

## **Identity Change and Self-Image in Arab Groups after September 11, 2001**

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### **Abstract**

Since September 11, 2001, there has been an increase in prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination against Arab groups all over the world. This research article examines the influence of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> on the identity and self image of Arab groups (i.e., Arab-Americans and Pakistani groups). This is important because it can clarify the reasons for the behavior of Arab groups toward both non-Arab and other Arab groups. Both national and religious identities are used more often after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Furthermore, there is a negative self image among Arab groups that is caused by the thoughts and actions of the mainstream community. Further research is needed regarding the effects of such an event as 9/11 on ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** Arab groups, Discrimination, Ethnic Identity, Identity label, National Identity, Prejudice, Religious Identity, Self-image, September 11<sup>th</sup>, Stereotyping

### **Introduction**

On September 11, 2001, the world watched while passenger planes crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania. The members of the terrorist organization responsible for these actions were Arab Muslims (Oswald, 2005) and several decades of slow and incomplete political and social organizing among Arab Americans suddenly seemed to unravel (American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2001). In the wake of these events, there was an increase in prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination towards Arab groups throughout the world (American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2001). Increased prejudice and stereotyping could lead to adverse psychological outcomes, such as health complications. These health complications are associated with both group- identity and self-concept (Meyer, 2003). This is because it had been shown that characteristics of identity may be related to mental health, and that a negative self-concept is internalized following negative evaluations by others. Because such changes in self-identification and self conceptualizations in relationship to terrorist acts have begun to be studied only recently, it is important to know which changes occur as a result of such actions. An understanding of these changes can lead to the creation of prevention programs and other relevant interventions for those affected.

“Identity” is an umbrella term and refers to the collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a person is known (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1999). Group identity terms that are used in this article are “ethnic identity,” “national

identity” and “religious identity.” These terms are used because of research that suggests that these identifications changed after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> (Witteborn, 2004; Peek, 2006). In this article, I consider an ethnic identification to be the relationship between an individual and a group which constitutes the basis of the individual’s belief that he or she shares common descent with a group, based on shared individual characteristics and/or shared socio-cultural experiences (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 1999). A national identity refers to an identification with a country as a whole in which culture, traditions, language and politics fall within the scope of national identity (Smith, 1992). A religious identity is the identification with a set of beliefs about nature, the meaning of life and the relationship among human beings as regards what they consider to be holy, sacred or spiritual (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1994).

These group identities are essential for healthy emotional functioning, which in turn leads to needs for individuation (a process by which elements of personality become integrated over time into a well-functioning person) and affiliation (Meyer, 2003). Characteristics of identity may be related to mental health both directly and in interaction with stressors. A “direct effect” suggests that identity characteristics can cause distress. An “interactive effect” with stress suggests that characteristics of identity would modify the effect of stress on health outcomes. On the other hand, group identity may also lead to stronger affiliations with one’s community, which may in turn aid in buffering the impact of stress (Meyer, 2003). The emphasis in this article will be on individuals who display a strong affiliation with their communities

(eg., ethnic identification). Identification with an ethnic group is linked to mental health, and is inversely to stress experienced by an individual as a result of discrimination (Mossakowski, 2003).

Identity is related to self-concept, which, refers to the set of attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values that an individual believes defines who he or she is (Berk). An anchor for self-conceptualization is provided by the process of social categorization, which triggers important intergroup processes (Meyer, 2003). Interactions with others are also crucial for the development of a self concept. A negative evaluation by others, such as that experienced by minority groups in society as a result of negative stereotypes and prejudice on the part of the majority population, may lead to negative self-conceptualizations, and maybe even to adverse effects on health (Meyer, 2003).

Because of these health implications, it is important to know what the effects of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination on identity and self-image of Arab groups have been since September 11, 2001. Therefore, this article will attempt to answer two questions. The first question will explore which kind of identification people used before and after 9/11. This will be explained through identity labels and associated core symbols. Secondly the relationship between mainstream thinking about Arab groups and the self-image of Arab groups (Pakistani groups) will be explored. Before answering these questions, the concepts of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination will be explained.

### **Prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination**

Prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination are all expressions of attitude. An attitude consists of affective (emotional), cognitive and behavioral components (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). Prejudice refers to the general attitude structure, while stereotyping and discrimination are elements of prejudice.

Prejudice is part of the affective component of attitudes. While prejudice can involve either positive or negative affect, people mostly use the word prejudice to refer to negative attitudes about others. In this context, prejudice is a negative attitude toward people in a distinguishable group (in this article, Arab groups), based solely on their membership in that group, and which results in the ignoring of traits or behaviors of individual members of the group that is the target of prejudice (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007).

