CHAPTER 31

Arab Families
An Overview

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Americans of Arab heritage have been described as one of the “most misunderstood ethnic groups in the United States, frequently misrepresented and vilified” (Erickson & Tamimi, 2001). This vilification and negative stereotyping has been more pronounced in the United States than in other Western countries even prior to the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The reasons for the negative stereotyping and the most recent justification for vilification are complex and not the subject of this chapter. Instead, this chapter attempts to dispel some of the negative stereotypes about Arab Americans and Arabs by describing their history, their cultural values, and their mental health problems, drawing on a growing number of articles and chapters as well as the author’s own clinical experience.

If asked to define who Arabs are, most Arabs would say they include all peoples who speak the Arabic language and claim a link with the nomadic tribes of Arabia, whether by descent, by affiliation, or by appropriating the traditional ideals of human excellence and standards of beauty. This definition includes reference to a historical process that began with the preaching by Mohammed of a religion called Islam, a process in which all Arabs play a leading part and by virtue of which they can claim a unique role in the history of humankind (Hourani, 1970). More than 170 million Arabs live in 18 countries located in the Middle East (Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq), the Gulf region (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), and North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan).

ARAB FAMILIES IN A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The cultural traits of modern Arabs have been impacted by several significant historical events. The period between the 7th and 10th centuries A.D. witnessed the emergence of one of the most profound and influential historical changes in the Arab world: the
growth and spread of the religion of Islam. In the early 7th century, the Prophet Mohammed called upon the people of the Arabian Peninsula to submit to the will of God as expressed in a book called the Qur'an. Uniting the tribes in the name of Islam, Mohammed guided them to the conquest of the surrounding countries. By the end of the century, this new empire, called the Caliphate, extended from central Asia in the east and to Spain in the west. This era saw the spread of both Islam and the Arabic language and the building of an urban civilization.

The Arab world was dominated by the Ottoman Empire for the next four centuries (15th–19th). Upon the conclusion of World War I, it was divided among the European victors. In this latter period, Muslim states were forced to adopt new systems of government and law to face the new developing realities as first Egypt, and then Tunisia, fell under European control and were eventually followed by Morocco and Libya.

Islam's legal practices were preserved, but new thought emerged to incorporate the strength of Europe and to promote the merit of adopting European ideas without being untrue to Islamic beliefs and culture. A new class of Arab “intelligentsia” was created, one that was convinced of the need to adopt European ideas to improve living conditions in Arab countries. Its ideas provided the foundation for the crystallization of 19th-century Arab nationalism.

The partition of Palestine in 1948 and the creation of the state of Israel ignited a political reaction that led to the fall of most of the old regimes in Arab countries. The new regimes were committed to nationalism that aspired to the close union of all Arab countries, independence from the superpowers, and social reform in the direction of greater equality. These ideas were embodied throughout the 1960s in the persona of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. The defeat of Syria, Egypt, and Jordan in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war halted the advance of these goals and led to a period of disunity and increasing dependence by Arab countries on one or the other of the two superpowers, Russia or the United States.

In the 1980s, the Arab world witnessed the reemergence and strong expression of Islamic feelings and loyalties. This filled an identity vacuum for the uprooted urban population, providing a solid base for their lives and filling a need for their own traditions and customs, as opposed to adopting those of the Western world. The 1991 Gulf War, which provoked conflict among the Arabs, was a historical event that further alienated the Arabs from the West. More recently, the bombing of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the invasion of Iraq, and the continued violation of the Palestinians’ human rights have ushered in one of the lowest periods in the history of Arabs and Arab Americans.

Religion

Islam

The essence of Islam, as preached by the Prophet Mohammed, was transmitted through the Qur'an, which is believed to be the literal word of God. In addition to the Qur'an were the laws of society, elaborated on by adding the Prophet's own traditional sayings (hadith) and his practices (sunnah). A fourth dimension was also added, taking into account certain pre-Islamic traditions and integrating other existing societal norms and customs.
Except by implication, the Qur'an does not contain explicit doctrines or instructions; basically, it provides guidance. The hadith and sunna, however, contain some specific commands on issues such as marriage and the division of property. They also address such daily habits as how often the believer should worship God and how all people should treat each other.

