

## Perceptions of Bilingual Identity among Arabic-English Speakers in North America

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### Abstract

This grounded theory study results from interviews with seven bilingual Arabic-English adults living in the United States. Participants were interviewed about their experiences as bilinguals, their perceptions of bilingualism, and their interpretations of American perceptions. Data was compared against previous research about bilingualism and relevant news stories were considered. Based on participant experiences, the overarching theme was the experiential dichotomy between men and women and how shifted identities affected home-culture relationships.

**Keywords:** Gender, identity, intercultural communication, bilingualism

## Introduction

Arabic, as a language and as a culture, is still addled with confusion in the United States. Due to post 9/11 hostilities between the US and the Middle East, Americans have exhibited a tendency to blur the delineations between Arabic and Islam and extremism and terrorism. Too often, media depictions are limited to violent fundamentalists, thereby creating a threatening stereotype in the American public consciousness.

Middle Eastern image problems are particularly salient in Western New York. Lackawanna, a suburb of Buffalo, became infamous for 'The Lackawanna Six,' a group of childhood friends arrested and sentenced as terrorists for visiting a training camp run by Osama bin-Laden before 2001 (Buffalo News, 2009). Western New York also witnessed the gruesome case and conviction of Muzzammil Hassan for beheading his wife in early 2011 (Huffington Post, 2011). Despite strong evidence of severe domestic violence throughout the course of the Hassans' marriage, popular media debated whether Aasiya's death was an 'honor killing,' an act supposedly justified by the Qu'ran to preserve family honor.

Since language and culture are so deeply interwoven, it is difficult for non-Arabs and/or non-Muslims to understand nuances and delineations. Aburumuh, Smith, & Ratcliffe explored confusion of terminology and ideology in North America reporting that many participants were unsure of popular concepts about the role of women in both Islamic and Arabic societies. What does it mean to be Arab What does it mean to be Muslim? And how is that expressed by Arab bilinguals currently in the States?

## Literature Review

Understanding how language can affect self-view is complicated because language penetrates every aspect of our consciousness. Although thoughts are abstract, the human ability to express thoughts within the parameters of a language provides shape and structure to such abstractions. Can the possibilities and limitations of a given language, then, shape possibilities for understanding the surrounding world?

Although considered strictly behavioristic in his work, Whorf (1941) explored how words elicit certain behaviors based on the ways people have come to understand their meanings. The implications are important because words give shape to abstraction and the meanings attached to utterances are internalized enough to elicit responses without further direction. This indicates that language can affect the way in which different people conceptualize the world.

Boroditsky (2001, 2009, 2010) has performed several studies about the inextricability of language and cognition, including how varying spatial descriptions of time that are culturally based (2001) and gendered descriptions of objects that vary by culture (2009). Boroditsky's work implies that the words available in our languages provide boundaries to possible descriptions, therefore limiting our perceptions, as well.

Despite the large role language plays in developing culturally bound perceptions, is it the only factor? What other factors could shed light on our preconceptions of self and of others?

Expressing identity via discourse is both intentional and inevitable; even if one attempts to adopt an accent to mask his/her true background, this masking speaks volumes about his/her intentions. This intentional construction of identity occurs via indexicality, which requires speakers to provide cues, or indexes within an interaction context to be understood by a listener (Bucholz & Hall, 2005). Indexicality depends on cultural beliefs to be understood; in other words, indexes are the cues used among members of the same speech community as indicators of symbolic competence and meaning. Indexes may very well be available to all speakers of the

same language, but they will only be interpreted as intended by members of the same speech community. Indexicality can, then, be used as a tool of exclusion or inclusion depending on a speaker's intentions. Indexicality may be used by speakers of subordinate linguistic communities to express pride of heritage or ethnicity, or as a way to distance oneself from the oppressive, dominating culture.

Indexicality is a powerful tool in identity-construction, but only if understood as intended. The interpretation relies upon the audience, and they provide another partial account. This partial 'other,' or partialness (Bucholz & Hall, 2005), is a crucial component of identity construction because it provides the catalyst for reaction: if one is seen as, for example, African-American, he/she will be treated as such, despite his/her indexes intended to be viewed as Dominican. Our partial views of ourselves will likely affect the way in which we as people assess our interactions, and alternatively, other's partial views of us will affect their assessments of those same interactions.

