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The Social Construction of Arab Identity in the U.S.: The Historical Complicity and the Modern Responsibility of Social Work

Cover Page Footnote

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The Social Construction of Arab Identity in the U.S.: The Historical Complicity and the Modern Responsibility of Social Work

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This paper presents the sociopolitical experiences of early Arab migrants in the United States (U.S.) and the process of contradictory and socially constructed racial categorizations favoring white supremacy. While there is much discourse of the racial formation of Arab immigrants since 9-11, the actual racial project started in the early twentieth century, through various entities including the social work profession where the “othering” process of early Arabs Americans existed in social welfare practice. Examples of the pejorative attitudes towards Arab immigrants from the early social work discourse are examined through proceedings from the National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW) in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Such conference proceedings from 1882 to 1982 highlight an Orientalist, ethnocentric and xenophobic stance towards early Arab immigrants. Implications for social work practice, education, and policy/advocacy are discussed.

Keywords: Arab, Syrian, Orientalist, NCSW, social work, racial formation theory, identity, “other”

While there has been increased government and media attention to Arab Americans in recent years, migration of Arabs (the term "Arabic-speaking" people has also often been used in the literature in reference to immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century because while they did speak Arabic, they did not necessarily identify as Arab) to the United States (U.S.) dates back to the late 1800s (Naber, 2000). The U.S. experienced a period of high immigration beginning in the 1800s through 1924 in which, along with other immigrant groups, Arab immigrants arrived in the U.S. in hopes of economic prosperity and new opportunities. These immigrants were from what was known as Greater Syria (also referred to as "Mount Lebanon"), which includes present day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel (Naff, 1985). In this paper we use racial formation theory as the organizing framework, complemented by an Orientalist lens, to provide an explanation of the pejorative attitudes towards Arab immigrants from the early social work discourse evident in the proceedings from the National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although Arab immigrants have an extensive history in the U.S., and despite a need for a clear and distinct identity within social services, Arab legal classifications as identified through racial prerequisite cases from 1878 to 1944 suggest their ambiguous position within U.S. society and highlight the contradictory practices favoring White supremacy in both political identity and ultimately in social welfare. In this paper we provide a historical overview of the waves of Arab migration to the U.S. to provide context into Arab-American identity. We also address the social and legal construction of race through U.S. census classifications and racial prerequisite cases, particularly as it pertains to Arabs. Lastly, we explore the implications of incorporating the historical trauma, racial identity, discrimination and xenophobia facing Arab-Americans and Arab immigrants into social work practice.

Review of Arab Migration

Arabs are a heterogeneous ethnic group who are primarily speakers of the Arabic language, are originally found throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and claim ancestry to any of the 22 Arab countries (Samhan, 2000).

Arabic-speaking immigrants entered the U.S. in three major waves. The first was between the late 1800s and World War I; the second occurred post World War II, from the 1950s to the mid-1960s; and the most recent, third wave reemerged in 1965 and continues to the present day (Ford, 2013; Kayyali, 2006). Sociopolitical events both in the Middle East and in the U.S. complicate the identification of Arabs in the U.S. Naff (1985) suggests that immigrants to the U.S. from the provinces of Syria prior to 1920 should be referenced as Syrians and that the term "Arab" should be reserved for post-World War II Arabic-speaking immigrants. This nuance is important in understanding the sociohistorical identity of Arabic-speaking migrants and is particularly significant when later examining early racial prerequisite cases.

The First Wave (1880s–1924)

Beginning in the 1880s and continuing through 1924, the U.S. experienced a period of significant migration (Kayyali, 2006). As the largest wave of immigration in history on North American land, over 20 million people from around the world came to the U.S. At its peak from 1905-1907, the U.S. experienced an influx of immigrants estimated at over a million each year (Naff, 1985). Immigrants comprising mostly of East-Central and Southern European descent constituted the largest number of arrivals. Arab immigrants from what was known as Greater Syria (present day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel) and smaller numbers from Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt were also among the newcomers arriving in the U.S.

While some records suggest approximately 90 to 95 percent of these immigrants mostly originated from Mount Lebanon, other records suggest that providing an estimation of numbers is challenging because of racial categorization conflation of all Arabs under the category of Turkey in Asia or Syria (Naff, 1994). In 1899, the Bureau of Immigration added the category of "Syrian" to its classifications (Samhan, 1999). It is estimated that by 1924, there were approximately 200,000 Arabs residing in the U.S. Immigration essentially came to a halt in 1924 with the passage of the Johnson-Reed Quota Act, thus virtually ending this wave of migration.

