LGBTQI-IDENTIFYING MEMBERS OF THE MIDDLE EASTERN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

NICHOLAS BAITOO

While the contemporary landscape of sociological and psychological literature boasts nuances that account for many cultural identities, there exists a paucity in research pertaining to the lived experiences of Middle Eastern-American (MEA) members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, or Intersex (LGBTQI) community within the United States. Researchers have investigated the experiences of LGBTQI-identifying individuals and those of MEAs, but the idiosyncrasies that occur at the intersection of these identities is still a largely unexplored terrain. Narrative accounts suggest that this group faces a high risk of adverse quality of life outcomes directly resulting from persecution along axes of race, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Moreover, this persecution is bolstered by post-9/11 American societal views, heteronormative Middle Eastern values, and non-MEA members of the LGBTQI community. Anecdotal evidence also indicates promise in exploring interventions, such as community building to curb psychosocial pathways that could otherwise result in self-injurious behaviors (including suicide) amongst Middle Eastern-American individuals who identify as LGBTQI. Unfortunately, the lack of research on this topic acts as a barrier to both understanding this extremely vulnerable group and providing its members with culturally competent support. This review will synthesize information germane to the experiences of LGBTQI MEAs in order to illuminate gaps in literature and indicate areas which further research could better inform social service practices on behalf of this group.

DEFINING "MIDDLE EASTERN-AMERICAN"

The term "Middle Eastern" refers to an ethnic and cultural identity that draws from a constellation of nations located in West Asia, Central Asia, and Northern Africa. Within this identity exists a myriad of ethnicities such as Arab, Assyrian, and Kurdish; religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism; languages, such as Arabic and Farsi; and political alignments. As of 2010, counts of individuals in the United States who identified with one of these various ethnicities amounted to approximately 9,981,332, totaling 3.23 percent of the population (Sheskin & Dashefsky, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2012). The Middle Eastern ethnicities most represented in the United States are Jewish and then Arab, representing 2.18 percent and 0.5 percent of the total population, respectively (Asi & Beaulieu, 2013). However, these numbers are only tenuous because, to this day, census forms do not include a discrete category for "Middle Eastern," forcing such individuals to select the classification of "White, Not of Hispanic Origin." This lack of a separate classification came as a result of the group's absence from political mobilization and participation in mid-20th century civil rights movements, during which other racial and ethnic groups successfully organized into political action leading to minority preference programs (Bakalian & Bozorghmehr, 2009). This oversight in classification is a barrier to obtaining accurate counts of ethnically Middle Eastern individuals within the United States, and is an example of the thematic lack of visibility that members of this community experience.

MIDDLE EASTERN-AMERICANS, 9/11, AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

Though Middle Eastern ethnic communities have existed in the United States since the late 19th century (Zong & Batalova, 2015), one of the most important incidents affecting the collective MEA psyche did not occur until the beginning of the 21st century: the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. A tremendous spike in enmity towards MEAs followed this tragedy: only four days after 9/11, Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh-American gas station owner in Arizona, was murdered by a man whose goal was to "kill a Muslim" (SALDEF, 2011). This marked the first of many documented attacks against Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern-appearing Americans (Bakalian & Bozorghmehr, 2009). Following this incident, other reports of physical and verbal attacks, de facto socioeconomic restriction, and discriminatory policy began to emerge, particularly at the federal level. Proclamations such as the "War on Terror," and legislation such as the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act, have come to be criticized as "state-sponsored terrorism" against specific groups (Minnite, 2005, p. 182), as they have violated the civil liberties of countless Americans (Chisthi, Meissner, Papademetriou, Peterzell, Wishnie, & Yale-Loehr, 2003). This coalescence of sociopolitical hostilities against perceivably Muslim-Americans was dubbed "Islamophobia," and it effectively homogenized and demonized an entire group of people, regardless of their religious affiliation (Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project, 2016). Understandably, MEAs experienced a collective identity crisis, marked by competing drives to either distance themselves from any potential associations with Muslim extremism or to withdraw into their own ethnic enclaves (Beitin & Allen, 2005). An interview with an Arab-American describes the sociopolitical climate since 9/11:

> It doesn't matter if you're Christian or Muslim or where you're from. Whether you're from Saudi Arabia or Palestine, you're considered an Arab, a barbarian. Some people see Muslim people as the ultimate evil. They don't want to get to know us. They just see us in supermarkets with our veils and they judge and they whisper...In a way, it was good that people took an increased interest in the Muslim faith after 9/11 but it was also bad. It caused even more misunderstanding because people were hearing the media's version of the Muslim faith. (Beitin

& Allen, 2005, p. 259)

In order to examine the lived experiences of LGBTQI-identifying MEAs, it is vital to first understand the ways in which these social and political contexts interact to create the strenuous landscapes that this group must traverse.