Indexicality and partialness help explain the dichotomy between self-view and societal view, which is important when one considers interpretations of speech and speech communities. This dichotomy provides a bit of insight into the chasm between popular conceptions of Arabs and Muslims: the indexes provided by Arabic or Islamic speakers are not understood by those of other speech communities. Interlocutors then interpret indexes and construct their own partial identities, largely based on media representations.

Despite the influx of immigrants and refugees from war-torn countries in the Middle East, few studies have examined how Arabic speaking adults living in the United States view themselves and their language. Dahbi (2004) claims that in our current post-9/11 world 'English is also referred to as a major cultural weapon that had been used by the West to impose its domination' and feels that such perceptions do not allow for genuine discourse 'as a means of cultural exchange and mutual understanding.' Due to this lack of discourse, is it reasonable to assume negativity from Arabic speakers towards English? Or, from English speakers towards Arabic? How does this affect speakers of both? Further, how do media representations of women affect speakers' views? Little research to date has explored any of these questions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This grounded theory study was performed through both constructivist and social constructivist lenses. Specifically, it is informed by the Bakhtinian (1981) view of dialogic discourse. For discourse to be truly dialogic, both or all interlocutors are changed by each other's input, even if such changes are barely perceptible. Here, the concept of dialogic discourse will support Bucholz & Hall's sociolinguistic analysis of identity construction through interaction (2005). Bucholz & Hall propose five principles to challenge traditional views of identity construction that allow for flexibility; identity is not static and is in constant, continuous flux. The five principles are (a) emergence, which states that identity is not pre-fabricated but rather an emergent product, (b) positionality, which states that interlocutors position themselves according to local social categories rather than analytical categories, (c) indexicality, which states that interlocutors provide culturally specific indexes that rely upon social ideology to be understood, (d) relationality, which states that identity is constructed in relation to other positions and societal exchanges, and (e) partialness, which states that identity is in part deliberate, but also in part determined by those who interpret it. These works both guide my inquiry and the analysis of my data: how do the five principals of identity construction affect the self-view in the context of Bakhtinian dialogical discourse?

## **Methodology**

In order to best access, understand, compare, and describe the experiences of the participants, I developed a grounded theory study. Grounded theory is well-suited for such work because it relies in part upon theoretical sampling, interviewing, and constant comparison with data and against literature (Creswell, 2007; Glaser, 2002). Despite several well-formulated criticisms of it (Creswell, 2007; Glaser, 2002), a constructivist grounded theory paradigm holds literature as an integral part of analysis and not as a separate entity entirely (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 29). It also allows for researcher subjectivity within grounded theory analysis: despite safeguards against bias, subjectivity is inherent in interpretation, and the interplay between researcher, participants, and literature constructs meaning and theory (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, p. 26).

### ***Participants***

Research participants were seven bilingual Arabic-English adults. The definition of being bilingual is hotly debated, but Baker (1996) posits that bilingualism can take many forms and by abandoning the 'monolingual' view of bilingualism we can view the use of each language independent of use of the other. Drawing from this view, bilingualism is here defined as communicative competence in two languages and participants set the parameters for determining the extent of their own proficiencies.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were largely recruited through snowball sampling via friends, colleagues, and other participants. One participant clarified that she was a native Farsi speaker and that Arabic was her third language. Both participant and researcher agreed to conduct the interview anyway because it was determined that her experiences are in-line with those of native-born Arabic speakers. This will be further discussed in the findings section.

### ***Data collection***

This study is based upon recorded interviews with participants. All interviews, except one, were conducted in person, and the exception was the telephone interview that became necessary when the participant was called out of town. As each interview was conducted, field notes were taken on word choice, hesitations, body language, or any other possible cultural cues that were then expanded into narratives to best capture the essence of each participant's experience.

