"I'm Stamped a Liar on My Heart": Challenges of Qualitative Research on Arab and Arab-American Drug User Populations

Amny M. Shuraydi

1Texas A&M University-Commerce

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ABSTRACT
In the social sciences, Arabs and Arab-Americans are an understudied population. While there are numerous contributing factors as to why this disparity in the literature exists, one of the main contributing factors when studying Arab populations is that of access. In quantitative data, those of Arab descent are often misclassified or grouped into broader categories such as “White,” “Middle-Eastern,” or “Muslim.” This can lead to data that either seem limiting or misleading. In qualitative research, cultural factors such as shame, stigma, fear of judgment, and a culture of honor can lead to blocked access to offender populations. This article will discuss some of the challenges with gaining access that are specific to ethnically Arab populations, particularly with drug users.

Introduction
Arab and Arab-American populations are an understudied population in the United States for a variety of reasons, especially when it comes to substance abuse. First and foremost, those of Arab descent are often difficult to classify. Racially, they are grouped with other Middle Easterners under the category of Caucasian, despite the vastness of the regions that comprise the Western-titled “Middle East.” Secondly, a lack of cultural understanding by non-Arab researchers and mental health workers in the U.S. can create an atmosphere that may appear to lack sensitivity to the needs of the population. Furthermore, Arab culture is a multifaceted one, comprised of, but not limited to, shame, honor, and fear of stigma. These realities can all create challenges when trying to gain access to research Arab populations.

Background and literature
Classification of Arabs
Arabs and Arab-Americans, on the U.S. census, have long been classified under the category of Caucasian. This classification, originally, was rooted in prejudice at the time that Arabs initially began to immigrate to the country. The debate of whether they were “white” or “yellow” was further exacerbated by the case of George Shishim, a California police officer, in 1909. Shishim had placed an individual under arrest, but his capacity to arrest the man and to testify in court was challenged because he was viewed as incapable of becoming an American citizen due to his then-classified race as Chinese-Mongolian, having hailed from the Fertile Crescent region of the Arab World.
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This resulted in a trial that led to Shishim claiming, “If I am a Mongolian, then so was Jesus, because we came from the same land” (Arab American Historical Foundation, 2011). In response, the California court set a precedent that classified Arabs as part of the white race, thus making them able to apply for citizenship. Although this was a “win” at the time, the classification of Arabs as legally “white” while the discrimination against them in greater society remained intact has created issues over the years.

This categorization as Caucasian is problematic for a few reasons: 1) it overlooks the fact that those from Middle Eastern countries often do not share cultural or physical traits with the ethnically-European majority that comprise the Caucasian category, 2) it places Arabs and other Middle Easterners in a non-minority racial category on paper, while they typically do not hold the same privileges of other Caucasian groups in greater society, and 3) it homogenizes a group of people with varying features, languages, and traditions, often viewing their ethnicities as interchangeable with the Islamic religion. All of these points are discussed in Naber’s (2000) study about the paradoxes faced by Arab-Americans, in which she discusses media representations of Arab-Americans, who are often lumped with Caucasians, other Middle Eastern groups, and Muslims (Shuraydi, 2018). Her second paradox discusses the idea that Arab-Americans are viewed as “white,” as detailed in the above account about George Shishim, and “non-white,” unable to truly fit into either category. This paradox still holds, with recent accounts showing that Arab-Americans still face this inner conflict: “To Arabs, I’m an American, and to Americans, I’m an Arab” (Shuraydi, 2018).

The aspect of homogenization is important to discuss as Arabs are often viewed as being interchangeable with Muslims or other Middle Eastern groups. This is problematic as most of the world’s Muslims do not reside in the Arab World, but rather in South Asia (Desilver and Masci, 2017). Equating these terms can result in the homogenization, stereotyping, and discrimination discussed in Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), one of the most referenced works on Western views of the East. Said (1999) himself even discusses issues relevant to the paradoxes discussed in the previous paragraph (Naber, 2000), finding himself somewhere in the middle of “East” and “West” in his aptly titled autobiography, Out of Place. These issues are very much about how Arabs are classified and viewed in the United States and have stood the test of time.

