



Of Being an Arab Woman Before and After September 11: The Enactment of Communal Identities in Talk

Saskia Witteborn

To cite this article: Saskia Witteborn (2004) Of Being an Arab Woman Before and After September 11: The Enactment of Communal Identities in Talk, Howard Journal of Communications, 15:2, 83-98, DOI: [10.1080/10646170490448312](https://doi.org/10.1080/10646170490448312)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646170490448312>



Published online: 11 Aug 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 214



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 13 View citing articles [↗](#)

Of Being an Arab Woman Before and After September 11: The Enactment of Communal Identities in Talk

Saskia Witteborn

University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

This article examines the impact of September 11, 2001 on the communal identity enactment of 5 Arab women. The Communication Theory of Identity is used to explore which identity labels and associated core symbols the women use before and after September 11. Before September 11, the women referred to themselves mainly with their communal identities as Arab, Palestinian, Egyptian, and sometimes Arab American. The main core symbols related to these labels are family, public person, and respect. After September 11, the women emphasized their national identities. Furthermore, the core symbol family expands in meaning to include social relationships in a community organization. Overall, the study contributes to the existing literature on identity and communication in that it demonstrates how identity is enacted in talk and how a combined analysis of cultural core symbols and identity labels can provide insights into what it means to affiliate with a particular communal identity. The study might encourage more communication scholars to explore identity expressions in general and Arab identity expression in particular. It might also help people of Arab descent to gain a stronger voice in communication scholarship.

KEYTERMS Arab, Arab American, communal identities, Communication Theory of Identity, core symbols, cultural identity, identity labels

I thank Gerry Philipsen, Valerie Manusov, and Nancy Bixler for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the annual convention of the National Communication Association in New Orleans, November 2002.

Address correspondence to Saskia Witteborn, Department of Communication, University of Washington, Box 353740, Seattle, WA 98195. E-mail: sawit@u.washington.edu

The Howard Journal of Communications, 15: 83–98, 2004

Copyright © Taylor & Francis Inc.

ISSN: 1064-6175 print / 1096-4349 online

DOI: 10.1080/10646170490448312

Cross, Strauss, and Fhagen-Smith (1999) stated that cultural identity is more salient when group identity is challenged. The aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11 in New York and Washington, DC can be regarded as such a challenge to Arab group identities in the United States. For many Arabs the challenge was a rigid ascription of a generalized Arab ethnic identity that overshadowed the diversity and multiplicity of national and panethnic, as well as religious, identities. One woman of Arab descent said briefly after the attacks:

Since the attacks I start talking about the images that are shown in the media, about the veil and Arab women and oppression as if it's presenting me or Egypt, which is not really true anyway. I'm Egyptian. I'm not oppressed in my country. I'm Arab after all, but we are not oppressed.

Another woman points out her Palestinian identity after the attacks: "I personally feel that I'd like people to know that I am Palestinian. I don't want to hide it. I am a Palestinian." These quotes point to two issues that are addressed in this article. First, the women use identity labels, such as *Egyptian*, *Arab*, or *Palestinian*, to describe who they are. The repeated use of these referring expressions implies that they have particular meanings to the interlocutors. Second, the women use national identity labels, such as *Egyptian* or *Palestinian*, after September 11 to emphasize an affiliation with a particular country or imagined political community (Anderson, 1991).

There is empirical evidence that referring expressions, such as identity labels, are one of the many communicative devices used to express communal identities. *Communal identities* are defined as large-scale group identities, such as ethnic or national identities (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Delgado (1998) showed that Mexican Americans associate particular meanings with particular identity labels, such as Mexican American, Hispanic, or Chicano/a. For instance, the label Chicana, which is a label that is often associated with a political identity, was used interchangeably with Mexican American by the interlocutors to refer to cultural heritage and traditions. Aoki (2000) supported Delgado's (1998) claim that the study of the situated use of identity labels can provide insights into the phenomenological life worlds of interlocutors. Aoki argued that studying the use of ethnic identity labels helps to unravel the meanings associated with these labels. His study revealed, for example, that hard work, family, and religion were three themes that Mexican Americans in Biola, California, used in their discourse to talk about what it means to be Mexican American. In addition, Marsiglia, Kulis, and Hecht's (2001) study about ethnic labels concluded that identity labels and the discursive enactment of identity are intertwined and consequential for ethnic groups. To summarize, the study of identity labels and associated values and norms provides valuable insights into what it means to affiliate with a particular communal identity.

I argue that it is especially important to study possible transformations in large-scale group identities of people of Arab descent in a time that is still characterized by the psychological impact of September 11 and misconceptions about people of Arab descent. For example, the author Douglas Brinkley gave an interview on National Public Radio (Ydstie, 2003) in which he talked about the biggest Arab community inside the United States, that of Dearborn, Michigan. He said: "You see Lebanese restaurants and Iraqi bakeries all over. It's like you have a big Muslim world right there." The misconception lies in equating Arab with Muslim when only 23% of Arabs living in the United States are

Muslims (Zogby International, 2000). As people of Arab descent in the United States are currently coping with an unprecedented amount of public and private discourse about their identities, an examination of the relationship between such referring expressions as Arab or Palestinian and their associated norms, values, and beliefs is called for.

Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following three questions. First, which identity labels do five women of Arab descent use before and after September 11? Second, which core symbols are associated with these particular identity labels? And third, how are the core symbols and related values, norms, and beliefs enacted in talk?

By answering these questions, the study attempts to contribute to the identity literature in three ways. First, the study shows in detail how identity labels and core symbols that the participants are using provide insights into the phenomenological life worlds of women of Arab descent in the United States. Second, the study adds to Hecht et al.'s (2003) Communication Theory of Identity in that the findings point to the specific communicative forms that the participants use to enact their communal identities in verbal communication. Third, the study adds to the scarce scholarly literature in the field of communication about identity expression by people of Arab descent.

Theoretical Framework

I use the Communication Theory of Identity by Hecht et al. (2003) as an orientation frame for this study. The theory has eight assumptions. The assumptions are the following: (a) identities have individual, enacted, relational, and communal properties; (b) identities are both enduring and changing, and identities are negotiable; (c) identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual; (d) identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation; (e) identities involve both subjective and ascribed meanings, and are codes that are expressed in conversations and define group membership in communities; (f) identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols; (g) identities have semantic properties that are expressed in meanings and labels; and (h) identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication.

In this study I focus on two assumptions of Hecht et al.'s (2003) theory. I chose to focus on only two assumptions because they address different frames of identity and the forms in which these identity frames can be expressed and enacted. Therefore, the assumptions are directly related to the questions that this study attempts to answer.

The first assumption is that "identities have individual, enacted, relational, and communal properties" (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 235). These properties or frames can be regarded as heuristic tools and sensitizing concepts that orient the researcher toward social norms and values within a community of people. At the same time, these frames are also part of the experience of the interlocutors themselves (Hecht et al., 2003). *Identity as a personal frame* means that people see themselves as unique individuals with certain characteristics and traits. *Identity as a relationship frame* indicates that people can define themselves in their social role in relationship to others, such as a female can define herself as a daughter in relationship to her mother. These relationships can take on identities themselves (Hecht et al., 2003). For instance, a mother and a daughter can create a relational identity that is characterized by high self-disclosure, the expression of feelings, and responsiveness (Wood & Reich, 2003).

The third frame, communal identity, is the focus of this study. *Identity as a communal frame* refers to the identity of large-scale groups, such as nations, religions, or ethnic groups. The group can use communicative practices, such as labels and rituals, to affirm and reinforce communal identities and at the same time to define the individual members and their relationships as part of the group. Therefore, communal, relational, and personal frames stand in a dialectical relationship with each other.

Finally, Hecht et al. (2003) defined the *enactment frame* as a frame that “focuses on the messages that express identity. Identities are enacted in social behaviors, social roles, and symbols” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 236).

The second assumption of the Communication Theory of Identity is that “identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings, and labels” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 235). This assumption draws from Philipsen’s (1992, 2002) heuristic conception that people use interdependent patterns of communicative conduct and associated values, premises, meanings, and norms related to these patterns to define who they are as individuals and as a community. One way to understand these intersecting patterns is to look at the labels people use to describe themselves. *Identity labels* are defined as “particular words that are used to identify a person as an example of a kind of person” (Carbaugh, 1996, p. 33). Identity labels can have avowed and ascribed meanings. For the purposes of this study, I will only describe the meanings that particular identity labels have for the interlocutors themselves.

The meanings of identity labels are interpreted in this study with the aid of core symbols. Core symbols are defined as particular words and phrases whose meanings reveal sets of norms, values, premises, and beliefs about the world (Hecht et al., 2003; Schneider, 1976). Values are beliefs about how the world should be, whereas norms are the manifestation of values in the form of social rules and moral imperatives. Cultural premises are unquestioned assumptions about how the world is.

Method

Data Collection

My interest in studying identity grew out of my interactions with people of Arab descent in social and organizational settings and my observations about the use of terms and phrases, such as “I am Lebanese” or “He is not Arab,” to refer to oneself or another person. I conducted interviews originally to study how Arab immigrants talk about their communal identities in the United States. The materials were collected through 1-hour, semi-structured interviews in the Puget Sound area of the Pacific Northwest from May to July 2001.

After September 11 many people of Arab descent in the Seattle area began to engage in public discussions about what it means to be Arab in the United States. I realized that the expression and negotiation of communal identities became very important for many Arabs after the tragedy. Therefore, I approached the same people I had interviewed before September 11 and asked for their permission to interview them again. The fact that the study only includes Arab women and not men is related to pragmatic reasons associated with the circumstances after September 11. The interviews before September 11 included some men, but after September 11 the men were more reluctant to talk because

they feared state and federal investigations. Therefore, the study focuses on women, whom I interviewed again from October to November 2001. I asked the same questions that I had asked before September 11, such as “When a stranger asks ‘Who are you?’, what do you say?” or “What does it mean to you when you say ‘I am Arab?’” All of the interviews were conducted in English, audiotaped, and transcribed.