Based on the general guidance of the Qur'an, five basic obligations of Muslims emerged in the form of the "Pillars of Islam." These consist of (1) oral testimony that there is only one God and that Mohammed is his prophet, (2) ritual prayer practiced five times a day with certain words and certain postures of the body, (3) the giving of alms, (4) keeping a strict fast, including no liquid or food from sunrise to sundown, during the month of Ramadan, and (5) a holy pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) once in a lifetime at a specific time of the year. A general injunction was added, jihād, which carries the universal meaning that every Muslim must exercise strenuous intellectual, physical, and spiritual efforts for the good of all. (For a more detailed description of Islam, see Chapter 28.)

Approximately 14 million Arabs follow the Christian faith. Lebanon contains the largest Christian population, which constitutes almost 50% of the overall population. Christians remain a minority in all other Arab countries, with the highest percentage in Sudan, followed by Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine. The largest Christian denomination in the Middle East is the Coptic Orthodox Church, numbering nearly 6 million believers, most of them in Egypt. Other Christian denominations include the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Eastern Greek Orthodox Church, and the Eastern Rite Catholic Church, that is, the Maronite Church (predominantly in Lebanon).

Although Christians make up only 10% of the overall Arab population, Arab Christians are described as having played a disproportionate part in the post–World War II political activities of Arab countries. This is especially true in the nationalist movement in the Middle East and in the Palestinian movement (Carmichael, 1977).

Christians often impress outsiders as being more "Arab" than Muslim Arabs in their Arab nationalist position. Among Arab Americans it is not uncommon to find Arab Christians holding traditional and conventional attitudes toward a variety of issues synonymous to those held by Muslim Arab Americans. After World War II, Christian Arabs led most Arab nationalist movements. Christian Arabs in the United States are very active in fighting to dispel the negative image of Arabs in the United States and the West. Some of the most prominent spokespersons for Arabs are Christians (e.g., Professor Edward Said and Dr. Hanan Ashrawi). Christian Arabs often become quite irate about any hint of their not being seen as part of the Arab community.

When the first major split in Christianity occurred (5th century), Western church leaders affirmed the dual nature of Christ (Christ was both spirit and body) in contrast to Middle Eastern Christians, who adhered to a Monophysite definition of Christ—that he was of a single nature, divine and spiritual. The Arab Christians belonged to the Monophysites.

The Assyrians are unique in that they use neither paintings nor sculpture in worship, but simply a plain cross above the altar. Prayer and worship are conducted in Aramaic, the language of Christ, and are led by laymen.
The Coptic Orthodox, located primarily in Egypt but also found in Ethiopia, believe that their church originated from St. Mark the Evangelist. Today the Coptic Cathedral is located in Cairo, Egypt, and the head of the church has the title of Pope and is revered as the successor to St. Mark.

The Syrian Orthodox Church is also known as the West Syrian Church to distinguish its members from those of the East Syrian Church; its members are also referred to as the Jacobites, after Bishop Jacob Baradaeus. Numbering about 160,000, members of the Syrian Orthodox Church consider the Patriarch of Antioch in Damascus as their spiritual leader. Worship is conducted in Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic), and the sign of the cross is made with one finger, signifying their Monophysite belief.

Eastern Rite Catholics are Arab Christians who maintained their ancient languages of worship and continue their tradition and rites but have split from the rest of the Arab Christians by accepting papal supremacy and returning to the Catholic Church. Unlike Eastern Rite Catholics, the Maronites claim never to have been outside the Catholic Church. The Maronite Church became the first Eastern church to accept papal supremacy in 1180. The Maronites have preserved their ancient Syriac liturgy, although most of their worship is conducted in Arabic (Shabbas & Al-Qazzaz, 1989).

Language

Albert Hourani (1970), in describing the relationship between Arabs and their language, said that they were “more conscious of their language than any people in the world, seeing it not only as the greatest of their arts but also as their common good.”

Arabic today is spoken by 130 million people. It was named the sixth official language of the United Nations and is ranked as the fourth most widely spoken language in the world (tied with Bengali). Spoken Arabic differs significantly from one Arab country to the other. It can be separated into five dialects, related to the different geographical regions: (1) the Middle Eastern dialect spoken by Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese; (2) the Gulf dialect; (3) the Egyptian dialect; (4) the North African dialect; and (5) the Iraqi dialect. The most familiar of these dialects is the Egyptian dialect, which has historically dominated the film industry as well as artistic expression. Although spoken Arabic is as varied as the different parts of the Arab world, classical Arabic is used for formal speech and in broadcasting and writing.