In early 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau declared that it would not be including the heavily called for “MENA” (Middle East and North Africa) racial category to the 2020
census (Wang, 2018). This category, distinct from the “White” category, was earlier reported by the bureau as being an “optimal” way to collect data from regions in the Middle East (Mathews et al., 2017). The report indicated that a dedicated MENA category, in tandem with a few other changes, “supported the research objectives of increasing reporting within standard OMB (Office of Management and Budget) categories, decreasing item nonresponse, improving accuracy and reliability, and achieving similar or higher levels of detailed reporting for all major groups.” Furthermore, it called for differentiation between groups within the category, in such as Israelis and Kurds, “as an example to help represent the broad diversity of the Middle Eastern and North African population ... to inform current discussions that are taking place with OMB and the public ...” (Mathews et al., 2017). The lack of a MENA category, alongside that of specific categories for Hispanics, has led to “Some Other Race” becoming the third largest racial group in the country (Humes et al., 2011; Rios et al., 2014; Compton et al., 2012, as cited in Mathews et al., 2017). Considering that they addressed these issues in their 2017 report, the decision not to include the category in any capacity on the next census is contradictory and could result in a continuation of the challenges of research on Arab-Americans.

**Past literature on Arab culture and stigma**

Understanding the nuances of Arab culture and traditions is necessary for understanding the population. Although the literature on Arab populations is plentiful, criminological studies tend to be limited in sample size and scope, often due to the issue of access. Many discussions of Arab criminality focus on domestic violence and honor crimes or terrorism. Even then, the research is frequently limited to using official records, news reports, or online posts—very few articles have data directly addressing or utilizing Arab populations.⁴

When discussing Arab culture, it is important to understand the reverence that the question, “اﻟﻨﺎس ﻋﻘﻮﻟﻮا؟” (What will people say?) holds in Arab families. This question represents the values of family honor, individual reputation, and shame that guide the behavior of many Arabs and Arab-Americans. As Naffsinger (1994) put it, “saving face” is a major part of Arab culture, and admittance of imperfections is rare and usually avoided (Shuraydi, 2018). Demanding “conformity to the group without questioning” (Shuraydi, 1981, p. 16), the culture stigmatizes people who stray from the norms. This can lead to denial of serious issues not only in individual families but in the greater Arab community. Recently, anecdotal stories about young Arab men who have died of drug overdoses that were stated publicly as undiagnosed heart problems or similar
ailments have surfaced. “Deaths became reported by family and community members as heart attacks or as other natural causes. No one wanted to admit the actual cause” (The Establishment, 2018). These issues are further brought to light in other news articles published in metro-Detroit, home to one of the most concentrated Arab communities in the U.S., that discuss the importance of awareness and seeking help for addiction (Dingell, 2018; Hijazi, 2016; Hunter, 2016; Robbins, 2016; The Establishment, 2018).

In an article written by The Establishment, issues unique to Arab-Americans affected by the opioid epidemic are discussed:

Both professionals and community members note the relative silence their issues are met with in mainstream America, and how that silence is internalized by Arab-Americans, discouraging them further from seeking help (The Establishment, 2018).

The article, although journalistic and not academic, highlights the real issues that Arab mental health and cultural studies have discussed prior (Abudabbeh and Aseel, 1999; Soheilian and Inman, 2009; Jackson and Nasser-McMillan, 2006; Kira et al., 2015; Dardas and Simmons, 2015). “Silence and denial hamper any discussion around addiction” (The Establishment, 2018). This ideology is in line with the ideas of “saving face” (Naffsinger, 1994) and conforming to the culture (Shuraydi, 1981). Fears that people will judge the individual or his or her loved ones can outweigh the willingness to seek treatment. These fears of stigmatization are even evidenced in the articles (The Establishment, 2018; Hunter, 2016) by professionals who are encouraging seeking addiction treatment by discussing their own family experiences with addiction but still refusing to state which family members were affected, to avoid the fact that they may “potentially embarrass their family” (Hunter, 2016). Family refusal to acknowledge the causes of drug-related deaths can lead to the issue of addiction growing in Arab communities as it goes unaddressed. While substance abuse programs for Arabs have increased (Dingell, 2018; Hijazi, 2016), the stigma and shame surrounding the issues may prevent people from seeking treatment.