In terms of validity of the interviews, cultural differences between the interviewee and the interviewer are sometimes regarded as problematic because of potential power differences (Miller & Glassner, 2002). All of the women in this study were motivated to share their life worlds with the interviewer, thus mitigating the possibility that the interviewees felt constrained because of cultural and power differences. Miller and Glassner also pointed out that knowledge of social worlds emerges from mutual understanding. Rapport building is therefore an important issue. I engaged in rapport building by adopting a dialogic interview style. This means that the interviewees shared their opinions on certain topics, and I positioned myself as being as involved in the responses to the questions as the interviewees. This created a bond between the interviewees and me that was characterized by trust and understanding.

For this study, I want to position myself not only as a researcher but also as a woman with European, specifically East German, background. I regard it as important to highlight my own East German identity because it became salient during the interview process, specifically during taperecording. In former East Germany, people who walked around with taperecorders were often members of the Stasi (secret police). In the context of this study, this memory made me very uncomfortable and I ensured that the interviewees understood that all the materials were confidential and that I made the interview process as transparent as possible. In addition, I provided copies of the respective taped interviews when the interviewees requested them, and I asked for feedback from one interviewee on the first version of this article.

Participants

The five women ranged in age from 22 to 60. All of them identified themselves as Arab. Three of the women were Christian, and two were Muslim. All spoke fluent English. The women had been living in the United States from 3 to 25 years. All of them had at least four years of college education and were either graduate students, had their own business, or were retired. Two women were born and grew up in Egypt, one in Lebanon, and one in Palestine. One woman was born in the United States but grew up in Saudi Arabia and identified herself as Palestinian because of her Palestinian father. Throughout the article I will refer to the Palestinian woman as P1, to the woman whose father is Palestinian as P2, to the two Egyptian women as P3 and P4, and to the Lebanese woman as P5.

The sample size of five is a result of the comparative nature of this project. The attacks on September 11 happened unexpectedly, and up to that time I had interviewed five Arab women, which I then interviewed again. However, instead of regarding the small sample size as a drawback, it could be regarded as an opportunity for deconstructing a rich problem. The study does not intend to generalize to the whole Arab population in the United States but instead provides insight into the situated social worlds of five persons of Arab descent in all their complexity. This study should be regarded as one more piece in the puzzle of identity research, a piece that provides a thick description of Arab communal

identities that have not been explored extensively in light of the challenge that September 11 presented to these identities.

Analysis

For the analysis I drew from Hymes (1962, 1972) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). I used Hymes's (1972) heuristic SPEAKING framework as a conceptual framework to guide my collection and understanding of the materials. The components of the framework point to the speech setting (e.g., time and place), the scene (specific psychological type of setting), the participants, the goals of the interaction, the act sequence, the key or tone in which an act is performed, the channels that are used for the speech acts, and the norms of interpretation and interaction, as well as the genres that are used. In addition to applying the heuristic framework by Hymes, I drew from Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory. That means that I conducted a detailed, line-by-line analysis of each transcript to generate categories for reoccurring linguistic identity labels and the relationship between the labels and associated meanings before and after September 11. For instance, I coded for identity descriptors that the interlocutors (i.e., participants) used. Then I examined and compared the meaning of these identity descriptors and the associated values, beliefs, and norms (i.e., norms of interpretation) that clustered around the use of particular labels in order to detect communicative core symbols that were interwoven in the discourse of the women. I also looked for the contexts (i.e., setting) in which the particular labels were applied, for instance in private or in public settings.

What It Means To Be Arab Before September 11

The label *Arab* is used before September 11 by all the women to indicate a communal ethnic identity that transcends national boundaries and that unites people of Arab descent through language and similar value and belief systems. In the following I display remarks by the women about what it means to be Arab before September 11:

P4: I consider myself an Arab. For instance, being an Arab means speaking Arabic and not English, haha. I speak it with my family and it makes me feel warm inside. Something moves within me when I hear it. It's not just the sounds but the way it makes me feel when others address me with sister in Arabic.

P2: I definitely consider myself to be Arab. There is values, social values. Family values are much stronger. The family is much stronger and much bigger, ehm. Arab is more community focused. Family values are much stronger. Like my father's family in Palestine whom I've seen in my life perhaps five times, they communicate with me. They have always communicated with me. And my mother's relatives here in the U. S. they make no effort. So I felt much more warmth and dedication from my father's family.

P1: Family is more important in Arab countries. And one of the things that my mother always said was to really care about the person who comes to the door. She always said or did things that made people feel that she cared about them.

One core symbol that is associated with the label “Arab” and that is mentioned by P4, P2, and P1 is *family*. The core symbol *family* is related to the values of speaking Arabic, communicating with other people, and caring about other people. In addition, the meaning of the family in Arab cultures is contrasted to the meaning of family in the United States. The values related to the core symbol *family* and the theme of difference will be discussed next.