The Second Wave (1925–1964)

In addition to the Johnson-Reed Quota Act, the severe economic downturn after World War I and the Great Depression of 1929 greatly reduced immigration rolls to the U.S. (Samhan, 1999). In 1948 however, the Arab-Israeli war and the Palestinian exodus known as the *nakba* (catastrophe) reignited Palestinian immigration as thousands of Palestinians were expelled from their homes. By 1949 the war ended and resulted in over 750,000 displaced Palestinians (Said, 1994). In 1953, the U.S. congress passed the Refugee Relief Act, the U.S. second resettlement and refugee law, which granted Palestinian refugees their separate immigration category. It is estimated that 6,000 Palestinians sought refuge in the U.S as the result of the Act, and approximately 3,000 more after the extension of the Relief Act ended act in 1957 (Kayyali, 2006). Therefore, Palestinians constituted the majority of Arab immigrants in this wave, followed by Egyptians.

Overall, immigrants from this wave were both Christian and Muslim, more educated, had an increased fluency in English, came from middle class backgrounds, and had more resources than those that came before them (Naff, 1994). While earlier immigrants were skilled workers who were successful in certain trades, later immigrants had higher educational aspirations. Students entered the U.S. seeking higher education and stayed to begin their professional careers. Although sharing a common ethnic or racial origin, the differences between the first and second waves were significant and altered the racial project of Arab identity in the U.S. (Suleiman, 1994).

The Third Wave (1965–Present)

Civil rights movements, immigration laws, as well as political and economic instability in their native homelands resulted in more than 400,000 Arab immigrants entering the U.S. during 1965 to 1992 (Kayyali, 2006). Significantly larger than the first and second waves, the third wave of immigrants saw more Muslims and a greater number of refugees from Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. The Lebanese Civil War of 1975 resulted in the migration of 120,000 Lebanese to the U.S.

Historically, immigrants from Greater Syria dominated the percentage of newcomers; albeit still significant, refugees from

Iraq, Sudan, and Somalia played a significant role in the new Arab and Muslim demographic. The 1991 Gulf War caused an influx of Iraqis who were fleeing from Saddam Hussein's regime and food shortages. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the U.S. and the U.S.-led coalition resulted in one of the largest diasporas in the world, but the greatest surge of Iraqi immigrants entering the U.S. was in the 1990s (Terrazas, 2009).

Between 1980 and 2010, Arab migration to the U.S. increased fourfold from 223,000 to 861,000 (Cumoletti & Batalova, 2018), and there was another 36 percent increase from 2010 to 2016 (861,000 to 1,167,000). Humanitarian migration from civil wars in Syria and Yemen during the early 2010s, as well as continued family reunification from the MENA region, continued the ongoing Arab migration into the U.S. From the 11 million people who have fled Syria or have internally been displaced, only 18,000 Syrians were resettled in the U.S. between 2011 and 2016. Despite the widespread displacement caused by the Yemeni civil war, the U.S. accepted only 61 refugees from Yemen between 2011 and 2016. Executive orders and travel bans under the Trump administration greatly affected the inflows of MENA immigrants in 2017 (Cumoletti & Batalova, 2018).

Review of the Social Construction of Race

Racial Formation

According to Omi and Winant (2015), racial formation is “the sociohistorical process, by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (p. 109). Racial formation theory is a pivotal change from previous understandings of race and racism. The essentialist notion of race is rejected, while maintaining that race has never been an illusion, but a socially constructed reality. Race is thus seen as a fluid, dynamic, socially constructed concept, and the state is perceived as “inherently racial.”

Omi and Winant (1994, 2015) further contend that since its inception, the U.S. has organized itself around racial lines and that this racial state is the preeminent site of conflict. Racial states are composed of institutions, policies, conditions, rules and social relations—all of which work to preserve racial hegemony (Omi & Winant, 2015). Preservation of racial hegemony is determined by social, economic, and political forces.

As a framework for deconstructing race as it stands today, racial formation theory and racial projects provide a useful tool in understanding how minority groups come to be seen as inferior. This inferiority status and identity diminishes certain rights and power of particular groups based on socially constructed racial classifications. As Omi and Winant (2015) contend, this is nothing new to the U.S. Rather, it is a system embedded in the core of our political, social, and economic structures and has been used to oppress and marginalize groups based on a “biological essentialist” framework. In the U.S., consensus on the meaning of race as a social construct as opposed to a biological fact has consequently opened doors of discussion in the conceptualization of race as a dynamic phenomenon (Feagin, 2010; Haney-Lopez, 1994; Rodriguez, 1994).