The shame surrounding addiction in Arab communities is also evident in discussions surrounding mental health. Abudabbeh and Aseel (1999) discussed the stigma that mental illness holds in Arab culture, especially concerns regarding family honor. Hakim-Larson and colleagues (2007) further discuss the issues surrounding stigma and honor in Arab families, suggesting that counselors need to educate themselves on the culture in order to provide the best treatment for patients. These studies are
important because the more perceived the stigma, the less likely Arabs and Arab-Americans were to seek out treatment or counseling (Soheilian and Inman, 2009). Regarding qualitative research, perceived stigma and fear of being labeled in a way that may bring shame upon one’s family may be deterring factors for potential participants.

Despite the stigma attached to drug use in the Arab World, documented use of drugs ranges back decades. In the 1950s and 1960s, the National Center for Social and Criminological Research in Cairo (Nahas, 1985) conducted studies on the use of hash consumption, surveying close to 2,000 people in Egypt, most of whom were inmates. The findings showed that those who did not use drugs thought drug users to be more likely to have criminal tendencies, yet non-user inmates were likely to have had prior records as compared to users (Soueif et al., 1977). Users, however, were more likely to react to stressful situations in “morally unsound” ways and were more likely to have shifts in mood due to withdrawal effects (Shuraydi, 2018). The Community Epidemiology Work Group (2002) found that more recent use of drugs in Egypt varied by socioeconomic status and that most addicts either did not typically respond to or seek out treatment, but were highly educated. Okasha (1985) also found that drug use was not uncommon in universities (Shuraydi, 2018).

Research by Bilal and colleagues (1990) found that students in Kuwait mostly viewed drug misuse as a deviant act that was defiant of Islam. In Palestine, a small number of high school students admitted to using drugs of some kind (cited in Community Epidemiology Work Group, 2002), but most viewed heroin negatively. Drugs were also identified as a major social problem in the United Arab Emirates (Alomosh, 2008). In a study in the early 1990s, Younis and Saad (1995) used patient files from the psychiatric ward of Al-Ain district hospital in the UAE to study 747 patients. They found that 10% were drug users, 34% of whom were repeated admissions. Drug users in the region at this time were mostly multi-drug using uneducated adult males under the age of 35. Heroin was popular with younger users, while alcohol as a standalone was more common among those over 25 (Younis and Saad, 1995; Shuraydi, 2018). In Jordan, research from the last decade has indicated that a genetic link may exist for addicts of this ethnic group (Al-Eitan et al., 2012). These studies show that despite the stigma regarding drug use in Arab culture, drug use is still prevalent, and has been for decades.

The study by Younis and Saad (1995) further addresses stigma in the Arab culture, stating the females are not included in the study not because they do not use drugs or
offend, but rather because drug use among them would be very secretive due to the cultural views regarding women, which will be addressed later in this article. The authors also state that their research is likely not representative of the widespread issue, due to stigma and “intolerant” attitudes about drug use (Shuraydi, 2018). This fear of stigmatization due to the culture not only leads to an under-representation of Arab patients overseas but also in the United States. Studies in Michigan have found that Arab patients are underrepresented in abuse treatment centers as compared to other ethnic groups, not because they need less treatment but because they are less likely to seek it (Arfken et al., 2008). The reasons why Arab-Americans feel less comfortable seeking treatment vary. Although cultural reasons may exist, as discussed early in this paper, a lack of sensitivity to cultural differences and language barriers in treatment centers can also deter those of Arab descent from getting help (Arfken, 2009a).

There are very few qualitative studies that discuss Arab and Arab-American drug use, and those that do typically have small sample sizes. Most of these studies focus on men, as it is even more difficult to gain access to females. Abudabbeh (2005) has one of the few available data samples of an Arab female’s drug use patterns, with a case study about Jordanian-American Sana, a teenager who uses marijuana and acts out sexually. Shuraydi (1981) explains:

... an area where the double standard of morality with respect to the sexes dominates Arab culture. That is, if males date and “have fun,” their behavior can be tolerated, if not encouraged; but females engaging in such activities must be sanctioned and their social reputation is usually smeared.