The Values of Speaking Arabic, Communicating, and Care

The fact that the interlocutors highlight family and relate the terms “family,” “speaking Arabic,” “communicate,” and “care” is an indicator that these concepts have a particular importance to them. Speaking is not only related to a commonly shared symbol system, which is Arabic, but to the interrelationships between the symbol system Arabic, the meanings of this symbol system, and the use of it in the family (P4). Talk performs the function of social glue in a family and is not necessarily associated with information transmission. For instance, P4 and P2 use utterances and terms that describe emotional sensations (e.g., “something moves within me” [P4], “warmth” [P2], and “the way it makes me feel” [P4]). In addition, P4 states that being “addressed” by another person in the Arabic language results in an emotional sensation. Addressed means that a person feels that she or he is being talked with and not talked to (Stewart, Zediker, & Witteborn, in press). *Talked with* implies that someone feels recognized as a person in his or her full potential. This recognition of personhood then explains the value of caring for other people (P1). Caring does not only mean to help other people with material goods, but also to acknowledge an individual as a person by communicating with that person.

The participants who are quoted above use the ethnic identity label “Arab” (P2 and P4) or the spatial pointer “in Arab countries” (P1) to frame their remarks. Family, speaking Arabic, communication, and care are therefore important values of a communal Arab identity. At the same time, the women describe social relationships between family members, which suggests *relational identities*. For instance, P2 talks about her father’s family and P1 talks about her mother to illustrate the meaning of communication in the Arab culture and in the United States. Hence, communal and relational identities are interconnected.

In addition, the values of speaking and communicating are enacted through the use of examples, such as “like my father’s family in Palestine whom I’ve seen in my life perhaps five times, they communicate with me” (P2), and “for instance, being an Arab means speaking Arabic” (P4). The examples evoke images in the mind of the listener that make it possible to relive the experience of the speaker. Identity is also enacted through the use of verbs that depict emotional states, such as “something moves within me” (P4). The verb *move* refers to a bodily sensation and can be used to connect with a listener on an emotional, rather than a rational level.

Finally, the speakers use indirect reported speech to give background information. An example would be when P1 talks about her mother: “And one of the things that my mother always said was to really care about the person who comes to the door.” The woman enacts what it means to be an Arab person by presenting the mother’s viewpoint. As Holt (2000) pointed out, indirect reported speech is often used to give background information. Therefore, the indirect reported speech utterance by the woman can be

interpreted as representing the interviewee's perspective on the importance of the value of "care about the person," a value that she learned from her mother.

The Meaning of Difference

Another meaning that is related to the core symbol family is difference. All of the women compare characteristics of the family in their home cultures and in the United States:

P1: Here in America the individual is more important than the group. In the Arab culture individuals don't see themselves as important but he or she is part of a group.

P2: The family is much stronger and much bigger. Arab is more community focused.

P3: I really miss my family, the whole closeness that I can't find here and that makes me feel that my identity is Arab.

P5: The family not only refers to the close family in Arab culture but also to the extended family and all your uncles and aunts.

The quotes contain grammatical forms that refer to "family," and that imply comparisons and difference, such as "much stronger" (P2) or "don't see themselves as important" (P1). In addition, the participants make comparisons that are expressed in spatial references, such as "here in America" and "in the Arab culture" (P1) or "I can't find here" (P3). The comparison reflects a tension between what is valued in Arab cultures and what is valued in American culture. One value that is associated by the speakers with an Arab identity is acknowledging the importance of the group in general and the family in particular. In contrast, an American identity is linked to "the individual" P1. The comparison between the meaning of the family in Arab culture and in the United States makes salient the value of the family in Arab culture.

What It Means To Be Palestinian, Lebanese, and Egyptian Before September 11

In addition to the label *Arab*, the women also use national labels, such as *Palestinian*, *Lebanese*, and *Egyptian*. These national labels are related to the core symbols *family* and *respect*.

The Core Symbol Family

The core symbol *family* is not only associated with an Arab ethnic identity but also with national identities as the following quotes show:

P1: As a Palestinian I really value my family. I remember, for example, there were a lot of families visiting and going from house to house. People spent a lot of time doing that.

P2: I am Palestinian American, or something. I used to say that I'm Saudi Arabian but now my parents don't live there I don't feel right saying I'm Saudi Arabian cause I'm not really from Saudi Arabia. And I don't feel right saying I'm an American only cause I was born here. Like, I said that to a Palestinian lady once, I said eh I am half Palestinian, half American. She's like, your father is Palestinian, then you're Palestinian, cause it's more paternal.

P3: Egyptians, like many people in the Arab world, cherish their families.

P5: You know, as a Lebanese woman I can say that family is huge.

