

**The Psychodynamics of First Generation  
Arab-American Muslim Women**

by

**Amal Hassoun Nardi**

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*The Psychodynamics of First Generation Arab-American Muslim Women*

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THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF FIRST GENERATION ARAB-AMERICAN MUSLIM  
WOMEN

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Psychology

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West Los Angeles, California  
2006

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(Hassoun Nardi, 2006)

## DEDICATION

To my children, Yassmeen, Sofia, and Zorro; I would not have been the person I am without you in my life. Thank you.

(Hassoun Nardi, 2006)

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In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF FIRST GENERATION ARAB-AMERICAN MUSLIM  
WOMEN

Amal Hassoun Nardi

California Graduate Institute  
December 2006

Bruce Johnston, PsyD, Chair  
Donald Schultz, PhD, CGI Reader  
Gus Dixon, MD, External Reader

This causal-comparative study explores the acculturation and its affects on the psychodynamics of first generation Arab-American Muslim women born and raised in the United States. Torn between the Old World customs of their parents and modern American traditions, first generation Arab-American Muslim women face a major identity challenge in trying to balance their two worlds.

Developmental psychologist E.H. Erikson (1970) proposed a theory of psychosocial development based on six basic concepts: stages of development, developmental task, psychosocial crisis, the central process for resolving the psychosocial

crisis, the radius of significant relationship and coping behaviors. Coupled with Erikson's theory is Young Yun Kim's theory of acculturation (1977), which posits that acculturation is a phenomenon when immigrants eventually come to understand the norms and values of their "host society," and that media of the host society provided a catalyst for the acculturation process.

Suinn, Rickard-Figueroa, Lew, & Vigil (1987) developed the Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (SL-ASIA), with 26 questions designed to measure acculturation level. The author adjusted the SL-ASIA to a more Arab focused version of the scale, called the ASL-ASIA. A pilot study was conducted to insure reliability and validity. The Arab Focused Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (ASL-ASIA) was used to measure the levels of acculturation of immigrant Arab Muslim mothers and the acculturation levels of their first generation Arab-American Muslim daughters.

A second tool used was the Mother-Adult Daughter (MAD) Questionnaire. Developed by Rastogi (1995), the twenty-five question MAD measures the adult daughter's perception of connectedness, interdependence, and trust in hierarchy in her relationship with her mother.

The last instrument used in this study was the Adult Attachment Inventory (AAI). Created by Main et al. (1984) the AAI is used to assess the attachment related issues of the mother's parenting styles. The AAI is a structured, hour-long, semi-clinical interview focusing on early experiences and their effects.

Several studies have shown that a mother's attachment level affects the attachment level of her daughter. Therefore, this study focuses on the question: Does the

level of acculturation of an immigrant Arab Muslim mother compare with the level of acculturation of her first generation Arab-American Muslim daughter? The research design of this study was based on an extensive literature review on the topics of Erikson's psychosocial theory (1970), Kim's acculturation theory (1977), Arab Muslim cultural perspective, and Islamic texts.

The premise of this study was that Arab Muslim mothers' levels of acculturation will affect the levels of acculturation of their first generation Arab-American Muslim daughters. It was also expected that the level of maternal cultural identification would affect the acculturation level of the first generation Arab-American Muslim daughter. Finally, it is anticipated that the first generation Arab-American Muslim daughter's level of acculturation would affect her attachment level to her immigrant Arab Muslim mother.

Findings appeared to support the hypothesis that the level of acculturation of the immigrant Arab Muslim mother is positively correlated with the level of acculturation of her first generation Arab-American Muslim daughter. A second hypothesis that the level of maternal cultural identification would affect the acculturation level of her first generation Arab-American Muslim daughter was not supported. Also, results did not support the third hypothesis that the acculturation level of first generation Arab-American Muslim daughters would affect her attachment level with her immigrant Arab Muslim mother.

This study concludes with the following recommendations:

1. A scale geared specifically towards Arab Muslims is necessary to accurately evaluate their levels of acculturation into American society.

2. Further research is needed in the general area of acculturation, as well as an Arab Muslim focus to address the stigma and other psychological side effects that the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> have left upon the entire melting pot.
3. A much larger varied sampling should be replicated to address the non-English speaking Mothers and their influence on their Daughters' acculturation and psychodynamic formation.
4. Another study should be conducted to test the influence of immigrant Arab Muslim Fathers/Male figures on the psychodynamic formation of their first generation Arab-American Muslim daughters.
5. A follow up on the first generation Arab-American Muslim Daughters that participated in the study is necessary, as well as an investigation on their relationships with their daughters to examine the acculturation and psychodynamics of their second-generation Arab-American Muslim Daughters.

The aim of future research is to aide therapists in becoming more culturally sensitive to their patients as well as to gain deeper understanding of the affects of acculturation. It will also assist immigrant mothers and first generation daughters of all nationalities to better transition their acculturation into the American society. Furthermore, first generation daughters alike will have greater insight into their own psychodynamics to aid in both their identity formation and their appreciation for their cultural differences.