The sample size of one in Abudabbeh’s (2005) study is indicative of the level of fear that females face when it comes to speaking out and seeking treatment for mental health or addiction. Sana is a rebellious person who strays from the norms of the culture. However, most women of Arab descent will still feel afraid or ashamed when it comes to being open about any activities they participate in that may bring shame upon their reputation (i.e., dating, drug use, etc.) (The Establishment, 2018; Younis and Saad, 1995).

**Prior qualitative research on drug use**

Numerous studies have been conducted about drug users, dealers, and traffickers within a broad range of ethnic groups in the U.S. and elsewhere (Adler and Adler, 1983; Goode, 1970; Blum et al., 1972; Langer, 1977; Leib and Olson, 1976; Carey,
1968; Atkyns and Hanneman, 1974; Tunnel, 1993; Williams, 1991; Bourgois, 1995; Zaitch, 2002; Anderson, 2000; Jacobs, 1993, 1996, 1998; Mohamed and Fritzvold, 2010; Sandberg, 2010; Lalander, 2008). Many of these studies discussed white male offenders and took place all over the United States and the world. However, many also focused on minority populations as well (Bourgois 1995; Zaitch, 2002; Anderson, 2000; Jacobs, 1993, 1996, 1998; Williams, 1991; Lalander, 2008; Sandberg, 2010). Most of these studies use snowball sampling, as does my research on Arabs and Arab-Americans (Shuraydi, 2018). Due to the nature of the subject matter, snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981) is one of the more convenient ways to not only meet new participants but allows researchers to have a preceding aura of trust with what would otherwise be skeptical strangers. Most of these studies used what is known in qualitative research as “a gatekeeper,” someone used for gaining access and establishing trust with a larger participant group. Gatekeepers allow researchers to understand what to expect out of a participant group and how to approach them, and provide a layer of credibility with participants that might not exist otherwise. They are in a position to help provide key access and connections for researchers, but can also be the reason that certain researchers lose access (Okumus, Altinay, and Roper, 2006).

Sample sizes of past qualitative research on minority drug users and dealers have tended to vary in range, from as low as one (Sandberg, 2010) to as high as 50 (Mohamed and Fritzvold, 2010). Sandberg’s (2010) study focuses on a Muslim, Norwegian drug dealer. Although his ethnicity is not specified, using this study as a tool for learning more about how to access Arab populations is helpful because many Arabs are also Muslims, and have cultural traits that are relevant to the religion. In this study, the participant expressed fears about his “judgment day” due to his lifestyle not following the teachings of Islam (Sandberg, 2010). Other research using Muslim samples has also taken place in the field.

Research on Muslim populations has increased since the attacks on September 11, 2001, as the population has become one of growing interest, especially regarding terrorism research. However, research on Muslim drug use also exists and can provide a better understanding of the culture that most Muslims share. It is important to note that Muslims hail from a variety of countries and backgrounds, sharing traditions unique to Muslims, but also maintaining differences in how they practice the religion that is tied in with their ethnic backgrounds. For instance, the Westernized atmosphere in a country like Lebanon might be shocking to someone from the Arabian Peninsula or South Asia (Shuraydi, 2018). Different people choose to practice the religion in different ways; some may believe that handshakes between men and women are taboo,
while others may view them as a normal part of daily professional interactions (Hammad et al., 1999).

Of the studies on Islamic populations, multiple discuss the topic of acculturation to new (Western) communities and the effect it may have on Arab drug use. Studies in the 2000s indicated that Muslims were less likely to partake in risk-taking behaviors than non-Muslims (Islam and Johnson, 2003; Bradby and Williams, 2006; Bradby, 2007). However, there has been a shift in the last few years that indicates that this no longer holds for Muslims who have adapted to new, primarily non-Muslim regions. Tirmazi and colleagues (2015) found that although participants in their study agreed that marijuana use was “forbidden” by Islam, many of them began using it in late adolescence in order to socialize and relax. This acculturation is depicted in Muslims in Spain as well (Sordo et al., 2015), as well as in Arabs, in whom acculturation has been linked with higher rates of polysubstance abuse (Arfken, 2009b). This is in line with Gfroerer and Tan’s (2003) findings regarding Latino and Asian American samples.

