MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ARAB-AMERICAN WOMEN'S IDENTITY

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by
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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore how a group of Arab American women have constructed their identities living in the U.S. and their perceptions of the role of media and popular culture in that process. The theoretical framework of the study was informed by critical media literacy, critical and feminist theory, and media studies, particularly related to the construction of identity. The study began with interviews with the seven Arab American women participants. Sources of data included these transcribed interviews, field notes of data collected from four learning sessions that were part of a facilitated critical media literacy pedagogical process of viewing, discussing, and analyzing films relating to Arabs and Arab Americans, and transcripts of a final interview exploring their learning and its effects on their ongoing construction of Arab American identity.

The findings of the initial interviews at the outset of the study in regard to participants’ identity and experience of media focused on: the experience of being “other; the backlash of 9/11; frustration with Western media images; and the complexity of having an Arab and American female identity. Their awareness and analysis of media messages grew with each learning session, and findings from final interviews indicated that participants: came to the realization that media largely reflects hegemonic interests; that media had an effect of transmitting ideology that affected their identity construction; began to deal with the lack of representation in the media by giving voice to others and in beginning forms of social action.

The study ends with a consideration of findings in light of the theory, and offers implications for adult education and media literacy practice and offers suggestions for further research.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of an action research study that explored how a group of Arab American women have constructed their identities in living in the U.S. and their perceptions of the role of media and popular culture in that process. The action research part of the study aimed to facilitate a critical media literacy pedagogical process with them by viewing, discussing, and analyzing films relating to Arabs and Arab Americans and to explore their learning and its effects on their ongoing construction of the Arab American identity. In order to address this purpose, this chapter provides a background to the study including its purpose statement, followed by a description of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding this research. An overview of the action research methodology that was employed in this study is provided, and the significance, assumptions, and limitations are highlighted.

Background of the Problem

Media has a huge influence on our culture. Within recent years media power has grown tremendously with the advance of technology. As a result of these tremendous advancements, we currently live in a global community that relies on information and communication to stay educated, aware, and informed. This information acts as a guide in our lives and helps us make decisions about matters related to our work, entertainment, health care, education, personal relationships, traveling and anything else that we have to do (Johnson, 2006). We also rely on the news media through radio, television, and the Internet to keep us informed about current events and educated on an endless variety of subjects and topics such as local and world news, cultures, languages, and the economy. Further, fictional entertainment media such as movies and prime
time television shows serve as another means of informal education that often affects people’s beliefs and attitudes about themselves and others. Indeed, how we view ourselves and others and the construction of our own and others’ identities is complex, and is influenced by a variety of factors, including media and popular culture, which as Giroux says, together act as a form of “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2000), that both educates and “miseducates” (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007).

People are continually surrounded by influential imagery in popular media and culture (Hartley, 2002). Therefore, it is no longer feasible that an identity can be constructed simply for example in a rural or small community and moreover only be influenced by relatives, friends, and school. Popular media provides a wide-ranging source of opinions on culture, standards, and identities to its consumers. For example, although it may seem on the surface that a movie is just a movie and an advertisement is just an advertisement, they always provide images, symbols, and messages which affect how people construct meaning (Berger, 2005). These media forms influence social norms concerning gender, race, class, nationality, and all the other ingredients that constitute identity, for they provide models of what it is to be black, white, Arab, feminine, masculine, etc. (Storey, 2006; Guy, 2007). A notion of what constitutes female beauty provides one instance of how media exerts power over gender identity. For instance, although beauty standards are constantly changing, it is important to recognize that a strong and able force in that continues change is the media's depictions of beauty, which ranges from Renaissance paintings to computer-generated images of the perfect woman in a Channel advertisement for its latest perfume. As bell hooks (1992) suggests, many people simply unconsciously absorb and/or give little thought to the messages they are getting through the media. Further, few people are offered many of the tools of critical media literacy (Yosso, 2002), and most have not been asked to think
critically about media messages. Given that media and popular culture act as a form of public pedagogy with the power to educate and miseducate adults, as well as children and youth, critical media literacy that specifically focuses on how adults can deconstruct the messages that they receive is an important area of adult education.

There has been a growing discussion of the role of media in relation to adult education in recent years in the form of edited collections (Tisdell & Thompson, 2007) and journal articles (Wright & Sandlin, 2009) within larger discussions of diversity and how people construct identity. Much of the diversity literature within the field focuses on trying to challenge power relations based on structural factors of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation addressing the educational needs of a variety of identity groups such as women, gay and lesbian and related groups, Latinos, and African Americans (Cervero & Wilson, 2001; Guy, 1999; Hill, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, 2001, 2003; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). Diversity in relation to identity is also discussed in the literature in terms of the nature of the adult student identity (Kasworm, 2005), the effects of labeling practices in multicultural discourse within adult education (Osman Ali, 1999), and the isolation of identity as a result of being of an ethnic minority (Pieck, 1994). There has been empirical research directly dealing with the needs of specific races and ethnic identity groups in a culturally relevant way in various anthologies (Guy, 1999; Sheared & Sissel, 2001), and in the recent *Handbook of Race in Adult Education* (Sheared, Johnson-Bailey, Colin, Peterson, & Brookfield, 2010). However, there has yet to be a discussion within the adult education literature dealing with identity and the learning of Arab American women. As Shaheen (2010) suggests, post 9/11 there has been a growing interest and need for the understanding of Arabs and Arab American identity, a point which will be discussed later in the chapter.
One of the ways that adult educators have begun to try to also deal with diversity is by calling attention to the ways popular culture and entertainment media can reproduce power relations or challenge them. Scholars of the field argue that it is important to teach adult learners and the community at large to read, or understand, the media, in so doing highlighting the importance and relevance of teaching media literacy (Tisdell, 2008) or otherwise attending to issues in popular culture that affect how adults learn and construct their ongoing identities (Wright & Sandlin, 2009). Given that the focus of this study was the Arab American women’s perceptions of the media, and how their critical media literacy developed in the context of this project, it is of relevance to better understand the purposes of critical media literacy.

**Critical Media Literacy**

The conception of critical media literacy draws on the work of Freire’s (1970) theory of critical literacy, in which he emphasizes the importance of developing a critical consciousness through education. He defines critical literacy as consciousness raising so that one has the ability to identify economic, social, and political domination and to take action against the domineering component of society. Although Freire originally worked with rural peasants in Brazil, many educators have adapted his framework to teach university students, community activists, people in communities, and many others. The subject matter is not limited to literacy, has been adapted by many for critical consciousness, and can also be adapted while teaching critical media literacy. The evolution of media research and studies in the U.S. includes the focus on media making, responses to media, utilization of media, ownership, as in who owns popular media, (de) regulation, circulation, analysis and critique; however this study will focus on the analysis and critique of movies. The impact of media studies on scholars has led some within the field of education to theorize on the effects of the media and popular culture on the very idea of
“literacy” (Alverman, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Buckingham, 2003). The value of such work, moreover, is considerable given that globalization exponentially increases the frequency and ubiquitous nature of media culture.

Although there is a variety of definitions of media literacy, Yosso’s (2002) definition of critical media literacy is most relevant to this study. She suggests that critical media literacy be used as a pedagogical tool to facilitate students’ becoming critically conscious of themselves in relation to the structures of power and domination in their world. She expands Paulo Freire’s (1971) notion on the importance of reading the world as well as the word, to encompass media literacy, since it is through the media that many people are uncritically reading the world. Tisdell (2007) summarizes Yosso’s discussion of the assumptions of critical media in the following:

Media is controlled and driven by money; b) media images are social constructions based on interacting influences of directors, actors, and other media images makers; and c) media makers bring their own experience with them in their construction of characters, including their perception of race, gender, and class and those constructions affect how characters are portrayed in the media. (p. 9)

There are numerous scholars in adult education and related areas who are discussing popular culture, consumer culture, or critical media literacy as is apparent in various anthologies (Sandlin & McLaren, 2009; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), with some chapter authors specifically focusing on the role of media in the examining of identity (Guy, 2007; Wright, 2007). Guy (2007), for example, argues that popular media is a medium in which many of us learn about others and ourselves. He points out that it is through mediated popular culture we learn our identity. In addition, Wright and Sandlin (2009) argue that popular culture informs how adults learn about themselves and others, and note in their extensive review of literature of pioneers in
the field of popular culture and adult education, that “popular culture has powerful effects on peoples world view” (p.119).

There are many ways in which the media propagates the interests of the dominant culture, and scholars in the field of media literacy argue that the uncritical consumption of popular culture is a way stereotypical images and ideas are propagated, either intentionally or unintentionally. Paul (1998) discusses the dangers of stereotypes and argues that stereotypes are created in order to justify social inequalities. He also suggests that stereotypes, in general, are harmful to any race or ethnicity when the negative implications about a particular group are considered to be synonymous with all individuals within that race or ethnicity. As Abreu, Ramirez, Bryan, and Haddy (2003) point out,

When one perceives an individual as a member of a particular stereotyped group, the perceiver’s mind activates the group-relevant cognitive structure and process, judgments and attitudes within the framework of that particular group. (p. 694)

Pitner, Astor, Benbenishty, Haj Yahia, and Zeira (2003) suggest that research has also indicated that holding negative beliefs about other groups is functional, in that it could strengthen the image and esteem of one’s own group. It could be argued that the perceptions that are formed by these negative stereotypes in the media are directly related to how one views that particular cultural group as well as one’s own.

As suggested above, Giroux (1991) argues that culture and the media act as forms of popular pedagogy. He calls for cultural studies and directs attention to media studies in education that provide counter pedagogy. He brings to the forefront that his own identity was heavily influenced by popular culture more so than formal education. Indeed, Giroux convincingly demonstrates in a large body of writing that it is precisely media culture that is
shaping our culture and everyday life, as well as in educational institutions and cultural sites, like museums, theme parks, and shopping centers. Sandlin and McLaren (2009), in the opening chapter of a recent edited collection about critical pedagogy and popular culture, argue that public pedagogy and everyday life are sites of education and miseducation. They argue that forms of mass media such as soap operas, television, and movies are forms of public education, and consider popular culture and everyday life powerful sites of pedagogical practice, which largely serves the interests of the dominant culture, and are probably more influential than formal education. They draw to a large extent on Giroux (1999), who suggests that “public pedagogy” is executed through the medium of popular culture, a location that produces meanings, social practices, and desires among the public. Giroux (1999) further states that media culture:

has become a substantial, if not the primary, educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity as a male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen. The media culture defines childhood, the national past, beauty, truth, and social agency. (pp. 2-3)

Wright and Sandlin (2009), in tracing some of the adult educators who have discussed the importance of attending to popular culture, also note the media’s role in the construction of identity. Within the field of adult education, this has been discussed conceptually by scholars such as Stuckey and Kring (2007) and Guy (2007), whereas Tisdell and Thompson (2007) discussed it from a research perspective, highlighting the role the media played in the identity construction and overall lives of the participants in their study. There is also additional research that discusses how people construct identity in relation to media. Some of this research is in relation to a variety of groups including African American women that addressed cultural
criticism and transformation (hooks, 1996). In addition, Yosso (2003) discussed the media in relation to Chicano students in the context of education and identity.

There has been relatively little attention, however, within the fields of adult education or U.S. media studies, to Arab Americans within the U.S. Media scholar Jack Shaheen (2009) has provided some limited discussion of media in relationship to Arab American identity. Post 9/11 there has been a growing interest and need for the understanding of Arabs and Arab American identity. Moreover, the number of Arab and Arab Americans living in the U.S. are increasing according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008). In addition, although not all Arabs or Arab Americans are Muslims, there are a large number who are; of that large number many of the women wear the hijab. This makes these Arab/American women not only easily identifiable but more susceptible to discrimination and abuse as well. In order to gain a better understanding of this growing group of people, it is important to consider Arabs and Arab Americans, and how they are portrayed in media.

**Arabs and the United States**

It is estimated that there are over 170 ethnic groups in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). However, defining exact numbers is difficult, due to the multi-ethnic population and annually increasing number of immigrants. Arabs with origins in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine began immigrating to the United States before the turn of the 20th Century. By the 1920’s, Arabs had established small residential clusters in Philadelphia. The earliest Arab immigrants were engaged in the wholesale and retail trades, many as urban or rural peddlers. A portion of the Arab immigrants integrated into U.S. society at a fast pace, while others, specifically immigrants with families back in the homeland did not assimilate into the American fabric as quickly, because they maintained the intention of returning to their homeland (Cainkar,
In 1996, 40% percent of the estimated 42,000 Arab Americans in Pennsylvania were of Palestinian origin. The Palestinian community’s immigration patterns are directly related to events in the homeland, with large numbers of Palestinians arriving in Pennsylvania following the 1948 and 1967 wars (Caninker, 1996). Kayyali (2006) highlights that Arabs and Arab Americans continue to be a misrepresented and misunderstood ethnic group, because what is portrayed in the Western media about Arabs is regularly stereotypical and negative. She makes the argument that this cultural misrepresentation has not only influenced Arab and Arab American’s self-perception, but it has influenced the West’s perception of Arabs and Arab Americans as well. She questions the morality of systems that reinforce these cultural misrepresentations and identifies many societal institutions, including educational systems such as schools and universities, as well as the media, as being part of a larger system that perpetuates cultural misunderstanding. However, she also identifies these educational institutions as being excellent platforms to address, analyze, and reflect on issues of the misrepresentations that result from stereotyping or other kinds of misinformation.

The Western Media’s Construction of Arab and Arab American Identity

As Levesque (2002) notes, Jack Shaheen is “probably America’s best known expert on how Arabs are portrayed in the media” (p. 3). Shaheen (2001) conducted an extensive review of more than 900 movies that depicted images of Arabs, and suggest that only 12 images portrayed Arabs in a positive manner. Furthermore, in a documentary titled, Real Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People (2006), Shaheen gives a historical view of portrayals of Arabs in Western media. In the documentary and his book (2008), he suggests that Hollywood has used repeated stereotypes as a lethal pedagogical tool for more than a century, and in so doing, he
argues that these stereotypical, repetitious images of Arabs and Arab Americans tutored audiences in film after film and contributed to the formation of negative stereotypes. As will be discussed further in Chapter Two, Shaheen (2001, 2008) has discussed the image and identity of Arabs in the media, and the ways in which the media has influenced the perception and conception of Arab American identity, though he does not deal with the issue of gender in his analysis. Further, films in the U.S. that highlight gender issues and identity construction for Arab or Arab American women are virtually nonexistent. Clearly, more research about how Arab and Arab American women construct their identity is needed. Below is a brief consideration of Arab American women’s identity construction.

**Arab American Women’s Identity**

When speaking to the current identity of Arab American women, there are three important areas: their historical and ethnic identity, their religious identity, and the events of 9/11. Most of this will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two. Briefly, the issue of 9/11 must be considered, because of its effects on the current situation of Arab and Arab American women in the U.S., who are often assumed to be Muslim, correctly or incorrectly. Zaal, Salah, and Fine (2007) suggest that, after the events of 9/11, there has been a shared Western criticism and devaluation of Islam and Muslims, in general, which affects Arab and Arab Americans in the U.S. This, they argue, has added to solidarity among Muslims and the increasing need among Arab Muslims not only to identify themselves as Arabs but as Muslims as well.

The previous literature is significant when trying to understand the basic elements that can affect the construction of Arab American’s women’s identity. However, the literature does not specifically address the construction of the Arab American women’s identity vis-à-vis the media. In addition, although Shaheen’s (2006; 2008; 2010) analysis on Arabs relating to media is
insightful, he addresses Arabs in general and does not tend to specifically focus on women. With the exception of *Persepolis* (Paronnaud and Satrapi, 2007), a film which does specifically focus on Arab women’s construction of identity, more research and literature are needed specifically that pertains to Arab/American women and the media. Clearly, the references above indicate that there is also a growing literature base on popular culture and critical media literacy in adult education and related areas. In media studies, there have been some studies of Arabs in the media, and studies of women’s responses to negative images in the media. Nevertheless, there is a lack of data-based studies about Arab or Arab American women in the media.

**Purpose and Research Questions**

It is unfortunate that some racial and ethnic groups tend to be depicted in a more positive or flattering way, while others are portrayed in a more negative manner.

Several of Hollywood’s most blatant patterns of bias fall within the categories of race, ethnicity and/or national origin. Included in this group are negative and/or stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Arab Americans. (Cones, 1998, p.3)

The existence of stereotypes of Arabs in the media and its implications on the Arab American identity are significant to this particular study. This fact, along with Kayyali’s (2006) analysis, brings to the forefront the need for education to address cultural issues such as stereotypes in the context of adult education, by aiding adult learners to become conscious and critical of the media. As previously noted, further research is needed, particularly about Arab and Arab American women and the media.

In light of the lack of data-based research studies dealing with how Arab American women construct their identity through media, and the limited attention to helping people to learn to critically reflect on media messages in the form of critical media literacy, the purpose of
this action research study will be twofold: (1) to examine how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identities in living in the U.S., and how they think media and popular culture has affected their identity construction; and then (2) through an action research process, to see how these women continue to construct their identity while going through a critical media literacy process of viewing and discussing movies portraying Arabs and Arab American women.

The specific research questions guiding this study of Arab American women include:

(1) How do Arab American women negotiate their identity in the U.S.; and what is their perception of the role of the media in relation to their construction of identity?

(2) How does discussion of media portrayals of Arabs and Arab Americans through a critical media literacy perspective act as a pedagogical tool for Arab American women? and

(3) How do the participants in this action research study believe that the action research process affected their ongoing construction of identity?

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in critical media literacy theory, particularly as related to the construction of Arab American women’s identity. Critical media literacy theory is informed by critical and feminist theory, critical and feminist pedagogy, and media studies. Informing this proposed study are concepts such as criticality, pedagogy, and culture, which were previously identified as key components of critical media literacy. These concepts contain many theoretical underpinnings that are central to critical media literacy, and therefore, will need to be explored in more detail in relation to critical media literacy to provide insight into critical media literacy and the theoretical framework of this study.
Critical Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Media Literacy

There is a wide body of literature that constitutes critical theory, but essentially, as Brookfield (2004) notes, critical theory aims to destabilize knowledge that presents itself as certain, final, and beyond human interests, in favor of alternative knowledge forms, specifically, those shaped by social interests and are democratic in nature. Moreover, critical theory seeks to “make problematic what is taken for granted in culture,” and it does so in the interests of “social justice,” especially in the interests of “those who are oppressed” (Nichola & Allen-Brown, 1996, p. 226). Systems of knowledge production such as media can be oppressive, because they reinforce the dominant culture, all the while excluding the “other.” Engaging adults, and in this case Arab American women, in critical analysis of the media, then, has the potential to be a forum for the kind of social responsibility discussed by Nichola and Allen-Brown and adult educators such as Brookfield (2004).

A fundamental aspect of critical theory related to the media, according to Frankfurt School critical social theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1972), originally writing in 1945, is the critique of cultural industry. Horkheimer and Adorno were among the first theorists to use the idea of the cultural industry. Speaking about life in the middle of the last century, they adopted the term to argue that the way in which cultural items were produced had become a repetitive operation. The meaning of the culture industry inherent in the dominant ideology had surfaced as a result of the capitalist movement, which had transformed “art” into a business and commercialized product. They argue that the culture industry creates predetermined ideologies and messages through art (radio, TV, music, film, and other forms of mass media, and now, they would likely include the Internet) that socially controls and conditions mass audiences.
to obey the established social structure, maintaining a capitalist economy for those who have the “power.”

Although Adorno and Horkheimer’s insights and suggestions are useful for this research project, a clear limitation of their work is that they do not particularly see any benefit to media. However, other authors highlight how some forms of media can act as a tool to resist the dominant culture. Postcolonial theorist, Edward Said, for example, best known for his book *Orientalism* (1978), urges people to be critical of social structures and systems of oppression and what he describes as the “contemporary cultural theory.” What is of significance is that he points to the fact that these same social structures can and should be used to resist these oppressive cultures that they tend to serve. This literature will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

Because critical media literacy has a specific educational component, the literature underlying it from critical pedagogy and its feminist influences is an important theoretical influence on this study. As mentioned previously, critical pedagogy is influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1970), who acknowledged class, structural power relations, and systems of oppression and related them to education. Furthermore, critical pedagogy draws from Freire in its emphasis on emancipation and empowerment of the learner (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Freire’s pedagogy is linked to the generation of social consciousness and revolutionary praxis (McLaren, 2000). Moreover, his work in Brazil with literacy programs is also directly tied to the struggle for human liberation. Freire’s perspective of pedagogy is known as pedagogy of the oppressed and reflects his belief in liberation through education. Critical pedagogy challenges us to recognize, engage, and critique any social institutions, such as media, that maintain inequalities and oppressive social relations (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom,
Critical pedagogy is concerned with the types of educational theories that support both educators and students to develop a relationship between ideology, power, and culture.

As many in adult education have discussed (Guy, 2007; Tisdell, 2007; Tisdell & Thompson, 2008; Wright & Sandlin, 2009), entertainment media and popular culture have functioned as a form of education or miseducation. Media also maintains dominant beliefs, values, and interests (Guy, 2007), but sometimes media also challenges dominant beliefs; this is the purpose of alternative media. Therefore, critical pedagogy can reveal that media images are always produced within particular social and historical conditions, and as a result must be accompanied by an exploration into their relation with power and ideology as well as the inherently subjective perspectives of the researcher, constructed by independent choices and intentions of the individual. In order to understand the sociopolitical, economic, and historical realities that shape media, Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American women as learners and educators must work to uncover new meaning and develop cultural practices that are critical, liberatory, and transformative to oppressive conditions. Traditional critical theory and critical pedagogy tend not to focus on gender issues, and focus more on race and class, to some extent. This is why this study will also rely on feminist theories to reflect the Arab American women’s experience, and therefore, to make sense of this study.

**Critical Feminism and Arab American Women**

Whereas critical theory deals with the concept of power primarily in relation to social class, an analysis of power that includes a gender analysis is an essential element of feminist theory (Bartky, 1999; Hartmann, 1999; Lee-Lampshire, 1994; Okin, 1998). In many ways, the concept of power in women’s lives is invisible to the women themselves. Many women, including Arab and Arab American women cannot see it, but it is always there. It becomes
internalized; part of who they are, their values and beliefs, their self-concepts. The effect of this power, then, is to bring about “a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). This is why a critical feminist lens is also needed in the study.

Critical feminism is concerned with elements of power, oppression, and one’s position in society, and directly connects these elements to race and class. Therefore, critical feminism looks at how these elements can be used to “interrogate and explicate the power relationships embedded within women’s stories and by so doing better understand their experiences” (Maneval, 2000, p. 6). A critical feminist perspective looks at how social structures such as gender, race, and class inform an individual’s identity and personal development and serve to reinforce unequal power relationships that exist in our society. By using a critical feminist perspective in this study, the participants’ gender issues in the analysis of their personal stories will become visible.

In terms of the notion of the construction of gender specifically in Arab American women’s identity, Naber (2006), a self-proclaimed Arab Feminist, argues that cultural identities are gendered and suggests that tense and often conflictual locations of Arab American femininities at the intersections of two contradictory discourses: Arab cultural re-authenticity and hegemonic U.S. nationalism has permeated many Arab immigrant families' engagements with the pressures of assimilation vis-à-vis a series of racial and cultural discourses. (p.13)

This conflictual intersection she argues plays a defining role in the construction of the Arab American women’s identity. This aspect of the theoretical framework will also be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.
Significance of the Study

As previously mentioned, although there is a small body of literature focusing on the stereotypes of Arabs in the media, there is a paucity of literature that addresses how these negative stereotypes affect the identity construction of Arab American women living in the U.S. This lack of research and literature points to the significance of this proposed study. First, in terms of adult education, there is a lack of data-based research on the relationship between media images and stereotypes, and the role it plays on the identity and culture of Arab American women. What this study proposed to do was not only examine Arab Americans perceptions of the media and its effects; it also proposed to encourage critical media literacy through an action research study. The body of literature on media literacy argues that one can critique media images and use the media as a pedagogical tool to encourage people to examine how they have constructed notions of themselves and others through media (Guy, 2007). It is critical media literacy, when people examine and then deconstruct the ways they have been affected by media messages, or when they began to analyze the multiple meanings of messages in the media. Media messages are problematic when the images of a specific race or culture are consistently or more often negative. As a result, cultural and social norms can be transmitted through popular culture and tend to be of the dominant culture, which is perceived as the norm (Giroux, 1991). Thus, this study began the exploration of how media messages affect Arab American women’s identity and add to the current literature within the field of adult education by sparking a dialog about the role of media and its influence on the Arab American Identity and culture. But it also proposed to go one step further by facilitating critical media literacy development.

This study allowed for new ways of viewing media and in particular the teaching and learning that occurs with this pedagogical tool, as well as identifying ways to unmask the many
messages that are transmitted by it. Furthermore, the use of critical media literacy theory also offers particular significance to the field of adult education and the literature on Arab Americans. Thus, it offers promise of Arab Americans developing a critical consciousness of themselves in relation to the structural of power and domination (Yosso, 2002).

Finally, this study has particular personal significance. This study served to enhance my teaching and support my belief in the importance of critical media literacy within the context of culturally relevant education. As an adult educator, with an identity constructed in the context of Islam, Western Culture, Middle Eastern culture, and whose parents, father/Italian American and mother/African American both converted to Islam and moved to Saudi Arabia, where I spent the first 23 years of my life, I continually face the reality of being a woman of color with a diverse cultural background working with and teaching White populations and the need to understand and identify my culturally and socially constructed beliefs and behaviors vis-à-vis the dominant culture. By conducting this study, I hope to contribute to changing the learning process of Arab American women who are participating in this study by offering research findings that will serve to assist them in better understanding their learning process.

**Overview of Methodology**

This was a qualitative action research study of 7 Arab American women living in the U.S. As will be discussed further in Chapter Three, the overall design of the study makes use of qualitative and action research methods; it is intended in its action component to promote critical media literacy among the participants. Here, I first discuss general assumptions of qualitative and action research, and then how these will be applied in this study.
Qualitative Action Research

In qualitative research, an assumption about the world is that there are multiple realities and perspectives, illuminated by the view of the participant (Patton, 2002). The process of collecting data requires flexible, changing strategies, and the results are specific and not generalized to the whole population. Qualitative research employs a small, purposeful sample of participants, rather than a large, randomized number of subjects; sample selection has a profound effect on the quality of the research (Coyne, 1997). Also, it is important to note the researcher is an important part of the study and influenced the study by helping participants make meaning of the learning experience (Creswell & Miller, 1997).

This study also employed a qualitative action research component. Although there are several different approaches to action research that are on a continuum of problem solving to improve practice, my specific approach was action research with a goal of empowerment. The purpose of action research is not only to ask questions and listen but also to take action (Patton, 2002). It is meant to improve a social situation; for example, in this case, to promote greater understanding of the relationship between media images and the education or miseducation that occurs as result of the consumption of popular media. Through cyclical phases of planning, action, observing, and reflecting, participants were able to explore the use of media literacy to engage in alternative ways of learning and making meaning of how their identities are constructed. In addition to the initial one-on-one interviews, the action research processes included four group discussions of particular movies that dealt with images of Arab and Arab American women and one final interview and reflection session as a conclusion. The cyclical interventions of acting and reflecting focused on the use of media images to help participants find new ways to better understand how their identities are constructed vis-à-vis the media.
There were three basic criteria for participant selection for this study: first, that they were Arab American women; second, they needed to have been born in the U.S. or came to live in the U.S. before the age of five and have lived here ever since; and, third, because of the differences in the cultural backgrounds of Arab American Muslims and those who are Christian or from other religious backgrounds, this study limited the selection pool to those who identified as Muslim women.

**Design of this Study**

This study began with a preliminary interview of participants to find out how they perceive that their identity as Arab American women has developed and how the media has affected it. The interview was also used to plan the action part of the study. The data collection process consisted of this preliminary interview; data collected and documented during the action phase of the study through extensive field notes; and a final interview to gather feedback on the process and to document their perceptions of change and the effects of the process. The action phase of the study actually consisted of four learning and discussion sessions; each approximately one week apart, which allowed me the opportunity to conduct analysis between sessions. This data collection and analysis process is discussed further in Chapter Three.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Strengths of the Study**

Every study has assumptions, limitations, and strengths. This study is no exception.

**Assumptions**

The following assumptions are embedded in this proposed research project:

1. Images of Arabs in the media have impacted the perception of both Arabs and non-Arab Americans alike, and as a result, this impact of perception has affected the identity construction of the Arab American.
2. The women selected in the purposeful sample wanted to contribute and participate in the goals and research of this study. Moreover, that they will have the freedom to express their own views feelings and thoughts.

3. Knowledge is constructed socially, and therefore, participants will make meaning from their experience and gain new insight into the process of their identity construction.

**Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

All studies have limitations as well as strengths. Some of the potential limitations of this study include:

1. The concept of media images containing messages that are ubiquitous in nature and act as a forum for education and miseducation can be ambiguous, and therefore, initially, participants may have difficulty identifying how stereotypes have impacted their lives.

2. This study is specific to Arabs and Arab American women living in the U.S. It will not to be generalizable to all women or even all women living in the U.S.

3. This study was limited to Arab and Arab American women’s identity construction vis-à-vis the media; media may also affect the identity construction of Arab American men. This study however focused only on Arab American women and did not include Arab American men.

In addition to the limitations that are related to this study, there are potential strengths that must be acknowledged as well. First, it is important to acknowledge that the action research methodology that was employed in this study was a strength of the research. As discussed previously, this methodology supported the learning of new information related to identity construction. Another strength to consider is that this study hopefully will make a difference in the lives of its participants. In this study, a critical or engaged pedagogy was considered in
conjunction with action research because the aim was not only to unveil study participants’ meaning of an often unconscious and subtle issue like education and miseducation of media, but also to incorporate a process of research that would allow participants to get directly involved in an effort that could positively influence their learning. Thus, the overall purpose of this study is to create a process that will serve the interests of the participants.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of this research study investigating the impact of stereotypes on the identity of Arab Americans. In doing so, the background of the study was discussed along with the purpose statement, research question, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding this study. This was followed by an overview of the research methodology and design to be employed within this study, along with highlighting the study’s significance, as well as a list of assumptions and limitations in the research study. The remainder of this chapter provides definitions of some of the terms used in the study. The rest of the document includes the literature review in Chapter Two and a discussion of the methodology in Chapter Three. Chapter Four introduces the participants and provides a summary of findings from the initial interviews and learning session. Chapter Five documents the findings from the remaining learning sessions, whereas Chapter Six presents the themes from the final interviews. Chapter Seven explores what it all means in relation to the literature and offers further discussion and conclusions.