## CHAPTER 1

### NATURE OF THE STUDY

#### *Background of the Problem*

As the daughter of immigrant parents, an Arab-American Muslim woman is raised with the traditions and values of her parents' Old World while attempting to reconcile them with the customs of her new world. This presents a major identity challenge for the first generation Arab-American Muslim woman as she struggles to find a place for herself. Is she an Arab? Is she an American? How does Islam factor into this equation? What forms the psychodynamics of the making of a first generation Arab-American Muslim woman?

#### *Problem Statement*

How does the level of acculturation of an immigrant Arab Muslim mother influence the level of acculturation of her first generation Arab-American Muslim daughter?

#### *Research Questions*

- 1) To what extent do the acculturation levels of first generation Arab-American Muslim daughters impact their attachment to their immigrant Arab Muslim mothers?
- 2) To what extent does the level of cultural identifications of immigrant Arab Muslim mothers influence the acculturation levels of their first generation Arab-American Muslim daughters?

- 3) To what extent does the level of acculturation of immigrant Arab Muslim mothers influence the acculturation level of their Arab-American daughters?.

### *Application of Results*

The goal of this dissertation is to measure, investigate, and classify the levels of acculturation of first generation Arab-American Muslim women born and raised in the United States. The knowledge of this identity crisis within first generation Arab-American Muslim women will help the practicing psychologist become more culturally sensitive to the needs of their Arab-American Muslim clients. Results may help first generation Arab-American Muslim women become better adjusted individuals and to better bridge the gap between immigrant Arab Muslim mothers and their first generation Arab-American Muslim daughters.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The guidance throughout this dissertation will be drawn from the Swedish developmental psychologist E.H. Erikson's (1970) theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's theory is based on six basic concepts: stages of development, developmental task, psychosocial crisis, the central process for resolving the psychosocial crisis, the radius of significant relationship and coping behaviors.

A developmental stage is a period of life that is characterized by a wide variety of behaviors in the area of competence or conflict. Each stage has unique characteristics that differentiate it from its predecessor. Erikson focused on a specific order of stages, with each stage containing the accomplishments of the prior stages. (Erikson, 1970, p. 104)

The second organizing concept of Erikson's theory is the concept of developmental tasks. These tasks consist of a set of skills and competencies that contribute to increase mastery over one's environment. These skills determine the healthy progressions in each stage. Erikson believed there to be ideal periods for learning developmental tasks, times when a person is most ready to acquire new abilities or developmental skills. Learning that occurs during these periods may enhance learning and performance of developmental tasks later in life (Erikson, 1970, p. 125).

A psychosocial crisis, the third organizing concept of Erikson's theory (1970, p. 118), occurs when one makes psychological efforts to adjust to the demands of one's social environment at each stage of development. Erikson refers to the term crisis as a set of psychological stressors; not an emergency situation.

The fourth organizing concept of his psychosocial theory is the central process which addresses how significant social relationships link the individual's need with the requirement of the culture at each life stage. (Erikson, 1970, p. 121)

The fifth organizing principle of Erikson's psychosocial theory has to do with the radius of significant relationships. At each stage of life, a network of significant relationships determines the demands that will be made on the person; the way they will be taken care of and the meaning derived from the relationships. The relationship network varies from person to person, but each person has a network of significant relationships and increasing readiness to enter into a widening social arena (Erikson, 1970, p. 123).

Coping behavior, the last concept of his theory, consists of active efforts to resolve stress and create new solutions to the challenges of each developmental stage.

The coping process has three components: 1) the ability to gain and process new information, 2) the ability to maintain control over one's emotional state, and 3) the ability to move freely within one's environment. In coping with challenges, individuals create their own strategies which reflect their talents and motives. Erikson hypothesized that prime adaptive ego qualities that developed from a positive resolution of the psychosocial crisis of a given stage provide resources for coping with the next. On the other hand, a potential core pathology, or destructive force, may also develop as a result of ineffective negative crisis resolution at each stage. These pathologies move people away from others, tend to prevent further exploration of interpersonal relationships and impede the resolution of subsequent psychosocial crises (Erikson, 1970, p. 126).

Coupled with Erikson's theory is Young Yun Kim's theory of acculturation. In studying the communication pattern of foreign immigrants, Kim noted that "as foreign immigrants move from one culture to another, behavioral modes and values in the old setting may prove maladaptive in the new" (Kim, 1977, p. 67). She hypothesized that acculturation was a phenomenon when immigrants eventually came to understand the norms and values of their "host society." She further provides for the possibility of an "intercultural identity" for an immigrant who has successfully integrated themselves within their host society's culture (Kim, 1992). Intercultural identity identifies an individual's ability to grow beyond their original culture and incorporate their new culture as well, gaining additional insight into both cultures in the process.

Kim viewed communication to be the mediating process necessary to effectively transition from one culture to another. "Communication is crucial to acculturation. It provides the fundamental means by which individuals develop insights into their new

environment” [\(Kim, 1977, p. 68\)](#). Furthermore, Kim posited that mass media and interpersonal communication were the most “salient forms in the cultural learning process” (Kim, 1977, p. 70).