The Arabic language is extremely difficult and grammatically complex, with its structure lending itself to rhyme and rhythm. Although many other people feel an affection for their native languages, Arabs’ feeling for their language is much more intense. The Arabic language is one of the greatest Arab cultural treasures and achievements (Nydel, 1987). Because it is difficult to achieve, a good command of the Arabic language is highly admired.

Family Structure

If the Qur’an is the soul of Islam, then the family can be described as the body. Whereas pre-Islamic Arabs found their strength in tribes, Islam emphasized the extension beyond the tribe, focusing on the umma and considering all Muslims as brothers and sisters belonging to the same umma. Umma is the Arabic translation for the word nation in English (Stowasser, 1987). Within the umma, families are given importance as units. Men are
given specific duties toward their wives and children, wives are given instructions as to how to treat their husbands, and children are advised to honor their mothers. The empowerment of the family unit reassures women of economic and emotional support in regard to their social position in the world. Both men and women are expected to contribute to the support and maintenance of the family unit according to the traditional codes of family and honor and are responsible for the rearing of children. In crisis, both are also expected to view the good of the family above the fulfillment of individual wishes and self-satisfaction. The concept of honor goes beyond the simplistic interpretation of sexual misconduct, encompassing such values as hard work, conservatism, educational and economic advancement, and avoidance of criminal involvement or other unacceptable conduct (Abudabbeh & Ascl, 1999).

There are today many signs of strain on the family system due to factors such as industrialization, urbanization, war and conflict, and Westernization. Despite these pressures, however, the family remains the main system of support throughout the Arab world and for Arabs living elsewhere. For the majority of Arabs, as for virtually all other cultural groups, no institution has replaced the family as a system of support (Fernea, 1985).

The Arab family can be described as patriarchal, pyramidically hierarchal with regard to age and sex, and extended. Despite movements toward a more Westernized nuclear family, the extended family remains important. Although families may have established their own households, they nevertheless maintain the concept of extension by considering their own kin as being worthy of the most attention, of being confided in, and of their allegiance.

Bedouins are the part of Arab society that came mostly from the Arabian Peninsula and migrated to other parts of the Arab world with the spread of Islam. Unlike city people, Bedouins are a migrant, tribal society. The Bedouin family, in both rural and urban areas, constitutes the dominant social institution through which persons inherit their religion, social class, and identity. Whatever befalls one member of the family can bring either honor or shame to the whole family. Family dynamics involve a great deal of self-sacrifice and also provide satisfaction based on the happiness of others or by vicarious living through others.

Another feature of the Arab family is its style of communication, which is described by both Sharabi (1988) and Barakat (1985) as hierarchical, creating vertical as opposed to horizontal communication between those in authority and those subservient to that authority. This relationship, according to Barakat, leads to styles of communication between parents and children in which parents use anger and punishment and the children respond by crying, self-censorship, covering up, or deception.

Marriage

The focus of this chapter on Islamic regulations governing marriage derives from the fact that the majority of Arabs are Muslim, which establishes an undeniable Islamic influence on the entire society. Islam considers marriage an important duty of every Muslim and a safeguard for chastity. Marriage (nikah) is recognized as a highly religious, sacred ceremony and is regarded as central to the growth and stability of the basic units of society (having moved away from the pre-Islamic tribalistic emphasis on kinship and blood relation). In Islamic law marriage is a contract legalizing intercourse and the procreation of
children. Under Hanafi law, a Muslim man is allowed to marry a non-Muslim woman as long as she belongs to the "people of the Book," meaning that she is either Jewish or Christian. Women, however, are not allowed to marry non-Muslims (Esposito, 1982).

Marriage is seen as a family affair, in which a partner is chosen by a person's family and not based on the Western concept of romantic love. However, despite some changes in this regard, this method of marriage remains the rule and romantic marriage an exception. Although the woman's opinion is supposed to be respected in accepting or rejecting a certain suitor, this is seldom practiced. In Islam, when the marriage contract is drawn, some Sunni sects allow the inclusion of clauses that would give women the power to terminate a marriage. Despite changes in family laws in some Arab countries, women continue to be shortchanged because of the long-standing traditional pre-Islamic and persisting post-Islamic attitudes toward women's role in society.

