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# A Qualitative Study of Middle Eastern/Arab American Sexual Identity Development

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Ayse Selin Ikizler entitled "A Qualitative Study of Middle Eastern/Arab American Sexual Identity Development." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

Dawn M. Szymanski, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Joseph Miles, Jacob Levy

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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A Qualitative Study of Middle Eastern/Arab American Sexual Identity Development

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Ayşe Selin İkizler  
May 2013

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## **ABSTRACT**

The development of one's sexual minority identity is a major part of sexual minority persons' lives, but unfortunately one that is often stunted by a heterosexist society. For individuals with multiple minority oppressions, the formation of a sexual minority identity becomes even more complicated. As such, there has been a call among researchers for more empirical research on the experiences of LGB individuals from racial/ethnic minority groups. The present study uses qualitative methods to fill some of the gaps in the literature related to identity development among same-gender attracted Middle Eastern/Arab individuals living in the United States (US). From 12 interviews, thirteen themes associated with the following issues emerged: intersectionality, race/ethnicity, sexual identity development, discrimination, stigma, oppression, sexual orientation disclosure, and invisibility. Themes, subthemes, and their implications are discussed.

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# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

The development of one's sexual minority identity is a process that is a major part of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning/queer (LGBQ) peoples' lives, but unfortunately one that is often stunted by a heterosexist society. For individuals with multiple minority identities, statuses or oppressions, the formation of a sexual minority identity becomes even more complicated. Indeed, there has been a call among researchers for more empirical research on the experiences of LGBQ individuals from racial/ethnic minority groups (DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees, & Moradi, 2010; Huang, Brewster, Moradi, Goodman, Wiseman, Martin, 2009; Moradi, DeBlaere, & Huang, 2010). One particular cultural group that has gone largely overlooked in the LGBQ literature is Middle Eastern/Arab Americans. Like other ethnic minority groups in the United States who also experience same-sex attraction (e.g., LGBQ Latino/a's), this group faces unique challenges due to its multiple minority status. There has been growing interest in better understanding the development and experience of intersecting minority identities; however despite a growing public discourse about Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims, especially in an era of heightened fear of terrorism/terrorist threats, considerably less attention has been given to the experiences of members of this (often unrecognized) minority population. Thus, the current study aims to develop further understanding of how one group – Middle Eastern and Arab-Americans – experiences sexual minority identity.

In order to better understand how same-sex attraction is experienced and identified within this particular ethnic group, it is important to understand the cultural and contextual influences in the lives of Middle Eastern/Arab Americans. In an attempt to ground the reader in this

framework, the following section will describe general Middle Eastern/Arab cultural values and expectations, the experiences of immigrants from the Middle East, and finally an overview of stereotypes and discrimination that is faced by this population.

### **Middle Eastern Culture and Experiences of Discrimination**

It is essential to be explicit about the population that we refer to when we discuss people of Middle Eastern descent. The Middle East is often associated with the Arab world and although there is considerable overlap between these two regions, Arab countries are those specific nations that are members of the League of Arab States or countries in which the primary language of the state is Arabic. These nations are made up of primarily Muslims and Christians and include much of North and West Africa. The Middle East on the other hand encompasses a larger region that includes the nation of Israel, which is comprised of a mostly Jewish population, and also other nations representing various religions (e.g., Turkey, Armenia, and Iran) which are non-Arabic-speaking and not considered Arab countries. The present study includes Middle Eastern Americans more broadly (as opposed to Arab-Americans more specifically) because it is expected that this cultural group has similar experiences as a result of hailing from the Middle East regardless of personal identification with the Arab world.

In general, an emphasis on collectivism and family are central themes that define Middle Eastern cultural values. Family values are a core concept that has been well-established in the literature for this population. For instance, one qualitative study of Arab-identifying therapists at a community-based mental health center that primarily serves Arab immigrant clients revealed that extended family is the dominant family structure of Arab Americans (Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003). Likewise, another study in which Lebanese adolescents living in an ethnic enclave in the United States (US) were interviewed also showed that family obligations were

central to the lives of these young people and additionally also demonstrated that the community served as a form of extended family in which other adult community members take responsibility and look out for youth not biologically related to them (Ajrouch, 2000). Along similar lines, Erickson and Al-Timimi (2001), in their recommendations and considerations for providing mental health services to Arab Americans, suggested that family roles, expectations, and obligations of clients are critically important to understand in therapy. These authors also asserted that due to family roles, individuation for such clients may not be culturally appropriate.

With this family-focus as a backdrop for Middle Easterners/Arabs, it is clear to see how acculturation in the US may be less than ideal. Unfortunately, although the extended family is stressed in Middle Eastern culture, basic family dynamics that stem from this foundation are upset by the emigration of nuclear families on their own (Nassar-McMillan & Hakim-Larson, 2003). The participants interviewed for the Ajrouch (2000) study explained that while they appreciated the closeness of the community and found in validating of their cultural practices and beliefs, it was also seen as limiting and intrusive of their privacy. Specifically, one example given was that a male participant said he had to be cautious about driving around with a female in the car with him for fear that someone might see the pair and report back to his parents. Likewise, many of the participants explained how gossip in their ethnic enclave served to exert social control within the community. Furthermore, the adolescents that were interviewed described ongoing tension they felt in negotiating between community sanctions (based on immigrant traditionalism) and individual freedom (a strong American/Western value).

Given the emphasis on family over individual needs, it makes sense that Arab society as a whole views marriage as a central building block of society, is considered a duty to Arabs, and is the only context under which intercourse is legal by Islamic law (Esposito, 1982). In general,

sexuality is a taboo topic of conversation, especially between parents and children, and homosexuality is rarely tolerated in Arab society (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005). Moreover, sexual transgressions are thought to bring dishonor to the family, especially when committed by women. In light of the apparent intolerance of sexual inappropriateness and its association with shame upon the highly regarded family honor, it is expected that developing sexual minority identity as an Arab (and by extension, Middle Eastern) individual would be especially challenging.

In addition to the disconnect between one's home country's culture and host country's culture as well as physical and emotional distance between family members of immigrants from the Middle East, other challenges that stem from stereotypes also emerge as strains for these individuals. The stereotypes associated with Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims in the US bring additional stressors. These stereotypes involve strong associations with terrorism in addition to a belief that Islam is oppressive, especially towards women who are passive and accepting of their inferior roles, Arabs are rich and greedy, and Arab culture has nothing of value to offer to the Western world (Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). These stereotypes have led to a wide variety of discriminatory events among Middle Eastern Americans.

The presence of substantial discrimination towards Middle Easterners and Muslims in the US has been relatively well-established in the literature. Besides the prejudice inherent in the stereotypes that are discussed above, behavioral forms of actual discrimination have also been documented. A small but growing body of pertinent research provides evidence for the presence of discrimination against Middle Easterners in workplace hiring decisions based on whether or not someone's name is European- or Arab-sounding (Derous & Ryan, 2009; Widner & Chlcoine, 2011). Furthermore, an earlier study using the "lost email" technique revealed that participants

held stronger feelings of prejudice towards Arab Americans than each of the other ethnic minority groups in the study, and individuals who held more prejudiced attitudes towards Arab Americans demonstrated more discriminatory behaviors (Bushman & Bonacci, 2004). In addition, another small body of literature has focused on an increase in ethnicity-based discrimination towards Arab Americans post-9/11 (Kulwicksi, Khalifa, & Moore, 2008; Padela & Heisler, 2010). For example, Padela and Heisler (2010) showed that “post-9/11 abuse” among a sample of over 1,000 adults of Arab and Chaldean descent reported discrimination that was associated with psychological distress. They found that after controlling for socioeconomic characteristics, personal and familial abuse [(defined as “verbal insults or abuse, threatening words or gestures, physical attack, vandalism or destruction of property, or loss of employment, due to... race, ethnicity, or religion (Padela & Heisler, 2010, p. 285)”) was associated with poor health and that many indicated that 9/11 had shaken their sense of personal safety and security. Finally, despite the hesitation of some to describe Middle Eastern/Arab Americans as ethnic minorities facing associated challenges with racism, the magnitude of the correlation between perceived recent discrimination and psychological distress found in a study by Moradi and Hasan (2004) was comparable to that found in studies with African-American samples, suggesting that perceived discrimination may be as influential to psychological distress among Arab-Americans as for African-Americans.

### **Middle Eastern American Sexual Minority Persons**

A number of models have been put forth to better understand individuals’ experiences of multiple oppressions (e.g., the intersectionality/additive models and greater risk/resilience perspectives; Moradi et al. 2010b; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008) with some researchers suggesting that having multiple oppressions poses greater threats to a person’s

psychological well-being (e.g., Szymanski & Kashubeck-West, 2008) while others have shown that experiencing multiple oppressions could actually be associated with an individuals' ability to cope better because they have learned to navigate different marginalized spaces in society (e.g., Wei, Liao, Chao, Mallinckrodt, Tsai, & Botello-zamarron, 2010). Therefore, one of the purposes of the proposed study is to determine if either or both of these models are represented in the stories of LGBQ Middle Eastern/Arab Americans' identity development.

The literature about Middle Eastern American sexual minorities is scant. A review of the literature identified only one empirical peer-reviewed article investigating sexual minority identity among Middle Eastern Americans, Arab-Americans, or Muslim Americans. This qualitative study explored the identity experience of gay Muslim men (Minwalla et al., 2005). The sample was small ( $n = 6$ ) and only included gay-identified men who were described as "progressive" and part of the same social justice organization. Of these six men, four were born overseas and raised Muslim from birth and two were raised Christian and converted to Islam later in life. The two converts to Islam included one African-American and one Anglo-American. Interviews took place in the US and in Canada, and it is unclear if the participants born overseas were Americans or Canadians.

Despite the limitations of information that we have about the participants' nationalities, several noteworthy themes were identified regarding sexual identity experiences for gay Muslim men. They were around religion (relationship with Allah, the Qur'an and homosexuality), East-West cultural comparisons (homo-sociality and gay identity, coming out as gay, marriage expectations, impact on sisters' marriage potential, physical danger of coming out), and color dynamics (social dynamics within the White gay culture, internalized racism, color and dating, etc.). Many of these issues involve family dynamics though the authors did not present family

issues as its own theme. For instance, the concerns expressed regarding physical danger of coming out was with respect to the family as the source of such harm. It is common for family dynamics and religion to be interrelated in many cultures and for immigrants in the religious minority and their families, this relationship may be even more salient.

This particular cultural group is of interest because of the lack of current research available about its experience of sexual minority identity development, despite recent heightened media coverage of Middle Eastern/Arab Americans and LGBQ civil rights. The coverage sheds a primarily negative light on Arabs/Middle Easterners as villainous outsiders to mainstream American culture. Given that the members of this cultural group are cast as outsiders of American culture, and sexual minorities are marginalized in most mainstream cultures, it is important to explore what oppressed individuals like this experience. Thus, another purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the sexual minority identity development among Middle Eastern and Arab Americans in the US. We will explore how participants conceptualize their own sexual identity in relation to immigration, family of origin, religion, and ethnic identification.

