Gender and intergroup contact: the case of Arab woman

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Abstract: Coexistence of various ethnic groups within the American and British societies made newspaper headlines following the events of 9/11 in the United States and of July 7 in Great Britain. This article based on survey research and focus group interviews aims to address intergroup contact. In a heterogeneous society, two major tendencies with regard to relation of the Arab community with the mainstream society surface. On the one hand, we notice a tendency to forge a new identity that is deep-rooted in the Arab culture, but with a declared belonging to the host society. On the other hand, there is a tendency of restraint and isolation. This choice of restraint and isolation is sometimes allotted to the ambivalent feelings generated by cultural disparity and stubborn attachment to certain values and traditions. In this context, our study targets the exploration of relationship of Arab women with the mainstream society with the stress laying on the reasons governing ups and downs of their integration within a new cultural environment.

Key-words: Arab women, integration, race relations, multiculturalism

Introduction

An intergroup contact implies a situation when individuals that belong to a particular group interact individually or collectively with another group. Summer used the terms in-group and out-group to make a distinction between a social groupings to which a particular individual belongs or does not belong (Brewer, Miller 2003:23). The same race relations are usually dominated by convergence and solidarity. Cross-race relations are, however, divergent; not only out-group contacts are fewer in number than the same race-relations, but their duration and quality may be lower. Ethnic groups tend to restrict their social environments and to favour mostly the intimacy of in-group relations. Attachment to in-group is an expression of preference and loyalty to its norms and trust-worthiness in dealings with its members. With regard to Arab women in the Diaspora, western literature "problematises" their integration within western societies. The notion of cultural difference was mainly developed in this sense. It not only punctuates differences in clothes and language, but it also underscores the fundamental divergence in life-styles and value-systems between the Arab world and the West. Female headgear has become the emblem of women's oppression and conservatism. Their attachment to traditionalism or adjustment to modern life is usually emphasised in the western discourse by reference to their appearance and vesture. When they wear a veil or a scarf, they are assumed to be in favour of a traditional conservatism and to stubbornly reject the transgression of the gap in the way of life between the Arab societies and the western ones. The adoption of the fashions worn by western women, by contrast, equates them with modernity and integration into the host societies.

Morokvasc (1987:3) laid bare the assumption that Arab women perceived as living on the margin of western culture embody models for an oppressed Arab woman prototype. Kohl (1989: 190) calls this representation, a symbolic standard of male power within which Arab woman "serves *man and is oppressed by him, be it as one among many other wives, or as the cleaning lady in the west who must always walk three steps behind her husband, or even as the woman who lives the spoilt 'life of luxury' in the Arab ruling houses so beloved by the tabloids- she remains passive and dependent*. [1]" In the western discourse Arab women are often represented under the oppression and submission of men, deprived of the right to have a say in the matters related to their status as members of the family (Minces1980).

Erotic descriptions dominate writings about Arab women in the western discourse with fantasies running wild on them in paintings, drawings, literature and fables. Alloula (1986) has analysed the female images produced by orientalist painters and photographers.

She underlines that the oriental female was portrayed as a prisoner of traditional social restraints, the counter-pole of liberated western women to the extent that, as Fatema Mernssi (2001:18) notices, in the West the word 'harem' is given pejorative connotations that evoke a sentiment of shame.

This article targets the exploration of intergroup contact, mainly Arab women's relations with mainstream society in America and Britain. It begins by reference to background of Arab immigration, the development of the notion of identity and cultural difference so as sketch out, as a final step, the different tendencies of Arab women with respect to existence and coexistence within heterogeneous societies.

Background to Arab immigration

America and Britain are two English-speaking countries that were a destination of immigrants from the Arab world. During the period of the Great Migration in the American history which extends from 1880 to 1924, significant waves of Arabs entered the United States, including immigrants from "Greater Syria" which includes present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine (McCarus, 1994:23). Most of them were farmers or artisans who were seeking better opportunities elsewhere. They settled mainly in the cities of New York, Boston, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland, but they could also be found in every state in the United States, in small towns as Arab populations tended to disperse geographically, particularly in the American South where their major economic activity was trade (Abu-Laban, Suleiman 1989:84).