**Challenges specific to Arab populations**

Now that a general background of cultural issues and past research has been provided, the focus of this article can shift to specifically addressing some of the issues that affect research on Arab populations specifically. Although the issue of gaining access to a group of interest is one of the greatest challenges that most field researchers face, gaining access to Arab populations who are willing to be open about illicit or deviant behaviors can be even more challenging. While most drug user and dealer groups may seem distrustful by nature due to a mix of factors, such as the composition of the drugs they are on, fear of police or incarceration, and fear of rival gangs, those of Arab descent may tend to worry more about the question asked earlier in this paper, “What will people say?” The offending patterns of Arab-American drug dealers and users tend to vary, at least slightly, from those of other groups.

Arab populations are not unique in terms of offending. Most past research on drug users and dealers has shown some overlap between articles, despite many of the samples varying in age, location, ethnicity, and social class. By nature, drug users may not always be the most dependable people. This varies based on the type of drugs that they use, the frequency of use, and the reasons for use. Many dealers also deal to supplement their own use (Mohamed and Fritsvold, 2010; Shuraydi, 2018), and therefore, also have the traits of users as well. Arab drug users and dealers do not fall outside of this realm. All three of the dealers in my data on Arab and Arab-American drug use and dealing (Shuraydi, 2018) fit into similar categories as those Mohamed
and Fritzvold (2010) discuss. “Closed-market dealing” was used most of the time, in which case drugs were only sold to close friends and acquaintances. This was also true about buying a good portion of the time—drugs were typically only bought through friends or friends of friends. All of them dealt to support their own use or because it was “easy” (Shuraydi, 2018). Many of the participants admitted to polysubstance abuse, which for those not raised in the U.S., came after they had been acculturated to their new living situation. This is in line with research on Muslims, Latinos, Arabs, and Asians (Tirmazi et al., 2015; Sordo et al., 2015; Arfken, 2009b; and Gfroerer and Tan’s, 2003).

**Arab identity**

Despite these and other similarities to other drug using and dealing populations, there are also quite a few differences in the ways that Arabs use and deal, and their reasons for doing so. Many of these differences are rooted in the discussion of cultural stigma mentioned earlier in this paper. Although those choosing to deal or use drugs may have strayed from cultural norms, their willingness to admit this openly to other community members tends to be still quite low. Research has shown that Arabs vary descriptions of themselves based on the audience the message is being delivered to (Ajrouch and Jamal, 2007; Saskia, 2007). In my sample, which was collected through qualitative interviewing and used grounded theory analysis, whether participants viewed themselves as Arab, American, or both was fairly mixed. Still, most said that they saw themselves as having Arab “morals” with American behaviors and attitudes. They viewed their drug-related behaviors as part of their acculturation and their values in knowing right from wrong as their Arab traditions. Even those born and raised in the U.S. felt that they were more Arab when it came to peer associations. One participant described himself as “white as fuck,” having been raised in the South. However, he felt more Arab than American because, “The relationship between Arabs is definitely more different than a relationship between like, Americans ... the bond is not gonna be the same as if you were friends with like, another Arab.”

This feeling of duality is expressed by WEB DuBois regarding African Americans (DuBois, 1903), and by Naber (2000), Said (1999), and other scholars regarding Arabs. Said (1999) describes himself as feeling uncomfortable even with his own name, which was a mix of Arabic and English. $^5$ He explains, “for years, depending on my exact circumstances, I would rush past “Edward” and emphasize “Said;” at other times I would do the reverse, or connect these two to each other so quickly that neither would be clear.” This exemplifies the twoness that Arabs feel in Western countries, described
by Naber (2000), Ajrouch and Jamal (2007), and Saskia (2007). Throughout his book, Said (1999) uses quotation marks around the name “Edward.” This confusion about which culture one truly belongs to is an important aspect of Arab-American culture and necessary to understand when researching these populations.

**Stigma, shame, and conformity**

Keisler and Keisler (1969) highlight the differences between shaming and guilting cultures. Arab culture, in this regard, would be a shaming culture (Shuraydi, 1981). The culture is collectivistic and focuses on groups more than individuals, using shame to elicit desired behavioral outcomes. This is in stark contrast to American culture, which instead uses guilt. The participants in my sample viewed themselves as Arab in regard to their ethics; in their eyes, the shaming culture was more ethical, while the guilting (American) culture was more laidback. A few participants said that they could adapt to fit into either culture when necessary (Shuraydi, 2018). This represents the cultural discussion by Shuraydi (1981), which states that Arabs will often conform to avoid being seen as rude. It also portrays what Ajrouch and Jamal (2007) and Saskia (2007) discuss regarding how Arabs portray themselves to different audiences.