Racial formation provides an explanation of how Arabs and Muslims came to be seen by a substantial portion of the American public in a largely negative manner (Cainkar, 2009). Social scientists (Abdulrahim, 2008; Alsultany, 2008; Cainkar, 2009; Jamal & Naber, 2008; Read, 2008) contend that the events of 9/11 crystallized preexisting undesirable sentiments ascribed to Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., similar to how the status of Blackness is assumed primary for Black men walking through White neighborhoods (Anderson, 1990; Cainkar, 2009). The racialization paradigm developed by Omi and Winant (1994, 2015) is one that defines the contours of American social life since the inception of its founding, serving social practices and legislation that differentiated sets of rights for Whites, Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos (Cainkar, 2009). Racial projects, as presented in this paper and in reference to the Arab American experience, reflect “De Facto” policies in the U.S. Bedouin (2016) argues that the cognitive dissonance between Arab American identity and Whiteness are vividly revealed in the historical categorization of Arabs as “White” as well as the Orientalist legacy of conflating “Arab” with “Middle Eastern” and “Muslim” identity, highlighting a pervasive sociopolitical framing of Arabs.

Orientalism

Orientalism has been widely embraced in the humanities and the social sciences (Meer, 2014) because of its resonating affirmations with social and cultural justice and humanism as a scholarship and discourse. In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said makes the claim that Western European and American scholarship reinforces the age-old dichotomy of West vs. East. Such a portrayal assumes Western superiority and prejudice against non-Western cultures and people. The classification of Easterners as Orientals or “others” as Said suggests, places groups of people, particularly Arabs, in a precarious position, one that continuously distinguishes them as different (“people not like us”). Orientalism has been understood as a way of seeing the Arab world as exotic, uncivilized and backwards, and as contemporary times indicate, as dangerous (Said, 1997).

Said asserts the premise of Orientalism:

There are Westerners, and there are Orientals. The former dominate; the later must be dominated, which usually means having their lands occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another Western power. (1978, p. 36)

According to Said (1978), Orientalism is embedded in the transaction between semiotic and political systems. Although race is still loosely defined (Baber, 2010), it is a social reality that has been utilized to perpetuate inequality, discrimination, and oppression by those who hold power in society. The rise of colonialism, slavery, and capitalism contributed to the legalization of oppression historically through the U.S. constitution, which set the stage for the social reproduction and reinforcement of racism and racial hierarchies. Political, social, and economic power created and maintained by Europeans (Whites) over non-Europeans (nonwhites) established a racial ideology (Fields, 1990) rooted in White supremacy (Rodriguez, 1994). The roles of “science” and “law” have been critical components in the preservation of White supremacy and its “legitimacy” in the U.S.

History of Arab Sociopolitical Identity and Race

"White by Census": Arabs and U.S. Census Classification

Inherent in the experience of Arab migration to the U.S. is the social construction of race, specifically the way in which political identity can shape and be shaped by race. Returning to racial formation theory, social and political forces combine to affect the social identities of a group (Skocpol, 1995). Furthermore, the construction or reinforcement of social identity is involved in the politics of social policy making. Suleiman (1994) defines the term "political identity" as "the views, attitudes, orientations, and affiliations of Arab-Americans as these related to the political processes on all levels, whether local, regional, national or international" (p. 37). The political climate thus plays a crucial role in racial formation.

Considering the U.S. Census as a racial formation process, Census categories that serve the oppressor are a narrative woven within U.S. history. In 1893, Arabic-speaking immigrants were classified as "Syrians." This classification was challenged, as Syrian immigrants were born in the confines of Turkey (Asian Minor) and thus, Syrians were caught between the "White" and "Asian" classification. Naff (1985) identified this period as the "yellow race crisis," where Arabs were socially treated as Asian, however, by law were not grouped with Asians; rather, they were classified as "White." Anti-Asian sentiment was thus directed towards Arabic-speaking individuals by society, but their racial status remained "White."

Categories created in 1978, known as "Directive 15" drew distinctions not on skin color, but identified four race categories: American Indian, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and White (Samhan, 1999). Persons from the Middle East and North Africa were clumped into this "White" category. In 1980, a question regarding "ancestry" was introduced as means to fill the gap in identifying racial groups. Individuals that trace their ancestry to the Middle East and North Africa are currently classified as "White."

Cainkar (2009) argues that the case of Arab identity is unique in that they have experienced a collective shift in the social status in American society:

Arabs were once seen as white, although often marginally so, and as such they benefited from a range of rights that were available to whites and denied to members of groups ascribed as nonwhite; they later experienced a reversal of this status through processes highly similar to racial formation. (p. 65)

Arab-Americans, although still classified as “White,” lost many of the privileges of Whiteness over time such as, “being perceived as unique individuals being associated with positive attributes, and being protected from structural discrimination” (Cainkar, 2009, p. 66).