The interview questions were based around personal experience with bilingualism, but they served more as guidelines than a strict format. Maintaining ease and naturalness during the interviews was very important, so participants often pursued different topics. Despite being off-topic at times, this approach provided richer descriptions rather than simply recording replies to a pre-fabricated list of questions. It also enabled us to access a wide swathe of experiences through story telling which was crucial because participant experiences varied greatly due to age, gender, ethnicity, country of origin, home language, and educational level.

Although the interviews were the primary source of data, data drawn from literature memos on relevant research were also included. Such memos helped situate the data within the context of bilingualism and gender in society.

**Data analysis**

Data analysis began during the interviews. Recording interviews allowed me to take notes as we talked, which were then expanded and used to help create categories.

After all of the interviews were conducted and transcribed, categories were finalized and data was coded accordingly. Themes were then compared for possible connections or contradictions (Seidman, 2006), which was then linked to media stories and previous research about identity. Finally, after all data was analyzed, coded, and compared, findings were interpreted to develop theory through a social constructivist lens.

**The Interviews**

The following table displays important demographics about each participant that may influence the experiences and perceptions of each. Participants represented both genders almost equally, a wide range of home countries and included a 20 year span. Such a wide span allowed for varying experiences to be explored.

**Table 1. Participants**

Name	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Educational Level	Languages Spoken	Years in US
Mohammed	M	23	Iraqi Kurd	Graduate student	Kurdish, Arabic, English	14
Anna	F	23	Caucasian American	Completed bachelor's degree	English, Arabic, German	23
Faid	M	23	Iraqi	Some college	Arabic, English	11
Aadam	M	24	Palestinian	Graduate student	Arabic, English, Hebrew	7
Ibrahim	M	38	Egyptian	Completed master's degree	Arabic, English	20
Roshni	F	40	Egyptian	Doctoral student	Arabic, English	2
Zahra	F	45	Iranian	Completed law degree	Farsi, English, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu	30

To follow are descriptions of the interviews in order to provide some insight into their experiences.

**Anna**

Although not a native-born Arabic speaker, Anna responded to an online ad for participants because she worked as an Arabic tutor and therefore felt close to fluent. She seemed interesting to interview because she would provide a voice for those who chose to learn the

language, rather than those who were born into it. Anna agreed to meet at a coffee shop near her job during her lunch hour on a Saturday.

Anna arrived about five minutes late, apologetic for her tardiness. She was very tall – it seemed over six feet – with her hair pulled back in a braid and a small silver stud in her nose. She was Caucasian with large, expressive hazel eyes lined in black eyeliner. She otherwise wore no make up. She wore a t-shirt from her company with a nametag clipped by one of her shoulders.

Anna sat and listened as the researcher explained a bit of background information about the study and she said she was pleased to be able to participate. She described her own background and educational history, leading up to her learning Arabic and traveling extensively through the Middle East. She never mentioned why, precisely, she was first attracted to Arabic culture but her passion was evident with her word choices and her inflection as she spoke.

Anna's hands mostly rested in her lap during our conversation, unless she was making a particularly impassioned statement. Her brows would knit with sympathy as she spoke of the suspicion many Arabic-speakers met in America, or as she spoke of her fiancé in Syria. It was a struggle to stay on track with the interview and Anna, too, would often stop and redirect her line of reasoning due to time constraints.

The conversation began to wind down, the discussion turned to a *Vogue* magazine article about the Syrian president, which she requested to read. She gave her address and asked that she be sent a copy of this article as well. Anna was fascinating and has chosen a challenging path in her life. By converting to Islam, she has created a distance between herself and her family, and by becoming engaged to a Syrian man, she has set herself up for suspicion.

### ***Mohammed***

While seeking to recruit participants for this study, an email was sent to a local K-12 Arabic public school. The principal responded that she would forward the email and information to teachers to see if there were interested in participating. Mohammed replied about a week later and said he would be willing to be interviewed. He agreed to meet at a coffee shop near his university midday on a Saturday.

Mohammed was a handsome young man in his early 20s. He carried himself confidently and made eye contact throughout the interview. His ethnic background (Kurdish) seemed to be a source of pride, as was his mastery of English.

