Arab Student Experiences of Inclusivity and Exclusivity at Portland State University and Off-Campus Locations

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Introduction[1]

In 1909, an Arab-American challenged the United States government's classification of Arabs as Asian, known at the time as "Mongoloid." According to the article, "Why are Middle Easterners Classified as Caucasian," the argument was, "Jesus MUST be white, because he is the son of God and the ultimate human. And if Jesus is white, then Middle Easterners must be white as well" (Boules, undated). The case, won, then overturned on appeal, failed to gain the plaintiff citizenship, but that is how Arabs came to be considered Caucasian in America. Regardless of census classification, Arabs in the United States have long been subjected to prejudice and racism, and since 9/11, there has been a measurable increase in discrimination, prejudice, and hate crimes against Arabs.

Portland State University (PSU) has a sizeable Middle Eastern student population, formed of Arab-American and foreign Arab students, yet there is limited statistical information because at PSU, Arabs are counted as White. In 2010, PSU students of Middle Eastern, North African, and Southeast Asian (MENASA) origin wanted a student cultural resource center that would represent and serve them. To determine funding and resources, the first question asked by university faculty is always, "How large is the population served?" Due to the way data is gathered, this question is impossible to answer, even though MENASA students comprise the largest percentage of international students attending PSU. In short, the system that denies the identity of Middle Easterners as a racial and ethnic group separate from Caucasians, became the greatest barrier to the establishment of a cultural center for MENASA students (Taniguchi, 2019).

The City of Portland and Portland State are both known for having liberal, even progressive, values, yet incidences of prejudice against Arabs exists both on

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[1] This article, which was based on a class project rather than a research study, was not reviewed by the PSU IRB.

and off campus. Yet despite Portland and Portland State University's liberal leanings, Arabs have faced significant racism both on- and off-campus. In 2016, Dana Ghazi, president of the Arab Student Association at Portland State, was attacked verbally as a "Middle Eastern Muslim immigrant" (Pintak, 2016). Additionally, in November of 2015, a PSU White Student Union group appeared on Facebook, and posters stating, "Islam is terror" were put up across campus (Loehlein and Monroe, 2015). Two years later, on the MAX, Jeremy Christian murdered two men trying to defend two Arab-American women, one of whom wore the hijab, after Christian threatened them, saying, "Go home, we need American here! I don't care if you are ISIS," and "F*** Saudi Arabia!" (Bernstein, 2017). This raises the question; How do Arab students experience inclusivity and exclusivity on Portland State University campus and off campus? In attempting to answer this question, issues such as prejudice and discrimination, social interactions, and personal identity are examined.

Literature Review

In the article, "The Racialization of Arab Panethnic Identity: Exploring Students' Ingroup and Outgroup Social Positionings," researched in 2015 and published in 2017, researchers found that Arab-American and foreign Arab students at Majority University, a predominantly white university (PWI) in the south, experienced racial prejudice against Arabs and Islamophobia. Acceptability of prejudice on campus was also commonly cited (Jones, 2017).

In the article, "Going Alone: The Lived Experience of Female Arab-Muslim Nursing Students Living and Studying in the United States," written based on research at Villanova University in Pennsylvania, the author reported that wearing the hijab is often mentioned as a source of racial disparagement (McDermott-Levy, 2011). In "Perspectives and Experiences of Muslim Women Who Veil on College Campuses," published in 2003, common themes include ignorance surrounding religious versus cultural customs regarding the hijab, negative stereotyping, and exclusionary behavior experienced by the subjects (Cole and Ahmadi, 2003).

This study differs from earlier work published on this subject in several ways. First, it explores both positive and negative Arab student experiences both on and off campus. Additionally, in the Jones study, participants were from a PWI in the South with a white student population of 65 percent (Jones, 2017). Portland State University has a majority white student population of 54.3 percent, which is significantly lower (Portland State University, 2018). Portland State is known as a progressive school, whereas universities in the South tend to serve a more conservative population.

McDermott-Levy's study participants were Omani women attending nursing school. In comparison, this study includes interviews of both Arab and Arab-American students. Additionally, there are differences in sex, religion, and country of origin among subjects. Finally, this study seeks to compare experiences on and off campus, whereas previous studies were focused on on-campus experiences.

Despite the significant number of Arab students attending PSU and the prevalence of anti-Arab incidences, there is a lack of information about the experiences and perceptions of this population. This study is intended to identify common themes of inclusion, exclusion, and personal identity of Arab students at PSU, and to determine if there is a significant difference between on- and off-campus experiences based on student recollection and perception.