A stereotype represents the cognitive component of an attitude (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). It is a generalization about a group of people in which identical characteristics are assigned to virtually all members of a given group, regardless of actual variation among the members of that group. Stereotyping is used to simplify how we look at the world. When stereotypical beliefs lead to intentional acts of abuse, then discrimination, the behavioral component of attitudes, will occur (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). Discrimination is an unjustified negative or harmful action toward the members of a given group simply because of their membership in that group (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007).

### **Social categorization**

Prejudice leads to the creation of groups of people (social categorization), based on certain characteristics. It is the underlying theme of human social cognition, and it has profound implications. One of these implications is in-group bias; positive feelings and special treatment for people in the in-group and negative feelings and unfair treatment towards the out-group members (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). In-group bias can be expressed in behavior (discrimination), affect (prejudice) and cognition (stereotyping) (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007).

Another consequence of social categorization is the perception of out-group homogeneity (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). This is the belief that members of the out-group are all the same. In-group members tend to perceive those in the out-group as more similar (homogeneous) to each other than they actually are. The out-group is also perceived as more homogeneous than the in-group members are. When the individual sees his or her group as superior to other groups, self-esteem will be enhanced. Enhancing self-esteem is the major underlying motive of social categorization and promotes in-group bias. When discrimination occurs, the in-group bias of the discriminated group will enhance the in-group bias in order to maintain a high level of self-esteem (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007).

### **Stereotyping and discrimination vis-à-vis Arab groups**

Prejudice and stereotypes directed toward Arab (i.e., Arab-American) groups are not a new phenomenon (Oswald, 2005). Negative stereotypes

about Arab groups comprise beliefs that they are untrustworthy, uncivilized, radical Muslims, and that they are terrorists or that they support terrorism. Sociopolitical events can increase prejudice and stereotypes (Oswald, 2005).

These are potential reasons why the attacks of 9/11 increased the stereotypes and prejudice against Arab groups. Another factor is that Americans felt threatened by the terrorist attacks, in terms of both their individual and group security. The perception of threat can result in out-group homogeneity while reinforcing in-group bias (Oswald, 2005).

The sense of threat results from the many news reports and articles with a stereotypic content that reinforce the group identity of Americans (Oswald, 2005). Flags and other symbols of American identity were displayed widely. There was also a strong impetus toward increasing security of US-citizens. For example, a terror-alert code system was introduced, which could lead to warnings and higher levels of vigilance for terrorist events, and increased security in airports and at large public events. In addition, a new department of the U.S. federal government, the Office of Homeland Security, was created (Oswald, 2005). Even President George W. Bush's rhetoric was notable for its stereotypical words and images (Merskin, 2004).

Along with increased prejudice and stereotyping, discrimination also increased (Oswald, 2005). Higher levels of public harassment, hate mail, and increased workplace discrimination toward Arab-Americans were recorded (Oswald, 2005). Negative journalism also spread widely in the non-fiction world of television, magazines, radio, newspapers and websites. A campaign of merciless negative journalism against Muslims and Islam had a huge influence on the sharply negative trend of American public opinion of Islam in the aftermath of 9/11. Americans however, believed that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> had no influence on their opinion about Muslims and Islam (American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2001).

In short, after September 11<sup>th</sup> social categorization leads to the existence of prejudice, stereotyping and even sometimes to discrimination. In the following section, the influence of social categorization on identity change in Arab-Americans and the self-concept of Pakistani groups will be discussed.

### **Identification change in Arab-Americans**

Group identification serves as a means of coping with discrimination at the group level (Meyer, 2003; Edwards, 2010). One important component of group identification is self-investment in the group, an aspect of identification with an important in-group. This means that the individual has positive feelings and bonding with the in-group. Self-investment is associated with a group's emotional responses to discrimination, with anger being one of the most important of these responses. A higher degree of self-investment leads to more anger. This anger leads to collective action, which refers to more than one person striving to achieve a common goal. Collective action is a coping mechanism for the purposes of responding to perceived discrimination, and aimed at changing the way the group taking action is treated and viewed by society (Edwards, 2010).

Therefore the identifications used by Arab-Americans changed in response to perceived discrimination, stereotyping and prejudice. The way in which these group identifications changed after September 11<sup>th</sup>, has been studied by Witteborn (2004). This study was based on two assumptions of the Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, Jackson & Ribeau, 2003 in Witteborn, 2004). "The first assumption is that identities have individual, enacted, relational, and communal properties" (Witteborn, 2004). This study especially focused on the third aspect mentioned here, communal identity, which refers to national, ethnic and religious identity. "The second assumption of the Communication Theory of Identity is that identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings and labels" (Witteborn, 1994). To express communal identities, one can use identity labels to communicate with other people. These identity labels consist of referential expressions and are related to core symbols, which are specific words and phrases, and which contain sets of norms, values, premises, and beliefs about the world (Witteborn, 2004).

