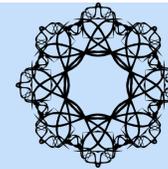


A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF ARAB AMERICAN PARENTS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS



ELIZABETH DONOVAN, M.S.

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY, SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

- 1.2 - 3.5 million Arab Americans, 2 - 6% of U.S. population (Brittingham & de la Cruz, 2005; Arab American Institute, 2004).
- Arab Americans are considered White and are not granted federal minority status (De la Cruz & Brittingham, 2003; Arab American Institute, 2004).
- Cultural differences can be seen in conceptualizations of mental illness, counseling, social and moral development, and intelligence (Sayed, 2003; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Gregg, 2005; Nisbett, 2003).
- There is no research to explain how Arab American families might perceive and accept the news of their child's special education eligibility, nor what their consequent openness to and experience of special education services might be.
- This research explores the experiences of six Arab American families with the special education process, the parents' understanding and beliefs about their child's disability, and meaning they assign to their encounters with the special education process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- One article discusses Arab American students: school psychologists might encounter parental reluctance for special education eligibility due to social-political concerns that the Arab American child is being stigmatized (Haboush, 2007).
- Gaps in the research:
 - Figures on the prevalence of Arab American students in special education (Abadeh, 2006).
 - Resources for working with Arab Americans regarding the special education process.
 - Perceptions of disability among Arab Americans.
 - Disability and family support in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region (Abu-Habib, 1997).
- Considerations:
 - Concepts of intelligence can differ between Arab Americans and Westerners (Nisbett, 2003).
 - Arab American parents might refuse a referral for their child's evaluation for special education services because they anticipate feelings of guilt and shame due to their perception of the cultural, religious, and social significance and stigma of the diagnosis (Sharifzadeh, 1998).
- School psychologists in the U.S. are at risk of providing services inappropriately and/or insensitively without knowledge of:
 - Culturally-influenced beliefs about disabilities in the MENA region, and how these beliefs compare to those held by Arab American parents.
 - How Arab American families could perceive and accept news of their child's special education eligibility, and their consequent openness to and experience with special education services.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do Arab American parents experience the process of their child being formally or informally referred for special education assessment and/or identified as eligible for special education services?
 - What aspects of the parents' experiences with the special education process stand out as most significant to them?
- How do the parents understand and contextualize their child's special education diagnosis?
- How have the parents' expectations or plans for their child's academic or professional future changed (if at all) as a result of their experiences with the special education process?

METHODS

- Phenomenology:
 - Researcher discovers the construction of personal and social worlds (McLeod, 2001).
 - Regards how an individual assigns meaning to an experience (Creswell, 1998).
 - Is uncommon in school psychology research (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).
- Participants:
 - Primary caregivers identify as Arab American (five mothers & one father; from Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, U.S.).
 - Families have a child who has been involved in the special education process (due to autism, Muscular Dystrophy, genetic disorder, learning disabilities, or speech).
 - Families have had these special education experiences within the last five years.
 - At the time of the experience, the child was in a grade from Pre-K to sixth grade.
 - At least one of the parents speaks English fluently enough to be interviewed without the use of an interpreter.

REFERENCES

- Abadeh, H. (2006). Perceptions of Arab American parents with children with special needs regarding home-school communications (Doctoral dissertation). Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
- Abu-Habib, L. (1997). Introduction. In L. Abu-Habib (Ed.), *Gender and disability: Women's experiences in the Middle East* (pp. 1-8). Oxford, UK: Oxfam.
- Al-Krenawi, A., & Graham, J. R. (2000). Culturally sensitive social work practice with Arab clients in mental health settings. *Health & Social Work, 25*, 9-22.
- Arab American Institute. (2004). *Arab Americans: Demographics*. Retrieved from <http://www.aaiusa.org/Arab-Americans/22/demographics>
- Brittingham, A., & de la Cruz, G. P. (2005). We the people of Arab ancestry in the United States: Census 2000 special reports. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/c2kbr-23.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- De la Cruz, G. P., & Brittingham, A. (2003). *The Arab population: 2000: Census 2000 brief*. Retrieved from www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-23.pdf
- Gregg, G. S. (2005). *The Middle East: A cultural psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haboush, K. L. (2007). Working with Arab American families: Culturally competent practice for school psychologists. *Psychology in the Schools, 44*, 183-198. doi:10.1002/pits.20215

FINDINGS: THEMES AND EXAMPLES

WORKING WITH SCHOOL STAFF

- He was in kindergarten and the teacher just used all the wrong words when she was telling me that he has a problem with socializing with the kids. [...] She came at me in all the wrong ways. I didn't even give it a second- I just pulled him out [of that school]. I was already traumatized that the kid was having problems in general.
- I feel more comfort now because I was so worried to be like for Mufeed to be in 4th grade or 5th grade and he can't read. Plus, me alone, I can do nothing with Mufeed, you know? Me with the school we can go [be successful]. But by myself, I can't.