**Definition of Terms**

1. Critical media literacy: The use of media as a pedagogical tool to facilitate students becoming critically conscious of themselves in relation to the structures of power and domination in their world.
2. Critical pedagogy: challenges us to recognize, engage, and critique any social institutions, such as media, that maintain inequalities and oppressive social relations (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996).

3. Identity: Marshall and Read (2003) conclude that identities are political in nature and are used to explain political divisions derived from group identities based not economic inequality and class conflict, but in defense of more expressive issues of cultural identity, such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

4. Islam: Today Islam claims around one billion adherents around the world and is the fastest growing religion in the U.S. (Roald, 2001). Although the vast majority of Muslims are non-Arabs, Arabic continues to maintain its special status as Muslims around the world study classical Arabic in order to recite the Quran. Islam recognizes one God (Allah, in Arabic) and previous biblical prophets as messengers of God. Muslims see Islam as a return to the monotheism of Abraham, from which both the tradition of Judaism and Christianity flowed (Haddad, 1998). The Qur’an is the foundation of Islamic belief and practice, and as such, is the most important source of reference for Muslims. Muslims believe that the Qur’an contains the exact words revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Muslims consider the Prophet a model that should be emulated, and his actions and sayings are identified as sunna and hadith. The Quran, sunna, and hadith form the foundation of Islamic law and way of life for all Muslims. The main branch of Islam is Sunni Islam, and the followers are called Sunnis (Kayyali, 2006). Sunnis are Muslims who follow the sunna, the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Cooke (2001) argues that Islam and Islamic discourse is such an
important part of Arab American identity that the advocates for human rights for Arabs and Arab Americans have no choice but to engage in an Islamic discourse.

5. Gender in Islam: In Muslim society, women and men are expected to behave in line with social, cultural, and religious codes. Although the Qur’an views women and men to be equal in human dignity, this spiritual or ethical equality has not been reflected in most societies (Cooke, 2001). For example, women do not have equal rights to make independent decisions about choice of a marriage partner, getting a divorce, and custody of their children. Reformists and feminists, such as El-Saadwi (1995) and Badran (1991), have challenged women’s lack of rights and lack of control over their own lives in Muslim Law through challenging the original texts of Muslim Law, the Quran, hadith, and sunna.

6. The hijab (veil): To control the sexuality of both genders, specifically the female gender, Islam calls for modesty of dress for both men and women (Kayyali, 2006). Although some religious Muslim men have distinctive beards, the men’s requirements do not usually reflect any outward religious signs or symbols of religion (Roald, 2001). Women, however, have to dress modestly, and some Muslims believe that Islam requires a Muslim woman to wear a veil around men who are not close relatives. Muslim scholars argue that the purpose of the veil is not to belittle a woman but to protect her from unwanted attention by men by covering her hair and body (Cooke, 2001). In the Western world, many see the veil as a symbol of oppression and degradation forced by Muslim men on women and consider the veil an endorsement of a backward culture and religion (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001). In contrast, many veiled women report feeling dignity and high self-esteem and enjoy that their physical and personal self does not enter into social
interactions. As a result, many women consider the hijab a symbol of freedom and liberation from men (Kayyali, 2006). However, Kayyali also argues that many veiled Arab American women in the United States are faced with discrimination, harassment, and even hate crimes as a result of wearing the hijab. It is also important to include the fact that not all Arab Muslim women view the hijab as something that is freeing. Islam, similar to other religions can be taken out of context and when this happens people falsely use religion to oppress women, although this is not the topic of this particular research.

7. Hegemony: "Hegemony emphasizes the way people learn to embrace enthusiastically beliefs and practices that work against their own best interests" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 92). This happens through largely unconscious processes as people unconsciously adopt beliefs from the dominant culture as propagated through the media and other instruments of popular culture.

8. Qualitative research: makes sense of a phenomenon and interprets the meanings that people give to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

9. Action research: provides an interpretation based on social change and solving practical problems through developing skills and applying those skills in the classroom or practice setting (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this action research study was first to explore how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identities in living in the U.S., and how they think media and popular culture have affected their identity construction. Then, through an action research process, the study aimed to see how these women continue to construct their identity by going through a critical media literacy (CML) process of viewing and discussing movies portraying Arabs and Arab American women.

This literature review focuses on three main areas of literature that relate to the purpose of this research. First, it begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework that is grounded in (CML) theory. The second section focuses on the Arab American woman’s context and explores literature related to the construction of Arab American women’s identity. The third and final section will review studies related to critical media literacy, with particular attention to the portrayal of Arabs in Western Media.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Media Literacy

As noted in Chapter One, the theoretical framework of this study is grounded in critical media literacy theory as related to Arab American women. CML, in general, is informed by critical and feminist theory and pedagogy, bell hooks’ (1994) notion of engaged pedagogy, and the role of popular culture as a form of public pedagogy. Concepts such as criticality, pedagogy, and popular culture are central to this study, which were previously identified in Chapter One as key components of CML.
There are numerous scholars in adult education and related areas who discuss popular culture, consumer culture, or critical media literacy as apparent in various anthologies (Sandlin & McLaren, 2009; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), with some authors specifically focusing on the role of media in examining identity (Guy, 2007; Wright, 2007). Guy (2007), for example, argues that popular media is a way many of us learn about others and ourselves, or at least how the media would portray both people like us and not like us. He points out that it is through mediated popular culture we “effectively learn what it means to be ‘white,’ ‘black,’ ‘straight,’ ‘gay,’ ‘middle class,’ ‘poor,’ ‘wealthy,’ ‘Christian,’ ‘Muslim,’ ‘American,’ and so on” (p.18). He suggests that although popular culture can be a powerful mechanism for shaping us, depending on its content, it potentially can also be a vehicle for challenging structured inequalities and social injustice. In short, media more often reproduces power relations, but it can also challenge them as well. In addition, Wright and Sandlin (2009) argue that popular culture, which includes media, is a form of adult education, though it was not given much attention in the field theoretically until the last few years. They make this argument by building on a core adult education assumption, also summarized by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) and others, that adults learn from experience, including their experience with media. Wright and Sandlin (2009) conducted an extensive review of literature of pioneers in the field of popular culture and adult education, and the authors highlight the fact that “popular culture has powerful effects on peoples world view” (p.119).

As previously stated, for the purpose of this study, critical media literacy is informed by critical and feminist theory and pedagogy. Therefore, the following will outline the elements of the theoretical framework and will begin by examining the influences of critical theory. Next, the influences of critical, feminist, and engaged pedagogy that influence critical media literacy
are explored. Finally, it concludes with a theoretical overview of pedagogy and critical media literacy.

**Influences of Critical Theory**

Most discussions of critical media literacy in both adult education and k-12 education are influenced to some extent by critical theory. Critical theory informs this study in two ways: first, critical theory attempts to expose the dominant power structures in society, particularly those related to class relations, and to some extent in its more recent iterations those related to race and ethnicity (Carr, 2010). Aspects of critical theory can be used to explore the power structures in society, including those faced by Arab Americans, and aspects of critical theory can serve as the basis for raising awareness among this particular group. On considering the use of theory, in general, Brookfield (1995) states,

>a theory can be judged as useful by measuring the extent that it helps us understand not just how the world is but also how it might be changed for the better (of course, how one defines better is framed by one’s class, culture, race, sexual orientation and ideology, among other things).” (p.7)

Critical theory is specifically associated with social thought and views knowledge as power and the production of knowledge as socially and historically determined (Brookfield, 2004). According to this perspective, knowledge is not neutral. Quite the contrary, it reflects human interests and the social and power relationships that exist within a society.

Critical theory was developed at the Institute for Social Research, home of the Frankfurt School in Frankfurt, Germany (Brookfield, 2004; DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999; Giroux, 2001). The first generation of critical theorists developed their work largely in response to what was happening in Nazi Germany. Although Neo-Marxist in their theoretical orientation, theorists
in the Frankfurt School placed a lesser role on the economy and focused on subjectivity and ideology, while exploring how everyday life represented a new terrain of domination (Giroux, 2001). In this context, critical theorists focused on revealing existing structures of domination. Critical theory further developed as a response to positivism, which focused on a scientific basis for studying culture. According to the Frankfurt School, positivism was a threat to critical thinking (Giroux, 2001).

In addition, critical theory is also influenced by the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the development of commodity and consumerism-based societies that fostered the development of capitalism in many countries (Kanpol, 1999). It was also influenced by the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who was imprisoned in Italy and died in 1937. As a result, capitalism is seen as a contributor to creating systems of inequality among race, class, and gender. Brookfield (2004) notes that critical theory aims at destabilizing knowledge that presents itself as certain, final, and beyond human interests in favor of alternative knowledge forms, specifically those shaped by social interests and are democratic in nature. Moreover, Nichols and Allen-Brown (1996) suggests that critical theory seeks to “make problematic what is taken for granted in culture,” and it does so in the interests of “social justice,” especially in the interests of “those who are oppressed” (p. 226). Systems of knowledge production such as media can be oppressive, because they reinforce the dominant culture in their portrayal of the “other.” Engaging adults, and in this case Arab American women, in critical analysis of the media, then, was a vehicle for enabling them to consider the ways media has influenced their identities.

Critical theory is generally defined as the diverse body of work produced by members and associates of the Frankfurt School. Among the most prominent of these individuals are Theodore Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse
In a broader sense, critical theory is also associated with the contributions of late twentieth century social and even literary theorists, such as Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes, and as noted above, was influenced by the writings of Antonio Gramsci. The theoretical contributions of the original Frankfurt School members frequently focus on media and technology (Benjamin, 1968; Habermas, 1970; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) and on education and the relationship of all of these to social change generally. There are a few key theorists and ideas from critical theorists that are central to this study on the development of critical media literacy. In what follows, I consider Gramsci and his notion of the organic intellectual, which focuses on how everyday people can learn to critique and challenge hegemony, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, as each of these will be used in the study.

**Antonio Gramsci, hegemony and the organic intellectual.** Gramsci (1891-1937) is considered to be one of the founding members of the Communist Party in Italy. In addition, Gramsci’s ideology expanded on Marxism and as a result of his political views he was imprisoned for the last part of his life under the leadership of Mussolini’s Fascist regime. He wrote extensively from prison, and though he died in 1937, his writings continue to be published. He is best known for his concept of cultural hegemony, where he highlights the process through which a capitalist society is maintained. Brookfield (2005), in summarizing Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, notes, "Hegemony emphasizes the way people learn to embrace enthusiastically beliefs and practices that work against their own best interests" (p. 92). This happens through largely unconscious processes as people unconsciously adopt beliefs from the dominant culture as propagated through the media and other instruments of popular culture.

Gramsci (1974/1971) is also known for the concept of the organic intellectual, and emphasized how a group of grass roots people who begin to analyze how society is organized
through ideology critique and work to change the system as organic intellectuals, can act as a tool that could counter hegemony. His focus differed from the scholars of his time because he focused on concepts such as hegemony and organic intellectuals as opposed to social structures like the economy and its ability to maintain a state of power and dominance in a capitalistic society.

The traditional Marxist theory of power was one-dimensional; at its core it revolved around the role of power and control as a platform for ruling and as a means to dominate the working class. Within this context, Gramsci (1947/1971) was instrumental in highlighting the fact that there was a form of ideology that worked to enable oppressive structures. He identified two forms of political control: the first, domination, which was used to define physical oppression by both police and armed officials; the second, hegemony, which was used to identify ideological control and consent of the majority. His argument was built around the belief that a government is able to maintain itself through organized power and armed forces. What is of interest is that he believed that governments were able to maintain themselves through popular and majority support. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, provides a way that the system will support the governing power and also promote the system that upholds it.

Today, media is a part of the fabric that is used to support the system that Gramsci discussed in his writings. For example, by watching the news one can easily detect how big multinational corporations who now control the media (Bagdikian, 2004), and to some extent, governmental regimes, rely heavily on the media to not only communicate their ideologies and beliefs but also to use it as a tool to guide, assist, and communicate with the masses in an effort to promote themselves and their ideologies. Therefore, now more than ever, educating oneself about the media through critical media literacy is important and necessary, as Gramsci would
have argued, in order to better be able to unpack the effects of hegemony. This is the purpose of critical media literacy; it provides people with a better understanding of power and domination, in the ideology of media. This particular study focuses on how this kind of hegemony affects the construction of Arab American women’s identity, and how the development of critical media literacy skills might continue to affect the ongoing construction of that identity. Although critical media literacy is a large area, including analysis of news, movies, television, video games, Internet blogs, etc. However, the focus of this study will center on the role of movies that feature Arab or Arab Americans and the construction of identity.

Trying to unpack the effects of a hegemonic ideology segues to the second concept in Gramsci’s (1947/1971) writings, which is the concept of the organic intellectual. Gramsci argued that the role of the intellectual was essential in forming a counter hegemony. He highlighted the significance of the ideological struggle in an effort to propel social change. This points to the fact that combating hegemony was not limited to only consciousness-raising but must also incorporate consciousness transformation. He was clear in pointing out that this concept could be imposed on people, but that they must arise from their actual working lives. The intellectual realm, therefore, was not to be seen as something confined to the elite, but to be seen as something grounded in everyday life, and he thus valued the idea that every day people could be organic intellectuals. Gramsci (1947/1971) argued that the creation of intellectuals would help create a counter hegemony that would undermine existing social structures. He urged intellectuals to be critical and made it clear that “critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is” (p. 323). Therefore, one could argue that an organic intellectual could be seen as anyone who has the motivation to know, feel, and understand at a higher level than the majority of the oppressed, and moreover, has the desire to take action. But one cannot really take action
effectively unless one has given critical thought to how the system works, and doing so is the process of being and becoming an organic intellectual.

Gramsci’s concepts of organic intellectual and hegemony introduced a new perspective on social relationships vis-à-vis power. He makes the argument that almost any member of society is capable of becoming an organic intellectual, in essence dismissing the previous notion that this is a phenomenon that is reserved for the elite (Brookfield, 2005). He also expanded on the meaning of the “intellectual,” suggesting that an intellectual is one who is knowing, conscious, and capable of feeling, and through doing ideology critique, can act as a catalyst for change.

**Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the culture industry.** Critical theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1972) are among the theorists from the Frankfurt School who most directly discussed the media in their critique of culture industry. Max Horkheimer was a prominent critical theorist who managed the Institute of Social Research at the Frankfort University in the 1930’s. He was also a dominant and influential figure at the Frankfort University and considered to be one of the founding fathers of critical theory. Adorno and Horkheimer first used the idea of culture industry as a concept in their book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). They adopted the term to argue that the way in which cultural items were produced had become a repetitive operation. Central to this study is their argument that the culture industry produces programmed ideologies and messages through art (radio, TV, music, film, and other forms of mass media) that collectively controlled and conditioned the mass audiences, so that they in return follow the established social structure that maintains a capitalist economy for those who have the “power.” Furthermore, they argue that through developing the desire and need for art and entertainment, the culture industry is able to allocate specific
ideological codes and meanings into these commodities. Moreover, meaning is further created through constant repetition and creating an atmosphere of social influence and pressure through all mediums. This strategy proves to be effective, they argue, because it “hypnotizes” the unknowing masses, who are “helpless victims” to what is being imposed on them (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944, p.75). The attraction of individuals to the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer assert, is because it is entertaining, humorous, and fun. Therefore, they argue that this presents an escape from powerlessness and boredom. They write, “The fusion of culture and entertainment that is taking place today leads not only to a deprivation of culture, but inevitably to an intellectualization of amusement” (p. 126).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, then, the culture industry is a concept that is still relevant today and is a tool that is used to dominate in everyday life; this domination leads to the “standardization” of culture, which can affect the way that the various identities within that culture are constructed by real people. Hence the standardization of culture is a domination and control of culture. It sells success to the masses, and many within the masses “buy” it: “the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are, therefore, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” (p.134). For Horkheimer and Adorno science is a form of standardization with the cultural industry, and regarding this standardization they state, “science is repetition, refined into observed regularity, and preserved in stereotypes” (p.181). They argue that both science and technology work together to facilitate continuous repetition and reproduction of the same. Although Horkheimer and Adorno highlight that it is difficult to keep people in this submissive position, they however suggest that most people are not capable enough to escape the messages and hegemonic influence of the culture industry. Hence, in their view, individuals are not able to recognize the standardization that
happens in the culture industry, because it is embedded within the very processes of socialization that makes one human, or, as Horkheimer and Adorno (1944) state, “all the trends of the culture industry are profoundly embedded in the public by the whole social process” (p.136).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno (1944), the culture industry is all encompassing because nothing is out of its reach. Furthermore, they argue that the culture industry is so widely accepted because the culture industry is able to sell the idea of uniqueness to the masses through the subtle vehicle of entertainment. They write, “Not only are the hit songs, stars, and soap operas cyclically recurrent and rigidly invariable types, but the specific content of the entertainment itself is derived from them and only appears to change” (p.125). To combat “standardization” by the dominant ideology, citizens must engage in “ideology critique,” which Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) state is, “the ability of individuals to disengage themselves from the tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations in order to exert more conscious control over their everyday lives” (p. 24).

In writing specifically about adult education, Brookfield (2005) defines ideology critique as a learning process that describes:

the ways in which people learn to recognize how critically accepted and unjust dominant ideologies are embedded in everyday situation and practices…As an educational activity ideology critique helps people come to an awareness of how capitalism shapes social relations and imposes often without our knowledge belief systems and assumptions that justify and maintain economic and political inequity. (p.13)

Given the power of the media, it is crucial that adults learn to do ideology critique of the media itself.
The limitations of Horkheimer and Adorno. Although Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1977) are instrumental in highlighting the social impact of the culture industry, it is imperative to recognize that their concept of culture industry, given the time of their writing, does not incorporate attention to the alternative media of today. They discuss only the power of the media to reproduce the dominant culture and do not consider ways media can be used to subvert the dominant culture, including what is now referred to as culture jamming, the concept of using the media an alternative way to turn it on its head (Sandlin, 2007), or simply creating alternative media to openly challenge dominant messages.

Contrary to the culture industry, alternative media is considered to be any type of media that is more-free of the control of multinational corporate business or governments. This form of alternative media can appear in as magazines, newspapers, television, radio, and movies. It also involves the newer media outlets of websites, e-books, e-magazines, streamed audio and video such as YouTube, or other media outlets that are found online (Atton, 2002).

Moreover, the independent nature of alternative media gives the director/producer the freedom to express an ideology that is not only more independent of hegemony but may resist it as well. Thus Horkheimer and Adorno’s culture industry does not speak of media as a tool to resist hegemony. The idea of media acting as a tool to resist hegemony will be further discussed later in this review. In closing, in the discussion on critical theory and the cultural theory it is important to highlight the fact that although there are many perspectives on critical theory, a fundamental commonality that is shared by all perspectives is that critical theory examines systems of power relations and oppression and brings to the forefront the sometimes subtle and illusive concept of hegemonic ideology. An understanding of the dominant hegemonic ideology and its impact on the “individual” identity can provide Arab and Arab American women with a
better understanding of how media affect the construction and perception of their identity. The particular, elements of critical theory—Gramsci’s notion of the fact that every day people can be organic intellectuals who critique hegemony, and Horkheimer and Adorno’s notion of the power of the culture industry and mass media as tools of hegemony—are foundational to this project. Further, critical theory’s emphasis on social structures and systems of oppression provide useful insight that can be applied to the learning of Arabs and Arab Americans.

**Influences from Critical, Feminist, and Engaged Pedagogy**

It is important to consider the modes of teaching in critical media literacy, which connects to the issue of pedagogy, and those discourses that deal with the role of pedagogy in deconstructing hegemony, or in developing critical media literacy. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, the conception of critical media literacy that will be used for this study is based to some extent on the work of Freire’s (1970) theory of critical literacy in which he emphasizes the importance of developing a critical consciousness through education. Many educators draw on the work of Freire as well as other writers in the realm of critical and feminist pedagogy to examine how to educate particular cultural groups, and to also develop a pedagogy relevant to teaching critical media literacy. Thus, before discussing media literacy, it’s important to consider the theoretical underpinnings of Freire’s work.

**Freire and the development of critical pedagogy.** Freire (1970) defines critical literacy as consciousness raising so that one has the ability to perceive political, social, and economic oppression and to take a stand against the domineering element of a society. Freire worked with rural peasants in Brazil, however educators have adapted his framework to teach college students, community activists, and lots of others. The subject matter is not limited to literacy, has been adapted by many for critical consciousness, and can also be adapted while teaching critical
media literacy as well. A key element in adapting this theory to a variety of educational settings is that Freire (1970) argues the educator should not act as simply the depositor of information, a lecturer, or in Freire’s words, a “banker”, but rather as a partner in learning. The teacher must work with the students or the community to learn what experiences inform their daily existences, for these experiences will form the basis for learning.

Critical pedagogy is heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1970), who acknowledged class, structural power relations, and systems of oppression, and related them to education. Furthermore, critical pedagogy draws from Freire in its emphasis on emancipation and empowerment of the learner (as summarized by Merriam et al., 2007), since Freire’s pedagogy is linked to the generation of socialist consciousness and revolutionary praxis (McLaren, 2000). Moreover, his work in Brazil with literacy programs is also directly tied to the struggle for human liberation. Freire’s perspective of pedagogy is often known as pedagogy of the oppressed, after the title of his 1970 book, and reflects his belief in liberation through education.

Freire (1970) maintains that education can be used to promote radical social change. He suggests that those who are oppressed are often unable to recognize their oppression and therefore are unable to confront and change it. Freire believes that true learning can only occur through a praxis that focuses on interest, reflection, problem posing, and dialogue. Dialogue is a particularly important part of the praxis, since it is through the dialogue process that people can name, take action upon, and ultimately transform their worlds. Once learners become aware of their oppression and how it controls their lives, they then can become empowered, and their empowerment, according to Freire, is what leads to action and change.
The role of the teacher as the leader or the central facilitator in this process is important to note, because it reflects a positionality that sets it above students in the learning process. It also reflects a more male-privileged perspective. In addition, Freire’s (1970) work focuses on those being oppressed not the oppressors, or in this study the hegemonic norms and perspectives. Virtually all writers in the realm of critical pedagogy rely and build on Freire’s work, and apply in to the theory and practice of different educational settings (Giroux, 2001; Kanpol, 1999; Maclaren, 2000).

**Critical feminism and engaged pedagogy.** Critical theory, critical pedagogy, and the culture industry, as discussed by all of the above-cited male authors, do not delve into the subject of gender. Proponents of feminist theory and pedagogy argue that an understanding of feminism is necessary to challenge ideologies and combat hegemonic thought (English, 2005; Weiler, 2001). It is impossible to reduce aspects of difference without incorporating the discussion of gender.

A feminist criticism of critical theory and critical pedagogy is their lack of focus and attention to gender. If identity is socially and culturally constructed, then an individual’s gender, along with her class, is shaped by social and cultural ideology as well. This shaping would be different for men and women. If social and cultural ideological expectations are different for men and women, approaches to challenging that ideology need to be different, as has been argued by many feminist writers in considering the limits of critical pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; hooks, 1994; Weiler, 2001). If hegemonic influences are constantly at work to encourage men and women to internalize certain beliefs about themselves and the culture, then it is logical to assume that those influences are different for men and for women.

Power influences would be different for either gender, again based upon social and cultural
expectations. In other words, approaches to the learning tasks of adult development outlined in critical theory, would vary based upon gender. Yet, critical theory is silent on the subject. “First-generation critical theory is strong on the analysis of alienated labor or the way repressive tolerance effectively neuters alternate ideologies but weak on the analysis of patriarchy as a source of female alienation” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 310). Therefore, in addition to the influence of critical pedagogy on the theoretical lens, a brief examination of critical feminism and engaged pedagogy is presented to suggest how positionality and other ways of knowing can contribute to a greater understanding of a pedagogy that will address the identity construction of Arab American women.

“Critical feminism provides a theoretical lens by which to deconstruct and problematized social power relationships and their effects on how various women come to interpret their experiences” (Maneval, 2000, p. 6). The nature of power relationships will be fundamental to this study to gain a better understanding of the experiences of how Arab American women construct their identity. Any theory that looks at social inequality within the structures of society and in cultural relationships needs to take into consideration race, gender, and class. To look at only one of these is to ignore the reality of their intersection (Belkhir, 2001; English 2005; Johnson-Bailey, Baumgartner, & Bowles, 2010; Tisdell, 1998).

In many ways, the concept of power in women’s lives is invisible, so that sometimes people cannot see it, even though it is always there. It becomes internalized; part of who they are, their values and beliefs, and their self-concepts. The effect of this power then is to bring about “a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1979, p. 201). A way one can bring about this “state of consciousness” within the context of teaching and learning is through engaged pedagogy, which bell hooks (1994) argues is
a blending of feminism and critical pedagogy.

Central to the theme of feminist and engaged pedagogy is that for true learning to take place, those who are oppressed due to class, race, gender, or sexual orientation must be fully engaged in the learning process (hooks, 1994). Feminist pedagogy is similar to critical pedagogy in that it also focuses on giving voice to those traditionally silenced, and also because it too recognizes the importance of reflection and action. Furthermore, feminist pedagogy brings the affective dimension to dealing with power relations rather than an exclusive focus on the rational (Tisdell, 1998). Whereas some models of feminist pedagogy focus on the socialization of women as nurturers and on emancipation in the personal psychological sense, others focus more on socio-cultural issues and positionality of both teachers and students, and how it affects learning and classroom dynamics, according to Tisdell (1998). Some versions of feminist pedagogy also draw from Freire (1970) in their emphasis on emancipation and empowerment. The goal of those versions of feminist pedagogy that focus on power relations is to challenge social structures in an effort to change the world through their attention to positionality, or where one is “positioned” relative to the intersections of race, gender, and class compared to the majority culture. Feminist pedagogy foregrounds issues of gender and focuses mainly on women’s learning although there are authors who account for other differences such as race, class, and sexual orientation among women (Tisdell, 1998).

hooks (1994) combines the ideas of feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy and calls for what she terms “engaged pedagogy,” which can easily be used in relation to critical media literacy. This form of pedagogy emphasizes well-being and accounts for people’s emotions in addition to critical thinking in learning about and working for social change. This means the role of the teacher is one that involves self-actualization in order to teach in a manner that empowers
learners. hooks clearly suggests that “to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn” (p. 13). This form of pedagogy requires a manner of teaching that respects and cares for students, if learning is to take place, and emphasizes challenging power relations and deconstructing media.

hooks (1994; 2003) mentions Freire (1970) as an inspiration in her efforts to address the “banking system” of education. hooks’ pedagogy does not focus on the passive consumer type of learner, but on active learner participation and personal success intimately linked with self-actualization and the need to account for the mind/body split that is often seen as a given. It emphasizes the well-being of learners and provides a connection between what is learned by students and their overall life experiences, and then ultimately allows learners to be responsible for their choices.

In summary, engaged pedagogy with its associations to both critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy is presented in relationship to the theoretical lens in this study because it does two specific things. First, engaged pedagogy does more to incorporate the teacher/educator as an equal to students than does critical media literacy and critical pedagogy, and thus provides valuable insight into how Arabs can uncover their identity construction in the ongoing process afforded by action research and, specifically, critical action research. Second, engaged pedagogy with its links to feminist pedagogy brings some of that perspective’s ideas into view, particularly in its focus on women, and gender relations.

Feminist pedagogy calls attention to the affective dimension and to the issue of positionality of the teacher and highlights how the teacher’s positionality affects teaching and learning. This cannot be said for critical pedagogy. Additionally, like Freire’s (1970) pedagogy of the oppressed, hooks (1994) also approaches pedagogy from a minority perspective, that of
blackness and the black female experience. Since this study relates to the minority perspective of Arab Americans living in the United States, a pedagogy that can address hegemony (the white male dominant way of thinking) is needed. In other words, a pedagogy that can uncover the norms of hegemony to allow for new ways to approach the challenges of positionality associated with racial and cultural inequality is the right pedagogy for this study.

**Critical Media Literacy and Pedagogy**

The question that emerges from the above discussion about critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and engaged pedagogy is: where exactly does the media fit in? The literature on critical media literacy itself offers direction on pedagogy and also makes some use of these earlier discussions on pedagogy. Although there are a variety of definitions of media literacy, Yosso’s (2002) definition of critical media literacy is significant for this study. She suggests that critical media literacy be used as a pedagogical tool to facilitate students becoming critically conscious of themselves in relation to the structures of power and domination in their world. She expands Paulo Freire’s (1971) notion on the importance of reading the world as well as the word to encompass media literacy, since it is through the world of media that many people are uncritically reading the world. Tisdell (2007) summarizes Yosso’s discussion of the assumptions of critical media literacy, that it is important to highlight that:

a) media is controlled and driven by money; b) media images are social constructions based on interacting influences of directors, actors, and other media images makers; and c) media makers bring their own experience with them in their construction of characters, including their perception of race, gender, and class and those constructions affect how characters are portrayed in the media. (p.9)
The literature and research on critical media literacy covers a wide range of topics and subjects, however for the purpose of this study, I will specifically explore the literature that discusses media in the context of teaching for media literacy, popular culture as public pedagogy, and media and the politics of representation and identity construction.

**Teaching for media literacy.** Best and Kellner (2001) and Kellner and Share (2007), theorists in the area of critical media literacy, have steadily drawn from the Frankfurt School and the influence of British cultural studies in discussing how to teach for critical media literacy. Like Frankfurt School critical theorists, they highlight the industrialization and commercialization of culture as a result of the capitalist framework of production that has become particularly evident in the U.S.; and they have written extensively on media culture as a complex political, philosophical, and economic phenomenon. Best and Kellner (2001) argue that media is a “contested terrain” (p. 14) in which political struggles are played out in narrative and visual forms. Thus films, television, and the Internet express dominant, conservative, and reactionary social values. Moreover, they argue that they also offer progressive resistance against these values.

