

## Self-Concept in Arabs and Arab Americans

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*A group of Arab American students from traditional families scored significantly higher than a group of Arab students in Egypt on 7 of 10 subscales of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale (TSCS:2; Fitts & Warren, 1996), reflecting overall higher self-esteem, self-confidence, and satisfaction with one's physical, moral, and academic self. The results are consistent with theories associating biculturalism with an enhanced self-concept and sense of well-being.*

LA FRAMBOISE, COLEMAN, AND GERTON (1993) described five models of how individuals cope with the difficulty of living in a distinctly different culture from the one in which they were raised. The key to psychological well-being for these bicultural individuals is the ability to develop competence in both cultures and maintain positive attitudes toward both. Empirical studies that test this prediction by examining self-concept in light of bicultural situations are relatively rare. Studies of Mexican Americans (Fernandez-Barillas & Morrison, 1984), Asian Americans (Sue & Sue, 1973), British Asian Muslims in England (Kitwood, 1983), and Arab and Jewish adolescents in Israel (Hofman, Beit-Hallahmi, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1982) provide mixed support for this prediction, in that some of these studies found a relationship between biculturalism and an enhanced sense of well-being whereas others did not. However, because they were designed to answer different questions, these data do not directly address this issue. The current study was designed to further explore the relationship between living in a bicultural situation and the nature of an individual's self-concept and sense of well-being.

We compared the self-concepts of Arab American college students raised in an Arab community in the

United States with the self-concepts of Arab students at a university in Egypt. Possibly because of their relatively small numbers and a cultural/religious background that is frequently quite different from that of most Americans, Arabs, as a group, suffer from a negative stereotype in America (Abraham, 1987; Slade, 1981; Stockton, 1994). Attempting to maintain any semblance of a traditional Arab lifestyle in the United States means having to overcome these stereotypes and reconcile two cultures with very different religious and cultural traditions. If the hypothesis concerning biculturalism and self-concept has any merit, there should be predictable differences in self-concept between bicultural Arab Americans and monocultural Arabs in Egypt. More specifically, we should find that Arab Americans score higher on measures of self-esteem and well-being than do Arabs living in a less bicultural situation in an Arab nation.

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**Method**

**Participants**

The participants were 25 Arab students (13 men, 12 women) from the American University in Cairo, Egypt, and 50 Arab American students (22 men, 28 women) from the University of Michigan–Dearborn. They were between the ages of 17 and 24, and can be described as being from middle to upper socio-economic class in their respective societies. The students in Cairo were all Arabs (predominantly Egyptians, but some were from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman) who had lived their entire lives in Middle Eastern Arab countries. The Arab Americans all lived in Dearborn, MI, a city with the highest percentage of Arab Americans of any city in the United States. They were American citizens, but all had been raised in Arab families that maintained Arab cultural traditions at home.

**Procedure**

Students in both groups completed the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, 2nd Edition (TSCS:2; Fitts & Warren, 1996) in English, which is the language of instruction at the American University in Cairo. The TSCS:2 consists of 82 self-descriptive statements the students applied to themselves along a 5-point scale ranging from *always false* to *always true*. The scale results in a total score that reflects overall self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence. There are also 10 subscales that reflect more specific aspects of self-concept and self-esteem as well as one that measures level of satisfaction with one's self-image. The Arab American participants also filled out a biculturalism inventory designed to assess the degree to which they, as Arab Americans, embraced Arab culture; they were also asked to classify themselves as Arab, Arab American, or American. (It should be noted that none of the Arab American participants in this study chose to classify themselves exclusively as Americans.) The biculturalism inventory was tailored specifically to an Arab American audience, and it would not have been appropriate for use with the Arab sample in Egypt. Given that all of the Arab participants in Egypt were raised in Arab families in a Middle Eastern country, they were by definition living in a monocultural situation relative to the Arab American participants in this study.

**Results**

Two (male/female) × 2 (Arab/Arab American) factorial analyses of variance revealed a significant main effect for cultural background on the total self-concept score and on 7 of the 10 subscales of the TSCS:2 (see Table 1). In all cases, the Arab American

