the student for participating and asked debriefing questions focused on processing the interview. Each participant was also given information for the university counseling center as a potential resource should they need it.

In grounded theory, the interviewer's role was "to listen, to observe with sensitivity, and to encourage the person to respond" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). It was important for the interviewer to establish rapport with the participant through validating their perspectives, exploring their stories, and appreciating their participation (Charmaz, 2006). The interviewer was active in the interview by asking for clarifications and exploring new leads that may emerge. To maintain the ability to be active in the interview, Glaser (1998) and Charmaz (2006) recommended audio recording. Audio recording interviews assisted in maintaining eye contact with the participant throughout the interview, sharing the data with those who did not conduct the interview, and checking field notes for gaps in the information (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1998).

Timeline of events. While interviews were being conducted, the researcher and research assistants kept track of the events that occurred both globally and locally on the university campus related to the Middle East. See Appendix F for a timeline of global events and Appendix G for a timeline of university events. As news events unfolded, it may have impacted the participant's responses and thus, it was important to keep track of these events in order to establish confirmability and dependability in this study and record details that may influence the research outcome (Bowen, 2009).

Memo-writing. The purpose of memo writing was to allow time for the interviewer to reflect and record her first impressions of the interview. This was an integral component of grounded theory and was done through note taking, recording ideas, and diagramming (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The memo-writing process began after the first interview and continued until the end of the research process. According to Charmaz (2012), asking analytic questions in the memos was helpful in sorting the data. The questions asked included, "Who's involved? How? When? What do they do? What are the consequences of their actions?" (Charmaz, 2012, p. 9). For this study, the researcher utilized a memo-writing notebook in order to develop ideas and keep track of conceptual categories that emerged throughout the data collection.

The Role of the Researcher

Insider researcher. Over the years, the interest in qualitative research has increased considerably (Hewitt, 2007). One attribute of qualitative research that has contributed to its rise is the ability to study a particular group in-depth (Hewitt, 2007). *Insider research* is a form of qualitative research that has been known to produce rich, detailed findings on a population that is being studied (Labaree, 2002). It has been empirically defined as "when

researchers conduct research with populations of which they are also members so that the researchers shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 58). The position of an insider researcher is known for its quick access and acceptance by the participants and has led to greater depth in the data collected and greater empirical knowledge on the population that is studied (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

As the primary researcher of a study on Middle Eastern American college students, it is important to note that I am an insider researcher as an Iranian American and a graduate student at the university that this study is being conducted. This position has given me the advantage of establishing quicker rapport and sharing in the cultural knowledge of the participants’ stories (Taylor, 2011). According to minority researcher Kanuha (2000), as an insider researcher I can bring “more knowledge, more analysis, and ultimately more understanding of others whose life experiences were similar to mine” (p. 441).

My role as an insider researcher is important because in qualitative research I serve as the primary instrument of data collection (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, I will illustrate ways my insiderness was influential throughout the course of this study. One example is that many of the participants asked about my ethnicity. I decided to willingly share this information out of respect to the amount of information they were disclosing to me during the course of our interview. I sensed that for most participants their knowledge that we were of the same ethnic background made them more comfortable with me during the interview. They would make cultural references and would speak in a way that included me in their experience, using words like “you know” when describing their discrimination experience. I was always careful of this, not wanting them to omit details because they thought I already “knew” due to our shared background, and thus, asked them to clarify or elaborate when necessary.

Although the interviews were conducted in English, it should be noted that some minimal exchanges with various participants involved words specific to one's culture. For example, when an Iranian-American participant made reference to "Chahrshanbe Soori," an important part of the Iranian New Year's celebration, I understood this term and its meaning even though it was said in Farsi. However, when an Arab or Israeli participant made reference to their cultural holidays or spoke in their language to describe something, it was necessary to seek further clarification. My shared ethnicity with the Iranian American participants may have had some influence on the interviews, possibly making them feel more comfortable discussing their experiences. Conversely, many of the Israeli participants who described within-group discrimination experiences, may have been influenced by the difference in our ethnicities in that they may not have been as comfortable as the other participants during the interviews.

Exercising reflexivity to minimize bias. As an insider focusing on reflexivity to reduce potential bias and influence on interviews, I first had to identify my personal motivation behind this research so that I could maintain an awareness of it and reduce any possible influence it may have. Being an Iranian American college student, I have had my own personal experiences of discrimination based on my ethnicity on college campuses. The turning point for me was my second year as an undergraduate involving an intense situation with an Iranian American peer who was detained by campus police for suspected connection to terrorism. Another student had overheard this individual speaking in Farsi and English about weapons and hostages and made the decision to tape record the conversation and turn it into the campus police. The campus police had asked for my help in translating the tape due to my leadership role on campus. While watching the videotape, I felt unsure of what to

expect, as well as the pressure of the police officers watching me, and worrying what my translation could mean for both my Iranian and American identity. I found that the conversation that had been recorded was not about any actual events, but a phone discussion about how to play a popular video game that involved freeing hostages. However, due to these accusations, the police had this Iranian American individual sit on the sidewalk of the Student Center for hours before he was taken into the police station for further questioning. I remembered how students had walked by and stared at him as he sat with his head in his hands while police officers surrounded him.

Following this experience, I began to wonder: If I talk about a movie or a video game on the phone, will I have to go to the police station for hours or be surrounded by police in front of my peers? Would this incident be on his student record? How would he feel safe again on campus? How will this impact his identity? Will he ever speak Farsi on campus or in the community again? Will I ever be able to speak Farsi with my peers on campus again? I was left grappling the desire to be proud and supportive of my culture while also being aware of the other systems that I was a part of, including post-September 11th America. After this experience, my own adjustment and sense of belonging on campus was impacted.

I have taken this experience, along with other similar experiences, and have created research questions from them hoping to study a phenomenon that has interested me for so long. In doing so, I continue to remember that among all researchers, it is the insider researchers who have the ability to do the most good or cause the greatest harm because of their intimate familiarity with the community they are studying (Haniff, 1985). Thus, in order for me to produce unbiased research that is beneficial to the scientific community, I have had to take reasonable steps to address any challenges that may have emerged during the course

of the study. Fisher (2012) suggested that researchers consult with their colleagues to be effective and objective in their work. Throughout my study, I consistently consulted with my research team, research advisor, and qualitative research professors, in order to accurately portray the participants' data and avoid potential biases. Additionally, my active engagement with the participants throughout the interviewing process made it critical for me to consider any biases that may have emerged while I conducted such involved research. I also relied on my education and coursework in qualitative research to assist me with managing my assumptions in order to analyze data accurately. I have been trained in qualitative research in the following ways: (a) three graduate-level courses on qualitative research methods, (b) training on qualitative coding conducted by my research advisor, and (c) a series of public webinars hosted by Atlas and other qualitative services.

Origins of the theoretical framework. I entered this study guided by the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) as a framework for approaching formulation, conceptualization, and analysis of my research. This model states that the person is not separate from their environment and, subsequently, these external networks shape their development. All of these separate, yet interconnected systems change throughout the course of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Considering the significance of this model, Bronfenbrenner (1995), called for future research to take into consideration the “person-context model” (p.639), which scientifically examines the effects of the person in their environment and how it shapes their development.

Utilizing this framework, I believe that an individual is a product of their environment and cannot be seen as separate from it. In particular, I believe that the college students' lived experience of discrimination is compounded with the messages they receive from their

family about their ethnic identity, the racial jokes and comments that are made by their peer groups, the cultural activities they participate in college, and the news about the Middle East that is reported in the media. When analyzing the data, I considered each of these systems as influential factors in the adjustment process because I did not see the student as remaining constant while experiencing discrimination, but instead as a dynamic individual moving through time and experiencing things within their identity, family life, peer groups, and communities simultaneously.

The Role of the Research Team

Throughout the course of the study, two research assistants remained consistent during the data collection and coding process. The other research assistants were part of the team for a shorter period of time due to academic obligations and scheduling conflicts. It is important to note that consistently one research assistant was Middle Eastern American and one research assistant was of another racial background. The research assistants that were Middle Eastern American entered the study with a shared understanding of being ethnic minority females, who had experienced discrimination while in college. They were chosen (and likely, sought out) to be a research assistant for this study because of their insider perspective (Laberee, 2002). They had insider knowledge on places to recruit participants and were helpful in understanding cultural nuances when coding the data. Their shared and lived experiences as Middle Eastern American women brought in greater knowledge about the population throughout the course of this study. I also had to consider how my Middle Eastern American research assistants were also students on campus. Therefore, I had to exercise the utmost caution when assigning interviews to be transcribed in order to protect

the participant's privacy. It was critical that no research assistant transcribed or coded a participant that they knew personally.

I also recruited for research assistants who were not Middle Eastern American. I interviewed and selected research assistants that were interested in the research topic, yet presented an objective view and an appropriate amount of detachment from the research being conducted (Simmel, 1950). I considered how someone of another ethnic background might be more aware of cultural details that I may consider mundane or be too familiar with and how important it was to have that perspective on my team. I also had my research assistants provide feedback on the interview questions in case I did not ask more obvious questions because I already knew the answers to them (Mercer, 2007). My insiderness may have produced weaker data had it not been for the people on my team that provided me with a valuable outsider perspective.

My entire research team was also involved in the data collection, coding, and analysis process. I trained my research team in grounded theory coding procedures prior to data collection and transcript analysis. We met weekly to discuss any triggers, biases, or assumptions that may have been activated while transcribing the interviews. Additionally, we shared our own expectations of the study and our personal experiences with discrimination that could potentially influence the study in any way. The goal of this was to minimize any biases brought forth by our own experiences by becoming aware of them in order to produce trustworthy data. Our training, data collection, and data analysis was monitored by a faculty member who is also a licensed clinical psychologist. The faculty member played an integral role in the formulation of the study and the data analysis process, ensuring that the data was collected appropriately and was being analyzed according to grounded theory tenets.

Data Analysis

The Reason for Qualitative Methods

There was a need for an exploratory study to understand the Middle Eastern American experiences of discrimination and its relationship to college adjustment and coping. Although the limited quantitative research on Middle Eastern Americans had contributed to the psychological literature by providing numerical data on the levels of psychological distress after experiencing discrimination, it continued to leave unanswered questions about the Middle Eastern American population. Specifically, after experiencing discrimination how did Middle Eastern Americans feel within their campus community? How had they been coping? Who were they turning to for support inside and outside of college? Qualitative research was helpful in providing answers to these questions by offering researchers in-depth access to the Middle Eastern American population (Flick, 1988).

Prior to conducting quantitative research, qualitative research has been useful in providing a theoretical foundation for an underrepresented population in the literature (Flick, 1988). It had been known for its “investigations of relatively uncharted waters,” and thus, could advance the limited knowledge about the Middle Eastern American college student population so that future research could continue to build on it (Stern, 1980, p. 20). According to researchers Corbin and Strauss (1990), the primary reason for choosing qualitative research was “the desire to step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective, and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge” (p. 16). Subsequently, the immersion into the Middle Eastern American participants’ world was helpful in generating a

theoretical understanding of this population and made qualitative research a natural choice in going forward with this study.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was best suited for this study as the research problem was oriented around theory generation to better understand an underrepresented population's experiences. I specifically chose constructivist grounded theory because I was a member of the community that was being studied. Constructivist grounded theorists believed that researchers could be subjective participants in the research process and, therefore, should acknowledge their values, beliefs, and biases as potentially influential parts of the research process (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, my goal was to manage my presuppositions in order to fully capture the participants' interpretation of their own experience (Charmaz, 2006). I exercised reflexivity by consulting with my research team and recording my personal thoughts and ideas after interviewing participants.

Constructivists grounded theorists also believed that the theory that emerged through data analysis was based on "shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 130). According to constructivists, the social context, the researcher, and the interactions between the researcher and the participants all influenced data (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher could not remain separate from the research process and was instead "the author of a co-construction of experience and meaning" (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 7). The researcher enriched the data by using participant's quotes in order to keep the participant a primary contributor to theory generation. Together, in a "delicate balancing act" (p. 7) the researcher's perception and participant's voice were represented in the theory that was generated.

In grounded theory, the method was designed for the researcher to enter the field with no prior preconceived theory in mind in order to derive the theory from the data that was collected from the participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012). Grounded theory gathered and analyzed the data in a “systematic, inductive, and comparative approach” with the ultimate goal of generating a theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012, p. 44). The tenets of conducting research with a grounded theory approach included: (a) sequential and systematic involvement in the data collection and analysis process, (b) sampling based on theoretical grounds, (c) utilizing a constant comparative approach, (d) memo-writing to assist in category formation and the analytic process, (e) three layers of analytic coding, and (f) formulating a theory grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Although these were all methods of data collection and analysis in grounded theory, there were three core tenets that set grounded theory apart from other qualitative approaches: theoretical sampling, constant comparison, and theoretical sensitivity. These three tenets are discussed below.

Theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling was when the researcher interviews a group of participants, analyzes the data, and re-enters the field allowing the analysis to influence the type of sample chosen (Charmaz, 2006). Through the simultaneous and sequential data collection and analysis, insights emerged and meanings were clarified so that the researcher could re-enter the field and expand upon them when interviewing participants. This combination of data collection and data analysis was influential in informing the sample that was chosen.

Constant comparison. Constant comparison was the process of making persistent comparisons across the data that was collected (Bryant & Charmaz, 2012). For example, once a code or concept was captured, the researcher would go to the previously coded data

and check for other times the code had been used. This comparative process assured that the codes were capturing a consistent concept across different interviews.

Theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity was defined as the “the ability to recognize what is important in data and to give it meaning” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 46). This concept emphasized that the researcher’s insight was important in developing the theory. This insight, or theoretical sensitivity, could come from a number of sources including the literature, the researcher’s experiences, and the analytic process.

Applied to this study, as the researcher, I was familiar with the literature on the topic that was being studied and I was more sensitive and aware of the underlying phenomenon that emerged from the data that was collected (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). My personal and professional experiences were also other sources of sensitivity. Applied to this study, I was a Middle Eastern American doctoral student studying other Middle Eastern American college students and I approached this study with a foundation of knowledge on this population. Finally, the analytic process referred to my interaction with the data. The more I asked questions, coded segments of the data, and made comparisons, the more sensitive I became to the data and the more aware I was of the relationships between concepts.

These three tenets set grounded theory apart from other qualitative methods, and made it an appropriate qualitative approach for this study. Its primary purpose of deriving a theory grounded in the data collected from the Middle Eastern American participants was helpful in taking the first step toward creating a theoretical premise for this topic.

Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

The research had suggested a range of criteria to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research that included credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability (Guba, 1981). These universal standards of quality in qualitative research could also be applied to constructivist research and are discussed below.

Credibility. Credibility was concerned with the accuracy of the findings (Guba, 1981). Similar to internal validity in quantitative research, credibility in qualitative research sought to measure what was intended. In order to maintain credibility in qualitative research, the researcher could utilize multiple methods to collect the data. This process was referred to as *triangulation* and could include utilizing field notes, observations, memos, and interviews to study the phenomenon of interest (Morrow, 2005). I interpreted my findings by repeatedly immersing myself in reading the transcripts, memos, and listening to the audio recordings in order to accurately analyze the data.

Another assurance of credibility was established through iterative questioning where I rephrased questions in order to detect any contradictions in the participant's responses (Shenton, 2004). Finally, credibility could be assessed through a technique called *auditing the decision trail*. This process involved "the presentation of details of all sources of data, collection techniques, experiences, assumptions made, decisions taken, meanings created, and the influences on the researcher" (Long & Johnson, 2000, p. 35). In a binder, I put together an audit trail for this study. Some of the items in this binder included the following: a copy of the IRB approval, comprehensive literature review, earlier additions of the interview protocol that had been modified to create the final interview protocol, coding scheme, the theoretical framework, timeline of events, and all additional materials for the study.

Transferability. The process of determining if the findings were applicable to other participants in other settings was referred to as transferability in qualitative research (Guba,

1981). According to Guba (1981), generalizations in qualitative research could be difficult to make because the phenomena under study may be unique to a certain group, context, or time period. However, some transferability could occur when two contexts shared similarities between them and I, as the researcher, was well versed in both contexts and the similarities they shared.

Dependability. Dependability referred to the ability to replicate findings (Guba, 1981). It was the process of keeping track of the changes that could occur in the setting and how it could impact the research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that there was much overlap between credibility and dependability, and that maintaining accuracy in one of these criteria of trustworthiness could help the other. One step that I took for dependability included creating a timeline of events that kept track of the global and local events that may have influenced the study. Other steps that researchers could take include creating in-depth step-by-step document of any explainable changes that happened during the course of the study. I also utilized the same semi-structured interview protocol to maintain consistency of topics during each interview.

Confirmability. Confirmability referred to the researcher's involvement in the research process and the biases that may influence it (Guba, 1981). A researcher's subjective perception could influence the selection of the study topic, the formulation of the research questions, and the interpretation of the data. Although subjectivity could be helpful in creating a research study by providing a framework for the researcher to work within, the researcher must exercise awareness over his or her biases in order to represent the interpretation of the findings accurately (Charmaz, 2006).

Constructivist grounded theorists considered the researcher an important part of the data collection, but found several ways to manage the influence of subjectivity (Morrow, 2005). For example, reflexivity was already integrated within this research paradigm and assisted in increasing awareness of biases that may have emerged during the course of the study (Charmaz, 2006). I managed my reflexivity, or self-reflection, through journaling to capture any reactions I had. I also consistently consulted with my research team and my research advisor in order to gain multiple views.