Practices such as endogamy continue to occur in many Arab countries where marriage within the same lineage (cousins) is still a norm. This is another indication that the family and the tribe, rather than individuals, form the basis of a community. The reasoning behind this type of marriage remains rooted in tribal tradition, which is pre-Islamic. Marriage to close kin ensures the kind of economic and blood kinship needed to continue and enhance the position of the tribe. However, studies conducted in several communities indicate that endogamy constitutes only 3–8% of all marriages and is more prevalent among the more traditional and conventional Arab groups (Barakat, 1985).

Muslim law allows a woman to be contracted for marriage by her guardian (in most countries, this is her father). This is the case at all age levels, unless the woman has been married before. Several Arab countries, however, have enacted laws more favorable to women in this respect, allowing adult women to draw their own marriage contracts. The minimum age for marriage for a Muslim girl is 15 in most Arab countries, and 18 for boys. The more education a woman has, the more likely she is to marry at an older age (Barakat, 1985).

Traditional Islamic law allows men four wives. Although the Qur'an qualifies the multiplicity of wives by stating that a man should not marry more than one unless he is able to treat them equally, the choice is left to him to determine whether to marry more than one. In recent years, some Arab countries have forbidden the practice of polygyny (Tunisia), whereas others have required that a husband must obtain a court's permission prior to taking a second wife (Iraq). In others (Lebanon and Morocco), a wife can insist on a clause in the premarital contract, giving her the option of divorcing her husband in the event he decides to take a second wife (Beck & Keddie, 1978). In practice, polygyny is rare in modern Arab societies.

Most Arab Christians belong to denominations that do not allow divorce. Among Muslims, it is permitted with certain legal stipulations. Mohammed is reported to have said, "Of all permitted things, divorce is the most abominable to God." Many verses in the Qur'an were intended to limit the frequency and facility of divorce that existed in pre-Islamic Arabia (Esposito, 1982).

Barakat (1985) describes the divorce rate as having risen in Arab countries, attributing it to the pressures of modern life. In analyzing the divorce trend, however, it was noted that most divorces occurred in the "engagement" period or during the first 2 years of marriage. This is probably related to the nature of these marriages (i.e., arranged marriages). It may be that what Western couples are able to discover in each other before marriage is possible for Arab couples to discover only after "engagement" (which in Islam is usually a binding contract) or during the early period of marriage.
Children

Children are raised to perpetuate the customs and traditions of the family. Methods of discipline vacillate between mild punishment for unacceptable behavior and putting fear in the child with warnings of what happens to those who do bad things. This is often accompanied by a great deal of unconditional love, especially toward sons.

Differential treatment of boys is not uncommon, and the instilling of traditional expectations in girls is common practice. Although these trends are changing, Arab children are encouraged to maintain close ties with their families and are not encouraged, as Westerners are, to be individuated and separate from their parents. Children who disobey and or shame their parents are likely to be disowned by them (Abudabbeh & Hamid, 2001).

In the event of divorce, a woman retains custody of her children for only a limited period of time and then places them, usually, with the father or the closest male relative as guardian. The age at which the mother relinquishes custody of her children varies according to the Muslim sect to which she belongs.

As the Arab family is more likely to use an authoritarian style in interaction with their children, it is not uncommon to observe that parents are more likely to lecture children than to engage them in discussion or dialogue. It is also common for the children to respect the father's authority, and they are encouraged to obey orders, as opposed to exploring ideas with him. It is likely that the children will spend more time with their mother, and they are more likely to be open with her, at times using her as a messenger or go-between with their father. Therefore, there is a greater likelihood of acting out on the part of the children, and of triangulation, as opposed to open communication among all members of the family.

ARAB AMERICANS TODAY

Arab Americans arrived in the United States in three distinct waves. The first wave, which came between 1890 and 1940, consisted mostly of merchants and farmers who emigrated for economic reasons from regions that were then part of the Ottoman Empire. Ninety percent of this first-wave immigrant population was Christian and originated from the regions known today as Syria and Lebanon. They seem to have assimilated in their new country with a good deal of ease.

