There are no graves here. These mountains and plains are a cradle and a stepping-stone. Whenever you pass by the field where you have laid your ancestors look well thereupon, and you shall see yourselves and your children dancing hand in hand. Verily you often make merry without knowing. (K. Gibran, 1978/1923, The Prophet, pp.87–88).

Introduction

Ancestral ties to the Arab world provide the foundation for the psychosocial development of Arab Americans. Psychosocial development can be construed as involving three core developmental tasks: developing a sense of trust in others, developing an achieved identity and well-rounded sense of self in relation to others, and attaining a mastery of ego integrity whereby a person looks upon the past with emotional acceptance (Sneed, Whitbourne, & Culang, 2006). The chapters in this part address such psychosocial development in Arab Americans in the context of their acculturation, ethnic identity, history of traumatic experiences, mental health risks and resilience, educational and work experiences, and overall health within their home environments and communities.

As will be addressed throughout the chapters of this part, the psychosocial development of Arab Americans has been affected by a variety of normative history-graded and age-graded influences as well as nonnormative life events (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). Normative history-graded influences are historical events, such as wars, famine, natural or economic disasters, which tend to have a similar
impact on an entire generation or birth cohort of a population such as the children of the Great Depression or their baby boomer children. The psychosocial development of Arab Americans has been affected by a host of worldwide events from the wars in the Middle East to the aftermath and backlash of attitudes in the United States after the tragedy of the attacks of 9/11. Normative age-graded influences affect people of the same age in a similar manner; Arab Americans face the same developmental tasks as other Americans when it comes to expectations by age—learning to drive a car as an adolescent, finishing high school by age 18 years, deciding on a career and making higher education choices in young adulthood, childbearing and child-rearing in adulthood, and facing retirement and eventually death in old age. Non-normative life events have an impact but differ uniquely from person to person and family to family. Given that Arab Americans represent such a diverse group of countries-of-origin and multiple generations, it is perhaps with nonnormative life events that we see some of the most unique psychosocial influences; for example, while an immigrant from Iraq and an immigrant from Lebanon may share a history of conflict and war in their homelands, the nature of their experiences could be quite different depending on when they lived in the Middle East and just who was involved in the conflict.

The Arab world has witnessed many normative history-graded influences extending from ancient history and these events form part of the long-term collective memory of the people (Zebian & Brown, 2013). This extended timeline of conflicts and political changes occurs even now and includes the youth movements in the Middle East during the Arab Spring of 2011. Thus, there is currently a juxtaposition of ancient conflicts with youthful innovation, edginess, and motivation for change. While the effects of the Arab Spring are yet to be fully realized, a public opinion survey in Arab countries and Iran late in 2011 showed that political issues involving democratic reforms and human rights were now top level priorities in comparison to public opinion rankings in 2009 (Arab American Institute, 2011). The effects of the history of economic problems, war, and conflicts on the younger generation appear to have reverberated throughout the older generation as well in the Middle East.

As noted throughout this book, the reasons for immigration from the Arab world to other countries in Europe and the Americas are varied, and include refuge from war and/or famine, freedom from oppression, the search for economic prosperity, and a spirit of adventure seeking (e.g., Suleiman, 1999). Many of the very issues that are related to ongoing protests and youth movements in the Middle East also formed the underlying basis for the immigration of some Arabs to North American over the past century.

In her chapter on acculturation and ethnic identity in Arab immigrants to North America, Mona Amer highlights the many protective and risk factors that have been shown to be related to their acculturation and psychological outcomes. Protective factors discussed include having a strong ethnic identity, using religion, family, and other forms of social support to cope, and having an available community network. On the other hand, risks include familial conflict over acculturation, assimilation pressures, public hostility after 9/11, discrimination, marginalization, and isolation from potential sources of support. While refugees from the Arab world have been
shown to be vulnerable to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder given their history of disrupted developmental tasks, adaptive psychosocial adjustment is also a potential outcome. From a developmental psychopathology perspective, adaptive psychosocial development has the opportunity to occur when both genetics and the environment interact in ways that protect individuals from risks; thus, some people are able to display resilience even in the face of the adverse effects of the exposure to war and discrimination (e.g., Masten, 2007). Resilience may be displayed by the ability to develop healthy attachments and trust in others, achieve a secure identity, and successfully integrate the events of one’s past, difficult though it may be, into a resolved feeling of acceptance.