To give an example, Best and Kellner (2001) use the image of the pop sensation Madonna as a complex representation of a woman that challenges gender, sexual, and fashion stereotypes, while simultaneously reasserting those images by presenting a “new” notion of the self that they argue is most reliant on consumerism. In the area of media culture, Best and Kellner’s work has been highly influential for educators concerned with fostering critical media literacy, offering the ability to interpret the complexities of the visual culture that surrounds us. Kellner and Share (2007) state, “Critical media literacy is an educational response that expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and
new technologies” (p. 60). They further argue that CML is a tool to “analyze relationships between media and audience, information and power” (p. 60). The work of Kellner and Share addresses issues of race, gender, class, and power as a means to explore how they are all interconnected within media; they also go a step further than just calling for critical media literacy to be taught by educators.

Kellner and Share (2007) analyze and highlight four general existing approaches to media literacy. The first three approaches are presented and critiqued, and the fourth, a critical media literacy approach, is their hybrid approach of the first three approaches. It includes what they suggest are the missing elements from the first three media literacy approaches. In the first existing approach discussed, they argue that media literacy is the outgrowth of fear, and its aim is media education to educate media consumers so they can protect themselves from “media manipulation” (p. 60). They criticize this approach because, according to the authors, this form of media pedagogy vilifies and reduces the function of media; it also neglects “alternative media production” (p.60), which they argue is a form of media that can empower the viewer to challenge existing hegemonic media.

The second form of media discussed is “media arts education” (p.61). Although they praise this form of media pedagogy because it increases critical media literacy among class participants, they find that this form of media pedagogy tends to focus more on how individuals tend to express themselves and less on engaging class participants in social awareness. The third approach of media pedagogy as discussed by Kellner and Share is the “media literacy movement” (p.61). This movement expands media literacy to include elements such as popular culture and, although they agree on the need for the expansion of media literacy, they argue that this form of media pedagogy tends to focus on the analysis of the media, which is not enough in
their opinion to facilitate a “democratic reconstruction,” as this form tends to neglect the power component in media. In summary, Kellner and Share (2007) argue that the first three approaches do not examine the complexity of power relations in the media that act as a form of reproduction and/or a form of resistance, or perhaps both at the same time. In addition, they make the argument that this approach does not focus on “politics of representation” in terms of gender, race, and class. Therefore, Kellner and Share (2007) propose a critical media literacy approach that includes all of the missing elements mentioned. In addition, they suggest that critical media literacy should include all forms of literacy. Finally, they argue that critical media literacy needs to include the audience as an “active participant” in the process of meaning making. Kellner and Share’s (2007) work is significant because it highlights how media literacy, critical pedagogy, and popular culture are all interconnected.

Freedman (2003) addresses media in the context of visual culture and in relation to education, specifically, in relation to art education. Kellner and Share (2007) would probably classify her discussion as a media arts approach, since her focus is on how media work as a form of expression that shapes our lives. She notes that visual culture is “all that is humanly formed and sensed through vision or visualization and shapes the way we live our lives” (p. 1). She suggests that these forms of visual arts are an important form of education. She makes the case that visual culture, including media, is a source of contention and politics, and is prone to complexity and contradiction; therefore, it needs to be studied and examined in an educational context. This is a clear call for critical media literacy. In terms of media literacy and identity, Freedman also suggests that visual culture images and objects are constantly seen and are immediately interpreted, thus helping the viewer to form new understandings and new images of identity. As previously stated by Kellner and Share (2007), this form of media focuses more on
the individuals self-expression and less on the ideological critique aspect of critical media literacy, nevertheless it is relevant to this study, because this approach engages the participant in critical media literacy.

Media theorist, John Storey (2006), discusses media in the context of culture and argues that there is a political dimension to media and popular culture; within this context his argument is built on the neo-Gramscian hegemony theory where media and popular culture are seen as primarily serving the interest of the dominant culture while also having pockets that resist the dominant culture. Hence, there is both resistance and struggle between the dominant ideology in popular culture and the “other” cultures. Similar to Best and Kellner (2001), Storey (2006) highlights that media functions as popular culture largely in the interests of the dominant culture. He discusses a variety of theoretical influences of media and popular culture, though he does not discuss media in relation to education or pedagogy. However, he highlights the negative aspects of popular culture and media in his writings and draws attention to the need for awareness in order to resist the dominant culture and its ideologies. In essence, he suggests that media acts as a form of public pedagogy, though he does not use that phrase, in its influence.

**Popular culture and public pedagogy.** In considering visual culture and media as a form of popular culture that is ubiquitous, and political in nature, many authors, particularly those contributing to Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick’s (2010) collection on public pedagogy, have directly argued that media and popular culture act as a form of public pedagogy. This notion of the media as a form of public pedagogy is useful for those working in the area of critical media literacy, because it helps give insight into the nature of hegemony and power structures. In this way, hegemony can be seen as a process that is learned and occurs within a power charged cultural and historical context. Therefore, pedagogical practices are not only present in formal
educational settings, but they are present within media and culture, as well in the public sphere of everyday life.

Henry Giroux (1999) identifies public areas as sites that reproduce social norms he states:

Learning takes place in a variety of public spheres outside of the schools, and while it is urgent for progressives to defend public and higher education against the ravaging influence of corporate culture, which means defending it as a public asset rather than as a private investment, we must also connect what is taught in the larger culture to the problems of youth and the challenges of radical democracy in a newly constituted global public. (p. 13)

Giroux’s point is to help readers consider how popular culture, including media, and power have become important sites for both pedagogy and politics. Thus, Giroux draws attention to the need to better understand sites of everyday life in the public sphere as a form of pedagogy.

Sandlin (2010) also speaks of popular culture as pedagogy, however she specifically relates popular culture to consumerism and argues that this form of culture that encourages constant consumerism is a form of public pedagogy that teaches people and miseducates them that consumerism is a way to happiness. She also argues that public consumer locations are sites of public pedagogy and highlights the need for consumers to be aware of the learning that takes place in such contexts, and highlights the need for learners to be aware of the potentially dangerous messages they are receiving through consumer culture. In several pieces, Sandlin (2007, 2010) and co-authors (Sandlin & Milam, 2008) highlight those culture jammers, such as anticonsumption activist, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping and Adbusters, who make use of media to challenge the media messages of consumption, thus turning media on its head. Sandlin and Milam (2008) describe culture jamming, as “the act of resisting and re-
creating commercial culture in order to transform society” (p. 328). They suggest that this is an action taken on by those who want to creatively critique modern day media culture, by doing a “jam,” by using elements of media culture itself to obstruct a message. In addition, the authors highlight that culture jamming about consumerism that creates an anticonsumerist message is a form a critical public pedagogy and imply that educators must begin to take popular culture consumption seriously as a site of learning and education or miseducation, and as a potential site of production and resistance of culture, when tactics such as culture jamming are used. In order to facilitate this engagement using the issue of consumption as an example, they work towards envisioning a critical pedagogy of anti-consumption, wherein they provide an overview of various perspectives on consumption and of various ways in which education, learning, and consumption intersect. This can easily be translated into other issues besides consumption where the processes of hegemony have been at work to create and propagate a certain ideology.

The politics of representation. The issue of identity and the politics of representation are key in the discussion of critical media literacy and are related to the previous body of work in terms of the discussion of identity in the context of the media. Given that this study is particularly about Arab American women and how they are represented, the literature on the politics of representation in the media is important. Within this context, Stuart Hall is key. Hall (1990) is considered to be one of the principal players in cultural studies; his work focuses on identity, media representation, race relations, multiculturalism, and the politics that are used to establish difference. Specifically, Hall considers the nature of the “black subject” as represented in “film and other forms of visual representation of the Afro-Caribbean (and Asian) ‘blacks’ of the Diasporas of the West” (p. 392). Similar to the literature on identity, Hall argues that rather than think of identity as an “already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then
Although in the realm of identity construction, focusing on the Afro-Caribbean and Asian Black groups, his work is arguably applicable to the Arab American group, for both groups have several elements in common. For example, both have experienced marginalization and have come to the West with a deep-rooted cultural history and identity. Both have undergone specific catastrophic historical events such as colonialism, 9/11, etc., that have shaped their identity as a result of the political media representations that emerged.

Hall’s work in cultural studies is particularly central to many discussions of media representation. In *Representation and the Media* and *Stereotyping as a Signifying Practice* (1997), an introductory lecture and published book, he argues that humans never experience reality directly, and that these experiences are filtered through a variety of social symbols, which includes mainstream media. To make his argument he draws on examples related to gender and racial stereotyping in the media. By using concrete and relatable examples, he is able to present identity construction as an experience of meaning making vis-à-vis the media.

Within this context, Hall argues that a single image can have many different meanings and supports the theoretical grounding of critical media literacy in that he highlights that communication is always linked to power, and that those groups who wield power in a society influence what gets represented through the media. Central to Hall’s argument is the fact that media messages work in complex ways, and that they are always connected with the way that power operates in any society, together at the same time.

Feminist theorist, Judith Butler (1999) sees identity as a verb; something we do as an ongoing process. Therefore, it is never, or can never be fixed. This stands in opposition to the
idea of finding a true identity; one that expresses one’s true or core self. She highlights that real life examples of externally imposed identities, such as media identities, serve to challenge this notion of self: stereotyping is an imposed identity that affects how others treat us, even if we do not agree with the stereotypical identity that has been given to us (Nash, 2005). We then act or react to the role assigned to us, whether consciously or not. In terms of the Arab American woman’s identity, she may choose an identity based on familial, socio-economic level, race, gender, or other outside influences. Identity is thereby continually constructed not only by one’s self, but also, and maybe especially, by others in our external environment. But, one can use learning to challenge, form, and re-form relationships with our external environments, and thereby reconstruct one’s sense of identity (Foley, 1999).

Within the field of adult education, this relationship is also discussed. Media forms influence social norms concerning gender, race, class, nationality, and all the other ingredients that constitute identity, for they provide models of what it is to be Black, White, Arab, feminine, masculine, etc. (Guy, 2007; Storey, 2006). As hooks (1992) suggests, many people simply unconsciously absorb the various symbols that are represented and/or give little thought to the messages they are getting through the media and how these messages are affecting their identity construction. Further, few people are offered many of the tools of critical media literacy (Yosso, 2002), and most have not been asked to think critically about media messages. Within the field of adult education, Wright and Sandlin (2009) discuss the role of the media in the construction of
the female identity. They call for the need for critical media literacy so that women can have a better understanding of the role the media plays in their identity construction.

**Arab American Women and Identity in Context**

Although this study specifically address the construction of identity of Arab American women through media, it is important to take into consideration the literature on identity in general in an effort to contextualize Arab American identity. For the purpose of this study, identity is simply one’s view of oneself, and the objective of this study is to focus more specifically on how identity is affected and constructed in response to external factors such as media images. Arabs who move to the U.S. are required to gain new knowledge and subset skills to become “Arab American.” Adult education authors, Hayes and Flannery (2000), argue that identity is anchored in a certain set of social and historical circumstances, and when those circumstances change, so too can our identity. As our understandings begin to change, so does our identity. We increase our capacity for agency, and develop new ways of acting in the world.

An identity model that is appropriate for this study is the Hays (2001) model that argues that multiple identities exist. Within this model Hays speaks of a dominant identity for those who are in control of groups that are less powerful, and she also speaks of a minority identity which is an identity that is encompasses by those who are in powerless situations.

One can argue that as our surroundings change, we seek out a variety of new roles. As a result, a corresponding change in our identity is required. This includes how we define ourselves within our new environment. Newman (2004, 2006) suggests that identity encompasses a number of different, matching, opposing, intersecting and separate concepts of self. Within the realm of this definition one can have different facets to identity or to some extent have two selves simultaneously (Newman, 2006), or as Clark (1999) says, there is a non-unitary self;
Rossiter (2007) discusses possible selves. This is relevant because just looking at “Arab American,” we can instantly extract two intersecting identities, Arab and American, and of course, there are many other intersecting possible selves in light of gender and other influences of identity, including historical events, that affect how identity is constructed. As a result of 9/11, for example, many Arab Americans have faced issues of discrimination and outright hostility, which has affected their identity and how they navigate power relations in society. Newman (2006) suggests that when a society offers little or no stability, a person ceases to have any predominant self at all and becomes instead a flock of “others,” at which point he/she becomes subject to a constant definition and redefinition. In light of these factors, and before discussing Arab American women in particular, I will begin by contextualizing identity as it is discussed by adult educators and some feminist theorists.

**Identity as Developing and Shifting**

There are many discussions of how identity develops and changes in adult development and adult education. Carolyn Clark (1999), in her discussion of the overlap of adult education and adult development, discusses the non-unitary self as being consistently challenged by society and is split between an experience and the interpretation of the experience. Therefore, how a woman feels about herself is not totally in her control; it is largely shaped by her contexts and experiences. As women gain experience in challenging external forces, they will begin to understand how those forces have shaped their notion of identity. However, according to Alcoff (2000), hegemonic forces in Western culture have limited the value placed on some aspects of women’s ways of knowing, learning and being; this has affected how women construct their identity. Women therefore require knowledge of how their positionality shapes their life experience (Tisdell, 2001), positionality being defined as where people are “positioned” based on
race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion and so on, relative to the dominant culture.

Understanding positionality to some extent helps people assess and process how social influences have shaped and continue to shape their identity. In this specific study, media will be the external factor that will be examined.

While not a feminist poststructuralist study, feminist poststructuralism offers insight related to the construction of identity for the present research. It rejects the notion that there is one single truth; just as rationality is not the only way of knowing, so is the linear self not the only way of understanding one’s identity. Rather, the non-unitary self is defined as a natural, healthy, and fluid sense of self (Ewing, 1990). It is a view of self and identity that is continually evaluated, constantly changing, as an individual examines or deconstructs the way race, class, sexual orientation, and religion have affected or defined his/her identity.

Non-unitary notions of self are the key to understanding the meaning that women give to their identity choices, challenges, and eventual changes. Poststructuralist and postmodern views of identity endorse the notion of a non-unitary self (Clark, 1999), a self that is distinctly and continually affected by social forces. Traditional psychological models urge us to gain strength to oppose external forces, so that the core self can survive. This idea of resistance is also in alignment with the previously discussed literature on critical media literacy.

**Arab American Women in Context**

The Arab American women’s identity first developed in a larger world context of what it means first to be Arab and female, and then American and female. Therefore, the following section will begin by providing an overview of the ethnic and historical identity of the Arab American, followed by a look at the literature that specifically addresses the Arab American woman’s identity. Because this study is specifically related to Arab American women in their
who are Muslim, the second section will discuss Islam as a religious and cultural identity; and the third and last section will specifically highlight Islam in connection to the Arab American woman’s identity.

**Ethnic identity in a historical context.** By definition, Arab women and men can trace their ancestry to the Arab world, an area that expands from the Persian Gulf to the Atlantic Ocean, from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east. The geography of the Arab world consists of 22 independent countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Djibouti, Mauritania, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestinian, and Comoros. These countries represent diverse cultures and beliefs and a variety of religions (Roald, 2001). Arabs made a significant imprint in history with the dawn of the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him (a phrase uttered by Muslims after the Prophet’s name is mentioned and the initials “PBUH” are used in writing to denote that phrase) and the rise of Islam in the 7th Century. Because so many Arabs and Arab Americans are Muslim, it is important to consider some of the historical development of Islam in the Arab world, in order to give context and understanding.

Muhammad (PBUH) was born in Makkah in the western part of the Arabian Peninsula. For Muslim Arabs, Mohammed (PBUH) is viewed as having been able to deliver a unifying and spiritual message in a time marked by political and religious turmoil (Emerick, 2002: Kayyali, 2006). The Qur’an, the holy book for Muslims, is believed by all Muslims to be God’s word as transmitted to Muhammad in Arabic. At the outset of Islam and until the ruling of the Abbasid dynasty in 750, Arabs dominated Islamic institutions. Soon after, however, Islam became the religion of Arabs and non-Arabs in the area, and the superiority of Arabs began to fade in the backdrop of the cultural contributions of the Persians, Indians, and Greeks. This new backdrop
eventually led to the emergence of a new and culturally diverse Islamic civilization (El-Saadawi & Hetata, 1980). Moreover, El-Saadawi and Hetata argue that the mixing of Arabs with other populations helped to form a new culturally and religiously diverse Islamic identity in the Arab world.

Like in many religious traditions, there are generally different roles that are prescribed for men and women, and how these have been interpreted and lived out varies from one Muslim group to another, and from one generation to another, in light of the context of the particular culture and context of the historical time period and country. Today, one could argue that there is a range of deep-rooted issues as to why the West assumes that there is a large gap between the identity of Arab women and men and the Islamic culture, and the identity of Europeans and Christian culture (Said, 1981). The main point of discrepancy is that the dominant religious culture of the West is distinguished by its foundation in the Judeo-Christianity. However, Arabs and Muslim societies would argue that they have more in common with Christianity and Judaism than the West often assumes, since Islam accepts and believes in the traditions of both Moses and Jesus, but Muslims also believe in the teachings of Muhammad. Thus, Islam fully recognizes and respects the Judaism and Christianity traditions and that Arab Christians and Arab Jews have always been an important part of the Arab world (Hitti, 1970).

Historically, it is important to note that since the dawn of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict after World War II, many Arabs have adopted the Palestinian cause and have aligned themselves with the Palestinians against the Israeli invasion and occupation, which some Arabs believe is generally supported by the U.S. This specific historical event coupled with the previous experience of colonization has caused tension between a large group of Arabs in the Arab world and globally and the West (Shaheen, 2002). Nevertheless, in spite of some of the tensions, and as
a result of the war, economic, and political instability, a large wave of Arabs migrated to different countries, many to Western countries. What significantly differentiated them from the first wave of migrants in the early 1900’s is that the Arabs of this 1960’s wave did not assimilate as quickly into the Western culture. This suggests that maintaining an Arab identity was a conscious effort at this stage. This is not to state that other identities were not taken in conjunction with the Arab identity. One could argue that this was the case, because once the Palestinian-Israeli war started, as part of a unified Arab identity, it was important to many Arabs to maintain their ethnic and religious identity as a sign of solidarity with Palestine.

Identity, ethnicity, and the background of the Arab Americans is geographically, religiously, and historically diverse. However, regardless of the diversity that exists among Arab American women and men living in the U.S., there is a recent historical event that has affected all Arab Americans; that of September 11, 2001 (Salaita, 2006). The literature on Arabs and 9/11 points to the fact that the events of that day affected Arab Americans’ identity, because it shifted Arab American identity to “Arab,” and in doing so, tended to isolate “Arab-American” from “American” and made them “other” (Haddad, 2004; Naber 2006). This “othering,” Haddad (2004) and Naber (2006) argue, vilified Arabs and provoked hate crimes against many that were thought to be Arab Americans or Muslims living in the U.S.

Willis (2005) suggests that 9/11 and the events that followed single-handedly changed the national identity of all Arab Americans. He highlights that the constant negative images of Arabs in the media played a significant role in altering the perception of what is an Arab and, by extension, Arab American. makes the point that the events of 9/11 have led to a form of political and ideological racism in the U.S. This is the case he suggests, because since 9/11, Arabs and Arab Americans have often been suspected of terrorism or labeled as “terrorists.” In
In this context, Naber (2006) states:

Revisionist recycling of the same rhetoric and practice of racial otherization, demonization, and exclusion thereby ushering in a new phase of racialization in the U.S., one that repackages old forms of discrimination to re-inject into a new generation and one that manipulates the blurred legibility of identity. (p. 166)

From the previous, it is clear that the history of Islam is significant and the events of 9/11 were a turning point in the construction and perception of the identity of the Arab American.

**Islam as a religious and cultural identity.** Given that many Arabs are Muslim, it is important to consider the relationship between religion and cultural identity among Muslim Arab Americans. At the outset of the 20th Century, Christians accounted for the majority of immigrants to the U.S. (Abedelrazek, 2007). However, by the dawn of the 1960’s, and according to Abedelrazek, Muslim immigrants to the U.S. outnumbered Christians. The Palestinian war and the differences in religion, nationality, ethnicity, education, class, gender, and individual character at the time of immigration all factored into the complex and fluid construction of Arab American women’s identity. Abedelrazek (2007) also argues that Arab American women’s identity has been facilitated by the externally imposed unifying definition known as “Arab American” in the U.S. In addition, she argues that ethnic discourse has successfully dissolved national origin through the spread of pan-Arab nationalism in the 1960’s and suggests that the Arab American identity was further externally influenced by the rise of fundamentalism in the late 1970’s, in the wake of the Iranian revolution. In recent years, it was further influenced as a result of Islamophobia stemming from 9/11 and the rise of Al Qaida. As a result, Arab American women are continually bridging a variety of lines to construct their identity. Also, as previously mentioned, is the fact that Arabs in America are an ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse
group of people, with many being Christian, though the majority are Muslim. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on Arab American Muslim women. To gain a better understanding of the role of Islam in Arab Americans woman’s identity, it is relevant to first have an understanding of the meaning of Islam, and second, to understand the role of Islam in Arab American Muslim women’s identity.

Linguistically, the word “Islam” in Arabic means submission. The word is a derivative of the word “Salaam,” which means peace (Wehr & Cowan, 1994). Shifting the word to a religious context, to be Muslim is to submit oneself to the will of God (Allah). Islam, considered a monotheist religion that was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) at the age of forty in the 7th Century. At its core, Islam is considered to be an expansion on the previous monotheistic messages of both Prophets Abraham and Jesus. In Islam, Mohammad is considered to be the seal of all prophets and of all religions and was given the responsibility to transmit the word of God “the Qur’an” to all his people (Said, 1981). Therefore, although the Qur’an is considered by Muslims to be the word of God, the interpretation of the word of God among Muslims varies according to sect. The Qur’an is also the main religious point of reference for those who follow this religion. Although the Prophet Mohammed’s message was rejected by the dominant belief of idol worshippers at the time, it quickly became one of the fastest growing religions. By the mid-700th year, Islam spanned from Spain in the West to India in the East. As previously mentioned, between the 1700 and 1800’s, the West influenced the Islamic religion through colonialism, World War I, and World War II (Haddad, 1998). This led to the redefinition and redistribution of power in the world and ultimately to tremendous geographical changes in the Islamic and Arab world.

Although the Qur’an is the primary religious source in Islam the words of the Mohammad
(PBUH) is considered to be a close second in authority. The actions of the Prophet are perceived by Muslims as guiding principles and are called the Sunna. Dependable transmitted speech of the prophet is called Hadith. Both Hadith and Sunna are considered to be a fundamental part of the Islamic faith (Hassan, 1990). The history of Islam is significant, because Islam is not only considered to be a religion by Muslims, but it is similar to other monotheistic religions in that it is a way of life. Saadawi (2010), an Egyptian feminist, suggests that Islam plays a significant role in the construction of the Arab woman’s identity. However, she is also quick to point to the fact that how Islam affects the Arab woman construction of identity varies. To make her point, she gives the example of two Muslim women. The first is very “westernized” in terms of fashion and make up, but she still wears the Islamic traditional garb, although she is barley covering her hair. The second woman on the other hand covers herself completely with nothing showing except her eyes. Both women identify as Muslim women; however, both have a different interpretation of the Muslim garb. Kanjwal (2008) states that because of the present context of Islam in the U.S. and particularly after the events of 9/11, many Arab Americans living in the U.S. find themselves as ambassadors defending Islam. She suggests that because many Arab Americans are presenting information on Islam in a reactionary and defensive way, they might be causing more harm than good to the image of Islam in America. She also suggests that since the events of 9/11, there is pressure on Arab American Muslims to exemplify modernity in religion to counter the extremism and terrorism. This, she concludes, is affecting Muslims’ ideology of what is Islam in America.

**Islam and Arab American women’s identity.** In recent years, there is a growing body of literature that highlights Islam as an identifier that affects the construction of Arab American women’s identity (Ajrouch, 2007; Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Read, 2003, 2004; Zaal, Salah, Fine;
though not all Arab American women are Muslim. Nevertheless, being of Arab descent, they are often assumed, correctly or incorrectly, to be Muslim. Therefore, it is important to gain an understanding of why religion, and Islam in particular, plays such an important role in many Arab American women’s identities. Zaal, Salah, and Fine (2007) suggest that after the incident of 9/11, there has been a shared Western criticism and devaluation of Islam and Muslims, in general. This, they argue, has added to solidarity among Muslims and the increasing need among Arab Muslims not only to identify themselves as Arabs but as Muslims as well.

As Kayyali (2006) notes, to control the sexuality of both genders, specifically the female gender, Islam calls for modesty of dress for both men and women (Kayyali, 2006). Although some religious Muslim men have distinctive beards, the men’s requirements do not usually reflect any outward religious sign or symbol of religion (Roald, 2001). Women, however, have to dress modestly, and some Muslims believe that Islam requires a Muslim woman to wear a veil, or hijab, around men who are not close relatives. Muslim scholars suggest that the purpose of the veil is not to belittle a woman, but to protect her from unwanted attention by men by covering her hair and body (Cooke, 2001). In the Western world, many see the veil as a symbol of oppression and degradation forced by Muslim men on women and consider the veil an endorsement of a backward culture and religion (Joseph & Slyomovics, 2001; Macdonald, 2006). In contrast, many veiled women report feeling dignity and high self-esteem and enjoy that their physical and personal self does not enter into social interactions. As a result, many women consider the hijab a symbol of freedom and liberation from men (Kayyali, 2006). However, Kayyali also argues that many veiled Arab American women in the U.S. are faced with discrimination, harassment, and even hate crimes as a result of wearing the hijab.
Although, the previous literature is in support of the Islamic religious custom of wearing the *hijab* it is also important to note that although not the focus of this study, there is a body of literature that views the wearing of *hijab* as a symbol of oppression against Arab Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Also, there are some that argue that the *hijab* is an instrument that is used to control Muslim women in general and specifically their sexuality. In this context it is believed that *hijab* is forced on some women in certain families and communities, this forcefulness of making women wear the hijab is under the influence of cultural and social pressure, all the while misusing the influence of Islam to accomplish the objective of subjecting Arab and Muslim women to wearing the *hijab* against their will Stowasser (1994). Subjecting women to do things under the auspices of religion is not a foreign practice, followers of other major religions have similarly fallen into the same monopoly of controlling women using the influence of religion.

**Research studies related to Arab American Muslim women.** There have been a number of research studies that examine aspects of the lives of Arab American Muslim women. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, when Yale anthropologist Carolyn Rouse studied American Muslim women for her 2004 book, *Engaged Surrender*, she observed that the practice of veiling in the U.S., increased after 9/11 and became a symbol of solidarity and group identity. *Hijab*, known to follow the guidelines of Islamic teachings, however, is a practice that varies among Muslim women living in the U.S. and abroad. Just as there is variability in the extent that those who identify as Muslim really practice Islam in their daily lives, there is variability in the extent to which women who identify as Muslim actually wear the *hijab*.

The literature on Islam and the American woman’s identity also highlights that Islam is used among Arab Muslim women to negotiate their rights within religion. For example, Marshall and Read (2003), in their study of identity politics found that political mobilization on the basis
of identity seemed to erupt in the latter decades of the 20th Century. They also suggest that religion for Arab American women is often a form of internal empowerment, because it enables Muslim women to use a nonnegotiable reference, in this case the Qur’an, to fight for gender equality within their families and communities.

Muslim feminists argue that it is possible to be both a feminist and a Muslim without compromising either identity (Roald, 2001). Although many feminists argue that male/female differences are socially constructed, the dominant Islamic and Arab feminist perspective is that men and women are different by nature, both biologically and psychologically (Roald, 2001). Muslim feminists are less focused on women’s sexual behavior, the individual identity, and exploitation by men; instead, they are more focused on politics, cultural identity, and the freedom and non-exploitation of the larger group (Hassan, 1990; Wadud-Muhsin, 1992; Yamani, 1996). Therefore, and as previously stated, within this context, feminists in Islam work to reinterpret the Qur’an arguing that men and corrupt states distort the practice of Islam and the *hadith* and that men and women are equal before God.

There are also several British scholars who have addressed Islam and its connection to Muslim women’s identity. Hutnick (1985) conducted one of the earlier studies in this area. In a quantitative research study that involved South Asian British women, 15 of whom were Muslim, Hutnick found that 80% of the Muslim women had marked religion as an important part of their identity. Although this study is dated and deals with British Muslim women, it is still relevant to this particular study, because it makes a clear link between Islam and identity vis-à-vis a Western environment. Similar to Hutnick, Dwyer (1991) conducted an analysis on how south Asian British women negotiating their identities through a synthesis of interviews, which included 49 participants. She concluded that Islam was one of the first elements that participants identified
with; moreover, participants saw the *hijab* as a symbol of the Muslim women’s religious identity. More recently, Tyrer and Ahmed (2006) conducted a study exploring identities with Muslim women attending a variety of universities in England by focusing on the experiences and prospects of Muslim women in higher education. Their findings stated that in many cases the Muslim women attending these universities tended to reject an absolute ethnic identity. However, when asked to describe their present identities, almost all descriptions included “Muslim.” Similar to the previous two studies, this study was not conducted in the U.S. However, it is relevant, because it adds a new element in the discussion of identity and that is education. Despite the fact that all of the women participating in the study were in higher education, religion still remained an important element of their identity.

Although the previous studies highlight core variables of the Muslim women’s identity, these studies do not provide insight into the effects of Western media on the construction of Arab American women’s identity. Another aspect of the previous studies is that they were mostly quantitative studies. Thus, in many cases, participants were given questionnaires that provided them with specific answers to choose from, and therefore, the outcomes of these studies were somewhat limiting.

**Critical Media Literacy Studies and Arabs in the Western Media**

In the last section, identity was discussed from an ethnic, nationalistic, and religious perspective. There was little discussion of the role of media in relationship to the construction of Arab American women’s identity. This final section of this literature review will first discuss studies specifically related to critical media literacy, and then focus more specifically on Arabs and Arab American identity as perceived in the Western media.