The second wave of Arab immigrants began after World War II (after the creation of the State of Israel). Unlike its predecessor, this wave consisted mostly of people with college degrees or those seeking to earn them. It also differed in that its people came from regions of post-European colonization and from sovereign Arab nations. Dominated by Palestinians and Muslims, this wave arrived with an “Arab identity” that was absent in the first. The third wave of immigration occurred after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. This group came from a variety of Arab countries, seeking refuge to escape the political unrest in their countries of origin. A disproportionate number of these people included Lebanese immigrants, fleeing the civil war in their country, and Iraqis following the Gulf War. With the crystallization of an Arab identity also came the practice of traditions and customs that affected either a hyphenated identity as “Arab Americans” and cultural separateness from the majority of Americans (Abudabbeh & Hays, in press).

Since 1991 several recent historical events, culminating with the tragedy of September 11, 2001, have put Arab Americans in an exceedingly difficult position. The com-
monplace negative stereotyping of Arabs prior to 9/11 (Mansfield, 1990; Suleiman, 1988) has now become significantly more pronounced, and hate crimes against them has increased 500% (Zoghby, 2003). Following the passage of the Patriot Act, Arab Americans have faced increased scrutiny, possible questioning, arrest, and deportation. This has impacted thousands of Arab American families, whose lives have been disrupted by the deportation or incarceration of their members.

Today Arab Americans can be described as a heterogeneous, multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic group, currently estimated at nearly 3.5 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The largest concentrations of Arab Americans are in Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, New Jersey, Chicago, and the Washington, D.C., area. The majority of Arab Americans are Christian (Catholic 42%, Protestant 12%, Orthodox 23%), and 23% are Muslims (Arab American Institute, 2003).

Approximately 85% of Arab Americans have a high school diploma, more than 4 out of 10 hold a bachelor's or higher degree (as compared with 24% of the American average). Twice as many Arab Americans as Americans have postgraduate degrees. Occupationally, 64% of Arab Americans are in the labor force, mostly in professional and managerial posts, with only 12% in government jobs. The median income for Arab Americans (1999 statistics) was $47,000 in comparison to the American median of $42,000. Close to 30% of Americans have an income of $75,000, in contrast to 22% of Arab Americans (Arab American Institute, 2003).

Cultural Values and Beliefs

Regardless of its country of origin, the family is the cornerstone of the Arab American culture. There may be differences from one country to another in the intensity of the centrality of the family, but not in its impact on the dynamics of the family. Final authority rests with the father or, in his absence, with the oldest male in the family. Within this paradigm, what are considered to be normal individualistic pursuits according to Western values, are often regarded as selfish and are therefore discouraged. Major decisions, such as the choice of a partner and/or a career, are impacted by family expectations.

Privacy is of primary significance, as it is connected to maintaining the honor and good name of the family.

The elders of a family are expected to be cared for by the other family members. Their place in the family requires respect and payback for their roles as good parents. Talking negatively about a parent is unacceptable and regarded almost as a sin.

Sexuality is a taboo subject, rarely if ever discussed openly between parents and children, which presents a dilemma for a large number of immigrant Arab families. Sexual inappropriateness can bring shame to a family; thus, there is little tolerance for homosexuality. Struggling with issues related to sexual identity or making such a choice is usually kept secret from the family. The following case vignette is an example of this type of struggle.

A Syrian college student was referred for an assessment of his eligibility for accommodations for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Suhail had had difficulties with his academic work prior to his arrival in the United States. His struggle with education had affected the family dynamics, as it made him more of a target for criticism by the males in the family, thus pushing his mother to become ever more protective. Suhail, unbeknownst to his family,
had been struggling with issue of gender identity and homosexual tendencies. Growing up in a society that would not allow for such a lifestyle or the questioning of his identity, Suhail had kept his struggle a secret from the family, leaving them with concerns about the issue of ADHD only. His contact with a therapist in the United States was Suhail’s first opportunity to reveal his struggles, and he was assured that they would be kept confidential.

There is some variation in attitude from one Arab country to the other on this issue; Morocco and Lebanon are among those described as more tolerant of homosexuality. Abdallah, a young Moroccan male was a self-referral because of his intention to change his major in college. His dilemma of disobeying his family was secondary to his homosexuality. Unlike Suhail, Abdallah had been able to reveal his sexual preference to at least some Moroccans.