Other ways to fairly represent the participant in the data analysis included using direct quotes from the participant in order to highlight findings (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006) and asking for clarifications when interviewing (Morrow, 2005). These methods were especially salient because I was an insider researcher or a member of the community being studied. I took on a naïve approach to the interview, despite being a part of the culture being studied, for the purposes of managing any biases that may have emerged (Taylor, 2011).

Coding in Grounded Theory

This study was designed under the grounded theory principles. In grounded theory, coding was the final step needed after collecting the data in order to generate a theory to explain the data (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theorists created the codes as they interacted with their data and this interactive coding process could “take you into unforeseen areas and research questions” (Charmaz, 1996, p. 37). Coding was the part of the analytical process that was directly involved with developing theoretical categories. This study implemented three layers of coding as recommended by Charmaz (1996; 2006) for constructivist grounded theory: initial, focused, and theoretical coding.

Initial coding. Initial coding was the first phase of coding where the researcher goes through the transcription line-by-line and labeled the actions and the events in each segment of the data (Charmaz, 1996). The purpose of initial coding was to help the researcher “refrain from imputing motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues” on to the data (Charmaz, 1996, p. 37). In initial coding, I immersed myself in the transcripts by reading and rereading them, asking reflective questions about the data, and writing down memos to assist with the coding process. The initial codes were descriptive and represented the action that was occurring in the transcripts. I stayed as close as possible to the data and created codes that best fit what the participant was saying. According to Charmaz (2006), it was important to remember that the “openness of initial coding should spark your thinking and allow new ideas to emerge” (p. 47). This process generated a list of codes including media portrayals, sense of belonging, and expectations of college (See Appendix H).

This stage of coding required a series of checks and balances. First, as soon as coding began, I used constant comparative methods to compare the codes with one another to make sure they were capturing similar meanings or actions (Charmaz, 2006). Second, line-by-line coding required careful examination of the data and brought forth an objective, analytic lens to prevent from transposing any assumptions or biases into the coding process. Finally, inter-coder reliability was taken into consideration where two research assistants (one self-identified as Middle Eastern American female and one self-identified as White female) and I used the set of codes that we had created to code the same interview independently, and then came together to compare our coding. Any discrepancies among team members regarding the codes were resolved through collaboration and providing evidence by using participant quotes in the creation of new codes.

Gradually, throughout the initial coding, I noticed additional data that could potentially add to the study. Since data collection and data analysis were occurring simultaneously, I was able to consider interview questions that could bring forth significant data. I added the following topics to my interview protocol:

- The participant's personal definition of discrimination
- The participant's earliest experience with discrimination
- The participant's experience with being called a terrorist (if and when it happened and frequency)

Focused coding. Focused coding was when the researcher goes through the initial codes to find the most significant or common codes that captured the central themes (Charmaz, 2006). Focused codes tended to be more selective, directive, and analytical than line-by-line coding. During this stage of coding, the researcher continued to be engaged in a constant comparative process, where the researcher returned to earlier data to check on previous codes and their alignment with new codes. Focused coding also created categories, which is defined as “selecting certain codes as having overriding significance in explicating events or processes in your data” (Charmaz, 1996, p. 40). Categories go beyond a description of the participant's words and were more analytical. During this stage of coding, I worked closely with one research assistant and my research advisor and went through the large amount of initial codes in order to select codes that would help us construct categories that made sense analytically.

Theoretical coding. Theoretical coding was focused on the selection of significant categories in the data that generated a theory. For this study, the theory emerged by repeatedly being present in the interviews and the data. These recurring concepts were

brought together to form categories that were described as the “cornerstones of a developing theory” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 7). During this stage of coding, my research advisor and I met to discuss the categories and understand the “analytic story” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63) that was emerging from the data. We unified categories to bring forth a theory that described the phenomenon under study.

Memo-Writing

After each interview, I reflected on what the participant had shared with me by writing in my memo-writing notebook. I also encouraged my research team to write in the notebook after every interview they transcribed with the interview still fresh in their minds. The research team also met every week to discuss these transcriptions and the interviews they had listened to and added additional reflections to the notebook. It was in these notes that we were able to make connections between the codes and noticed consistent patterns that were emerging throughout the interviews.

Computer Software

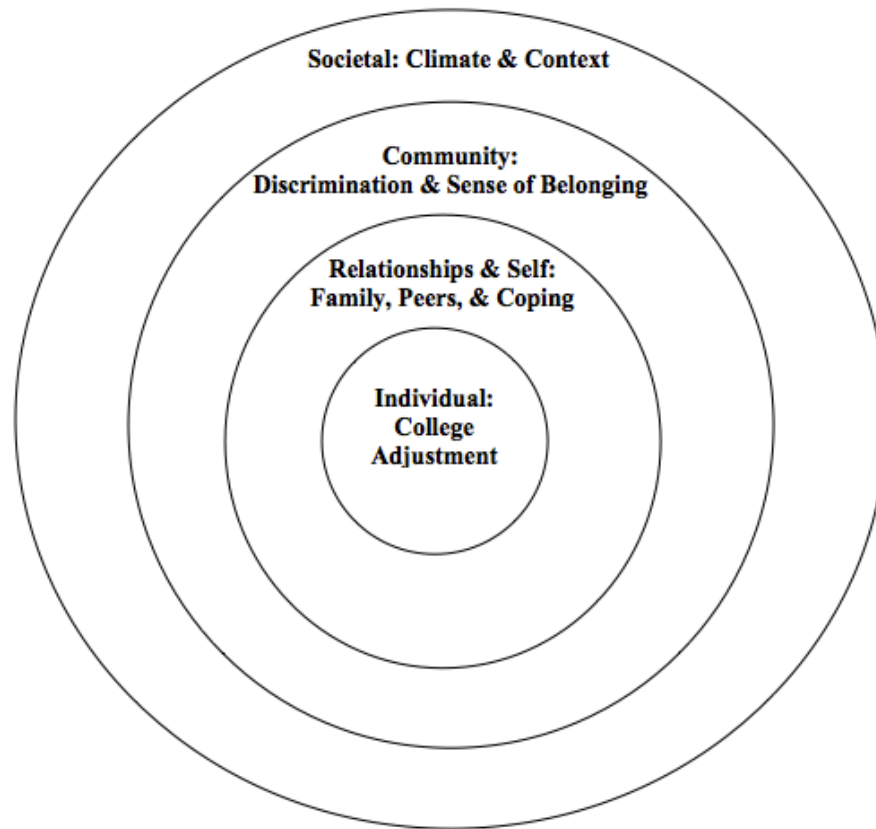
I used computer technology to assist in exploring the data. MAXQDA® is a software program designed for qualitative data and assisted in consolidating the large volumes of data I had gathered. In addition to storage, it visually displayed complex relationships in the data through diagrams. Strauss and Corbin (1990) were known for their use of diagrams to assist in the coding and data analysis process. Diagramming assisted in visually illustrating complex relationships between concepts through flow charts or analytical maps.

CHAPTER III: RESULTS

The aim of this research study was to generate an understanding of the Middle Eastern American college students' experience. More specifically, its intent was to explore and to understand their experiences of discrimination, how it influenced their college adjustment process, and how they were coping. Due to the limited research on this population, it was important to understand them both on an individual and an environmental level in order to attempt to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. This meant that the environment that the Middle Eastern American student was apart of was considered influential to their overall college adjustment process. Thus, the theory that emerged depicted several levels that the Middle Eastern American college student experienced discrimination within. These socio-ecological levels were the following: (a) societal: climate and context, (b) community: discrimination and sense of belonging, (c) relationships and self: family, peers, and coping, and (d) individual: college adjustment.

The first level (societal: climate and context) started from the participants' perspective within a societal framework and the final level (college adjustment) ended with the participants' perspective within their individual microsystem. Each of the levels did not appear to stand alone, but instead seemed to be influenced by one another as they ultimately impacted the individual's overall experiences and development. Figure 1 below depicted the results in a visual format. For the remainder of the results section Middle Eastern Americans are referred to as MEA(s).

Figure 1. Socio-Ecological Levels that Influence College Adjustment



Societal: Climate and Context

Political Climate: Being Labeled as Terrorists

Soon after beginning the interviews, a discrepancy in the participants' responses were noted. When asked if they had experienced discrimination, the participants had typically denied it. However, when discussing other facets of their experiences, such as the current political climate concerning the Middle East, a common theme began to emerge. Some participants made reference to being referred to as a "terrorist" or how their culture was related to "terrorism" in gest, which they had chosen to not take seriously or with malicious intent. Upon seeing this theme, the interview protocol was subsequently adjusted to directly

ask about experiences surrounding being called terrorist. Interestingly, all of the participants ($N = 24$) confirmed various experiences of being called terrorist at some point in their life, with the exception of the first interview when this theme had not yet emerged and was not directly asked about.

When the participants were asked further about their discrimination experiences, they described associating the word “discrimination” with serious hate crimes and overt forms of harassment. Many participants explained how the word “terrorism” had been a part of their culture and ethnic identity for as long as they could remember, preventing it from standing out as a form of discrimination when they were first asked about it. When asked further, the participants did not blame their peers or members of the community for labeling them as terrorists, but instead pointed to the current political climate, society’s understanding of the Middle East, and the media for continuously perpetuating this stereotype. The participants described the frustration, sadness, and anger they felt about this perception. Several participants attributed specific sociopolitical events as catalysts that changed how society perceived the MEA population. These events were not limited to, but included the September 11th attacks, the wars in Iraq¹ and Afghanistan², the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris³, the Arab Spring⁴, and the rising of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)⁵ in the Middle East.

¹ The Iraq war (2003-2011) was due to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein posing as a potential threat to the U.S. (CNN, 2016a).

² The war in Afghanistan (2001-2014) was due to al Qaeda’s involvement in the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks (CNN, 2015b).

³ The Charlie Hebdo shooting occurred in January 2015 in Paris, France. Terrorists targeted the Charlie Hebdo magazine offices due to their satirical caricature of Prophet Mohammed. They killed 12 people total (CNN, 2015c).

⁴ Arab Spring refers to the uprisings in the Middle East where countries including Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia held anti-government protests to demand change in their country leading to war and many deaths (Simpson, 2014).

They explained that after these events their ethnicity became tied to the current political climate. Melody (19) stated, *“A lot of people just associate everything bad, in terms of terrorism, with Middle Easterners.”* Sanaz (19) noted that after the recent events people’s perception of who she was as an individual changed, *“People associate me, as an individual, with the political events...There’s more to my people, my country, and me, than politics.”*

However, there was a time when the MEA community was not associated with terrorism. Many participants reflected on this change with mixed emotions, expressing grief over the former perception of the MEA community and anger with the current perception. Tariq (18) who was born in the U.S., but had immigrated back and forth to Syria over the years, described how before September 11, 2001, it was a *“much, much different world.”* He described how since he had moved back to the U.S. after September 11th, he felt that people expected him to be more supportive of terrorist attacks because he was MEA, even though he was also a U.S. citizen. Mohammed (18) shared similar experiences, explaining that before September 11th, he and his family were stereotyped, as *“super rich Arabs.”* He described how several generations of his Egyptian family had been educated in Europe and identified as European-Muslim, instead of Arab-Muslim, and felt more culturally aligned with Europeans. However, after September 11th, Mohammed explained how people in the MEA community had to make a choice between being *“Western or Eastern.”* For Mohammed, he described never having a choice. Although he identified culturally as more European and was born in the U.S., according to him, he physically looked like an Arab and occasionally wore Muslim prayer clothing, and thus, society chose a side for him by discriminating against him and calling him a terrorist repeatedly (before and during college). Mohammed’s sense of

⁵ ISIS, originally a part of al Qaeda, is now a separate group controlling land in Syria and Iraq. They are known for their fundamentalism, holding public executions, destroying holy sites, and enslaving women and children (CNN, 2016).

rejection by the Western culture had resulted in him aligning more with his Arab and Muslim side, which was a shocking shift for his family who was not as religious as he was and for years had attempted to assimilate to Western culture.

These examples highlighted the difference in society's perception prior to and since the events of September 11th and the impact it had on the participant's ethnic identity development. For many of these participants, September 11th occurred when they were 5 or 6 years of age and subsequently, this was also the time that a majority described experiencing discrimination. For example, Minha (19) recalled her first experience of discrimination less than a few months after September 11th. She and her siblings were bullied and beaten by other children on a playground near her home when she was a child. She described her conceptualization of the discrimination that had occurred:

I made the metaphor of 'blue faces, red shirts, white minds' the American flag. My shirt was covered in blood, my face was blue and bruised, and my mind was still white and innocent because I had no idea that I was personally responsible for the bombing of September 11th at the age of 5.

Mohammed (18), felt a similar shift in society, "*Growing up in post-9/11 America makes you really contemplate certain things. All of a sudden I was expected to explain terrorism.*" Sami (18) described that as he got older in elementary school more of his peers began to really understand terrorism and what happened on September 11th and the discrimination increased with more racially charged comments like, "*Osama bin Laden's your grandpa,*" "*you're a terrorist*" and "*camel jockey.*"

The impact of September 11th also altered the way many of the MEA participants and their families were treated in public spaces, particularly airports. They described being pulled

aside in the airport lines, searched thoroughly, and treated differently as a direct result of the societal stereotype of MEAs being terrorists. Sami (18) laughed at the comments that had been said about him in airports, *“In the airport I have heard ‘look at that terrorist’ or ‘we’re on a flight with a terrorist.’”* Bahar (18) echoed the responses of many of the other participants’ that had been randomly searched in airports, *“Whenever I go to the airport, literally, I always get randomly selected. I’m not even kidding.”* Other participants also described that this happens to them or a family member *“every time”* they go to the airport. Bahar expressed frustration and shock when she was singled out recently in an airport to have her hands checked for bomb residue. She expressed feeling confused about the process of random selection versus racial profiling, resulting in her feeling *“super uncomfortable”* whenever she was in an airport.

The participants also expressed confusion about racially being labeled as terrorists, categorically being identified as White, and for many of them, nationally being U.S. citizens. The intersections of these identities led many of them to express their feelings of unfairness over how they were being treated, especially as U.S. citizens, while historically other racial groups had committed horrible acts of terror globally, but were treated differently. Navid (19) described this further:

It kind of sucks because it’s not our fault and I don’t understand why they always just blame us if it’s a Muslim extremist. But there’s other things White people have done, but nobody goes up to White people and blames them for doing that, so it’s kind of sad and it sucks.

Due to the perception that extremism and terrorism were associated with Middle Easterners and Muslims, Navid (19) believed that other races were not held accountable or were labeled

differently when they committed similar acts of terror. Based on these responses, MEA students have been struggling with society's perception, reaction, and treatment of their ethnic identity due to the current political climate.

Stereotypes in the Media

This theme referred to the participants seeing negative depictions of their community in the news, movies, and social media and their reactions to it. Several participants described how the association of MEA with terrorism was exacerbated by the media's promotion of stereotypes and continued portrayals of the MEA culture as *"evil"* and *"thieves and villains"*. A few participants described how the news continuously played images of war and Muslim extremism in the Middle East, choosing to discount the beauty and history of the region that many of the participants grew up witnessing whenever they would visit it. An international student from Lebanon, Nadia (19), noted the discrepancy in the media's portrayal, *"Most often what the media shows in the U.S. is completely different then what happens and what we actually live like there."*

Other participants described how MEAs were often casted to play the roles of villains in movies. Mohammed (18), recalled going to the movies and seeing these stereotypes played out on screen and the negative impact it had on his younger brother, *"In Iron Man, the terrorists speak Egyptian Arabic. So, for my brother who's three years younger, when the movie first came out, it was a huge shock to him because he spoke the same language as the terrorists."* Mohammed described not knowing how to comfort his brother after seeing the depiction of their people as evil villains terrorizing the innocent main characters on screen. Sami (18) felt similarly, *"Movies like American Sniper just ruin it for us...just the fact that there's so many efforts to make us 'the other' instead of trying to unify us."* The participants

described the consequences of the media's portrayals and how, although, it may have just been a movie, the audience walked away with these negative images of MEAs. Sanaz (19) explained how the image of MEA as terrorists had led to other jokes in mainstream media. For instance, she described a joke she had heard recently about singer Zayn Malik, who was part Middle Eastern, and a former member of the band One Direction:

I heard a joke: 'you know, when Zayn left One Direction? I bet he just went to go join ISIS.' I know it's a joke but it just doesn't rub off well because ISIS is really bad and just because someone is from the Middle East doesn't mean they're associated with them.

Ali (19) described the consequences of these types of portrayals:

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

Ali referenced the Chapel Hill shooting, where three MEA Muslim college students were shot and killed over a parking dispute, however, many have argued that it was a hate crime. Ali highlighted how generalizations and negative portrayals of MEAs could bring about dire consequences, such as increasing hate crimes toward MEA and Muslim populations.

Social media including, Twitter and hashtags (#), were also mentioned as important platforms for delivering messages about discrimination out to the public. Minha (19) described how during the Chapel Hill shooting the hashtag #MuslimLivesMatter was started,

It really grinds my teeth when people don't see us as equal, when we are not important enough to make a political statement...I tracked it [#MuslimLivesMatter]

and it died so fast, the whole shooting, and the #BlackLivesMatter went on for at least two years and we lasted for two days.