If the first wave of Arab immigrants was unqualified, the recent arrivals constituted a component of educated, bilingual, politicized immigrants that belong to middle-class backgrounds and formed a diverse group either religiously or geographically (McCarus, 1994, Naff 1985). In general, Arab immigration was motivated by the pursuit of better economic opportunities and the desire to escape the political and military chaos that dominated the Arab region.

Arabs in Britain originate from a wide spectrum of Arab countries like Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and Yemen. Their presence in Britain is largely related to the colonial past of Britain in the Arab region. In the nineteen century, Yemeni seamen sailed with British ships from Aden which was under British control; some of them stayed in Britain where their ships docked, and began working in the British navy, or the burgeoning rail network (Halliday 1992). At the same period, a number of Somalis, Syrians and Lebanese settled also around British ports as a result of serving on British ships, mainly in Manchester.

Large-scale Arab immigration began after 1945, with Palestinians fleeing Zionist ethnic cleansing, Egyptians and Sudanese coming for professional advancement and later Moroccans seeking a better life as the post-war economic boom and the ensuing labour shortages led to Britain's active recruitment of migrant labour (El solh 1992: 240). London's East End, Tyneside, Liverpool and Cardiff became centres of small Arab communities (Lawless, 1995). Political instability in the home countries continued to be a major reason behind Arab immigration and in the 80's and 90's, mainly from Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, and Somalia. Greater London is the main centre for British Arabs; but there are also traditional areas of Arab settlement, such as Sheffield, where many Yemenis moved to work in the steel industry.

Once in the Diaspora, Arabs started to bring their families and many associations emerged so as to forge an educational and cultural forum. The tendency of Arab community in the Diaspora to set up their own organisations reveals the concern they attach to the question of culture and identity in terms of perpetuation of traditions, religious practices and language. To prepare the ground for the discussion of the impact of cultural diversity on

relations of Arab women with mainstream society in America and Britain, it is crucial to have a look initially at the definition of the term "identity" and its implications.

On the notion of identity

Immigration movements around the world knocked over the relative homogeneity of modern societies where the plural aspect is becoming more visible. Cultural pluralism is thus a dominant aspect of many societies in America and Europe. The question of identity arises in a multicultural environment where individuals and groups raise questions about their cultural particularity and the suitable manner to bear on their singularity. Emergence of this concept and its circulation in human sciences are attributed to the psychologist Erik Erikson. He was the first to suggest the notion of identity through the concept of 'identity crisis', while studying changes undergone by Indians facing modernity in the United States. His studies scrutinise identity crisis and conflicts resulting from double belonging. The term 'identity' spread widely in human sciences in the sixties in America with the claims of the black minority to uphold their economic and cultural rights. The claim for one's identity is the major factor behind conflicts, political activities and demonstrations of ethnic minorities in different parts of the globe as the case of the Basques in Spain, the Kurds in Turkey and the Kabyle people in Algeria. Several authors from a variety of disciplines attempted to define the concept of identity like Erik Erikson, Margaret Mead, Henri Tajfel, and Basil Bernstein.

Identity as a notion refers to a set of elements that individualizes a person and implies the existence of another person who is different. According to Edmond Marc Lipiansky, identity appears in a paradoxical way through a relation of difference and sameness (Saez, 1995:35). The construction of identity is built on two poles of differentiation and identification in relation to our surroundings. The dialectic differentiation / resemblance that ensures the fundamental and paradoxical nature of identity is described by Edmond-Marc Liapiansky as a dialectic union of two processes: an identification one by which individuals appear similar to others and a differentiation process by which they take distance from others designed as culturally different (Tap, 1980: 35).

Individuals recognise sameness and shrink from difference in process of ebb and flow at the time of contact with others cultural groups. Hence, Ting-Toomey (1998) adds another process which is the dialectic security /vulnerability through which individuals strike a balance between the need for the recognition of their existence as different and an inherent uncertainty resulting from their interactions with others. The concern for the preservation of one's identity is caught not only between the two poles of differentiation and resemblance, but between four poles: security/vulnerability and differentiation / resemblance. Individuals combine, when manifesting their identity, three-dimensions of identity: the perception of the self, the representation of others and the image generated by the perception of others (Pollak, 990: 276). Identity has therefore a cultural and communicational aspect with diverse facets. It is the image of the self for the self and a potential representation of a person by another one.