A number of authors have noted the need for more research regarding the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people of color (LGB-POC) and have designated qualitative research as particularly appropriate for this type of research. For example, DeBlaere, Brewster, Sarkees, and Moradi (2010) suggested that researchers “investigate LGB people of color’s phenomenological experience of discrimination by exploring whether discrimination events are experienced as singularly racist, sexist, or heterosexist or if there is overlap or interaction among types of discrimination. (p. 345)” The present study aims to address this issue head-on by exploring the qualitative stories of same-sex attracted men and women of Middle Eastern and

Arab descent in the US. Furthermore, this research will also advance our understanding of the intersections of multiple identities in addition to similarities and differences these identities share with dominant groups and the larger bodies of research regarding Middle Eastern Americans and sexual minorities, as they have been studied separately, another recommendation from DeBlaere et al. (2010). Cognizant of the concerns raised by Pachankis and Goldfried (2004), Garnets (2002), and Parks (2005), the authors of the current study believe that it is important to minimize the degree to which dominant frameworks of sexual minority identity development borrowed from White culture and among other LGB-POCs are imposed upon Middle Eastern and Arab Americans. We stress the value of allowing individuals to freely express their personal stories. Given this and the dearth of currently available research regarding the experiences of LGB-POC in general and sexual minorities of Middle Eastern/Arab descent in particular, qualitative research is an appropriate approach with which to start.

## CHAPTER II

### Method

#### Participants

The sample included 12 individuals (4 women, 8 men) identifying as lesbian (1), gay (7), bisexual (2), queer (1), or pansexual (1) persons of Middle Eastern and/or Arab descent living in the US. Participants were recruited via professional networks and an email announcement of the study sent to various local and national LGB affirming organizations, including university LGB resource centers and community-based organizations. The criteria for participant eligibility included being at least 18 years old, US residence, some ethnic background originating in the Middle East (as defined by the participant), and experience of same-sex attraction.

Participants ranged in age from ranged from 18 to 52 years, with a mean of 26.6 years ( $SD = 9.06$ ). Their countries of origin included Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia, in addition to some European countries among participants who had mixed ethnic backgrounds. Individuals in the study were living in various parts of the US including California, Illinois, Ohio, Massachusetts, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Washington, D.C. Participants represented a range of education levels including completion of high school ( $n = 1$ ), some college ( $n = 4$ ), 2-year college ( $n = 1$ ), 4-year college ( $n = 3$ ), and graduate/professional school ( $n = 3$ ). Participants were from lower middle/working class ( $n = 3$ ), middle class ( $n = 5$ ), and upper middle class ( $n = 4$ ) backgrounds. Participants reported a range of involvement with Middle Eastern- and LGBQ-related organizations such that four participants reported no membership in such groups, two reported membership in only Middle Eastern-

related organizations, four reported membership in only LGBTQ-related organizations, and two reported membership in both types of organizations.

### **Procedure**

The present study was approved by a large southern university's Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited via professional networks through an email announcement to various university- and community-based LGBTQ-affirming/resource organizations and Gay-Straight Alliances. The criteria for participant eligibility was (1) identifying as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person (or someone who has experienced same-sex attraction), (2) having Middle Eastern or Arab ethnic background, (3) residence in the US, and (3) being at least 18 years of age. Prospective participants responded to the research announcement by sending emails or placing phone calls to the first author expressing interest in participating in the study. They were sent consent forms and demographics questionnaires. Once those forms were received, an interview time was scheduled. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing (e.g., Skype) or telephone. Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions that began with questions about the participant's ethnic and religious identity and upbringing. The questions then proceeded into first realizing that they experienced same-sex attraction and specific questions regarding their coming out stories and how the experience affected relationships with family members and/or their ethnic community (see Table 1). Each interview was conducted by the first author and lasted roughly one hour. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### **Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted using a constant comparative methodology (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The two authors read the first two transcripts independently, noting comments, observations, and questions concerning information that was

striking in some way. Each researcher identified emerging themes and associated statements from participants that supported each emerging theme. Researchers kept records of the emerging themes and participated in discussions about these themes after each set of two or three transcripts was read and analyzed independently by both researchers. Emerging themes were updated, edited, merged, or divided as needed to better represent the data as more transcripts were read. As the analysis process and development of themes drew to a close, the authors compared emerging themes to the existing literature to contextualize the findings (Merriam, 1988).

Researchers were careful to ensure credibility, transferability, and confirmability in the present study. As recommended by Morrow (2005), credibility was achieved by first author's prolonged engagement with participants (sustained email/phone correspondence, phone/video chat personal interview), negative case analysis (scanning transcripts for instances that supported or disconfirmed emerging themes), researcher reflexivity (multicultural training including examination of personal social identities and biases), and participant checks (transcripts sent to participants for review and clarification when audio recordings were unclear). Additionally, we also used data triangulation (Morrow, 2005; Yeh & Inman, 2007) by way of collecting completed demographic questionnaires in addition to oral interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Any discrepancies were discussed with participants. Transferability is inherent in the description of participants, which provides demographic and recruitment information (Morrow, 2005). Confirmability is ensured by the use of direct quotes to support emerging themes, enabling the reader to determine accuracy of themes identified by researchers (Morrow, 2005). Additionally, researchers read each transcript and identified themes and meaningful excerpts independently of one another, and finally, an independent auditor who was

not a part of the research team read a sample of transcripts and the results to ensure confirmability (Creswell, 2007).

Trustworthiness and accuracy were ensured by the use of an external auditor independent of the research team who was uninvolved with the data collection and data analysis processes. This individual read a randomly selected subset of 4 transcripts and a draft of the manuscript, including the interview protocol, resulting themes and supporting quotations. He concluded that (1) the interview questions were appropriately broad enough to maximize participants' freedom to respond based on their own views of their experiences, and (2) the process by which the researchers developed the themes from the data is logical and that the themes/sub-themes are accurate, thorough, and seem to come out of the transcripts.

The external auditor suggested that the two themes "Experiences of Heterosexism" and "Sexual Minority Stigma in Middle Eastern Culture" have considerable overlap and might more simply describe the data if collapsed into one theme. However, he also reportedly recognized the potential value in more clearly delineating broad notions of heterosexism from heterosexist stigma encountered by other Arab and Middle Eastern people. Upon further consideration of the raw data, the authors believed that the current representation of themes, although possibly somewhat muddled or more complex, seem to flow more directly from the transcripts as a more accurate model of how the participants described experiencing different forms of discrimination and marginalization. Therefore, a decision was made to keep the current themes intact.

Researchers were cognizant of the potential impact of personal biases which might skew the ways in which they considered and interpreted the data. Additionally, we recognize the importance of allowing readers to evaluate the trustworthiness of the data by being transparent about our own identities and personal biases. The first author is a US-born Turkish-American

woman. She is a young adult and identifies as queer. She emigrated from Turkey with her family in early childhood and identifies as an immigrant. She became interested in this research after noticing that there was a lack of research and knowledge available regarding the experiences of people of Middle Eastern/Arab descent in the US. The second author is a middle aged U.S. born Slavic American lesbian who conducts research on LGB issues and multiple oppressions. In order to reduce the potential effects of these biases, notes were kept throughout the stages of the data analysis process in order to reflect on and document decision-making as prospective themes and subthemes emerged, dissolved, were collapsed and were divided.

## CHAPTER III

### Results

The analysis process resulted in fourteen distinct themes (with varying numbers of subthemes within some of these broader domains): Connection with Ethnic Community in US, Blurry Racial Identity, Ethnic Oppression, Ethnic Identity Development, Influence of Middle Eastern Cultural Values, Rejection of Traditional Religion, Sexual Identity Development, Experiences of Heterosexism, Gay Stigma in Middle Eastern Culture, Intersections of Sexual and Ethnic Identities, Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Family of Origin, and Invisibility of Middle Eastern Sexual Minority Community. Table 2 summarizes these themes and subthemes, and provides the number of cases that exemplify each domain. The following descriptions utilize quotations from the transcripts to illustrate the experience of these themes and subthemes.

#### **Connection with Ethnic Community in US**

Seven participants discussed their relationships with other Middle Eastern or Arab individuals from their country of origin in the US. These discussions revealed generally strong or weak connections with one's ethnic community.

##### ***Strong***

Four participants described strong connections with their cultural groups. Some of these individuals explained that these connections were fostered during their childhood, often with support from their parents. For instance, one bisexual man from Israel reported that he, "grew up in an Israeli community [in the US]. I went to a Jewish youth group where almost all of us were Israeli, so, um, very much impacted by that culture." Likewise, one gay man from Lebanon had a similar story. He emigrated to a large metropolitan city in the western US at the age of 5 where

his extended family and friends lived close together and made an extra effort to visit would-be members of the community who lived farther away. He said:

We grew up, my parents, my aunt and uncle and their kids lived in one of the apartment buildings next to us, and we had a lot of, um, family friends who were Lebanese and they would, you know, we would get together with them. Whenever my parents had time off, that's usually when we would go visit somebody or, um, go...basically they weren't all in our immediate area, but [name of city] has a huge population in general, so we would cross town to visit other people. Some of our friends from Lebanon actually moved to [name of city], um, so they definitely...yeah, it was a community there.

On the other hand, one Palestinian woman may not have had as much exposure to her ethnic group after immigrating to the US at age 8, however she found that she was able to connect with other Arab through her school's Muslim Student Association and Arabic courses once she entered college in a more cosmopolitan city:

And like I don't know that's kind of how I stay plugged into the community but also just by taking Arabic classes, like there's the community right there, you know? Like folks who are interested in like developing or like perfecting their Arabic like, it's a weird niche, you know? It's not like, I mean obviously it's not all Arabs, there's actually very few Arabs. (Laughs) But it's still like, I don't know, being able to speak your language or like my native tongue and discussing things with my professors about the Arab world and always being plugged into what's going on in Arab countries is um it's another way I guess for me to be involved in my community. Um and um Students for Justice in Palestine is a very, very open-minded group of folks who like they do a lot of work with um LGBT groups on campus because um I don't know like a queer, I think a queer person has a lot in common with like you know the Palestinian movement just because you know, queer folks have to deal with the marginalization in society constantly, you know?

Several participants like this Palestinian woman drew parallels between being an Arab American and identifying as a sexual minority person. This quote highlights one of the few instances that was described in which both of these identities were embraced and accepted in a single setting.

**Weak**

Three participants remarked that they knew very few other individuals from their home country and were disconnected from their ethnic community. One gay man from Lebanon said that although he didn't have many Lebanese or Arab friends. He explained that, "the majority of my friends you know, are White or funny enough are Israeli." For him, it sounded like it was simply happenstance that he was not connected with the Arab community, but others were deliberately prevented from being connected with the community. One example is from a gay man who emigrated from Jordan at age 11. He told the following story:

It took like hardships of trying to become naturalized, and um become U.S. citizen, U.S. citizens, which we are now. And um but yeah not having family, going from all of us having a community to having no community. Um and um I think unique to my family is that my dad um in some ways discouraged us from connecting with the Arab community. I didn't really grow up, growing up in [name of state], um I wasn't connected at all to the Arab community. Um so, like it very much assimilated and um like even practicing cultural practices in my family, it would be like maybe Ramadan a little bit, um and it would be more my mom practicing Ramadan than the rest of my family. Um and then like we would acknowledge holidays like the Eids and stuff, but we wouldn't actually like celebrate, or like go to family because I didn't really have that many family. Um so, I guess maybe it's not typical, more typical of like just in terms of like assimilation process, and the culture shock, and the lack of community and peace.