The women use the core symbol *family* in relationship with their national communal identity labels, such as “Palestinian” (P1), “Egyptian” (P3), or “Lebanese” (P5). P2, who was born in the United States and grew up in Saudi Arabia with a Palestinian father and an American mother, defines herself personally with the pan-national identity “Palestinian American”. The example of P2 shows that relational and communal identities can be intertwined. Although P2 avows herself a pan-national Palestinian American identity, she is ascribed a Palestinian communal identity because of her relational identity as a daughter (“your father is Palestinian”). This ascription of a Palestinian identity means that a person becomes and remains Palestinian through kinship, regardless of where the person resides or which nationality he or she holds.

The quotes also show that communal identity is enacted in talk. All of the participants use identity labels, such as Palestinian American, Egyptian, and Lebanese to express their identities. In addition, P2 and P1 use examples and direct reported speech. For instance, P2 uses direct reported speech, such as “I said,” and “she’s like” to express her communal identity as a Palestinian American. Contrary to indirect reported speech, direct reported speech reproduces the original utterance, thereby providing the listener access into the communicative action of the original speech act or speech event. By performing the interaction between herself and the Palestinian lady through direct reported speech, P2 provides the listener yet another opportunity to experience the importance of kinship for people of Palestinian origin.

In addition, P1 expresses her communal Palestinian identity by illustrating common and appropriate social behaviors with an example (e.g., “for example there were a lot of families visiting”). The example of visiting points to specific experiences that illustrate what it means to value the close and the extended family.

The Core Symbol Respect

In addition to family, one Egyptian woman mentions the core symbol *respect*. Respect is related to the themes of sexual harassment of women in public and the decline of respectful behavior toward women over time:

P3: It’s more about how you have to treat each other by respect. You don’t really talk to boys. The old generation was raised like that. In a sense back then you were more respected as even a mother figure, a wife figure or a girl daughter than walking down the street now because more women work and support their families and being harassed constantly, constantly harassed. Like they are called “hey sweetie” in the streets. Whether you’re wearing the veil or not. It doesn’t matter anymore. Now you have all the freedom in walking down the streets. I’m avoiding every contact with men on the street.

The interviewee enacts the vanishing respect for women in public through reported speech (e.g., “hey sweetie”). The reported speech provides the listener with the opportunity to gain insight into the nature of sexual harassment in the streets in Egypt. The

interviewee attributes the vanishing respect to the ever-increasing visibility of women in male-dominated domains. The speaker juxtaposes being female in the past to being female in the present and expresses her concern about the detrimental effects of female emancipation and sexual harassment. The freedom of women when walking down the streets by themselves is an illusion because in public the female body—and mind—is controlled by males.

What It Means To Be Arab American Before September 11

Another label that is used by the participants before September 11 is the label *Arab American*:

P1: I use Arab American when I am a public person and fill out forms or when strangers ask me in the streets. I also use it when I talk with the media.

P2: I don't call myself Arab American very often. Only when I want to express a political opinion in front of a group or in a public setting.

P5: I call myself Arab American when I want to emphasize my citizenship.

The label "Arab American" is used with a particular audience, such as with strangers, with the media (P1) or with groups (P2). In addition, the label is used for particular purposes, such as filling out "forms" (P1), expressing a "political opinion" (P2), or emphasizing "citizenship" (P5). The core symbol in these quotes is being a public person. In other words, the participants call themselves Arab American when they see themselves as public persons who engage in purposeful interactions in public settings. The label is used in situations that demand the presence of a group identity that overcomes individual national identifications and unifies people of Arab descent on the basis of their American citizenship.

The label *Arab American* is a label that refers to panethnicity. The meaning of the label *Arab American* and the related core symbol *public person* support Espiritu's (1992) claims about the characteristics of panethnic identities. Panethnic identities have been defined as "larger-scale affiliations, where groups previously unrelated in culture and descent submerge their differences and assume a common identity" (Espiritu, 1992, p. 3). Panethnic identity is based on the development of solidarity and organizations, as well as the reinterpretation of a group's history (Espiritu, 1992). Espiritu shows that panethnic terms, such as Asian American, are political, not cultural, terms that are either self-avowed for socio-political reasons by cultural groups or that are imposed on large ethnic groups by the receiving society. The women make use of the label *Arab American* when they talk to the media, to strangers, or to groups. One of the purposes is to point out being a citizen of the United States. Therefore, the label serves as a means of empowerment by pointing out equality with other American citizens.

The Importance of National Identification After September 11

One immediate observation after September 11 is that the women use national labels more frequently to describe themselves in the interviews. For example, P1 says:

The attacks brought Arabs together. It became very clear to all of us as a unit that we are very invisible and that's why we would like to make ourselves more visible. I personally feel that I'd like people to know that I am Palestinian. I don't want to hide it. I am a Palestinian.

Although the speaker defines herself as part of the “we,” which refers to an Arab identity, the speaker also highlights her Palestinian identity. Referring to herself as Palestinian repeatedly stands in contrast to the first interview where she said: “In the street if we had met I would have said I am Arab American, you see?” Therefore, after September 11 the woman is more willing to express her Palestinian identity in public than before September 11.