Relationships with those outside a person’s family are often regarded as crucial for the person’s safety and well-being, but never as significant as the relationships within a person’s own family. Central to maintaining the strength of those relationships is adherence to certain social obligations, expressing specific verbal responses for particular occasions, and, above all, speaking in a manner that is always respectful of the person being addressed. Openness and directness can be interpreted as rudeness. Dwairy (1998) describes this style of communication as *muesvara*. The power of the spoken word is a two-edged sword, capable of maintaining a “good” relationship by using the appropriate phrases, or causing irreparable damage by uttering the wrong ones. Thus, openness and directness are avoided for the sake of keeping a relationship intact. This style of communication inevitably creates a fertile ground for what Dwairy calls *istigaba*, which implies saying what you really mean about a person only in his or her absence. Thus, one of the most important elements in building intimacy with others is significantly impacted.

In addition to being proud of their language, Arabs take a great deal of pride in their generosity and hospitality. One of the greatest characteristics that can be attributed to a person is generosity, and the most dreaded is stinginess, as illustrated by the following Arabic saying: “Generosity conceals a thousand shortcomings.”

**TREATMENT IMPLICATIONS FOR ARAB AMERICANS**

The emphasis on family as the source of support, as well as the concept of the *umma* in Islam, discourage Arabs from seeking professional help for their emotional problems. Dwairy (1998) describes Arabs as less likely than Westerners to seek help from mental health providers because of their higher tolerance for mental illness and their attribution of mental illness to outside factors. In recent years the combined loss of support systems and proliferation of Arabic and Islamic community resources has led to a documented increase in the number of Arab Americans seeking professional help.

According to information from the Naim Foundation, a nonprofit mental health clinic in Washington (1982–2001) and a call-in mental health radio program in Arabic (1990–2001), Arab Americans seeking help were more likely to telephone than to come in person. The majority of the callers were females, most probably because of their inability to drive or to ensure anonymity. Those seeking help in person were likely to come for only one visit, seeking advice for a specific situation, or at times asking for
information for someone else. This approach is probably akin to asking advice from a learned person or a trusted friend to assist in decision making. For example, a Sudanese female who was unwilling to accept her husband's word that her test results from a physical examination were negative, was brought by the husband to the therapist to convince his wife that he was telling her the truth about the results of her examination. The wife was apprehensive of the test results, fearing that she might have cancer. This consultation illustrates (1) the esteem in which a therapist is held, (2) the suspiciousness aroused because of the custom of keeping bad news from family members to protect them from the psychological harm it may cause, and (3) the need to keep such a situation secret even from those who are close.

Arab men were as likely as women to seek help from a female therapist, including Arab men from such conservative backgrounds as Saudi Arabia. Common problems presented include the following:

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and generalized anxiety. The increase in the number of Arab Americans diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder has been documented in recent surveys of Iraqi and Lebanese immigrants (Abudabbeh and Hays, in press).
- Generational conflict, gender-related conflict, and challenges presented by the forging of a hyphenated identity.
- College students with learning disability and attention-deficit disorder.
- Marital discord.
- Legal problems leading to placement on probationary requirements, as well as evaluations to assist the courts with a variety of legal charges.

The experience of the Naim Foundation is that, unlike other ethnic groups, Arabs were more likely to seek help for couple problems than for family problems. Although families have had to be “lured” into treatment, couples presented a steady stream of patients. This is likely due to the motivation to keep a marriage going, inasmuch as divorce is frowned upon and keeping the family intact is paramount.

Problems presented by couples are as follows:

- Emotional or physical abuse by the spouse, most often the husband.
- Cross-cultural marriages impacted by religious differences.
- Within-culture differences between Arab Americans and Arabs and between Arab Americans from different Arab countries.
- Problems in dealing with a partner with mental illness.
- Premarital counseling.

In contrast to couple therapy, family therapy with Arabs can be more challenging because of their fear of exposing the shaming behavior of family members, along with the possible undermining of the authority of the father. However, the situation is ameliorated by most Arabs' attitude toward a therapist whom they respect as knowing more than they do and often approaching the therapeutic intervention as a learning experience.