This research may provide valuable information for the newest campus cultural resource center, MENASA, which is currently seeking its own dedicated space on campus, as well as provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Arab students on campus.

Methods Justification

I conducted five interviews. Subjects include a Syrian-American, Christian female, in her first year on campus; a Syrian-born, Christian male who earned his master's degree from PSU in 2018; an Egyptian-American, Muslim female, in her second year at PSU; a Syrian-born, Christian female, in her third year at PSU; and an Egyptian-American, Muslim female, in her third year at PSU.

Two of the five students believe they are identified as Arab based on Arab facial characteristics and three of the five speak Arabic in public habitually. One of the students wears the hijab. Participants were chosen to include country of origin, religious, and language competence diversity. Interviews were conducted in English only (2), mixed English and Arab (2) and Arabic only (1), based on the subjects' choice of language.

Study participants were found through personal contacts (2), the Arabic Language and Culture Students Association (1), and the Arab Students Association (2). Five additional interviewees were recruited, but time constraints precluded their inclusion. All subjects displayed a high degree of willingness to participate. All interviewees names are changed to protect their privacy.

Data Analysis

Interviews provided a great deal of data and identified several common themes. The most prevalent themes are feelings of inclusion on campus; feelings of otherness and exclusion on and off campus; experiences with ignorance, racism, and prejudice; and strong disapproval of current racial categorization practices. Subjects' direct quotes are written in grammatically correct English.

Feelings of Inclusion and Acceptance on Campus

All interviewees express a feeling of inclusion and acceptance on campus while also acknowledging negative feelings toward Arabs. Subjects feel that they are widely accepted in their peer groups, both within extracurricular clubs and in the classroom. All subjects say that they have several non-Arab friends and that they feel like they "fit in" at Portland State. Beyond that sense of general inclusivity, they also feel that hostile behavior against them would face general disapproval. Rihab admits that she believes that some people "feel that way on the inside," but that, "...because it's college, if they let those feelings show, people will complain about them and they'll get in trouble because the college values diversity."

Overall, subjects believe that they are not disliked because they are Arab, speaking Arabic, or wearing the hijab on campus. Amin believes that some American students do not like to mix with foreign students but says students who

are native to the Portland area are more open-minded. He says, "in general, the feeling was very good, very friendly," and notes that students who seem less friendly toward Arabs tend to come from more rural areas of the state or from other, more conservative states. He feels that being on campus and mixing with American, non-Arab students provides the opportunity to lower levels of fear and prejudice against Arabs. For this reason, he feels it is important that Arab students avoid forming cliques, but rather, reach out proactively to non-Arab students to create friendships.

Rihab notices people listening when she speaks Arabic, but says, "When I first came to PSU, I thought people didn't like hearing me speak Arabic, ok, but maybe they… just have curiosity..." She goes on to say, "It's so much better here [on campus] ... there's really very few people here who are really racist, really very few."

Nabeeha, the only subject who wears the hijab, says, "people I hang out with… have diverse backgrounds, so I do fit in..." She makes the distinction, however, that her personal friend-group includes other ethnic minorities, rather than white students. She expresses the belief that this is one of the reasons she fits in. Regarding the university administration, she says, "they promote diversity here and just loving everyone… whatever religion, so I feel very comfortable, on campus at least." Other subjects also echoed this sentiment.

Feelings of Otherness and Exclusion

Despite the overall positive experience shared, several subjects offered examples of ways in which they felt "othered" by fellow students. Amin mentions the limits of his friendships with American students, "...no one wanted to hang out with me outside the campus, maybe they thought I am Muslim, or I am Arab and I don't go to parties." He also feels that "they still have some bad experiences [with] us. They are... scared [of] us. They don't show it but…"

Fear toward Arabs is mentioned regarding terrorist jokes. Rihab says, "people will make these jokes, and I laugh. These are my friends. But you know...they think this way about Arabs. They say it as a joke, but… it is based in

truth. Everybody thinks this way here." Warda also shared this experience, "yeah, they always make jokes. And you know they're joking but…"

Another common theme of "othering" is the questioning of ethnic background. Rihab and Amin both speak with a heavy accent and Amin has distinctly Arab features, so it is understandable that people question their ethnicity. However, all three Arab American students, who are fluent in English and stated that they feel they lack recognizable Arab features, are also questioned about their backgrounds. When asked if people question her background, Syrian American Mada replies, "yeah, a lot…like I've had plenty of people ask me if I was Mexican." Warda's father is Egyptian and her mother is "European white," according to Warda. With tightly curly, bright blond hair, pale skin with a golden undertone, and bright golden eyes, Warda says that people often tell her she is "racially ambiguous." All subjects indicate a sense that Americans in general and white people in particular see Arabs as being different.