As described in the chapter on trauma, resilience, and recovery by Ibrahim Kira, Mona Amer, and Nancy Wrobel, it is a challenge for family members and health professionals alike in working to overcome the cumulative severe traumas embedded in the psychological histories of some Arab American refugees. Collective identity traumas incorporate the collective suffering of the peoples of the Middle East, including torture, oppression, autocratic government rule, and a succession of direct and neighboring wars. In addition, gender discrimination for women and the non-normative trauma of domestic violence experienced by some intensify the types of post-migration stressors encountered with acculturation, discrimination, and post 9/11 backlash. The experience of refugees varies as well by which period of the life span was most affected. For example, children and adolescents may be affected by a disruption to the attachment system, while refugee elders may face having to learn a new language and new way of everyday life. As reviewed by Kira et al., there are a number of models of recovery designed to help trauma survivors, but among these multi-systemic perspectives, ecological models seem to hold the most promise as they are quite comprehensive and incorporate various relevant contexts including the use of community agencies and the legal system.

Issues relevant to the mental health and well-being of Arab Americans across the life-span are further delineated in the chapter by Nancy Wrobel and Ashley Paterson. In particular, they describe studies that show how level of acculturation, religious affiliation, and education level among other factors have been linked to mental health outcomes including depressive and anxiety disorders. Taking a developmental view by looking at the age-graded tasks of Arab American children, adolescents, and adults from youth to old age, Wrobel and Paterson highlight the variety of stressors that can put individuals at risk for psychopathology. Guidelines for practitioners are provided in this chapter with the aim of fostering the culturally sensitive assessment and treatment of Arab Americans in need of mental health services.

Critical to the adaptive psychosocial development of Arab Americans are their achievements at school and work. Karen Haboush and Nicole Barakat describe in their chapter how resilience is based on the successful navigation of individuals in educational and employment contexts. In the Arab world as in the United States, both educational and occupational successes are highly regarded. Haboush and Barakat document how historical trends in education and employment in Arab American immigrants are related to various government policies, labor practices and needs, and sociopolitical contexts or “zeitgeist.” The chapter authors further
delineate the importance of the school and work environments for healthy identity development in children, adolescents, and adults, including individuals with disabilities and those who are learning English as a second language. Unfortunately, at times prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices are still challenges to be overcome by Arab American students, employees, and those advocating on their behalf. Haboush and Barakat highlight the importance of future research trends in assisting in the progress for Arab Americans at school and work in the wide range of communities in which they live.

This part of the book concludes with a chapter by Hikmet Jamil on environmental health in Arab American community settings. As noted by Jamil, various countries in the Middle East are now attempting to make progress in setting social and environmental public health policies to benefit the people affected. However, this was not historically the case. Throughout the history of immigration to the United States, for example, the lack of government attention to public health and well-being in many Middle Eastern countries-of-origin led to deficiencies in public health education and services. Thus, Arab American immigrants often brought health problems with them that may have been exacerbated by the social and physical environments in which they settled. Jamil discusses issues such as lead poisoning, air pollution, workplace safety issues, and smoking and their impact on chronic diseases from a public and environmental health perspective.

The bio-ecological systems framework of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1994) and Swick and Williams (2006) seems to be an especially appropriate way to organize the complex interplay of persons and environments that are involved in the stresses and everyday experiences of Arab Americans as described in the chapters of this part on psychosocial development. Bronfenbrenner’s theory incorporates a series of nesting influences on the development of individuals. At the microsystem level of analysis, the child, adolescent, or adult interacts directly with others in the social network of family, school, and work, while the mesosystem involves the next higher level of analysis whereby the various microsystems interact with each other (e.g., the parent–child system interacts with the parent–child-teacher system). An example of a mesosystem would be an immigrant mother having conflicts with her adolescent daughter about going on an overnight field trip with her class from school; the dynamic interaction between the mother-daughter pair and the daughter’s teacher would be considered a mesosystem. The developing daughter is directly involved in the processes both at home and at school with the teacher. The exosystem incorporates the interaction of two or more systems, at least one of which only indirectly involves the person of interest; nonetheless, the interaction has an important influence on the individual’s development; an example would be an interaction between the home setting, where a parent and developing child interact, and the parent’s place of employment (where the influence on the developing child is indirect). Macrosystems incorporate all three of the above in a broad and comprehensive way organized by subcultural or cultural systems of belief, social roles, and psychological understanding. Finally, the chronosystem refers to the stability and changes that occur over time in both the developing person and the environments in which he or she functions. In Bronfenbrenner’s approach, the importance of genetics
cannot be overlooked as the bio-ecological model predicts that gene–environment interactions are pervasive and dynamic, and that the underlying genetic potential of many humans is not as yet fully realized due to environmental constraints. Indeed, consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s hypothesis, the chapter authors in this part of the book on psychosocial development place emphasis on the many ways in which the social and physical environments of Arab Americans can be improved to help optimize their adaptation, health, and well-being.

References