Throughout the interview, Mohammed was eating, so some of his answers may have been shorter than they would be otherwise. However, it is possible that this brevity was also an indication of sensitivity: although he seemed comfortable, he was discussing his background with a complete stranger, and so his brevity may have instead been an indication of discomfort or insecurity.

Regardless, Mohammed talked easily throughout the interview, seemingly self-assured and relaxed. He indicated a closeness of family that contrasted with Anna. In fact, the theme of family ties permeated his interview – he mentioned an uncle who sponsored his family to come here, a sister who had struggled a bit more in English than he did, and his father who was currently working on a graduate degree as well. Despite any difficulties Mohammed may have faced, he expressed his self-confidence and satisfaction with his achievements and indicated a desire to further the achievement of himself and his family.

### ***Roshni***

Roshni was referred to researcher through a mutual friend. She was contacted, and it was stressed that participation was completely optional and that she was under no obligation to participate. She responded immediately noting that she was happy to help out. Roshni proposed to meet at her office a few nights later.

Roshni appeared to be around 40 or so, with thick black curly hair. She looked tired and maybe even discouraged, but this was a feeling that could have been due to the intensity of her profession.

Roshni had a very strong presence and seemed intelligent, eloquent, and a little short of patience with those not up to par. She talked briefly about frustrations with her studies. Her frustrations could also be part of her tired appearance.

Throughout the interview, Roshni responded slowly and with precision. Not a word was misspoken. She would pause to collect her thoughts before continuing, and would very often give extremely detailed stories in response. However, when she discussed her family, she would shift in her seat or cast her eyes downward, body language that indicated her discomfort.

Roshni's descriptions about her choices in education were similar to Anna's descriptions and were in contrast to Mohammed's descriptions: it seemed that, so far, further education (and the bilingualism that came with it) distanced women from their families by defying familial and cultural expectations. Mohammed, on the other hand, noted the benefits of his bilingualism for his family.

### *Aadam*

The researcher knew Aadam through previous tutoring experiences together. Therefore, when considering participants, Aadam immediately came to mind because: (1) Although he was born in Israel, he is Arab and he is a devout Christian. This combination might provide a unique perspective, and (2) Aadam speaks English without a noticeable accent. His multilingual ease might provide a unique perspective.

Aadam was out of town when first emailed, but he replied that he would be happy to participate when he returned, so a time was arranged. When he arrived for the interview, he was as energetic as ever. Aadam speaks very quickly in English, and one can only imagine his Arabic must be the same. Like Mohammed, Aadam stressed the utility of his bilingualism over any problems that might be linked to it. He mentioned several times that it has enabled him to translate for incoming refugees and at churches. His dedication to community service was evident.

However, unlike other participants, Aadam seemed to have thought about issues related to language before the interview. Perhaps his experiences as an Arabic instructor allowed him to become more self-aware. Whatever the cause, Aadam hesitated less than anyone else and provided many more direct answers.

As the interview finished up, Aadam made the differentiation between language and culture. This was really the essence of the interview: language was often seen as representative of culture. He liked this and offered a few more observations in response.

### *Zahra*

Zahra was the wild card of all participants. She was a native Farsi speaker from Iran and remained committed to Iranian causes. She also spoke Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi. Despite this her multilingualism being slightly off target, we agreed to interview anyway. Her focus on Qu'ranic law might put perceptions in perspective. She offered to meet at her law office.

For the interview, Zahra wore jeans and a t-shirt and explained that she was not seeing any clients that day. She was tall, which thick curly black hair and black-lined eyes and was very elegant and poised, even in her jeans. As this study was explained more fully, she listened thoughtfully. She replied to interview questions slowly and carefully. She did not seem hesitant in any way and she precisely enunciated her words.

Zahra fully explored all of the questions asked and was not brief with any. Since she had been in the US for thirty years, she had many experiences from which to draw. She has also straddled the Iranian and American communities and described criticisms she has received from both. Despite the criticisms, she did not appear upset or bitter in any way.

The issue of family came up once again, just as it had with all of the participants so far. Family ties were growing increasingly complicated. Although Zahra did not note the distance felt by both Anna and Roshni, she said that she had to ask her parents for help with Farsi because hers was frozen at an adolescent proficiency. She noted the discomfort that came with such requests.