Minha recalled how she noticed that the #MuslimLivesMatter hashtag was not trending on Twitter the way the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was trending. She was frustrated by how quickly people forgot about the Chapel Hill shooting and Muslim lives mattering. In contrast, Elina's (19) peers thought that the attention on the Chapel Hill shooting was becoming a "*big deal*." Elina expressed anger over this and shared her perspective with her peers that if a Muslim MEA man had shot and killed three innocent civilians in Chapel Hill, then society would be making it a much bigger deal.

In the end, many participants described how the media was an influential source in making and perpetuating stereotypes and that the continual categorization of MEA as "*others*" was detrimental to the MEA community because people "*never get to see who we really are*" (Zaina, 19). Zaina, like many of the participants, described feeling powerless in the face of Hollywood with no way of changing the role of MEA in these movies, unless she became a director herself. Additionally, as the political climate in much of the Middle East had remained unstable since September 11th and more recently, with the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS, many participants described never knowing what the media could present next. According to many of the participants, the media often chose to cover negative, violent, and threatening images and stories without the nuance and balance that they felt conveyed the authentic nature of the events, but rather casted MEA in a negative light, as noted in their experiences of discrimination. Thus, when the participants experienced discrimination, the blame was less on the perpetrators for being discriminatory, but more on the media for tarnishing the image of MEA. They described how the media had a choice in their depiction

of the Middle East, however, they felt that those who were discriminatory in person likely had a skewed understanding of the Middle East because they received their information from the media and had been influenced by what was delivered to them.

Community: Discrimination and Sense of Belonging

Outside of College Campuses and into the Community

Most of the participants described how they rarely experienced extreme acts of racism or hate crimes on their college campus. In fact, on campus, the participants primarily experienced generalizations and stereotypical remarks, which will be described further below. However, off campus and in the community, the participants mentioned incidents of discrimination that really surprised them by shedding light on people's perception of their community. Sami (18) who self-identified as ethnically Lebanese and religiously Christian, reported that while he was on a bus, he saw a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, walking on a popular, busy street in town. An older lady on the bus began making racist comments indicating that no one in "*her country*" should wear a hijab. Sami explained how he tried to educate and reason with her, but the lady stated that she didn't "*respect any country or ethnicity that violence, death, and oppression is preached.*" Sami described feeling defeated in helping this woman see the truth about the MEA community, "*It's like no matter how many people you educate, there's always going to be people that are so backwards in their way of thinking.*"

Firuzeh (19) who worked at a restaurant close to the university described how a police officer had come in and asked her questions about her race while he was ordering food, He asked me what my ethnicity was and I was like I'm Iranian and he's like "Oh my God, you don't want to go there right? You'll get your head cut off!" He literally said

that. I was like what are you saying?! He asked me if my parents came here legally...they've lived here longer than they ever lived in Iran.

Firuzeh's experience was different from Sami's where she did not feel comfortable enough to educate the officer about Iran or reason with him about his comments because he was in a position of power. Subsequently, she kept her feelings of shock, hurt, and anger bottled up. Both participants expressed feeling misunderstood by the members of the community, as well as defeated, knowing that they could not educate or influence certain people and that these people would continue to maintain their negative perceptions about MEAs.

Finally, the current political climate's perception of Muslim MEAs was found to be influential to how a Muslim participant felt in their community. Two of the participants who identified as Muslim described not wanting to write they were part of the Muslim Student Association (MSA) on their job application or, in the future, on their graduate school applications. The jobs were for both on-campus and off-campus positions. Shima (19) explained how she wondered how her status as Muslim in the community would impact her ability to get a job or get into a good school, *"I don't know what other people will think."* Zaina (19) described how she had worked hard to get a good leadership position within MSA, but had chosen to exclude this activity from her resume, *"Some people are very judgmental on the type of race or religion you are so sometimes I don't put that because I feel like they won't hire me."* They described being fearful that these positions would not accept them because of their Islamic beliefs and the negative stereotypes that came with being Muslim, so they opted to exclude this part of their identity for the sake of potential job security.

Institutional Discrimination

Institutional discrimination was in reference to the discrimination that the MEA participants experienced from their university, whether it was by university policies or interactions with professors. Many participants described a general sense of satisfaction with the campus climate and the university's treatment of ethnic minority groups. However, some participants repeatedly mentioned the lack of diversity on campus and their disappointment in not seeing many MEAs and how this contributed to them feeling like an outsider on campus. According to Nicole, the lack of MEAs on campus was so noticeable that she would become excited when she saw a MEA on campus, "*When someone tells me they are Middle Eastern I'm like oh my God, wow, I'm Middle Eastern too! I don't typically find a lot of Middle Easterners on campus.*" Due to the small MEA population on campus, a few participants reported that they were sometimes "*put on blast*" in their classes when a topic on the Middle East would come up and they were asked by the professor or teaching assistant to contribute to it. For example, Nicole (19) described,

Sometimes when she [the professor] would make reference to Arabic culture in reference to like art and architecture, she would look at me a little bit and I'm like I can't agree or disagree with you, I'm just trying to learn about these buildings, about porticos and stuff.

Nicole expressed feeling "*weird*" about being singled out to comment on things related to her race, especially when she was there to learn about it as well.

A few participants described a discrepancy in how different racial groups were being treated on campus. An example continuously brought forth in interviews was the university's dormitories being segregated by racial groups. According to the participants, the university purposefully did this in order to enhance a sense of community among ethnic minority

groups, however MEA students were grouped in the Caucasian dormitories and the participants found this unfair. Noora (18) asked her friend who was African American about how he felt living in the dormitories designated by racial groups. He had described how he was pleased with it because it helped him find a social network and community on campus. Noora recalled her conversation with her friend, *“I thought, nahh I don’t really agree with that because I mean you don’t have all the communities. Where is the Middle Easterners? There’s a lot of missing cultures that are not being placed in the dorms.”*

Although many participants viewed this as a constructive attempt on the university’s part to enhance a sense of community among otherwise marginalized minorities, they described how the exclusion of their racial group hindered MEAs from being able to form their own community within the institution. If they wanted that community, MEA students had to actively search for each other through attending cultural organizations or events. Minha (19) suggested an alternative for the university to consider that she thought would be beneficial for all groups,

I went to the other dorms and I saw them isolating them by their race-don’t do that to them, don’t give them that option...make sure you integrate them with other cultures and different people because when they meet different people, yeah, some people may not be nice, but the fact that they are meeting different people they will be able to make connections and learn about different cultures.

The New Discrimination in College: Cultural Ignorance

The words *“ignorant”* and *“ignorance”* were so consistently used to describe the dominant culture across the interviews that the term *“cultural ignorance”* emerged from the text to capture the participants’ perception of the discrimination they were experiencing.

Similar to stereotyping or making generalizations, the participants' described cultural ignorance as an individual's lack of knowledge about the Middle East, which could result in questions, or statements that could be perceived as offensive and/or prejudiced. When applied to the college setting, the participant described how their peers' remarks, however stereotypical or racist, held some level of ignorance to them, and thus, were not wholly discriminatory. Several participants pointed to the current political climate, the use of the news and media as the sole source of learning about the Middle East, and the U.S.'s lack of education in schools about the Middle East, as contributing factors to this ignorance.

Many participants provided examples of cultural ignorance to assist in clarifying the definition of it: questions about a participant's interest in belly dancing, what types of food MEAs eat, how strict their families were, and their opinions on the current political climate in the Middle East and ISIS. Nadia (19) described how she came across cultural ignorance on her first day of school when her peers asked her if she rode a donkey when she lived in Lebanon. Many of the participants brought up speaking Arabic, Hebrew, or Farsi in their dorms and having their peers mimic them or ask them questions about it. Mohammed (18) described feeling misunderstood and angry about his peers' reaction when he was speaking Arabic on the phone in the dormitories, *"A lot of kids were kind of weirded out. Some of them came and asked, "Is that a language?" I was like okay, I assumed that if I'm talking on the phone, it would be a language [sarcastically stated]."* Ali (19) described how his peers would find out he was Arabic and ask him why he did not have a full-grown beard like the Arabs did on the news. Shima (19) explained how people assumed that all MEAs were Muslims and how her non-MEA peers were ignorant of the religious diversity within the Middle East region.

A majority of the participants explained that the reason behind conceptualizing these comments or stereotypes as ignorant was because it lessened the impact of these remarks for them. Instead of these remarks being experienced as negative and intentional, they were seen as uneducated and uncultured, and thus, were not as hurtful as they could have been. For example, Kimia (19) said,

Honestly, I think of it as more of an ignorant thing, people who say that even if it's as a joke, they don't consider it a big thing so I just think they're just ignorant when they say it and they don't mean it in a bad way.

Navid (19) added that the discrimination that he had experienced on campus had been primarily based on "*ignorance to certain cultures*" and could be combated with education in order to clear certain misconceptions and generalizations about his race. Tariq (18) explained that the concept of cultural ignorance could have a "*best-case*" scenario and a "*worst-case*" scenario. He described how when people asked him about his opinion on ISIS, in the best-case scenario option, people believed him to be an informed person on the subject and were genuinely interested in his opinion. However, in the worst-case scenario, people assumed that he was sympathetic to ISIS or somehow involved with them. He reported only experiencing the best-case scenario while he had been in college, but he also shared that he was aware of how quickly ignorance could escalate into negative stereotypes and lead to "*people laying the blame on the local Middle Eastern student instead of ISIS*" and thus, he was attentive of cultural ignorance's potentially harmful impact.

A few participants also mentioned examples of their peers being culturally ignorant by stereotyping them as model or successful minorities. For example, Tariq (18) explained how one of his peers thought he was rich because of the stereotype of Arabs having money

because of their access to oil. Jasmine (18) described that stereotype was similar for Iranians too, *“People think that I have it easy and I’m so rich because I’m Persian.”* On the contrary, some participants described how they applied to scholarships or loans in order to afford their tuition and the stereotype of being rich was frustrating and invalidating because it undermined their independence and hard work to achieve their current goals. Many participants were asked if they were studying to be a doctor or lawyer because those were stereotypically MEA occupations. For the participants that had chosen majors outside of those career paths, they described an additional pressure from both their peers and their family to succeed in their untraditional route and prove they were just as intelligent. Kimia (19) described how when she performed poorly one academic quarter, her friends were surprised due to their assumption that MEAs were supposed to be smart and always get high scores on exams. Many of the participants expressed finding humor in these culturally ignorant remarks, but also felt pressured to get good grades or major in specific fields because of others’ perception of their ethnicity as a successful minority. This, in turn, negatively impacted their self-esteem when they performed poorly in areas that they were stereotypically supposed to succeed in.

Discrimination Based on Physical Appearance

The participants who perceived themselves with a lighter skin tone or feeling racially ambiguous and being able to pass for other ethnicities described a hierarchy of discrimination based on physical appearance. In particular, they noted that they were not discriminated against as often as their MEA peers due to their lighter skin color. Navid (19) explained how he hadn’t experienced much discrimination throughout his life when comparing himself to his MEA peers because *“most people think I’m white.”* Navid also noticed that whenever he

and his family were in airports, they were not stopped or searched randomly by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and he attributed it to their lighter skin color. Bahar (18) spoke similarly of her experiences of being a lighter skinned MEA. She explained how she hadn't experienced many of the microaggressions on Racial Ethnic Microaggressions (REMS) scale that had been administered prior to the interview and attributed it to not looking "*super Middle Eastern.*" Kimia (19) described how her roommate who was also MEA had reportedly experienced discrimination more than Kimia had because she had a darker skin tone. These participants described passing for different ethnicities, including Indian, Latino/a, or European.

A majority of the participants described how based on certain physical attributes MEAs were easily identifiable. Shima (19) said,

If I was wearing a headscarf, people would probably stare at me more because it's different. I guess the fact that I just look like a lot of other people is helpful in the sense that people don't really mind me... There are different levels because some people look more Middle Eastern and then some people look less so it's easier for them to blend well.

For Shima, she was able to practice Islam without being discriminated against as much as her Muslim peers that wore a hijab or other religious symbols.

Noora (18) explained how when she was filling out the REMS scale, she kept imagining an African American person filling it out and how they would most likely have experienced many of the microaggressions because of their skin color. She explained how important skin color could be in discrimination and MEAs had such varying experiences because they were "*white, dark skinned, we are everything.*" Talia (19) stated that on the

inside she felt very Israeli, but on the outside she looked White and, subsequently, was treated that way by others and hadn't experienced as much discrimination as her other ethnic minority friends.

Elina (19) described how her lighter skin tone was seen as a positive attribute when she was considering joining a sorority on campus. Initially, she was not interested in joining one, but her peers in her dormitory encouraged her and one of them, who happened to also be a lighter skinned ethnic minority, told her that she was “*white enough to get into one of the sororities.*” She described laughing, thinking that the comment was a joke, but found that the other girls in her dormitory also agreed that she would easily be accepted because of her lighter skin. Prior to college, Elina described being part of a large MEA community and never noticing her skin color, but since college, she had become more aware of her ability to racially blend in with her White peers. Ultimately, a majority of the self-described lighter skin complexioned participants named physical appearance as a significant factor in whether or not they experienced discrimination.

Searching for “someone just like me” on Campus

The participants' sense of belonging on campus was varied, tied to their expectations of college and the reality of what they were met with when they began school. The participants' experienced different degrees of belonging, including those that found their universities to be diverse and supportive, while others described predominately White campuses, lacking a MEA community, and acknowledgement of MEA culture.

The participants that struggled with their sense of belonging on campus identified the lack of MEAs on campus as one of the primary reasons they had a difficult time feeling apart of the campus community. An example that highlighted this was when Sanaz (19) described

her experiences of the Iranian New Year (Norooz) that took place during finals week of winter quarter. Before arriving to this university, Sanaz had visited her sister's university during Norooz and described feeling like she "*belonged*" on campus even though she was not a student there. She attributed it to the university's large Iranian student population and its celebration of the culture and heritage during Norooz. When she arrived to this university, she thought she would have a similar experience as her sister did on her campus, however, when Norooz happened there was limited acknowledgment of it on campus. Sanaz believed that it was due to having a small Iranian population on campus. For Sanaz, a lack of Iranians meant less people to celebrate Norooz with and bring awareness to it so that it would be recognized university-wide. She described how the lack of MEA on campus had resulted in her feelings of detachment and loneliness from the university, and shared, "*I definitely shed a few tears during the Persian New Year because I was all by myself.*"

Other participants echoed Sanaz's concerns that the lack of MEA representation on campus was impacting their sense of belonging. Tariq (18) explained how discrimination occurred on campus when his peers were unaware and uneducated about his culture and made assumptions. He described how holding large-scale cultural events could educate the masses. Tariq had noticed how ethnic minority groups on campus, like Latino/as, held informative and organized events with the goal of educating the student population on their culture. He primarily attributed their success to the larger percentage of them on campus than MEAs. With more helping hands, the Latino/a students were able to hold these educational events, however, the lack of MEAs on campus resulted in the student population's lack of knowledge about the MEA culture. According to Tariq, this lack of knowledge was a catalyst for discrimination and led to MEAs feeling like outsiders after experiencing discrimination.

In addition to the need for more MEA students on campus, participants described how their sense of belonging was tied to the campus racial climate and the student populations' awareness of racial issues. The participants' previous experience with discrimination prior to beginning college was found to be influential on their current feelings about their university. For example, some participants who had experienced more discrimination in their pre-college years described noticing a difference in their peers from high school to college. They found that college students were "*more mature*" in regards to discrimination and other race-related issues. However, other participants who had experienced discrimination on campus since they arrived felt differently. Ali (19) described how he didn't think he would experience it when entering such a prestigious university, "*I thought I am coming to a really great school, people are educated here, they're really smart and they know right from wrong. I assumed and I was just a little naïve.*" Due to these experiences, Ali turned to his MEA peers for support and solace. In fact, several of the participants that had experienced discrimination in college described seeking out a MEA community in order to find "*someone just like me*" to assist with feeling like an outsider on campus after experiencing discrimination. However, due to the limited number of MEAs on campus this proved to be difficult, unless they were willing to join a cultural organization. Thus, a cyclic pattern of belonging emerged as the small number of MEAs resulted in limited representation on campus and limited educational events on the MEA community. This played a role in many of the participants' feeling like an outsider and these feelings were exacerbated if they were discriminated against. When they were discriminated, they would often turn to other MEA peers for support, however due to the limited number of MEA students on campus, they may be left with a continued sense of isolation and a challenged sense of belonging on campus.

Finding “a whole new world” Among Cultural Organizations

A majority of the participants mentioned student-run cultural/religious organizations and clubs within the university that they found critical in helping them feel apart of the campus. Of the 25 participants, 19 participants had attended a cultural or religious organization meeting or were an active member of a cultural group on campus. Several participants reported joining cultural groups in order to belong to a community on campus that embraced their ethnic background. For Bahar (18), who came from a state that did not have many Iranians, she was hesitant about joining the Persian Student Group on campus because she was not sure what it would be like and how she would fit in. Instead, she found her experience to be positive after joining the group,

I’m actually making really good friends- like those girls in the Persian dance- now we are all really close friends and there is a certain understanding that I never felt with anyone else before because I never really had that Persian connection, especially when you talk about your family like, “Your mom does that? Because my mom does that”(laughter). It’s just really funny.