Today, Arab-American lobby groups and organizations are advocating for a MENA category to be added to the 2030 census. Proponents (Arab American Institute, 2017) of this added box suggest that compiling accurate statistics on the number of Arab-Americans is critical for state and federal funding initiatives and gives voice and presence to a growing population. By broadening the Census Bureau’s options pertaining to ancestry, the census would more accurately represent the ethnic and racial composition of the U.S. The debates over racial classification within and outside of the Arab-American community are still pending deliberation.

“White by Law”: Arabs and Prerequisite Cases

Racial categorizations are the workings of human agents supported by the laws that govern society. Considering the law as a racial formation process, case law contributes to the preservation and legitimacy of White supremacy. In 1790, Congress passed a law that stated that naturalized citizenship may be granted or open to “free White persons”; however, who these “free White persons” were by definition was ambiguous and was subject to criticism.

From 1909 to 1910, Syrians were identified as “White” through three different racial prerequisite cases using varying rationales to justify “Whiteness.” In the first two cases illustrated below, Syrians were categorized as “White” by means of scientific evidence. Excerpts from the Najour case highlight support for presiding District Judge Newman’s appeal to scientific evidence of Syrians “Whiteness:”

Whiteness, I think, refers to race, rather than to color, and fair or dark complexion should not be allowed to control, provided the person seeking naturalization comes within the classification of the white or Caucasian race, and I consider the Syrians as belonging to what we recognize, and the world recognizes, as the white race. The applicant comes from Mt. Lebanon, near Beirut. He is not particularly dark, and has none of the characteristics or appearances of the Mongolian race, but so far as I can see and judge, has the appearance and characteristics of the Caucasian race. (In re Najour 174 F. 735, as cited in Haney-Lopez, 1996, p. 171)

Four years later, District Judge Smith held that Syrians are not “White” while presiding over the Shahid case. Common knowledge was provided as an explanation to deny Shahid naturalization. The judge’s statement indicates the premises in which the application of the applicant be refused.

He is now 59 years of age, and was born at Zahle, in Asia Minor, in Syria, and came to this country about 11 years ago, and is a Christian. He writes his name in Arabic, cannot read or write English and speaks and understands English very imperfectly, and does not understand any questions relating to the manner and method of government in America, or of the responsibilities of a citizen...In color, he is about that of walnut, or somewhat darker than is the usual Mulatto of one-half mixed blood between the white and the negro races...In the present case the applicant is not one the admission of whom to citizenship is likely to be for the benefit the country. (Ex parte Shahid 205 F. 812, as cited in Haney- Lopez, 1996, p. 172)

In sum, the subjectivity and socially constructed notions of racial classifications are evident. This illustrates the complex and confusing mechanisms of racial classifications and reiterates how judicial officials assert their position to socially construct political identities and deny naturalization based on those socially created identities.

Social Work Perception of Early Arab-Americans

To better understand how early social work advocates perceived and addressed the Arab population, a purposive search

of conference proceedings from the National Conference of Social Welfare (NCSW) was conducted. The findings highlight an Orientalist, ethnocentric, and xenophobic stance towards early Arab immigrants. This is important in understanding Arab immigrants as a racial project and in identifying the responsibility for the profession of social work to have a more culturally competent approach to this population. The conference proceedings show the paucity of coverage of Arab immigration, trends, and major events in the MENA region that prompted migration to the U.S. This evidence is contrary to social work's values of inclusivity and democratic commitment to social justice.

Data Source/Sample

From 1874 to 1985, the NCSW was a pivotal forum for reform and social welfare service efforts in the U.S (Bruno, 1948). For over forty years (1874–1917), the organization was designated as the National Conference of Charities and Correction (NCCC), but in 1917, the organization changed its name to the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW). This change was not only one of name, but also of direction (to conform more to the times) and purpose, which was partially prompted by the denial of social work as a profession. In 1915, Dr. Abraham Flexner proclaimed at the NCCC that social work was not a profession (Ehrenreich, 1985; Morris, 2008), because a legitimate profession must possess specific properties (Brady & Moxley, 2016). According to Flexner, social work lacked a definitive and educationally transmissible technique, lacked a scientific knowledge base, and did not have a sort of unifying structure and organization that most other professions possessed, thus it was not socially sanctioned (Bruno, 1948). In 1956, the organization once again changed its name, now to the National Conference on Social Welfare, to address the diverse and complex issues the profession was encountering; this denoted significant pivots in policies that reflected changing social and cultural norms.

Every year for more than a century, thousands of social work luminaries in the field would convene to discuss and debate issues related to a broad range of social issues such as immigration, child labor, public health, mental health, poverty, juvenile delinquency, etc., with the purpose of developing new programs and initiatives to address societal ills. The Conference's

published proceedings reflect attention to, and the professional framing of, a broad range of social concerns.