Zahra firmly noted that the US is her home. All of her family was now here, and she said that is what ultimately determined home for her.

### ***Faid***

Faid already know the researcher for several years before the interviews, so his family history as refugees from Iraq was already known. Because he was called out-of-state during the time of the interviews, he agreed to a phone interview.

It was rather difficult because phone interviews do not allow access to body language. Further, although the researcher and Faid were acquaintances, they were not familiar enough to understand reasons for pauses or breaks in the conversation. For this reason, even field notes were difficult to take.

It is therefore imperative to take note of what Faid did not discuss: Faid had been arrested on petty charges a few years back and spent close to 9 months in jail due to mistaken identity. His name came up as not having a green card, which he does indeed have. He was sent to a state other than the one in which he had been arrested and could not contact his family. According to Faid, the entire reason for the debacle was that he was driving while Arabic.

That said, it is unclear whether this is fact or whether this is how he explained his long absence. Without access to his records, there is no way of knowing what the actual charges were. Was her really profiled, or is that his way of covering up a more serious offense? There is simply no way to know.

### ***Ibrahim***

Ibrahim initially emailed in response to an ad placed seeking participants. He replied that he was happy to participate and proposed to host a dinner at his home. Since the researcher and Ibrahim had mutual friends, this seemed a welcome option.

Ibrahim's family was present during the interview and he proudly introduced everyone. His children were warm and friendly. Ibrahim's friend Ali was over, who was also originally from Egypt. Ibrahim and Ali discussed general things at first as Ibrahim's wife, Yasmin, came in to say hello before disappearing into the kitchen to prepare the meal.

When interview began, Ali stayed, which made for a very relaxed and friendly setting. He teased Ibrahim occasionally about his English, and Ibrahim teased Ali back about his Arabic (which apparently is not very strong since Ali grew up in the States.) Ibrahim was very



expressive and did not withhold emotions at all. When he described his feelings about certain things, the emotions registered immediately on his face.

After the interview, Yasmin brought out a large meal and set up the children to eat in the kitchen. Yasmin served a pasta dish, an Egyptian soup, and a salad. Everything was delicious, and their trust and generosity was impressive. The discussion continued for several hours, including everything from politics to education and cultural difference.

### Findings

Within each interview, several themes continued to appear regardless of who was being interviewed at the moment. The initially broad categories of ‘distance’ and ‘assistance’ were delineated into the codes of ‘freedom,’ ‘ambition,’ ‘pride,’ ‘benefit,’ and ‘liability.’ For the purposes of analysis and discussion, these terms are defined as follows:

*Freedom* includes the linguistic and cultural flexibility and competencies to maneuver within two (or more) domains to best express oneself.

*Ambition* includes the desire to advance and achieve beyond that which is deemed average, and is a direct result of access provided by bilingualism.

*Pride* includes the self-confidence and satisfaction that come with the knowledge of achieving bilingualism. Pride also includes dissatisfaction when one does not understand or forgets parts of either language.

*Benefit* includes the advantages that one has obtained with bilingualism, either for self or for broader community.

*Liability* includes the disadvantages that have come with bilingualism.

It is important to note that bilingualism is not seen in isolation. Rather, it is representative of the education and circumstances that lead up to mastery of two or more tongues. Indeed, none of these themes occurred in isolation. Pride and liability could be expressed consecutively and are firmly embedded in the participant’s perception. All of these perceptions are also rooted in participant experience with different communities and families.

Bucholz & Hall’s components of identity construction (emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness) are the connectors between themes. Each participant expressed an emerging identity only because identity is never fixed. Their current position, as a graduate student or as a long-time resident, guided their responses at the moment because it is part of the lens through which they currently view the world. Indexicality linked their experiences with those of friends and family; for example, Aadam noted the subtle jokes he could make with bilinguals, all of which would not be possible without the indexes he provided. Relationality situated each participant within the context of interviewer-interviewee, a setting that likely provided insights unlike those that would crop up in natural conversation. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the themes developed here can help explain the fuller picture when one considers partialness: although participants described their experiences, situating them and comparing them against each other and against current events shows that their interpretation is only partial. The interpretation and the perceptions of others reveal a side of identity that they had not.