When Bahar (18) mentioned being apart of a Persian dance with other Iranian girls, she was referring to a student-led Iranian culture show. Many Iranian students on campus had gathered together for a small, annual celebration of their culture by playing musical instruments, singing Persian songs, reading Hafez poetry, or dancing. Bahar’s shared experiences with her same-ethnicity peers helped her feel like she was apart of a community and had increased her sense of belonging on campus. She explained further, *“It’s like a whole new world I have now-it’s like really cool to be a part of.”*

Even though the university had a fair amount of MEA related organizations, a few participants expressed a desire to see an increase in the quantity and quality of the organizations that were available for students to join. For example, there was only one Persian Student Group and one Arab Student Group on campus, while other racial groups had a number of clubs related to their ethnicity. A few participants found that their options were limited, especially if they did not feel welcomed in the organization or did not connect with other members that were already in the group. When this was the case, they were left with no other cultural groups to join.

Shima (19) described how the limited number of clubs on campus had led her to feel like an “outsider” especially when her friends mentioned the number of culturally related organizations they were apart of, *“I think it’s those times that I feel it [being an outsider] the most and I’m just like, I wish I had something like that.”* For some participants having even one MEA organization on campus was satisfactory, but for others, like Shima, it highlighted the lack of representation on campus. Shima (19) described how her Latino/a friends had not only cultural and religious groups, but also groups related to their ethnicity and professional trajectories. These other organizations helped enhance not only the Latino/a students’ sense of belonging culturally, but also academically, as they connected Latino/a students to career opportunities.

Ultimately, although organizations related to MEAs were limited, many participants continued to seek them in order to build some sense of community. The participants that were involved with the cultural organizations built their community by being involved in other Middle Eastern groups and forming friendships across them. Lily explained, *“It’s really like a solid Middle Eastern group we have going on and everything’s familiar you*

know, the lines between Iran and Lebanon and Syria are all kind of blurred when we all come together for certain events.” For example, the Arab Student Group assisted the Persian Student Group in their culture show by promoting it and helping backstage the day of the event. These intergroup alliances may not have been formed if there were a larger number of cultural organizations on campus for the MEA students to choose from.

On the whole, many participants described cultural organizations as important for a number of reasons, including building a sense of community to help them feel like they belong on campus, as well as serving as a platform to host events that could educate their peers about the MEA culture and ethnicity.

University Resources that Enhance a Sense of Belonging

When same-ethnicity peers were difficult to find on campus, participants described turning to resources and services that the university provided in order to enhance their sense of belonging. The participants mentioned the following resources that the university offered as helpful in strengthening their connection to their campus: a room in the Student Resource Building for MEAs, a quarterly Middle Eastern Ensemble where music and dance from the Middle East was performed, university sponsored events, a Middle East Studies major, understanding professors, and counseling services.

The participants described the MEA room on campus as a place used for studying, meetings, and socializing. Nusha (19) explained that just knowing there was a room for MEAs on campus was comforting to her because it meant that the university was acknowledging her community. Lily (20) provided additional comments about the room, *“It’s just nice to go into that room and see all the different calligraphy and art that is associated with the Middle East and having other people who aren’t Middle Easterners walk*

in.” Lily felt like she was sharing a part of her culture with other students who were not MEA when they would come into the room to see the Middle Eastern influenced art and different cultural displays. She found the room useful as not only a place for her community to gather, but also a way to educate others about her culture. Several participants attended cultural organization meetings there on a weekly basis, while others had not been there before, but had heard of it and appreciated having a room designated for the MEA community on campus.

When the participants were asked about cultural events that they could attend on campus, the Middle Eastern Ensemble was one that was mentioned frequently. The Middle Eastern Ensemble was run by university professors and community members and occurred three times a year to showcase Middle Eastern culture, music, dance, and poetry with the goal of exposing the larger community to the culture of this region. In addition to the Middle Eastern Ensemble, the participants also mentioned a university sponsored comedy show where a MEA comedian held a sold out show. Bahar (18) described how the audience was a mixture of MEA and White people and the jokes were primarily related to being a MEA. She described how the experience of having a MEA comedian perform at her university was both “*amazing*” and “*awesome*.” Even a participant who had missed the show described how this comedian had been known for educating people through his jokes and ultimately had “*a large effect on a lot of people*” by breaking stereotypes in a non-threatening way in today’s society.

In terms of academics, participants mentioned taking classes through the Middle East Studies department, even if it was a class that was not needed for their major, because they found it “*interesting*.” A majority of the participants had taken a course through this

department to learn more about their culture. Additionally, the MEA professors that taught these courses served as mentors and advisors for the MEA cultural organizations. A few participants described the positive influence that this department had on their sense of belonging, as it provided them with knowledge about their culture, professors as role models, and introduced them to other MEA peers who were taking the same classes. Additionally, non-MEA professors played an important role in helping the participants' sense of belonging. Minha (19) described how an empathic and understanding professor served as a role model for her. Minha's history professor started the class by saying how he was personally responsible for the Pearl Harbor attacks when he was 10 months old. Growing up in a post-September 11th world, Minha described identifying with this professor's experience and found comfort in the professor's self-disclosure and perspective in being an ethnic minority in the U.S. and experiencing discrimination.

Finally, a few participants spoke about how the counseling center was an important resource on campus, but how they did not use it when they had experienced discrimination. They oftentimes used it due to academic stress or other personal reasons. Sanaz (19) described how it was difficult for her to seek counseling after experiencing discrimination because not many people could understand her culture and the current political climate's impact on her ethnic identity. Sami (18) expressed a desire for a MEA psychologist working at the university counseling center, *"The last thing you want is to go to a counselor that doesn't know the Middle East and you're educating the counselor."* Other participants also explicitly mentioned the significance of having a MEA psychologist on staff to understand and validate their experiences related to race and culture.

Although many of the participants' expressed satisfaction for the university resources that were offered to them, they also had recommendations and ideas of their own for the university to hopefully expand on. See Appendix I for the participants' descriptive responses to when they were directly asked what services their university could provide for MEA students, particularly after experiencing discrimination.

Relationships and Self: Peers, Family, and Coping

Peers: A Double-Edged Sword

Interpersonal relationships and discrimination. A majority of the participants described how the perpetrators of discrimination were often friends or an acquaintance within their social circles. Some participants described how their friends were usually the ones making culturally ignorant statements, but they interpreted their friends' comments as jokes. Zaina (19) described,

My friends always make jokes, like really racist jokes. I know they're just joking but they always do it. My two guy friends will make these jokes, like "Oh we better watch out for you guys [Middle Easterners], you're going to come do something to us. Kimia (20) described how she and her ethnic minority peers often joked about each other's races because "*we're so comfortable with each other.*" However, if a White peer was to make similar jokes, she said it would be perceived as racist. She explained how she and her ethnic minority peers were on "*equal levels because we're both ethnic of different kinds*" and have shared experiences, however, a White student could not identify with these experiences and thus, their comments would be offensive.

Occasionally, there were times when the participants found their friends' actions, jokes, or comments to be insensitive and offensive. Nicole (19) described socializing with a

group of her friends after an architecture class and when the conversation steered toward Middle Eastern architecture, Nicole felt that her friends dismissed and ignored her comments because she was MEA and claimed that she would be biased. Nicole was disappointed by this and explained why, *“I was born in America and raised here and I feel like my opinion was devalued.”* Nicole expressed how because she was MEA, people only saw her as that and overlooked her American identity and her capability to have multiple opinions on a single topic. Shima (19) recalled that after the Charlie Hebdo shooting in France, her friends made comments like *“there are a lot of crazy Muslim terrorists”* which Shima found to be offensive. She described sitting in-between two of her friends, one who was arguing that a majority of Muslims were terrorists and the other who was arguing against it. She explained that these types of debates were common considering the current political climate, however, it was still hurtful to witness such comments made about her identity, especially when she felt she was proof that not all Muslims were “crazy terrorists.”

Despite peers being the perpetrators of discrimination, they also were found to be the system of support for the participants who had experienced discrimination. A majority of the participants described seeking the support of both same-ethnicity and different ethnicity peers after experiencing discrimination. Ali (19) described how he felt comfortable talking about his discrimination experiences with his friends of all ethnicities. With his peers from different ethnic groups, Ali said that he was *“really open and I just tell them exactly what I have experienced.”* However, Ali did express finding more support and understanding from his same-ethnicity peers. Consistently, friends were identified as a critical source of support for the participants because they were usually the first available after they experienced

discrimination (i.e., living in the dorms) and/or participants felt truly understood by their peers.

Within group discrimination. In addition to participants experiencing interpersonal discrimination, there was a consistent theme of within group discrimination. This meant that discrimination was occurring within the Middle Eastern community. Specifically, a topic that emerged repeatedly in the interviews was the Israel and Palestine conflict in the Middle East. Despite many of the participants growing up in the U.S., this conflict was still close to home and influenced their ethnic identity, social interactions, and participation in cultural activities. Nicole (19), who was of Palestinian-descent, described how when she would mention her ethnicity, other MEAs would ask her about the conflict in both sensitive and insensitive ways, and even at times informed her that Palestine did not exist. In order to avoid these conversations, she decided to no longer mention her ethnicity unless directly asked about it,

Unless somebody asks me what I am I don't necessarily put it out there. I'm not like just going around like "I'm Palestinian, I'm Palestinian" because I don't want to deal with the remarks and I don't want people to push stuff on me.

Similarly, Talia (19), who was Israeli, described her experiences the same way as Nicole,

It's [being Israeli] not the first thing I say about myself in most situations. Because of the climate I never know who I'm talking to when I'm meeting new people. I wouldn't want it to get in the way of a potential friendship or somebody thinking a certain thing as soon as we met.

These participants described feeling "*anxious*," "*awful*," and "*scared*" by other people's reactions toward them when they mentioned their ethnicity, which is why they no longer revealed it unless directly asked.

Erin (18) who self-identified as White and Israeli, explained how her grandmother was Arab Muslim, but had converted to Judaism when she married her grandfather. Erin described identifying as both Israeli and Arab and when she entered college, she had a strong desire to explore her multicultural background, however, she was worried about joining an Arab cultural organization on campus because of her Israeli roots. She described contacting the president of the Arab Student Group on campus, *“I actually changed my name to my first and middle name so she [president of the Arab Student Group] wouldn't see my last name was Jewish.”* Erin explained that she decided to do this when she noticed her Arab peers reacted to her differently once they found out she was Israeli. She would feel them *“close down”* and give her a certain *“look”* and this made her feel judged. She described how the looks that she received from her Arab peers were a form of discrimination for her,

I feel like once they know I am Israeli, even if we've talked about our Arab culture and ancestry, I feel like all of that was erased in a second...I wasn't expecting that at a college setting and even though it wasn't completely slurs, just that face is so different for me.

Adam (19), who was also Israeli and worked at the Middle Eastern Resource Center on campus, reported that he often felt the *“anti-Israeli, free-Palestine vibe”* when the Arab organizations would meet in the center. He explained how it was difficult for him to work in the center because a cultural organization called Students for Justice in Palestine would also meet there. In order to avoid conflict, Adam described not disclosing that he was Israeli and when he was asked about his ethnicity, he would tell people that he was Middle Eastern. He explained, *“I don't want to quarrel with them over something that is thousands of miles away from us. Why bring it here?”* Erin also echoed Adam's sentiment,

To be honest, it's hard for me to take a side and really form a solution because we are college students. I mean it's great that we have opinions, but what do we know? We are not in the countries, we are not involved, we don't know everything, we know what the media gives us.

Nicole (19) had learned to avoid the conversation about the conflict in the Middle East completely,

With Israel or Palestine, every time I'm with someone who wants to talk about that, I just don't talk about it and will be like, you know you're valid to your beliefs, but let's move on to a different conversation because it can get so heated and sometimes even scary.

MEA participants that were not Israeli or Palestinian mentioned this within group discrimination as well and felt the impact of it on campus. A few participants described how their non-MEA peers asked for their opinion about the Israel-Palestinian conflict, but at the same time would dismiss their opinions because they assumed that all MEA were pro-Palestine. Sami, (18) who identified as Lebanese, argued, *"When you speak about the Palestine-Israel conflict people always assume that I'm against the Jews when really I'm not because I see it both ways."* Sami described that his most significant memory of discrimination on campus was within group discrimination. He had been reading a Palestinian wall that Students for Justice in Palestine had created to resemble the wall in Palestine when a group of students approached him and made derogatory comments, saying things like, *"You Arabs are all terrorists and you all want Israel to be demolished."* Sami was taken aback and felt shocked that these comments were being made toward him when he was just a passerby reading the wall. Erin wished for a resolution of these conflicts, wanting

a club on campus that would represent all Middle Eastern cultures, as opposed to separate Arab, Iranian, and Israeli clubs. She explained,

A lot of the culture really intertwines with food and music and even languages are intertwined. I feel like sometimes that gets lost and people forget about their connections and maybe that's why a lot of separation and discrimination happens on campus.

Family's Influence and Support

Despite being many miles away from home, the participants' family continued to play a critical role in their identity development and understanding of discrimination. Some participants recalled how parents often encouraged them to embrace their American identity and to assimilate to the mainstream culture. For example, Bahar (18) recalled,

My mom was always like, when I was filling out college applications, it only says Hispanic, Asian, Native American, it doesn't even say Middle Eastern anywhere and then I was like I'm going to do 'Other' and I'm going to put Persian which is what I always do. Then my mom was like 'Just circle White because we are Caucasian' ... Why are you [directed to her mother] always saying to call ourselves Caucasian and White when we're not and there's no crime in saying we're Persian.

It's more specific anyway and that's what we identify with.

Sami (18) expressed similar views about his parents and the messages they have been communicating to him about race, *"My parents always told me don't be that Arabic at school, don't get involved, just always have your opinions to yourself because they're afraid that people are going to beat me up or discriminate or something like that."* Consistently, many of the families encouraged the participants' to embrace the Caucasian label or American

identity, not only for assimilation purposes, but also because of their awareness of society's stereotypes and their concerns for their child being a target of these stereotypes. Bahar described,

I remember when the Boston Bombings happened. They didn't know who it was yet and my mom was like oh, kind of in a joking but serious way, she was like I hope they're not Persian, you know like pray, and I was just thinking what if they were, what would that mean for me?

Bahar witnessing her mother's preoccupations with the identity of a terrorist during the Boston Marathon terrorist attack⁶ led Bahar question her own ethnic identity and what it meant for her future. Similarly, Tariq (18) described,

It's a joke my mom makes every time something bad happens, like no way it better not be one of us this time again. At this point I mean it doesn't even matter because in the Boston bombings the guys were Chechen, but I mean to this day I can still get jokes about it. I have friends that kept making jokes about it even though it was a joke, but it just shows to you they didn't even know that the people weren't Arab, they were making jokes about them being Arab terrorists and they're not, they're Chechen terrorists, but they are terrorists, that's the only thing that matters.

Tariq's mother also made comments about the terrorist's identity, but Tariq took it further understanding that whether or not the terrorist were MEA, his identity would still be blamed. His mother's joking was a salient message indicating that when things go badly in the world, MEA were often the first to be targeted.

⁶ On April 15, 2013, two brothers of Chechen origin bombed the Boston Marathon, killing three people and injuring 264 (CNN, 2016c).

A few participants also described how their parents' messages about race and the current racial climate influenced their future career options. For example, Minha (19), described how her brother had always wanted to work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), but their mother discouraged him because his name was very Arabic. Minha believed this was because her mother continued to feel the influence of a post-September 11th climate,

My mom is so terrified these things are going to hold us back and I'm like mom that's not true, that was over a decade ago things have changed, and she's like yes but people's mentality haven't, a lot of people still think like that.

Additionally, family members not only communicated messages of race and belonging, but they also provided support to the participants who had experienced discrimination. Many participants reflected on how their family members had struggled with discrimination as well, and how it was difficult for them to witness their parents go through such experiences. Nusha (19) described how her father dealt with discrimination,

My parents, my Dad especially, I can't say on a daily basis he faces discrimination, but it definitely exists...But he just takes it in slightly...like a lot of times people don't really intend to be racist so instead of just being angry at them, educating them.

Nusha's father modeled for her how to respond to discrimination. She described how he had taught her that not all remarks were racist, but some were based in cultural ignorance and education was an effective way to respond to it.

The participants' family also helped tether the participant to their identity, especially during a traumatic experience like discrimination. Kimia (19) described how she turned to her mother for support during distressing times because "*she always makes sure our culture stays alive.*" Erin (18) reported that she could rely on her brother when she experienced

discrimination, “*He’s probably not as immersed in our culture as I am but he sticks by it and I feel like he would understand more and help me more.*” However there were other participants, that described not speaking to their family members about discrimination, especially their parents, because they did not want to stress their parents out or felt that their parents wouldn't be able to empathize with their emotional reaction. Minha (19) described, “*I never told my mom my problems and even if I did, she only believes in physical problems, she doesn't believe in mental illnesses, they say make some tea, so you can't tell them.*” Minha described “*make some tea*” as a MEA response to curing mental illness by drinking tea and feeling better, thus, conveying her point that her family would not take her sadness over discrimination seriously if she were to tell them about it.