Shuraydi (1981) explains that:

> Conformity to the expectations of significant or related others deeply penetrates the structure of Arab culture to the extent of invading the individual’s privacy in many important domains (cited in Shuraydi, 2018).

This “invasion of privacy” is something that impacts how those of Arab descent choose to behave when away from family members and Arab communities. When explaining why he never uses or deals drug when visiting family in the Middle East, my study’s gatekeeper stated:

> … People here don’t talk as much as overseas. If one person deals overseas, everybody’s gonna know who he is. Everybody and everybody’s family, because Arabs love to talk. They love to gossip. (Previously unpublished quote)

According to Shuraydi (1981), “Obedience to authority, although ideally very desirable, is met with discontentment and challenge in actual situations, particularly among the young and educated strata of society.” Another participant in the study, whose quote is used as the title of this study, claimed:

> One thing that I’ve seen is repetitive is … the strictness of parents really backfiring on them … I’m the biggest case of the biggest backfire … The pressure
they put on you like, umm, that I’m growing up shit (sic), and the no talking to girls like, umm, you know, you grow up, like, ok, you deal with it, you deal with it, you deal with it, you deal with it, then all of the sudden, you get a car and then you just ... you take off, you know? (Shuraydi, 2018)

Multiple participants described this rebellion. Shuraydi (1981) describes the coping mechanisms used by Arabs to deal with these issues as “the ability to suppress one’s feelings in order to avoid discourtesy to others, particularly in situations where the demands of other people run counter to one’s values, beliefs, or true feelings.”

This explanation of coping by Shuraydi (1981) is important when it comes to understanding how Arab study participants may rationalize or hide their behaviors. For example, the previous quote from one of my study participants explained that he is in an almost constant mode of rebellion. However, this rebellion is not always expressed in an outward way that his parents are made aware of. He claims, “I’m stamped a liar on my heart,” describing the levels he goes to hide his non-conformity to the culture and the Islamic religion (Shuraydi, 2018). Another participant stated, “I’d rather get beaten every single day. For like a year,” rather than to have his parents find out about his drug use. Most of the ten participants said that, if given a choice, they would rather face legal charges than the possibility of disappointing their parents. This fear of informal sanctions makes access to Arab offender populations more difficult, as the increased concerns of being a target of gossip can create a sense of distrust toward people who are not in their close friend groups (and also partaking in these behaviors).

**Establishing trust**

Gaining access to Arab populations requires establishing trust and credibility and expressing an understanding of cultural norms and stigmas while maintaining a non-judgmental persona. Although simple on paper, it is quite difficult to meet that first criterion. Many Arabs, as described above, will portray a positive image that they deem the person they are interacting with will approve of (Shuraydi, 1981). Part of this image, especially around members of the Arab community, is rooted in family honor and the desire to “save face” (Naffsinger, 1994). Therefore, not only is it difficult to earn this population’s trust but also to distinguish when that trust has been earned, as a researcher may not know a participant’s true personality until this trust has been established. With that being said, distinguishing individuals who may have behaviors to disclose is a challenge within itself. Identifying people who fit the criteria you are attempting to study is difficult, and finding people who are willing to speak openly is even harder.
The key to establishing trust with Arab populations is patience. It took me over a year to secure a gatekeeper, who already happened to be a close friend. It took another year to be able to secure interviews with others who were willing to speak openly and answer questions about their behaviors. Even then, it took close to two more years to schedule interviews with certain people who would agree to meet and then changed their minds. Of dozens of people approached by the gatekeeper, other friends, and me, 15 agreed to do interviews, and only 12 followed through, with 10 providing reliable data. More often than not, mentioning the study would be met with unease, awkward silence and distancing, and sometimes even laughter at the fact that I even thought it was possible to collect data on the subject. The gatekeeper was a trusted friend and dealer to many of the people who refused to participate or even discuss the matter. Thus, having an “in” is not always enough when studying Arab populations. At one point, I tried to expand the sample size by reaching out to friends who I was aware had close friends who either used or had used drugs at some point; the idea was promptly shut down by the potential participants. Trust, in these populations, can take years to earn and is not always guaranteed through mutual friends or acquaintance. Often, paranoia and fear outweigh social connections.