Many participants like this man from Jordan, emphasized the importance of community and lamented a lack of community ties or a lessened feeling of closeness with their ethnic group in the US, as compared to their home country (this pattern is described in greater detail under the theme "Influence of Middle Eastern Cultural Values").

### **Blurry Racial Identity**

A common issue that came up for the majority of participants ( $n = 11$ ) was uncertainty about how to classify themselves racially: White or a Person of Color (POC). Most participants acknowledged some degree of confusion or ambivalence about racial identification and smaller

set of participants discussed deliberately hiding their Middle Eastern background in order to pass as White.

***Confusion/ambivalence about White vs. Person of Color identification***

Seven participants uncertainty regarding whether they were technically White or not, and many felt that neither identifier told the “full story” for them. Participants varied in how they are perceived by others, sometimes being perceived as White, generically Mediterranean, or some other ethnic minority (e.g., Latino, Southeast Asian). Some said they passed as White and therefore have White privilege in that regard while others expressed frustration for being considered White because they do not see themselves as having White privilege. This was particularly true for one Palestinian woman:

Yeah. Like, I don't pass as White you know, like people they, well they never know what I am. Um but they'll like guess like oh Indian, or like something you know? So like I don't, like I don't have White privilege. I just don't feel like... I shouldn't be forced to call myself Caucasian because it's, I don't know like there's so many things about society that like um I don't know it's like built in a way that like it still benefits, like or it's still harder for people of color to navigate within certain areas of society and I feel like I have to navigate those areas just as hard, like I used to wear the hijab too because I'm also Muslim and um and I was racially profiled in high school. Like I had to deal with like harassment and all of these things so like I don't think yeah I don't think calling myself Caucasian is very fair to what has happened throughout my life, you know?

Several participants mentioned feeling invisible as a racial/ethnic group in the US. One man from Jordan noted that, “Arabs are invisible and visible. Like, we could be invisible if you know some of us are White, and um some of us are not. So there's, and we're also confused for Latino. I get that a lot, or like other cultures.” This highlights the differences across individuals of Middle Eastern descent with respect to how they are read based on the color of their skin. This same participant described how his own ethnic identity development was influenced a lack of

language or appreciation for his ethnic background. However, even having this awareness, he still felt a sense of not belonging fully in either group.

We're considered White, but we're not really White. And uh, and so like on on all applications even when I applied to college, I checked "White..." but um it's still it so I like grew up even in my own neutral identity through middle school and high school um I thought I was white. Like I didn't even, I mean, I knew I was different but like I didn't, I couldn't put a label on it. I just thought I was an immigrant. But I saw myself as White until I got to college, and I developed more of my racial identity there.

Later he said, "Because I feel like in terms of being an ethnic minority, I, I was always like in between. I was never fully, I'm obviously not White, and I didn't feel fully Arab,"

A gay man of Iraqi and Lebanese background expressed similar frustration with being caught in between. He explained:

I'm sort of frustrated, I don't know remember which one it was but one of them I think it was the maybe... the official way they group Middle Eastern in with Caucasian? Which I suppose maybe that's just the actual like official, you know, connotation. But, I don't feel like, I, I don't think that makes sense to me. Uh, so yeah, I usually check two boxes: the mixed, the multiracial one but at the same time I don't feel like I really, like I identify as a quote on quote "Person of Color." Like, yes my skin is brownish, like I'm clearly not White. Um, but I don't, I don't know if I would call myself a Person of Color, which is sort of confusing to myself actually too. I don't know.

Thus, most participants described confusion and dissatisfaction with the possible racial identities with which they could classify themselves.

### ***Hiding ethnicity to pass as White***

For the most part, individuals in this study described a genuine feeling dissatisfaction with available terminology to describe them simply because the language seemed to misrepresent or fall short of representing their full experiences as Middle Eastern/Arab Americans. This was independent of expressions of shame towards being Middle Eastern, which was evident in a smaller minority of participants. Seven participants discussed deliberately trying to hide their

Middle Eastern background at times in order to pass as White. For instance, this statement from a gay man from Jordan illustrates how he learned from his father that it was better to be European than Middle Eastern:

So, we never really developed that community, and then um I guess the piece where I would say like just my dad might have discouraged it, um only in terms of like um uh kind of to prevent us from being racially profiled. Like whenever we would be, I don't know, in a store, or like um somewhere, and somebody asked, "Where are you from?" And my dad would often not say Middle East, and he would say like Greece, um just so he could like avoid that conversation.

One White bisexual woman from Iran, described an incident when she was harassed as an adolescent for being Middle Eastern that led her to want to hide her background growing up (this specific discriminatory event is described under the theme of "Ethnic Oppression"). She explained:

And I um... I just, I just hid that part of myself for a long time. And I just wanted to be White, I just wanted to just be American, I wanted to be like everybody else for a long time. And then in my twenties is when I just really, I started thinking about it and then you know just doing more psychology and I feel like um... I don't know I just feel like uh... I, I did a lot of my own searching and you know now I feel, now I'm much more comfortable sharing it. You know I've talked about it in groups of people and I used to wear this big Iran necklace. So you know, but yeah. Now I consider myself part of both cultures and feel, feel good about that. Whereas before, I was like I don't belong to any one thing and was just kind of frustrated... with it.

Another participant, a gay man originally from Lebanon, reported that although he prefers his Arabic given name now, he had previously changed his name to a non-Arab Western name so that he could more readily cover his ethnic identity. This overarching theme of blurry racial identity has been a dynamic experiential experience for many of the individuals in this study.

### **Ethnic Oppression**

A total of nine participants in this study talked about some type of ethnic oppression that was experienced on the basis of being specifically Middle Eastern/Arab or generally brown-

skinned. Some of it was general and some was directly associated with or immediately in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

### *General*

Among participants who reported general experiences of ethnic oppression, nine of them discussed overt and personal incidences of discrimination. For example, the bisexual Iranian-American woman who went through a phase of wanting to be White, had been referred to as “Saddam Hussein’s little sister,” when she was in middle school. She said, “that really stuck with me,” highlighting the lasting impact it had on her. Others described being racially profiled. For instance, one gay man of Lebanese descent told this story:

Well, the only, ironically the only negative experience I ever had being Arab-American was um, was at an airport in Newark, getting ready to go out on El Al Israeli airlines. I don’t, I don’t know why my travel agent put me on there, you know, but after an hour of, of, of what they call “interviewing,” I called “interrogation,” they finally let me on a plane, but you know, that’s the only time I ever really have felt anything negative about my ethnic background. Or any negative behavior toward me because of that. And, of course, I knew that it would, I knew that it was specifically because that the, the, because uh, the interviewer, before he ever said hello. His first question was, “What is the ethnic background of your last name?” And I thought, “Oh, crap. Here we go.”

Similarly, another gay man from Lebanon reported that he often stopped and searched, and watched closely in retail stores. This same man also discussed that within his work as an Arab immigrants’ rights advocate, his intentions are often called into question once people learn that he himself has Arab background. Additionally, a queer woman from Palestine noted that the media coverage of Muslims was narrow and stereotyped. She stated:

So um that, and then also the media in American society, I think their depiction of that identity, because I obviously, as hard I try hard not to be influenced by all of this, I still am influenced by the media and by advertisements and society and all of these things. And in that paradigm, there’s also... that idea is reiterated all the time especially the idea that there is only one way of being Muslim, based on a universal or the universal Arab. That is depicted over and over and over again in

the media and um and that idea I think shows through also. I have never seen like a gay Arab or a gay Muslim on T.V ever, you know? It's just unheard of.

(It should be noted that this statement was made before the television premiere of a new reality show on Bravo entitled, "Shahs of Sunset," that follows a group of Iranian Jews living in Los Angeles in which there is one character who is an openly gay Iranian-American.) These encounters have all been notable ways in which the individuals in this study have been cast as outsiders in American society.

### *Aftermath of 9/11*

For those individuals reporting experiences of ethnic discrimination that was directly tied to reactions to 9/11, five of them described that they felt different in some capacity after those attacks. Their perceptions of themselves or others' perceptions of them were changed. One especially poignant story was told by a Lebanese woman whose father owned a shop in New York City at the time of the 9/11 attacks.

Now, my dad lived in New York for over 35 years, and he moved here [a state in the Great Lakes region] when, um, after September 11th.. Yeah, it was kind of hard for him to live there and go to work there because he was always, you know, threatened and stuff... Well, you know, he was being an Arab, and when it happened it was, targeting the Arabs and stuff. So, it's just for him...it's a whole different experience, so for us, we had to move... Yeah, he did [face a lot of discrimination]. He had his business, everything was gone, everything was in New York. That's where he basically grew and lived. And uh, you know, after that, it was just kind of difficult for him to go to work and do his daily stuff... Yeah, yeah, he wanted to make it safe for his family, so that's why he wanted to move to [name of state in which they current reside], where it's all, there are a lot of Arabs around here.

For others, their experience of facing discrimination post-9/11 was less immediate, yet still distressing. A gay man from Lebanon stated,

I mean, I knew I was different, but because like um I was in high school when 9/11 happened. And um after that, like my dad was hyper vigilant. And like put American flags on everything, but I remember like hearing comments um in school like directed towards me about being Middle Eastern or a terrorist and

stuff. So, I mean, I knew I was different, but I didn't think about it in terms of race until college... Um. I mean I remember, um like the day of 9/11, um on the bus back, um um like on the way back on the bus, just like when I got on the bus students started saying, "Oh here's another terrorist".

This participant was living in a large Mid-Atlantic state at the time. A queer Palestinian woman reported similar experiences of harassment immediately after 9/11. She told the first author, "especially after 9/11, they would drive past us and like moon us or like yell obscenities at us or like, there was even less um less obvious racism going on in my high school." As such, the majority of participants reported some kind of ethnic oppression in their lives, and almost half reported oppressive experiences that were reactions to 9/11.

### **Ethnic Identity Development**

In spite of experienced racial identity confusion and ethnic oppression, ten participants discussed their experiences of ethnic identity development. A range of emotions relevant to having Middle Eastern/Arab American status emerged from the data, such as shame and pride, in addition to varying levels of awareness at during different phases of individuals' lives. One gay man from Jordan articulated his journey from unawareness of racial/ethnic minority status to awareness and pride:

...what helped me sort of start to understand my racial identity was um... I had two Black male friends... and I remember with them we would um like just have random conversations and at some point like race would come up and... I would say, "well, I'm White". And they were like, "No, look in the mirror. You're not White," ...then we would we would argue, I'm like, "well, the census says I'm White. My dad tells me I'm White. Like, I know I'm obviously not *white*, but that's how I am racially." And so like some of those conversations, I started to sort of question, you know, how I saw myself, and how I identify... I went to [name of university], which is a very diverse school and there was actually a large Arab representation on campus and Middle Eastern, like Persian, very large Persian community too. Um but I was, I never um like ever went to any of their um like student group things. I never became involved with them. I never did do really anything with them. Um and that's um partially because well, mostly because I was, I'm gay and um I was afraid to, I was afraid to connect with them and um be outted or you know I was afraid of the potential rejection that I would

experience. Um, so my ethnic community was really more somewhat like African American community. Like friends from that community and other ethnic minorities um and in college also towards the end of my freshman year, I became good friends with another gay Middle Eastern (he's Persian) guy, and so I think I, with him I sort of have the community of like somewhat the Middle Eastern and gay community intercepted. Um, and then what really more um um I became more proud of being Middle Eastern more later in my college career, like more my junior/senior year. Um like I had my emerging in that way like I took an Arabic class, and um wanted to know more about my culture, and like started to listen to some Arabic music in like senior year of college.