The following cases illustrate the complexity of working with Arab American families whose adherence to societal norms at times supersedes the welfare of the individual in the family.
The therapist received a call from a young man who wished to refer his brother, Kader, to therapy. Kader's family is a well-known Israeli Arab family in the community, described as conservative with traditional expectations of their children. The men were expected to achieve academically and marry women chosen by the parents. All the children were born in the United States, but spoke Arabic fluently and remained in close contact with the country of origin. Kader had fulfilled one of his obligations by becoming a physician. However, unlike his siblings, he "failed" his family by not complying with their wishes to accept the chosen bride. Although he was able to complete a preliminary part of this obligation, he was unable to go through with the latter part of it. Having obliged his parents by marrying in the country of origin and fulfilling other associated rituals, upon return to the United States he adamantly refused to have his bride come to live with him. Kader was further described as having had emotional problems as a child and having always been in conflict with his father. Kader had been the one to challenge the authority of his father, who was a strict disciplinarian. Kader had disciplinary problems in school as well. None of these issues were ever discussed in a mental health context prior to Kader's reaching adulthood. There was tension between Kader and his father, who perceived him as a failure, thus exacerbating his problems further. The mother, an illiterate woman, realized that her son's problems were serious. As she was the only member of the family with this awareness, she had no choice but to become his protector. Later, as Kader's emotional problems began to manifest themselves in a variety of ways, such as in his isolation from others, he became more paranoid and conservative in his religious practices and beliefs. His siblings urged him to seek help, but he refused. Based on the description given by his brother, the hypothesis was that Kader might be suffering from depression with paranoid features. The therapist recommended that his brother, as well as his parents, accompany Kader, explaining that his likelihood of coming would be highly enhanced if the whole family came. The challenges presented were typical of those presented by other Arab American family members. A child is seen to have problems, which are either denied or ignored for fear of revealing a family secret. Eventually, the problem child becomes an adult and a particular situation reveals the secret of the family. In this case the parents were forced to deal with their son's emotional problems as they became exposed to the community at large because of the marriage. The secret in this family was having a son with a mental illness or an emotional disorder that had needed attention during childhood. The emotional disturbance was seen as disobedience to the authority of the father and treated accordingly. The mother's intuitive understanding of the vulnerability of her son was interpreted as spoiling him and never given the weight it deserved because of her secondary role in this particular family.

Anticipating the first session to be the only visit the family would be making, the therapist scheduled the session accordingly. First complimenting the father on his willingness to come to therapy, and acknowledging it as a sign of his caring for his son, attended to Arab family dynamics and cultural values. The mother was given credit for her supporting role within the constraints of these particular family dynamics. The son was given a great deal of support by the therapist's congratulating him on his accomplishments. There followed a description of what other Arab immigrant families experience in their struggle to find a balance between the values of two cultures. The session ended with concrete advice given to each member of the family to help them improve their communication and interaction, as follows:

- The father was asked to accept the realities of Kader's emotional status and to also appreciate how much his son had been able to accomplish despite his problems. He was also told that his son's accomplishments were in part due to (the father's) input. This reassured the father of his role as the authority figure and prepared the way to improve his relationship with the "failing" son.
• The mother was told about her very significant role in protecting her son, as that may have given him the inner strength to go on to earn a degree despite his depression.
• The therapist focused on Kader mostly by validating his difficult position, and his guilt about having disappointed his parents was alleviated by the therapist pointing out that he had done exceptionally well under his specific circumstances, by educating the whole family about depression.

A 16-year-old Jordanian American girl, Sana, was referred by Child Protective Services for therapy after running away from her home. She was the younger of two sisters who were born in Jordan. The father was a successful businessman who had divorced the mother and remarried when he immigrated to the United States. The two daughters had never met their mother, nor were they ever given much information about her. The sisters, who were 1 year apart, were very close. Sana described her father as a caring man, who was American in “certain ways” but remained Arab in others. Although Sana could dress like any other teenager in her school, she was not allowed to date. The stepmother was described as caring and basically close to both of the girls. Sana, who described her home situation as “confusing,” especially when it came to boys, began acting out, initially by smoking marijuana and, eventually, sexually. In contrast to Sana, the older sister, who was academically successful, did not exhibit similar behavioral problems. She had initially smoked marijuana with Sana and had sneaked out of the house with her. Their father became aware of the problems when Sana’s academic performance began to deteriorate. When called for a conference with the school, he discovered that Sana had missed school on many occasions and had also forged her father’s signature.