Coping: Risk and Protection in the Context of Racial Discrimination

Coping was categorized under the socio-ecological level of “relationships and self” because the participants endorsed using both external and internal sources of support in the face of racial discrimination. The role of social support was previously discussed under the sections on *cultural organizations, peers, and family*, as they were the primary systems that were relied upon after experiencing discrimination. In addition to social support, the participants described a series of coping strategies that they used in the face of discrimination from their social support, peers, or other community members.

Representing the Middle East. As a result of a limited number of MEA on campus, a majority (N = 18) of the participants described being an “*educator*” or “*representative*” of the Middle East for their group of friends. When incidents of cultural ignorance would occur, they would turn to educating and increasing their peers’ knowledge as an antidote to potentially harmful negative assumptions and generalizations about the MEA community.

Ali (19) explained how his goal was to *“improve upon the education of people around me so they know more about it, instead of just hearing about it in the media.”* He illustrated how when he used himself as a tool for education people were more likely to respond and listen,

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

Ali explained how both educating people and using himself as a representative had been helpful in giving his peers a positive example of a MEA as opposed to the ones that they had seen in the media. Tariq (18) found that when he helped one person *“break their stereotypes”* of MEA, it was enough to make impactful change. He also used himself as an example when educating others, *“When someone is making statements like ‘all Arabs are stupid’ then you show them someone who isn't.”*

Many of the participants that chose to cope through educating and breaking stereotypes, expressed pride for their ethnic identity and were comfortable speaking about issues related to race. Nusha (19) explained how her underlying motivation to educate others was because she was *“proud”* of her culture and had a desire to show her peers the positive aspects of it. Kimia (19) also shared pieces of her culture with her peers and explained why, *“If you're not confident about your own ethnicity, you're going to give people a reason to not be confident about your culture either.”*

Getting used to it. Another form of coping that was identified by many of the participants was *“getting used to”* to the discrimination. This concept was based on the participant's own words when describing their response to discrimination and was mentioned frequently by several of the participants. Coping by getting used to the discrimination meant

a number of things. First, for some participants it meant that it was just the MEA time in history to be targeted, as has historically been the case for other ethnic minority groups in the U.S., including African Americans and Irish immigrants. Kimia (19) expanded on this,

I think the best thing to do is to just own it because we're in a time where all this turmoil in the Middle East is going on, but it hasn't always been that way. There was a time when groups of people would be criticized heavily, like I remember there was something with the Irish where they were criticized and discriminated against heavily so there will always be a time when people focus in on a group and they'll attack the group.

Ali (19) explained further, *"It's a crazy time to grow up in...I always remember that other groups have gone through this as well with different types of things throughout history."*

These participants may have coped with the discrimination by looking to the past for perspective to remind themselves that difficult times like these have evolved historically into less intense periods.

All of the participants grew up in a post-September 11th world where discrimination toward MEA increased rapidly. Thus, for many of them these discrimination experiences, such as stereotypes and generalizations, had been ongoing for years. Nadia (19) described how she no longer took offense to the discrimination, *"I'm used to it. People talk so much about it and we hear so much stuff on the news."* Shima (19) explained that over time she became used to it, *"You learn to get used to it so that you don't have to argue or always be the one fighting with people about it."* For Shima, she had found that educating her peers about the MEA culture was a viable option, but not always well received and would sometimes lead to arguing so she opted for getting used to it and not saying anything at all. A

few participants described being so used to the ignorant remarks that they found humor in them and joked alongside those that commented. Minha (19) recalled how people would tell her that Osama bin Laden was her uncle and she would respond to them sarcastically by saying, *“You’re very funny, did you think of that on your own?”* She explained that she had gotten to the point where she had heard these comments so many times that she had learned to be sarcastic and *“tune them out.”*

The process of getting used to the discrimination appeared to be gradual for the participants throughout the interviews. Erin (18) explained further,

I got a lot of terrorist jokes and in the beginning it started to bother me, but in the end it didn't. When I look back I don't know if I was exactly comfortable or if I just got used to it.

Bahar (18) also echoed the gradual process, *“I’m definitely less sensitive to it...it hurt me so deeply before because it was something that was so new.”* Based on some of the participants’ responses, getting used to discrimination appeared to be a gradual process where over time they could begin to bear the pain of the comments.

Upon further exploration of this form of coping, participants endorsed problems that emerged as a result of it. Despite this approach to coping, many of the participants still described feelings of *“sadness,” “irritation,”* and *“frustration”* when experiencing discrimination. This form of coping did not appear to protect them from feeling the discrimination emotionally, but rather from responding to it leading to potentially more negative interactions. Although Shima used this form of coping, she also noted that it could be potentially problematic and harmful for her community. She explained how many MEA have learned to ignore discrimination in order to cope, but this has resulted in discrimination

becoming an *“ignored problem.”* Many MEA may have chosen to ignore the discrimination or get used to it in order to not draw any additional attention to their racial group, or as, many participants explained, in fear of the backlash they may receive if they did draw attention to it. According to Shima, this led the MEA community to not notice, be aware of, or consider what they experienced as discrimination because they had been preoccupied with actively ignoring it.

Avoidance due to fear of backlash. Fear of backlash was such a consistent theme in the interviews that it was coded on its own. A majority of the participants expressed fear of retaliation, isolation, and rejection for being Muslim, for discussing the conflict in the Middle East, or for being vocal about discrimination. Nicole (19), who identified as Palestinian, explained how her decision to not be vocal *“about race or politically controversial comments”* had made her life easier and had helped her avoid conflict at school. When Nicole attended a university-sponsored discussion on the Charlie Hebdo shootings, her friend made a racist remark about MEAs and this led Nicole to respond to her friend in an attempt to educate her. However, afterward she described regretting attending the event because it made her vulnerable to discrimination. Thus, she felt that by avoiding these events, along with conversations about race and politics, it would reduce the likelihood of being discriminated against. Nicole explained how this research study and academia were in a *“bubble”* where the concept of discrimination could be studied and talked about thoroughly and safely without any backlash because it was protected by science. However outside of academia, Nicole felt that any time race-related issues were brought forth, there was a chance that someone would get offended or hurt and it was best to avoid it completely. She explained further,

If you say things you'll get backlash. Racism is wrong, sexism is wrong, all the violence is horrible but it is that way. It is the society we live in and I'm not trying to fight it. I'm trying to live my life.

Working toward being a model minority. Finally, a few participants described how being considered a model minority was a form of coping for them. In the face of the current political climate, wars in the Middle East, and the ISIS killings, participants described how MEA were still often seen as successful people in the community and stereotyped as model minorities. These participants described that the image of MEA being successful in the U.S. helped them keep going and work harder in the face of discrimination experiences. Noora (18) described how she wanted to live up to this stereotype of being MEA because *“they are really, really smart and get involved in the medical field or they're just really smart so I would like to live up to that.”* These messages about being MEA, whether told to them by their family or by their perception of society, served as a source of inspiration for these college students. However, simultaneously, the messages could also put unnecessary pressure on some of the participants that did not choose to go toward the stereotypical careers or did not have the freedom and support to pursue other paths. For those participants, this form of coping was not beneficial, but for some of the participants that were becoming doctors or lawyers, they expressed pride in this model minority perception and found it helpful for them.

In addition to these forms of coping, the participants were asked if they had coping advice for other MEA student who had experienced discrimination. See Appendix J for the participants' personal responses.

Individual: College Adjustment

Social Adjustment

The participants described social adjustment to college as composed of finding a supportive social network, forming new friendships, and being involved in different campus organizations. After experiencing discrimination, the participants described the impact that it had on them during their first or second year of college while they were still adjusting to being at a university. For many of the participants, after experiencing discrimination they began to seek out additional social networks such as cultural or religious organizations. Shima (19) described that after experiencing discrimination it made her want to hang out with other Iranians because she found “*strength in numbers.*” Sami (18) explained how once he joined cultural organizations he felt much more socially at ease and was able to be himself,

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

For others, the discrimination was not seen as influential enough to change their social networks and they maintained their friendships choosing to use different coping strategies to combat the cultural ignorance. Navid (19) described how his friends were primarily White and even though he experienced cultural ignorance, he did not mind it. The reason he joined Persian Student Group on campus was because he became “*homesick*” and “*to get more Middle Eastern friends.*” Due to the lack of MEA at the university, participants primarily had a diverse group of friends. If they wanted to find other MEA, they had to seek them out through cultural/religious organizations or events. Only one participant arrived to

the university with an Iranian roommate, but she had pre-arranged it through finding each other on Facebook. All the other participants had roommates of different racial groups, and subsequently, were limited in their daily social interactions with other MEAs unless they actively searched for it.

Noora (18) described how she noticed that often people in her dormitory paired up with other people from their racial group to socialize with. She found that she would sometimes be excluded or isolated because she did not share the same ethnicity or language as her peers in her dormitory. Noora (18) expressed her desire for having someone MEA in her dormitory, especially when she experienced cultural ignorance, *“If there was other Middle Easterners that I could relate to on some things then I would think it would be different. I would talk them more because they understand.”* Noora went from living at home with her parents and siblings, sharing the same culture and values, to moving into a dormitory at a large public university, sharing a room with people from different backgrounds. This sudden change had caused her to feel uncomfortable in her dormitory and not having someone of her own racial group had made the transition even more challenging. Despite this, Noora had made a diverse group of friends, but also attended cultural organization meetings in search of a MEA community.

Many participants described experiencing discrimination before entering college. These participants entered college aware of the friendships that they did not want to form. For example, Shima (19) who had experienced discrimination in the past entered college thinking, *“It just makes me keep wanting to look for people that aren’t like that. I just have avoided kinds of people that are going to be completely ignorant about who I identify with being.”*

A majority of the participants described forming friendships in college that they deemed supportive and helpful. They explained that they were open to talking about their discrimination experiences with their peers of all ethnicities. Melody described how her peers here were *“really open-minded.”* Although this was not the case for all the participants, many of them stated that no matter the ethnicity, they received support from their friends and felt acclimated to the university.

Academic Adjustment

The participants identified academic adjustment as related to their motivation to succeed academically and pursue their career goals. Participants described that being strong in academics meant that they could contest negative stereotypes. Sami (18) described how he often came across two stereotypes for the Arab community: either they were smart and stealing American jobs, or they were ignorant and uneducated. Sami found these stereotypes as motivating for him to prove to people that his racial group was *“not dumb.”* Noora (18) reported that she wanted to contribute to the positive stereotype of MEA being successful, *“I feel like the typical Middle Eastern woman is really smart, she’s either a doctor or something because, you know, all my family members are a researcher or doctor so I feel like it just encourages me.”*

Deena (18) explained how discrimination impacted her both negatively and positively. When she experienced discrimination, she found herself emotionally overwhelmed and this caused her to neglect her schoolwork. However, at the same time, she found that derogatory comments about her race served as a source of motivation and gave her a *“reason to try.”* On the contrary, Nadia (19) who was an international student was completely discouraged by the university’s racial climate and had requested to transfer to another university. She described a

number of reasons for transferring, including not feeling like she fit in with the other students, not finding other Lebanese students that she could connect with, and feeling the impact of cultural ignorance by her peers. She was also considering dropping out and moving back to Lebanon. Nadia expressed her frustration, *“Last quarter I just couldn't anymore, I called my mom and I was like I'm done with this whole thing.”* However, she decided not to drop out and had been waiting for a response from the university she wished to transfer to during the time of the interview.

For Lily (20), she found that her career path in international law was heavily influenced by her ethnic identity and the current perceptions of the Middle East. Lily was a member of the Model United Nation organizations on campus and was headed to New York to represent Western Asia in economics and social commission. She described her experiences with being an ethnic minority woman and experiencing discrimination as influential,

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

Similarly, many participants saw themselves as representatives of the Middle East and wanted to advance their education to bring about change and break stereotypes globally.

Participants also took courses in the Middle East Studies major that was offered on campus. Through this major, participants described getting to know their culture better and many were taking classes purely as electives. Shima (19) described the classes, *“I always look out for those. I always try to take one once in awhile. Its nice to have something that has*

to do about your people.” Jasmine (18) enjoyed the classes, taking them for not only academic reasons but to better understand her culture as a second generation Iranian,

I am taking a Modern Day Iran class because I want learn more about it and I fear because I am second generation and that the customs and the traditions, and even the history, has to be passed down through my parents, I’m scared I’m going to miss some things and not be able to share that to the next generation. So, it’s really important to me.

Participants reported that they were able to form friendships with other members of the MEA community through these classes, which helped their social adjustment, and they expressed an appreciation for it.

Emotional Adjustment

The participants described their emotional adjustment to college as the way they felt on campus after they experienced discrimination in college. There was a range of responses, from feeling frustrated by society’s image of the Middle East to feeling determined to change the current perception. Erin (18) expressed feeling appreciative of the discrimination because *“I have something that they feel like they need to discriminate against.”* Bahar (18) stated that, *“I definitely felt really hurt to the core when it was happening because it was something that was so out of my control. I didn’t do anything, I was being judged for nothing of my own fault.”* Zaina (19) described the struggle of not culturally fitting in with her peers, compounded with her discrimination experiences, *“When I feel like an outsider emotionally I just feel really bad. I’ll just sit in my room and cry sometimes and then I feel like why am I even here? I don’t feel like I belong.”*

In addition to carrying these feelings, Lily (20) described feeling uncomfortable expressing her emotions because she would get judged for them, especially with feelings of anger, which had been typically associated with Middle Easterners. She said,

What's a blurry line for me is that if you have this anger and this rage within you-not rage I'm not saying I'm bad at anger management- but if you're angry about something or passionate about something, a lot of people associate that with the Middle Eastern type of, I don't even know how to describe it, type of passion.

Whereas it might just be that that person is just angry about the situation or has that temperament.

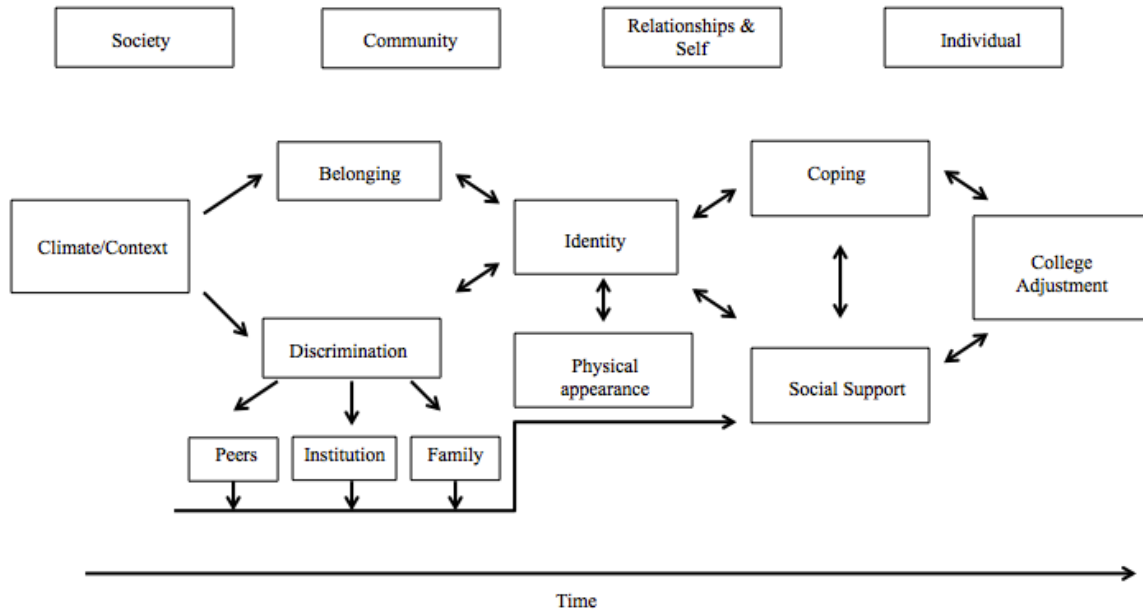
Other participants expressed similar feelings related to the expression of anger and not wanting to be seen as "angry" Middle Easterners because that was how the media already portrayed them and consequently, it was unsafe and fulfilled a stereotype when they expressed it.

The wide range of emotional reactions to discrimination while in college, and even at the times before college, compounded to influence their college adjustment. Emotional reactions could be seen in their academic adjustment and their social adjustment as well. Oftentimes, the participants described feeling tired of the stereotypes and misconceptions about their racial group and using it as a fuel to become a lawyer to fight injustices or a doctor to prove their intelligence. Their friendships also changed as they chose people they felt safer and accepted with. They surrounded themselves with people that enhanced their sense of belonging while distancing themselves from those who made them feel like outsiders. Noora (18) described her adjustment process as a "*plot twist*" where instead of feeling saddened by the discrimination, she had felt prideful toward her culture. When her

peers called her a terrorist, she internally recalled the beauty of her culture and remained “positive and prideful.”

Theoretical Framework of College Adjustment in Response to Discrimination

Figure 2. Model of College Adjustment in Response to Discrimination



Based on the findings, the conceptual model in Figure 2 illustrated the MEA college students’ discrimination process through the following socio-ecological levels: society, community, relationships and self, and the individual. The first level is society, defined as society’s perception of the MEA community. The participants identified two factors that greatly influenced society’s perception: the *political climate* and the *context* of the media’s portrayal of the Middle East. According to the participants, the continuous portrayal of MEA as “terrorists” was an influential factor in society perceiving the MEA community as threatening and evil.