Furthermore, national labels are used to counter ascribed identities that do not fit the avowed identities by pointing to socio-political or geographical characteristics about the individual countries. The women use the strategy of anticipating common notions about Arab countries and then counter these notions with socio-political and geographical examples:

P5: I'm Lebanese. People always think that there is no democracy in the Middle East and that everything related to Arab means dictatorship and oppression. Actually, as Lebanese we have freedom of speech. There is democracy. And Lebanon is a beautiful country with the Mediterranean, mountains, old cities, and a great climate.

P4: I have to say that as an Egyptian I am proud of the long history that goes back to the Pharaohs.

The women use national labels, such as “Lebanese” (P5) and “Egyptian” (P4), to express their communal identities. P5 uses words, such as “democracy” and “freedom of speech” to counter the notion of the existence of dictatorships in every Arab country. P5 complements political characteristics with geographical characteristics to express her pride in her country. P4 adds the concept of “history” to express pride in the history of Egypt. In addition to political, geographical, and historical characteristics of their respective countries, P3 refutes the notion of oppression of females in her country:

I have always defined myself as Egyptian, no matter, no Arab thing. I am thinking that I need to re-question this again. I think that I should define myself as Egyptian again. I'm Egyptian, I'm not oppressed in my country. I'm Arab after all, but we are not oppressed. But we are always portrayed as the poor veiled Arab women. I went to an exhibition of Annie Leibovitz, the photographer. She photographed many women from all different spheres of life. There was only one image of an Arab woman. And guess what, she was veiled¹ and she was hanging there on the wall being juxtaposed to women, such as Hillary Clinton or Oprah.

In this quote, the woman enacts her identity by using the identity labels “Egyptian” and “Arab.” Although she points to her ethnic identity as Arab, she makes her national Egyptian identity more salient by using the referring expression “Egyptian” three times. She also uses an example to express her communal identity as Egyptian and her relational identity as an Egyptian woman. The woman exposes in her example of the Annie

Leibovitz exhibition how the seemingly unmotivated juxtaposition of a veiled Arab woman with successful public American women adds to the negative stereotyping of Arab females. By identifying with the communal national identity Egyptian the woman resists the ascribed relational identity of a female oriental other who is depicted as oppressed and veiled in visual and public discourses.

To sum up, after September 11 the women use national identity labels, such as *Lebanese*, *Palestinian*, or *Egyptian*, to make themselves more visible in public settings and to emphasize the political, geographical, and historical characteristics of their respective countries. The purposes of expressing national identifications are to make the diversity of the area, commonly called the *Arab world*, more transparent for non-Arabs and to refute false Western notions about female oppression.

The Expanded Meaning of the Label Arab After September 11

After September 11 the label *Arab* is not only associated with the close and extended family anymore but is used to mean social relationships within a community organization. PI makes the following statement:

We founded something called an Arab American community coalition that is an umbrella organization for all Arab organizations. We are more aware of ourselves as Arabs now and are willing to make it visible. But I also realized that there is lot of disorganized behavior amongst the Arabs here. For instance, everybody wants to be the leader and in charge in the new organization. It's like wanting to be head of a big family. There are just different styles of discussion.

In the quote, the term “family” is used to refer to people of Arab descent who organize themselves in a community coalition. After September 11 Arab organizations in the Puget Sound area came together to create a new umbrella organization that provided a basis for the achievement of common goals, such as educating the general public about Islam and Arab countries, being more active politically as an Arab community, and strengthening solidarity between the different Arab communities. This new organization was characterized by enthusiasm but also difficulties. The woman compares the leadership of the new organization to a “head of a big family.” This metaphor is again a specific instance of enacting what it means to be an Arab person after September 11. The woman places herself into a particular place, the organization, and evokes a vivid image in the listener’s mind by using a metaphor. Although the metaphorical comparison between the leadership of the organization and a family once again points to the importance of the family as an epitomizing symbol, the post-September 11 discourse shows that there are many differences between the core symbol *family* before September 11 and the organizational family after September 11. The organizational family is characterized by “disorganized behavior” and “different styles of discussion.” The family before September 11 was characterized by warm communication and social support. It was described as a metaphorical place of comfort and was never criticized. In contrast, the behavior of the organizational members is criticized. The organizational family is regarded as a group of people who are

not related through kinship but through common interests. Discussion is regarded as a means of communication to put the common interests into practice and to achieve the organizational goals of making the Arab communities more visible. The organization is compared to a family because it fulfills the functions of a traditional family, namely to provide support, to make people feel they belong, and to collectively work on the accomplishment of goals.

The Label Arab American After September 11

Before September 11, the women associated the label *Arab American* with the core symbol *public person*. The label was also used to create a feeling of unity that transcended ethnic and national boundaries. One might have expected Arab Americans to stress their rights to citizenship after a crisis, such as September 11, by stressing the American in the hyphenated identity, as Japanese Americans tended to do after World War II (O'Brien & Fugita, 1991). However, the women don't use the panethnic identity label more than before September 11. For example, P1 rather uses the ethnic label *Arab* to refer to herself and other members of Arab communities: "We founded something called an Arab American community coalition that is an umbrella organization for all Arab organizations. We are more aware of ourselves as Arabs now and are willing to make it visible."