Research method and sample

The present study is an attempt to shed light on intergroup contact through the study of the case of Arab women in America and Britain. It is designed to highlight the various tendencies that dominate Arab women contacts with the mainstream society. Our qualitative analysis is intended to check out hindrance of out-group contact. We conducted interviews, in order to assess the relationship between gender and intergroup contact, with 76 Arab-American women and 89 British-Arab women from different national origins, ages and socio-economic status, identified through Arab associations. The sample which is mixed in terms of

religious affiliation and nationality ranges in age from 20's to 55 years old with both first and second generation immigrants. The overwhelming majority of interviewees are Lebanese, or Iraqi, but also present in the group are women who were born or originating in Egypt, Sudan and Morocco. The criteria for selecting participants were their willingness to take part in the study. The aim of the study, however, was not to make empirical generalisations about Arab women, but to explore the manner they endeavour to live in heterogeneous societies. Non-random sampling techniques were particularly conducive in this sense. In fact, they were effective in drawing attention to the major tendencies of Arab women with regard to out-group contact.

Arab women and out-group contact

Gender is a powerful determinant of the dealings of Arabs in the Diaspora. The ways women interact with the host society are clearly different from those of men. Women bear more on the anti-assimilation tendency than men and tend usually to emphasize differences and heterogeneity in relation to others. Their social relations are more confined to members of their ethnic group. This restricted contact with in-group reveals that Arab women operate within established ethnic boundaries, where indigenous cultural norms and values shape their contacts and relations (Read, 2004). However, migration may be a driving force behind women's compulsion for integration given that the new cultural environment may modify their perceptions. This may give birth to the reconceptualisation of their convictions and habits. Renegotiation of religious and cultural identity discloses a process of adaptation and reformulation of cultural values. For Arab women, reconciliation of cultural differences and establishment of contacts with mainstream society is far from being a harmonious and painless process. Opposing and sometimes clashing attitudes give tongue to ambivalent feelings which mark issues of cultural identity and race relations. Our study reveals that, regarding out-group contact, attitudes of Arab women are torn between a tendency of conservatism that sets as limits frequenting the in-group, an inclination of a mosaic identity with developed bonds with others cultural groups, whereas a break in the relations with the co-ethnics and the adoption of cultural norms of the host societies dominate the life of a category of Arab women.

Tendency of restraint and adherence to ideals of cultural singularity

Both in America and Britain, Arab women draw boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in light of attachment to cultural singularity. Degree of involvement in social relations with the mainstream society differs between them. The choice of withdrawal into one's culture and rejection of that of the mainstream society characterises race relations of a group of Arab women. This option is explained by a desire to live without transgression of Arab and Islamic cultural values. Cultural divergence, mentality and religious difference are crossroads where this group of informants turns his back to out-group contacts. Karima, an Arab American woman stresses this tendency:

> Our cultural values and traditions are different from those of most American people. They tolerate drinking, relations without marriage, I do not want my kids to get these bad habits, obedience and respect for parents is very important. I feel concerned and worried about education of my kids; they have to be dutiful with submissive behaviour to our religion and culture…..

The exclusive attachment to one's cultural values is a kind of resistance, a response, sometimes, to a fear of assimilation and the loss of cultural traits and practices that define them as a distinct entity apart from others. Those who espouse such positions are attached to

the traditional way of life in the Arab society, particularly in its religious dimensions. The concern of an external cultural impact and dissolution of cultural identity are the central motives behind restriction of intercultural contacts. Frequent relations with members of ethnic, religious or national group dominate this group's contacts, evoking as a reason behind the desire to rub elbows with members of their community the question of cultural kinship. Hence, the rareness of interaction with members of the mainstream society is usually related to an inclination to live in an Arab cultural surrounding that resembles that of the country of origin with the same concerns and preoccupations as Leila, a British Arab indicates:

> I know so many British people, but, to tell you the truth, I do not feel at all comfortable making social relations with them. You know, they are different. Look, when you first go into their house, the way they keep asking if you would like a drink and you keep making the point that you do not drink. Even if I talk to them about my own problems, they don't relate to those problems. I need somebody from my own culture to understand.