According to Kim’s theory (1977, p. 68), increased interpersonal communication also increases acculturation. She maintained that increased communication with members of the host country would facilitate acculturation. Communications with members of one’s original culture, however, were viewed as detrimental to the acculturation process.

Kim also maintained that each person had different degrees of motivation. “Whatever the reason may be, different immigrants do show different levels of acculturation motivation” [\(Kim, 1977, p. 73\)](#). The different levels were said to correlate directly with the influence of mass media and the amount of interpersonal communication one has. Furthermore it is argued that an immigrant’s perception of the host society is influenced by language competence and acculturation motivation, which is mediated by mass media and interpersonal communication (Kim, 1977, p. 72).

## *DEFINITIONS*

### *Acculturation*

In relation to this study, acculturation exists in different modes. Many studies have considered the relationship between acculturation status and mental health or illness;

however, the results of this research have not been entirely consistent. Studies have shown that acculturation is related both to *more* (Singh, 1989) and to *less* stress (Padilla, Wagatsuma and Lindholm, 1985); similarly, acculturation has been related to both *more* (Kaplan and Marks, 1990) and *less* depression, but in the case of this study, acculturation refers mainly to the inevitable assimilation of first and second generation Muslim women in an American society that they immigrated to and have come to understand.

### *Allah*

God.

### *Arabs*

The Arabs are defined as the descendants of the Semitic race. The original Arabs lived in the Arabian Peninsula, either as town dwellers or as nomads or Bedouins. Brave, enterprising and influenced by nature, waves of them migrated and settled in the vast area stretching from the Nile to the Tigris and Euphrates basin. From here spread their influence to places further south of the Sahara. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century as the Arab empire continued growing in size and strength, other peoples of these newly acquired lands became Arabized. Today all of them are Arabs.

### *Arab-American*

The term Arab-American applies to persons who immigrated to the United States from a group of independent nation-states and North Africa and the Middle East. They have a common linguistic and cultural heritage that has been shaped primarily by the religions of

Islam and Christianity.

### *Arab Culture and Muslim Women*

The socialization process of an Arab baby girl differs from that of a boy. Many attitudinal factors enter the picture upon the birth of a baby girl. The woman is brought up to be emotional, submissive, and very strongly dependent on her family, with no individuation permitted even after her marriage. The girl's welfare is her family's responsibility. Her arrival into the world in her family's eyes is sometimes a curse that they have for life. It is incumbent on the males of the family especially to protect, to control and to police her (Al-Kayyat, 1994).

### *Arabized*

To imbue with qualities native to or associated with the Middle East.

### *Culture*

A culture is composed of attitudes, values, concepts and opinions. It may affect how one thinks, decides, behaves and defines events. Thus, most people are subjected to being strongly influenced by their cultural values and conditioning – both consciously and unconsciously . This is sometimes also referred to as a recessive gene within the self (Johnson, p. 22).

### *Culture Shock*

Culture shock is a term used to describe the [anxiety](#) and [feelings](#) (of surprise, disorientation, confusion, etc.) felt when people have to operate within an entirely different cultural or [social environment](#), such as a different country or a different state

than where they live (e.g. urban southern California vs. North Africa and the middle East). The term was introduced for the first time in [1952](#) by [Kalvero Oberg](#).

### *Developmental Stage*

A period of life that is characterized by a specific underlying organization. A wide variety of behaviors can be viewed as expressing the underlying structure of each stage. At every stage, some characteristics differentiate it from the preceding and succeeding stages. Stage theories propose a specific direction for development, and each new stage incorporates the gains made during earlier stages. At each stage, the accomplishments from the previous stages provide resources for mastering new challenges. The interplay of the developmental tasks, psychosocial crisis, central process, and significant relationships provide the experiential base for a new psychosocial learning, and therefore the development. Each stage is unique and leads to the acquisition of new skills related to new capabilities (Davison et al., 1980; Flavell, 1982; Fischer & Silver, 1985; Levin, 1986; Miller, 1993).

### *Eid*

In Muslim communities, Eid is the name of two [Islamic festivals](#):

[Eid ul-Fitr](#), marking the end of the month-long [fast](#) of [Ramadan](#), held on the first day of [Shawwal](#).

[Eid ul-Adha](#), commemorating the [Prophet Ibrahim](#)'s willingness to sacrifice his son to [Allah](#), held on the tenth day of [Hajj](#), exactly 40 days from the end of Eid ul-Fitr.

### *First generation Arab-American Muslims*

The children of immigrant Arab Muslims who are born and raised within the United States.

### *Generation*

A generation can be a stage or degree in a succession of natural descent. A generation can also represent all the people born at about the same time, sometimes called a generational cohort in demographics.

### *Hadeeth*

The meticulously documented acts and sayings of the Prophet recorded in a body of writings.

### *Heritage*

Heritage refers to something which is inherited from one's ancestors.

### *Imam*

An Arabic word meaning "Leader." The ruler of a country might be called the Imam, for example.

### *Integration*

The act or process or an instance of [integrating](#) : as a: incorporation as equals into