Measures and Analysis

Each yearly NCSW publication from 1892-1982 was analyzed, at first through a contextualization strategy and then with a second strategy utilizing purposive searches for specific identifiers. A "contextualizing strategy" (Maxwell, 1996) involves a review of content and a "marking" of the text as patterns and themes began to emerge, while a purposive search of predetermined codes or markers is an inherently deductive complement to the more inductive contextualizing method.

Search terms included: "Arab," "Street Arab," "Syrian," "Turk," "Levant," "Middle East," and "Lebanese." Additionally, for the years 1948-1967, the search included the terms "Palestinian" and "Israel" to assess references regarding the creation of the Jewish state and the mass exodus of Palestinians to the U.S. Both the existing literature and contextualizing strategy guided the selection of these identifiers. For example, "Turks" was not a predetermined term but was eventually included after analysis suggested that, while not part of the Arab world, was often used and grouped with Arabs due to demographic proximity and phenotypical similarities. In total, there were 107 references found in the NCSW published proceedings.

Themes of Orientalism

Conference proceedings from 1882 to 1902 highlight a condescending and pejorative depiction of Arabs. Most significantly, the common reference to Arabs as "street Arabs," paupers, having diseased parents and being in need of help by Westerners, is consistent with an Orientalist perspective. The term "street Arab" was first used in the mid-nineteenth century, a time when urban centers such as New York City received an increased number of foreign immigrants (Rohs & Estrine, 2011). Alluding to the nomadic lifestyle of some Arabic people, the term "street Arab" was adopted as a reference to children in poor communities that roamed the streets, often begging, stealing or finding alternative means to sustain themselves.

In 1882, the conference proceeding from President Elmore on charity and the children's aid society mentioned Arab youth: "I have never been to Paris nor seen the sights of the great exhibition, but I have seen street Arabs from New York...I have never seen one that made a good boy" (National Conference on Social Welfare, 1882, p. 147). Two years later, a similar reference to Arab children was made:

So far, I have spoken only of boys who have been blessed with parental care. Many of the Arabs belonging to the community have no such care. They are left to fight the battle of life alone ...It takes far more innate virtue for a boy under such circumstances to grow into an honest, God fearing man than it does for a boy who is kindly watched and cared for; and for, this very reason, the more loudly comes the Macedonian cry, "Help us! Help us!" (National Conference on Social Welfare, 1884, p.105)

Later conference proceedings refer to Arabs of the docks and streets and then continue to state,

Diseased and enfeebled parents beget diseased and enfeebled children, and this is true of the mind as of the body...Hereditry as surely dooms the progeny of the depraved as water runs downhill. It requires an outside force to save them. It is a hard saying to utter, that children are criminals by fate; and yet, with such antecedents and with such cruel surroundings, the birth of children is the prophecy of crime for the future. (National Conference on Social Welfare, 1887, p. 233)

In 1890 and 1892, the focus of the conference proceedings related to Arabs was immigration. In the seventeenth annual conference of charities, proceedings suggest that immigration policies should be stricter as to limit the number of gypsies and Arabs into the U.S. In 1892, Arab immigrants are again mentioned and identified as an "army of street Arabs:"

Out of every thousand immigrants thus moving from place to place, a few tramps are furnished; while of the children of immigrants [are] thrown upon the public for support by the

death, desertion, intemperance, or imprisonment of their parents, the army of street Arabs and roadside beggars is largely recruited. (National Conference on Social Welfare, 1892, p. 87)

In 1915, a discussion on the perceived negligence of Arab parents was discussed through the story of a Syrian boy and his mother who, per the excerpt, endangers her child by not adhering to medical advice:

To return to the subject of heart disease in children and its necessary medical-social treatment. The medical history of a Syrian boy of 12 years, with acute endocarditis is read as far as the point where he is discharged:

hey see the recording line on the chart approach a red line by which we have indicated the establishment of good compensation, but soon after this line has been touched, the mother demands the return of the boy to the unhealthy, overcrowded, Syrian quarter, where he can again run wild on the streets. —“against advice” from the wards. (National Conference on Social Welfare, 1915, pp. 54–55)

Other proceedings (National Conference on Social Welfare, 1895, 1902) also highlight the charity given by non-immigrant individuals to Syrian boys to help them “dress better,” and be “more obedient,” as well as stating that they are “needing saving.”