The interaction between the political climate, media, and its influence on the individual college student led to the next level: community. Community consisted of the

discrimination experiences that the college student faced, primarily stereotypes and generalizations that the perpetrator learned from the media and the larger society that they were apart of before they entered the campus community. It also captured the student's sense of *belonging* after experiencing discrimination. The discrimination experiences described by the participants took place in the community and on campus and included overt racism, microaggressions, and the concept of cultural ignorance coined by the participants. The students experienced this discrimination from their *peers*, their *institution*, and the messages that were communicated to them by their *family* about their race. Within the community and as a result of the discrimination, the college student's sense of belonging was challenged. Their interactions with their peers, university, and family shaped their *identity* and where they fit in in relation to others. For some students, they felt like outsiders after experiencing discrimination, while for others they were able to find a way to fit in despite the discrimination. The college students' searched for support through social networks, cultural organizations, and university resources to find a sense of self and a community to belong to. According to participants, depending on their physical appearance, dress, and skin color, the students had different experiences with discrimination and fitting into their campus. The MEA students that viewed themselves as lighter skinned found that they appeared to racially pass or blend in with their peers and were targeted less and experienced fewer incidents of discrimination.

As students engaged in ways of understanding their ethnic identity and college identity, they entered the next level of relationships and self. This reflexive process marked the dual relationship of the college student with their social support. The peers, institution, and family that were earlier identified as sources of discrimination, were now also sources of

social support. The student engaged in using this social support when they experienced discrimination, but also turned to internal ways of coping to be able to adjust to their college experience.

On an individual level, it appeared that the students took in nearly everything that had happened across all the levels and then had to find a way to adjust to college socially, academically, and emotionally. These three components of *college adjustment* can be envisioned as a circular process where one form of adjustment informs the other. For example, when the student experienced discrimination, their emotional adjustment could have influenced them socially and/or academically. Throughout the course of years (visually marked as *time* in the graph), the political climate influenced many and perhaps all components, as the student transitioned to college and adjusted in the midst of these discrimination experiences.

Each student's experience with discrimination was influential in how they adjusted to college. Their stories were unique and their experiences were subjective, and through their words this grounded theory was developed to conceptualize this collective process. In order to illustrate the model, Ali (19) was used as an example. Ali, a second year, Lebanese Muslim male and a first generation immigrant, had moved to the U.S. when he was one year of age. When I first asked Ali about experiencing discrimination, he mentioned his peers stereotyping him or making generalizations about his race. When probed further, he confirmed that his White peers had called him "*terrorist*" before, but quickly added that it was in a joking manner. As the interview progressed, Ali described how traumatic events like September 11th, the Boston bombings, and the Chapel Hill shootings were all apart of the "*crazy time*" that he was growing up in where his ethnicity was "*really being stigmatized.*"

He attributed his experiences of discrimination and his peers understanding of these traumatic events to the media's bias in reporting,

What they [peers] hear is through the media and, obviously, they're not going to hear the right type of things. We don't really learn the history of the Middle East in school or anything so what they've accumulated is what they see from the media and we agree that the media is pretty biased.

Ali described how his friends "*blindly follow*" the media and this had been "*a bit of a let down*" because he had expected more from his peers when he entered college. As a result of this, he had taken it upon himself to be an educator within his group on his culture and ethnicity and had taken a step forward by discrediting or breaking the stereotypes.

Ali described that he primarily experienced discrimination in airports (his last name was the same as a notorious terrorist's last name) and cultural ignorance from his peers. He found that after experiencing discrimination, he continued to remain friends with his non-MEA peers, but drifted more toward cultural organizations because they provided him with a "*huge sense of understanding.*" He also joined the cultural organizations because he was interested in seeking a MEA community similar to the one that he had back at home before college, a place where he could share the same language and culture with his peers. Through these experiences of discrimination, Ali found his relationship with his ethnicity growing "*stronger*" and he had become "*very proud*" of his cultural roots. Although Ali did not mention his physical appearance as a factor in his discrimination, he did mention that others perceived him as Arab and were able to discern this by his appearance.

When coping with the discrimination, Ali described how he attributed his peers' comments to a lack of awareness of the impact of their remarks and the media's influence.

Thus, he coped by taking on the role of educating his peers and sharing with them parts of his culture that were important to him. He described that the discrimination he experienced in the airport and the process of being racially profiled “*derived from hatred,*” but with his peers he called it a “*lack of education*” and found it a platform for increasing knowledge about the Middle East.

Ali’s college adjustment was impacted on a social level, where he became involved in cultural organizations, formed a MEA community, and socialized more with his same-ethnicity peers. He said that the discrimination did not directly impact him academically and he continued to have a strong interest in pursuing medical school. However, he described emotionally being frustrated and angry about the negative perceptions of the Middle East and the inaccuracy of how it was portrayed, and these emotions served as his motivation to continue educating others.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This qualitative study explored the discrimination experiences of 25 Middle Eastern American (MEA) first and second year undergraduates and its impact on their college adjustment. Given the rise in discrimination toward MEAs in the U.S. since September 11th, 2001 (ADC, 2015; Kia-Keating, Ahmed, & Modir, 2015; Rousseau et al., 2011), there was a need for research to better understand this population and their experiences. Previous research had focused on the discrimination experiences of other ethnic minority groups (Hwang & Goto, 2008; Levin, Van Laar, & Foote, 2006; Prelow et al., 2006), with little attention on MEAs. The intent of this study was to move toward closing the gap in the literature by providing a theoretical model for understanding the discrimination experiences of MEA college students as they entered a new academic environment. This model contributed to Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence and departure and was influenced by an ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), taking into consideration the college student's functioning within his or her environment. Subsequently, this study derived a theoretical model that depicted how racial discrimination influenced college adjustment across multiple socio-ecological levels. Although Tinto's framework provided a foundation for understanding the college adjustment process, this study provided research on ethnic minority students, specifically MEA students, who faced unique challenges in adjustment than their peers.

Experiences of Discrimination

The findings in this study highlighted the MEA college students' perception of the discrimination they were experiencing. On a societal level, the participants described the

media portraying the Middle East unfavorably and influencing the public's perception of this region. As such, they expressed concern that this influence could instigate dire consequences toward their community, such as increasing stereotypes and hate crimes. Indeed, previous research had found that people who had more media exposure after September 11th, 2001, exhibited more prejudiced behaviors toward Arabs, bringing into question the ethics and responsibilities of journalism as it could have powerful repercussions (Persson & Musher-Eizenman, 2005).

In the community, some participants described experiencing more overt examples of discrimination than what they had experienced on their college campus. Participants described people in the community as being more opinionated about the Middle East, and less likely to be interested in learning about the facts. Other reactions to potential community discrimination included a few participants withholding their participation in religious organizations on campus on their resumes and job applications due to the fear of discrimination. Findings from a previous study confirmed that there was a hiring bias against Arab Americans, particularly toward those with names that were associated with the MEA race (Widner & Chicoine, 2011). In the study, the researchers sent out a resume to employers using the name of an Arab or White job applicant (Widner & Chicoine, 2011). Despite the resumes being identical, there was a lower callback rate for the Arab applicant, and in particular, a significantly lower callback rate for managerial positions. This highlighted the challenges that MEA college students could face in the community upon graduation and seeking employment, especially when applying to higher-level positions that they may be qualified for, but denied the opportunity due to discrimination.

On an interpersonal level, a majority of the participants experienced discrimination from people they were familiar with including their peers or other members of their college community. However, they tended not to blame them for engaging in what the participants called “cultural ignorance” or making unintentional stereotypical or derogatory comments. Research suggested that after the civil rights era, racism in the U.S. changed from being public and overt to what is now called *modern racism*, or subtler racism (McConahay, 1986; Sue et al., 2007). However, many participants described being overtly called “terrorist,” but often found it difficult to label this and other remarks as racism, and instead perceived the derogatory comments as a joke or a form of ignorance meant to do no harm. Interestingly, research has found that the MEA community typically responded to discrimination by “transforming discriminatory encounters into humorous ones” (Marvasti, 2005, p. 543). This could have detrimental implications, such as people continuing to stereotype them because they perceived MEAs as not being harmed or affected by it.

Similar to the societal level, discrimination experienced on an interpersonal level was largely in part due to the media’s strong influence on the participants’ peers. The participants’ tended to blame the media for their peers’ image of the Middle East as a war-torn, terrorist-breeding region, and how, in turn, this may have caused their peers’ cultural ignorance. Indeed, research found that the influence of the media and the power of the message it delivered to the general public played an important role in discrimination (van Dijk, 1989). Researcher van Dijk (1989) explained that the news often paid little attention to ethnic minority groups unless they were engaged in negative events that included violence and deviant behaviors. For many of the incoming non-MEA college students, they may have never met a MEA person until they started school, but they may have already formed an

opinion or stereotype about them that they most likely learned from the media. Research found that when the news reported on the violent behavior of ethnic minority groups, not only did the majority population become fearful of them, but they also began to associate them directly with these acts of violence that they had seen on the news (van Dijk, 1989). In the current study, the participants noticed that as the broader society was influenced by these stereotypical depictions of the Middle East, so was the campus community that they were apart of, and the peers that they had formed friendships with. Many of their peers directly asked the MEA participants about terrorist organizations in the Middle East and if they were sympathetic toward or supportive of groups like ISIS. A potential explanation for this could be that the peers may have taken what they learned from the news and applied that image to their MEA peer that they met in college, believing that MEAs tended to be sympathetic toward terrorism. Thus, many MEA participants expressed frustration, anger, and sadness with society's perception of the Middle East, but an understanding of where their peers' perspective and ignorance came from.

Finally, discrimination experienced on an individual level tended to be related to the participants' physical appearance. The participants that appeared to have a lighter skin color were typically able to racially pass as other ethnicities and thus, self-reported less discrimination experiences. Additionally, the participants that did not display their religious identification through their clothing (i.e., wearing a headscarf) described being able to practice their religion without fear of backlash. Prior research has demonstrated similar findings for other ethnic minority individuals as well, including African Americans and Latino/as (Espino & Franz, 2002; Klonoff & Landrine, 2000). For example, some researchers have found that a darker skin tone is associated with higher levels of perceived

discrimination (Espino & Franz, 2002; Klonoff & Landrine, 2000). The research suggested that despite the desire to label the U.S. as a color-blind society, skin color continued to be a critical factor in whether or not people were discriminated against (Espino & Franz, 2002; Klonoff & Landrine, 2000).

Responses to Discrimination

The participants described responding to the discrimination they experienced in a number of ways. A commonly utilized form of coping that had been empirically supported for other ethnic minority groups was social support in the form of family and friends (Llamas & Morgan Consoli, 2012; Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013; Morgan Consoli et al., 2014; Prelow et al., 2006; Wei et al., 2013). In particular, the participants described the central role that their family continued to play despite living away from home. Similar to the Latino/a cultural value of *familismo* and its ability to assist Latino/a college students in overcoming adversities (Morgan Consoli & Llamas, 2013; Llamas & Morgan Consoli, 2012), MEA participants also tended to rely on their family in the face of discrimination and other stressors. Although, for some MEA participants their parents may not have fully understood the participants' distress over experiencing discrimination, the participants continued to consistently identify them as their primary source of support when distressed.

This study also found that MEA college students tended to seek support from the same social groups that often discriminated against them. This provided a potential explanation for why MEA participants made sense of the discrimination they experienced from their peers and labeled it as ignorant as opposed to offensive. They most likely needed to continue feeling safe with their peers because they relied on them for support during their first and second year of college. For this reason, they may have accepted their peers as

ignorant and coped with this ignorance by turning to education. The MEA participants described spending a considerable amount of time with their peers providing them with information on the Middle East, breaking stereotypes, and partaking in worldly discussions about the conflict in that region. The participants believed that by increasing their peers' awareness, they would be able to provide a platform for change. According to Fleming, Lamont, and Welburn (2012), education was one of the most effective responses to discrimination because it challenged stereotypes and dismantled false beliefs about a group.

Beyond this, other forms of coping emerged from the MEA participants' responses, including (a) "getting used to" the discrimination, (b) avoiding discussing topics related to ethnicity and culture in public or with peers due to a fear of backlash, and (c) working toward being a model minority. Many participants described how their experiences of discrimination had been ongoing and they had chosen to cope with it by "getting used to" it, as well as not responding to it. Marvasti (2005) found that when Middle Eastern Americans were faced with overcoming stereotypes, they tended to "cower" or "resign" (p. 544) themselves, which in turn led to them "abandoning any attempt at having an active role or voice in the interaction" (p. 544). Marvasti (2005) attributed this response to Middle Eastern Americans feeling powerless in the face of discrimination, and subsequently, "getting used to" the discrimination was the safest option. Researchers Moradi and Hasan (2004) studied the loss of personal control for Arab Americans that experienced discrimination and found that without a sense of mastery or control, Arab Americans experienced significant mental health symptoms. Thus, coping by "getting used to" the discrimination may stem from a sense of powerlessness or loss of control, which has been associated with psychological distress in this population, bringing to light possible negative consequences with this form of coping.

Other participants expressed fear, worry, and distress when potentially speaking about their race and culture within their community. They worried that it would deem them an outsider within their peer groups and would make them vulnerable to their community's opinions about their race. Previous research on Arab Americans found that fear of backlash was common among those who had experienced discrimination and was a strong predictor of how proud they were of their ethnic heritage (Nassar-McMillan, Lambert, & Hakim-Larson, 2011). Thus, this form of coping may be associated with reducing the participant's pride in their ethnic identity in their attempt to avoid topics surrounding it.

Finally, despite being stereotyped as "terrorists," the participants described how society also perceived them as a successful minority group holding prestigious occupations, such as being a doctor or lawyer. For some participants this served as a source of inspiration to succeed in order to confirm this perception of their community. On the contrary, research found that for ethnic minority groups, like Asian Americans, being labeled as "model minority" could have consequences because although initially perceived as a compliment, it could also invalidate their experiences of discrimination or the inequalities they have faced (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009). In this current study, some participants also expressed frustration over stereotypical remarks made by their peers about MEAs being wealthy or smart, which they found to be invalidating of their hard work. However, many participants described finding the comments around MEAs' intelligence positive and inspiring. Additionally, they described not directly associating these comments with stereotypes or discrimination experiences, but instead with their culture's value of education and achievement.

Adjustment to College in the Face of Discrimination

The participants described their experiences of discrimination impacting their college adjustment socially, academically, and emotionally. Consistent with previous findings, MEA participants tended to turn to cultural resources, including cultural and religious organizations, in search of social support, particularly after experiencing discrimination (Ahmed, Kia-Keating, & Tsai, 2011). In addition to identifying social support as a buffer against the negative effects of discrimination, participants also expressed how it reduced their homesickness and increased their sense of belonging—both of which were two critical components of college adjustment (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Watt & Badger, 2009). Therefore, having a large MEA population on a college campus could positively impact MEA students' levels of college adjustment through increasing the likelihood of perceived social support, belonging, and cultural resources.

Additionally, the majority of the participants described being inspired by their discrimination experiences. They saw their role as an educator in their community and subsequently, pursued academic goals oriented around breaking stereotypes. Participants described pursuing careers in law and political science to one day be in positions of power and bring forth a positive image of their community. However, there were also participants who continued to struggle academically due to their inability to socially adjust; these MEA students' attributed their academic withdrawal to feelings of being an outsider due to difficulty finding same-ethnicity peers (because of a lack of MEA on campus or in dormitories).

It was also important to consider participants' emotional adjustment, particularly because student mental health has become a primary issue on college campuses today (Reetz, Barr, & Krylowicz, 2013). MEA participants' expressed a range of emotional reactions to

experiences of discrimination, including anger, sadness, belittlement, invalidation, disbelief, and frustration. Some participants described difficulty expressing their emotions publicly for fear of confirming stereotypes. Primarily, participants described not being able to react angrily to being called terrorist for fear it would confirm their peers' perception of MEA being an angry or hostile population. Thus, these participants internalized their feelings and/or avoided issues that triggered anger. More research is needed to understand if this kind of coping leads to adaptive or maladaptive outcomes.

Taken together, these findings illustrated how experiences of discrimination influenced participants' college adjustment through multiple socio-ecological levels, such as society, community, peers and family, and the individual. These findings suggested that discrimination experiences are critical components to consider in the matter of MEA students' college persistence and graduation.

Clinical Implications

With limited research on this population primarily due to them being categorically identified as Caucasian/White, studies like this one attempt to provide tools to understand this unique and diverse student population, especially during the first two years of college when research has deemed them the most vulnerable (Tinto, 1993). These findings offered a number of implications for college counselors, administrators, and clinicians when working with MEA college students on an institutional, interpersonal, and individual level, specifically surrounding their experiences of discrimination, sense of belonging, and college transition.

First, institutional interventions could be implemented to increase the MEAs sense of belonging. This study found that the discrimination that MEA participants primarily

experienced in college was related to cultural ignorance and was influential to their sense of belonging in college and among their peers. Thus, interventions like Walton and Cohen's (2011) brief intervention for first year college students should be explored as an intervention for increasing the students' sense of belonging. This intervention involved first year students reading about how older students struggled with finding friendships when they initially started college and how over time this problem dissipated for them and they were able to form social groups. The first-year students then had to write about their current college experiences and their sense of belonging, and read it aloud in front of a video camera. They were told that the video would be shared with future first years with the goal of helping the future first years feel validated and increase their belonging as they started school. Research on this intervention had demonstrated positive results for African American college students, in terms of higher GPAs, improved health and well being, and decreased visits to student health centers. This intervention assisted in empowering ethnic minority groups when they had difficulty socially adjusting to campus, and social adjustment could be particularly challenging after experiencing discrimination (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Although this intervention had not been empirically assessed on MEA college students, the intervention's ability to increase a sense of belonging for other ethnic minorities made it relevant to the college adjustment process and should be considered.