### Theme: Freedom

Freedom was a universal theme. All of the participants described their bilingualism as a means of access to opportunities they would not otherwise have. For Anna, Roshni, Mohammed, Zahra, and Ibrahim these opportunities were crucial to their lives. Anna was engaged to a Syrian

man, an event unlikely had she not been fluent in Arabic and traveling through the Middle East. Roshni was in New York studying, another even unlikely without her bilingualism. Mohammed described his ease in English and his ability to work within it to help bewildered travelers, a phenomenon that would not be possible without his fluency in both Arabic and English. Zahra managed to complete a law degree and publish in English, both of which were probably not possible in her native Farsi due to her rather low level of proficiency. Ibrahim was an educator, an opportunity that simply would not exist for him without his bilingualism.

However, Aadam and Faid both downplayed such freedom of expression. Aadam felt that he took freedom of expression due to his bilingualism for granted. Still, even he felt that his bilingualism allowed him to play with language in a way that monolingualism would not permit. Faid, however, only noted the negative image of this: he expressed frustration when he could not find words because he had both languages to work within.

### **Theme: *Ambition***

Roshni, Zahra, Anna, Aadam, Mohammed, and Ibrahim all expressed ambition through their interviews. For Roshni, her personal ambition was what led to the distance between herself and her family, a problem that will be explored further under the theme of 'Liability.' Anna, too, had set clear goals that Arabic helped her achieve: she loved the language and cultures and therefore converted to Islam and will be marrying into Syrian life. Zahra's ambition led her to the US, and her ambition was further driving her mastery of language because criticism of her and her 'Americanness' was driving her to perfect her academic Farsi. She may not have felt the need to do this without a driving sense of ambition. Finally, Ibrahim wanted to further his education by pursuing a doctoral degree. All of his academic goals had been supported by his bilingualism, and his current ambition, as well.

Aadam's ambition took a slightly different tone. He was driven to work within both languages, but part of his drive is religious. He was a devout Christian and since most of his evangelical work has taken place in America, he affiliated it more with English. Still, he was keenly aware of the insights that bilingualism have afforded him and noted that he was able to take the best of both cultures in order to be a better person.

Mohammed's ambition was slightly more subtle. He discussed wanting to further his education here in the US, an ambition that is possible through his bilingualism. Faid was the only participant who did not discuss ambition, beyond that of helping his siblings with their Arabic.

### **Theme: *Pride***

Like ambition and freedom, pride was also expressed by almost all participants. Pride took two forms: while all expressed self-satisfaction in achieving bilingualism, Mohammed, Faid, and Ibrahim described shame and embarrassment when they could not recall certain words or structures. In fact, Mohammed was particularly bothered that someone recently noticed his accent. Although the intention was not negative at all, Mohammed still felt that it signified him as an 'other' and not as a native speaker of English. It ultimately detracted from his accomplishment. Thus, the pride he had previously felt turned to shame when his self-perception was challenged. Mohammed similarly reported that he does not 'like to see myself' as a non-native speaker. He was very bothered if an American noted his accent or other elements of language that indicated his second language learner status. This indicated that his pride was injured because he didn't note that people made such comments as criticism.

***Theme: Benefit and liability***

Perhaps the most significant findings from this study are the categories of Benefit and Liability. These two themes clearly fall along gender lines.

All of the participants reported benefits to some degree, but the men described more overt benefits. For example, Aadam described being able to translate for members of his church, and Faid talked about using his linguistic skills to help keep his younger siblings proficient. Ibrahim used his mastery of both to petition that New York State offer Arabic as a Regents-level course, which would allow students to study it for diploma credit.

However, the men did note a few negative experiences associated with language use. Faid briefly mentioned of suspicion among non-Arabic speakers, but it is safe to assume this has happened often enough to make an impression worth recalling during the interview. Ibrahim described Americans yelling ‘This is America – Speak American!’ to him and his wife as they walk down the street speaking Arabic. Although these instances are not due to bilingualism, it is their bilingualism that allowed them to be insulted: they understood the criticisms perfectly well because they were proficient in English.