Adoption of this attitude is characterized by an immersion in the Arab cultural environment. Social life of this group of informants revolves around community of compatriots, ethnic and religious group in line with existing links before immigration, or other bonds woven after settlement in the host societies. Having social relations on the far side of the ethnic and religious group is really seldom. This backward step from interpersonal relations outside the ethnic and religious group is sometimes ascribed to a growing distrust towards others, inadaptability to cultural change, or the acerbity of feelings towards certain cultural differences. Most Arab women in this group of informants take a dim view of individual liberty that characterizes relations within the mainstream society, mainly mores' release as the viewpoint of this Arab American woman mirrors:

> It scares us, the lifestyle that kids have over here, the drugs, and the sex. Oh look they are always kissing in daylight. People start worrying about their children growing up in this environment. I want my kids to have a definite sense of direction and not to be distracted by things that are foreign to our culture, we change our clothes, but our values we can not change them, here people do not care about religion… cohabitation is tolerated and marriage between people of the same sex is allowed,, honour matters a lot for us.

This spirit of individual liberty in terms of sexual liberty and cohabitation is systematically deplored in a manner that imparts a fear that such attitudes permeate Arab families. Morality with respect to sexual behaviour is a virtue Arab women endeavour to hand over to their offspring. The protection of honour is repeatedly mentioned regardless whether they are Christians or Muslims. The accent is on the relation of the community to the surrounding society; it is that relation that is raised. The notion of honour ranks Arab women along specific lines of conduct and frequentation. The theme of female sexuality dictates their orientation in that the preservation of cultural identity and assimilation to the host society's norms are put in opposition. In this sense, the perpetuation of cultural identity was gendered, sexualized and disproportionately placed on daughters. Their rejection of this vision of *Arab* womanhood could denote cultural loss and the negation, in consequence, of the quality of 'good Arab woman'. The accent is put on eastern values of honour and chastity and rejection of aspects of western culture that lead, they believe, to social disrespect for women and many other social ills that are contrary to their mores.

Moreover, the patriarchal nature of the family blocks extension of networks of relations beyond religious and ethnic group. The rules of conduct that are prescribed to women by the ethnic surrounding and families make their contacts limited to members of their community. They are incited to abide by customs and mores of the ethno-religious

community and to maintain behavioural patterns that are normative in their ethnic group. This control and limitation take a stricter dimension for women who are single.

On the whole, this group of Arab women have been shaped by a culture and a religious tradition that are very different from those of the host societies. This is clearly manifested in the case of marriage as religious endogamy is a parameter governing the possibilities of spousal relationships, mainly among Muslim Arab women who refer to Islam as the central criterion to validate the choice of their partners. In a word, these Arab women have developed their own cultural values, their own definitions of status and prestige within the host societies and tend to place greater constraints on intergroup relations.

Tendency of inclusion coupled with a hybrid identity

Contrary to the first tendency, for a group of Arab women maintaining cultural integrity is married with integration into the new cultural environment. There is an inclination towards the adoption of some cultural traits of the mainstream society's culture and a desire to simultaneously retain the Arab culture. It is a kind of hybridization that promotes assimilation and acculturation that encourage the incorporation of positive Arab and western cultural traits. In contrast to the conservatism of the first group, for the proponents of this trend, change is no longer seen as an evil, but rather as a vital necessity. These Arab women tend to have modern interpretations of religious concepts and to reconcile them with values and standards of the new cultural environment. They do not want to be isolated members of the host societies, alienated from others due to their difference. They rather endeavour to forge a hybrid identity as Hoda, an Arab American woman underlines:

> We are supposed to keep our tradition, but I do not see contradiction in identifying as an Arab, with being in this country and identifying with the values and traditions of this country. There is not really any contradiction; rather it is luck to be enriched by the fact that you combine the two cultures.