He went on to explain that he subsequently made more of an effort to learn about his home culture and connect with other students who had similar background. It seemed that for this participant, a reflection from others regarding his ethnicity and then affirmation from another gay Middle Eastern man were key vehicles for his own self-exploration regarding his ethnic identity. Many participants explicitly noted their feelings of pride in their Middle Eastern background. For one particular gay man with Syrian and Lebanese heritage, he noted how he makes a particular effort to attend to current events in Syria and learn the Arabic language. He also reported that it is important to him to attend local Middle Eastern festivals where he lives.

In addition to the pride that was expressed by the majority of participants, the particular experience of being a Middle Eastern/Arab person in the US and identifying with US culture has also been influential was noted by several participants. For example, one gay man from Lebanon explained that he experiences his Arab American identity as follows:

I used to be resistant to the idea that I was Arab American in the sense of like assimilate culturally and go on, but then I also recently have understood a part of how being in the US has impacted who I am, and it is who I am. And there are benefits to living in a country that has such diversity and that definitely impacts who you are. Like, I've been impacted by other immigrant groups. I've been impacted by White people and Black people, by a lot of other people. And that's actually, you know, when my friends from Lebanon, when I had conversations with them, one of the things I realized is a benefit of the US is being able to date people in a different way. Um, and so I think I identify still with my Arab immigrant identity, but I think it's a lot less black-and-white about it. Like, I could

be American. I could be Arab. It sounds cheesy, but it makes, it all makes a lot more sense to me now.

This participant clearly expressed his appreciation of being both Arab *and* American, and how for him, this is a qualitatively different experience than being simply Arab (non-American).

Another participant also elaborated on her experience of pride in her Armenian background being purely prideful. She expressed feelings of detachment and frustration in having to take the extra steps to learn more about her culture:

I feel kind of detached though from my cultural identity entirely... I mean, I did not grow up in an Armenian family. I've actually never really been to any Armenian traditional family things whatsoever. I mean, I think that kind of irritates me a lot. I mean, it's basically what I do know about my culture, that's just from my own personal research.

This participant had the unique experience as the only individual in this study who had been adopted by a White Jewish family that did not identify with Middle Eastern background and dismissed her biological Armenian roots as basically irrelevant, as her father encouraged her to think of herself as just White.

For most, ethnic identity development followed the basic path of shame/unawareness to exploration, then awareness and pride. However, what is different for this group than for other ethnic minorities, is that most of them dealt with complexities that stemmed from having another country (or countries) of origin with which they identified, having a sexual minority identity that restricted their involvement with their ethnic communities, and the racial blurriness that left them developing at times White identity, other times Middle Eastern/Arab American identity, and often times both simultaneously. This issue of additional complexity is elaborated upon under the theme "Intersections of Sexual and Ethnic Identities" and its subthemes.

## **Influence of Middle Eastern Cultural Values**

In addition to identity development with regard to ethnic background, six of the participants commented on specific ways in which Middle Eastern cultural values have influenced their day-to-day lives. For some, these instances were described in relation to sexual orientation whereas for others, they were independent functions.

### *Collectivism emphasized*

As noted under the theme “Connection with Ethnic Community in the US,” several participants ( $n = 4$ ) emphasized the importance of collectivism, or community-orientation, in their lives. One gay man of Lebanese descent reported how this tradition was reflected in his family:

That was one of the things that was ingrained in us. I mean, yeah, you have your religion, but, you have your family and you have your, and you have your clan, and you know, you’ve got, and you’ve got to be open and loving and accepting of those people in your family and in your clan whether you really like them or not.

For him, it was this value system that acted as a buffer for him when he came out to his family. In discussing his coming out to them, he said, “I was one of them and that was about it.” Thus, the emphasis on family above all was a protective factor against potential heterosexist discrimination that may have arisen from family members had they not endorsed this value system. All participants who described a collectivist value system described it as a positive quality that they’ve inherited as a part of their Arab heritage. Another participant, a queer Palestinian woman also talked about the importance of family and community. She stated:

I feel like there’s a lot of things that about the Arab culture that are like very special to me, like the meaning of family for example. Like, I don’t know, like I’ve grown up always eating dinner together and like always trying to feel like we are all one person, basically. And I really like that idea of like community, you know, like whenever like someone got sick like all the people in the community would come over to our house and like bring food and everything. And just like the, I don’t know, like the connections between people. I really like the fact that, I don’t

know, like Arab culture like really, I don't know, really thrives on, like, keeping that.

She described this emphasis on family and togetherness as positive; however she also acknowledged that the intense collectivist value system could also serve to silence individuals within the family when it came to topics such as sexuality. Specifically, she said that, “a lot of like, families, they operate under this paradigm where you just don't talk about the things that will make anything uncomfortable.” In this way, in the family peace would trump an individual's wish to be open about his/her sexual orientation and keep it out of the family sphere.

Collectivism among these participants once mostly viewed as a unique and positive attribute, however it was not unifying for all of these participants when it came to issues related to sexual orientation.

### ***Patriarchy/male gender role expectations***

A couple of the male participants in the study commented on how Arab notions of patriarchy or male gender role expectations have been demonstrated in their families of origin. Specifically, one gay man of Lebanese and Syrian descent reported that for him, work and being the breadwinner of the family largely defined the expected role for men in his family. He explained,

I think there's a work ethic in my Middle Eastern roots. Like my grandfather built a business from scratch and my dad took it over and work, work, work. It was important to be able to support yourself, to support your family. Um, but there wasn't necessarily the sense that you had to be macho or bravado.

This family tradition of male breadwinner status carried over to the participant's vision for his relationship with a future long-term partner. In another statement, he said:

...one thing that comes to mind is that both, both sides of my family, there has been this image of the male being the one who worked, the one who provided and I, and I, I think that they, at least prior to my current relationship, which feels way more egalitarian than in the past, I think I tried to internalize this idea that I would

be the provider, that I would be the one taking care of, um, somebody, um, and that this idea that the male does all that. I think that was something I thought in my own family and I thought that would play out for me... I wanted my partner not to have any ambitions about working or that would be happy staying home, taking care of the kids. I don't have any kids by the way. But that I would be, I would be like the breadwinner.

Along similar lines, another gay male participant, in describing his switching major in college, without consulting with his father first, said:

...I went against the patriarch, you know the Arab dad and his orders. Um so he stopped paying for school, and would get my brothers to try to threaten me about that. And my brothers understood what I was doing, and they didn't, they didn't dislike, they didn't like discourage me, but they also were not happy about it because my dad was really upset... You know, it's tradition. It's part of the norm that your dad kind of makes those decisions for you.

Both of these participants emphasized the male dominance in Arab culture in a traditional way that has been carried on to their generation in the US.

### ***Food to retain ethnic heritage***

A total of three participants brought up food as an avenue for retain and staying connected with their ethnic heritage. One gay man made this statement, suggesting that the different food that his family ate set them apart from the dominant community, but also brought them together as a family with unique taste:

...growing up we were very proud to be, to be Lebanese. Um, in fact we were the odd family on the block. We were...we were um, it was...it was more or less...most of the neighbors were , it was either Irish or German, and we were the odd people on the block with being neither. So, while they would be having corned beef and cabbage, we would be having *kibbeh* and *tabouli*. And we would really gross out, loved to gross out our friends by eating *kibbeh nayeh*, which is uncooked *kibbeh*. So, um, you know, it, it, it was...it was we, we were close to family and we still are to some extent.

Likewise, another gay man of Iraqi, Lebanese, and mixed European descent mentioned food while discussing how much he identifies with Middle Eastern identity and culture.

I guess I do feel cultured because of maybe my grandmother. You know, I do feel like I am relatively in touch with uh, cultural Lebanese background because you know at big family gatherings and all the food we eat and sort of those types of things maybe did keep me in touch with my Lebanese background. Um, you know and when I go home for the holidays, my mom will make that food and it's like kind, it's that's like my comfort food still. Um, good luck finding good humus you know uh, and that might be. So that's the cultural side of it and eventually bi-racially I do identify as um, like, as a Middle Eastern American.

For this participant, it seemed as though for him, having had those family gatherings with Middle Eastern dishes justified his identification with his Middle Eastern roots. The cuisine serves as a uniting factor among Middle Eastern Americans and a distinguishing factor from the dominant culture in the US.

The findings in this study demonstrate the various ways in which Middle Eastern or Arab culture plays on in the lives of those who have immigrated to the US, and those whose ancestors immigrated. Sometimes, participants identified how these cultural influences have intersected with their sexual identity and at other times, it was clear that ethnic heritage existed independently from sexual identity. Likewise, Middle Eastern American identity and sexual minority status were sometimes described as coexisting peacefully with one another and at other times, there was clear tension between the two that created complication for the participants in this study. This issue is discussed in more detail under the theme “Intersections of Sexual and Ethnic Identities.”

### **Rejection of Traditional Religion**

Participants represented a range different religious affiliation with which they were born and/or raised. These were the religion of birth for participants, which we refer to here as “traditional religion.” These included Islam, Judaism, Christianity (Catholic and Melkite), and one ambiguous one that was likened to Atheism. Although a couple were more complex in that these participants assigned qualifiers to these religious identifications (e.g., culturally Jewish, but

non-religious), almost all participants ( $n = 10$ ) reported having gone through some sort of process in which they began identifying with a different religion than what they were brought up with. There was noticeably more diversity in the religious identities that participants developed for themselves. These religious identities of choice include Atheist, non-religious spiritual, “recovering Catholic,” Quaker, Buddhist/agnostic, Nichern Buddhist, and Muslim/questioning.

For many participants, their rejection or detachment from their traditional religion was closely associated with their sexual identity development. Several individuals noted that the faith they were raised with (which varied in intensity) were not compatible with their sexual identity development and they were unable to reconcile those differences. For example, one gay man from described his experience like this:

Um I don't identify with any religion. I'm more spiritual than anything. I was raised Muslim, and um my family didn't, we practiced it in terms of like the holidays, um I grew up fasting like Ramadan. My mom was uh more religious in the family, but we didn't really like go to mosques like regularly..... I'm at a point where I just don't believe in religion, um organized religion. Um. I had, I had a lot of tension like I would say in middle school and high school as I was realizing that I was gay. I had a lot of tension between being Muslim and being gay.

Another gay male participant was even more adamantly angry toward his religion of birth – Catholicism – yet he was also devoted to his faith in God while his belief in the Catholic Church had wavered.

I sometimes refer to myself as a “recovering Catholic...” Well, what I mean. What I mean is, is that all of the crazy dogmas associated with the church and when it comes to like, various issues, like how, how, how they treat, or how they, how the Catholic church advocates against gay, uh, LGBT rights and such, or when um, when, or when states pass, pass like marriage rights or uh, laws, or, or uh, or civ, or civil unions. And the Catholic church says, “Oh we can't, we can't do that, we can't do um, adoptions anymore because, because we might have to give them to a gay married couple. It, it just really pisses me off. Or the fact that, you know, there's so much, there's so much that has happened in the past with, with um, with abuse towards, towards children and everything, and the church, instead of blaming itself, points, points out that gay people are responsible for this. Things like that really piss me off. ... So, so, I guess, I guess I'm not really

into church anymore, but yet I still have a firm belief, have a firm belief in God, not so much in religion anymore.