Although the men described some instances that were most likely the result of ignorance, the women reported negativities that became crucial aspects of their lives and their identities. Despite, or perhaps because of, having higher levels of education than the men, the women interviewed described liabilities associated with their bilingualism, and for each, the liabilities were big. Anna noted ‘lingering animosity’ among family members for her conversion to Islam. She also was questioned by the FBI for her ties to Syria, an experience that certainly sets her apart from most young American women. Anna also felt a responsibility to show Arab culture and Islam as deeper than what most people see on television. She called herself a ‘cultural ambassador,’ a weighty title indeed.

Zahra also described the liability attached to her ‘Americanness’ that none of the men described. She has received criticism from the Iranian community for her lack of Farsi because they see it as evidence of her cultural transformation. In doing so, her extensive studies about – and advocacy for – women’s rights in the Muslim world are belittled as being from the American perspective. Although Zahra did not address this specifically, it is clear that language can lessen the societal importance of her work due to pre-conceived notions.

Finally, and perhaps most drastically, was Roshni. Roshni had the unique experience of being placed in one of the top schools in her area as a child, and then being later chastised for her academic pursuits. She noted several times the distance that her education, which is directly linked to her bilingualism, has forced between her and her home culture. Even her brother has commented on her lifestyle as a single woman. Roshni specifically created more distance between herself and the Muslim population at her university in New York for what she perceived as a snub by one of the male members; although she now admits she may have been too sensitive, her fears are well-founded. As a woman in her 40s who has never married or had children, she has chosen a strange path in the eyes of most Egyptians. Her bilingualism and education have become a liability because she is now past the marriageable age. In a society for which marriage is seen as the ultimate goal for women, Roshni poses a threat to those values.

**Discussion**

Linking these themes back to the initial research questions, then, it is clear that the participants described a wide range of experiences as bilinguals while living in North America. For the most part, the experiences have been positive because their bilingualism is invariable so

deeply connected to education that they have experienced achievement, both personally and for the larger community. As Shaaban & Ghaith (2003) state, “The use of English... seems to be based on utilitarian and rational considerations rather than emotional or ideological ones” (p. 72). Indeed, all of the bilinguals interviewed seemed well aware of the utility of language and were adept at using it to their advantages.

Despite the tumultuous political climate, only Anna expressed fear. She was also the only participant who mentioned being investigated by the government. The current turbulence of the Arab Spring has left her fearful for the safety of her fiancé, and worried that his arrival will be delayed. Both Faid and Mohammed came to the States as refugees, but neither discussed how the recent war in Iraq has affected them. Similarly, Roshni and Aadam did not mention any personal affects resulting from the revolution in Egypt or the constant hostilities in Palestine, respectively. Ibrahim talked about how his home country of Egypt has declined, but he did not cite recent events in particular. Zahra mentioned that Americans often tell her how ‘lucky’ she is to be in the States, specifically when wars in the Middle East are front-page news. She does appear to be grateful for her life, but she seemed understandably weary of this comment.

One important consideration is that of sympathy: are Americans reacting more or less sympathetically to Arabic-speakers due to the ongoing revolutions? While the interviews focused on overall experiences and not only current ones, recent events can provide a more positive or negative spin on total experience. It would be helpful to revisit each participant in a year and determine if their perspectives have changed at all.

Only Ibrahim described hostility from Americans. Aside from a few negative experiences based on ignorant stereotyping (i.e. Zahra’s experience at the border, suspicion of Faid’s Arabic use in front of monolingual Americans), most of the participants reported Americans as being curious about their language. Anna articulated why she feels Americans are so curious and then surprised when they hear her speaking Arabic; she feels that the only times Americans hear Arabic is when it is screamed by an extremist ‘holding an AK-47’ on television. These images sully the overall image of both the language and the cultures attached. Cahill (2004) a similar phenomenon occurring with Gaelic. Gaelic speakers expressed disdain with the use of their tongue by the Irish Republican Army as a rallying cry for violence. He quotes a Protestant speaker of Gaelic as saying ‘Every time [Gerry Adams] opens his mouth he puts a nail in the coffin of the language for the [Protestants.]’ (p. 161). Anna would surely sympathize.