**Critical Media Literacy Studies**
There are numerous scholars in adult education and related areas that are discussing popular culture, consumer culture, or critical media literacy, though none have discussed this in relation to Arab American women. Some scholars in adult education and in related areas have also conducted data-based studies dealing with issues related to media literacy and education. Wright (2007) conducted a study of the impact of the TV show, *The Avengers* (Newman, 1961), on the construction of British women’s identity. *The Avengers* provided an image of a woman that was strong, highly educated, and worked in a high-powered position, an image that broke away from the traditional and stereotypical role of woman as a child bearer and homemaker. In her study, she found that many women who followed this series emulated the heroine, Cathy Gale, and drew on that image to break away from the social norms. Wright also found that although Cathy Gale was an imaginary character in a show, she acted as a role model and a path for women who wanted to change the current social barriers that existed at the time. Wright concluded that the media has a strong influence on the construction of women’s identity, and as a result of this influence, points to the need for educators to incorporate critical media literacy, and highlights a variety of strategies on how to use popular media in an educational setting to better facilitate learning.

Tisdell and Thompson (2007) conducted a mixed method study that was informed by critical media literacy and social constructivism. The goal of this study was to explore adult educators’ consumption of media and the role media played in how they conceptualized group-based identities as a result of media consumption. They found that media literacy has the ability to expand how an individual thinks about “others,” particularly through interaction about portrayals of characters. As a result of the study, they also call for the need for critical media literacy as a means to facilitate learning. In addition, they highlight that entertainment media and
popular culture have functioned as a form of education or miseducation, which reinforces the need for critical media literacy to help educate where media has miseducated.

Tisdell (2008) also performed a cross analysis of three research studies of adult learners and the role media plays in higher education. The analysis found that media gave adult viewers “alternative narratives” (p. 57) about themselves and others, which in some cases were transformative. She also highlighted the role media plays in understanding “othering” and marginalization and gave insight into how power structures work within a social context. Carr (2009) conducted a qualitative study where the objective of the study was to understand the effects of media on teaching and learning. This objective was in an ongoing effort to highlight effective teaching strategies for media literacy in higher education sociology of education classrooms. By analyzing on-line class discussions on specific questions related to media literacy he highlighted among other findings the need for educators to connect with all kinds of emerging popular media in an effort to help prepare students to become critically engaged with society. He also argues that for media literacy to be effective within higher education it needs to permeate education as a whole and not be limited to a media literacy class.

Within media studies, there have been numerous textual analysis studies as well as audience analysis studies of media (Allen, 1985; Ang, 1996: 2001; Gamson, 1994). For example, in his book, Speaking of Soap Operas (1985), Allen discusses textual analyses of soap operas and highlights several critical approaches for consuming popular culture and the media, based on a reader response theory. His examination of the media also explores the soap opera as a narrative that influences the female identity. The analysis is instrumental in bringing to the forefront the fact that within the production of media, factors such as the audience’s age, gender, race, needs, and culture are all taken into account before scripts for shows like soap operas even
go into production. This is significant because, as previously mentioned, it highlights the fact that media is a calculated process. In addition, it speaks to how media zeros in on specific groups and provides a narrative calculated specifically for that audience.

In a similar vein, exploring the construction of identity and the consumer culture of Madonna as a female icon who continually transforms her image, Santiago Fouz-Hernández and Freya Jarman-Ivens (2004) and the other authors in their edited collection examine the construction of female identity, not only of Madonna herself, but in the women and girls she has influenced over the years. The editors refer to cultural theorists such as Foucault and tie present cultural progress in areas such as race, gender, class, identity, and American culture to Madonna’s music videos and songs. One of the connecting themes in this edited collection is that Madonna’s images in the media influenced future and present female identity. Several authors draw on specific examples such Britney Spears to show how future generations have used Madonna’s images as a benchmark to conceptualize the identity and culture of the American girl in the media. Clearly, one can argue that the image and identity of the American girl does not boil down to one specific image at any given moment. The editors are instrumental in making the connection between Madonna’s constant change of identity/image in the media as a clear indicator in how identity is fluid and constantly changing as a result of the media.

In addition, Ruth Wodack (2010) examined the effects of American media on the international perception of the “American” post 9/11. Through a critical analysis of the show The West Wing, Wodack investigates how the globalization of the American media played a significant role in the perception of the ideology of the American post-9/11. She draws on a specific episode of The West Wing to make her argument and suggests that because the show mimicked a specific real incident in the history of the U.S. the content of the show was seen by
viewers worldwide as mimicking the views of the American public at the time. In addition, to make her argument, she examines various scenes in the episode that aired after 9/11 and makes the argument that the show presents “good American values,” and in so doing, justifies many acts of aggression and racism against Arab Americans. However, she also points to the fact that the show also created a platform for American viewers to combat racist acts against Arabs. She argues that this particular episode was so influential, because the events of the show were taken from a real context.

The previous discussion highlights the fact that critical media literacy and media studies as related to identity construction and resisting popular culture that arguably affect identity have covered a variety of topics and peoples. However, it is important to note that within the literature, there is a lack of discussion on the topic of critical media literacy and the role it plays in the construction of the Arab American identity. Therefore, this study will add to the body of literature on critical media literacy, and specifically, addressing critical media literacy in relation to the identity construction of the Arab American women. Now I turn to the literature and studies that have been done in regard to Arabs and Arab Americans in the media.

**Media Portrayals of Arabs and Arab Americans**

In an attempt to identify and analyze images of Arabs in the media, it is important to discuss and review literature regarding stereotypes of Arabs in the media. Paul (1998) argues that stereotypes are created in order to justify social inequalities. Further, Abreu, Ramirez, Kim, and Haddy (2003) note, “A person develops stereotypes about a group from information and disinformation, distortions, and/or opinions made available through family, friends, and the media” (Abreu, Ramirez, Kim, & Haddy, 2003, p. 693). They also suggest that stereotypes, in general, are harmful to any race or ethnicity when the negative implications about a particular
group are considered to be synonymous with the identity of all individuals within that race or ethnicity. Abreu et al. (2003) point out,

when one perceives an individual as a member of a particular stereotyped group, the perceiver’s mind activates the group-relevant cognitive structure and process, judgments and attitudes within the framework of that particular group. (p. 694)

Crocker and Major (1989, as cited in Pitner, Astor, Benbenishty, Haj Yahia, & Zeira, 2003) suggest that research has also indicated that holding negative beliefs about other groups is functional in that it could bolster the image and esteem of one’s own group.

It is unfortunate that some races may be depicted in a more positive or favorable way while others are portrayed in a more negative and biased manner. “Several of Hollywood’s most blatant patterns of identity bias fall within the categories of race, ethnicity and/or national origin. Included in this group are negative and/or stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Arab Americans” (Cones, 1998, p. 3). The existence of negative images of Arabs in the media and its implications on the Arab American identity are significant to this particular study.

In preparing and carrying out this project, I built on the work of Shaheen, “probably America’s best known expert on how Arabs are portrayed in the media” (Levesque, 2002, p. 3). In his most recent publication, Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People, Shaheen (2001) completed an extensive survey of more than 900 movies that depicted images of Arabs. Out of the large number of images, he argues that only 12 images portrayed Arabs in a positive manner. Shaheen suggests that Hollywood has used repetition as a dangerous teaching tool for more than a century, and in so doing, he argues that these stereotypical, repetitious images of Arabs and Arab Americans tutored audiences film after film. Furthermore, he suggests that the popularity of movies also seems to entice children and teenagers in that “teenagers are avid
moviegoers and purchase four out of ten movie tickets” (p. 5). Shaheen also noted that Hollywood movies and American television are very popular in at least 150 countries worldwide. Within these movies, many images are available to all individuals who view them. However, the meaning that these images may hold or be attributed to may play an important role in the formation of stereotypes. “Studies indicate that stereotypes are automatically or unconsciously generated in the mind, and that categorization is an important part of the mental process of evaluating the world” (Paul, 1998, p. 52). Shaheen’s research primarily focused on movies related to Arab portraits and themes. He examined thousands of movie reviews, as well as searched for “Arab” story lines, settings, and character casts. He argues that the majority of Arab characters fall under four basic myths that are associated with the stereotypes of Arabs and Arab Americans. “They are all fabulously wealthy, they are barbarians and uncultured, they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery, and they revel in acts of terrorism” (Shaheen, p. 13).

Rainey and Hakki (1996) suggests that images of ethnic groups are formed by what is seen and observed in popular culture. They argue that because most people do not have the opportunity to meet and interact with Arab Americans, their perceptions of Arab identities are formed and influenced by the media. What is of interest and relevant to the topic at hand is that Rainey highlights the role of profit in the media, namely, that all media is profit-driven and that this plays an important role in the existence of Arab stereotypes in the media, in terms of making media’s time and space very valuable. He suggested that because of these time constraints writers are forced to use characters that are instantly recognizable to the audience in order to make an immediate connection. As a result, stereotypes become a very useful and readily available tool in popular culture. Although not all stereotypes are negative, Rainey suggests that stereotypes depicting Arabs usually are. Therefore, when writers want to portray a terrorist, for
example, or someone who is threatening, they tend to put the actor in a Middle Eastern costume, give him an accent, and make him look Arab. These stereotypes, argues Rainey, are used often, because they are a very quick and easy formula for the writers. He further argues that it may be tempting to believe that because of the prevalence of negative Arab stereotypes in popular media, one may think that it is a conspiracy against Arabs. But, in his opinion, writers of mass media are not knowledgeable enough about the Middle Eastern culture to engage in such a conspiracy. The only conspiracy writers are engaged in, he argues, is “the conspiracy to make more money” (Rainey & Hakki, 1996, p. 2).

James Zogby (1998), on the other hand, focuses on the absence of positive roles of Arabs in the media rather than on the profit and financial aspect of Arab stereotypes in popular culture. Zogby conducted a study analyzing the images of Arabs on three major television networks. In his study he surveyed entertainment programs airing over the span of five years. His findings suggest that the only roles that Arabs had in the surveyed programs were either as terrorists or oil sheiks. Through the five-year period, he was unable to find a positive Arab character on all three networks. He argues that because of the absence of positive images of Arabs and Arab Americans in mainstream media, Western audiences fail to see Arab Americans as a multifaceted community with positive characteristics. Zogby also argues that although these misrepresentations may stem from ignorance of the Arab culture, the problem is not the ignorance but what he believes is passing for knowledge and misinforming the general public. The study exhibited some limitations in that Zogby did not identify a specific genre of programs in his study. One could argue that homicide and police shows, for example, depict more violent terroristic stereotypes. Also, the study is from 1998, and may not reflect current images of Arabs and Arab Americans on television, nor do they reflect the post 9/11 realities of many Arab
Americans living in the U.S. Regardless, however, the study offers some interesting insights, particularly because it allows for increased awareness about the specific perceptions of Arabs and Arab Americans by the dominant culture. Within the contexts of analysis, Shaheen (2001, 2006, 2008) has discussed the image and identity of Arabs in the media, and the ways in which the media has influenced the perception and conception of Arab American identity. However, his analysis tends to focus on the effects of the repetition of negative stereotypes in the media and not the connection between media images and identity construction. He tends to focus his discussion on Arab portrayals, in general, and not to deal with gender, or Arab/American women’s identity.

As previously mentioned in Chapter One, Alan Ball’s film, Towelhead (2008), and Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel, Persepolis (2000/2001), which was made into a film, highlight the influence of media on females from the Middle East. Although these films do not specifically address Arab American women, thus far, they are one of the very limited accessible films in the U.S. that highlights gender issues and identity construction for Arab or Arab American women. Clearly, more films and research about how Arab and Arab American women construct their identity is needed.

Unfortunately, Arabs and Arab Americans are not the only variables in the equation that are affected negatively by the stereotypes of Arabs that are portrayed in motion pictures. More specifically, Hollywood “Arabs” and consistent media images also seem to encourage the idea that all Arabs are Muslims, or they seem to be portrayed as such. As a result, arguably, the religion Islam does not go un tarnished in the process of stereotypes. Islam, therefore, may become a faith that is assumed to be associated with some of the same stereotypes of Arabs, such as terror and violence. Shaheen (2001) states that,
today’s image makers regularly link the Islamic faith with male supremacy, holy war, and acts of terror depicting Arab Muslims, as hostile alien intruders, and as lecherous, oily sheikhs intent on using nuclear weapons. (p. 9)

One could also argue that the same biased depictions of Arabs and Arab Americans are being transferred to similar characteristics in presenting Islam in popular culture. Shaheen (as cited in El-Farra, 1996) states,

In an attempt to place Islam in a category that Americans can understand, the media portrays images of Muslims as belonging to a faith of 800 million people, consisting of strange, bearded men, in robes and turbans. (p. 2)

El-Farra argues that the distortion of Islam leads viewers to believe that it is a mysterious religion prone to acts of terrorism and violence. These themes, she argues, are consistently reinforced and maintained by filmmakers. Shaheen (2002) further states:

Show only vilifying images of any group, incessantly, and after a while—100 years in the case of Arab stereotypes—it becomes “natural” not to like certain people. In the sin of omission—we omit the humanity—and of commission—show only hateful images that make a stereotype that injure the innocent. (p. 10)

It is clear, then, that stereotypes play a significant role in the Western perception of the Arab American identity. However, what is not discussed or explored in the literature is the effect of these stereotypes on the construction of the Arab American Identity.

In addition, the literature addressing the Arab American identity typically does not address identity construction in the context of media images. Also, it often does not place an emphasis on the learners understanding of exploring their culture and identity development through media in order to gain a better understanding of their learning process. This study
contributed to the knowledge base on Arab Americans by not only looking at the outcomes of implementing specific strategies in a learning context, but also by providing a context of deeper meaning by recognizing issues of privilege, racism, power, oppression, and structural inequality.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided an overview of literature dealing with the culture industry, critical media literacy, and the construction of Arab American women’s identity development. Throughout, I have considered the research studies that have been conducted thus far that are relevant to this study. Given the limited literature dealing with Arab American women and how the media relates to their construction of their identity, clearly there is a need for the knowledge this study provides. The next chapter will outline the methodology.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identities in living in the U.S., and how they think media and popular culture have affected their identity construction. Then, through an action research process, the study aimed to see how these women continued to construct their identity by going through a critical media literacy process of viewing and discussing movies portraying Arabs and Arab American men and women.

After an initial preliminary interview to explore the women’s perceptions of how they have constructed an Arab American identity in the U.S. and the role of the media in it, in the action research portion of the study the learners were provided with a frame or model of media analysis intended to promote the development of critical media literacy. This enabled them to look at knowledge construction in their own lives in terms of hegemony, oppression, and privilege. In addition, this study helped learners explore their identity and develop a heightened awareness of power structures.

As implied, this was a qualitative action research study. Qualitative and action research methodologies are often used in the field of adult education to understand aspects of adult learning in order to find out how adults perceive or understand their world (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). As noted in Chapter Two, qualitative and action research methods have also been used in critical media literacy studies to understand and interpret how adults construct knowledge through their engagement with the media. Given that this is a qualitative action research study, this chapter will begin with a brief overview of qualitative research in general, and then move to a discussion of action research, and critical action research, the specific type of methodology that
was used in the study. This chapter will also include a discussion of my background as the researcher, and will discuss the data collection and analysis methods that were used in the study, as well as the strategies that increased the dependability of the findings.

**The Qualitative Research Paradigm**

The purpose of qualitative research is to make sense of a phenomenon and interpret the meanings that people give to it. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), qualitative research is “pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (p. 2). Morse (1994) sums it up well remarking that, “the laboratory of the qualitative researcher is everyday life and cannot be contained in a test tube, started, stopped, manipulated, or washed down the sink” (p. 1). Merriam and Simpson (2000) note that the goal of qualitative research is to “achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, to delineate the process of meaning making, and to describe how people interpret what they experience” (p. 98). The purpose of this study, was to gain an understanding of how the participants, Arab American women, have constructed their identity and understand how they experienced learning through media, and more specifically, how they perceived how the media has impacted their identity development as Arab American.

Furthermore, it was important to recognize some underlying characteristics or assumptions associated with this form of research. First, a basic assumption of qualitative research is that individuals socially construct reality as they interact within their environment at a given point in time and in a particular context. As a result, their interpretations of reality are subject to change slightly based on their ongoing lived experiences, the time period, and their continued interpretation of personal meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Merriam, 2002). Different people will interpret their life experience, as well as their relationship with the media,
differently in light of their overall life experience and particular context. It is the role of the qualitative researcher to attempt to understand participants’ perspectives and how each one is making sense of the world. An assumption of qualitative research is that each individual socially constructs “reality”; hence there are multiple realities. As such, the primary purpose of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of how people see reality related to the aspect being studied, and how they make meaning out of their lives (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

The larger goal of a qualitative researcher is to shed understanding on a specific topic; this understanding comes as a result of analysis of meaning making and synthesis of the data collected for the purpose of the study (Patton, 2000). The aim of qualitative research is to examine a phenomenon in depth and to find out from participants how they make meaning of their experience. It is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviors, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture, or lifestyles (Patton, 2000). This was a suitable approach for this study, because I was interested in how Arab American women perceive how they have constructed their identity specifically as Arabs and Americans, and the role of the media in that process. Moreover, qualitative research typically involves not only the analysis of interview and observational data, but also the analysis of text, documents, or media that are related to the context of the study (Patton, 2000). Given that the study focused on the women’s analysis of media, a qualitative approach was appropriate, since it gave insight into how Arab American women construct meaning from media images.

Another important assumption of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, in that the researcher conducts the interviews, observations, and the analysis of text. Patton (2002) explains that if the researcher is to “get at the deeper meanings and preserve context, face-to-face interaction is both necessary and
desirable” (p. 49). Qualitative researchers are deeply and directly involved in the process of data collection and very present in it, unlike in quantitative approaches where the researcher is distant and typically not physically present in data collection processes, such as in sending out a survey. Qualitative researchers utilize multiple interconnected approaches, and typically engage in multiple means of data collection that seek to get at a better understanding of the subject matter. Interviews, observations, and documents are the primary means of data collection used in qualitative research (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). These data collection methods are employed to better understand the participants’ interpretations of their experiences.

A final important tenet of qualitative research is that qualitative research attempts to study the particular in depth (Merriam, 2002) and to do an in-depth analysis on a smaller number of cases. It is not meant to be generalizable. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define generalizability as the “degree to which the findings can be applicable to other populations or sample” (p. 786). Generalizability focuses on the degree that the findings are representative of a larger population, which is difficult with a small sample. It may be that that the findings will only be reflective of the Arab American women participating in this study. Nevertheless, Merriam (2002) suggests that there can be reader applicability or generalizability, whereby the reader determines the extent to which the findings can be applied to similar situations.

Qualitative research methodology is especially appropriate to use when there is little known about a specific phenomenon (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Little is known about the impact media has on the learning and subsequently the identity construction of Arab Americans, and specifically Arab American women. Therefore, a qualitative research design will allow the opportunity to explore this area in a more in-depth manner, which in turn will afford the opportunity to gain some much needed insight about Arab American women living in the U.S.,
and salient aspects of how they have constructed their identity, as well as the role of media in that process. Moreover, the process of conducting the research in dialoging and interviewing the female participants has the potential to uncover elements of change that can enhance the experience of Arab American women living in the U.S. in a positive way by raising awareness about topics related to identity construction through the influence of the media and empowering the participants through media literacy.

There are many different types of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). This particular study was a qualitative action research study. Thus, the following section will describe action research, which arguably, is the qualitative research approach that was best suited for this study.

**Qualitative Action Research**

Most forms of action research make use of only qualitative methods of data collection, though it is possible to collect quantitative data in action research studies, this study, however, made use solely of qualitative data collection methods. Kurt Lewin first introduced action research in the 1940’s (McNiff, 1995), with the premise of gaining “insight into a process, the researcher must create a change and then observe the effects” (p. 122). He described a non-linear spiral of planning, acting, observing, and evaluating to bring about an improvement or change (McTaggart, 1991). Since that time, action research has evolved due to the need to address difficulties in using traditional scientific research and to find solutions that are practical and timely (Cunningham, 1993). Lewin (1951) was influenced by Dewey’s desire to improve social conditions, while existing in a variety of contexts through action and reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Action research offers an alternative for when it is desirable to change behavior and observe how and why the behavior is targeted (McNicoll, 1999).

Several forms of action research are used by researchers. They include participatory action
research, often associated with social transformation in the Third World; critical action research, to bring together broad social analysis; classroom action research, to improve practices for teachers by using the cycling approach of action research; action learning, to address management problems within organizations; action science, to understand practice in organizational settings as a source of improvement; soft systems approaches, to highlight the human “systems” analogy for systems engineering; and industrial action research, to focus on reflection and the need for broader organizational and social change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Action research can be used to solve specific social problems that are found in our environment (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). While Lewin first introduced action research in the 40s, it really began to be used to some degree in the 1960’s with roots in solving social problems and anthropological research methods (DePoy & Hasslet, 1999).

Assumptions of Action Research

Several basic assumptions are associated with action research (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Action research upholds the belief that those who experience a phenomenon are those most able to investigate it in their own context. Its purpose is to generate knowledge to inform practice, especially where results are intended for immediate application. Action research is based on four main values: democracy, equity, liberation, and life enhancement (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The researcher serves as a facilitator for problem solving and actual design is formulated during the action research process. Action research tends to be qualitative, reflective, cyclic, and participative. Finally, most action research occurs in a natural setting and incorporates interpretative strategies.

The action research cycle is one of analyzing, gathering facts, identifying the problem, planning, and taking action on the problem, then repeating this process as new information is
presented (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Action research is not just a educational development strategy, but also a means to uncover the beliefs of practitioners in the settings in which they work, and to help participants explore how they might improve their analytic skills, and perhaps become what Gramsci would refer to as an organic intellectual, and/or facilitate change for themselves and their communities. Thus, an action research process that investigated the process of how Arab American women attempt to understand concepts related to the development of critical media literacy, such as, hegemony, stereotypes, and culture, particularly in relationship to their identity was appropriate for this study. As implied in Chapter Two, action research is also considered in relationship to critical or engaged pedagogy a discourse that deals with power relations.

Among all the variations of action research, the most common is taking action on the problem, then repeating the cycle as new concepts and understanding emerge. The limitations of action research include a lack of external and internal controls.

Action research provides an interpretation based on social change and solving practical problems through developing skills and applying those skills in the classroom or practice setting (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Rather than traditional, positivist, which assumes knowledge is objective and independent; search for one “truth,” paradigms that value validity through external methods of control, qualitative action research utilizes relationships between the individual and sociocultural aspects of the environment (Jacobson, 1998). Action research differs from strictly interpretive forms of qualitative research that try to find out participants’ perceptions of a phenomenon without direct intervention from the researcher. In action research, the researcher is actually creating a direct intervention and embraces non-neutral, non-objective discourse and assumes a more collaborative inquiry, and attempts to facilitate the change of consciousness or
behavior, if the participants want that, and does so in light of what the participants desire (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). This highlights the less formal nature of action research, which is not focused on, gives little formal structures of control and experimental procedures (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Patton, 2002).

In action research, the role of the researcher is to facilitate problem solving and provide direction to the participants of the research project (Merriam & Simpson, 1995; Stringer, 1996). A central facet of the researcher’s role is accepting and respecting the participants’ views and ideas as valid as well as negotiating the relationships and dynamics of the participants while conducting the research (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003). Since the focus of action research is to solve problems in practice, and as noted above, the researcher is the primary source of data collection as is the case in interpretive forms of qualitative research (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The researcher can facilitate the process of defining and re-defining the research design based on the collective understanding and meaning making of the participants, thereby adjusting the research process as the project progresses (Stringer, 1996). In this regard, action research departs from the classic form of qualitative research in the extent of the involvement of the researcher.

In essence, the purpose of action research is to make something happen. For this particular study, it was to highlight an awareness of aspects of the construction of the Arab American woman’s identity and to take action by facilitating learning through media literacy. The process of action research used in this study also focused on creating a series of learning activities, which ultimately allowed the participants to learn about and take action against the potentially biased and hegemonic mainstream media, in this case films.
A critique of some general versions of action research is that they do not necessarily address the issue of power, status, and influence (McTaggart, 1991). The researcher working with a group of learners or marginalized participants, whether in the classroom, community, or workplace, usually brings a dynamic of power that is a concern to the research process and foregrounds the subjectivity of data analysis and interpretation (Zeigler, 2001). Critical action research specifically explores and focuses on the issues of power and positionality, not only in the content of what is being explored in the research, but also in the research process itself. This study specifically made use of a critical action research approach.

**Critical Action Research**

Because of the limitations of some forms of action research noted above, many authors now write about specific types of action research. These types are collaborative, participatory, and critical action research, all terms that emphasize inclusion of stakeholders in a problem, equity of participants, and the social action component of the action research model (Jacobson, 1998; McTaggart, 1991).

Critical action research in the context of this study attempted to bring about social change, specifically, for Arab American women who have been portrayed negatively or have been misrepresented in the Western media; the change that was sought after in this study was in the form of awareness initially, and potentially, some action on the part of at least some of the participants, at the end of the learning sessions. Education for social justice is an idea that has been most influenced by Paulo Freire (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), as discussed in Chapter Two, and the many who rely on his work. Freire’s (1970) ideologies were also a vital component of the philosophical and theoretical lenses discussed in the previous chapters of this study, which clearly argue for education for developing a critical lens and education for social change. Some
major assumptions underlying critical action research stress action against oppression and the participatory role of both participants and researchers in the development of critical consciousness. Freire foregrounds the importance of participants taking part in the process of transformation and knowledge creation in his notion of problem posing education (Marshall & Rossman). These elements of his approach to education were central to the critical action research component of this study.

The action research principle of knowledge production focuses primarily on shared understanding of knowledge developed by the group (McTaggart, 1991). Therefore, knowledge is constructed through and is heavily influenced by the learners’ experience, which is determined to be inseparable from the knower, non-neutral, culture and context dependent, and based on the premise that there is not one single truth. Moreover, in the context of critical action research, the researcher’s knowledge and understanding contribute to the construction and identification of meaning, while being responsive to the context of human experience (Jacobson, 1998). From the previous, one can deduce that in the context of this study, as the facilitator in the educational setting, I was an integral part of the research, and directly affected the action through initiating identification of the problem (i.e. portrayals of Arab and Arab Americans in the media) and constructing the strategies through the pedagogical design implemented to address the problem.

All types of action research, including critical action research, prescribe procedures to conduct the research. These procedures are carried out through stages of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, which was employed and will be fully discussed in the “Participant Selection” section further ahead. Action research takes on a unique design in which flexibility to change as the research progresses is vital (Patton, 2002). The reflective component of the critical action research paradigm weighs heavily in the process, along with an emphasis on lived
experiences of the students and the researcher, a commitment to social change, and attention to power differentials (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Critical action research recognizes status and power differentials between participants and researchers, as well as power relations and hegemonic processes in society, in general. Some versions, such as feminist participatory action research (Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006) focus more specifically on helping women come to voice and take action in their lives, as well as issues of power and positionality between the researcher and participant. To some extent this study was informed by such approaches since the study is particularly about Arab American women. The degree that the participants can be involved in each phase of the research process can vary; some participants are not that interested in participating in the analysis of data or the process of writing up the findings. Nevertheless, to some extent, all participants are involved in forming various aspects of the study in critical action research, though their degree of “participation” might vary at different stages of the study.

Overall, critical action research, with its involvement of the participant in the design and its awareness of positionality attempts to empower the participants (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). As a result, one could argue that as the participants in this study moved through the action phase of the research, they potentially gained a greater understanding of systems of oppression and privilege processes in society and the role of entertainment media in those processes. As a result of “critical” action research, participants can become empowered to take action against these oppressive systems and create new knowledge through this social experience, in perhaps increasing others’ awareness of critical media literacy.

The Researcher’s Background

Within the methodological approach of critical action research, the researcher is a participant and facilitator for problem solving, and immediate applicability of findings are
incorporated into practice. Further, the research design emerges as a part of the research process (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

Given the significance of the researcher to the process of action research, it is important that, as the researcher, I disclosed to participants my background and history as a Muslim woman growing up in the Middle East. In addition, I disclosed my own positionality as a woman of mixed racial heritage (Italian American, African American). The two previously mentioned variables could have acted both as a strength and weakness for the study. In terms of strength, my cultural background of mixed racial heritage and growing up in the Middle East, and the fact that I am fully fluent in Arabic, as well as Muslim, gave me at times greater cultural capital with this particular group of participants, in spite of the fact that I am not of Arab descent. Moreover, understanding the culture, religion, language, and ethnic makeup also helped in making the participants more comfortable and less reluctant to share information at times.

Also, my background and cultural experience having grown up in the Middle East gave me insight into how to handle sensitive topics and issues within this group's culture and religion. My religious background and lived experience in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia also gave me additional religious and cultural capital with the group, because it added another level of common ground and understanding. Further, I am married to an Arab American who was born in the U.S., and since the death of my father-in-law several years ago, my mother-in-law, also Arab American, has been living with my husband and me. She, was born in Palestine, yet has been living in the U.S. for over 30 years. So, although not Arab by nationality, I have been immersed in a geographical and cultural Arab context since birth, and I am extremely familiar with issues related to Arab Americans. This cultural and religious capital was significant because, as a researcher, my role was to facilitate the learning activities and collect data. However, it was
impossible with my background not to offer parts of my own experience and religious and cultural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 1985).

One could argue that because of my background being similar in so many ways to the participants’, in spite of the fact that technically I am not of Arab descent, my interpretations of participants' stories, experiences, and overall data influenced the knowledge construction that took place during this study. One could see this as a limitation, but I see it primarily as a strength, because there was less danger of misinterpretation. One could also see the fact that I facilitated the action research component of the study as a limitation, but ultimately that is the purpose of action research: to influence a process. I did not intentionally plan to influence the initial individual interviews (see below for details). But, once the initial interviews were conducted in the planning stage of the study, as the researcher in this critical action research study, my primary role was to serve as a facilitator of discussion during a series of ongoing media literacy and film discussions and analysis. In addition, I was also the primary implementer in the educational activity. In assuming these roles, it was virtually impossible for me not to allow my beliefs to surface. It was not my goal to be the main contributor. However, at times, it was necessary to share my ideas, beliefs, and values, in facilitating the educational process about critical media literacy. Also, my involvement in this study and participation had an influence on my own beliefs, values, and assumptions.