While some participants described distancing themselves from organized religion altogether, there were others who explained finding other religions that were more compatible with their personal values and sexual identities. For instance, one gay male participant described moving away from the Catholic Church and finding the Quaker religion. He stated:

I mean the God that I believe in, um, does care, haha. You know, is a loving God. I think the dogma that the Catholic Church puts out there, um, about you know how my life is sinful, is something that I don't agree with and I think it pushes me away from Catholicism. ...Um, but I find the Quaker meeting that I go to so uplifting, um, and it's, not even tolerant. Like, tolerance like, is step A, like I think they celebrate people of all orientations and then they have programming that affirms this celebration. So, they're light-years beyond like where I see the Roman, the Church being. And I just, I say that if I have religion in my life then I don't want to have to hide who I am, and with Quakers it seems like a better fit for me. And a lot of other reasons too but I think sexual orientation is definitely one of them.

Most of the women in the study also strayed from traditional religion. One formerly Muslim woman described disengaging from traditional religious expectations and facing backlash from her ethnic community as a result. She said:

I have a really complicated relationship with organized religion. Um I used to be very spiritual and religious and um and then I um I started, I don't know, like um questioning my beliefs a lot. And so I stopped wearing the hijab and like unfortunately like the community in [name of hometown in US] wasn't very happy about that.

Within her story, this participant had said that the community expected her to behave as a role model for other Muslim girls, and because she distanced herself from religious traditions, she was criticized for setting a poor example.

For these and almost all other participants, it seemed that the religion that they were born into or raised with failed to meet their needs for a combination of reasons. For many, religion's incompatibility with sexual orientation was one major cause whereas others described other life

events (e.g., death of a sibling) that turned them away from traditional religion in search of other faith-based beliefs or ways of knowing.

### **Sexual Identity Development**

Eleven participants in this study clearly articulated their sexual identity development, that is, what they experienced regarding sexual orientation from the first time they noticed same-sex attraction, to becoming familiar with a framework for same-sex attraction (i.e., LGBTQ, queer, etc.), locating themselves somewhere within that framework, and choices to disclose or not disclose this identity to others. In general, most participants described (1) realizing that they are different and/or noticing that they had experienced same-sex attractions, (2) internal struggle related to acceptance over having these feelings (questioning), (3) considering if, how, when, and to whom they might disclose, and (4) gradual coming out to others. There was little diversity in how far along most participants were in their development (most considered themselves fully or almost completely out), and greater variation in when and how they decided to label their sexual orientation. Specifically, for women there was much more variation in the identifications they chose to use. In addition to the general sexual identity development phases that were described, half of the participants elaborated on their phases of questioning and hesitating to come out. Notably, a subset of male participants described having girlfriends while knowing themselves to be gay.

#### ***General***

For most participants, the early stages began with shame, confusion, and/or internalized homophobia/heterosexism. For instance, one gay male participant said,

And um, I um over the, over the years of like middle school and into high school I finally realized, “okay, I think I’m gay.” And had a lot of shame, a lot of, um I guess kind of like a little homophobia. And um uh in some ways like sadness or depression about it, um but I didn’t really talk about it with anybody because,

because of the shame, and because of um the culture and I was... I couldn't tell my parents obviously or family and I didn't really have friends, that many friends to talk to anyways. But I didn't care to even say in school because I remember seeing a gay kid in high school that would often get beat up, and knowing like, "I'm never coming out in high school." Like um because I know that's what would happen to me.

His story is very similar to many others that were shared during the interviews for this study. A lesbian woman from Lebanon described an especially difficult and dark time that she had trying to decide how to deal with her realization that she was experiencing same-sex attractions. She described her experience as such:

Um, sister was a hard decision, but I had to make it. So I did, and a lot of my friends did accept me, some, I guess didn't agree with what I am, so I guess they weren't my friends after all. But, um, the reason I did that was because I was being tired of who I am, I guess I was really, I guess I was really suffering. I did come to a point when I wanted to commit suicide a few times in my life. I didn't know what to do with myself, and I didn't know if I was right or wrong. I didn't know how to deal with who I am, so I had to run to the safe people in my life, and talk with them about it. And they were very supportive. They got me to talk to other, uh, organizations and stuff like that, too. Kind of helped me out and made me understand myself better, so.

For this individual, she found solace and support in coming out that she would not have had if she continued her struggle alone. It was important for her to find safety and support in others, and discovering others who had similar experiences was also helpful. She is still working to feel more comfortable with her identity. She later added, "Um....um, I'm kind of 90% satisfied with it right now...I'm still questioning, like questioning myself, so...It's kind of difficult accepting who I am, but...I say I'm more...more accepting right now, a little more accepting than before."

Many participants described phases of questioning or being in denial about not being straight. For instance, one gay man stated, "I realized that I was gay when I was 16, but I really more or less fought it off until I was in, until I was about maybe 22 I think, maybe 23." He elaborated on this experience, "I started noticing myself noticing the other guys and everything,

and it's like I would think to myself, 'No, I can't do this. I can't, I can't be this way. I want to be straight.'" Similarly, a female participant said:

I mean maybe in a sense that, in a sense that like... some people don't like the term bisexual and will have a reaction to the term because they associate it with being very promiscuous and so that makes me want to embrace it because I'm like... you know let's take it back. So, in that sense I would say they're related... but I mean I don't know what else to call myself. I mean I'm not gay. I'm not straight. Like I mean queer is more of a catchall term... Bisexual is like, "okay, that fits." It just really seems to fit.

For participants of all different sexual minority identities, they had very similar experiences that typically included denial, shame/internalized heterosexual, and eventual pride.

### ***Know self to be gay well before coming out***

Expectedly, half of the participants in this study described a period of time when they were questioning their sexual identity and thinking that they are probably not heterosexual, before beginning to come out to others. All of the participants whose data fit with this theme reported that they began questioning sometime during childhood or adolescence. Several participants noted that although they noticed that they were experiencing feelings of same-sex attraction early on, they did not have a framework or language for it when those feelings first entered their awareness. For instance, one lesbian Muslim woman who emigrated from Lebanon at age 10 said:

I always kind of knew [that I was gay] but I didn't know that there was a label for it and a whole, like there were other people basically that that was a defining factor of their life so I basically knew by the time I guess was 15 or so, when I was in middle school, when it starts to get talked about and so that's kind of when I knew that I was actually gay; but I didn't say it openly yet. [Researcher: And when did you start saying it openly?] That was, uhh, my freshman year of college. Basically I think that school, and then I actually started to see somebody and that's when it, when I just decided to come out and say it officially. ... Yeah, I'd definitely say that I officially came out when I was 18 when I came out.

This individual was out to some people in her life, but had not fully come out to her family at the time of the interview. Once participants realized that they identified as non-heterosexist in some way, then they described the process of deciding who to come out to, how, and when. One pansexual woman from Armenia discussed it this way:

I was actually kind of cautious at my private [high] school... because um, I actually had no idea if the administration was homophobic or not and I didn't want to lose any of my honors or anything that I had earned... I feel like now, I mean eventually if I end up doing something good in my life, I'll get to come back and make a graduation speech and I'd love to do that. And like, I'd like to do it out of the closet.

Thus, the individuals in the present study provided personal stories that are very consistent with established stage theories of sexual identity or sexual orientation development.

#### ***Had girlfriends while knowing self to be gay***

A smaller subset of gay male participants ( $n = 4$ ) went to some lengths to cover or deny their sexual minority status by dating members of the opposite sex while they themselves knew they were gay. One man reported, "I had a girlfriend for like a month. Um and I had her knowing that I was gay, and it was more just so people won't think I'm gay," suggesting that his intention was to hide his true sexual identity. Likewise, another man stated:

I actually did not have hardly any trouble. Part of it is like, um, I don't know. I mean I dated some girls in high school and we were somewhat serious, you know for high school. So people never really attached that idea to me... I did [have girlfriends in high school while knowing I was gay]. And at the same time I knew that I eventually wanted to come out. I never had a, um, like a phase where I thought that I was going to try and hide it for my whole life. Basically since I was a kid and I was attracted, like I wanted to be in a relationship with a guy... I think that I was trying to fit in because other people were dating and at the same time somebody liked me and I was really bad at seeing somebody get hurt if I turned them down.

In this way, this individual explained wanting to hide his sexual identity temporarily and wanting to avoid causing waves by just "fitting in."

One participant who also reported experience dating a woman as a man who knows he's gay referred to this type of behavior as living a "double-life." This statement and other stories demonstrate the disconnect that several participants experienced during at least one phase of their sexual identity development.

### **Experiences of Heterosexism**

In addition to general shame that participants described feeling as a result of the dominant cultural perspectives in which they found themselves when they first began questioning, the majority of participants ( $n = 7$ ) also described specific experiences of heterosexist events at various times throughout their development. One gay man told a story of an exchange he had with his father after he was out to him.

I didn't really know where my dad's stood on it at all cause we had never really talked about it and it came out that basically that he like, was..wasn't okay with it for the most part, I guess is the simple version and so I got really mad because he was making comments on like same-sex marriage and how he thought it isn't something that kids should know about, I guess? And, I was..like how could I not take that extremely personally because he is essentially talking about the relationships that I have and how he doesn't think they're legitimate enough for, for children to know about them? And, so I was just like completely, I was floored that he actually, when he first said that, I asked him, are you joking, like do you seriously think that? 'Cause I was so shocked and so I just ended up like going upstairs.

One gay man from Tunisia described feeling similar discrimination from his partner's family. He explained,

His side [partner's family] probably would not want to come because of the gay thing. They never particularly said anything about me being Arab except that, I mean they didn't know where Tunisia was and they never really left the US. So they don't really know what anything is on the other side of the ocean is about, but, um, I don't think they would have any issue with him marrying an Arab person. They would have an issue with him marrying an Arab *man*.

Participants described incidents within their own families as well as heterosexist encounters with strangers. For example, one pansexual female participant explained some of her encounters at

different schools, “When I was like 13, I recall like a lot of people were harassing me in school, like telling me I’m a lesbian and um, I kind of felt really odd about that.” A lesbian woman described being harassed at school too. She said,

I came new to a country and, uh... was always more of a tomboy I guess. Um, people didn't understand me very well. I was misunderstood, and um...you know, here it's different because you get bullied or, uh, teased sometimes. But I didn't like it. [Researcher: So did they bully you for being a tomboy or for being from Lebanon, or...?] No, for being a tomboy and for being different I guess, um...you know, I just hated school. Really hated school. I tried, uh...I was so sick of school that I tried to actually hurt myself before when I used to come to school.

In addition, several participants reported hearing the word, “faggot” and confronting offenders who said it, regardless of if it was directed at the participant or not.

On top of the interpersonal experiences of heterosexism that participants reported, as US citizens with limited civil rights, participants are also discriminated against on a systematic macro-level. One gay man described it this way:

Um...in terms of my gay identity and the impact of that, um...one of the difficulties I think is that not only do my parents not necessarily fully recognize our relationship, neither does the government, so we are, we're in basically a domestic partnership. Illinois has civil unions, but you can't really get a tax break out of that. You can't do a lot of the things that people can do when they're married.