Experience with Ignorance, Racism, and Prejudice

Subjects believe that ignorance is at the root of much exclusionary behavior they experience. Amin, and Rihab, both Syrian Orthodox Christians note that Americans expect them to be Muslim. According to Amin, "they thought that Syrian people don't joke, they don't go to parties...and I don't know why they think like this…" Off-campus, Amin was told at a pizza parlor, "you can't eat that pizza, it contains pork." Rihab has been asked, "how can you be from Syria if you don't wear the hijab?"

Amin also experienced racism when speaking Arabic with his father at a pharmacy. A man approached them and said, "you are in America, talk American." Amin responded, "I speak English, there is no language called 'American,' and also, this is the land of freedom, I can speak as I like." Rihab routinely experiences prejudice at work. Some customers immediately ask to speak to someone else or claim that they cannot understand her, others accuse her of not knowing how to do her job:

> So many of my customers, they never - they are really, really racist... they
> don't like my accent...they're not ok with me working there… [they] say 'I

know the rules more than you… I'm American, you don't understand how it's done here.' They tell me I'm wrong and then they want to talk to my manager." When asked if she was ever wrong in these situations, she replied, "never." Three interviewees report negative encounters at the airport. For instance, Amin remembers being pulled aside and interrogated. "Texas! They were not good with me. At all. They investigate me for 1-1/2 hr., 2 hours." Nabeeha says, "Yes, we do a lot. And my brother too. They always pick him when it's a "random" pick.... And obviously us, they have to check the hijab. I understand them. They have to pat it down and make sure there's nothing…

It's interesting to note that subjects only recall these incidences after being asked about airports. This demonstrates another common thread among the students; minimizing and justifying the negative experiences they encounter. Mada, Warda, and Rihab all downplay the racism inherent in terrorist jokes, while still acknowledging underlying bias, saying things like,

[it's] not anything serious… in high school, there'd be dumb boys who would make…. terrorist jokes [pause] which is stupid. That was just really annoying. That was just a bunch of white boys… making dumb racist jokes. And I… know that they weren't serious, I know that it was just like, like none of them are actually racist."

Throughout the interviews, examples of racism cited by subjects were commonly followed by minimizing statements. Nevertheless, it was clear from the subjects' demeanor that these experiences have a negative impact on them. It also is clear that their primary strategy when faced with this kind of low-level, non-violent racism is to minimize it or discount it.

Strong Disapproval of Racial Categorization

Participants feel that overall, the university administration does a decent job of creating a positive, inclusive atmosphere for Arab students on campus and that staff seems to care about inclusivity, however, there was one institutional practice that they find strongly objectionable, racial categorization, which they feel is discriminatory toward Arab students.

The general feeling is that the lack of a "Middle Eastern" or "Arab" category is a way of erasing the students' ethnic identities. They objected even more strongly to being categorized as White or Caucasian and to the directive to check the box themselves, thus being forced to self-identify as White. Students indicate a strong preference for choosing "Middle Eastern" or "Arab" and say they would choose "other" as an alternative, when available.

If neither "Middle Eastern" or "Arab" is an available choice, the two Egyptian-American students say that they either check "African-American" or that they would prefer to, but they have received or fear receiving pushback, since neither subject has black skin. Nabeeha tells me, "My mom's grandpa is Egyptian. He's black… but I can't check the box which is really – I feel that it's really discriminatory." Warda says, "it's not as acceptable to identify as African American here, people are like, 'Well you can't check that because you're not black.' And I get that from black students… I mean I'm a second generation African-American…"

Mada indicated that she will often make her own box. "I feel like there is always an "other" box… but if there wasn't an "other" box or a "Middle Eastern" box, I would make my own box… There should be a "Mediterranean" box, that's a nice blanket statement that a lot of people could probably check."