In term of my relationship with the participants, they were selected from the local mosque, of which I am a member. In addition to the mosque being a place of worship it also offers many educational activities for adults, which include language, culture, and education classes in areas of interest. The extent of my involvement in the mosque is that I attend holiday ceremonies given at the mosque.
My interest in this study was not only the result of the aspiration to bring to the forefront the experiences of Arab American women living in the U.S., but also, to explore concepts such as hegemony, pedagogy and critical media literacy, which were all concepts explored throughout my course work for the Adult Education Doctoral Program. The various concepts and ideas that I was exposed to in the program coupled with preparation for this research project has propelled the desire for me to take action not only in the context of this study, but in any social injustices that may exist in my immediate and extended community.

**Participant Selection**

One of the strengths of qualitative research is that it examines the particular in-depth. According to Patton (2002), “the purpose of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (p.169). In this research, the experiences of Arab American women in their ongoing construction of identity was best defined and described by Arab American women themselves. Therefore, this group was selected as participants for this study.

As a part of this proposed research, I selected Arab American women that live in the area and are members of the local mosque. The mosque met the criteria of an adult education-learning center, because they offer specific classes and learning opportunities geared to adult learners within the community. Also, I selected this location because I knew that I would not only be able to find candidates qualified for this study, but moreover, that they would be less hesitant to participate, because I was a member of this mosque and of the local Muslim community.

In addition, the selection of the participants was based on the following criteria.

All participants:

1. Were Arab American women born in the U.S. or were living in the U.S.
since infancy or their pre-school years;

2. Identified as Arab American (meaning, not only identifying as American or Arab, but both); and

3. Were proficient in English.

Participants were recruited through personal contacts. An initial letter was e-mailed to possible participants to explain the research project and determine interest. By using a small purposeful sample, I was hoping to be able to shed light on how Arab American women construct their identity, and their overall perceptions of the role of the media in the process. The role of the participants become clearer in light of the data collection processes and action research cycle of plan, act, observe, and reflect. I was hoping to gather six to eight participants for the study. In the end there were seven participants in the study; a complete description of the participants appears in Chapter Four.

The Action Research Process

Qualitative research studies typically make use of three types of data collection, namely individual or focus group interviews, observations, and analysis of documents or artifacts related to the setting (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2001). This study made use of all of these forms of data collection, but did so in the context of the action research cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. How this was implemented in this study is outlined here in light of the phases of action research.

Planning

This study initially explored how Arab American women perceive their identity in light of living in the United States and the role of the media in the process. At the outset of the study, an initial individual, preliminary, semi-structured interview explored some general questions of how
these women perceive key aspects and events that have affected their identity development as Arab American women.

This initial interview focused not only on where and how they grew up in general, but moreover, on what they see as key moments or events that shaped their identity as Arab and American and took a look at the kind of media they consumed growing up, particularly in the form of television and movies; the extent to which these forms of media were discussed among family members and friends; and their perceptions of the role of the media in the process. (The specific interview questions appear later in the data collection section. The interview also explored in general what each of the women wanted to gain from the experience of participating in the study, and how and why this learning experience would be beneficial to them. An attempt to answer these questions provided focus for the planning phase of the action research cycle, planning and understanding how to approach and deal with the problem at hand is a significant and vital part of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

The use of interviews allowed for an atmosphere that was more intimate, such as one-on-one, for sharing personal feelings and ideas related to what might be viewed as a sensitive subject by some participants. In short, the planning stage provided the necessary information from participants, through a preliminary interview with each participant, to develop and format a critical media education learning activity that was meaningful and beneficial for this study’s participants while simultaneously exposing them to concepts such as hegemony, critical media literacy and pedagogy.

Acting

In the second stage of this research, a series of four learning activities were developed that lasted approximately four weeks and included viewing films and discussions and scenarios
designed to elicit further understanding about identity and the media as an important component of critical media literacy, with a fifth follow up group session. While the actual activities were negotiated with the participants, the format of the program resembled a combination of the following:

The first session consisted of getting to know the participants and then moving to a general discussion of media, and I asked them to share a memory of a significant movie or television show that stood out for them. As the facilitator, I provided participants with a brief framework of analysis that was used as a tool to analyze media during the learning activity. For this particular learning activity, Yosso’s (2002) assumptions of critical media literacy, as discussed in Chapter Two, were used. Following the briefing and watching the first movie in the learning sessions, I asked participants to rethink some elements of what stood out from the movie or television they discussed in light of Yosso’s framework, and to think about new questions they might ask about the movie in relation to messages they received from the viewing. The succeeding sessions of the action phase included viewing a film, followed by a discussion of the film. Before viewing the next film, I asked participants to discuss and reflect on the previous viewing for further insight, reflection, and also to discuss further insights that they may have had regarding media since the previous session. This included, for example, things they had thought about in regard to Yosso’s (2002) framework of analysis. After viewing and discussing the chosen film for the day, the sessions concluded with a discussion about the movie and proposed formatting for the next part of the learning activity. Movies that were proposed in the initial session included *The Kingdom* (2007) and *Sex and the City 2* (2010). Both movies are Hollywood blockbusters that contain images of Arabs in them. Other movies were be negotiated and chosen by participants. A brief description of each session appears in the next section on “Observing” and in the data collection
section of this chapter, but the details of how the learning sessions unfolded are described in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

**Observing**

Observing and recording is the third step in the action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The acting stage and the observing stage often took place simultaneously in this action research, in that the group engaged in an activity, while I, as the researcher, typically observed how each session unfolded. The participants in this study were also asked to observe the unfolding of their knowledge as a group, and how it helps facilitate awareness. This was discussed in the leaning sessions and was further facilitated through an exclusive on-line discussion for one of the movies. In the observation stage of this study, I also asked participants to consider their daily lives and interactions with other non-Arab Americans about media in an effort to gather additional information that shed light on the conversations about hegemony, media, etc. I also asked them to provide concrete examples for further discussion and exploration of the topic. In this way, participants were able to identify how they gathered their own information about identity, media, and hegemony from their own experience, and what they learned from their investigations. Further, from one week to the next, I asked them to reflect on the kinds of conversations they had with their friends and families in regard to media and its effects on the lives of Arab Americans. I was particularly interested in their unfolding awareness of the role of media in their lives and how it related to and shaped aspects of their identity.

Observations about what participants learned through their own participation in the media literacy educational activity coupled with considerations of their own experiences helped document what new knowledge and insight participants gained from each session both about
media and how it relates to their identity. I took notes throughout the sessions and then wrote up observational notes immediately following each session before leaving the learning site. These observational notes acted as a form of field notes. Further, at the end of each session, I asked participants to fill out a critical incident questionnaire, developed by Brookfield (1995), which asked them to identify the most important thing they learned, when they were the most and least engaged, what they found surprising, and what they wanted to talk more about. This provided documentation and also assisted in planning the next session.

**Reflecting**

Finally, as the last stage of the cycle of action research and before going into the next learning activity, I collected and analyzed the data from the learning activities, the on-line discussion, and planned with the group what the next sessions would look like.

The plan, act, observe, and reflect cycle is also similarly reflected in Merriam and Simpson's (2000) writings. This plan of the sequence of action was repeated throughout the study. At the end of the last cycle, I asked participants to reflect on the learning activity and to suggest plans of actions to combat the media images they have observed and analyzed. I also asked if participants were planning on taking action; and if so, what would that action look like?

As a final reflection, a second interview was conducted this time. It was semi-structured and took place with each participant individually to identify what was ultimately learned about media literacy and identity construction after the formal educational activity ended. These interviews also suggested future educational activities related to media literacy and the construction of the Arab American woman’s identity in their communities. This was conducted within two weeks of the program’s conclusion. In essence, it examined what participants felt were significant moments in their learning and how will they implement what they learned in their future learning
and informal or formal teaching engagements.

**Data Collection**

Data for the study was collected in the iterative, spiral fashion inherent in the action research, discussed above; to some extent, the data collection methods were inferred and discussed throughout. As noted throughout, typically, modes of data collection in qualitative research include interviews, both one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews, observations, and the use of documents and other artifacts at the site (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). In this study, all of these modes were employed. Individual, semi-structured interviews and the four learning sessions themselves, and my own and the group’s observations of them and written feedback about them, were the main data collection methods used in this study. Additionally, documents, including handouts, written materials created by participants during group activities, etc., served as additional sources of data. Each type of data collection that was incorporated in this study will be discussed further below.

**Individual Interviews**

As previously mentioned, interviews are an example of a qualitative research method that allows for the examination of issues such as identity construction through an open method, which seeks direct input from participants about their perceptions, opinions, and beliefs. Basically, an interview can be described as an encounter where the researcher gathers information from a participant through a series of questions and prompts, which can vary in degree of structure based on the nature of the study. The interviewer should strive for quality in the interview. Quality is discussed in relationship to the skills needed in an interview such as reflective summaries and clarifications and human traits such as respect and sensitivity (Schamberger, 1997). An advantage of using an interview is its effectiveness in gaining in-depth
information (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Interviews in this study were at first preliminary and face-to-face. The closing or final interview was in-depth and semi-structured, lasting anywhere from one to two hours and centering on the participants’ meaning and understanding of the effects of Western media on identity construction, as well as its association to the participants’ experience living in the U.S. Interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. As mentioned, they were semi-structured, and focused on identifying key moments in the lives of the participants when they had some sense of defining themselves or being defined by others as Arab or Arab American. I was interested in their positive experiences and negative or discriminatory experiences, as well as moments of cultural misunderstanding and the positive opportunities of educating others. The initial interview included both questions related to their background and identity and their experience of media. Those focusing on aspects of identity included:

1. Can you tell me a little bit about where and how you grew up; and how, why, or when you/your ancestors came to live in the U.S.?

2. What does it mean to you to be Arab American; or what are some key experiences in your life that has defined you both as Arab and American?

3. What does it mean to be an Arab American “WOMAN”; and how is your experience different from that of Arab American men?

4. What are the key events in your life as an Arab American woman that you feel play a role in the construction of your identity as Arab American and female?

5. What have been the best parts of your experience of being an Arab American woman; and what are the most difficult parts?

6. How have you responded when asked specific questions about Arabs, Arab Americans, or Islam?
The questions related to their experience of media included the following:

1. When you were growing up, what kinds of television shows or movies did you watch? What did you most enjoy; and to whom did you relate the most?

2. To what extent did you see Arabs portrayed in entertainment media (fictional television and movies); and how were they portrayed?

3. In your opinion as an adult, how has western Media portrayed Arab/Arab American women? And, how has that affected your life in general living in the U.S?

4. How do you think have these images affected how you are viewed in the larger American community?

5. What role if any do you think the media plays in your identity construction, or the kind of person you want to be, or the kind of life that you desire?

6. What would you most like to learn in this action research study about Arab American women and the media?

As per their intended purpose, these interviews were used to gain a greater depth of understanding about how these women have constructed their identity, and how the media affected the identity of Arab American women. As noted above, two interviews were conducted with each study participant. One interview took place before the first session of the learning activity where concepts such as identity, media literacy, and hegemony were introduced and explored. The second interview, was much shorter than the first and took place a week after the learning activity was concluded, in an attempt to uncover what participants felt were significant moments in their learning, and how they will implement what they learned in their lives and/or will take action in the future. These questions included:

1. What do you think about the Critical Media Literacy action research process?
2. What did you learn about the construction of your own identity by viewing and critiquing the movies that you watched?

3. What have you learned about Arab American women in the context of the media?

4. What have you learned from the other participants from the discussion?

**The Learning Sessions**

There were four learning sessions and a fifth follow-up group session to discuss the overall group sessions. Each of the learning sessions was comprised of the group of seven participants. The learning sessions included the framework and activities previously mentioned in the planning, acting, observing, and reflecting cycles. The first introductory session consisted of individual introductions, the discussion of Yosso’s (2002) tool of media analysis, the viewing of the movie, *Sex and the City 2* (2010), chosen because of its content about the Arab world, followed by a discussion of it, and then finally, the filling out of the critical incident questionnaire (CIQ). The following four sessions began with a discussion of insights since the last meeting, viewing a movie chosen with the participants, a discussion of the movie, and the filling out of the CIQ. Discussions in the sessions, at some points, were recorded. Although I planned the initial stages of the learning activity, it is important to note that after the initial learning session, the structure and content of the remaining three additional learning sessions, the last of which was online, were negotiated with the participants. So, for example, additional movies were added, and specific topics within the context of identity in some cases were singled out for discussion. The final group session, as discussed in detail in Chapter 6, took place one week after the fourth learning session and was aimed at highlighting possible actions, the learning that took place, and ways of implementing new knowledge that could be gained in the future. A brief summary of the learning sessions appears below, but these sessions and the
learning that unfolded appears in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

The learning sessions in brief included the following:

Session 1: Introductions, Overview, and Negotiation of Movies.

The viewing and discussion of *Sex in the City 2*.

Planning for Next Sessions and Filling out the CIQ.

Session 2: Reflections and Follow-up Discussion from the First Session.

The viewing and discussion of *The Kingdom*.

Planning for Next Sessions and Filling out the CIQ.

Session 3: Reflections and follow-up discussions from the previous session.

The viewing and discussion of *Body of Lies*

Preparation for the Online Session.

Session 4: The viewing of *Aladdin* before the on-line discussion.

Online discussion of *Aladdin*.

Closing online discussion and dialogue revolving around final meeting.

**Generating Documents/Artifacts and Observational Field Notes**

As discussed above, the learning activity started with an initial one-on-one preliminary interview. During this stage, I took notes on the answers of the questions, which provided additional insights besides the generated interview transcripts. In addition, some field notes were taken after each session, and session recordings were available to the facilitator when participants were comfortable doing so. The online discussion in the form of the four learning session and the CIQ also provided a wealth of written information. Additionally, and as previously mentioned, the final reflection interview also offered the facilitator with written
documentation from the participants.

**Data Analysis**

Once data began to be collected, the process of analysis took place. Data analysis based on action research requires the researcher to evaluate the overall leaning process and, in the process, “create a documented comparison based on the results” (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997, p.30). Within this framework, the learning activity, which consisted of the initial interview, the discussions generated from watching the movies, the CIQ, the online learning session, and the final reflection interview were all analyzed, along with the accompanying notes and field notes.

The preliminary interview highlighted specific themes that were developed into specific groups. As the facilitator, I looked for specific ways in which knowledge about how the participants’ identities were constructed. In addition, I also examined how they made meaning by watching and analyzing the movies shown during the activities. As themes developed and similarities and/or differences emerged, they were marked and identified numerically. This method assisted when comparing the various common or uncommon results found within the data and insured that the identified themes were consistent across the collected data. As previously mentioned, the action research part of the study took place through the analysis of the data collected through the initial interview, discussions, CIQ, Yosso’s (2002) tool for critical analysis, and the final reflection interview. Combining these various critical research methods of analysis helped bring to the surface and confirm knowledge constructions using a variety of approaches, which ultimately enhanced the validity of the findings. In using the interview data as an example, the transcribed data was coded first to see what potential themes or categories emerged from the data (Merriam, 2002). Then, some of the data was compared to generate possible categories and coded with as many possible categories that were appropriate. Second,
categories were examined with relationship to the data in order to better understand the categories and their properties. Third, categories were reduced, and data was again considered relative to the overall framework, which developed through the data analysis. Finally, in the fourth stage, themes begin to emerge from the coded data that responded to the research questions posed in this study.

This mode of data analysis was used to analyze the individual interviews. First, the initial preliminary individual interviews were analyzed to discover emergent ideas related to understanding the concepts such as identity and hegemony. The focus here was their background and identity overall, and more specifically, their perception of the role media plays in these Arab American women’s understanding of their lives. Second, data uncovered during the action research phase of the study shed light on what strategies were being used in the learning activities themselves, what strategies facilitated ongoing learning, and which strategies were less helpful in the process. Third, the group and online learning sessions facilitated dialog central to the observation phase of the action research cycle, during which observations about what participants learned through their own participation in the learning activity coupled with considerations of their own experiences were shared. Notes from the discussions were also analyzed to uncover emergent themes following the strategies described by Kuhne and Quigley (1997).

Lastly, after the completion of the 4-week program designed as a result of the planning stage of the action research cycle, second individual interviews were employed and data collected. This data was analyzed to discover emergent themes related to the learning program, including what was learned about the concepts discussed in the learning activity by the Arab American women who participated in the learning activity and what action would they suggest or
want to take after this learning activity.

**Verification Strategies**

Several issues of qualitative research in general are examined in relation to this study to consider whether, as a qualitative research study, it can be termed trustworthy or good research. These issues are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and can also be considered in relation to qualitative action research. The discussion that follows attempts to illuminate several issues central to qualitative methodology that is important to consider in regard to this study.

Patton (2002) views quality and credibility as connected “in that judgments of quality constitute the foundation for perceptions of credibility” (p. 542). More simply stated, credibility refers to the ‘truth’ or ‘believability’ of the findings (Morse, 1994). By having field notes, interviews, Yosso’s tool for critical analysis as a method to collect data, and the CIQ, information was extracted through a variety of methods and provided documentation that adds to the “believability” of the data. Credibility is also discussed in terms of the researcher. “Judgments about the significance of findings are thus inevitably connected to the researcher’s credibility, competence, thoroughness, and integrity” (Patton, 2002, p. 64). Credibility is evident when the researcher attempts to make clear anything that outlined by Patton, are researcher change, competence and skill, biases, interaction with participants, and sensitivity. I have discussed all of these issues above in the section on my background as the researcher and it was also shared with participants. In this study, every attempt was made to make clear both positive and negative effects of the researcher on the study. In addition, I did my best to be thorough and transparent in presenting the study’s findings, but also in addressing issues related to me as the researcher, such as competence, as well as my biases and assumptions. It was also my aim to
present the information necessary so anyone reading this research will be able to clearly understand where it comes from and what limitations it brings with it.

In addition to credibility, transferability is another issue in qualitative research that can be examined in relationship to this study. Transferability is a concept that can be used to look at findings in qualitative research, since findings in this research will not be generalizable (Morse, 1994; Patton, 2002). Malterud (2001) proposes that no study can produce findings that are universally transferable. Being that critical action research is a form of qualitative research, the findings regarding this particular group will not be transferable to any other ethnic group, and perhaps not even applicable to all Arab American women. Maltrerud (2001) suggests that, the study design should show a thorough consideration of what an adequate degree of transferability would be, in view of the assumptions of the research question, and present a relevant sampling strategy. (p.485)

In this action research study, transferability could only to be a specific group with the same criteria used in the selection process. The researcher must supply data that makes transferability judgments possible for those examining and wanting to apply the data. Further, as Merriam (2002) suggests, the reader of the report can determine the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied to a particular situation, which is sometimes referred to by Merriam and others as reader generalizability.

In order to make transferability judgments possible, the researcher must provide detailed accounts of the research conducted and provide a narrative that reveals thick, rich descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick, rich description “takes the reader into the setting being described” (Patton, 2002, p. 437). As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) acknowledge, “the thicker the description that can be produced, the subtler the interpretations that can be made” (p. 711).
Denzin and Lincoln further suggest that, “thick description makes thick interpretation possible” (p. 391). Marshall and Rossman (1999) also mention the contribution of thick descriptions to valuable findings. Every attempt was made in this study to provide the thick description necessary to make transferability possible for future consumers of this research including a presentation of contextual background material, such as demographics and study setting, which will be necessary “if the reader is to be able to ascertain for which situations the findings might provide valid information” (Malterud, 2001, p. 486). Given that this was an action research study, I also provided an in-depth outline of what the learning project actually entailed, so that others might try to duplicate it in relevant settings.

Dependability is another issue that is central to qualitative methodology that can be considered in regard to this action research study. This aspect is concerned with the fairness and dependability of the process used to examine data, interpretations, and recommendations. It addresses the question: Can the findings be trusted? It requires the use of sufficient methods and techniques to ensure that the study’s findings can be trusted. Dependability can be demonstrated in a variety of ways, and the researcher must determine which ways are best given the study. One way to obtain dependability is to use an external auditor to the research being conducted. Dependability also requires credibility, and these aspects are often enhanced through making use of triangulation, or multiple means of enhancing dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks were also used in the context of this study. This included a process in which during the process of interviewing, planning for the learning activity, and discussions throughout, as the researcher, I made a constant effort to restate and summarize information instantly in the form of a question to make sure my observations and understandings were in alignment with what the participants wanted to convey.
In this study, considering that it is a dissertation research, my primary dissertation advisor and dissertation committee, to a lesser degree, served as external auditors in the process of reviewing both the study and its findings, in an attempt to demonstrate that the study is in fact dependable research. In that sense, this plurality of researchers acts as a form of researcher triangulation. I also ensured dependability by using multiple data sources, as discussed with data triangulation, by using member checks, and by going back to participants for confirmation.

All of the issues or criteria discussed in relationship to this study, credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability, are congruent with the philosophic purposes and goals of action research and the qualitative paradigm and support the notion of good research. If these criteria are met, confidence is generated in the findings, thus suggesting that the findings presented can be considered trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Chapter Summary

In summary, the purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of the methodology that was used in this study, which focused on how Arab American women construct their identity vis-à-vis the media. In addressing this goal, the chapter began with an overview of qualitative research and specifically rationalized the reason for using action research. This chapter then highlighted the background of the researcher, which was followed by an explanation of how participants would be selected, as well as how data would be selected and analyzed. This chapter concluded with an overview of verification strategies that were employed while conducting this study.
CHAPTER FOUR

PARTICIPANTS AND PLANNING AND INITIAL FINDINGS

The purpose of this action research study was to explore how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identities in living in the U.S., and to understand how the participants think media and popular culture have affected their identity construction. Then, through an action research process, the study examined how these women continue to construct their identity by going through a critical media literacy (CML) exercise of viewing and discussing movies portraying Arabs and Arab American women. The process of the action research employed an interactive approach that consisted of the following four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.

This chapter focuses on the initial planning stages of the study. While planning is always ongoing in action research, the interviews, the analysis of them, and the first session were used not only to understand the participants’ backgrounds and how they have constructed their identity, but also to draw on the data to plan future sessions. Thus, in this chapter, I first introduce the participants based on the interviews that lasted approximately one hour, and then I provide an analysis of the interviews. In the third part, I will describe the opening session with the participants, which consisted of a brief introduction, followed by an overview and discussion of CML, the watching of the movie, Sex and the City 2, chosen because of its content about the Arab world, as a group, and lastly, an open discussion of the movie.

Initial Preliminary Interviews

All of the initial interviews were conducted individually prior to the first learning session. The goal of the interview was to gain an understanding of the participants in terms of
important elements of their identity, to gage media influence, and to explore parameters of comfort in discussing elements of their identity. It was also to gather data to create a collaborative framework that would address the specific study questions, and to find out what the participants were interested in learning. To achieve these goals, the interviews were divided into two parts. The first part of the interview focused on aspects of the participants’ identity, while the second part explored the participants’ experience related to popular media.

Throughout the preliminary interview process, as the researcher, I was able to establish a bond with participants very quickly; in my opinion, this connection was largely a result of my gender, religion, and familiarity with the Arab American culture. All participants were Muslim and women; the fact that I shared these two elements with them created an instant bond within the first minutes of the interview. As discussed in Chapter Three, although I am not Arab American, I grew up in the Middle East, married an Arab American, and was immersed in the culture since I was born. This, in my opinion, gave me cultural, religious, and gender capital with the participants. The manifestation of this bond was captured in comments made by the participants during the interview. Fatima stated, when asked about growing up as a Muslim Arab American woman, “You know how it is growing up in an Arab Muslim family. You know what we have to go through as Muslim women.” Tala said, “So many studies on Arabs are done by Westerners. I do not think they fully understand the scope and dynamics of our religion and culture. I’m optimistic that you are doing this study, you are one of us.” Nevertheless, a couple of the participants were still hesitant at some points in the interview and during the learning process, which will be evident throughout the discussion of the learning activity. The preliminary interview with the participants unveiled many interesting facts and findings, which will become
clearer in the following discussion. But first, in this section, I provide a summary of my interview with each participant.

Table 1 (see below) provides a summary of some demographic data on each participant, such as current age, the age of the participant when moving to the U.S., her level of education at the time of the study, whether the participant wears the hijab, if she is working or a homemaker, and finally, her marital status.

Table 1. Participants’ demographic data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age upon Arrival in U.S.</th>
<th>Education Achieved</th>
<th>Wears Hijab</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Spouse Status</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatima</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>U.S. born</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maha</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>U.S. born</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aysha</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>U.S. born</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tala</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3 years old</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arwa</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>U.S. born</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samar</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>U.S. born</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Working</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Arab American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summarizing some of the demographic data of the entire group of participants based on the table, it is easy to see that, all participants in the study are Arab American, Muslim women who were born to immigrant Arab families, and who moved to the US, with just one exception, Tala, who came to the US as a very young child. All participants are married to Arab Americans with two exceptions. One participant is married to a White American man, and another is single. All participants are members of a local mosque and participate in various religious, cultural, and educational activities held there. The married women have one to three children, ranging in age from 6 months to 22 years of age. In the following section each participant will be introduced individually to gain a better understanding of their Arab American identity, and the effects the popular media has had on the construction of their identity.

**Tala**

Tala is a 45-year-old, Muslim, Arab American woman. She is the only participant in the group that was not born in the U.S., as she moved to the U.S. at the age of 3. Tala’s family, of Palestinian origin, made the decision to move to the U.S. for better financial opportunities and to escape the unsafe conditions in Palestine that were and still are the result of the ongoing war between Palestine and Israel. Tala is married to a Palestinian, Arab American man, who is a distant cousin. Marriage to a first, second, or distant cousins is an accepted union in Islam, the Middle East, and many other Muslim countries. Tala graduated from high school, does not work outside the home, and has three children, aged 8, 16, and 22.

When asked how she identified herself, she stated that she believed she was Arab and American, which indicates that her identity was encompassing of both categories. To Tala, the
Arab identity allowed her to maintain the Arab culture and traditions. She stated, “I still have my Arab roots and culture.” On the other hand, she explained that at the core of her American identity was the freedom to be and do whatever she wanted, and for her, that was the polar opposite to what would be the case if she still lived in Palestine. Tala explained that she felt that her identity, along with many Arab Americans, was affected negatively by the events of 9/11, even though she stated that being American gave her the freedom and courage to speak and dispel many of the misconceptions. As such, being American allowed her to defend her Arab identity and culture.

In terms of media exposure growing up, Tala watched a lot of “Egyptian” Arabic movies, stating, “none of which I could relate to,” although she enjoyed watching them and found them very entertaining. She also watched Dynasty, Charlie’s Angels, and The Six Million Dollar Man, and said that she felt that these shows exemplified what it meant to be a true American. Tala was very excited to participate in the study and was interested in learning about how the world viewed Arab Americans as a result of the media. She also wanted to explore if the media is playing a role in enlightening the American public about Arab Americans.

**Fatima**

Fatima is a 25-year-old, Muslim woman, born and raised in the U.S. She is married to an Arab American man and has one child, aged 8 months. She is a college graduate and currently works as a respiratory therapist at a local hospital. Her parents emigrated from Lebanon over 30 years ago, and she grew up in a family of five siblings. She spent the majority of her life in the U.S., with the exception of when she moved back to Lebanon at the age of 5. She returned to the U.S. at the age of 9. Although Fatima’s family moved to the U.S., they did not assimilate into the Western society. They chose to live in a large Lebanese Muslim community, and they were also
very involved in their community. What is interesting is the fact that, although Fatima’s family
did not assimilate into the Western society, she identifies more as an American than as an Arab.
She states, “I was born in the U.S. to Lebanese parents, so I will always think of my identity as
being American more than Lebanese. I will always identify with the U.S. as my place of origin.”

Growing up, Fatima watched a lot of cartoons and was not allowed to watch much else.
She indicated that as a young girl, she found herself drawn to the movie *Aladdin* and felt that
princess Jasmine looked similar to her in that she had brown skin, big eyes, and dressed in
familiar garb. This made her like the movie very much. She is disturbed by the fact that there are
currently a lot of negative images of Arabs in the media and is optimistic that this learning
activity will assist her in dealing with the damaging repercussions of negative Arab and Arab
American images in the media.

**Maha**

Maha is a 22-year-old, Arab American woman. She is married to an Arab American man
who is her first cousin, which, as indicated previously, is a culturally, religiously acceptable, and
common matrimonial tradition in many Arab and Islamic countries. Maha was born and raised in
California and moved to a mid-Atlantic state when she married at the age of 16. She has two
children and her highest level of education is a high school diploma. She shares an ethnic
background similar to Tala, in that her father is of Palestinian descent. Her mother is a Mexican
American, who converted to Islam and has fully embraced the religion and Arab cultural
traditions. Maha’s mother also wears the hijab and has been doing so for the last 10 years. Maha
is the youngest of three siblings and grew up in an affluent home. Although Maha’s mother is
Mexican, Maha identifies as Arab American. She maintains that she grew up with the idea that
Arab American women “ Stayed at home, cooked, cleaned, and took care of their children.”
Therefore, she feels that her identity as an Arab American woman is to fulfill these same roles. This, she argues, was instilled in her mind, and she suggests that she is happy to fulfill such obligations.

When she was growing up, she watched a lot comedy shows and found that, occasionally, Arabs were the punch line of the jokes, often making her feel alienated and embarrassed to be Arab American. She also watched music channels, such as MTV and VH1, and claims that they were a guilty pleasure, as they provided an escape into the “Western style of living,” and the images she saw reflected what were, in her opinion, “real Americans.” Participating in this study, Maha is hoping to learn who is in control of the media and the negative images of Arab Americans that frequently “plague” the screen. She also hopes to better understand the effects media has on the construction of her identity.

**Aysha**

Aysha is a 33-year-old, Arab American woman, whose family is originally from Lebanon. She is married to an Arab American man and has three children. Her parents moved to Michigan in the early 1960s, in search of a better life. Aysha grew up in a large Arab-Lebanese community founded by her relatives prior to the arrival of her immediate family. She attended and graduated high school there, and growing up in this particular community gave her a sense of belonging, because she attended Arabic schools and participated in many Arab functions. She asserts that she did not mix with “Americans,” because she was not allowed to go outside of her community. However, she argues that she was fully aware of the culture and norms of the “outside community.” She added that the reason she was content staying in her community was because she could not identify with the outside community. “That is who I am. I’m Arab. I’m not like them [non Arab Americans].”
Growing up, Aysha watched a lot of television. Among the shows she enjoyed were *Who’s the Boss*, *Growing Pains*, and *Charles in Charge*. Although she took pleasure in these shows, she was always conscious of the fact that “we are different than them,” and “we cannot do what they do in the shows.” She could not relate to any of the characters and even found it hard to identify with them. From this learning activity, she hoped to learn how to deal with questions non Arab Americans ask concerning her identity, religion, and culture. She also hoped that the learning activity would give her insight into why people hold so many negative misconceptions about Arab American women.