Participants were clearly victims of heterosexism and have coped with it on several fronts: at home, with other friends and family, and in the mainstream US society as a whole.

### **Sexual Minority Stigma in Middle Eastern Culture**

In addition to the experiences of heterosexism perpetuated from the dominant culture, nearly all participants referred to stigma about being a sexual minority within Middle Eastern Culture. About half of participants described stigma that they expected or believed was present (perceived) and another half described actual events that enacted such stigma.

### *Perceived*

Six participants discussed their hesitance in becoming more involved with Middle Eastern/Arab organizations for fear of perceived stigma against sexual minorities, or felt a need to cover or hide their sexual minority status in those spaces. Two gay men described having these feelings. One stated, “I went to like the Arab student organization meeting. And I remember being so scared to go. Like it, absolute scared to go to this meeting, and it was because I was gay. And I was afraid that they will um reject me,” Another made the following statement:

Yeah. So, it's, it's unfortunate, um, but I do, I am cautious about being out in Middle Eastern spaces, whether that's, whether that's a club or whether it's even like, this sounds kind of silly, but like a restaurant, you know, like if I go to a Middle Eastern restaurant (laughs). Um, or, it is a concern of mine, for, if I go to Lebanon whether it's to live there or study there or just vacation there, like, so yeah I guess the question's hard because I don't really have any Middle Eastern friends but I am cautious about being out around Middle Eastern people whether that's in the club that I run or in other spaces.

Another gay male participant described feeling supported by Muslim women at his large public Southeastern university, but noted that he believed they were especially liberal and the exception to the norm. Additionally, a queer woman reported perceived stigma and steps she takes to avoid facing discrimination based on this stigma. She explained:

In [participant's hometown], I am only out to my friends in my ethnic community and they're like sworn to secrecy, basically. Just because there are like a lot of rules within like Arab society and um a lot of um women break those rules and when they do, they kind of like, will almost rat out other people um who are breaking rules and so I am always slightly distrustful and what not. And um in [participant's West Coast university], it's not really an issue at all ...even folks who told me they were, like I'm never, they were just telling me, “I've never had a queer friend before.” Like, they were like, “I had these ideas about what a gay person was but you kind of just like made them, like, gay folks seem so normal, you know? And, just like, they are just as human as we are, which is stupid for us to like ever think that that was the case.” But they were like brought up in a certain environment and certain communities where like, you know, you were told you could pick out a homosexual from like a mile away because of their disgusting habits or the way that they look or blah blah blah, you know?

Thus, despite having somewhat positive experiences in which people were open-minded in getting to know her and understanding her queer identity, she believed their original conceptions were rooted in traditional upbringing that included stigma toward same-sex attraction.

### *Actual*

As one might expect, stigma from Middle Eastern culture was not limited to perceptions and speculation. Five participants also described actual encounters that demonstrated this stigma. One gay man with mixed Lebanese background, for example, described an interaction he had with another Middle Eastern person and a Middle Eastern festival in his mid-Western state. He described this incident:

You know, it's, I think one time there was a rather, there was a rather effeminate man walking, walking to the festival, and it was obvious that he was gay and a couple, and a couple people were just like, "Can you believe that, the nerve of coming here?" And it's like, "Why should he have," and I would say, and I responded back to them, "Well... Why should that be a problem? Is he doing anything to you?" "Well, no." "Well, then why do you have a problem with him being here? Is he up to no good, is he doing anything?" "Well, no." It's like, "how do you know that, that there aren't other gay people here?" "Well I would know." It's like, "how would you know? How do you know? How do you know that I'm not gay?" They said "well, you're not," and I said, "yes, I am." "Oh, we didn't know you were gay." It's like, yeah, you know, it's like, "just watch what you say."

A bisexual man from Israel explained that his parents and Israeli friends' parents reacted negatively to their coming out to their parents explicitly because sexual minority status ran counter to accepted norms in their home culture. A gay man from Lebanon described a similar experience coming out to Arab American friends. He reported:

It always felt a lot more difficult coming out to my Middle Eastern friends... It was always a lot harder, especially in college, even like, particularly because when I told...certain friends, I came out as bisexual that, you know, I got a lot of reaction particularly from the guys.

Thus, with regard to both perceived and actual encounters to heterosexism/homophobic stigma from Middle Eastern culture, participants described coping with in on multiple levels, including family, close friends, and the broader community.

### **Intersections of Sexual and Ethnic Identities**

Within the intersections of participants' sexual minority identity and ethnic identity status of having Middle Eastern and/or Arab background, participants described having found (1) strength/resilience; (2) complexity, complication, and difficulty integrating their multiple identities; (3) separate and independent processes; (4) richness in sense of self; and (5) themselves acting as advocates for others.

#### ***Strength/resilience***

Four participants referenced how they gained a strength and/or resilience from their multiple identity status as sexual minorities of Middle Eastern/Arab American descent. For example, one gay man of Iraqi and Lebanese descent explained how developing one identity prepared him for coping with the other. He said, "...learning, going through the process of sort of figuring out my queer identity, I think that that process has helped me in the past few years to try to sort of sort through how I identify culturally." This participant explained this process further:

...it wasn't easy to go through the process of figuring out, you know, my sexual identity, um...and it wasn't easy, well it's easier to figure, to think about my, you know, cultural and ethnic identity, but I like I said I think that's probably because I've done it with being queer and could use those same experiences, or strategies.

Similarly, but reversing the two identities, another gay man stated that for him, his cultural background provided him with different perspectives that allowed him to cope with developing a sexual minority identity in some unexpected culturally-based ways that he considered to be a major asset for him. Finally, a queer Palestinian woman who emigrated from Jordan said that

these multiple identities, “actually like made me more vocal about like about my feelings, you know?” suggesting that for her too, overcoming adversity was a source of strength.

***Complexity, complication, and difficulty integrating identities***

Six participants described struggling to integrate their ethnic/cultural identities with the sexual identities. A pansexual woman from Armenia described complication in her multiple identities in the sense that she has a lot to explain to others, perhaps too much to explain. She stated,

Yeah, I mean, I think kind of a lot of people just get the idea that... everyone's different, but it's only like very minimal aspects, you can't be different in several aspects. That's.. that's something. I'm different in several aspects.

To expand further on the issue of others’ lack of understanding, one gay man of Lebanese descent explained that developing his view of his identities and communities has been a complicated process both for him and for others:

I guess I was just less idealistic about my sexual, about my cultural identity. And I don't always think of it if it's like “oh, great” ...sort of, you know, like it's not one or the other. It's not all good or all bad. It's complicated, and it's complicated to other people, so I don't try to. And I think at some point, when I try to suppress my sexual identity, I try, I also really idealized my Arab identity as like it's all about family and all about community, and it was nothing like the American culture.

Along similar lines, speaking on a broader scale, the same participant expressed frustration over communities that represent his individual identities shunning one another. Specifically, he reported:

They kind of place some general racist stereotypes around Arabs and Middle Eastern people. And, promote that, which alienates both the Arab community, but also people that are Arab queer. Then on the other hand, there will be people who will argue that, you know, uh, queerness, being gay, is foreign to the Middle East and it's an American imposition. Part of a larger American imperial project, or whatever, and that also alienates LGBT people. (laughs) And, my big thing is that it's not a game of football. It's not something that, you know, people, that has a really serious impact on peoples' lives and how they consider who they are and

what they want to do in their life, and I think that people just need to be much more conscious about how much like abstract they are from reality and turning it into like this big, you know, as if like you know gay Arab people don't exist and have real lives that and have complicated political identity, class, background, whatever. So, um, that just does a great disservice to gay Arabs in general.

One queer woman discussed a view she developed as a child that some identities are inherently incompatible with one another. It was that view that she had to actively combat and find ways to disprove. She explained:

And I remember one day my grandmother was reading an article about this lesbian or something and she was like really surprised and really angry and I remember she was like really disgusted. And she was like, “we don't have any lesbians, you know?” Like, “there is no such thing as a lesbian Arab or a Muslim,” like, “this is wrong.” And I remember at that very early age, like I was maybe like ten or eleven, and I remember after that day I realized that there are certain things that you can't be simultaneously. That's like what I thought after that and um also just because a lot of lectures, like religious lectures that I would go to would never... whenever homosexuality was brought up or like that idea of not-fitting-the-norm would come up, it would automatically be shut down.

This participant's story was similar to others who described early experiences with their families of origin or their ethnic communities in which they received messages about homosexuality being somehow incongruent with their religion or ethnicity. These participants explained that they not only lacked queer Middle Eastern models growing up, but that same-sex attraction was explicitly rejected. Given this context, it was incredibly difficult putting those two identities together while being instructed that it is inherently impossible. They found themselves looking for ways that would make it work.

An additional source of complexity came from the fact that many participants touched on, that having these particular multiple identities was a double-edged sword, simultaneously providing strength and adversity. One gay man captured this issue in his statement:

It's very complex and very complicated. It creates opportunities, creates many opportunities, but also creates many barriers um and oppressions. And um it, it, I think what's, what's hard for me to figure out and um I still sometimes feel that

way, is not fully being in either identity or being in either community. And so, I always sort of see myself in this between kind of like a, a bridge in some way. Um so, but that, that on its own I've learned that is, you know, that it's unique, and that's immediate, and that's important. But you know, um but, but there are realities. Like I'm in the gay community, and I still experience discrimination [for being Middle Eastern].

### *Separate and independent processes*

While some of the time, participants were able to articulate the intersections of their dual identity status, other times they described experiencing them as separate and independent processes that operated in isolation from one another. Five participants described identity experiences related to either ethnic or sexual identity independent of the other. For instance one gay man who described his skin tone as “olive,” stated that he only recently started becoming aware that people don't perceive him as White, even though he “feels very White.” This identity development associated with racial and ethnic identity has essentially nothing to do with his sexual orientation, he just happens to also identify as gay.

An Iranian American bisexual woman reported that originally she felt that her ethnic and sexual identities were experienced separately, and that they developed in separate contexts. She reported that as time goes on, it has started to, “all come together.” A bisexual man from Israel expressed having similar experience of his identities, as experiencing them separate and recognizing that they have a collective impact. He said, “But I just haven't really thought about how they interact with each other and how they like collectively impact me and my life.” As such, although it may be tempting for academics to want to establish a clear theory in which dual minority identity is experienced at the intersection *or* separately (e.g., the additive model), it seems that in reality, for the Middle Eastern/Arab Americans in this study it seems that both frameworks apply at different times.

### *Richness in sense of self*

Four participants credited their multiple identities with providing a unique richness in their sense of self. Two gay men from this study articulated this point in the following statements. The first, a participant with Tunisian background, stated:

Um, if I had something to say, for me it's been a really positive experience having multiple perspectives on my ethnicity, my race, my languages and my sexuality and I think for anyone, it's really really good. You get to see the world from many different eyes and, um, I think the Arab-American, or Arab-gay or American-gay or any combination of that, have that capability and they should use it.