Untraditional approaches in dealing with Sana and the family included the therapist’s paying a visit to the family’s home, with the knowledge that hospitality is of utmost importance and a visit by a therapist would not be rejected. Initially, the father was reluctant to participate in family therapy, especially when Sana was unwilling to return home, because he insisted on maintaining strict rules and regulations about outings. Family therapy was adapted to meet the needs of this particular situation by seeing Sana individually while continuing to meet with the rest of the family at home. The therapeutic intervention included the following:

• Sana was helped to understand her father’s position in the community, his cultural constraints—that is, his need to “save face,” meaning to redeem his reputation before his own family and friends. The father’s contradictory positions on various issues, such as ways of dressing and sexuality, were explained to Sana within the context of her father’s own challenges in bringing up his children in a milieu that was totally different from that in which he was brought up.
• Sana was taught how to take better care of herself and was engaged in trying to understand her possible reasons for acting out. She was able to look at her anger about her mother’s abandonment, and at her father for leaving her mother.
• The father was given advice as to what might be more effective in working with Sana. The discrepancy in the two daughters’ behavior was explained as possibly resulting from early attachment issues that may have affected the two daughters differently. Sana, the younger of the two, may have been more affected by the separation from her biological mother and, consequently, had more anger at her father.
• The father was advised to challenge his traditional inclination to remain angry with his daughter for having left the home and having “shamed” the family. This might take a while, but he was advised to keep the “door open” to reconciling by talking to Sana when she called the house and to eventually bring himself to visit with her. He was also told not to prevent the sister from keeping in touch with Sana.
Treatment ended with Sana’s acting out behavior having subsided significantly, the father’s position improved by agreeing to talk to Sana on the telephone, and options remaining open to accept future sessions for family therapy.

Treatment can be enhanced if the therapist relinquishes traditional approaches, such as the most formalized aspects of conducting psychotherapy:

- To facilitate treatment, the therapist should use didactic and structured therapies, rather than in-depth or insight therapy, which is contraindicated.
- In the event that family members refuse to come for therapy, calling them personally and inviting them might work. This fits with the Arab response to those who make an effort, in contrast to the negative reaction to formalized relationships with caretakers.
- A family’s giving of gifts and invitations to their home is a common experience, done as a gesture of appreciation. A therapist’s refusal may be interpreted as an insult.
- The hierarchical and patriarchal nature of the family should be kept in mind while helping the parents work through new norms for the family. In dealing with Arab families, the definition of family should be expanded to include any other persons designated by them. As in the cases described earlier, therapeutic intervention should always take into account the authoritarian position of the father while integrating the protective role of the mother in the process.
- In dealing with taboo issues such as homosexuality or sexual problems, the therapist has to consider the traumatic implications of these problems in the family within the community. The treatment approach in dealing with Suhail and Abdallah involved exploring with them strategies for dealing with their families’ views about homosexuality, and their families’ response to such a choice. In Suhail’s situation, even with the therapist’s support, he was unable to tell his family.
- Scheduling and timing should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the expectations and needs of this population, as was done with Kader’s family.
- There should be openness to providing family therapy even when family members cannot all be in one physical space, as was the case with Sana’s family.

CONCLUSION

Like other minorities or culturally diverse groups, Arabs are newcomers to the benefits of psychotherapy. Seeking psychotherapy is not an instinctual behavior; it is a learned behavior. The benefit of psychotherapy or psychological intervention as we see it today is the outcome of at least a half century of ongoing research and education in this country. Our sensitivities to incorporating other cultural norms into the delivery of services are even more recent. Ensuring the delivery of optimal services to non-Western people calls for educating both the service providers and those who receive the services. To provide the appropriate services, the emphasis should be on education. The experience to date supports the impression that when Arab families, like others, become aware of the benefits of psychotherapy as an essential tool in achieving a better or less stressful life, they are good candidates for psychotherapy. Like other non-Western populations, Arabs can benefit from changes in the approach used in the delivery of service, changes that incorporate
some of the expectations of Arabs in seeking a therapist. Given the pervasive anti-Arab sentiment in the United States today, therapists are urged to examine their own attitudes and biases before treating Arab clients. To familiarize themselves with this population, Western-educated therapists are encouraged to seek various resources to enhance their understanding of Arabs. In addition to self-educating, it is suggested that direct consultation with those who are familiar with this population be initiated.

REFERENCES