**Arwa**

Arwa is a 22-year-old, college graduate. She is the only participant in the study who is single and has no children. She was born to and raised by a mother and father that came to this country in their teens and married each other soon after. They, like many other couples mentioned previously, were also first cousins. Arwa is similar to other Palestinians who migrated to the U.S. Her family came here in the early 1970s to escape the turbulent war conditions. Arwa grew up in an all-American community where the majority of people where White, and the only Arabs she knew growing up were her mother’s immediate family. She highlights that ever since she was a little girl, her family instilled in her the importance of higher education. A constant memory is of her parents insisting that she attend college. Although her mother and father did not attend college, they felt that it was very important that she do so.

Arwa has just graduated from college and feels that her education has played an important role in framing her identity. She believes that if she had not gone to college, she, like many of her other cousins and family members, would have already been married with children. She also feels that her education has given her the opportunity to expand her identity from being
not just a housewife, sister, and daughter, but also to incorporate a new identity, because she is now able to choose from a variety of professions. She believes this will give her a degree of independence from her family. She feels that being Arab American provides her with a great sense of culture and diversity within her combined identity.

Growing up, Arwa watched a lot of romantic and comedic movies and TV shows. She admits that she could not relate to any of the characters or the story lines, because they never had any Arab or Arab Americans depicted in them. She explained that the negative images of Arabs in the news made her look and feel like a terrorist at times. She believes that the popular media has not influenced her life decisions and aspirations. When asked what she would like to learn from this learning activity, she states that she would like to view movies that portray Arab American women in a positive light, since “that’s what was lacking in the other movies that I watched growing up.”

Samar

Samar is a 35-year-old, Arab American woman. She is married to an Arab American man. Born and raised in Michigan with Palestinian Arab American parents, Samar married at the age of 19. She has three children, aged 7 to 15. In Michigan, where Samar grew up, there was a large Palestinian Arab American community. This made it very hard for her growing up. “As a woman, I always had to be careful growing up in such a large Arab American community.” She felt that her community always scrutinized her every move. Samar was very happy to get married and move away from this community. She said this gave her the privacy to live her life without the interference of the Arab American community.

Samar believes that she has two identities; one, Arab, and the other, American. She suggests that when she is with her family, she separates the two from one another. “I have to
suppress my American identity, I feel that I have to." From a very young age, she was taught that it was bad to be like “the American girls.” Therefore, although she is married and lives independently away from her family, when she is around them, she still feels the need to hide that part of her identity. She admits that this is very hard to do, although she suggests that it is something that has “become second nature.”

Growing up, Samar was only allowed to watch educational shows, such as National Geographic and documentaries. This made her very interested in watching “regular” TV. At every opportunity, she would sneak to watch shows such as 21 Jump Street, Full House, and daytime soap operas. “I had an insatiable appetite for television. It was taboo in our house, and therefore, I always wanted to watch it.” This also made Samar feel that all activities, actions, and images in the shows were prohibited. The attitude Samar’s parents held against Western ideology impeded her ability as a young adult to assimilate and develop an integrated Arab American identity. Samar is hoping that, from this learning activity, she is able to delve into a better understanding of her identity, and what she believes to be the dichotomy of the Arab and American identity.

**Manal**

Manal is an Egyptian, Arab American. Her parents met and married in Egypt. Soon after, they moved to the U.S., as her father was accepted into graduate school in the America. After graduating, he was offered a prestigious position at a company, and based on this employment, he made the decision to remain living in the U.S. Manal’s family’s migration is different than all other participants in the study, as her family did not move to the U.S. as a result of a war or in search of a better future. On the contrary, her family moved for educational purposes, which later developed into a career for her father and, ultimately, into her family settling in the U.S. There is
also another distinction: unlike all other participants who have only gone back to their native country once or twice, Manal goes to Egypt every year. She is also the only participant that is not married to an Arab American; Manal is married to an American who is of Irish decent. She has successfully completed a Master’s degree and, therefore, has the highest level of education in the group of participants. She has three children, aged 3 months to 4 years.

To Manal, being Egyptian is very important. “I love Egypt and I’m very proud of being Egyptian…ever since I was a little girl, I felt a sense of pride.” Manal believes her identity is an equal blend of Arab and American. She was born and raised in the U.S. Her family assimilated into the Western society, and Manal rarely mixed with Arabs unless they were family visiting from Egypt. Out of her best friends, she only has one that is Egyptian Arab American. She is similar to Manal in the fact that she was born and raised in the U.S. Culturally, Manal feels fortunate, because she believes having both identities allows her to enjoy the American and Arab culture. “I enjoy all of the American holidays, especially Thanksgiving. I think we should all be thankful, and it is a great time for family and friends to get together.” Not forgetting her Arabic culture, she believes that Arab culture provides her with the code of conduct for special occasions, like fasting during the month of Ramadan. She is excited to be part of this study and learning activity and is looking forward to having time to reflect on her identity. In her life, she has not yet had time to analyze and reflect on it and to have an interactive learning activity with a group of Arab American women.

**Summary of Themes**

The objective of the initial interviews with the participants was to elicit information related to their personal beliefs about their identity and the popular media. The research questions that guided the exploration of this objective included: (a) What does it mean to be an
Arab American, and what are some key experiences in your life that have defined you both as Arab and American?; and (b) In your opinion, as an adult, how has Western media portrayed Arabs or Arab Americans, and how that has affected your life living in the U.S.? As previously mentioned, my history, background, and marital status all helped to create a level of comfort between the participants and me, which allowed the women to respond to the questions freely. However, there were moments of discomfort that appeared later and will be discussed in Chapter Five and in the context of the learning activity.

Based on the data from the preliminary interviews, four themes emerged that are related to both identity and media. The participants shared: (a) the experience of being the “other”; (b) the backlash of 9/11; (c) the frustration with Western media images; and (d) the complexity of an “Arab” and “American” female identity. Each of these themes will be addressed in detail in the upcoming sections.

**The Experience of Being the “Other”**

From a very young age, being Arab American made participants feel different and alienated from the rest of the non-Arab Americans in their surroundings. Childhood experiences commonly included feeling like the “other” in relationship to non Arab Americans, specifically when it came to Arab culture and religion verses American culture and religion, which in many cases posed social constraints. Fatima did not feel like a “normal” or typical American girl growing up. This was, in part, because all her friends could have opposite sex friendships and, as an Arab American, this was culturally unacceptable. It upset her that she could not go to birthday parties and sleepovers, because boys were going to attend, or because the girl having the sleepover had a brother. “I always had to make excuses as to why I could not go to the party or sleep at my friend’s house…After I got to a certain age, I realized that I was different, and I just
told them I could not come.” When classmates were planning activities, parties, and events, she would pull away from the group. This, in turn, always made her feel different and isolated from the group. Maha speaks to a similar experience in which she expresses that “although growing up I was surrounded by Arabs and Arab culture, I was aware that if I left my community, first, I could not go by myself, and second, I would have to ‘watch out’.” This statement supports the idea that, from a very young age, she was made fully aware of the fact that she was the “other” and had to be cautious and on guard when leaving the surroundings of her Arab American community. Aysha confirms the notion of growing up knowing that she was different from others and recalls that “as long as I can remember, my parents compared me to all my non Arab American friends using the words ‘you’ and ‘them’ when making the point of what I was and wasn’t allowed to do.” She grew up with a comparative frame of opposites when it came to her and the “others.” She implies that what she was allowed to do almost always seemed to be in complete opposition to what her counterpart “non Arab friends could do. “If they wore short dresses, I had to wear long dresses; when they played sports, I could not, because playing sports, especially ‘soccer,’ was something in the Arab culture that was only for boys.” Reflecting on Maha and Aysha’s experiences of feeling like the “other,” it is possible to argue that the feeling of being the other was not only the result of non-Arab Americans making them feel like the “other.” On the contrary, the Arab community also played a role in making their members feel like the “other.”

Many of the participants expressed what it was like growing up and compared themselves to their non-Arab American counterparts. As a young girl, when it was lunchtime at Manal’s school, her lunch was different from the other students. As a Muslim, Manal was not allowed to eat pork for religious reasons. Therefore, on “Pizza Friday…, which all kids in school
were excited about,” she had to eat a veggie sandwich, as the pizza was served with pepperoni or sausage many times. To eliminate any mishaps, her family requested that she be specifically given a veggie sandwich, other vegetable, or a carbohydrate alternative. She could not eat any bacon or pork extracts, meaning she was not allowed to eat hot dogs either, a common food for American children. Also, because Manal’s family adhered to the Islamic law of meat slaughtering, which is similar but not exactly the same as Kosher, she could not eat any beef or chicken products that were served at school. Alternatively, on many school days, her mother packed lunch for her, which in many cases was an ethnic Arab meal like a “Zatar” or “Labana” sandwich, which is not a typical American sandwich as the bread that it is made with is traditional Arabic bread. When she took her homemade lunch to school, classmates would ask, “What is that?” Manal specifically recalls “begging” her mom to let her stand in line with the other kids and to choose her lunch from the assembly line like all the other kids. She felt it was a lose-lose situation: if she brought her lunch from home, she felt alienated, because her food was strange and did not look like the other kids’ lunch; and if she stood in line for “hot lunch” with the other kids, oftentimes, she would be served a different meal to fit her religious, cultural, and parents’ dietary requests. At Manal’s school, like many other schools in the U.S., lunchtime in the cafeteria was a social highlight of the day, but because of her religious and cultural dietary constraints, this was a daily experience that only made her feel alienated from her classmates and social circle of friends.

Tala’s experience growing up echoes those who have been discussed previously. To her knowledge, she was the only Arab American in her school. Although this may not have been the case, growing up, she felt that this was her reality, because her mother was the only woman that came to school in Islamic garb. She explains that the memory of feeling different is one that goes
back to elementary school, when her mother would drop her off for class in the morning, and she noticed other parents in the yard staring at her. As a learning activity, the teacher requested that Tala’s mother come to school and give a historical and cultural briefing about Arab Americans. Tala’s mother happily obliged and, although this activity was informative to Tala’s classmates and teacher, it also worked as a double-edged sword, since her mother was the only one that came into the classroom to give such a briefing. Regarding this experience, Tala states: “That made me feel strange.” She felt that it alienated her from her classmates even more, because it highlighted her differences.

Samar felt that, because she identified as an Arab American, some of her teachers went out of their way to bring up things related to the “Arab culture” in class. She gives the example of being in art class and the teacher incorporating art projects with camels and tents, elements the teacher thought were the fabric of the Middle Eastern culture. “As a young child, I was not aware that that was part of my culture.” In retrospect, she appreciates her teachers’ efforts to make her feel included, but this also worked to make her feel like she was the only one that came from that “strange place,” where everything was different. Fast forward to the present, and Samar states, “I tend to withhold speaking about my ethnicity, because I do not want to be bombarded with “strange” questions.” She believes that her current feeling of not wanting to always discuss her ethnic identity stems from her early childhood experiences of feeling like the other “other.”

The common experiences of alienation and feeling like the “other” when growing up, set the stage for the development of the “them” and “us” perspective that was a common thread between all participants during the preliminary interview. When participants talked about themselves in comparison to non Arab Americans, they tended to refer to themselves as “us” and non Arab Americans as “them,” or “we” and “them.”
The Backlash of 9/11

A more dangerous common experience that participants shared without exception was of the uncomfortable and sometimes scary confrontations that came from the immediate backlash of the events of 9/11 and the horrifying media images that took over the news. Fatima remembers that, instantaneously after the events of 9/11, she was bombarded with a variety of offensive acts. She clearly remembers the day of 9/11. She, like many other Americans, watched in dismay as her country was attacked. “I stood in horror watching innocent people jump to their death.” However, what she did not anticipate was how people would react to her as a result of the images in the news that told the story of 9/11. She recalls going to Wal-Mart shortly after 9/11. As she walked back to her car, wearing her hijab, as always, someone spat on her in the parking lot. “I was humiliated… they told me to go back to my country.” Fatima was confused. This was her country! “I wear a scarf. That is a dead giveaway.” However, experiencing these horrific acts made Fatima very worried and scared to leave her home.

Participants also commented on the negative feelings associated with being Arab American. Arwa argues that for the first time in her life she felt that her citizenship as an American was questioned. “I always thought of myself as Arab American. After 9/11, for the first time, I began to see that people separated the two.” Being an American meant that she could not be Arab; and being Arab meant that she was not a true American. Arwa was very young during the events of 9/11, but she remembers feeling shame for being of Arab descent. “I did not want to tell anyone I was Arab American. I felt like they would think I was like those people on TV.” In retrospect, Tala feels that the images and events of 9/11 transformed how non Arab American citizens view her and continue to view her to this day. She constantly has to explain to people she meets how “not all Arabs are terrorists,” nor do they condone acts of terrorism. She
understands people’s fears and frustrations, but she feels that the constant barbaric images in the news of Arabs, such as “Arabs dancing after 9/11,” worked to vilify the image of Arab Americans in the minds of non Arab Americans.

Aysha was a preteen at the time of 9/11 living in California, however she clearly recalls going from being one of the “popular” kids in school to being the girl that was an outcast. She argues, “because I did not take the bus my mother, who’s Mexican but wears the hijab, would pick me up from school, I remember having to explain how my mom was not Arab but wore the hijab, and I was constantly asked why she would want to be part of this ‘terrorist’ group of people.” She specifically recalls feeling overwhelmed by questions and concepts that she could not explain. “I did not understand how to answer many of the questions I was asked…Because of my frustration with the whole thing, and I remember asking my mom not to wear the hijab to pick me up from school because it embarrassed me. When she didn’t listen, I asked her to pick me up from the block down the street and not in front of the main school door. I wanted to make sure no one saw her.” Aysha feels that although the events made her feel extremely embarrassed at the time, she also thinks that they forced a dialog between her and her family about many topics regarding Arab and Islamic culture that she may have not had otherwise.

For Tala, the aftermath of 9/11 is still very real. “It was one of the hardest times living in America, and it still affects me today.” Tala suggests that the images of 9/11 would come to dictate directly how she lives the rest of her life. She stopped going to the mosque, because she was afraid that she would be associated with “Radical Islam.” She also suggests that she took her kids out of Arabic class for the same reason. She did not want to put her kids in danger of being ridiculed or attacked by unpleasant comments. She recollects that after 9/11, the government announced the War on Terror in the media. This led to what she believes to be racial profiling,
something that affects her still today. She points to the fact that whenever she flies in the U.S., she is pulled out of the line and questioned. She fully understands that this is in an effort to keep the country safe, but “being the one that is almost always picked out of the line,” makes her believe that she is intentionally targeted because of her Arab identity.

In the aftermath of 9/11, participants felt a level of fear, discomfort, and isolation. Many spoke of their identity as Arab American being questioned by other American Nationals. They felt that their identity transformed from being Arab American to being only “Arab.” Also, many felt that because of 9/11 and the repeated negative images of Arabs in the media; they had now become defensive and compelled to give explanations for “terrorists” acts.

**Frustration with Western Media Images**

This theme is related to the preceding one in that 9/11 is seen as a turning point at which participants believed that media worked as a tool to amplify negative Arab perceptions. This prevalence and constant stream of negative images in the media catapulted Arabs into a negative light. A common thread among the participants is that they felt a level of frustration and/or anger because of negative experiences with which they were all faced. In this particular context, the women anticipated that these negative encounters were partially a result of the lack of positive images of Arabs and Arab women in the media.

Tala is angry when speaking about this issue, specifically; her anger is directed at the perception of Arab American women in the American media after 9/11. “Today when I watch TV, I see Black American women, Indian American women, Irish American women, but I have yet to see Arab American women on daytime TV.” She also feels that prior to 9/11, there were hardly any images of Arabs, and Arab women in particular, in the media, and that since 9/11 a slew of negative images has emerged. These images include “the Infidels,” “terrorists,” and
“Jihadist.” She also refers to another term that was born in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 “home grown terrorist.”

Aysha also address this term and argues that this term “refers to us. They are talking about Arab Americans being bred as terrorists on American soil.” She also discusses the effects of the current images and jargon that is used in the news regarding Arabs and Arab Americans. She argues, “we are at war. That is what is all over the media. We are at war with terrorism and terrorists, and who are these people that we are at war with? It’s us.” Aysha speaks to the media images in the news today and addresses the negative impact these images are having on Arabs and Arab Americans. For instance, she states, “When who you are and where you come from are constantly associated with suicide bombers and terrorists, you have to expect that people watching this stuff will hate you.” She believes that there is a justification for the birth of anger against Arabs since the events of 9/11. However, she feels that the constant images of Arab terrorists depicted as the “bad guys,” and non Arab American as the people that are fighting the war on terror, does nothing but harm the image and reputation of Arabs and Americans and creates hardships for Arab Americans living in the U.S.

Participants also felt frustration toward the media that was outside the context of the events of 9/11. For instance, growing up, Samar often felt frustrated when people asked her about Arabs. “It was not the questions that bothered me. It was the type of questions that were asked that made me cringe.” She highlighted incidences where she was asked if her family in the Middle East lived in a tent, or “if we had a camel.” This, she felt, was a direct correlation to images in the media that portrayed Arabs as barbaric and as a group of people that have yet to evolve. “Why else would they think that?” These types of “redundant questions” made her angry and frustrated; she could not understand why people still thought that Arabs in the Middle East
lived as nomads. “Why is it that we [Arabs] know so much about America, and Americans know so little about the Middle East?” Samar is tired of answering what she sees as “silly questions.” She feels that if people want to learn about the Middle East and Arabs, they should take some initiative to learn and not ask questions that are “offensive.” Samar believes that if non-Arabs are to understand Arabs and Arab Americans, they will have to move past the false and minimal images that are in the media and take the initiative to educate themselves. The participants felt that Western media provided a misleading visual that played a role in how were perceived living in the U.S, they also felt that these images were directly linked many strange and uncomfortable questions that they were face to answer on a regular basis.

**The Complexity of an “Arab” and “American” Female Identity**

What it meant to be Arab American varied among participants. However, the description can generally be categorized into two groups, first: those who identified as Arab women living in the U.S. The second group, identified as both Arab and American. To the first group, being Arab American and female meant relocating their Arab female identity to a new land, America. At the same time, they needed to maintain their Arab culture, religion, and language, and stay connected and immersed in the Arab community. For this group, this part of their identity held priority over the development of their American female identity. For instance, growing up, Aysha was constantly told that “the girls back home do not wear short dresses,” and they “don’t have boyfriends.” Consequently, Aysha explained that growing up she was expected to be like “the girls back home,” even though Aysha’s context was different than the girls from where her parents originally came from. She was also not allowed to go to a regular public school, and it was mandatory that she attend an Islamic and Arabic studies school. “My parents wanted me to learn about cultural traits of Muslim women and to speak Arabic. This was extremely important
to them.” She highlights that it was important that she maintained her language, culture, and religion. This also was in alignment with maintaining the transported Arab female identity. Aysha also sends her young daughter to an Islamic Arabic school for the same reasons her parents chose to do so. On several occasions, she highlighted her current involvement in the Arab community, and how that was central to who she was as an “Arab Woman.”

Other participants highlighted the importance of maintaining their “original” Arab identity. For example, Maha, who reaffirmed the concept of maintaining a transported authentic Arab female identity, stated, “This is who we are. We are Arab women and without our culture we are not. We become American women.” The previous statement points to the fact that transporting and maintaining an Arab female identity and, in some cases, rejecting the American female identity was what was expected from some of the participants.

On the other hand, the second group of participants believed that their identity encompassed both an Arab and American female identity, and they spoke of the positive aspects of having a combined and evolving identity. Arwa mentions elements from both identities and views both as equally important. “Being an Arab American woman makes me interesting.” She appreciates aspects of both identities and chooses from each what she believes suits her. She argues that, although her mother adhered to many Arab traditions for women, she makes a conscious decision to choose from the “Arab traditions” what she finds “suitable.” She mentions advantages of having an American female identity that included the freedom “to be and do whatever I want, without ridicule.” She argues that if she lived in an all-Arab community growing up, “like other participants,” she would have been forced to abide closely to the Arab culture and religion that identifies a strict framework of conduct for women. “I would be more of an Arab woman.” She is thankful that her parents decided not to live in an all-Arab community
when they moved to the U.S., and attributes this decision to giving her the flexibility to be selecti

ve in the person she wants to be.

What is of interest is the fact that, when speaking about their identities, the first group of participants that viewed their identity as a “transported female identity,” meaning that their family had moved to the U.S. from the Middle East and transported their Arab female identity to the U.S. These participants did not see themselves fully as American women, rather they viewed their identity as Arab women living in the U.S. This was evident through the process of the first preliminary interview where they did not refer to themselves as Arab American women. However, when the second group talked about their identity, they specifically referred to both Arab and American identities during the interview. This factor further confirmed the idea of the existence of a split in the group. For the first group of participants, maintaining their Arab culture, religion, and language in the same form as “back home” was central to being an Arab American woman. For the second group, a more middle-of-the-road description of the merging of both Arab and American female identities was reflected.

Some of the women in the group also specifically discussed gender in relation to their culture. “Oh, it makes me so mad when people ask me if I feel lucky that as a woman I live in the U.S.” Maha suggests that this statement echoes many initial responses when she tells people she is an Arab American who is obviously a female. It is her belief that this particular statement is offensive on several levels. First, she suggests that, by making such a statement, people knowingly or unknowingly suggest that the Arab world is oppressive to women. She states, “This is not true. One could argue the opposite, that women in America are oppressed.” This statement also suggests that she should feel fortunate to live in the U.S., which ignites another level of anger, because, she argues, “I am American, just like they are. I was born in this country.
It is my country, too.” She states that such statements would not be acceptable if made to any other race: “African Americans and all other Americans, if asked a question like this, would look at such questions as not being acceptable.” These types of comments, Tala argues, have built in her a level of anger towards “non Arab Americans,” who ask such “negative” questions and hold such beliefs about Arab American women.

Samar also feels misunderstood because she is an Arab American woman. She argues that it was hard to explain to people why when she prayed five times a day she had to cover her body from head to toe on the other hand, the men did not. She recalls observers asking her, “Why do you have to wear a scarf when you pray?” It is difficult for her to get people to understand aspects of her religion and culture in the context of her gender without seeming oppressed, and it gives her a level of comfort to talk to someone that can understand and relate to some of the difficulties she faces living as an Arab American woman. Participants were unified in their frustration and anger towards the lack of understanding from people who were not Arab American. Some participants even discussed their frustration in the lack of positive images of Arabs and Arab American women specifically in the media.

The previous highlighted the themes that emerged from the initial interviews with the participants. It was from the analysis of these themes that the first stage of the planning for the learning sessions took place.

Planning: Opening Learning Session

A core attribute of action research is that its method is constantly evolving; therefore, it is not possible to know the full design of the details of the study before the study begins. On the contrary, it is an ongoing process that relies heavily on the participants and unfolds based on what has taken place at each prior stage. Once the interviews were completed and analyzed, each
of the learning activities was designed based on what had gone on before, even though I had a general plan at the beginning of the study of how to conduct it. As stated, the study examined how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identity while living in the U.S.; how they think media and popular culture has affected their identity construction; and how these women continue to construct their identities by going through the Critical Media Literacy (CML) learning process. The first session functioned as a planning stage with the participants as a group, for laying a groundwork, and on helping the participants get to know each other, including the introduction of the CML process, the viewing of a movie, and a discussion of identity in relation to the movie. This section outlines the opening session of the series of learning activities. It includes a brief description of the introduction process of the participants to one another and the presentation of the CML model, which serves as a tool of analysis during the learning activity. This will be followed by an explanation of the introduction to the first movie, Sex and the City 2, and the responses that emerged from the participants after viewing the first movie.

**Setting and Introductions**

The first session took place at the agreed upon destination in a local mosque community center. This was a large room that was nicely furnished with tables, chairs, and media equipment that comfortably accommodated the participants. The chairs and tables were arranged in a circular pattern, so that all participants would face one another once they were seated. Since the participants and I were meeting for the first time as a group, I provided food and beverages in the hopes that this opening eating activity would also work as an icebreaker.

As the participants arrived, I welcomed them, introduced them to one another, and invited them to have a bite to eat. Although the participants were somewhat reserved at the beginning,
as time went by, interaction increased. As a result, small talk started to take place between the participants, and they began to ask questions about their Arab ethnic heritage, marriage, children, etc. After a short period of talking and eating, I passed around a few sheets of paper and some pens. I asked all of the participants to write the following items on a piece of paper and to share it with the group once they were done: (a) name; (b) three things they would like to share with the group; and (c) their favorite part of the initial interview process. Participants took five minutes to complete the questions.

As participants were finishing their answers, Manal, who had finished first, volunteered to share her answers first. As she began to talk, the participants’ conversation began to intersect as they talked about their background, upbringing, culture, religion, and living as Arabs in the U.S. After participants shared information about themselves, I told them about myself: how I was born and raised in the Middle East; and how my parents were not Arabs, but that they were Muslims that converted almost 40 years ago. I also shared with them that I was married to an Arab American, and, like them, I was also Muslim. After the introductions, I introduced the participants to the concept of CML, as this theoretical backdrop would provide the tool of analysis during the discussion in the learning activity.

**Overview of CML: 40 minutes**

In keeping with the framework of the study, the introductions were followed by my presentation to the participants that highlighted concepts in CML. As previously mentioned, the theoretical framework of this study is grounded in critical media literacy, which is generally informed by critical and feminist theory and pedagogy. This activity emphasized, specifically, the fact that media is everywhere, the various forms that media embodies, such as social media, print media, etc, and that the learning activity would specifically focus on Hollywood movies. I
then moved on to Yosso’s (2002) assessment of CML, the notion that media images are social constructions, and the potential that critical media literacy has in effecting social change. This was followed by the introduction of Guy’s (2007) concept of the relationship between identity and popular media, highlighting the importance of the media as a location where we learn about others and ourselves. The purpose of the briefing was to arm participants with the tools for media analysis.

Within the realm of CML, the interpretation of media and the learning that takes place varies from one participant to another. Because the goal of the learning activity was to discover and understand how these Arab American women construct their identities through media, the descriptions in the learning activity were based on participants’ comments during the discussion of the movie. This introduction took an estimated 30 minutes before I opened the floor for questions and answers. After some clarifications and making sure that participants had no further questions regarding CML, I proceeded to introduce the first movie.

Given the participatory nature of action research, and in an effort to start the learning activity in a light context, I offered participants three comedic choices for their first movie. By a consensus vote, the first movie chosen was *Sex and the City 2*. It is a movie that particularly addresses Arab American female identity and the American female identity in somewhat of an opposing manner because although the main characters in the movie are white American women, Arab women are featured throughout the movie, however representation of both in the movie are polar opposite. Also, the movie was a comedy, and the majority of participants wanted to start the learning activity with a light and fun movie. Since this was the first learning session and the first time the participants had all met, I decided to assist participants in the selection of the first movie, by providing a limited number of movies from which to choose. The activities thereafter
would solely be the participants’ choice, and I would not take apart in the movie selection process. Also, because CML is a new concept to the group of participants, and in the interest of getting at core influences to the construction of their identity, I felt the need to outline a list of topics that are under the umbrella of tools of analyses in CML. This list included the following variables: gender, race, class, and social status. In addition, I also added culture and religion to the list, because these were two variables that were overarching in the preliminary interview.

**Description of Sex and the City 2 (1:46 min)**

The *Sex in the City* movies are the outgrowth of a popular HBO series with the same name. The premise of *Sex and the City* is telling the stories of four best friends, Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Miranda Hobbs (Cynthia Nixon), Samantha Jones (Kim Cattral), and Charlotte York (Kristin Davis).

In this movie, Carrie writes a column for a New York newspaper about herself and three best friends. The focus of these stories is the various life events, including sexual and romantic encounters, of the women, who all go through different experiences and are affected differently by them, because they have very different backgrounds, personalities, and professions. Carrie is married to Mr. Big but has reached a plateau in her marriage. She is not the party girl she once was, but she is not ready to have children like other married couples. Miranda is a lawyer who is intellectual, smart, and is also a mother and a wife. Throughout the history of the *Sex and the City* TV show, she is portrayed as open minded. She dated men with a wide range of ethnicities, before settling down, having a child, and then later marrying the father. However, at this point in the movie, she is frustrated, quits her job, and decides that she wants to spend time with her husband and son. Kim is the oldest in the group of friends and is more sexually promiscuous than the other women. She owns a public relations company, and her main interest is men. In the
movie, she is fighting old age with hormone therapy. Charlotte is an art dealer and is considered to be the most conservative and traditional member of the group of friends. For her, sex falls into the traditional male and female roles. She is starting to think that her husband is sexually attracted to the nanny and finds this extremely disturbing.

*Sex and the City 2* takes place at a culminating moment when all of the four best friends are facing difficult personal and professional circumstances in their lives. When Samantha is given the opportunity to go on a luxury vacation to a resort in Abu Dhabi, she quickly convinces her girlfriends to go with her on the vacation as a way to have fun, regroup, and reflect.

Because the movie is sexually charged and thus deals with a subject that could be offensive to the group, I asked and made sure that all of the participating women were comfortable watching the movie in a group setting. When asked, all the women were familiar with *Sex and the City* and felt comfortable watching this movie with the group although no one had actually watched *Sex and the City 2*. After watching the movie, I started asking participants their thoughts on the movie, using the CML framework as a guide. The following depicts the discussion that took place using the Critical Incident Questioner (Appendix 2).

**Discussion of *Sex and the City 2* (1:00)**

Since I wanted to know how the participants made meaning of media images, and how this meaning affected their identity construction, what is described in the discussion below is participants’ interpretations of their experiences being Arab American vis-à-vis media images, and how these images affected the construction of their identity. Throughout the discussion that follows, the participants’ voices will be heard, explaining and interpreting images that struck them, and how they defined and interpreted the meaning of these images. It was a common occurrence that, as one person began to speak of a specific scene; other participants would jump
in to make comments regarding that specific scene also.