**Maintaining access**

Once trust is established, maintaining access to the population is another hurdle. Although gaining access is the hardest part of the process, researchers must carry themselves in a very specific way when interacting with participants and potential future participants. It is also important to decipher what type of persona the researcher will portray to participants. Appearing too laidback can seem suspicious, and seeming too professional or formal can be off-putting. Portraying oneself as an American who has not worked with Arabs prior may make it seem like the researcher does not understand the culture and may not be worth the participants’ time, or worse, can make the population feel tokenized. However, appearing to be an Arab who conforms to cultural ideals can also lead to blocked access, as participants may be embarrassed to admit to unsavory behaviors due to fear of being judged or losing face.

Having a cultural understanding, without seeming overly committed to every cultural norm, is usually the best way to maintain trust and openness from participants. Being conscious of facial expressions, responses, and tone of voice are all important factors here. Although these factors are pertinent to most field research, it is especially important with Arab populations, as even the slightest feeling of stigmatization can lead to losing access to the entire sample.
**Understanding potential trauma unique to the population**

When studying Arabs and Arab-Americans, one of the most pertinent issues to keep in mind is that many of the participants are either refugees or are the children of refugees. If they do not fit into either category, then there remains the possibility that they have witnessed some form of war in their lifetime, depending on their ethnic origins and where they have resided. These issues are not typically a concern with non-veteran, American participants, but need to be addressed prior to working with Arab populations. In the last three decades, there have been conflicts in Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian territories, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Bahrain, and Egypt, many of which have ongoing turmoil in their regions. Being cognizant of this is important when approaching Arab populations and also, when analyzing data, which may be influenced by trauma.

Understanding that many Arabs came to the West to avoid persecution or war, or for better opportunities, can guide researchers to be cautious and to approach these populations with a more realistic, and potentially less ethnocentric, view. According to Hakim-Larson et al. (2007):

> Issues related to discrimination, degree of acculturation, and acculturative stress are likely to emerge, as well as the more familiar therapeutic issues involving the psychosocial development of individuals and routine family adjustments and stresses.

Mental health issues and substance abuse can go hand in hand, as people often self-medicate in order to cope. The trauma of facing discrimination and potentially witnessing crimes against humanity can lead to substance abuse if professional treatment is not sought out. Researchers should be aware of the way they carry themselves to avoid unintentionally marginalizing a population that already fears stigma and shame.

**Suggestions for future research on Arab and Arab-American populations**

There are quite a few challenges when it comes to gaining, and maintaining, access to Arab Populations. However, many of these are insignificant when compared to the quality of data that can be obtained from taking the time to overcome these issues. Familiarity with and sensitivity to the culture and patience can go a long way when it comes to working with offenders of Arab descent.
Classifying Arabs

One of the major points of focus in this paper, and a topic that should be addressed before approaching Arab study participants, is that of how to classify Arabs properly. Misclassification can lead to a lack of understanding of specifically Arab populations. Using Arabs interchangeably with Middle Easterners and Muslims, or classifying them as Caucasian without providing a subcategory for specification, can result in overlooking potential correlates in data sets. When interviewing Arabs, misclassifying them or homogenizing them is not only alienating to the participants but will result in flawed analyses. It is important to differentiate those who identify as being a descendant from an Arab League country, versus those who happen to be from a similar or nearby region.

Advanced research will take the time not only to correctly distinguish Arabs and Arab-Americans from Middle Eastern, Muslim, and Caucasian populations but also to differentiate between Arabs of different regions and locations. Although most Arabs share similarities in language, religion, values, and other cultural facets, each country in the Arab World has its distinct traditions and norms, and each region of the Arab World has its dialect and its way of upholding Arab values. The region is comprised of 22 countries and territories and consists of nearly 300 million residents living on millions of miles of land. Keeping this fact in mind is necessary to avoid homogenizing the population.