Furthermore, on an institutional level, academic departments similar to the Middle East Studies at this university may serve as a protective factor against discrimination for the student by providing them with knowledge about their ethnic background. Research on discrimination found that students that were knowledgeable about their religious or ethnic group were able to use that knowledge as a buffer against discrimination (Brondolo et al.,

2009). The students' awareness and reliance on their cultural and religious values served to decrease psychological distress when they were targeted (Brondolo et al., 2009). Several of the participants in this study mentioned taking courses in the Middle East Studies major in order to learn more about their culture and enhance their connection with it. Thus, continued institutional support for academic courses on the MEA culture may be helpful in assisting the students in increasing their knowledge about their community in order to serve as a buffer if and when they experience discrimination.

At the interpersonal level, the present study highlighted the importance of social support for MEAs while they were in college. Additionally, previous research on MEAs had also found that belonging to a cultural organization served as a protective factor for this community (Ahmed, Kia-Keating, & Tsai, 2011; Shamma, 2009). Thus, clinicians should have an awareness of the available cultural organizations and university resources on campus that could increase a sense of belonging on campus. The clinicians' familiarity with campus resources would allow them to suggest cultural organizations, events, meetings, and groups that the student could connect to after they experience discrimination and were in need of a community.

Additionally, there are interpersonal interventions that have been identified as helpful in assisting with the college adjustment process. For example, Mattanah et al. (2010) implemented a nine-week social support intervention to enhance the adjustment process for first year college students and found significant results. The groups were offered in the fall of the first year and created a safe space for the students to discuss their experiences of transitioning to college and leaving home behind. Due to the groups being smaller in size (6-10 members), the students were able to talk about serious and deeper topics, including issues

of diversity, which were typically neglected during orientation week when there was more information to cover. In the current study, the MEA participants also recommended that after experiencing discrimination it would be helpful for the university or counseling center to offer support through counseling groups (See Appendix I for additional recommendations). Thus, a group similar to this one may provide them with both the care and community they need during their first year.

On an individual level, clinicians should understand how discrimination could be a potential challenge to MEA students' adjustment process and how it appeared to be no longer an overt and conscious experience, but subtle and hidden messages communicated to them by their society, community, university, and peers. Thus, clinicians should be aware the MEA student might not realize or identify certain experiences as discriminatory at first, however, carry the effect of the experience with them into their social circles and academics later on. This understanding by the clinician could enhance the rapport and increase their sensitivity to the needs of this group. Additionally, clinicians could assess further about the coping strategies that were identified in this study in order to see if they were effective in mitigating the consequences of discrimination.

Strengths and Limitations

This study made a distinctive contribution to the literature because it utilized qualitative methodology to examine how Middle Eastern American students, a community that has often been empirically neglected, adjusted and coped with college. It presented some of the complex ways Middle Eastern American college students' transitioned into a new academic experience. Specifically, using grounded theory methods to guide the study and analyze the data was a strength as it assisted in building a theoretical foundation for

understanding these nuanced and impactful discrimination experiences that occurred across multiple socio-ecological levels, but ultimately impacted college adjustment.

However, this study also had limitations. First, it represented the perceptions of a unique group of Middle Eastern Americans at only one university. In this study, it was the intimacy with the phenomenon that grounded theory was seeking as opposed to evidence of transferability. Second, one of the research team members for this study was a Middle Eastern American who was heavily involved in cultural organizations and her advertisement and outreach may have resulted in recruiting participants that perhaps were also more involved in cultural or religious organizations on campus. It is possible that a more diverse research team might have resulted in more varied recruitment outside of cultural organizations to bring new narratives that may have not been included. Third, the study's sample size was primarily female participants. Despite efforts to recruit a balance of male and female participants, the female voice was more represented in the themes that emerged. Finally, a simultaneous strength and weakness for this study was the researcher's position as an insider in the Middle Eastern American student population. As an insider, the researcher was able to understand cultural nuances, however, simultaneously, an insider has been known to overlook or assume critical information due to their familiarity with the culture or community, and thus, must continuously approach the interview and study with a naïve perspective, and practice reflexivity in order to manage any biases.

Future Directions

It was the intent of this study to take the first step in raising awareness of the issues that MEA college students faced with the hope of future research continuing to expand on this foundation. Taking into consideration the theoretical framework that emerged in this

study, future research should use these findings to develop a scale to measure the MEA college student experience in order to test relationships between categories that influenced the adjustment process. Additionally, researchers should examine the direct mental health implications of experiencing discrimination while in college, specifically how and if it influenced retention rates for this community. Due to universities demographically grouping MEAs with the Caucasian/White students, this study was unable to examine retention and graduation rates of the MEA community, but encourages future research to examine the circumstances surrounding creating a separate racial category in order to more accurately study retention rates. Future research should also examine the discrimination experiences of MEA in other universities across the U.S., especially in areas where the MEA community is small and the population is more conservative. The ability to capture these experiences across the U.S. is important as it can influence interventions that could be impactful nationwide.

In terms of the discrimination experiences, a few participants described experiencing “undertones” of discrimination, which could indicate that discrimination has evolved from overt actions to subtle comments to now even subtler undertones and future research should look into this further. Another interesting theme that emerged was the concept of working toward being a model minority and how it served as a form of inspiration for many of the participants. Future research should continue to examine this as this may not have been the case for other ethnic minority groups and the differences across cultures may provide significant findings for future interventions. Additionally, future research on the experiences of MEA males should be conducted as their perspective may have been missed in this study and they could have a wider range of experiences to contribute. There could also be gender differences in the responses given regarding discrimination experiences and coping, thus,

researchers should examine if and how gender influenced the adjustment process. Finally, future research should look into the experiences of Middle Eastern international students, as the sole international student in this study faced significant challenges in socially and academically adjusting to college and had requested for a transfer to another university that was more racially diverse. Research in this area could examine what unique resources could be helpful in the college adjustment process for international students in order for them to persist academically and graduate.

As for coping and protective factors for this community, this study did not investigate the coping strategies in terms of how much they were used and whether they had an impact on college adjustment and mental health in order to assess how effective they were in reducing the negative consequences of discrimination. This study could only conclude that the participants endorsed using these coping tools when they were faced with discrimination in college and future research should continue to explore them further.

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APPENDIX

- A. Flyer for Participant Recruitment
- B. Consent Form
- C. Demographic Questionnaire
- D. Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS)
- E. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol
- F. Global Timeline of Events
- G. University Timeline of Events
- H. Qualitative Interview Codebook
- I. Participant Recommendations for University Services
- J. Participant Advice

Appendix A

Flyer for Participant Recruitment



**The Middle Eastern Experiences (MEE) Project
1st & 2nd Year Students of Middle Eastern descent
needed for Research Study**

We are interested in learning about your college experiences:

- Academics**
- Social life**
- Family**
- Culture**
- Experiences with discrimination**
- Coping with stress**

Earn a \$10 UCSB bookstore gift card by participating in one brief pencil-and-paper questionnaire and an interview focusing on your experiences.

To learn more, contact the primary investigator of the study, Sheila Modir (UCSB graduate student), at theMEEproject@gmail.com

Appendix B

Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

Purpose: You are invited to participate in the Middle Eastern Experiences (MEE) study to better understand your transition to college and experience with perceived discrimination. To participate in this study, you must be age 18 or older, a first or second year undergraduate student currently enrolled at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and self-identify as Middle Eastern.

Procedures: If you agree to participate in this portion of the study, you will take part in a survey and a 1-hour to 1.5 hour interview. Your interview will be audiotaped and transcribed for coding purposes. All audiotapes will be destroyed after 6 years. In return for your participation in this project you will receive a \$10 gift card for the UCSB bookstore. You will receive the gift card regardless of whether you choose to skip any questions that you do not wish to answer or stop participating in the study, which you can do at any time.

Risks & Benefits: This study involves no risks to your physical or mental health beyond those encountered in everyday life. However, you may experience some sadness or other unwanted feelings by being asked to think about your adjustment to college and discrimination experiences. If you do experience extreme distress, you are encouraged to talk to the researcher about it immediately. We will provide you with a list of on-campus resources. We hope to use the results of the study to improve our understanding of the first and second year college experience.

Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is confidential. Your real names will never be used in any written document except the consent form. To allow us to match your surveys together, we will use your initials and then assign you a pseudonym. Only the researchers will have access to the audio recording, which will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the primary researcher's office. The consent forms will be stored separately from the research data in a separate locked cabinet. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, since research documents are not protected from subpoena. If data are subpoenaed by a court of law or the investigator has reasonable cause to believe the well-being of a child is at risk, he/she is obligated by law to breach confidentiality.

Right to Refuse & Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary. You are free to decline to answer any specific questions without penalty. You may refuse to participate at any time without any negative consequences.

Questions: If you have questions about this study, please contact Dr. Maryam Kia-Keating (805) 893-2133, mkiakeating@education.ucsb.edu, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490. If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Committee at (805) 893-3807, hsc@research.ucsb.edu, or

University of California, Human Subjects Committee, Office of Research, Santa Barbara, CA 93106.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. BY CHOOSING YES, YOU WILL INDICATE THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT IN THE STUDY DESCRIBED ABOVE. YOU MUST BE 18 YEARS OF AGE OR OLDER TO AGREE TO PARTICIPATE.

If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

Name (printed): _____

Email address: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C

Demographic Questionnaire

1. **First and last name initials:**
2. **Age:**
3. **Current G.P.A.:**
4. **Generational Status:**
 - a. 1st – I was born in another country
 - b. 2nd – One or both of my parents were born in another country, but I was born in the U.S.
 - c. 3rd – Both my parents and I were born in the U.S.
5. **Country born:**
 - a. If in the U.S., what state were you born in: _____
 - b. If not in the U.S., please list other countries you lived in before moving to the U.S.:

 - c. If not in the U.S., when did you move to the U.S.? _____
6. **Gender (please circle):**
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Other
7. **Ethnicity:** _____
8. **What ethnicity do others perceive you as?** _____
9. **Education level (please circle):**
 - a. First year undergraduate
 - b. Second year undergraduate
10. **Religious belief:** _____
11. **Where do you live?:** _____
12. **Current major:** _____
13. **Future career aspiration:** _____
14. **Based on your looks, what percent of the time do strangers perceive you as Middle Eastern?**
 - a. 0% (no one ever perceives me as Middle Eastern)
 - b. 25% (rarely)
 - c. 50% (about half the time)
 - d. 75% (often)
 - e. 100% (all the time)

On a scale of 0 (no adjustment) to 5 (well adjusted), please rank the following:

How well have you adjusted academically to UCSB?

0 1 2 3 4 5

How well have you adjusted socially to UCSB?

0 1 2 3 4 5

How well have you adjusted to being away from your family?

0 1 2 3 4 5

Appendix D

Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS)

Instructions: Think about your experiences with race. Please read each item and think of how many times this event has happened to you **since you started attending UCSB**.

0 = I did not experience this event.

1 = I experienced this event at least once at UCSB.

1. I was ignored at school or at a campus-related job because of my race.
2. Someone's body language showed they were scared of me, because of my race.
3. Someone assumed that I spoke a language other than English.
4. I was told that I should not complain about race.
5. Someone assumed that I grew up in a particular neighborhood because of my race.
6. Someone avoided walking near me on campus because of my race.
7. Someone told me that she or he was colorblind.
8. Someone avoided sitting next to me in a public space (e.g., Student Center, I.V. theater, campus buses) because of my race.
9. Someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race.
10. I was told that I complain about race too much.
11. I received substandard service in on campus-stores compared to customers of other racial groups.
12. I observed people of my race in prominent positions at my school.
13. Someone wanted to date me only because of my race.
14. I was told that people of all racial groups experience the same obstacles.
15. My opinion was overlooked in a group discussion because of my race.
16. Someone assumed that my work would be inferior to people of other racial groups.
17. Someone acted surprised at my scholastic success because of my race.
18. I observed people of my race portrayed positively on television.
19. Someone did not believe me when I told them I was born in the U.S.
20. Someone assumed that I would not be educated because of my race.
21. Someone told me that I was "articulate" after she/he assumed I wouldn't be.
22. Someone told me that all people in my racial group are all the same.
23. A peer was unfriendly or unwelcoming toward me because of my race.
24. I was told that people of color do not experience racism anymore.
25. Someone told me that they "don't see color."
26. Someone asked me to teach them words in my "native language."
27. Someone told me that they do not see race.
28. Someone on campus clenched her/his purse or wallet upon seeing me because of my race.
29. Someone assumed that I would have a lower education because of my race.
30. Someone of a different racial group has stated that there is no difference between the two of us.
31. Someone assumed that I would physically hurt them because of my race.
32. Someone assumed that I ate foods associated with my race/culture every day.

33. I observed people of my race portrayed positively in movies.
34. Someone assumed that I was poor because of my race.
35. Someone told me that people should not think about race anymore.
36. Someone avoided eye contact with me because of my race.
37. Someone told me that all people in my racial group look alike.
38. Someone objectified one of my physical features because of my race.
39. A professor treated me differently than my White peers.
40. Someone assumed that I speak similar languages to other people in my race.

Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Background

1. How do you see yourself (ethnically)? How do you identify yourself?
2. What do you think other people's perception of your ethnicity is?
3. Was ethnicity a factor in choosing UCSB?

Perceived Discrimination and Growth

1. How do you define discrimination? What does it mean to you?
2. How do you define microaggressions?
3. What was your earliest experience with discrimination?
4. Were you ever called a terrorist? How did that make you feel?
5. Looking back on your first year, were you treated differently because of your race by anyone at school (peers, faculty, housing)?
6. Looking back on your first year, did anyone you know that was Middle Eastern be treated differently because of their race by anyone at school (peers, faculty, housing)?
7. How did the microaggressions or discriminatory acts make you feel?
8. How have the recent terrorist attacks in the United States impacted you (ISIS, Charlie Hebdo, Chapel Hill shootings, Islam phobia, war on terror, media portrayals, Boston bombing, September 11th)?
9. Have you experienced discrimination between members of your own group (within the Middle Eastern community)?

10. In your view, what campus, local, national, or international events are most impacting Middle Easterner's experiences?
11. Why is it important to study discrimination experiences of Middle Eastern college students?

Adjustment to college in light of discrimination

1. How has this discrimination experience impacted you in the following areas of your life:
 - a. Expectations of college (prompts: What aspects of your discrimination experience impacted your expectations of college and how?)
 - b. Peer relationships (prompts: What are your peer relationships like now? How have they changed since experiencing discrimination? In what ways are your peers aware of the discrimination you have faced? How open are you with them about what has happened?)
 - c. Involvement in any organizations on campus? (prompts: If none, what has kept you from getting involved in more campus activities? What involvement have you had with any cultural organizations?)
 - d. Emotionally and overall sense of well-being (prompts: What emotional difficulties came up for you during and after the discrimination incident?)
 - e. Academically (prompts: Did the stress of the discrimination incident impact your grades or motivation to learn or to be in school? If no, why not?)
2. How has your college experiences been impacted by your previous discrimination experiences?

3. After having experienced discrimination, what advice would you give to other Middle Eastern college students?

Coping with college in light of discrimination

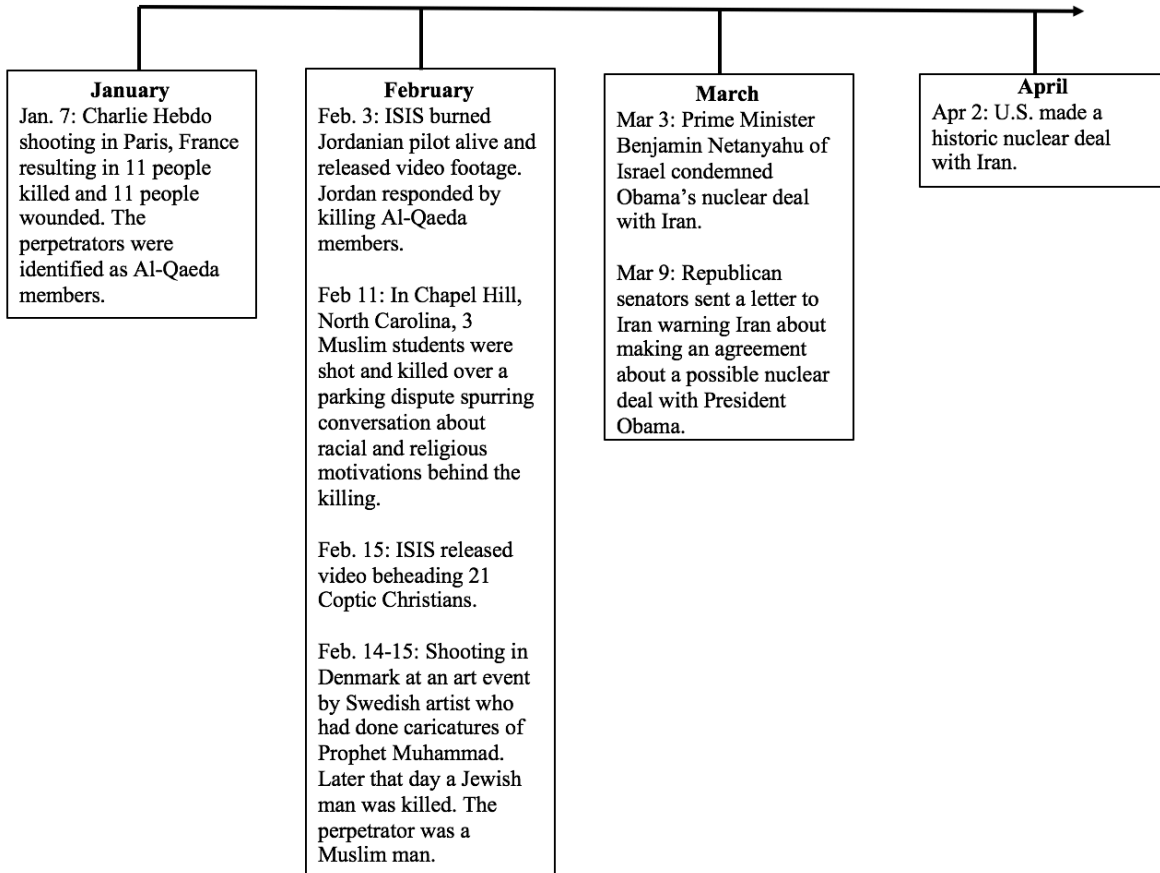
1. In what ways have you dealt with the discriminatory experience? Who do you turn to for support?
2. In what ways has your identity changed since this discrimination experience?
(prompts: How have you grown as a _____ (i.e. Iranian woman) since experiencing discrimination?)
3. What cultural values have you held on to, if any, to support you through this discrimination experience? What pieces have you let go of?
4. What resources on campus or in the community have you used to support you after experiencing discrimination?
5. Any suggestions for services or other ways to help support Middle Easterners adjust and excel at UCSB after experiencing discrimination?