Authenticity is a recurrent word in these women's discourse. However, the accent is laid on the necessity to accommodate and adapt to the cultural environment in which they live. Authenticity and attachment to tradition are not necessarily constructed on passive and rigid terms. Without talking explicitly of assimilation, this group of Arab women evoke the necessity of initiating and establishing parameters of dialogue and contact with members of the mainstream society. In parallel with the identification with Arab culture, there is a desire to establish a harmonious relationship between Arab identity and culture of the host societies. The issue of "keeping our tradition" is at the core of concerns and preoccupations, but the movement toward other cultural groups is a concrete recognition on the part of these women that they are no longer temporary immigrants. On the contrary, they are, in essence, affirming their belonging to the mainstream societies, to two cultures and trying to maintain a presence in both.

Hence, the emphasis is put on the importance of restructuring an identity with deep-roots in Arab culture and a willingness or readiness to receive and interact with different cultures and groups. Cultural re-authenticity within the context of a new cultural environment means a re-definition of identity that takes into account the fact of living in culturally mosaic societies. Arab cultural re-authenticity emerges as a reaction or an alternative to the stubborn attachment to cultural singularity that induces the withdrawal into oneself and sets barriers in relation with peoples of different cultures. In this regard, interviewees stress the need to conform to the dominant ways of life and to affirm their compatibility with the mainstream societies. To put it another way, relation with the host societies is built on dichotomy of belonging and maintaining an Arab identity and culture. Their affirmation of cultural

singularity is combined with notions of assimilations and integration as this Arab American woman states:

> We have to participate in civic work, to become part of the mainstream, we should take part in all activities in the society as our own society, and we have to avoid looking as outsiders, I don't see that being an Arab is related to wearing a headgear. It is essential to integrate into the mainstream, to establish bonds, not to be immersed in your own micro-community, to become American, not Americanized.

Whereas some women turn to Islam and cultural singularity as the only possible path to either maintain or indeed achieve both personal and social advancement in a context of dislocation in different societies, other Arab women show flexibility in practising Islam and admit different behaviours, adopting a hyphenated identity in a more progressive manner in their intergroup contacts. More importantly, Arab women who renegotiate the question of religious and cultural identity construct their own versions of authenticity by reformulating and accommodating diverse cultural and religious practices. This position is mirrored in interpersonal relations which exceed ethnic and religious limits, setting thus intergroup bonds. If co-ethnic relations are advocated by a group of informants in a more steadfast way to a degree of isolation, another group of Arab women moves towards other cultures and ethnic groups in a process of forging a new identity.

Arab women: between Americanized and Anglicised?

Acculturation refers to changes that occur within a society or culture when two different cultural groups come into direct continuous contact (Bastide, 1998). It is a process in which members of one cultural group adopt beliefs and behaviours of another group. Although a minority group usually adopts habits and language patterns of the dominant group, acculturation can be reciprocal, that is, the dominant group can also adopt patterns typical of the minority group. In the sample used for this study, for some Arab women, the significance of either religious practices or cultural identity may shift. Accused of capitulating to a western hegemonic culture, which they have assimilated, this group of Arab women wish to define themselves in their own terms, resisting and contesting the rhetoric of cultural identity. Salima, an Arab American woman from Michigan states:

> Really, I tried not to get in touch with people from my own community. You know, actually, I do not like the fact that they talk about each other and they expect you to behave in a certain way. I did not want the stigma of this woman goes out, I did not want to see that in people's eyes. I wanted lead a life as I like"

These Arab women have been assimilated into culture of the mainstream societies, adapting themselves to its norms and customs. It is a deliberate inculcation of an "American or British" code of conduct and a break with Arab culture. They are totally detached from their previous cultural background to which they are unable to re-assimilate themselves. They behave like ordinary British or American citizens and prefer to be considered as British or American. Members of their community design them as Anglicized or Americanized Arab women. This means that they have become culturally "lost" and eventually separated from their community. Their attitudes, values and norms are indistinguishable from those of their native counterparts. Despite their efforts to reconcile themselves with the prevailing culture, their religious roots and cultural tradition create some ambiguity and conflict within them, leading to pattern of behaviour reminiscent, sometimes, of the undetermined identity.

