But from the moment when it is recognized that above the individual there is society, and that this is not a nominal being created by reason, but a system of active forces, a new manner of explaining men (and women) becomes possible. (E. Durkheim, 1915, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, p. 495—parentheses added).

Introduction

Society provides the foundation for specifying the cultural elements that shape Arab American life. To understand Arab American life, attention must be directed toward the underlying elements that drive their social reality. Social reality, “…is a matter of particular social actors, in particular social places, at particular social times” (Abbott, 1992, p. 428). Though it is now widely understood that culture patterns behavior in unique ways (Hall, 1966), it must also be recognized that culture is produced in the course of social interactions and relationships, through which meanings arise, persist, and change. Human actions occur within structures that provide opportunities as well as present constraints. Social relationships occupy a special place in the social sciences, serving as a critical foundation for the scientific study of culture, as well as for enhancing health and well-being. The chapters in this part present aspects of Arab American culture and their implications for health by
focusing on social relations that range from the interpersonal up to the group level in the areas of social identity, family, gender, aging, and forgiveness.

The nature of social relations has preoccupied philosophers and social thinkers for centuries. Early theorists in the tradition of European and American sociology often described and sought to explain social change by highlighting the influence of various contexts on social relations or conversely by outlining how the nature of social relations, or repeated social interactions, ultimately extended to create society. Indeed, social relations have emerged as a key predictor of health and well-being (Antonucci & Jackson, 1987; Cohen & Syme, 1985; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Social relations may involve close, interpersonal relationships, or relationships with groups and institutions. From the micro- to macro-level, the structure, type and quality of relationships hold enormous significance for daily life and overall well-being. Social relations hold an added layer of significance for understanding Arab American culture. The study of culture emphasizes a focus on meaning. Meaning is produced and reproduced through interactions that occur in social relationships (Blumer, 1969; Strauss, 1978). Hence, highlighting social relations as the core element to elucidating Arab American culture provides an important means by which to present issues of key importance in striving to present a biopsychosocial perspective on Arab American health.

The uniqueness of Arab Americans as a cultural group stems from the social conditions under which the group arose as a distinct, recognizable, and visible ethnicity. Contrary to the domestic policies (e.g., slavery, geographic expansion, industrialization) that brought about pan-ethnic groupings of Native Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Asians, and African Americans, the impetus for carving Arab Americans out from the dominant white category into a distinct entity has involved US foreign policy directives in the Arab world (Cainkar, 2009). Indeed, political instabilities in the Arab world, beginning with the Arab-Israeli conflict (along with the United States’ clear support for the state of Israel) are often cited as critical determinants of anti-Arab sentiment in the United States (Abraham, 1994; Salaita, 2006). Because the construction of Arab ethnicity is so intimately tied to events and political instabilities in the Arab world, Arab Americans incur a special situation, marginal in their status, “not quite white” (Samhan, 1999), yet not fully accepted as a legal minority (Cainkar, 2009), what Nadine Naber terms “ambiguous insiders” (Naber, 2000). Indeed, Arab Americans tend to adopt social identities that vary along national origin, age, and religious affiliations (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007). Addressing the situation and needs of Arab Americans would benefit from a deeper understanding of culture.

This part addresses Arab American culture in a broad sense. Recognizing first, that similar to other pan-ethnic groupings (e.g., Hispanic/Latino), Arab American constitutes an umbrella term that essentially lumps a highly diverse group of people into one homogenous category, two chapters directly tackle the complexity of an Arab American social identity by examining the sociopolitical history of the Arab American experience as well as the ethnic and religious diversity found among those who fall within this category. Through these presentations, we gain insights into social relations between Arab Americans and others, as well as the nature of
relations among diverse subgroups of Arab Americans. Second, the foundation of social relations for Arab Americans is the family. To understand gender dynamics, as well as the experience of aging among Arab Americans, references to family situations are critical. Moreover, gender and family issues overlap with the topic of forgiveness, which is presented within a framework that privileges social relations and culture as key to elucidating the conditions that shape the experience of hurtful social relations, or a sense of being wronged. As such, though each topic stands alone in importance, unavoidable overlap arises as this part seeks to clarify the importance of these issues for health and well-being. The six chapters in this part are summarized below.

In her chapter on the sociopolitical history of Arab Americans, Dalia Abdelhady traces the immigration history of Arab Americans by presenting multiple perspectives on the ways in which immigrants from Arab lands integrated. She challenges the traditional assimilation-pluralism framework as the only means to understand the social and political experiences of Arab immigrants and introduces the concepts of Transnationalism and Diaspora to reflect the complicated nature of the Arab American experience. Social relations are highlighted as the chapter illustrates the multiple ways that Arab Americans interact with the host society and home country. Through those interactions, the status and social identity of Arab Americans emerges.

