March 2024

Mental Health Attitudes and Perspectives of Arab Americans: Beliefs Associated with Stigma, Treatment, and the Origins of Pathology

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Recommended Citation

Knill, Sadie; Browning, Liam; Oska, Nicole; Kidess, George; Hinchey, Liza; Saleem, Arwa; Elhage, Malaak; and Javanbakht, Arash, "Mental Health Attitudes and Perspectives of Arab Americans: Beliefs Associated with Stigma, Treatment, and the Origins of Pathology" (2024). Medical Student Research Symposium. 346.  
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Mental Health Attitudes and Perspectives of Arab Americans: Beliefs Associated with Stigma, Treatment, and the Origins of Pathology

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Key Words: Arab American, mental health, stigma, attitudes

Acknowledgements
The authors thank the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS) and the National Arab American Medical Association (NAAMA) for help in distributing our survey.

Abstract

Purpose:
Arab Americans are one of the largest ethnic groups in the United States. Despite elevated incidence of mental illness and diminished rates of treatment within this community, the mental health of Arab Americans, along with their attitudes towards mental health, has not received adequate study. Unique cultural interpretations of mental illness may engender stigma, exacerbating disparities in treatment. This study aimed to assess the attitudes and perspectives of Arab Americans concerning mental illness, with the goal of identifying and addressing barriers to treatment.

Methods:
Using an anonymous bilingual Qualtrics survey, we assessed Arab and non-Arab participants (n = 294; ages 18+) on their conceptualizations of the causes of mental illness and on their stigma towards mental illness and mental health treatments. Comparisons were performed between Arabs and non-Arabs, as well as among Arabs.

Results:
Compared to non-Arabs, Arabs reported higher average mental illness stigma and were more likely to rate psychiatric medications as additive and unhelpful. Among Arabs, being Christian, male, and older (>29 years old) were each associated with higher stigma. Arabs were less likely than non-Arabs to believe in a biological explanation for mental illness.

Conclusion:
Our results demonstrate higher levels of stigma towards mental illness among Arab Americans, especially Christian, male, and older Arabs, potentially related to a weaker belief in a biomedical model for mental illness. These are among the first findings describing mental illness stigma and beliefs about mental health in the Arab American population, offering potential guidance for forthcoming community interventions to deliver culturally competent care.