Comments regarding the exclusion of an Arab or Middle Eastern category include, "I think that's, excuse my language, complete bullshit… just stupid. I just think that's totally unnecessary. And lazy and not, you know, not right." Rihab notes, "Yeah, I don't like it. I'm not white, I mean, my skin is white, but I'm not white.... I am happy to check a box that says, "Middle Eastern." According to Nabeeha, "it's good that you ask this question. I get really annoyed that we don't have a box, 'Middle Eastern.' There should be a box… because for some reason, we have to identify as white, I don't know why, even though I'm Egyptian and that's in Africa."

According to several faculty and administration officials, Portland State uses the federal guidelines for collecting racial data, which categorizes people of Arab or Middle Eastern descent as white, and provides no alternative choice, like

"other," or "decline to state." The subjects are unanimous in saying that this is the one official policy of the university that feels discriminatory to them.

Because of their active involvement in the Arab Student Association, two of the students interviewed are aware of the problems this practice creates. As an example, these students cited the difficulty obtaining administration approval for a Middle Eastern cultural center (MENASA) because of the lack of statistical information regarding the number of Arab and Arab-American students on campus. Therefore, the administration's practice of categorizing Arabs as White interfered with the students' ability to provide that data. As a result, it took nine years for the students to secure approval and funding for the MENASA cultural center.

Critical Reflexivity

As a Syrian American, my identity strongly influenced this entire process. The formation of my question came directly from my own inclusionary and exclusionary experiences in the United States and the Portland area. As a new student at PSU, I wondered if speaking Arabic or talking about my culture would yield positive or negative responses from non-Arab students. The questions I asked during interviews came directly from my own experiences.

The only real power differential at play here is my age, since I am much older that my subjects. Rihab recognized this, and coming recently from Syria, she naturally called me "Tante," or "Aunt" during our interactions.

As an insider, it was very easy to find subjects to participate and conversation was very comfortable for me and my subjects. Both Nabeeha and Rihab kissed me on both cheeks when we met, adhering to common Arab tradition. We all behaved as if we share a community. I did not detect any hesitation in subjects to speak openly and honestly, and they seemed to feel that I understood exactly what they were saying. Several students made somewhat critical remarks about Americans, white people, and American culture, and even then, they did not seem to worry that I might not approve (as an American), in fact, they often spoke in such a way as to suggest that they expected me to understand and agree with what they were saying.

During my work, I did not really meet any ethical challenges, although I did feel uncomfortable with some of our shared negative views of Americans or white people. I am American and many of my friends are white, non-Arabs. Still, I did understand the subjects' comments and complaints.

As I got deeper into the project, I felt increasingly satisfied with the interview method of data collection. The questions themselves became clearer as students confirmed common themes from interview to interview. If I could expand this project, I would devise some effective means of participant observation; wearing the hijab myself, both on and off campus, or recruiting volunteers who cover to collect data for the research. I would also reach out to more male students, especially those of strong Arab appearance, and recruit them for participant observation as well. Additionally, I feel that a large-scale survey as well as focus groups would be of great benefit, both in discovering the prevalence of common themes among the larger population, and in finding more interviewees.

Conclusion and Preliminary Findings

Based on my research, I have concluded that compared to off-campus sites, Arab students experience minor exclusion and feel a fairly strong sense of inclusion and belonging on campus relating to their non-Arab peers. Additionally, students feel that Americans, which they also define as white people, do harbor overall negative stereotypes of Arabs, yet the students feel that they encounter only occasional racism off-campus.

All subjects interviewed feel proud of their heritage and indicate that they are very open about it with non-Arabs. While all students feel accepted on campus, they still experience some degree of exclusionary behavior or othering, which they seem to minimize or downplay. A common attitude among the subject is that Americans are largely ignorant of other cultures, including Arab culture, and cannot be expected to know better. They often blame the media and the education system for this situation.

Finally, the area in which the students feel the greatest sense of discrimination on campus is in the racial categorization of Arabs as White.

Subjects show a strong dislike of this practice and feel it is discriminatory, factually incorrect, and serves to render them racially and ethnically invisible.

One of the most interesting findings was the homogeneity of opinion shared by both Arab-American and international Arab students. I expected that Arabs born in the United States might have a common view that differed from the students who came here from other countries, but that was not the case. This points to the strength of the common Arab culture as expressed in the homes of Arab-Americans and the confirmation of these students' choice of identifying culturally as Arabs, regardless of birthplace.

This was a very small sampling of Arab students on campus and it would be worthwhile to expand this research to draw stronger conclusions about Arab student experiences of inclusion and exclusion both on- and off- campus. Widespread surveying, additional participant observation, and a greater number of interviews would be very helpful in confirming these initial conclusions.

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