These excerpts are only a few that underscore attitudes of social work luminaries at the time. Many other references to Arabs were made, mostly within negative contexts and labeled as “street Arabs.” Such Orientalist narratives that promote the inferiority of Arabs as compared to “native” Westerners are evident even with Arab American classification as “White.” The previous discussion, “White by Census,” complicates the Arab-American narrative, as being labeled “White” does not afford Arabs the societal privileges associated with that classification. Arabs have been historically and continue to be seen as the “other.”

Despite well-intentioned efforts by the profession to promote immigrant protections and advocacy for those marginalized by society (Beck et al., 2017; Varghese, 2016), as evident by the changing name of the NCSW organization, the social work discourse, as in the wider public discourse, continued to

promote an “othering” narrative of Arabs (Beck et al., 2017) as being unfit for American society (Park & Kemp, 2006). Furthermore, Park and Kemp (2006) argue that “despite good intentions, social workers often viewed immigrants as dependent, abject, and exotic subjects” (p. 705).

The growth of urban immigrant enclaves further promoted the call for social workers to act as brokers of American society to the newcomers, and while it is well documented that social workers were genuinely concerned about the well-being of immigrants, they did reflect the larger social contradictions which viewed immigrant communities as threatening (Jacobson, 2000; Park & Kemp, 2006) and as “evils to the community at large” (Park & Kemp, 2006, p. 720). While, to date, there is no literature that addresses the problematization of Arab immigrants in social work discourse, it is evident by the excerpts above that Arab immigrants were met with similar apprehensions, were viewed as problematic, and were viewed as abject, exotic subjects who needed to be civilized into American society.

Park and Kemp (2006) argue that despite social workers being at the forefront of efforts to promote immigrant protections, “many of these social work discourses supported (while purporting to redress) the larger discourses that made possible the exclusion of immigrant communities from full participation in American society” (p. 707). The authors’ analyses of social work’s public documents (primary and secondary) in the period from 1875 to 1924, which included proceedings of the NCCC and NCSW, underscore advocacy efforts to promote the inclusion of and well-being of early immigrants. At the same time, these records also show the efforts of social work being “fundamentally constrained by its position within prevailing social ideas and its own professional aspirations” (Park & Kemp, 2006, p. 726), further noting that “contemporary social work faces many of the same dilemmas in fashioning a response to immigration” (Park & Kemp, 2006, p. 705).

Implications for Modern Social Work

The National Association for Social Workers (NASW), which was founded in 1955, is the largest membership organization of professional social workers in the world (NASW, 2020). The NASW Code of Ethics is intended to serve as guide

for the profession and outlines the values that we collectively espouse. The six core values: social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships integrity and competence (NASW, 2020), all underscore the profession's underlying responsibility to promote social justice, advance social policies, and enhance the overall well-being of people, families, and their communities.

Embedded or inherent in the values of the profession is a commitment to justice for racialized people (Beck et al., 2017), yet that cannot be achieved if the profession does not address its earliest practices with immigrants and their communities and neglects to discuss the theoretical tenets and social mechanisms that have been used to further promote the "othering" of diverse peoples. In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) asserts that "Arabs are practically the *only* ethnic group about whom in the West racial slurs are tolerated, even encouraged" (p. 26).

In modern history, Cainkar (2009) contends that Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. faced a continued racialization process, exasperated by the events of 9/11, and which mirrored the experiences of Japanese Americans before and after World War II. The social construction of the Japanese "character" as treacherous existed before the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, but the events thereafter simply reinforced those preexisting negative stereotypes of group danger and collective complicity. Drawing parallels to the Arab experiences pre- and post-9/11, scholars (Abulrahim, 2008; Cainkar, 2008, 2009; Jamal, 2008, Naber, 2008) argue that Arabic-speaking people were largely invisible subjects pre-9/11, although having the racialized Arab immigrant experience of being "White but not quite" (Samhan, 1999). Arab-Americans became visible subjects post-9/11 and were subject to being viewed through the Orientalist images of barbaric, dangerous men and subjective women.

In *Decolonizing Social Work*, the authors (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013) address the limitations of imperialist frameworks and contend that the profession must acknowledge its complicity in the participation of colonizing projects, urging social workers toward contemplative review and paradigmatic shifts in practice, education, and research. This work extends beyond issues with Indigenous peoples to immigrants, refugees, and people of diverse cultures. Despite recent attention given to the othering of the Arab community since 9/11, a

critical examination of the historical context of these contemporary racial projects is seldom, if ever, incorporated into larger discussions around historical trauma, race, discrimination, and xenophobia. It is incumbent on the profession to understand both the history and current impacts of colonization (Tamburro, 2013) in order to work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. The section below addresses how social work may incorporate discussion of Arabs and Arab-Americans into the profession.