In the chapter that follows, Helen Samhan outlines the intra-ethnic and religious diversity found within the pan-ethnic category of Arab-American. In detailing underlying differences, Samhan elucidates the complexity of Arab ethnicity, illustrating why an Arab identity is not embraced by all. She provides valuable data on immigration from the multiple countries (22 total) that comprise the Arab world, identifies subgroups labeled as ethnic and cultural minorities in their country of origin (particularly Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Kurds), and furthermore describes religious diversity within the broader Christian and Muslim religions. The ways in which sectarian and national-origin boundaries facilitate or obscure acculturation are discussed. Indeed, social relations among Arab Americans as well as with others outside of the Arab American ethnicity again surface as a key element to the creation of identity. A poignant outcome arising from this chapter involves the difficulty inherent to identifying Arab Americans, raising questions about existing data and scholarship.

Ben Beitin and Mireille Aprahamian present a portrait of family. They first identify underlying values and traditions in the Arab world as a much needed context to the Arab American experience. They provide a thorough depiction of dominant values in the Arab world concerning the institution of family including large and extended family forms, and patrilineality, as well as the nature of the marital and parent–child relationship. By juxtapositioning traditional Arab values with US values, the authors offer important insights into potential tensions and conflicts members of Arab American families may face. For instance, the authors illustrate the challenges of collectivistic values in a self-reliant society and furthermore explain how gender roles are paramount to the structure of family relations and expectations. Social relations between men and women, young and old, therefore become a key site of negotiation in the US context. Beitin and Aprahamian conclude with a
call for more research on the Arab American family to provide much needed insight into family change and continuity.

Louise Cainkar and Jen’nan Ghazal Read address the issue of gender. The dynamics of gender are discussed within a family context. The authors note that not all families are the same and gendered norms may be treated more flexibly in some families and more strictly in others depending on family resources (e.g., social class), the social capital (e.g., relationships and community) they build in the United States and their interpretations and management of interactions with the host society. The prominence of social relations in the articulation of gender dynamics provides an important lens. Noteworthy is the illustration of human agency, i.e., active decision-making, among Arab American women, and how decisions regarding gender norms facilitate social belonging. Noted is the paucity of data on the Arab American male experience.

In the chapter on aging, Sawsan Abdulrahim and Kristine Ajrouch focus on family relations and immigration as fundamental influences on well-being in later life. Four contemporary theoretical perspectives are discussed and applied to the Arab American experience. First, a life course perspective provides a lens by which to consider ways in which sociohistorical (e.g., war) and life events at various developmental stages (e.g., immigrating as a child or as an adult) shape outcomes in old age. Second, the Convoy Model of Social Relations draws attention to key relationships within (e.g., spouse, child, sibling) and outside (e.g., friends and neighbors) the family as key influences on health and well-being over the life course. Such relationships are thought to change in some respects, but remain the same in others. Third, intergenerational solidarity/ambivalence draws attention to relationship quality and provides a mechanism by which cultural ideals may be deconstructed to show pragmatic realities of social relations between older adults and adult children. Finally, the cultural assumptions behind the term successful aging are critiqued and applied to the Arab American experience.

In the final chapter, Kristine Ajrouch and Toni Antonucci discuss forgiveness in the context of culture and social relations. The concept of forgiveness is reviewed with cultural dimensions elaborated to suggest that in cultures tending toward collectivism the motivation to forgive may emanate from relationships with key others as opposed to a quest for inner peace. Data are then presented to illustrate how social relations influence the experience of forgiveness among Arab American college students in the metro-Detroit area. In particular, the authors consider how social relations influence within-group articulations of what it means to be Arab as well as shape explanations concerning strategies used when faced with difficult or hurtful situations.

Arab American culture involves multiple facets, the meanings of which are fruitfully guided by attention to the practice of social relations. In this part, the sociohistorical conditions of the Arab American experience and the diversity that marks the social identity of Arab Americans is illustrated. Both provide key insights into macro-level social relations. The interpersonal nature of social relations represents the key focus in the treatment of family, gender, and aging. Finally, both micro- and macro-level social relations emerge in discussions of forgiveness. Taken together, the chapters in this part provide key ideas to inform a more complete understanding
of social aspects that shape the Arab American experience and ultimately their health and well-being.

References