The creation and naming of the organization as "Arab American community coalition" after September 11 suggests that community leaders wanted to strengthen an Arab American panethnic consciousness that supersedes nationalities, religions, and ethnicities. However, the woman refers to herself as "Arab." Although one cannot be certain whether P1 used the label Arab instead of Arab American intentionally, the repeated use of national labels by the women after September 11 is another indicator that identifying as Lebanese, Egyptian, or Palestinian is more meaningful to the women than identifying as Arab American.

Summary

To conclude, before September 11 the women frequently used the label *Arab* to talk about themselves. The meaning of Arab evolved around the epitomizing symbol of the family. The values that were related to the family were speaking Arabic, communicating, and caring for other persons. The women indicated that they used the identity label *Arab American* less frequently. Arab American was related to being a public person. Furthermore, national identifications were related to the core symbols family and respect. After September 11 the women refer more often to themselves as Palestinian, Egyptian, and Lebanese, less frequently as Arab, and hardly ever as Arab American. The meaning of national identity labels evolves around political, geographical, and historical characteristics of each country, and not so much around the core symbol *family* like before September 11. The presence of national labels after September 11 does not imply increased nationalism. Instead, it should be understood as a way to help the general public understand the diversity within the Arab world with respect to politics and geography as well as history. In addition, national identifications are used to refute generalized notions about female oppression. Furthermore, there is a shift in meaning from the family as the sacred place

that offers support and communication to the family as a place for discussion and the pursuit of common goals and interests after September 11.

Practical Implications

The findings have practical and theoretical implications for research about the communicative expression of communal identities. First, the findings can help other people of Arab descent to better understand how some Arabs in the United States struggle with the question “Who are we?” The women’s struggle with the question what it means to be Arab after September 11 might resonate with many Arabs throughout the United States and might help to create a bond between Arab communities across the country. The women voice concerns about the commonly perceived image of Arabs as oppressed and backwards and provide a more accurate picture of the multiplicity of Arab, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Lebanese communal identities.

Second, the findings might help non-Arabs to better understand that people of Arab descent have multiple national, ethnic, and panethnic identity dimensions that have specific meanings. By listening to core symbols closely, non-Arabs might be able to interpret values, beliefs, and premises of people with Arab background. People can take these symbols as a starting point for dialogue. As the researcher I can say that my conversations with the women sharpened my understanding of the importance of supportive relationships and respect for other people that the women expressed. The conversations also made me reflect upon my own identities and the situated use of labels to describe myself as an East German, European woman, who is living in the United States.

Theoretical Implications

This study adds to the Communication Theory of Identity and challenges it at the same time. The study adds to the theory in two ways. First, it illustrates how the combined analysis of labels and associated core symbols becomes a method for studying communal identities, that is large-scale group identities. In this study, the core symbols *family*, *public person*, and *respect* are indicators for values and beliefs that provide valuable insights into the worlds of meanings of the interlocutors. It is not the labels by themselves that help scholars of culture understand the interlocutor’s worlds of meanings better. Instead, it is the interconnection between the labels and the associated meanings, values, beliefs, and norms that provides a thick description of the meaning of cultural membership. The enactment of identities before and after September 11 also illustrates that the salience of core symbols and associated values, beliefs, and premises is dependent on the situation people find themselves in. For example, being Egyptian before September 11 was mainly associated with the core symbol *family*. After September 11 the core symbol *family* was not as salient anymore. Instead, being Egyptian was related to being proud of the history of Egypt and refuting Western notions about oppressed Egyptian females. This does not imply that the importance of the family has diminished after September 11. But in the light of challenged group identities, family as a cultural core symbol is not as salient as it was previously.

Second, the study supports one of the assumptions of the Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht et al., 2003). It demonstrates that communal, relational, and personal identities are interconnected. For example, the family emerges as one powerful core symbol that is related to Arab ethnic identity and several national identities. However, family in itself also implies relational identities and personal identities, which in turn are defined by the women as part of their communal ethnic and national identities. In other words, to identify as Arab or as Palestinian, Lebanese, or Egyptian means also to identify with particularly salient social identities, such as being a mother and a daughter, a niece and an aunt, a sister and a brother, or a cousin. These social identities in turn influence the self-concept of an individual, such as being a person who cares for other people. Therefore, personal, relational, and communal identities are interrelated.

On the other hand, the study challenges the Communication Theory of Identity. On the basis of the findings, I argue that the conceptualization and definition of the enactment frame should be reconsidered. The current definition of the enactment frame as a frame that “focuses on the messages that *express* [italics added] identity” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 236) seems to be too ambiguous. From a social interaction perspective, identities have to be expressed in communication to become meaningful and salient. Therefore, expressing a sense of self is always part of identity display. People can talk about their relational identities without necessarily implying a communal identity, but they can’t communicate their identities without verbal or nonverbal messages, which would make the enactment frame always part of the personal, relational, and communal frames.