Adaptation to western culture and secularization in social life crystallize this group of Arab women. They seem to be involved in multiplex secular social relationship with non-

Arabs and are less oriented towards Arab cultural and religious values. Once this degree of social interaction and assimilation is attained, many viewpoints on Arab and Islamic values, social communication and the performance of religious rituals are modified. This shows significant divergences from orientations and practices of other groups of Arab women, especially those who uphold, defend and promote what has been called "resistant identity". For the youth, in particular, all the trappings of western culture, relations before marriage, occasional drinking are culturally accepted norms, and religion has no relevance to their present lives. Typically, they have adopted a new identity as a consequence of social interaction with the mainstream societies.

The extent to which ethnic intermarriage occurs is widely accepted as an important indicator of assimilation and identification. This group of Arab women advocate marriage outside their religious and ethnic group, evoking the constraints that marriage with a person of the same group may engender. Exogamous marriage is a way to escape the social rules seen as barriers to the smooth conduct of marital life. Unlike the previous group who sticks to endogamy and have a stronger cultural adherence to the marital ideals of their community, this group of Arab women favour intermarriage which weakens ethnic attachments and increase contacts with potential mates from other groups. Christian Arab women are more likely to out-marry than Muslims who are subjected to stronger social control, particularly in the choice of an appropriate marriage partner.

Conclusion

Arab women adopt multiple ways concerning race relations within the new cultural environment. On the one hand, some Arab women appropriate cultural singularity as the only alternative to assimilation and cultural homogenisation which, for many of them, are perceived as immediate dangers of identity loss. This reflects a global phenomenon whereby cultural identity is constructed as an arena untouched by western globalisation and is propounded as the culturally authentic alternative to western modernity (Tucker, 1993:52). In a context of migration, the assumption of an Arab identity with its religious and cultural facets involves drawing boundaries which define belonging to community of Arabs and Muslims, a local and transnational universal community. The fear of dissolution of their cultural difference, the assumption of cultural symbols and rituals and the socialisation in an Arab environment respond to the need to make this difference and identity visible. Women embrace an Arab and Islamic identity as an attempt to distinguish themselves from western society, a society deplored as a disordered one where the family is fragmented and women's bodies are exhibited as objects.

On the other hand, another group of Arab women are engaged in a process of identity reconstruction in an endeavour to adapt to the new cultural environment. Advocating the preservation of cultural specificity is associated with identification with the mainstream society. Hence, openness is the key feature that characterise their relations with other cultural groups. These Arab women construct a model of identity that bring into consonance Arab cultural traditions and western values of society. It is apparent that religion and cultural identity affect women's contacts decisions. However, some women do not assign significance to religion and cultural identity in their lives and tend to shrink from traditional conservatism of their community. These women adopt a more liberal attitude that is not bound by religious and cultural considerations. Cultural assimilation is greater among Arab women with longer exposure to the norms of the host society and relations with mainstream society differ among them. Those born in the Arab world have kinship networks and an attachment to indigenous cultural norms with an inclination to associate mostly with people from their ethnic group. Native born Arab women, on the contrary, shift from this tendency to adopt a more

progressive attitude in their intergroup contacts. Arab women's relation with mainstream society is affected by their degree of ethnic identification and religiosity, given that Arab kinship networks and religious circles tend to favour a more conservative attitude.

If ups and downs characterise relations of Arab women with the host society, it is important to stress, as a final point, that intergroup relations in this case can not be dissociated from the international context. Beyond any doubt, geopolitical problems have an impact on the internal situation in that the relationship between the mainstream societies and Arab communities is shaken by events in the Arab world. The whole life in Diaspora has been punctuated by the news of the Middle East, news of wars, conflicts, killings and after the wars, the prejudice against minorities, mainly Arabs and Muslims, and the whole media portrayal of them tend to cloud race relations in general. Medias install barriers and impede tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity by conveyance of an image of mainstream society that is white, Anglo-Saxon under threat of other cultures that endanger its values (Poole, 2002). The representation of Arabs or Muslims either stresses cultural deviance or religious fanaticism. As a result, in the irregularities which characterise writings of the western elite about the Arab world and Islam, (Huntington, 1998, Fallaci (2002), cultural otherness is represented as an ultimate excuse to dismiss the other whose religion and culture are taken incompatible with "living together".

Notes

[1] A. Lueg, 'the Perception of Islam in Western Debate' *the Next Threat: Western Perceptions of Islam*, p.18.

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