Practice

Issues specific to Arabs and Arab immigrants and refugees have been noticeably lacking in social work curricula. The exclusion of this population(s) reflects an overall lack of attention on the diverse set of issues faced by varying communities of immigrants. At the micro level, much of the literature in the social work discourse discusses work with Arab populations through a clinical and mental health lens (Abu Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Ahmed & Reddy, 2007; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000; Dwairy, 2006; Griner & Smith, 2006; Roysircar, 2009), and while important, it does not address the racialization of Arabs in the U.S. and consequently is not discussed within social work curriculum.

At the macro level, even *Immigrant America* (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006, 2014), now in its 2014 expanded edition, the most widely accessed book on immigration in America (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009) and one often used in macro social work curriculum, provides a rich discussion on Islam and the plight of Muslims, particularly after 9/11; however, it fails to address the diverse immigrant experience of Arab people. In social work textbooks on international practice (Bettmann, Jacques, & Frost, 2013), the inclusion of case studies from around the globe seldom address cases from the Arab world and if so, discussion on the heterogeneity of the Arab world, customs, and traditions are virtually absent. Most often, the discussion centers around religious practices, underscoring the “backwardness” or incivility of Islam and its incongruence with Western values. While some literature (e.g., Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007; Al-Krenawi, 2016; Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003; Al-Krenawi et al., 2004; Megahead, 2016) addresses the cultural and structural distinctions that discern citizens that fall within the pan-ethnic category of Arabs, the majority

of research within social work discourse generalizes the term "Arab" and is often conflated with "Muslims."

When working with the Arab immigrant population in the U.S., practitioners should be aware of the possible attitudes and perceptions of the U.S. and Western culture that they may harbor which have been influenced by the legacies of colonialism. Understanding not only the immigrant experience, but also the unique and complex relationship that immigrants may have towards Western culture and Westerner practitioners is critical in the helping relationship. Without cultural awareness and sensitive practice, social workers perpetuate oppression when working with clients from other cultures. As a result, social work as a profession is truly misunderstood and not well received in the ethnic Arab community because it is seen as interference in the social well-being of the collective self (Abu Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Dwairy, 2006). In order to address this gap, social work practitioners should take into consideration levels of acculturation, historical and collective trauma, stigmatization associated with mental health services, cultural expectations, family (immediate and extended) involvement, roles of religious or spiritual intervention, and the possible inclusion of traditional healers (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000).

Education

Despite progressive reforms throughout the course of history and advancements and awareness in the multicultural approach, racial and ethnic inequality and oppression continues to be a pervasive issue in society and social work education is lacking in responsiveness to these issues. Although social work has embraced the importance of a multicultural curriculum, scholars have raised concerns regarding how issues of diversity are addressed and taught in social work education (Daniel, 2011; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Razack & Jeffery, 2002).

These concerns are valid, as the literature suggests that there is a large discrepancy between stated goals and competencies and the delivery of practice behaviors in social work programs (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Constance-Huggins, 2012; Freeman, 2011; Razack & Jeffery, 2002). Students are thus left unequipped in dealing with issues of institutional racism and oppressions. Tamburro (2013) contends that social workers need

to understand the history and the current issues created by colonization in order to work effectively with those who have been colonized. One approach to furthering the professions goals of diversity and inclusivity is by incorporating approaches and theories that start with the history of diverse peoples to inform their current status in society. The inclusion of post-colonial theory, focused on orientalism (Beck et al., 2017) would serve social work well, as it would provide an alternative to the Western Eurocentric perspectives on culture and history mostly utilized by the profession (Baskin, 2009; Blackstock, 2009; Tamburro, 2013; Weaver, 2005).

Courses that promote and teach diversity with the human behavior and social environment sequence can benefit from the inclusion of both international and domestic concerns of the Arab and Arab-American population. Teaching and facilitating courses that allow for the inclusion of diverse topics such as Arabs in the U.S., as well as bringing in current and timely issues, such as the Iraqi and Syrian refugee crisis, opens the door to critical dialogues. Furthermore, including such conversations is critical, especially with the current social and political climate boasting xenophobic sentiment, particularly as it relates to Arabs and Muslims.

Social Work Policy and Advocacy

The work of Park and Kemp (2006) underscores the contradictory stances in the profession's immigrant discourse. On one end, prominent Progressive Era social workers were at the forefront of early immigrant protections, intending to raise awareness of the challenging conditions they faced in their "little alien colonies" (p. 706), thereby providing a case for public intervention and advocacy initiatives. On the other end, social work discourse, as in the broader public discourse, promoted a pathologizing immigrant narrative, predicated on the emerging "scientific" work on race, heredity, diseases, and their effects on the environment. This inconsistency in the profession's discourse was also reflected in its advocacy efforts. The historical and current racialization of Arabs in the U.S. is driven by a politico-legal and socio-cultural collection of "othering" founded by a structurally racist system (Khoshnevis, 2019).