The study of identity labels and associated core symbols provides insight into the meaning of identification with a certain communal identity. The study of Witteborn (2004) answered questions regarding both the identity labels that women of Arab descent used before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, as well as the core symbols associated with these identity labels. Only five individuals were included in this study. Therefore its results cannot legitimately be

generalized to all Arab American women. I will first discuss the identifications used before September 11<sup>th</sup>. Secondly, I will discuss how these identifications changed after September 11<sup>th</sup> (Witteborn, 2004). Afterward, I will compare these findings with the outcomes reported in other research.

#### *Identities before 9/11*

Before September 11<sup>th</sup>, Arab women used three different identity labels; The label “Arab”, the label “Arab-American” and national labels (Witteborn, 2004).

The “Arab” label was used by all women to express a common ethnic identity. This ethnic identity goes beyond national boundaries and it unites people of Arab origin on the basis of both language and similar value and belief systems (Witteborn, 2004). One core symbol that is associated with the “Arab” label is family. This core symbol is related to the values of speaking Arabic, communicating with other people, and caring about other people. The meaning of family for Arab-Americans was frequently compared and contrasted with the meaning of family in America. Doing this highlights the meaning of family for Arab cultures. “Family” was also used to describe social relationships between family members (ie., relational identities). Relational identities and communal identities are interwoven (Witteborn, 2004).

The second label used by the women to express a common ethnic identity was the “Arab-American” label. This label is used by strangers, the media or in reference to groups of people (Witteborn, 2004). It is also used to express that you are a native of a specific area, or to express a political opinion. The label refers to a “pan-ethnicity” whereby groups emphasize a common rather than a differentiated identity. In this case, Arab-American citizens use this label as a way of indicating that they are equal to other American citizens. The core symbol associated with the label Arab-American is being a public person (Witteborn, 2004). This means that the person sees himself or herself as a person who engage in interactions in public situations. It is used in situations that require the presence of group identity and is a label that overcomes individual national identifications and unifies people of Arab descent on the basis of their American citizenship (Witteborn, 2004).

In addition, the women also used national labels, such as Palestinian, Lebanese, and Egyptian,

to express their identities. These national labels are related to the core symbols of family and respect. So the core symbol of “family” is not only associated with an Arab ethnic identity, but also with national identities (Witteborn, 2004).

#### *Identities after 9/11*

After September 11<sup>th</sup>, the label “Arab” was not only associated with the core symbol of “family” but, most especially, with organizational family (Witteborn, 2004). The warm communication and social support associated with the core symbol of family now became characterized by disorganized behavior and different styles of discussion (organizational family).

The label “Arab-American” as a pan-ethnic identity was used less frequently that it had been before September 11<sup>th</sup> (Witteborn, 2004). National labels, however, were used more frequently after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Participants associated themselves with the “Arab” label but emphasized their national label in order to make themselves more publicly recognizable and to show the political, geographical, and historical characteristics of their admired countries (Witteborn, 2004). This is not because they wanted to show their nationalism, but because they wanted others to understand their diversity within the Arab world. There was also a different meaning behind the core symbol of family. It was a place that offered support and communication, and now also became a place for discussion and for identifying goals and interests (Witteborn, 2004). In short, national identifications are expressed more often, while ethnic identifications are expressed less frequently (Witteborn, 2004).

In contrast to the research of Witteborn (2004), studies conducted by Peek (2006) and Rousseau & Jamil (2008) have not found an increase of national identification among Arab-Americans after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Peek (2006) shows that a lesser degree of expression of ethnic identification depended on family socialization processes, peer group influences, religious group ideas, and the perceptions and experiences of individual or group discrimination within the dominant society. Thus personal, social and external factors (like those of September 11<sup>th</sup>) influenced the awareness and changing of ethnic identities. In contrast, the finding of Witteborn (2004) was more dependent on the personal and social factors of the research group (ie., five Arab women) the size of which, as

mentioned before, limits the extent to which his findings can be generalized.

However, for the group of participants ( $n = 127$ ) in the study of Peek (2006), all of whom were students, ethnicity was not as important to their construction of self following perceived prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination, as their religious identity (Peek, 2006). Religious identifications were more common than before September 11<sup>th</sup>. Religious identity became more central to the social and personal selves of the participants. Stronger religious identities may lead to a strengthening of group solidarity, cohesion, and collective identification. On the other hand, stronger religious identities, may also provoke hostility and discrimination on the part of other Americans. However religious identities are actively constructed by individuals and groups in the social world, and are therefore a dynamic and ongoing process (Peek, 2006).