MIDDLE EASTERN-AMERICAN VALUES AND THE LGBTQI COMMUNITY

While a conglomeration of diverse cultural value systems exist in the Middle East, Islam influences many of these cultures due to its proliferation throughout the region (Zeghal & Waldman, 2009). D'Souza explains that Islam describes [LGBTQI] individuals as "'…people of the wrath of Allah,' and most Muslims find the notion of legitimizing what they perceive as sinful conduct to be disgusting and unspeakable (2007)." Nearly all Middle Eastern countries boast criminal laws against "sexual activity by [LGBTQI] people" (Human Rights Campaign, 2016), and at least six of these nations have laws stipulating that sexual acts by LGBTQI individuals can be penalized by death (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). Given these heteronormative expectations of society exist across Middle Eastern cultures, they instigate strong tensions between LGBTQI MEAs and their ethnic communities (Arida & Ameri, 2012).

LGBTQI-IDENTIFYING MIDDLE EASTERN-AMERICANS

NARRATIVES OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

Though some research exists that describes the experiences of LGBTQI communities in the Middle East (Sharma, 2007), LGBTQI communities in the United States (Stewart, 2014), and Middle Eastern communities within the United States, there is a glaring absence of research focused on LGBTQI-identifying MEAs (Ikizler & Symanski, 2014). However, anecdotal narratives describing those who navigate these seemingly incompatible identities have begun to emerge, and these narratives often take the forms of videos, organizations, news reports, and blog posts. For example, Bashar Makhay, founder of Tarab NYC, describes a life impacted by these converging identities, and his experiences include receiving an ultimatum from his mother to "become straight," a subsequent separation from his family, a rejection from American society and non-MEA LGBTQI spaces, and a longing for community (Associated Press, 2014). Khalida Saed, the Iranian-American author of On the Edge of Belonging, utilizes a pseudonym despite coming out as a lesbian for fear of backlash from Muslims and Middle Eastern communities. She also describes the "pain of straddling separate identities" that accompanies the struggle to reconcile two seemingly antipodal cultures ("Contemporary Gay Muslims in America," n.d.). The difficulties this group faces are best captured in an article from the Detroit Metro Times:

> As immigrants, they must cope with melding two nationalities; as [Middle Eastern-Americans], they must deal with unbridled, post-9/11 racism in this country; and as gays, they must deal with jokes, harassment, discrimination, and sometimes, the threat of being attacked and beaten — even by their own families. (Klein, 2006).

EMERGING THEMES IN LGBTQI-IDENTIFYING MEA EXPERIENCES

Though these accounts originate from varying sources in different parts of the United States, two prominent themes emerge: rejection from family and an onerous search for community. LGBTQI-identifying MEAs face the fear of or actual experience of violence, rejection, or coercive action from family members. For cultures that are historically hostile towards LGBTQI individuals or for communities that originate from nations that actively criminalize LGBTQI identities, it is understandable that this group would be apprehensive of their families' reactions. Second is a longing for community; each of the prior stories portrays individuals being ejected from one community and subsequently rejected by another. This struggle is marked by a sense of loss and confusion as the individual searches for acceptance and understanding, thus underscoring the importance of community for this largely invisible group.

ISOLATION AND RISK

For many MEA members of the LGBTQI community, being forced to conform to cultural expectations of sexuality, family structures, and social obligations isolates them from their own ethnic communities, and the pervasive Islamophobia following 9/11 furthers their distance from other Americans. This Islamophobia, underpinned by race-based divides within the LGBTQI community (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011), excludes them from authentic community within LGBTQI spaces, further exacerbating the isolation that this population experiences.