**Making comparisons.** The immediate reaction after watching the movie was a general feeling that the participants were happy to see that, while generally more about the four White heterosexual women than about Arabs, the movie did have a depiction of Arabs and the Middle East in Abu Dhabi. Overall, they felt that the movie was funny and very entertaining. When asked who would like to take the floor and share their first thoughts on the movie, Aysha spoke up and said, “As a woman, I can’t relate to these women at all, the American women are women that I don’t identify with and as far as the Arab women, I barely saw them.” She further argued that as an Arab Muslim woman, she would never “dress” or “behave” the way in which the women in the movie did. “Their clothes are outrageous and very sleazy.” By making this statement, Aysha made a clear distinction between the women in the movie and herself. This distinction can also be seen as a form of making a conscious decision to separate the way Arab women act, and the way the women in the movie (portrayed as White, upper-middle class, heterosexual women) act. This comment was a catalyst in steering the women away from their initial overall agreement with the fact that the movie was funny, and it opened a dialog of criticism and critique of the movie. Clearly, the initial negative comment affected the discussion in the group, and highlights the need to be aware of the dynamics of group discussions. Nevertheless, this is how the discussion started.

The distinction between the Arab women and the American women was echoed by Manal, who commented that although she never would “wear any of the outfits,” she appreciated the high fashion that was displayed in the movie. However, she also stated that, “This high fashion did not exist where I grew up. We did not have Prada stores in my area. We had Walmart.” Here, Manal is not only making a distinction between Arabs and American women, she is also
highlighting a class distinction in the movie between the affluent representation of the women in the movie and her reality growing up in America. This distinction was significant, because it was the first time during the discussion, thus far, that a participant knowingly or unknowingly grouped Arabs with American women when making a comparison.

Samar also made comparisons between the identity of the women in the movie and her own life, and stated that, as an Arab American, she would not discuss her sexuality with such openness, even with her closest friends. She also referred to the scene where Samantha was dressed in shorts walking through the *souq*, an Arab market, and spills a pack of condoms in the midst of a group of Arab men. After spilling the condoms, she motions her body simulating a sexual act. Regarding this scene, Samar stated, “It is taboo in our culture for a women to explore, speak, or even discuss anything sexual.” In reference to this same scene, Arwa suggested that, because she is a White American woman, the scene is scripted as funny. However, she believed that such a scene depicting an Arab woman in this way would not exist. She also stated that “if it was an Arab man doing that, he would have been depicted as a “scary sexual predator.” It was at this point that I followed up the previous statement and asked, “Why?” She replied, “The women in the movie can get away with anything. They are rich, and they have everything. No one is going to stop them.” This observation was significant, because the participants began to realize that the women in the movie were not “Arab American,” and therefore, had more freedom to do as they wished in this Arab land without consequence. One could argue that this particular observation is reflective of the fact that the women realized that there was a class difference in addition to the ethnic difference.

**Possible change of perspective.** In what seemed to be a trend in the analysis phase of this particular movie and is possibly a feature of group discussions, at the outset of each new topic,
the women seemed to be pleased by specific aspects of the movie. A discussion would then follow, and in some cases, a change of perspective appeared to take place. For example, Maha commented on a scene in the movie in which the American women were fleeing some Arab men in the *souq*, and a group of Arab women dressed in the traditional Islamic garb proceeded to take the women into their secret place. Once the women were all behind closed doors, the Arab women took their traditional cover off and revealed their high fashion. When the American women saw that the Arab women were wearing designer clothes and shoes and had designer bags under their traditional garb, they commended them for their good taste. Addressing this specific scene, Maha stated, “It was nice to see that the Arab and American women meet and discussed fashion.” She further explained that it was good to show that Arab and American women had common interests.

Fatima quickly followed up on this comment by recalling a different scene in the movie, in which the American women were sitting in the open lounge of the hotel while wearing “clothes that were very revealing.” At the same time, a group of Arab women sat within sight, “completely covered” and would raise their “face veil” to eat French fries. Fatima stated, “They are making it seem that Arab women have no freedom, like we do not go out or have a life.” This scene was interesting, because the American women in the movie were barely dressed. Regarding this scene, Manal stated, “This just shows that when one puts both groups of women side by side, Arab women are presented as oppressed, because they are covered and are unable to even eat their fries in a public place.” Arwa followed up by suggesting that this comparative scene also demonstrates the lack of respect that the American women have for the Middle Eastern culture. This was evident in her statement in reference to the same scene that “they think they can do whatever they want in the world,” meaning that American women do not feel
obliged to respect the Arab culture when they are in Arab countries. This can also be seen as a dismissal of the Arab culture by the American culture, and also highlights the dominance of American culture. Although Arwa might be overstating her case, she is offering an interesting analysis.

There was a common thread when addressing scenes and observations in this movie regarding both groups of women. At first, the participants had a positive perspective about a scene only to change their perspective after a closer analysis and discussion. However, when analyzing aspects of Arab and American culture in the movie, this pattern of analysis took a different course.

**Portrayals of the Middle East, Islam, and Arabs**

Before watching the movie with the participants, I had conducted some research on every movie that was put forth in the selection process. In so doing, I discovered that, contrary to what the movie depicts, *Sex and the City 2* was not filmed in Abu Dhabi. It was filmed in Morocco. I thought this was important, because the reason the movie was not filmed in Abu Dhabi was because the film’s sexual content was considered not in alignment with the religious and cultural traditions in the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). The participants would soon realize this fact themselves. Samar addressed this issue, before I had the chance to share it with the group. In disappointment, she pointed to the fact that the landscapes were not filmed in Abu Dhabi. “I went to Morocco a couple of years ago with my husband, and I recognize this stuff.” It was at that point that I shared with the group the background information I had gained from my research. Arwa also echoed this idea, disappointed in how Arab countries were falsely represented. She recalled another falsity in the depiction of the Middle East, its language, and its culture, when she highlighted that many actors in the movie were not Arab and, on numerous
instances, spoke Hindi, a language spoken in India. “This is insulting. I’m sure they could have found real Arabs.” Regarding this same issue in the movie, Aysha regards the depiction of Arabs with other ethnicities as dismissive to Arabs by the director and states: “They get A-list actors to represent Americans, but for Arabs, they do not even bother to get Arab actors.” It was clear in Aysha’s comment that she felt that the director, producer, etc., held the American representation with higher regard than the Arabs in the movie, who were held with less importance.

Tala interjects and, in this line of thought, highlights the comment that is made by the character Miranda, who states, “All women in the Middle East have to cover themselves.” This statement, Tala argued, “makes us look like all of us are the same,” so that they all wear a headscarf and cover their faces like all of the Arab women in the movie. It had become evident at this point in the discussion that the women were disappointed in how Arabs and Arab women were portrayed in the movie. The fact that all the women in the movies were covered and veiled, and only one Arab woman out of all 7 women in the group wore a headscarf with no veil was misleading in the movie.

Once all participants had completed their discussion, and I checked that no one in the group had any additional comments to add, I requested that the group reflect on the movie and discussion. I told them that the next session, that would take place in a week, would start with participants’ reflections and comments. As the researcher, I wanted to give ample opportunity for participants to address more issues, ideas, comments, etc. I also requested that the participants choose the movie for the next session and to inform me of their choice before the start of the session. Overall, the feeling was that participants enjoyed the first learning session and were eager to come and meet the next week
Summary

In sum, this chapter described the initial part of the learning activity and the first step in the planning stage of the action research cycle. This chapter consisted of a brief introduction of each of the participants and the themes that developed from the preliminary interviews. These themes included: a) the experience of being the “other,” b) the backlash of 9/11, c) the frustration with Western media images, and d) the complexity of an “Arab” and “American” female identity. Following the preliminary interviews, the chapter then highlighted the first session and, in so doing, describes the setting of the learning activity and provides the participant analysis of the first movie, *Sex and the City 2*. The next chapter, appropriately titled “Acting and Observing,” will discuss these aspects of the action research cycle in the context of the five learning sessions that followed the opening planning session.
CHAPTER FIVE

ACTING AND OBSERVING

The purpose of this action research study was first to explore how Arab American women view how they have constructed their identity in living in the U.S, and second to understand how participants think media and popular culture have affected this process of identity construction, particularly as their greater awareness of media unfolded over time in the course of this study through the learning sessions. Action research is conducted within a continuous cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Chapter Four presented the findings of the initial interviews, and focused on the participants and the initial planning stage of the action research cycle. It also introduced the first of the series of learning sessions, which laid the groundwork for participants to gain a better understanding of each other, the group, and the facilitator. As noted in Chapter Four, the first session also introduced participants to critical media literacy, the theoretical backbone of the study, and allowed participants to begin to discuss a variety of issues related to their identity and its construction by watching the first movie in the learning series. In addition, at the first session, I did suggest to the participants as part of their own critical media literacy development, that they look up whatever information they could find about a given movie before we actually viewed it. This chapter focuses on the action and observing stages of the study that took place throughout the remaining learning sessions.

The learning sessions were developed and constructed in consultation with all of the women participating in the study through the initial interviews and in the first learning session. The learning sessions overall lasted approximately four weeks, and consisted of a total of four sessions, the first of which was discussed in Chapter Four. Within the context of the action
process, participant observations were made and documented through my own field notes; a critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) was conducted at the end of each session to document the process from the participants’ perspectives, and to find out at the end of each session what they learned and wanted to focus on next (see Appendix 1). These data were all taken under consideration in the process of observing, assessing, and evaluating the learning that was taking place, and the ongoing planning for the next session. The format of each learning session, with the exception of the fourth session (which was online), was similar in that each session started with opening reflections shared by the group members regarding their thoughts about the previous session, or about media/identity construction since we last met. Watching a movie chosen by the group followed this activity, and the session would typically end with a discussion of the movie and the CIQ and a plan of action for the following session.

The fourth session was an exception to the other three sessions in terms of format, because some of the participants were traveling and therefore could not be present. In an attempt to adjust to the needs of the participants, after discussing various options to solve the issue, the women as a group decided to complete the fourth session by each watching the movie in their own homes and discussing it online. A location was created for an online forum in which only participants in the study could view, post comments, and respond to them after watching the movie. As the researcher, I posted specific questions related to the movie and the learning activities in an effort to jump-start the online discussion. This will be discussed in more detail below.

The following sections will discuss each of the remaining three learning sessions individually in an effort to highlight elements and nuances of participants’ identity perception and construction process by engaging in a critical media literacy learning activity.
Learning Session Two: *The Kingdom*

Each of the sessions began by first beginning with reflections since the last session and then watching and discussing the film for the session.

**Reflections and Follow Up Discussion from Last Session**

Aysha began the discussion and stated, “I will never watch TV the same way again.” She argued that as a result of participating in the first part of the leaning activity, she noticed herself “analyzing images and messages and thinking of the meaning behind these images.” Fatima echoed the same sentiment and stated, “watching TV will never be the same.” She suggested that she become hypersensitive to how Arabs and Arab women are portrayed in the media, arguing that before the first session of this learning activity this was something about which she did not necessarily focus. During the discussion, Manal stated, “I’m looking forward to watching the movie today and learning more about media and how it affects me.” The feeling in the room was one that was positive and optimistic about the learning process. It was also obvious that participants were more comfortable with one another as their interaction and dialog had increased. After the opening statements made by the participants, we prepared to watch the second movie, *The Kingdom*. In preparation, I restated the list of topics associated with critical media literacy that were mentioned before watching the first movie, in an effort to keep the participants focused on the specific aspects of media in the context of identity construction.

**Description of *The Kingdom* (1:50)**

The movie states that it is based on a true story of a terrorist attack that takes place on an American compound in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. The story line of the movie opens with an attack that kills Americans on a U.S.Military compound in Saudi Arabia. In reaction, the U.S. government, spearheaded by FBI agent, Ronald Fleury (Jamie Fox) is able to blackmail the
Saudi government to allow him five days in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to investigate the crime. He is assisted in his investigation by agent Grant Sykes (Chris Cooper), Janet Mayes (Jennifer Garner), and Adam Leavitt (Jason Bateman). The individuals on this mission have a vested interest in finding the terrorist who committed the crime because a mutual friend was killed in the attack. The team is supported in their investigation, which is filled with obstacles and complications, by a local Colonial in the Saudi army by the name of Faris Al Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom). The story unfolds as the Americans and Saudis unite to find the terrorists on Saudi soil and culminates in a standoff between the American-Saudi team and the Saudi terrorists.

Discussion of The Kingdom (1:00)

The discussion for this session included all participants with what seemed to be an equal distribution of turn taking. The mood of the room was quite different from the first session in that participants were understandably less upbeat, possibly because it was not a comedy. This movie was based on a true story, of which the participants were aware, and the combination of this fact and that it was an action suspense movie with many deaths and dramatic moments, made the mood of the room less bubbly and giddy.

General discussion. The discussion centered on several topics and issues. For instance, there was the dichotomy of heroes and “idiots” throughout the movie as Samar pointed out. Fatima drew the group’s attention to how the story paints the FBI agents as “the guys who come and save the day.” She argued, “When the terrorist attack happened, the Saudis could not solve their own problems with their own people. They needed the Americans to come in and help them.” Addressing a similar point, Samar points to how the Saudi prince in charge of handling this matter “is dumb. The director made his character seem like he does not have a clue.” On the other hand, she argues, “the Americans come in and not only are organized but they criticize the
Arabs and have to show them the right way to do things.” She supports her argument by giving
the example of the “Saudis” messing up the scene of the crime by unknowingly tainting the
evidence. The Americans come in and complete the job in five days and “the Arabs are in ‘awe’
of the Americans and what they can do.” One could argue that this dichotomy unmask and
underlying power relationship between the Arabs and Americans, meaning the Americans in this
movie and in particular in this specific analysis are seen as the group of people who have power
because they are able to come in and solve the problems of the world thus giving them a
leadership position. It is of significance to note not only Samar’s observation about the movie,
but also the fact that she specifically states the “director.” This is relevant, because this is an
indication that participants’ scope of understanding movie images is broadening. The observation
is a clear indication that participants are becoming aware through this learning process that
images and messages are often controlled by the director of the movie, who brings his or her
worldview to the story and production of the movie. Although other participants did not
comment on this specific observation, they would later comment on the role of the director with
regard to his ethnicity.

In terms of gender, Tala highlights the fact that Janet Mayes (Jennifer Garner), the only
American woman in the movie, is portrayed as a “strong woman,” who is also “a woman that is
equal to men because she has the same job as the American men and carries a gun like the men.”
However, she also points out that this image is contradicted by other stereotypical things that
Jennifer Garner’s character does. For instance, Tala brings this issue to the forefront when she
states in a sarcastic manner, “but she is very thin and beautiful,” and makes a clear connection
between the stereotypical view that being thin is beautiful. Aysha followed up with, “yeah, she
got the pink room and cried much more than the men did.” Manal also felt that there is an
inconsistency in how the female American actress was portrayed. She states: “how can it be that she is shooting a gun one second, and the next minute she is sucking on a lollipop?” This statement might imply that she thinks that the female actress is being sexualized with this act.

This comment was a segue into Maha’s observation on the visibility of women, in general, in the movie. She felt that throughout the movie “there were one or two Arab women and one American in the movie,” as opposed to the abundance of both American and Arab men in the movie. Fatima discussed gender in relation to the role of the Arab women in the movie. She specifically highlighted the scene where “the Arab woman is a good wife, listens to her husband, and takes care of the kids at home, while he works at solving the problems of the world.” Obviously, this role is a traditional and stereotypical one of a good, obedient woman that takes care of the home and kids.

In sum, on the issue of gender, the women felt that Arab and American women were portrayed in a similar light in terms of visibility, in that the roles for all women in the movie were scarce. They also felt that all women in the movie were cast with stereotypical attributes. However, they did note that when it came to the issue of power distribution, they felt that there was inequality. They argued that the American woman had a more powerful role in her “job” than the Arab women, in that the American woman’s job was equal to the men’s positions, despite the fact that she was not treated as equal by her counterparts.

The participants also addressed ethnicity; Tala expressed that she was happy to see “all kinds of Saudis in the movie. You have the bad Saudis, the good Saudis, the religious Saudis, the smart Saudis.” Manal was optimistic about Tala’s observation and stated, “showing all sides of the Saudi race gives viewers a more realistic view of Arabs and Saudis.” Maha is personally familiar with Saudi Arabia, because she has gone to the Hajj pilgrimage in the city of Mekkah,
Saudi Arabia. She added to the line of discussion by stating that “I feel like the description of the Saudi and U.S. relations are positive and accurate as well.” Addressing the topic of ethnicity, participants felt positive and optimistic about how Saudis were portrayed in the movie. They also felt a sense of accuracy with many of the details related to the portrayals of Saudis in the movie. Growing up and living in Saudi Arabia for over 23 years of my life gave me many insights into the country, its culture, and foreign policy. Therefore, I wanted to point out to participants that I agreed with them in the positive and accurate way Saudi Arabia and its people were portrayed in the movie. I also mentioned the view that, the fact that Saudi Arabia is one of the biggest oil exporters in the world; this plays a huge role in the positive relationship Saudi Arabia has with the U.S., as one of the largest oil importers. Saudi Arabia’s oil assets have given the country more power and leverage money. This trade relationship influences many aspects of the interaction between both governments. I purposefully did not mention this comment during the discussion because I did not want to skew participants’ analysis and observations but I thought it was important for participants to be aware of this reality and have the ability to come back and discuss this point if they so wish possibly at the opening of the next session when we reflect on the previous session.

**Critical media literacy and movie analysis.** After viewing the movie the CIQ was distributed. In addition to completing the CIQ it was also important to recall the request from the first learning session where I specifically asked participants to research the movie to find facts they thought were relevant to the analysis of the movie, in order to enhance their media literacy. Therefore, although Samar had previously mentioned a poignant observation regarding how the director framed a specific scene, I wanted to explore more deeply the participants’ findings in their prep research for the movie. Fatima eagerly addressed her findings and stated:
“the director Peter Burg, is of Jewish descent.” This would become an issue with all participants even though most participants had not taken note of this fact prior to Fatima sharing it with the group. After this statement, the discussion quickly turned to the mistrust the participants held for Jewish people in telling their story, “the Arab story”.

This was an interesting development in the discussion because it changed the positive mood and outlook of the conversation and it also united all participants in their point of view, meaning, how they felt about the Arab story, or more accurately a story involving Arabs being told by a Jewish director. As mentioned in Chapter Two the Palestinian-Israeli issue is one that holds high concern and resentment for many Arabs, who agree that Palestine is occupied by Israel. Within the course of this occupation many Arabs believe that atrocities have occurred to the Palestinian people and by extension to the Arab world as a whole. Keeping this point of view in mind, it is not surprising that participants who some are of Palestinian descent had negative feedback regarding finding out that the director was of Jewish descent. Responding to Fatima’s comment about the director’s ethnicity Tala states: “I just don’t feel comfortable that a Jewish guy is telling my story.” Manal followed this comment by stating “why is it that Arabs are not telling the Arab story, why does it have to be the people we have been at war with for the last 50 years telling our story.” It was clear that in the analysis process participants are taking in more variables to analysis and as a result are becoming more aware and critical of the of the movies that they are watching as a result of these observations the mood in the room had changed, and participants had gone from thinking that the movie was objective in some of its portrayals of Arabs to becoming defensive, skeptical, and mistrusting of the director telling what they perceived to be “their story”.
Fatima also disclosed with the group that the lead Arab actor in the movie was a “Jewish man of Arab descent”. This statement ignited the emotions in the room even further regarding the Palestinian Israeli issue. I recall Aysha’s statement “I see why he is the good guy, he is one of them”, which upon further probing by me asking who are “they”? She replied “He is Jewish”, clearly making a clear distinction between Arabs and Jews and in so doing bringing to the forefront the Arab Israeli conflict. I have to admit that although I am very familiar with the Palestinian Israeli issue and the heated discussions that evolve around this issue, I quickly became a little uncomfortable with the situation. And as a result I thought I should steer the conversation into another topic; however, despite this thought, I also realized that it was important for the authenticity of this learning experience that participants gain critical tools to analyze the media and this could only take place if they expressed their observations, findings, and analysis freely, and see how these observations and points of views would take shape and possibly change and develop in the context of this learning experience. So keeping this in mind I decided not to interject. Maha made the next comment by asking the group:

Did anyone see the poster that was used for the cover of the movie? …I did not think much of it at first, but now that we are talking about this, I remember that the cover had two lines of people one was the good guys, that included all of the American actors and the good Arabs in the movie, who faced two guys that you could not see their face but were dressed in Arab traditional clothes.

After she made that comment I used this opportunity to ask the rest of the participants their thoughts on this particular image (See Picture A below). After taking a couple of moments to reflect Arwa commented: “This picture is dismissive to the traditional Arabs pictured in the poster because they have no face…. they are no one important.”
Fatima followed this statement by arguing: “Look, all they are good at is being terrorists and shooting guns, they even look like they are primates, there not even standing straight.” Her description of the picture makes a similar argument to the one mentioned earlier in that Arabs are barbaric, destructive, and not capable of handling their internal issues and problems.

In the same line of discussion Tala interjects and makes an important observation when she states:

Why is the ‘Aqsa Mosque’, picture in the cover poster, that mosque is in Palestine, why is it in movie that supposedly takes place in Saudi Arabia?…. You see it is always about Palestine, the Americans and Jews are the protectors of Israel, that’s what this is telling me. It is notable to state that the Aqsa mosque is the third holy mosque for Muslims; it is in Jerusalem and is at the heart of the conflict because it is a holy place for the Palestinians and the Jews alike. The other two holy mosques are both located in Saudi Arabia, the first is in Makah and second in Medina. Samar followed by stating: “Look the ‘Aqsa’ is behind them they are definitely protecting it while the Arabs just move towards them with their guns”.

It was clear that once the observation were made about the director and his ethnicity all following discussions were in some way linked to the Palestinian Israeli issue which was a “hot topic” to say the least; there was no doubt that it would be a reoccurring one in future discussions.

**Summary and Reflective Thoughts**
The mood in this learning session that centered on the movie *The Kingdom* was more serious than the previous session. In this learning session, participants discussed and debated several issues related to Arab Americans in relation to media, these topics included the dichotomy of heroes and idiots in how Americans were seen as problem solvers and the Arabs on the other hand were unable to solve the problems on their own soil. They also discussed gender and felt that both Arab and American women were discriminated against in terms of stereotypes and agreed that women of both ethnicities lacked visibility in the movie. Although they believed that in one area inequality did exist in that the American woman was given an advantage over the Arab woman because her job was equal to that of her male counterparts. As a result of this observation, the women in the group felt that the Arab women were still at a disadvantage in comparison to the American woman.

In terms of ethnicity and authenticity of representation, participants felt that the movie gave a fair representation of both Arabs and Americans and were very pleased at this fact. The discussion took a very different turn when the issue of Palestine came into view. This topic was clearly an issue that touched a nerve with participants. This was reflected in the heated discussion that took place regarding this issue. The participants were unified on this particular issue, mainly that in their view, despite media portrayals, Arabs were united in favor of Palestine when it came to the issue of Palestine and Israel.

**Learning Session Three: Body of Lies**

For health reasons Arwa was not able to participate in this session for personal family reasons. As a result the group decided that they would brief her on the discussions so that she could stay up-to-date on the discussions and learning sessions.

**Reflections and Follow Up Since the Previous Session**
Tala began the discussion and went back to where the discussion had left off last session, mainly speaking to the Palestinian and Israel issue. She opened the discussion for this session by stating: “When it comes to media images of the Israeli Palestinian war the news coverage in my opinion is not giving the American people the whole picture of what is going on over there.” As previously noted, Tala is of Palestinian descent and similar to other members of the group that are originally from Palestinian, their families had to leave their country because of the unsettling circumstances. This reality in itself without a doubt creates raw feelings and emotions for those who have experienced it first-hand. Maha suggests that the skewed images and coverage of the Palestinian Israeli war “makes Palestine and the Arab countries that support it look like violent people, while Israelis are seen as people that are defending their freedom and land.” She goes on to suggest that this misrepresentation in the media “has an influence on how people feel about the Palestinian people living in the U.S.” She is convinced that people watching the media “will not get the real story from their media; they think of the Palestinians as ‘suicide bombers…’, well when people take everything you have? You have nothing to lose.” One could interpret such a statement as Maha justifying the actions of the suicide bombers as being the last resort to their current situation.

I took this opportunity to ask participants how the Israeli Palestinian conflict as played out in the media impacted their lives. Samar who is also of Palestinian descent stated: “The Israeli Palestinian issue is one that unifies all Arabs to some extinct…I’m not going to hide the fact that because of how Palestinians are seen in the media, many Arab Americans feel that America supports Israel over Palestine, this is not fair to the Palestinians … My country ‘America’ supports a group of people that are against everything I am.” It is clear that this issue is complex and one that has many layers to it, however it is also clear that it is a core element in
how this group of women are unified in identifying, relating, and taking sides with the Palestinian side and how this issue is not reflected fairly in the media. They also feel that the West has misrepresented the issue in the media and this misrepresentation has affected their lives living in the U.S. in how they are perceived and internally react to people's perceptions.

Aysha speaks to the issue and adds, “these images are live and real and even though they do not tell the whole story because people are affected by them and believe them.” This point of view she believed is why many people think of Arabs as “terrorists when they deal with matters that may have conflict.” Tala revisits the conversation and states “as an Arab American, you face many instances of discrimination and on top of the questions we are asked about our religion, culture and all that other stuff, people do not know who we are and they do not understand us and all they have are these false images to go on.” It is clear that participants are making connections between media images and the immediate impact they have on their daily lives. This discussion was also another turning point in the learning sessions because participants are beginning to make connections between media images and how they have a direct impact on their lives living in the U.S. and are relating this impact to how this influences who they are and how they react to these assumptions.

With reflections and thoughts of the previous session ending it was now time to turn to watching the movie for this learning session Body of Lies.

**Description of Body of Lies (2:06)**

The storyline of the movie revolves around a CIA agent by the name of Roger Faris (Leonardo DiCaprio), who is stationed in Jordan; his boss Ed Hoffman (Russell Crow) is managing this sensitive case from the U.S. In Jordan, Faris works with the local head of security of the country by the name of Hani (Mark Strong), an important part of the storyline is the
relationship that develops between Faris and a Middle Eastern woman by the name of Aisha. It is the first movie that the participants watch thus far that specifically addresses the issue of relationships and it even takes it a step further because this relationship is an interethnic relationship and the dynamics of this kind of relationship and the issues that it entails are matters and issues that have shaped the participants lives.

Faris’s mission in the movie is to catch a European serial bomber who is in Jordan. As the story unfolds both the American CIA agent Faris and his counterpart and head of security Hani are deceived by Ed Hoffman who has also sent in a double agent to handle the case and in doing so he is jeopardizing the life of agent Faris who has a delicate relationship with his local counterpart who is constantly warning him not to deceive him. The CIA agent is able to catch the bomber but he also loses his credibility with the local people and especially his Hani because his boss double-crossed him and he has lost his credibility and has been put in danger.

Discussion of *Body of Lies* (1:00) 3/26/2011.

Samar starts the discussion with “just like the other two movies, the Arab world is shown here as a hot desert place with people that have no clue and are constantly needing the West to help them out and save the day.” The participants’ origins are varied. Aysha is from Lebanon and she argues: “The only Arab world I know is green and has beautiful mountains.” Inconsistencies of reality of the Arab world and what the participants see as fictional depictions have become more apparent. Moreover, they believe that these fictional depictions are positioning the Arab world as less evolved and its people in constant need of the Western world to help them with their internal affairs. This Westerner is then able to come to the Arab world, to seamlessly blend in and solve the problems of the Arab world all the while asserting the West as powerful and making the local Arabs seem inadequate and helpless.
Tala believes that the ideas depicted in today’s movies reflect an ideology that has affected Arabs living all around the world:

When I go back to visit Palestine in the summer, I realize how lucky I am to have had the chance to move to the States and get out of a war zone, but I also realize that my family and friends have a false beliefs of America, they all want to move here and think it is a better place, and that America is better than Palestine because besides it not being in a war zone, it is more organized… they just have the feeling that Americans are better and that’s why they want to come here.

With this statement Tala is suggesting that the idea that America is better than Palestine is an ideology that exists in the Arab world. Samar goes beyond this observation and makes a connection between this ideology and the movies that are made and produced by America:

“Well if all they see of America is what are in these movies, what do you expect? Everyone in the Arab world thinks America is better because of these movies… It’s all they know”. She goes on to say: “Why do you think our families wanted to come here? They thought it would be better.”

Tala and Samar have led the discussion and made a connection between media images in movies and the role they play in shaping Arab and Arab American ideologies, specifically, the ideology that America is better than the Arab countries. This ideology was also present in their families who made a conscious effort to leave their countries of origin and come to America rather than any other country in the world.

In terms of gender and culture, the participants spoke to the relationship between Faris and his female interest Aisha, who was a nurse living in exile in Jordan and working at a Palestinian refugee camp. Maha addresses this relationship between the American man (Faris)
and the Middle Eastern woman (Aisha): “It’s great that the media is showing a cross-cultural relationship, but this relationship is romanticized and goes against our personal experiences and everything in our culture.” When asked to elaborate on this point she said:

Well they meet in public places, she brings him home to meet her family, this just would not happen in real life, not even in America, let alone in the Arab world, the Arab community would never willingly accept a foreign man to date their daughters, and become part of them, they would prefer the women to first take an Arab man to maintain her children’s Arab identity, unless she was divorced, then marrying a foreign man could be considered because in many situations Arabs do not like to marry divorced Arab women.

This statement was said with some resentment; it was obvious from Maha’s tone of voice and hand gestures that she was upset with the reality of her cultural situation and how it was in opposition of the movies depiction.

Manal picks up on this and is quick to say: “The scene where she hesitates to shake Faris’s hand because people are looking at her, but then she sits with him in an open place despite the looks of disappointment from the Arab people in her community is very unlikely to ever happen.”