The increasing prominence of religious identity noted by Peek (2006) was also found in the study of Rousseau & Jamil (2008). Positive phenomena associated with religious identity are reactive cohesion and identity affirmation. This increase in religious and/or national identifications could be due to the fact that affiliation with one's community may in turn help buffer the impact of stress (Meyer, 2003). Increased stress could lead to a lower self-esteem, and thus affiliation with one's community may boost self-esteem. This enhanced self-esteem in turn increases the in-group bias which then further increases self-esteem (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007).

### **Relationship between negative thoughts of the mainstream and self-concept**

In addition to finding that religious identification increased after September 11<sup>th</sup>, Rousseau & Jamil (2008) also investigated the self concept of two Pakistani groups after September 11<sup>th</sup> as part of their study. The negative representations of Arab (American) groups (i.e., that they are untrustworthy, uncivilized, radical Muslims), and that they are terrorists or that they support terrorism (Oswald, 2005) on the part of the dominant society, a perception partially caused by the media, have led to a very negative collective image of Pakistani groups (Rousseau & Jamil, 2008). The "self" in both groups refers to Pakistanis locally and to Muslims globally, but the "other" is directed to Americans specifically and the West generally. So,

in both Pakistani groups, there is an image of a weak self and a powerful other.

Both Pakistani groups see themselves as victims of 9/11, instead of as the enemy which the mainstream depicts them as (Rousseau & Jamil, 2008). This victim position is associated with a weak collective self-concept, because both groups reject the aggressor image which is projected onto those Pakistani groups. That is why the Pakistani group want to give vent to the anger which they feel as a result of their being discriminated against (Edwards, 2010). However, the Pakistani groups feel that they cannot express this anger in public (because doing so reinforces the stereotypical beliefs of the dominant society). Thus, on one hand, the mirror imaging of beliefs leads, as we see in the meaning attribution patterns, to projecting all responsibility onto the "other". Simultaneously, on the other hand, there may be an internalization of a negative self-concept by minorities that is typical of alienation processes (Rousseau & Jamil, 2008). According to Rousseau and Jamil (2008) self-esteem (both personal and collective) and a feeling of personal control both function as protective factors that counter the effects of discrimination. This self-esteem enhances in-group bias (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2007). This in-group bias exists because Americans felt threatened, in terms of both their individual and group security, by the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> (Oswald, 2005). The negative evaluation of the world (specifically Americans) may lead to negative self-conceptualizations and perhaps also to health problems on the part of individuals in groups that are the targets of discrimination (Meyer, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

There was an increase in prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination against Arab groups all over the world following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, 2001). These attacks have strongly influenced the identity and the self-concept of Pakistani groups which, in turn could lead to health problems for those belonging to those groups (Meyer, 2003).

The first goal of this study was to explore what the changes in identifications after September 11<sup>th</sup> were. There turned out to be a change in national identification, which was resorted to more frequently than before September 11<sup>th</sup> (Witteborn, 2004). The meaning of national identity labels mainly revolves around the political, geographical,

and historical characteristics of each country, and is less involved with the core symbol of family, than before September 11<sup>th</sup> (Witteborn, 2004).

This change in national identifications was not found in other studies (Peek, 2006; Rousseau & Jamil, 2008). Because of the small sample size of the study of Witteborn (2004), it is not possible to conclude that national identities are more frequently resorted to by all Arab-American groups. Thus, more research has to be done regarding the change in national identity. It is important to understand the mechanism which leads to the kind of identifications observed following events such as those of September 11<sup>th</sup> for the purpose of preventing consequent health problems (Meyer, 2003).

Ethnic identifications were used less frequently following September 11<sup>th</sup> (Witteborn, 2004). However, according to Peek (2006), this more frequent use of ethnic identifications depends on both internal and external factors. This could also be due to the small groups of participants in the study of Witteborn (2004). Further research is needed to more clearly determine the relative influence of internal and external factors are on these identifications. A clearer understanding of internal influences could lead to intervention programs (i.e., after the occurrence of an event (an external factor) such as September 11) aimed at preventing a lowering of the self-esteem among individuals belonging to the affected groups.

In addition, religious identities were also expressed more frequently after September 11<sup>th</sup>. This finding was supported by two studies, and it seems to be a promising result for those who are interested in increased expression of religion (Peek, 2006; Rousseau & Jamil, 2008). It also illustrates the continued importance of religion as a basis of personal and social identity.

All of these findings have to be further researched, since further information regarding these issues may help people of Arab descent to better understand why Arab groups struggle with the question of their identity. It might also help non-Arabs better understand that people of Arab descent have multiple national, ethnic, and pan-ethnic identity dimensions that have specific meanings.

This is also of importance because of the likelihood of future terrorist attacks on the U.S., and because of the history of violence against ethnic and religious minority groups following such events. The mainstream community will then be

able to recognize the problem of prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination on minority groups after such events, and thus be better prepared deal with the aftermath of such events.

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