According to the 2010 Census, there are 1.9 million Arab-Americans living in the U.S.; however, this number is a huge misrepresentation of the Arab population, due to the lack of ethnic categorization in the U.S. Census. According to research by the Arab American Institute (AAI, 2017) and Zogby International Research, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates of the Arab-American population is significantly lower than reported. This underreporting is due to the framing of the “ancestry” question in the U.S. Census. Reasons for undercount include: the placement of and vagueness of ancestry question (as distinct from race and ethnicity); the effect of sample methodology (small, unevenly distributed ethnic groups); the increased number of “out marriages” (interracial/interethnic marriages) by third and fourth generations; and the lack of trust and/or misunderstanding of government surveys by recent and long-standing immigrants (Arab American Institute, 2017). Therefore, the AAI adjusted population proposes that the U.S. is home to approximately 3.6 million Arabic-speaking persons.

One key opportunity for social workers to engage in policy addressing the status of Arabs in the U.S. is promoting representation in the 2020 Census. The Census Bureau announced that it would not add a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) category to the 2020 U.S. Census, despite advocacy efforts of many Arab-Americans and Arab-American institutions (e.g., Arab American Institute) to be represented and not categorized as White. Executive Director of the Arab American Institute (AAI) Maya Berry asserts, “Our communities, like all others, rely on representation through legislative redistricting, civil rights laws, and education and health statistics. A continued undercount will cause harm” (Berry as cited in Wang, 2018, p. 1).

Despite this over decade-long battle with the U.S. Census Bureau to collect more detailed data on people with roots in the MENA region, there still can be much done around advocacy and awareness. For example, social workers can continue to promote the use of open-ended questionnaire items asking respondents to write in their “origins” under ethnicity to capture representation of the Arab community. Lebanese and Egyptian Americans are examples of the two largest MENA nationality groups and having their numbers reflect the Arab community in the U.S. would serve legislative purposes and provide increased access and allocation of resources to meet the growing

community needs. Looking toward the 2030 Census, social workers could work with Arab-American organizations locally and nationally to include a MENA category in the next Census.

Conclusion

Park and Kemp (2006) prompt social workers to think about “what are the slippages in today’s social work discourse on immigrants?” (p. 729). It is evident that the profession’s response to not only early Arab immigrants, but also to issues of concern to today’s Arab immigrants and Arab-Americans seems to underscore the continued negotiation of promoting its democratic commitment to social justice. Despite their long-standing presence in the U.S., the Arab-American constituency continues to struggle to find their identity within U.S. society. This identity, which has been fiercely contested by the dominant discourse, is supported by the law and census classifications that are intended to categorize individuals into socially prescribed racial groups. While communities of Arab-Americans have been here for decades and have in many ways assimilated into U.S. society, more recent waves of immigrants have struggled to maintain their cultural, religious, and ethnic identity amidst growing anti-Arab and anti-Eastern sentiment.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, there has been a heightened interest in the Arab world, particularly after: the attacks of September 11, 2001; the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003; the Arab revolutions beginning in 2010/11; and the current crisis of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). Although it may seem as though this increased concentration on the MENA region is a recent phenomenon, the Arab and Muslim world have been subject to Orientalist narratives that reduce the rich and diverse cultures, traditions, and experiences of Arabs and Muslims for decades. Islamophobia, xenophobia, and anti-Arab sentiment have been fueled by the media (Said, 1997) through coverage of revolutions, wars and insurgency throughout the MENA region—all which reinforce a narrative of the “other.”

In looking at U.S. census classifications and racial prerequisite cases, the political identity of Arab-Americans becomes clearer, albeit still a complex issue that requires more attention and reflection. The social crossroad at which Arab-Americans find themselves is an interesting juncture of dialogue, but one

that cannot be simply reduced to a dichotomy of “White” vs. “non-White.” Current color-blind ideology and rhetoric suggests that we have moved into a post-racial era; however, this is far from the truth. Individual and group racial identities continue to promote racial divides that perpetuate oppression and discrimination. The Arab-American experience is not immune to race-based politics that promote exclusion.

Writing from the perspective of social justice workers, it is only appropriate to examine how social work platforms that were used to discuss the most pressing issues of the day and advance social welfare reform politics were in many ways culturally insensitive and discriminatory. A commitment to serving immigrant populations is not foreign to social work principles; however, in looking at the NCSW conference proceedings, that commitment to culturally sensitive practice and the promotion of human rights seems to fall short of fulfilling our mission of social justice.

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