**TABLE 1**

**Results of the Main Effect Analyses for Participants' Cultural Background**

TSCS:2 scale/subscale	F value & degrees of freedom
Total self-concept score	$F(1, 66) = 11.78, p < .01$
Conflict subscore	$F(1, 66) = .33, ns$
Physical self-concept	$F(1, 66) = 15.91, p < .001$
Moral self-concept	$F(1, 66) = 8.31, p < .01$
Personal self-concept	$F(1, 66) = 6.18, p < .05$
Family self-concept	$F(1, 66) = 2.06, ns$
Social self-concept	$F(1, 66) = 2.44, ns$
Academic self-concept	$F(1, 66) = 7.94, p < .01$
Identity subscore	$F(1, 66) = 15.52, p < .001$
Satisfaction subscore	$F(1, 66) = 6.23, p < .05$
Behavior subscore	$F(1, 66) = 21.42, p < .0001$

group scored higher than the Arab group, indicating overall higher self-esteem, greater self-confidence, and greater satisfaction with one's behavior and with one's physical, moral, and academic self. The only significant sex main effect involved women who felt more socially competent in their interactions with others than did men,  $F(1, 66) = 4.37, p < .05$ . There was no effect for culture on this subscale. For the Arab American group, responses to the biculturalism inventory successfully predicted whether individuals classified themselves as "Arabs" or as "Arab Americans." Those students who classified themselves as "Arab Americans" ( $M = 35.00$ ) scored significantly higher on the biculturalism scale than those students who classified themselves as Arabs ( $M = 27.78$ ),  $t(42) = 2.14, p < .05$ . Several participants did not provide useable data on this survey.

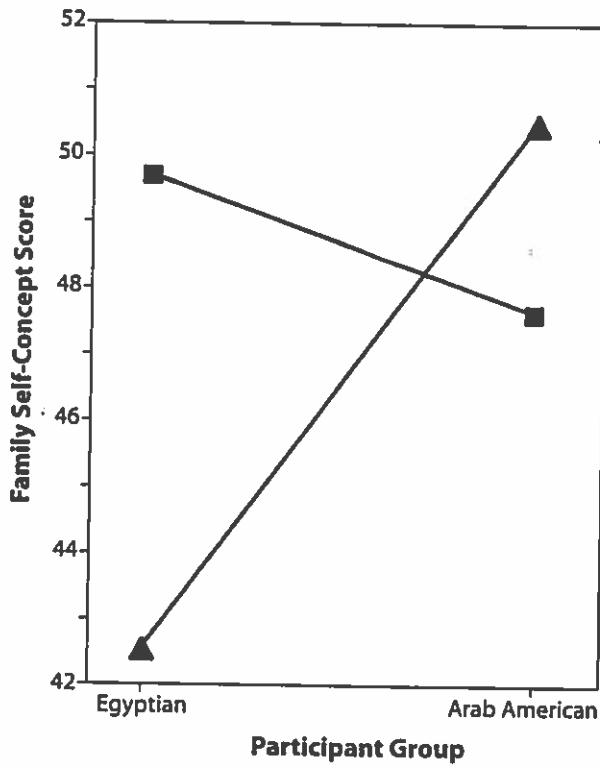
The analyses yielded only one significant interaction between sex and culture. On the family self-concept subscale that measured how each individual viewed his or her adequacy and worth as a family member, Egyptian men scored higher than Egyptian women, whereas the Arab American women scored higher than Arab American men,  $F(1, 66) = 6.06, p < .05$ . This interaction indicates that Egyptian women have a much lower sense of self-worth within the context of the family than do their Arab American counterparts and men in both countries (see Figure 1).

**Discussion**

Although the Arab Americans scored significantly higher on most subscales of the TSCS:2, generally both the Arab and Arab American groups obtained self-concept scores that would be characterized as healthy and well within the norms established for

FIGURE 1

Interaction between subject group and sex for family self-concept.



other groups on the TSCS:2 (Fitts & Warren, 1996). In fact, Arab Americans scored at or above the mean compared to other groups of Americans on almost all of the self-concept scales, indicating extremely positive self-concepts overall. Although there may be other plausible explanations for the findings (e.g., cultural biases against self-promotion when filling out questionnaires), the consistently higher scores of Arab Americans on the TSCS:2 are consistent with the hypothesis that biculturalism is linked with a positive

self-image and heightened self-esteem. At the very least, this finding is compelling evidence that a bicultural lifestyle certainly does not diminish self-esteem or lead to a negative self-image, even when individuals are members of a minority group associated with strong negative stereotypes. It should be noted that the Arab Americans used in this study came from a city with an unusually high proportion of Arab American residents. The fact that Dearborn has so many Arab Americans residents, organizations, and businesses may have made it easier for the participants in this study to adjust to their minority status by minimizing cultural conflicts and providing strong cultural support systems. Future research may find that the nature of the communities in which bicultural individuals live is an important variable to consider when assessing the relationship between biculturalism and self-concept.

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