He, like others in the study, appreciated the multiple perspectives and open-mindedness that comes along with having had diverse experiences. Another type of richness that was described by a handful of participants had to do with being empowered to discover and mold one's own identity. For instance, this participant stated, "I'm definitely, you know, much more that it's fortunate to have all these different influences in my life that I can, you know, kind of carve my own identity out of it that doesn't have to be black and white."

### *Acting as advocate*

The final subtheme that emerged under the major theme "Intersections..." resulted from six participants identifying advocacy work. For many participants, having struggled through their own multiple identity development has led them to want to give back to their communities. One bisexual woman, like other participants, described a form of privilege in having multiple identities and feeling obliged to use this privilege. She stated:

Well it means that I have privilege because I'm in both worlds, in both ways. I feel like I'm Iranian and American and I can have the privilege of two perspectives. You know, being bisexual and like... I can feel like I can teeter between both worlds um... so I feel like I am a bridge and I feel a responsibility to be a bridge.

Another group of participants found that their personal experiences acted as a source of motivation to become more involved in activism. For one participant who identifies as Armenian-American and pansexual said that in response to sexual orientation-based hate that she's noticed in the world, she decided to become a political science major, in hopes of being able to effect change in the future.

Based on the above subthemes, the results of this study show that there are numerous ways in which participants experience their multiple identities as Middle Eastern/Arab Americans who identify as sexual minorities. They discussed how these identities have influenced them both together – at their intersection – and also as independent dimensions of who they are. In addition, they also described how their multiple identities have provided both challenges and benefits to their lives.

### **Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Family of Origin**

Ten participants, as part of their coming out stories, talked about disclosing their sexual identities to their families and/or family members. Four subthemes emerged through these discussions: positive reactions in which family members expressed support, negative reactions in which family members expressed disappointment, mixed positive and negative reactions, and decisions not to disclose to one or more specific family members.

#### ***Positive/support***

Eight participants reported at least some positive reactions from family members in which the individuals to whom they disclosed their sexual identity to responded with supportive statements or actions. Many participants stated that their siblings and parents were supportive and accepting. For instance, one gay man reported his mom's response to him coming out to her. He reported that she said to him, "I'm sorry this has happened, and you know, I know that it

hurts very badly, but the bottom line is that I don't care if you're gay or not, you're my son, I love you... And I accept you for who you are.” Several participants noted that they became closer with their family members once they came out to them. For example, a gay man in the study made the following statement:

Uh, I think maybe with my mom and sisters, they became closer. Just because I had, like, when I had relationships with girls in high school they were just like small relationships and wasn't a big deal but when I started dating my boyfriend now we all kind of got closer because it was, it's almost like we're engaged or married the way they talk about him. So it kind of brought us all together, closer.

In addition, some family members apparently responded with a lack of surprise, expressing that they suspected that the participant (their son, daughter, or sibling) might be and that they were waiting for the individual to tell them. An example of this comes from a queer Palestinian woman discussing her relationship with and coming out to her brother:

I've been out to my brother for like the past two years.... He's very, very open-minded. And he's very, very supportive. He's always been supportive of like not like everything I do but the things that he respects and would do himself and even the things that he doesn't understand at all. He's so very respectful and supportive. Um, he's amazing... Like, he told me that he wasn't that surprised. He was like, “I thought maybe that you were like bi or something, but like, you know, as long as you're happy and, um, yeah. That's all that matters,” you know?

### ***Negative/disappointment***

Five participants reported negative reactions to their coming out to family members. For most participants who reported family members' negative reactions came in the form of disappointment. Others explained that their family members were still “processing it” or “taking it hard.” Some participants were discouraged from letting others in the family or extended family know that the individual was a sexual minority. The type of disappointment expressed by family members is well illustrated by this statement from a gay men of mixed Syrian, Lebanese, and European descent:

I said to her, "Mom, remember when we were talking earlier, you said, "hopefully I'll get to meet you know, my future wife that'll make me happy?" Well I am seeing somebody and it's not a female and I'm gay and I want you to know." Then we talked in the car for about ten minutes, um, she cried and said she was upset and said she always wanted grandchildren, because I was her only child. She never told me she was upset with me or even said anything sort of homophobic but, um, I think she was right to be shocked and just kind of startled by the news and I guess the fact that she may never have grandchildren.

Furthermore, participants that reported family reactions involving the family member(s) struggling to come to terms with the individual's news made comments similar to this statement from a queer woman:

Um and so I was hoping that it would, like open things up between us again, like in a better way but um I don't know because it's a heavy thing, you know? And it's really my parents, are very very religious and very spiritual so it's very difficult for them to accept it because, you know, they believe that it's a sin and it's something that they can't accept, you know?

Similar to this woman's experience, other participants also described the difficulty that their parents or other family members had with their sexual identities, most who experienced negative reactions from family reported disappointment, sadness, anger, and/or a lack of understanding. None of the participants described family members actively trying to change them.

### ***Mixed positive and negative reactions***

Three participants described reactions from family members that were not clearly either positive or negative, but instead were mixed with both positive and negative components. A gay man with mixed Lebanese and European background provided the following explanation that illustrates this point well. He said:

But, in each one of my experiences [with various family members], the bottom line was, well, you know, we may not understand, we may not be completely thrilled with, with the fact that you're gay, but you are our fill-in-the-blank and we love you anyway... And, for me, you know, that, all, it, it was always a very powerful experience. You know, and one sense, while there were tears, they were tears in a positive way.

For him and others, reactions were then somewhat ambiguous. Family members expressed love and caring, but had difficulty fully understanding and being able to provide support for the individual's sexual minority status.

***Decision not to disclose***

Four participants described their decisions not to disclose to one or more members of their families. Interestingly, this theme seemed to be more common among the women in the study than the men. One gay male participant explained his rationale being based on discouragement from other family members not to come out to other more distant relatives (i.e., parents recommending not coming out to grandparents), two female participants said that their sexual orientation is personal and not the business of their family members, and one noted that because sexuality was taboo to talk about in Arab culture, it didn't make sense to her to discuss her homosexuality with her family.

**Invisibility of Middle Eastern Sexual Minority Community**

Five individuals lamented the invisibility of a Middle Eastern sexual minority community. Several participants commented that it was difficult or that they didn't have success looking for a community of sexual minority Middle Eastern people in the US. Some comments suggested that it would have been easier for individuals in the present study to develop and come to terms with their multiple identities if they had a community of others like with whom they could identify and use as models. For example, one gay man from Jordan said, "And it's just, it's so hard. I mean I like I'm adamant about seeking out like gay Arabs, gay Middle Easterners – they are so hard find. Period." Similarly, another participant, a queer woman, made the following statement:

I think when I was first coming to terms with everything like um, excuse me, I wasn't sure whether like I could actually be like a practicing Muslim and still

identify as queer, like I um, because its, I don't know, there isn't that much, there aren't that many studies, there aren't that many out Muslims, I think that's the thing.

Additionally, another sentiment that emerged from participants was that the community – which participants described as invisible, underground, or disjointed – goes unrecognized by mainstream American society. To illustrate this point, one pansexual woman remarked, “Actually, a lot of people tend to think that we [Middle Eastern Sexual Minorities] don't exist.”

## CHAPTER IV

### Discussion

The present study aims to provide insight into the identity development of being a same-sex attracted person of Middle Eastern and/or Arab descent living in the US. The participants in this study described a range of different experiences. Some participants were full Middle Eastern or Arab in their ethnic background while others were half or less. Additionally, some of the participants had immigrated to the US themselves as minors with their parents, while others were up to fourth-generation Americans. Participants described both positive and negative experiences of holding the intersecting identities of being Middle Eastern/Arab and sexual minorities in the US. Many felt grateful that they have this unique experience and perspective while acknowledging the challenges of oppression that they've faced. Several participants whose sexual identities were in the early stages of development in 2001 found that disclosing their sexual identity became more challenging once they were faced with additional discrimination on the basis of their ethnic background immediately following 9/11. Participants also discussed their various levels of connection with their ethnic community and extended family. Additionally, many participants discussed how their religiosity developed over time, in some cases in relation to their sexual identity development. Finally, many participants also lamented the lack of a community or visible people with these social identities.

Our findings expand upon earlier findings regarding the experiences of Middle Eastern American sexual minority individuals, and help fill in some major gaps in the research about this group and about intersectionality issues for LGB-POC persons more broadly. The study by Minwalla et al. (2005) in which researchers interviewed six gay Muslim men had noted East-

West cultural comparisons related to gay identity, coming out as gay, physical and psychological dangers of coming out, as well as color dynamics associated with being Muslim within White gay culture, internalized racism, and color and dating. Likewise, within in the present study, we also heard from participants that they were very much aware of their racial identity as not being fully White and referred to gay culture in the US as being associated with Whiteness.

Additionally, gay stigma in Middle Eastern culture also emerged as a theme in the current study suggesting that these participants also had concerns about the dangers of coming out to their families and ethnic communities that was unique or in addition to general worries about coming out.

With respect to the LGB-POC literature, our findings of participants lamenting the invisibility of sexual minority Middle Eastern Americans run parallel with Moradi, DeBlaere, and Huang (2010) in which they discussed the issue of invisibility among LGB-POCs.

According to Moradi et al. (2010), there are basically two camps of thought regarding this issue: one is that invisibility due to individuals' ethnic/racial community's heterosexism and subsequent suppression of sexual minority identities, while the other holds that there is a presence of LGB POC community/culture, however a lack of research renders these groups invisible. For sexual minority Middle Eastern Americans, their group has indeed been overlooked in the literature.

The present study brings this groups identity development and experiences to the light and also demonstrates that for sexual minority Middle Eastern Americans themselves have had difficulty findings others like themselves, thus providing evidence for both camps of thought put forth by Moradi et al. (2010). The findings of the present study emphasize the need for more visibility for this population. In fact, participants themselves recognized the challenge of finding others like themselves and that when they have, it has been beneficial for them. Therefore, it is critical for

researchers to attend to this group in an effort to increase visibility and move toward a stronger presence of sexual minority individuals of Middle Eastern descent.

In their development of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people of color (LGBT-POC) microaggression scale, Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, and Walters (2011) conducted focus group with LGBT-POCs. These focus groups included individuals who identified as African American, Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander, and biracial/multiracial. Although Middle Eastern Americans were not included in the focus groups, the themes discussed were similar to those that emerged in the present study. Specifically, Balsam et al. (2011) identified the following themes: racism in the LGBT community, heterosexism in racial/ethnic minority communities, problems with relationships and dating, concerns about immigration status, and rejection by other LGBT-POC. Their participants like those in the present study also discussed feelings of alienation from family and friends within their racial/ethnic communities and a range of feelings of fragmentation versus feelings of integration with regard to their multiple identities. The theme of gay stigma in Middle Eastern culture that emerged in the current study is consistent with the LGB-POC finding of alienation from racial/ethnic communities. For some participants in the current study, this theme was described as rationale for not disclosing sexual orientation or more hesitantly disclosing to other people of Middle Eastern/Arab descent. Similarly, the theme of Intersections of Sexual and Ethnic Identities that was found in the current study highlighted exactly how these participants experienced these multiple identities. In particular, the subthemes of (1) Complexity, Complication, and Difficulty Integrating Multiple Identities, and (2) Separate and Independent Processes seems to especially dovetail with Balsam et al.'s (2011) findings that for some, identities were experienced in a “fragmented” way while others described more “integration.” In the present study, we also saw a

variance in fragmentation and integration and were particularly struck by how depending on the context, participants described either separation or integration of their identities. It is important to note that the present study focused on multiple identities of sexual and ethnic identities, however of course other identities came into play as well – perhaps most notably, gender and religion. Future research may focus on the roles of these other identities in the lives of sexual minority Middle Eastern Americans.