If the enactment frame was to be treated as a separate frame in the Communication Theory of Identity, I suggest that the concept of enactment could be used in the sense of performed. The women used identity labels, metaphors, examples, reported speech, and verbs that depict emotional states to perform their value and norm systems in talk. Especially reported speech has been found to be a communicative means for performing identities. Hymes (1981) pointed out, following the discussion of reported speech by Bakhtin (1981) and Voloshinov (1971) that direct quotations as in reported speech are a sign of performance. Tannen (1985, 1995) added that people use quotations to perform their own or others’ words in a creative way. The fact that the women in this study used rhetorical and linguistic means to let particular roles and events come to live points to the importance of performing particular identities in talk.

To conclude, I encourage scholars interested in the Communication Theory of Identity to think about the interrelationship between the four frames proposed by the theory, conceptualize the enactment frame, and propose verbal and nonverbal means with which personal, relational, and communal identities are performed in particular speech situations.

As an afterthought I want to add that despite and because of the differences in avowed and ascribed identities, two of the women I interviewed are still engaged in educational activities about Arab cultures in high schools and universities. It is as if they are saying: I cannot identify with an Arab identity that has been imposed upon me, but I will work actively to tell people who I am, so that I can reconstruct an image about people of Arab descent that is closer to my, and our, experiences.

Note

¹In this context “veiled” means that the woman wears a head cover and a face cover.

References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (rev. ed.). New York and London: Verso.
- Aoki, E. (2000). Mexican American ethnicity in Biola, CA: An ethnographic account of hard work, family, and religion. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 11, 207–227.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Carbaugh, D. (1996). *Situating selves: The communication of social identities in American scenes*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Cross, W. E., Jr., Strauss, L., & Fhagen-Smith, P. (1999). African American identity development across the life span: Educational implications. In R. H. Sheets & E. R. Hollins (Eds.), *Racial and ethnic identity in school practices* (pp. 29–47). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Delgado, F. P. (1998). When the silenced speak: The textualization and complications of Latina/o identity. *Western Journal of Communication*, 62, 420–438.
- Espiritu, Y. L. (1992). *Asian American panethnicity: Bridging institutions and identities*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hecht, M. L., Jackson, R. L., II, & Ribeau, S. A. (2003). *African American communication* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Holt, E. (2000). Reporting and reacting: Concurrent responses to reported speech. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 33, 425–454.
- Hymes, D. (1962). The ethnography of speaking. In T. G. Gladwin & W. C. Sturtevant (Eds.), *Anthropology of human behavior* (pp. 13–53). Washington, DC: Anthropological Society of Washington.
- Hymes, D. (1972). Models of the interaction of language and social life. In J. J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp. 35–71). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Hymes, D. (1981). Breakthrough into performance: In D. Hymes (Ed.), *In vain I tried to tell you* (pp. 79–141). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Marsiglia, F. F., Kulis, S., & Hecht, M. L. (2001). Ethnic labels and ethnic identity predictors of drug exposure and use among middle school students in the Southwest. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 11, 21–48.
- Miller, J. & Glassner, B. (2002). The “inside” and the “outside”: Finding realities in interviews. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (3rd ed., pp. 99–112). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- O'Brien, D. & Fugita, S. (1991). *The Japanese American experience*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Philipsen, G. (1992). *Speaking culturally: Explorations in social communication*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Philipsen, G. (2002). Cultural communication. In B.W. Gudykunst & B. Mody (Eds.), *Handbook of international and intercultural communication* (pp. 51–67). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schneider, D. (1976). Notes toward a theory of culture. In K. H. Basso & H. A. Selby (Eds.), *Meaning in anthropology: School of American research advanced seminar series* (pp. 197–220). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Stewart, J., Zediker, K., & Witteborn, S. (in press). *Together: Communicating interpersonally* (6th ed.). Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Tannen, D. (1985). *Talking voices*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tannen, D. (1995). Waiting for the mouse: Constructed dialogue in conversation. In B. Mannheim & D. Tedlock (Eds.), *The dialogic emergence of culture* (pp. 198–219). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Voloshinov, V. N. (1971). Reported speech. In L. Matejka & K. Promorska (Eds.), *Readings in Russian poetics: Formalist and structuralist views* (pp. 149–175). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Wood, J. T. & Reich, N. M. (2003). Gendered speech communities. In L. A. Samovar & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (10th ed., pp. 144–154). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Ydstie, J. (2003, June 3). *Interview: Douglas Brinkley discusses his book “Wheels for the World: Henry Ford, his company, and a century of progress, 1903–2003.”* [Radio broadcast]. Morning Edition. Seattle, WA: National Public Radio.
- Zogby International (2000). *Demographics of Arab Americans*. Retrieved May 1, 2003, from <http://www.aaiusa.org/demographics.htm>.