SHAME AND ACCEPTANCE OF DISABILITY

- He has shame a little bit because he is a doctor. In the beginning, he refused me to go to the doctors. He was very mad that I took her without telling him and going to the doctors for diagnosis. He said, "I am a doctor. I know there is nothing wrong with her. You are dreaming." But I had Bader before her so I know how the kids should be. She's not normal for me. She's not typical child. So I took her [to the doctor]. I've done everything for her without him knowing that for one year and then he after this he was convinced. [...] He doesn't like to go to his doctor friends and ask him about Rawan or something. He wants me to go out, to Cairo to anywhere. He feels bad. [...] He doesn't like the fact that his daughter- Everyone is talking about his daughter.

CHILD'S FUTURE

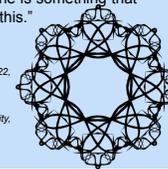
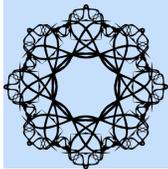
- They don't marry from these girls [with disabilities] or the girl's sisters. Or if there a man and he has a brother like this [with a disability] they don't like to marry from him because he can- I mean, they have everything! It's ignorance but they don't know anything about it. They don't know and they don't want to know about it: "Why should I bother?"
- Even with the Arab mentality- You see, with anybody else- Like if I told a White lady, "Well, hey, your kid has a problem." Me: "Is my son going to be able to get married and have children? Am I going to be able to see that?" That's the first thing that pops into my head. I don't know how somebody else would think. But that's how we think because that's a big thing to us.
- I hope he's going to be he can take care of himself. I want him just to take care of himself. I know he won't be able to go by himself alone or drive maybe, or married, but that's okay. [...] That's why I told my older son, "Please, be good, do something in your school. This is your chance. Look, I don't [expect] anything from Ali, but I [expect] it from you." But in the same time, I don't want to put pressure on him. "You're my only son, you're the older." I said, "You're the only [male child] here. Ali- maybe he needs your help when you grow up. You have to take him."

PERCEPTION OF PARENT'S RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

- Ali- He screams in public, you know? Everybody look at you. Especially I'm wearing the scarf. You feel like, (crying) I can't explain to everyone my son is autistic.
- I was in Jordan and then I took [my hijab] off here because I was young. Then I feel I'm ready for it. I feel that, but never, never, nobody [is] like hurting me or look at me. But I feel like maybe because Ali's like this and you know, we're Arab. [People think] we don't care of our kids. Maybe I don't know what they are thinking, but no, I don't care. "I'm like this. I'm wearing my hijab. My son is autistic, that's it. You wanna talk? I look back to you. You wanna talk? I will talk back to you."
- Maya started off as a lefty and then she switches on it. It's like she's not a lefty and not a righty. So let's say she starts the story from the left side and she decides to switch her hand she starts writing it from there. They thought- Because the teacher was Arabic, she's Lebanese, she said, "Well you know, because my mom and dad didn't believe-" which is true. Arabs like to use the right [hand], they believe in the right but I never did that. I was born here. If the girl is a lefty the girl is a lefty. Well Islamically we say, "Eat with the right, that's it." But I never stressed her. [Her teacher] thought that I was trying to make her a righty when she was a lefty and it wasn't the issue.

SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MENA

- I'm sure if we are back in Egypt [my husband] would choose to not make Rawan go to school at all.
- It's impossible if you want to have a normal life with a special need kid- Back in Egypt it's almost impossible. It's not easy at all. You would live but like I tell you, by pretending, "I don't have this child." You would live very good by pretending, "I don't have them." One time they discover that someone has a daughter with sixteen years-old. The close friends of the parent- They don't know about her all. They've never seen her in their whole life. And when they come to visit she is like in the basement, locked there. They are very good to her but no one can see her. She is something that no one can see. "I am your close friend for sixteen years. I don't know that you have a daughter like this."



- Leech, N. L., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2007). An array of qualitative data analysis tools: A call for data analysis triangulation. *School Psychology Quarterly, 22*, 557-584.
- McLeod, J. (2001). *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage.
- Nisbett, R. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently... And why*. New York: Free Press.
- Sayed, M. A. (2003). Conceptualization of mental illness within Arab cultures: Meeting challenges in cross-cultural settings. *Social Behavior and Personality, 31*, 333-342.
- Sharifzadeh, V. S. (1998). Families with Middle Eastern roots. In E. W. Lynch & M. J. Hanson (Eds.), *Developing cross-cultural competence* (2nd ed.) (pp. 441-482). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.