The present study also sheds light on the ways in which experiences of sexual minority identity development among Middle Eastern/Arab Americans fit in with established understandings of Middle Eastern/Arab culture and experiences in the US. Specifically, our findings regarding acceptance among family members in response to sexual minority identity disclosure, possible gender differences in decisions to disclose sexual identity, invisibility, and blurry racial identity can be partially explained by literature about Middle Eastern/Arab American culture and values. For instance, Nassar-McMillan and Hakim-Larson (2003) wrote that immigrants of Lebanese tend to have a relatively more Western bias and are generally more understanding of psychological and emotional problems, highlighting the heterogeneity among Middle Easterners. Although several different countries were represented in the current study, perhaps those who described family members who were more open and accepting of their sexual identities were also more open to Western values more broadly.

Regarding gender differences in coming out, it is important to note that Ajrouch (1999) had reported that in their study, because females in their sample were expected to maintain traditions of Arab identity, males seemed to be acculturating more easily to dominant US culture. In the present study, males were more vocal with their families and communities regarding their sexual identity than were the females, with a couple of women reporting that they chose not to

disclose their sexual orientation to their families because either it was “none of their business” or because sexuality in general is taboo as a topic of conversation in their culture. Men in the present study seemed to be much more open about discussing their sexuality with family members, lending support to the hypothesis that acculturation for males, and also sexual minority identity development, is more acceptable and easier for males relative to females.

The problem of invisibility has been established in LGB-POC literature and appears in Middle Eastern/Arab American literature as well. It emerged as a theme in the current study of sexual minority Middle Eastern/Arab Americans. Invisibility has been identified as a likely source of stress that should be considered with regard to mental health services for Arab American therapy clients. It has been noted that the lack of recognition that Arab American have as an identified ethnic minority group in the US can contribute to possible inhibitions of positive individual ethnic identity development and cohesive group identity (Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). Therefore, it seems that invisibility is already problematic as far as identity development goes for the general population of Middle Eastern/Arab Americans and exacerbated even further for sexual minority individuals of Middle Eastern descent. In essence, sexual minority Middle Easterners have dual *invisible* minority identities – ethnic and sexual.

An issue closely related to invisibility of this population is blurry racial identity, which also emerged as a major theme in the current study. Many participants in this study discussed confusion or uncertainty about whether they are perceived as White or as a person of color, in addition to how they should think of themselves. Within the subtheme of confusion about racial identity, one participant remarked that it did not seem appropriate or fair to her to be called White because she has been prejudiced against for her ethnic background. In contrast, another participant had said that he always thought of himself as White until recently when friends of his

provided feedback to him that they did not perceive him as White due to his Middle Eastern background. The other subtheme is less benign and surrounded the fact that several participants actively tried to hide their ethnicity and pass as White based on the premise that they might fit in better than way and/or protect themselves from racial discrimination. Both types of blurry racial identity experiences fit with previous writing about Arab Americans, given that there is a lack of recognition of Middle Easterners/Arabs as a distinct ethnic minority group. It could be argued that recognition, either institutional or socio-cultural within the US, might provide some useful understandings and comforts for individuals experiencing ethnic oppression based on their Middle Eastern or Muslim identities. It would provide validation as well as dialogue and a framework from which these individuals could better be understood and better understand themselves.

Religion emerged as an important theme in the present study, and more specifically, most participants described distancing themselves from their religion of birth that they were raised with. This pattern appeared across various religions of birth. Some participants explained that conflict between sexual minority status, however it is unclear what role generation may also have been a factor that led to less religious identification or conversion to other religion affiliation given that most participants in this study were young adults. The finding that sexual minorities have found tension with religion is consistent with Hansen and Lambert (2011), a study of four rural lesbian women's loss of religion where themes of the need to modify their beliefs, the experience of rejection by church members or the church itself, and seeking acceptance emerged.

### **Clinical Implications**

The findings of the present study have important implications for conceptualizing clients and treatment planning. Participants in the study discussed major difficulties that are encountered

by sexual minority Middle Eastern/Arab Americans including racial/ethnic discrimination, heterosexism, identity confusion, and maintaining conflicting demands from personal values, family obligations and expectations, and religious beliefs.

Ethnic identity confusion for this population stems from a lack of recognition as an ethnic minority group as well as a corresponding lack of validation for experiences of ethnic oppression. Essentially, the research shows that Middle Eastern Americans do deal with prejudice and discrimination in social and professional domains, however they are not granted the same recognition and protections that other ethnic minorities in the US have been provided. Therapists who are aware of this dynamic in clients' lives may be able to offer some insight and validation that has otherwise been missing for clients.

Additionally, clinicians in mental health professions should be aware of the conflicting demands in the lives of sexual minority Middle Eastern American clients, and the possibility that some of their clients may struggle to manage familial expectations and the role of religion in their lives. It is also important to recognize the ways in which this experience may be different for women and men, and for individuals from varying countries of origin. In general, family connectedness is a central element in Middle Eastern/Arab culture, however many families are fragmented by emigration and the family structure may be disrupted as a consequence. Additionally, the decision to disclose or not disclose one's sexual minority identity to family members will likely be more complex than for European American LGBT individuals given that the cultural values of Middle Eastern/Arab Americans emphasized group needs over the needs of an individual. There is some research regarding Muslims' coping with discrimination (Abu-Raiya et al., 2011), however much more research is needed to better understand coping and treatment for sexual minorities of Middle Eastern descent or Muslim identification.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

The methodological limitations of the present study should be recognized. First, the participants were recruited via convenience sampling using professional networks, listservs, and organizations that serve as LGBT resource centers and Gay-Straight Alliances. An advantage is that this recruiting method allowed for collecting a diverse sample of women and men from different parts of the US and from various countries of origin. However, it is reasonable to believe that this sample is not representative of the entire population of sexual minorities of Middle Eastern/Arab descent, and that the present study did not include individuals who are likely to be either lower in level of outness and comfort with sexual minority status and/or less advanced in their identity development. Second, the sample was relatively small and the diversity of the sample led to smaller fractions of the sample having particular gender and sexual identities as well as countries of origin. For example, four women participated in this study and of the four, only one identified as a lesbian (one each of the others identified themselves as bisexual, pansexual, or queer). On the other hand, there were eight men in the study. Seven of the men identified as gay while only one identified as bisexual. Thus, the majority of participants were gay men and each other participant was the only one of his or her same gender and sexual identity.

It would be beneficial for future studies to include larger more representative samples by expanding the recruitment process to other recruitment sites or narrowing to only women or men or only one particular sexual identity. In general, both types of research – more broad or more narrow – are useful given the extremely limited literature currently available regarding multiple oppressions among Middle Eastern/Arab American sexual minorities. It would be helpful to know how variation in acculturation by gender influences individuals' decision to come out to

family members, comfort with sexual identity, general psychological adjustment, and other mental health indicators.

In sum, the current study adds to the existing literature on dual minority identity development for sexual and ethnic minority individuals by examining the unique experience of same-sex attraction among individuals who have Middle Eastern/Arab background living in the US. Our findings illustrate heterogeneity of the ethnic group (religion, nationality) and variation in familial level of LGB accepting/rejecting in addition to common themes that many people in this population experience

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## APPENDICES

**TABLE 1**  
**Interview Protocol**

1. Tell me about yourself.
  - 1a. Where did you grow up?
  - 1b. What is your family immigration history and cultural background?
  
2. How do you identify yourself culturally?
  - 2a. What nationality are you?
  - 2b. How do you see yourself ethnically and racially?
  - 2c. What was/is your religious affiliation?
  
3. Tell me about your coming out story.
  - 3a. When did you realize that you were lesbian/gay/bisexual or unsure about your sexuality?
  - 3b. How does your cultural background and ethnic identity influence your sexual identity and vice versa?
  - 3c. How do your religious and spiritual beliefs influence your sexual identity and vice versa?
  - 3d. How does your relationship with your ethnic community and/or family influence your sexual identity and vice versa?
  
4. Are you out to your family (or ethnic community)?
 

If yes...

  - 4a. How did you come out to your family (or ethnic community)?
  - 4b. How did they react?
  - 4c. What was your relationship like with your family (or ethnic community) before and after you came out?
  - 4d. How was it different than coming out to your non-Middle Eastern/Arab friends?

If no...

  - 4e. Tell me about your decision making process related to not disclosing your sexual identity to your family (or ethnic community).
  
5. How do you feel about your cultural and sexual identity now?
  - 5a. How have your feelings changed over time?
  - 5b. Could you tell me about a specific time where you felt a shift in your feelings?
  
6. What is your experience like being a Middle Eastern/Arab American LGBQ person in the United States?
  - 6a. What does it mean to be both Middle Eastern/Arab American and LGBQ person?
  - 6b. What issues do you face?
  
7. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with me or you'd like others to know about your experience as a Middle Eastern/Arab American LGBQ person?

**TABLE 2**  
**Themes and Subthemes**

Theme	N of Cases
1. Connection with Ethnic Community in US	7
a. Weak	3
b. Strong	4
2. Blurry Racial Identity	11
a. Confusion/Ambivalence about White vs. Person of Color Identification	4
b. Hiding Ethnicity to Pass as White	7
3. Ethnic Oppression	9
a. General	8
b. Aftermath of 9/11	5
4. Ethnic Identity Development	10
5. Influence of Middle Eastern Cultural Values	6
a. Collectivism Emphasized	4
b. Patriarchy/Male Gender Role Expectations	2
c. Food to Retain Ethnic Heritage	3
6. Rejection of Traditional Religion	10
7. Sexual Identity Development	11
a. General	11
b. Know Self to be Gay Well Before Coming Out	6
c. Had Girlfriends while Knowing Self to Be Gay	4
8. Experiences of Heterosexism	7
9. Gay Stigma in Middle Eastern Culture	11
a. Perceived	6
b. Actual	5
10. Intersections of Sexual & Ethnic Identities	7
a. Strength/Resilience	4
b. Complexity, Complication, and Difficulty Integrating Identities	6
c. Separate and Independent Processes	5
d. Richness in Sense of Self	4
e. Acting as Advocate	6
11. Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Family of Origin	10
a. Positive/support	8
b. Negative/Disappointment	5
c. Mixed Reactions	3
d. Decision Not to Disclose	4
12. Invisibility of Middle Eastern Sexual Minority Community	5

## VITA

Ayse Ikizler was born Washington, D.C., in 1985. After graduating in 2003 from Northwest High School in Germantown, MD, she attended St. Mary's College of Maryland where she received a Bachelor of Arts in 2007 majoring in Psychology and minoring in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Between 2007 and 2010, Ayse worked for the Education and Human Development branch of the American Institutes for Research in Washington, D.C. In the fall of 2010, she enrolled into the doctoral program in Counseling Psychology at the University of Tennessee Knoxville in the department of Psychology. Her major research and professional interests include feminist therapy and theory, immigrant mental health, internalized heterosexism, minority stress, multicultural issues, multiple oppressions/intersectionality, and sexual minority issues.