

Press Release

ARAB AMERICANS AND THE MELTING POT

We are all familiar with the image of the melting pot, the assimilation of immigrants into the citizen pool and the culture of the United States. In “Patterns, Determinants, and Implications of Inter-marriage Among Arab Americans,” to be published in the February *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Drs. Andrzej Kulczycki and Arun Peter Lobo look at Arab immigrants and one important aspect of the melting pot experience, intermarriage.

Kulczycki, a Professor in the Department of Epidemiology and International Health at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and Lobo, from the New York City Department of City Planning, believe that the rate of intermarriage is an important indicator of assimilation and identification. The researchers suggest that intermarriage erodes social, cultural, and psychological boundaries between ethnic groups. Using 1990 census data, their research shows four out of five Arab men and nearly three out of four Arab women married non-Arab spouses. Among foreign-born Arabs, 67% of men and 38% of women married non-Arabs after they came to the U.S.

Notably, more Arab American men out-marry than women. The authors theorize that the Arab cultural traditions are especially patriarchal, and even Arab immigrant families place greater cultural constraints on the marital choices of women. There is also a higher proportion of men among Arab immigrants. The

shortage of marriageable Arab women may lead foreign-born Arab American immigrant men to consider marriage outside the ethnic group.

The authors find that the overwhelming majority of children in Arab American households were living in families where only one parent was Arab. The census data show that the children of intermarried couples are less likely to be identified as Arab. Dr. Kulczycki notes, "Although the children of intermarried couples may be better able to assimilate in U.S. society, they may also have a diminished Arab ethnic identity."

How does religion affect out-marriage among Arab Americans? Religions, state Kulczycki and Lobo, tend to discourage intermarriage. Although census data do not allow for a study of the influence of religion on intermarriage, the authors believe it possible that Christian Arab Americans are more likely to intermarry than are Muslim Arab Americans. More recent immigrant Arabs, an increased proportion of who are Muslim, have lower rates of intermarriage than their native-born counterparts. Native-born Arab-Americans tend to be descendents of earlier Lebanese and Syrian immigrants, who were largely Christian.

Dr. Marilyn Fernandez, Chair of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Santa Clara University, believes this research based on 1990 census data is still timely, especially given the events of September 11 and their aftermath. She points out that, "Such high rates of intermarriage would be expected to continue into the present." Dr. Fernandez finds it especially noteworthy that a high percentage of intermarried parents reported their

children's ethnic identification as part-Arab (50%) or even non-Arab (39%). Only 11% of this group reported their children as fully Arab.

Dr. Alexis Walker, Editor of *JMF*, also points to the ethnic identification of these children when she states, "Drs. Kulczycki and Lobo make us question our assumptions about immigrants to the U.S. We seem to think that Europeans blend into U.S. society without notice, whereas immigrants from the Middle East are kept apart. This study confirms that immigrants from many different nations, in part through marriages and childbearing, become a part of the fabric of our society relatively quickly, within a generation or two."

Dr. Benigno Aguirre, of the Department of Sociology at the University of Delaware, agrees. "This research by Kulczycki and Lobo," Dr Aguirre comments, "shows that the known patterns associated with intermarriage and assimilation also apply to persons of Arab descent residing in the U.S. Their practices are like those of other subnationalities. Given the unfortunate anti-Arab reactions in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack, this finding takes on added importance, for it shows them to be true to the American experience."

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