With their ethnic identities viewed as yet another source of risk, some LGBTQI-identifying MEAs experience a phenomenon known as the "Double Closet Effect," which compels individuals in this group to compromise multiple parts of their identities and endure the continuous stress of doing so (Gittens, 2009, p. 7). These individuals retreat from their sexual identities while simultaneously divorcing their cultural identities, and this process results in stress, isolation, and shame. This social maneuver, as well as its psychological effects, is consistent with Moradi's "risk hypothesis," also known as the "double jeopardy" hypothesis, which states that in contrast to White [LGBTQI] individuals, [LGBTQI] people of color endure higher levels of stress resulting from dual pressures of homophobia and racism (as cited in Meyer, 2010, p. 447). Though research does not exist to confirm the effects of this continued isolation on LGBTQI-identifying MEAs specifically, data on discrimination against gender, sexual, and racial minorities suggest higher rates of mental health disorders, substance abuse, violence, and suicidality (Mereish, O'Cleirigh, & Bradford, 2014; Lavers, 2011; O'Donnell, Meyer,

& Schwartz, 2011). The MEA community also carries a historical hesitation to access psychological services (Al Khateeb, Al Hadidi, & Al Khatib, 2014), and as a result LGBTQI-identifying MEAs are at risk for an incremental compounding of the negative psychological effects spurred by the precarious intersection of their identities (Meyer, 2003). This resulting isolation, compounded by multiple layers of cultural incrimination, testifies to a great need for further exploration that will provide nuanced, culturally relevant interventions for members of this specific population.

PROMISING PRACTICES

MEA members of the LGBTQI community are forced to navigate an idiosyncratic psychological gambit due to the competing pressures in their daily lives: societal persecution based on their ethnic identities, violence and rejection from their ethnic communities based on their gender and sexual identities, and the invisibility that results from being unable to integrate all facets of their identities. A minority multiple times over, this group experiences extreme isolation as a consequence of prejudice against its unwittingly oppositional identities, and the dearth of research about LGBTQI-identifying MEAs results in knowledge gaps regarding health outcomes, resiliency models, and community resources available to serve this particular group. This knowledge gap signals a severe research need, as knowledge gleaned from studies of LGBTQI ethnic minorities suggests severe complications in health, mental health, socioeconomic status, and lifespan (Balsam et al., 2011). In the absence of such research, this group is at risk for continued isolation and hindrance of quality-of-life outcomes. Consequently, service providers are at risk of unintentionally mistreating members of this community and further exacerbating this group's historic reluctance to access services.

Research into protective factors for Arab-Americans suggests that "ethnic density," which refers to the high concentration of culturally similar individuals in near proximity, curtails socioemotional pathways that typically lead to suicide (El-Sayed, Tracy, Scarborough, & Galea, 2011) thereby reinforcing the value of community. For a historically disparate and isolated group such as the MEA LGBTQI population, the lack of such density likely contributes to the distress of its members; therefore, this research implies that creating community among this group's members can mitigate daily distresses and produce a powerful protective factor against suicidality. Anecdotal narratives demonstrate the value of community, and organizations such as Tarab NYC, Assal, and Al Gamea have emerged as resources through which this community can unite. This value suggests that interventions focusing on community building can be effective protective factors for this group. However, because anonymity is tantamount to safety for LGBTQI MEAs, community building may pose a daunting task. In the past, the internet has offered a safe space in which members of vulnerable groups can connect with each other (DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013; Miller, 2012); service providers can leverage the internet to construct online community spaces for LGBTQI MEAs. Although these web-based services could be promising, further research is required in order to determine the efficacy of these or other interventions to mitigate the psychological, social, and emotional stressors that LGBTQI MEAs experience. Differences across axes such as ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and citizenship likely account for variations in experience, so further exploration is also necessary in order to ascertain outcomes along these lines.

CONCLUSION

There is a great need for research pertaining to LGBTQI-identifying MEAs, as little investigation has emerged that can strengthen the cultural competencies of service providers who encounter members of this group. Such research would provide insight into this group's numbers, its aggregate psychosocial status, the effects of immigration on Middle Eastern refugees and asylum-seekers, nuances among ethnic differences among MEAs, and effective interventions in serving its members. The National Association of Social Workers calls for such cultural competency (National Association of Social Workers, 2017), so it is an ethical responsibility for practitioners and researchers to add to the canon of knowledge on this subject. Through conducting such research, this often-invisible group can be better understood, and subsequently, be better served by researchers, mental health practitioners, community organizers, and policy makers.

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NICHOLAS BAITOO Nicholas Baitoo is the Assyrian-American child of Iranian parents, and his background as an LGBTQI-identifying first-generation American has a significant influence on his worldview. Before attending Columbia University School of Social Work, Nick was a teacher, an after school program evaluator, and a counselor for youth experiencing homelessness. He came to the field of social work in order to acquire the knowledge, skills, and connections

needed to empower communities so they can identify and overcome societal oppression. Nicholas will be graduating in 2017 with an emphasis in clinical practice, and hopes to leverage his training and experiences to provide direct service to historically marginalized communities, develop empowerment and service programs, generate social policy, and produce research publications.