The findings indicate that the most important variable is that of gender. In this study, gender greatly influenced both self-perception and perceptions of others. Shaaban & Ghaith (2003) note that ... “linguistic attitudes’ covers the following variables: perceptions of the utility of the foreign language compared to the native language; language as a status marker; language use in media; language use and cultural identity; language in education and society...” (p. 55). All of the women interviewed described both their own linguistics attitudes and those of others. Interestingly, they described almost no discrimination expressed via American linguistic attitudes; rather, the deepest issues stemmed from gender roles within their home cultures.

Although Sarroub (2005) highlights the differences in Yemeni and American culture, these ideas were extended to the Arabic-speaking world. Sarroub notes that American society emphasizes the individual’s moral responsibility to and for himself, but that in Arabic society, the entire community is responsible for an individual’s moral development. This has strong implications for the behavior of women and girls since modesty is a highly valued commodity. What is deemed modest varies within Arab society, but the burden of maintaining the acceptable levels falls on the shoulders of girls and women, sometimes with brutal punishment for

transgressions, both real and imagined. Although not from such a socially strict country as Yemen, Roshni's experience with both Egyptian family members and Arab students within her graduate program show the cultural expectations tied to gender that profoundly affect her perception of self and others. Not as drastically, but still quite noticeable, is Zahra's experience as being 'American' in the eyes of the Iranian audience. Was she seen as American because of her lack of Farsi, or was it more because of her passion for gender equality? The two may be so intertwined that her audience would not even be able to untangle them.

Sarroub (2005) also argues that "... the process of identity formation is one of socialization as one gains access to social institutions... but it also means that rules can be suspended and that the notion of self shifts with time and location" (p. 5). While this may be true for the male participants, none of the women seemed able to fully suspend rules about identity, at least not permanently. Roshni is in a location that allows her more freedoms than she would have in Egypt as a single woman, but she is still confronted with pre-existing attitudes about her choices and what they mean about her deeper character. Anna's choices have led to animosity among family members and scrutiny by the federal government. Rules of identity formation were never fully suspended for these women and they are facing the consequences.

There are several limitations to this study. The most obvious is that of the number of participants; seven people cannot be representative of the general population, particularly when Arabic is spoken in such a wide range of societies.

The second limitation is that of location. Would Arabic-English bilinguals in a different place, such as a politically conservative American city, differ in their perceptions of Americans, bilingualism, and self? Even without having interviewed any such adults, it can be assumed that the answer is yes simply because local society can certainly affect perception. All of the participants were in a fairly liberal state and were therefore surrounded by certain aspects of American culture and ideology that would likely be different elsewhere.

The biggest limitation to this study is that of educational level. All participants had at least some college classes completed, and most had (or were working towards) advanced degrees. Their bilingualism was crucial to this level of academic achievement, so it is likely that bilingualism is viewed as more of an asset than anything else. Such levels of education also indicate that participants are more likely to be based in a domain that is open to inquiry; the further one pursues one's education, the more likely one is surrounded by curiosity rather than prejudices.

Despite these limitations, this study indicates that women have very different experiences as Arabic-English bilinguals than men do. Given the separation of the sexes in many Islamic and Arabic-speaking societies, this study raises certain questions for further investigation. Is the experience of the current participants typical of other college-educated bilingual women from the Middle East? How would religious, national, age, or cultural differences affect the findings? How do these women reconcile the benefits with the liabilities tied to their bilingualism? Future studies using a discriminative sample to focus solely on similar women would provide more answers.

For the women who participated in this study, the liabilities are ultimately the results of their own choices. The women interviewed had control over their own lives, but what would this study look like if all participants were less educated? Some refugees have a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education at best. How could this study help us understand the sociocultural environment of such women to help improve their educational chances here in the United States? This is an important consideration because many immigrant women do not have many employment options here

without English, but how can they begin to study English when they are not literate in their home language? For now, these questions will remain unanswered.

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