Debrief Interview

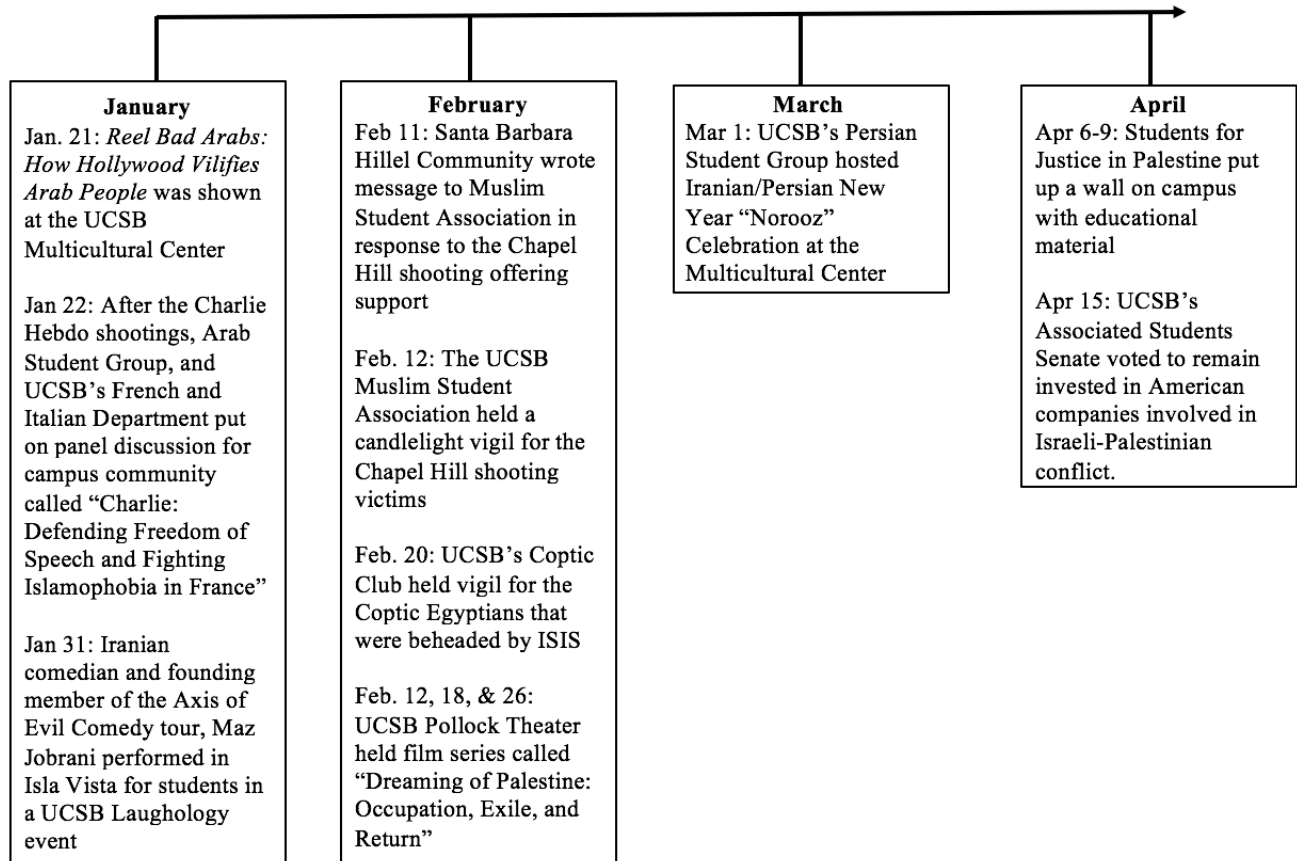
1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about in regards to your first year experience at UCSB that I haven't asked you that you think would be important to this study?
2. How do you know that the person is discriminating against your ethnicity specifically and not reacting to another attribute of yours?
3. What was this interview like for you? Did it bring up any new thoughts about your cultural heritage?
4. Do you have any suggestions about topics that we covered, or ones that we missed?

5. Would you be willing to be contacted again for a possible interview or follow up study in the future?
6. Any questions for me?

Appendix F
Timeline of Global Events (January 2015 – April 2015)



Appendix G
Timeline of University Events (January 2015 – April 2015)



Appendix H

Qualitative Interview Codebook

SOURCE (S) OF DISCRIMINATION → reference to the source of the discrimination (i.e., where did it come from?)

- INTERPERSONAL – discrimination was among friends
- WITHIN GROUP – discrimination was from other Middle Eastern Americans
- BETWEEN GROUP – discrimination was from people that were not Middle Eastern American
- COLLEGE – discrimination was from the university (dormitory, services, etc.)
- SOCIETAL – discrimination was from the community/environment/society

TYPES OF DISCRIMINATION → mentioned the different types of discrimination that participants have experienced

- RACE
- GENDER
- SEXUAL ORIENTATION
- RELIGIOUS

LACK OF UNIQUE CATEGORY → reference to how Middle Eastern Americans are not considered a racial category, how they are grouped under “Caucasian”

HOMOGENOUS → reference to Middle Easterners being grouped as the same, each country not being seen as distinct

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE → reference to discrimination based on physical appearance

MEDIA PORTRAYALS → reference to discriminatory or offensive ways that Middle Eastern Americans are portrayed on television, movies, and other media

CULTURAL IGNORANCE → reference to microaggressions, discriminatory remarks, or comments made by others that are ignorant about the Middle Eastern culture (i.e., do you ride camels?)

POLITICAL (TERRORISM) → reference to Middle Eastern American students being called terrorists or other terrorism-related references

FEAR OF BACKLASH → reference to the participant’s description of their heightened perception of discrimination after terror attacks or how they reacted after the discrimination experience (i.e., did not bring up ethnicity with strangers due to fear of backlash)

DISCRIMINATION STORY → reference to the participant’s description of the discrimination event(s) that he or she experienced

PRE-COLLEGE DISCRIMINATION → discrimination experiences that occurred before college

COLLEGE DISCRIMINATION → discrimination experiences that occurred during college

SENSE OF BELONGING → reference to participants describing their sense of belonging toward their college or group of friends before and after the discrimination

ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT → reference to student's academic adjustment to college before and after experiencing discrimination

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT → reference to student's social adjustment to college before and after experiencing discrimination

EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT → reference to student's emotional adjustment to college before and after experiencing discrimination

EXPECTATIONS OF COLLEGE → reference to discrimination's influence on their expectations of college

COPE → reference to the ways that students are coping with the discrimination

MAKING SENSE → reference to the ways students attempt to make sense or meaning of the discrimination (i.e., dismissing it or rationalizing it)

SOCIAL SUPPORT → reference to the social support they received after experiencing discrimination

FAMILY → code any time they talk about their family/parents, immigration story

RESOURCES → reference to the resources students are using to help them cope with the discrimination

VALUES → reference to the values that students describe as helpful after they experienced discrimination

IDENTITY → reference to how discrimination may have shaped their identity

ADVICE → reference to the advice students would give to other students experiencing discrimination in college

SERVICES → reference to their description of recommendations that could help support Middle Eastern Americans adjust and excel at UCSB after experiencing discrimination

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES → references to university-based resources/activities that pertain to the Middle Eastern American culture and help students' adjustment process/serve as protective factors/enhance sense of belonging

Appendix I

Participant Recommendations for University Services

Recommendation	Description	Relevant Quotation
Counseling group or support group	Participants expressed interest in having a safe space to talk to others who have also experienced discrimination, similar to a counseling or support group that a university's counseling center could offer.	“Just having people to talk to and having people who accept you for who you are if people are experiencing discrimination. If I could meet people who are experiencing this and talk to them I feel like I'd be able to be at ease.” (Ali, 19)
Collective cultural organization	Participants had a desire for a larger, all-encompassing Middle Eastern cultural organization that could bring the community together as opposed to separate ethnic-based groups.	“I think it would be cool if we could have a huge organization that brings all the Middle Easterners together and then have little committees with different branches of Middle Easterners so that people can identify with their own kind and then also come together. Because we are all Middle Eastern.” (Shima, 19)
Educating the campus	Participants were interested in holding educational events for the student population to attend and learn about the Middle Eastern culture.	<p>“I would say an awareness campaign regarding like, this is going to seem trivial, but how unrelated we are to ISIS.” (Tariq, 18)</p> <p>“What would be cool would be talks about how like this whole five percent of terrorists that's out there in the world don't represent everyone in the Middle East and also it would be really, really informative if there was some type of talk that was put out there that told people that Muslim is not Middle Eastern because those words are interchanged too much.” (Nicole, 19)</p> <p>“Maybe they can host events in</p>

		<p>Campbell Hall. They can raise awareness of issues that Middle Easterners face because I know they have Black History month and have African Americans speak at Campbell Hall for certain events so there could be something like that.” (Elina, 19)</p>
<p>Addressing within group discrimination</p>	<p>Students expressed interest in creating safe and informative dialogue between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine supporters with an emphasis on uniting them based on their cultural similarities.</p>	<p>“Immediately I would think of facilitating discussion between people of different opinions, however, if it’s not facilitated correctly, I could see it causing more problems than good. Maybe some kind of writing forum where instead of conversation you go up on stage and read an excerpt from a writing you wrote or based on a prompt. Maybe a sharing rather than directly responding. It’s about listening rather than being heard kind of a thing....I mean that could be crazy but if you could have a night where they say ‘we ask you kindly to not talk about the conflict and come together and talk about things we have in common’ like the same food, or the same music.” (Talía, 19)</p>
<p>University-wide celebration of culture</p>	<p>Participants expressed an interest in a university-sponsored large-scale event that celebrated their culture.</p>	<p>“I went to an Indian celebration last week for color and it was super fun and there were a lot of people there who were clearly not Indian, but it was very fun and open for everyone. There is no reason why Middle Eastern cultural events should not be open and that fun for everyone...other people may love this and enjoy this and may associate it [Middle Eastern culture] with more than just terrorism.” (Sanaz, 19)</p>

Appendix J

Participant Advice

Participant responses to the following interview question: After having experienced discrimination, what advice would you give to other Middle Eastern college students?

Participant	Advice
Shima (19)	I would say if you see stuff like that happening, just speak up against it, talk to them and inform them and don't be rude or mean. Try to be understanding about it so, yeah, I guess just stick up for it and just say your side of things and I mean eventually that message will pass on to someone else and on and on.
Zaina (19)	Definitely to educate their peers so their peers don't have negative thoughts about Middle Eastern people. They should give them the real facts so it could be positive and everyone can be happy.
Tariq (18)	I would just say don't let it get to you.
Ali (19)	Don't ever be ashamed of where you come from. You have to remember that people have no education on where you come from. You have to remember where they are getting their information from, and then if you're bitter and aggressive about it then you are not going to make any friends.
Bahar (18)	Just like don't back down and just don't be ashamed of anything and just like do something that either gets people's attention about it or directly talk to the people that are discriminating against you. Just explain things like how ridiculous it is and if there's any personal story you could say that too.
Noora (18)	I would say find your group, find your club, find people you can relate to because in college it's so important, something that I didn't do yet that I wish I had because it is good to you know venture out and learn about other cultures and all, but I do think it is important to find out more about yourself and the area you came from just because you know that's what you can relate to the most
Navid (19)	Don't let it get to you. Just know that there's always going to be people in the world that are either insecure and have to deflect their insecurities on other people or are just ignorant to perspectives around the world that aren't the same as theirs. That's pretty much it, those are the two main reasons people discriminate.
Nusha (19)	Just find a group that's open to hearing about it and a very accepting

group. Because I know a lot of people they're just really close-minded about issues not relating to White people

- Nicole (19) Probably just chill and honestly sometimes its not worth it and ok eventually they will forget about it because, for the most part, I've never felt like my physical safety has been threatened so I feel like the less obnoxious and less you give something heat, then the less like it will be talked about. Just be cautious about what you say and not to volunteer extra information.
- Lily (20) I'd say just do you. Honestly. If you want to join those ethnic groups at a super Christian school where there's maybe three other people, do it! It speaks so much volume about what you value and if you value your ethnicity, you know, grab other people and do something about it. Even if it's trying to say something that you know is going to turn heads...Build a small campaign or if you have that activist drive in you just roll with it.
- Minha (19) My biggest advice to anybody when they are discriminated is you when you're upset and you're told something you go downhill and you're like you're right, I cant do this anymore, and like if your friend was to tell you that she can't do this anymore because she's supposed to be a terrorist or something, would you tell her yea you definitely are! No, you would be like no girl you're really pretty, you're so smart. I don't get why people can't do that for themselves, you live in your body, but you're more willing to be nice to a stranger than to your own body so be your own best friend is the biggest advice I can give to you.
- Elina (19) To not be hesitant to correct people if its like an offhand comment. A few times I have just brushed it off but then I'm like oh I wish I said something like "You should educate yourself a little more about that before making assumptions."
- Erin (18) Try to seek out different cultures, like lets say you were just from an Arab family, try to go to a Persian club on campus, maybe try to go to like pro-Palestine and a pro-Israeli, see what each looks like, what are their meetings, really just immerse yourself in all the different cultures on campus. There's not one set club that you can go to which would be easier but just really explore outside of your culture to really get a feel for all the cultures and countries and all the places that influenced your own culture, you might get a better sense of it. I guess don't be hesitant to really get involved from the beginning.
- Sanaz (19) There will always be a time when people focus in on a group and they'll attack the group but that doesn't mean that being a member of

that group is bad and you shouldn't be ashamed of your ethnicity.

- Sami (18) Just try to take everything lightly. Don't let it affect what you do. Because I could have let this discrimination make me sad and make me self-conscious and make me not enjoy things that I might be uncomfortable or I could just brush it off and try to educate them and whoever changes, changes and whoever doesn't change whatever I don't care.
- Sanaz (19) Be open to educating people about yourself, but at the same time don't take it to heart because ignorance is fueled by bigger forces in society than just us individuals so educating them would be battling that ignorance but don't take it to heart.
- Firuzeh (19) Just learn about yourself more, utilize everything, every resource you have here. Because like this... this university is a really special place and there's so many different types of people, just try not to be turned off by the experience. Just learn from it and try to contribute to the school being a better place. But if I feel like people don't know enough about Persian culture, then I'm making a difference by helping put on the culture show and then inviting all my friends in the dorms to come.
- Jasmine (18) Put yourself in situations that you're not going to feel comfortable. You should because you have to do this in order to take a chance and see, you know, you can hope that something good can come out of it, and come to school with fresh eyes and meet everybody, just meet everybody. Don't look for something, don't look for another Persian or Middle Eastern, if it comes it'll come but be the same to everyone, share your culture with whoever wants to know. Don't be afraid to be you.
- Mohammed (18) I think the most important thing is to choose how to define yourself. I think we have to understand that this is our choice. I think it's something very empowering for us.
- Talia (19) I would say don't let the conflict [Israel and Palestine conflict] come in between who that person is as an individual. If this person is very strong on one side, and the other is strong on the other side, maybe you can acknowledge that there is a huge difference, but don't have a conversation because it's not your place to try to correct the other side.
- Ben (19) I would say don't go around looking for a fight that's like pro-divestment/pro-Palestine if you're Jewish for example, because, one, those kind of conflicts have been going on. That kind of conflict is
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century's years old. And it's not going to be resolved on a college campus especially since, you know, if top-notch peacemakers are trying to resolve it and if they're having issues doing it then there's no way you're going to resolve it. Because it's a very complex issue.