Keeping in mind the nuances discussed earlier in this article, in the section about Arab identity, researchers should work to understand how participants view and carry themselves. Understanding that self-identification and behavior in these participants can change depending on the audience (Ajrouch and Jamal, 2007; Saskia, 2007; Said, 1999) should lead researchers to assess how their presence may impact that validity of their data. Researchers must carry themselves in a way that will not lead participants to behave differently than they would in private settings. Developing research questions that inquire about identity, level of acculturation, and family background can help to shape a fuller image of each participant, the accuracy of his or her responses, and the needs of the sample as a whole. This will also provide more solid analyses that can be used to make effective policy and treatment suggestions.

Overcoming stigma and shame

Another important feature of this paper is the discussion regarding stigmatization and shame in Arab societies, and the issue of saving face and maintaining honor.
(Naftsi, 1994; Shuraydi, 1981). Reputation is one of the most important facets of Arab culture, and individuals’ reputations directly affect family honor. It is necessary to understand just how significant these factors are to Arab culture because they have an impact on participants’ willingness not only to seek mental health treatment but to partake in criminological research as well. Fear of being caught or of bringing shame upon oneself or one’s family can create a very difficult time when it comes to gaining access to these populations.

Future researchers should be aware of the concerns that participants may have in speaking openly about behaviors that do not conform to the norms of Arab culture. These concerns do not necessarily have to be in regard to illegal acts, but can be connected to illness, dating, and even clothing choices. Many people are reluctant even to discuss the deviant actions of people they know for fear of bringing shame onto family members or friends, and this often leads to silence and falsified information being disseminated publicly in times of tragedy (Hunter, 2016; The Establishment, 2018). This is problematic for a multitude of reasons, but causes two main issues for researchers: First, it makes it difficult to assess the problems of the community as truthful information is often covered up, and second, it makes providing treatment for these populations tough.

Researchers need to approach Arab populations in an open-minded, friendly, and non-judgmental way. It is essential to keep in mind that the fear of informal sanctions and stigma will remain a factor throughout the study, even after trust has been established and data collection has begun. Researchers should address and work to quell participant concerns or fears. They should remain calm if participants seem to teeter back and forth between agreeing to participate and changing their minds. Being pushy or forceful may be off-putting or scare away certain participants. While part of the culture aims to please (Shuraydi, 1981), participants who are made to feel uncomfortable may become avoidant and or disappear altogether. Patience is the best way to gain, and maintain, the trust of the population, who often will come around with time once they see that others have not faced repercussions for their involvement.

The ability to access and assess this research is important because a better understanding of Arab substance abuse, offending patterns, and other deviant behaviors can provide knowledge on how to approach these populations for prevention or treatment. Abu-Rashid and colleagues (2014) found that mosque-endorsed heroin treatment programs could result in successful recoveries for Muslim populations. Being able to replicate these outcomes, and to provide practitioners with specialized
training on how to approach patients of Arab descent, could lead to higher recoveries and fewer lives lost due to stigma and fear.

**Conclusion**

There are many issues that Arabs and Arab Americans present when it comes to criminological research. They are a very difficult population to gain access to, and even then, access is difficult to maintain. However, the potential for policy impacts and a stronger awareness of the needs and correlates relevant to the population are worth the extra effort. Researchers should consider Arab identity, cultural fears of stigmatization and shame, potential past trauma, and conformity when developing studies on Arabs and Arab-Americans.

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**Contributor**

Amny M. Shuraydi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at Texas A&M University-Commerce. Her research interests are social justice, drug use, and the influence of cultural factors on crime and deviance.

**Footnotes**

1. While “Arab World” refers to countries that have chosen to identify as part of the Arab League, which consider their descendants Arab, “Middle East” is a Western
term that is Eurocentric in nature (Scharnweber, n.d.), referring to parts of North Africa, West Asia, the Arab World, and even Turkey.

2. Reports state that he was of Syrian ancestry but born in Lebanon.

3. This is despite the fact that the region has a variety of religious groups and sects.

4. It is important to note here that this article is focusing on Arab populations, who are sometimes grouped with Muslim populations. Articles on Muslims have risen, but the differentiation between ethnic groups in these Islamic populations is rare.

5. He was born in Palestine at the time of the British mandate.