This was an interesting observation because just before gender in relation to culture was discussed participants were arguing that Palestinians and Arabs feel that America is better than their country of origin, however, there is some inconsistency in the fact that although they aspire to come to live in the U.S., they still want their daughters and sisters to maintain their Arab identity and part of how this maintenance is achieved is by the families making sure that Arab women only date and marry Arabs and Arab Americans.
To confirm this assumption and make sure I was not jumping to conclusions, I asked the participants: “So do you agree with your family that America is a better place to live? And if so, why are Arabs, and Arab Americans, as you mentioned, not willing to let their daughters marry and date American men?”

Manal took the lead on this discussion, it is also important to note that she is the only woman in the group that is married to a non-Arab “white” American man. In this regard, she states: “I met my husband when I was doing my masters. I knew my family would not accept him, but I could not stop myself from falling in love with him.” It’s important to mention that among the group of women, Manal’s family is the only family that came to the U.S out of choice and not necessity. She also comes from a family that both mother and father have completed degrees in higher education. Also, Manal is the only woman in the group that has a master's degree. She follows up her statement by saying: “When I told my father, he said that if I were to marry this man he would disown me. ‘You’re not my daughter, I will have nothing to do with you’, you can just go and be American.” Manal is also the oldest of her siblings and feels that this also added to her father not accepting this marriage. She states: “If I the first child did this, left my Arab culture by marrying an American man, he would have no control of the rest of his children losing their Arab identity by choosing to marry out of their culture.” Manal adds that the importance of marrying an Arab or Arab American was solely based in “culture, and religion, and maintaining being Arab” She also highlighted the fact that her father would be “humiliated by his family’s comments, they would make him feel that he can’t control his daughters.” All participants in the study are Muslims, an Islamic religion, which is patriarchal. Muslim men are allowed to marry Muslim, Christian, or Jewish women; on the other hand Muslim women are only allowed to marry Muslim men. This religious Islamic rule has become part of the fabric of
the Arab culture. Although Manal’s husband had converted to Islam once they started dating, Manal explains that his conversion’s “motives” were constantly in question by her family. To highlight the intensity of the situation Manal states: “Marrying my husband meant breaking the tradition of my family; our family tree that goes back more than thousands of years. My family made a big deal when my aunt married a man from a different town and he was Arab so can you imagine marrying into a different race and culture?” So far in the discussion on marriage, participants have related relationships and marriage to maintaining culture and identity, an Arab woman departing from marring an Arab man is seen by the Arab American community as the women exiting from her culture, religion, and identity.

Tala interjects at this point and states “I have to admit, unlike the movie, my parents would have never allowed me to have a relationship or marry a ‘foreign’ man, and although I think of myself as very progressive I would not want my daughter to marry an American non-Arab man, I think she would lose her Arab identity.”

Judging the participants reaction to this statement by the nods of confirmation there seems to be a consensus on this issue, at least among some members of the group. Maha dispels what seems to be an agreed assumption in the group by stating: “I know the older generation of women would only marry an Arab man, but I was open to marrying out of my race, I always knew that my parents would prefer that I marry an Arab man so I was happy when one came along.” On the contrary, Aysha states, “I knew I did not have a choice, I had to marry an Arab and maintain my culture”.

The previous discussion points to the fact that although media images depicted in Western movies can affect the Arab American ideology when they reflect images of the West, for example selling the idea that America is great as previously discussed, some images fail to
have the same influential effect when the images contradict traditional gender roles as in the cross cultural relationship. One could argue that they actually can reaffirms the choice for Arab American women to stick to traditional gender roles based on the participants’ dissatisfaction with the images that broke the traditional gender, culture, and religious Arab American role. Therefore, gender and culture play a significant role in these women’s lives and their identities, these roles can be affected by media images but not always, especially when they break away from cultural traditions such as biracial/bicultural relationship which were depicted in the movie for this session.

Although they are all American women by nationality, it is clear that as Arab women their ethnicity, culture, and religion have dictated to a large degree who is acceptable for them to marry. Although it seemed like the younger generation (Maha) was open to marrying a non-Arab, at the end she still conformed to her religion, culture, and gender expectations. What is interesting is that when asked, the women admitted that men in their family have married outside of their ethnicity and culture. Samar states: “My brother married an American girl who is Christian. He is a guy he can do what he wants.” I thought it was interesting that although the fact that men can marry out of their religion and race has its roots in religion, Samar did not make this connection. She did however connect this freedom of choice to her brother’s gender.

Clearly, culture, religion, and gender role socialization play a significant role in the participants’ life-long decisions’ these variables are also ones that define and sculpt the identities of the participants, as was apparent in the above discussion. As the researcher I took note that participants began to gain critical media analysis tools and gain understanding into how images of gender, culture, and religion play a role in defining the participants’ identities.

**Summary and Reflective Thoughts**
In summary, this session dealt with new and continuing issues directly related to the effects of media representation on the lives, perception, ideology, and identity of the participants. One of the continuing issues discussed in the opening and reflection part of the session was the Palestinian and Israeli war and how participants felt that the media’s misrepresentation of such a sensitive issue affects them in that they are alienated from their country of nationality, which takes sides against their country of origin (one could argue that this forces them do have a spilt identity or take sides with who they are). They also find themselves having to react to such misconceptions, which cast them in a less favorable light in comparison to their American counterparts in the media.

Participants also discussed and highlighted what they felt to be an ongoing issue thus far: the fact the Arabs are portrayed as being in constant need of the West. In this respect the participants believed that America is also seen as better than the Arab World and able to solve the problems of the Middle East. These portrayals have impacted Middle Eastern ideology and the desire of many to move to America. It has also cemented this ideology in the Arab Americans that call America their home.

In terms of gender and its relation to religion and culture, the participants discussed how media images in the movie were inconsistent with reality. This led to a discussion of how these images have affected the participants lives vis-à-vis the media based on culture and religion, and the fact that these images had little to no impact in such areas.

**Prep for the Online Session**

After completing the discussion for this session, conversation turned to preparation for the next session. In the process of preparation it was apparent that several participates were traveling and some had family obligations and would not be able to make it for the learning
session for the following week, therefore, several suggestions were made as to how to proceed with the following learning session. After negotiating several suggestions and ideas, the group decided on an on-line session. This was something that as the facilitator I was comfortable with, I had the capability and knowledge to set up an on-line session for the participants that would be a private space for all involved. Once agreement was reached on the medium for the next session, what remained was for participants to choose the movie for the session, which after some discussion they agreed to choose a children’s film. All of the participants with the exception of Arwa had children. This being the case, participants wanted to watch a children’s movie that depicted Arabs. Tala who has three children, suggested that they watch *Aladdin* for the on-line session. The group who all seemed familiar with the movie had no objections and agreed that it would be a great movie to watch.

**Learning Session Four (on line): *Aladdin***

For the on-line session it was important that a user-friendly methodology be used; this was a new medium for the participants as a group and it would only be used once through the course of these learning activities. It was necessary to make sure that all participants could readily log into the tool, answer questions, make comments, and respond to other participants’ comments. Therefore, I chose a medium that participants were familiar with “Facebook”. They all had “Facebook” accounts and were very familiar with how to navigate through this on-line format. I created an “event” in “Facebook” where only those who were invited could view and participate in the “event”. Participants were expected to first watch the movie at home, then log into the “event” that was created with a beginning and expression date. Participants had a week to go on-line to respond to the posted questions, make comments and were required to respond at least twice to two other participants’ comments.
**Description of Aladdin (1:30)**

Aladdin is based on a story taken from the book titled, *A Thousand and One Nights*, a book of Middle Eastern stories that was compiled over a long period of time by a variety of authors and editors. *Aladdin* tells the story of a street urchin who lives in a fictional city named Agrabah. He is accompanied in the movie by his faithful monkey friend, Abu. As the story unfolds, the daughter of the King, Princess Jasmine, gets tired of being forced to stay at the palace and decides she wants to explore the city. Against her father’s wishes, she decides to sneak out and, during her adventures in the city, she meets Aladdin. They are caught together by Jafar, the Sultan’s (King) advisor, and as a result, Aladdin goes to jail. He is also blackmailed by Jafar, so that Aladdin must obtain a lamp that will help Jafar rule the world. The tale has it that only a person who is a good person will be able to get the lamp from the Cave of Wonders. Jafar has his eyes on Aladdin for the job, because he feels that he fits this description. Getting the lamp makes Jafar an evil and powerful man who tries to take over the kingdom. However, Aladdin is able to defeat Jafar who is trying to take over the kingdom. Aladdin, saves the kingdom, and in so doing, is able to save Agrabah from evil and wins the approval of the King to marry Jasmin.

**On-Line Discussion Session of Aladdin**

As previously discussed, the on-line discussion would consist of questions posted to initiate and jump-start the interaction. The discussion sessions, thus far, centered around general themes and observations around the role media plays in aspects of the participants’ gender, culture, and identity. It is evident that participants’ ability to be critical of media has broadened and advanced since the first session. This is exemplified in the comments, observations, and lines of discussion that have taken place up to this point in the project.
The on-line discussion format was an excellent opportunity to expand the participants’ critical lens by asking more specific questions related to symbols, music, and the historical context of the movie, and how those things play into the overall message of the movie. Some of the on-line questions included:

a) How is race, gender, and class portrayed in the movie?

b) What is the director’s message and how do the symbols support the director’s message?

c) What is the role of power in the movie; and, who is in possession of it?

d) What is the movie’s message?

**The Further Development of Media Literacy**

Based on their responses it appears that their critical media literacy is developing, and they both seek out information on their own, and pay more attention to portrayals. One of the lines of the discussion that developed centered on the historical context of the movie, i.e. the time at which the movie was made. In this regard Manal writes: “I wanted to better understand the director’s message in the movie, so I did some background research. What I found was very interesting.” She shares that although the date of release of *Aladdin* was 1992, “the actual making of the movie was in 1991, during the Gulf War.” The Gulf War centered on Iraq trying to take over Kuwait, and America taking the lead to restore peace and security in Kuwait thereafter. Tala responded to Manal’s written statement by writing, “This put a whole new spin on things.” During this line of discussion, she argues that, “Aladdin is the symbol of America. He is saving Argrabah from evil, just like the Americans saved Kuwait from Saddam during the war.”
The perceived symbolism between *Aladdin* and America continued to be a theme throughout the discussion when Aysha replied to their posts by stating, “He looks more like an American than he does an Arab. He does not have an accent. He has light skin. Jafar has a big nose, big mouth, and he speaks English with a strong Arab accent.” These observations are interesting. Aladdin is attractive, speaks perfect English, and wants to save the world. On the other hand, Jafar is ugly, with exaggerated Arab features and an Arab accent. He has characteristics of an evil and deceptive person, all characteristics that are similar to the way Saddam Hussein appeared in the media. Fatima continues this thread by writing: “If you guys noticed, Aladdin steals bread in the beginning of the movie, but because he gives the bread to poor people, he is seen as some kinda Robin Hood, like the American hero [sic—actually Robin Hood isn’t American] that takes food from the rich and gives it to the poor. That really shows that he has American values, which go against our Arab culture. Even worse, him stealing [sic] is justified because of it.” The parallels between Aladdin as the symbol of America and Jafar as the symbol of an Arab world dictator continues to be seen by the participants when Arawa states:

Look at Jafar. He wants to take over the city and rule the world. He is trying to be a dictator. He wants to do whatever he wants to the people. On the other hand, you have Aladdin, who is like you guys said, a symbol of everything American. He wants to better himself, make a better future for himself and marry the princess. It’s almost like the American dream, the same reason why our families wanted to come here.

By using symbolism and background information regarding the movie, participants were able to critically link the symbolism of the two leading men in the movie to actual events that took place during the time of the making of the movie. Participants were also able to come to the conclusion that the symbolic characteristics of the characters conveyed an ideology that, as
Arawa argued, was part of the reason why Arabs wanted to move to America. In the case of Aladdin, it was the fact that, in the movie, he reflected American values and the American dream. This concept was delivered to the audience, as participants pointed out in the discussion, through his skin color, accent, and values. This was in contrast to Jafar, with his unappealing dark features and his actions that reflected what is perceived to be the Arab dictator ideology, who wanted to rule the world.

Within the context of the on-line discussion, class and power were also briefly discussed. For instance, Maha writes: “The people who have power in the movie are Princess Jasmine and the Sultan. They are both the lightest people in the movie. They are rich, White, and they also have clear American accents.”

Arwa replies, “Again, I think they are a symbol of the ‘real American,’ White, rich, and powerful.” The discussion, thus far, reflected that participants are beginning to be aware of the fact that being an American is not truly a term that encompasses everyone. Within the American fabric, there are divisions that are based in power, race, and class. They are also gaining an understanding that these divisions that they live in have impacted them, because they are not considered to be part of the rich and powerful group. This observation is further confirmed by Fatima who states:

Look at the bad people. They look like Arabs. They are dark, have heavy accents, and they all have negative or bad qualities and habits. The people in the beginning of the movie selling stuff are just ripping people off. They’re selling fake stuff. Also, all of the ‘real Arabs’ in the movie are friends with camels and monkeys, like they are stupid.
What Fatima is getting at is that the Arabs in the movie reflect being primitive by having animals as friends. They are also people who do not care about their own people, because they are deceptive and have deceptive habits.

Gender was also discussed. Samar writes, “Princess Jasmine fights for her rights. She wants to marry Aladdin even though she knows that her father will not let her do so. She wants to be free to choose.” So, one could argue that in terms of gender, Jasmine is fighting for her freedom, but the freedom she is fighting for contradicts the Arab culture. Arwa confirms this observation by writing, “The father is traditional and wants her to marry a prince. She has to marry someone of her rank, but she doesn’t want to; she wants to marry Aladdin.” Gender in this on-line discussion is discussed in the context of women’s freedom. Jasmine wants her freedom. She wants to be free to marry whomever she wants. However, her tradition does not allow her to do so, and this is something from which she struggles to break away. This concept affects the participants directly, as discussed earlier by Manal, when she shared with the group the difficulties she faced and the resistance she came up against when she chose to marry an “American” man. So, in this case, the movie is reflecting actual struggles that some participants are faced with in their personal lives. It also is supportive of some of the struggles that Arab American women are faced with growing up in the U.S. Similar to Samar, Jasmine is able to expand outside of her Arab culture, marry someone she wants to marry, and make that union one that eventually becomes acceptable to the Arab community.

In summary, the on-line discussion covered several interrelated topics. The first discussed was the symbolism of the West in Aladdin and the Arab dictator in Jafar. This topic was interesting, because it allowed participants to delve deeper into their critical analysis by making several parallels between the characters and Arab and Western ideologies. Participants also
discussed the historical context of the movie and how they felt that actual facts from the Gulf War were tied into the storyline of the movie, making this Disney production a vassal to retell this story as perceived by the West.

Class and power were also briefly discussed. In this regard, participants realized that the people who had power had similar features: they were White, spoke English well, and were from the royal family, reconfirming to participants that in America, not everyone is equal. Gender was also discussed. Participants felt that the movie reflected actual hardships that they face in their lives in terms of marrying outside of the Arab race. They were pleasantly surprised and comforted by the fact that the movie was actually supportive of some of the decisions participants were faced with, even if they went against their Arab culture.

The on-line discussion represented the last learning session that consisted of watching a movie, discussion, and analysis. The participants and I met briefly, the week after the on-line discussion, to allow participants to come together to discuss their reactions to the learning sessions. We also discussed ways for participants to take action on what they had discussed and learned. Chapter Six will discuss the joint action expressions and the final reflection interviews.
CHAPTER SIX

PARTICIPANTS’ VOLUNTARY ACTIONS AND FINAL INTERVIEWS

The purpose of this study was to explore how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identities in living in the U.S, and how they think media and popular culture have affected their identity construction. Then, through an action research process, the study aimed to see how these women continue to construct their identity by going through a critical media literacy (CML) process of viewing and discussing movies portraying Arabs and Arab American women. Chapter Four described the initial planning stage of the action research cycle. It consisted of a brief introduction of each of the participants and the themes that developed from the preliminary interviews. These themes included: a) the experience of being the "other", b) the backlash of 9/11, c) the frustration with Western media images, and d) the complexity of an "Arab” and "American” female identity. The previous chapter, Chapter Five, focused on the acting and observing part of the action cycle. It gave a detailed account of the remaining three learning sessions that took place during this action research study. This chapter will focus on four major areas: the discussions that led to some participants taking action; a presentation of the action part of the study; findings from the final interview; and, finally, a summary of the chapter.

Discussions that Led to Some Participants Taking Action

During the final learning session, participants decided to meet a week after the final session to discuss the possibility of taking action and as a completion to the critical action research cycle. This action aspect of the study was an effort to allow participants not only to get directly involved in the process of their own learning, but also to give them the opportunity to
create change and empower themselves by giving them a medium and voice to express their views.

Approximately one week later, this planned meeting took place. All of the participants were present, and I opened the discussion by asking participants what, if any, action they would like to take in response to the learning sessions that they took part in. After discussing several possibilities, there were a few ideas that included, but were not limited to making a group informative video clip and posting it on U-Tube, and publishing an informative pamphlet about Arab American women living in the U.S. and distributing it to the community at large. Some participants even suggested giving a brief seminar at the mosque, which would involve the media as a tool of analysis, with a question and answer period to give opportunity for people attending the seminar to ask questions and gain insight and knowledge.

Through the process of discussing these several options, it was quickly apparent that many of the participants were uncomfortable with taking action in these formats. This was not because they did not feel compelled to take action, but because as Samar stated: “I do not want anyone to know that it was me. We come from a community that is very critical and I do not want to do such an open action for that reason.” It is important to pause at this moment and acknowledge that although not the topic of this study it is clear that the Arab American community, like any religious/cultural community, creates social constraints that are rooted, to some extent in religion and culture. Whether people impose these constraints on themselves or they are imposed by the norms of the community is not totally clear, and it probably depends on the person and the issue, but there is no doubt that participants to some degree were affected by their perception of these norms, and such constraints could possibly also be related to gender. Some of these perceived gender norms or contraints were evident in some of the discussions in
regards to the freedom of choosing marriage partners. Another example related to gender is how in some Arab American communities and families women are encouraged or perhaps at times required to wear the hijab. Perceived gender discrimination and oppression inflicted by the Arab community itself on its members is an important and relevant subject that could be the topic of further research.

Although options that did not involve names and any kind of identifiers were discussed Samar still decided at the end of discussions that she did not want to participate in any kind of action. She was not comfortable and her discomfort made me not want to push the issue. Manal echoed this same feeling, in terms of participating in the action part of the learning activity, without giving any specific reasons. Manal stated, “I learned a lot from this whole experience, but I just don’t feel comfortable participating in any final action as part of the activity.” I asked her to elaborate why, but she insisted that she just did not want to take part. Once Samar and Manal made the decision not to take part in the action part of the research, the remaining participants identified that they wanted to choose a medium that they could express what it meant to each participant to be an Arab American woman.

Following another several rounds of discussion, the women came to the agreement that they wanted to make a joint audio recording in which each person had the opportunity to describe what it meant to be Arab American. They also decided that each person should take a turn on the recording and that this recording should take no longer than a minute. They also agreed that each person would make this recording privately. Some argued that this would be more “comfortable” and give them the “private” space to express themselves. For the final product, participants made the decision to put together the recordings as one final continues string of work. They wanted to make what Fatima described as “a joint and like diverse
perspective on what it means to be an Arab American Woman, using real Arab American women.” Once the group agreed on the final activity it was decided that time was needed so participants could reflect on what they wanted to say in their recordings. Therefore, the women decided to meet the following week to create the final action part of the learning activity.

**A Presentation of the Action Part of the Study**

Although both Manal and Samar had both decided not to participate in the action part of the research, they did arrive on time with everyone else. The remaining participants were eager and excited about recording their audio. In preparation for the action part of the event, I brought a digital recorder to the meeting and designated a specific closed room in the learning area in the mosque as a private space so participants could record their personal audios. It was at this moment that, Aysha approached me and asked if she could speak to me alone. I agreed and we went into another room to talk. Once we were alone, she took out a piece of paper from her bag. She apologized and said, “I know I agreed to do the audio…At first, I wanted to do it, but as I thought of what I wanted to say, I realized that this was something personal to me and that I did not want to share it with the group. So I wrote it down on a piece of paper and I wanted to give it to you.” I explained, that it was perfectly ok, and she could be completely confident that I would not share it with the group. It was at this moment that I asked her if she felt comfortable if I incorporated it into the study. She agreed, and I reminded her of the confidentiality of her identity and that if she had any hesitations she did not have to oblige my request. She commented by saying, “I would like you to incorporate it in the study. However, I just do no not want to present it to the group and I do not want it to be part of a joint production.” Once again, I assured her that her thoughts would not be included in the final joint action production by other participants. It is important to note that the women that chose not to participate (Manal and
Samar), and Aysha, who participated in a limited form, with the exception of Tala, were the older women in the group. Gaining a better understanding into how age affects the construction of the Arab American identity possess vis-à-vis the media is an interesting dynamic that would be a great topic for further research.

**Arwa**

In Arawa's audio recording in which she defines herself to the audience, it was evident that she had owned and embraced her voice. She seemed to have felt the need to clear the air regarding misconceptions about her identity as she states,

> You might assume that I’m heading down a path that leads to becoming a homemaker and nothing more. You may think that is all that I am capable of and that all Arab women are subservient, submissive, passive, and have no voice. Well now I do, I also have a degree.

In identifying herself she also wanted to use her voice to disassociate herself with the stigma that the media had associated with her identity as she also states, "I am so much more than the stigma you associate with me." She identified her culture as being an integral part of her identity and being an Arab American woman." My culture does not bound me, but rather I bound my culture, it is a part of me that improves who I am rather than deters me from success as many my assume."

Arwa clearly embraced her Arab culture, and Islamic-religion as part of her identity and wanted to make sure that her voice was able to clearly state that: "I embrace where I come from as it makes me who I am. So please do not judge a book by its cover because of all the negative portrayals of my people in the media.” In terms of making herself visible to American society and claiming power and ownership to American society she states: "Arab Muslim women are
just as valuable to modern day American society as any other person. I am Arab, I am American, I am Muslim, I am a woman, and I am proud.”

Maha

Maha also wanted to use her voice to talk about her identity, highlighting that an important part of her identity is to be able to make choices independent of her culture and religion.

I am an Arab American women. I grew up in America where when one is a teenager education is very important. It was at this age, at the age of 17, I took a different route than most other American women. Instead of going to college, I got married.

Maha felt the need to use her voice to make sure the world knew that she was aware of her choices growing up as an Arab American woman and that she also knew of her choices at the time she got married at 17 years old. She also wanted to redefine herself to her community and let them know that her choice makes her who she is today. "I want the world to know that I am an Arab American woman, and that means when you see me walking on the street with my two kids and you know I am Arab, know that I was not forced to get married because of religion or culture. This is something I wanted to do." She also wanted to use this medium to dispel misconceptions people may have of her because of the media, she states: "As an Arab American woman I am independent and I make my own choices. I’m happy about the choices I have made despite what you may think of me because of the media that you watch.”

Tala

Tala wanted to use this medium to first express her anger at the media and to talk about the pain and loss she experienced as a result of the media. She states:
As an Arab American woman racism is something I deal with on a regular basis. I have lost my best friend, my friend of seven years following the September attack on the United States. She called me the day after. She was angry and hurt, I understood. I don’t blame her, but I do blame the media and now I have the voice to talk back and say what I want to say. My most cherished friendship ended because of the media. I want to say to the West stop making me look like a terrorist, and unless WE Americans take action against how we are portrayed, Arab Americans will continue to face discrimination.

After using this medium to express her frustration with the media and all of the pain it has caused her, she also wanted to define herself in the following statement:

I want America to know that I am American, and as Americans, we all come from different places originally, but we now call this our home. Treat me as your neighbor and not your enemy. Don’t be scared of me when I tell you I am Arab American.

She also defines herself further and states, "I have the same needs, wants, desires, and hopes as you do." She realizes the power of her voice and this action and states: "I will start with my voice and more voices will join and this is the time for the world to know who I am, because I am going nowhere, so you should try to understand and accept me.” It is clear that the hardships Tala has experienced as a result of being Arab American have defined who she is today. Feeling a lack of understanding and experiencing pain is something she has become accustomed to as being Arab American. As a result, she is seeking better understanding from the general American population, so that the pain that defines her life today can subside.

Fatima
Fatima wanted to use this medium to inform others that being an Arab American woman does not mean that you are a terrorist and to clarify that although people may identify her as Arab, she is identifying herself as both Arab and American. In this regard, she states:

If you see me walking in the street, don’t cross to the other side. Approach me and ask me if it’s true, and I will tell you that we Arabs are not the heartless monsters the media makes us out to be. I am an Arab American woman who has lived in between Western and Middle Eastern life.

She also wanted to warn people of the mis-education potential of the media:

The media is only one source of information. However, it does not always capture what is true. As an Arab American woman, I now feel an obligation to educate you, not only on what is seen through the camera lens, but also on what is not seen once the cameras are turned off. The media has made me appear oppressed and uneducated.

She goes on to debunk the media and identify herself when she states: “This is a misconception. I am an educated, 25 year old woman working in America in a job that allows me to help all American.” She also closely aligns her identity with the Arab culture and Islamic religion, and highlights the fact that her hijab is an important part of her identity. She states:

As an Arab American woman I embrace my religion and culture and have chosen to cover my head. My covering does not hide me, as the media would like you to believe but it protects me and invites you to see who and what I am.

She further identifies herself in the context of media images and states:

I am an Arab American Muslim woman standing before you to say that the media is a playground in which you can get hurt if you do not know how to look at it critically. If
you see me walking down the street, don’t be afraid. Please come and talk to me as we are a people of peace.

So, in the last segment she has chosen to try to highlight the mis-education that the media has done and urges people to be aware of being critical of media images.

**Aysha's Poem**

As previously mentioned Aysha did not want to participate in the audio recordings. However, she had submitted a piece of writing, which she had agreed to share in the context of the study, but did not want to share with the group. The following is the poem that was submitted by Aysha on the same day.

“I walk in the Street
What have you done
What have you done to Me
I wanted to be you
You wanted me to be the other
But I am here to tell you
I am you
I have love
I try not to hate
I want you to know me
I'm a mother
I'm a sister
I'm an aunt
I'm a wife
I'm a daughter
I'm a lover
I'm Muslim
I'm Arab
I'm a woman
I'm American
Don’t believe what you see
Listen to me
I'm you
I'm me"

In the writing above Aysha expresses what it means to her to be an Arab American woman. As is evident in the poem, to her, being an Arab American woman is related to many aspects of her identity that she believes is a combination of a variety of variables that are also shared with all American's and with American women specifically. Therefore, her identity is one that contains general concepts that are shared by many other Americans and she is seeking inclusion into the general American identity, all the while giving her identity some distinctive qualities such as being a Muslim, Arab. However, one could argue that these distinctive qualities that she mentions should be included in the identity fabric of America.

Findings from the Final Interview

Once the participants concluded the audio part of the activity, as a group, we then moved to the final individual interview segment. Participants reviewed the findings and themes from the first preliminary interview and they also responded to several guided questions about what they
thought about the Critical Media Literacy (CML) action research process, what they learned about their own identity construction by viewing and critiquing the movies, what they learned about Arab American women and the media, what they learned from the other participants, from the discussions, and from the final action project that followed.

Because the mosque had more than one room where the learning activity was taking place, and in the interest of each participant having the privacy to speak freely and comfortably with me, the final interviews were conducted in a different room. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes or less.

The following section is organized around three primary themes that emerged from the final interview: a) realizing media largely reflects hegemonic interests;; b) realizing how hegemonic images relate to ideology and identity; and c) beginning to deal with the lack of representation in the media.

**Realizing Media Largely Reflects Hegemonic Interests**

In the final interview, it was clear that many perspectives had changed from the first interview in terms of media and the construction of the participants’ identity and also in light of how participants viewed their identity. One of the first emerging themes was that it became clear to participants in light of the analysis conducted during the learning sessions, fe that the media that they grew up watching and continue to watch, unbeknownst to them, largely reinforces hegemonic America. In this regard, Samar stated:

"I realized from this learning activity that the media is a tool, a tool that has been in my life from a very young age. This tool has been good at times and it sometimes has led me in the wrong direction…As a young girl the media taught me that I was different than the
girl on the screen. Growing up with that feeling always made me feel less than all the images of the 'White blond girls'. I felt that I was nothing. I did not exist.

This statement is a clear indicator that through the learning sessions Samar has come to the realization that growing up with this media has worked to make her feel less powerful than her White American counterpart. It has done so by largely excluding images of Arab women in the media, or presenting such images in mostly ways that support hegemony. In alignment with this thematic point, Manal states:

In this learning activity I thought it was amazing how America was constantly portrayed as powerful, White, smart, problem solvers, and leaders. They were always powerful. Meanwhile, Arabs where always seen as less than. They were always weak and evil.

By participating in the learning sessions, the participants have become aware that America is powerful, and part of how it maintains this power is by projecting a hegemonic image in the media. Participants have realized that these images are constant and often send a clear message, intentional or not, to all viewers of who fits the hegemonic American mold and who does not. The intertwinement of power and hegemony is also acknowledged by Tala, who in the interview states,

I never realized till after these learning sessions that part of why I always felt less than or not accepted in the bigger mainstream American community is because media was teaching me and everyone else watching it who had power and who was 'the real American Girl', and meantime, it sent clear constant messages to me that I was not part of America and because I was not part of America I had no images, no voice, and no power.

This was a powerful statement, because it marks a clear departure and transition of the participants from a state of non-awareness of the impact of media images on their identity, to
arriving to the understanding of how media images impact participants ideologies and by extension how these ideologies of power and hegemony have become part of how they define themselves in terms of power and hegemony and how they define others in the same respect.

What is also interesting is that in the first interview participants were aware of the fact that they were the "other". However, by the end of this project, they had come to understand that the process of othering was manifested through a powerful and hegemonic dynamic: one that often tended to exclude the participants from the hegemonic fabric of America. This dynamic made sure that they had limited power in the context of mainstream media, and in this particular case, Hollywood Movies.

**Realizing the Effects of Media on Ideology and Identity**

The previous theme of realizing the hegemonic power of the media is related to this theme in that participants realized how media has influenced their ideologies and identities. In terms of gender, transmitted ideologies, and identity construction, Maha noted:

> In gaining an understanding of how media operates, it’s clear to me now that at times I have learned how to be an American girl from the media. At other times I have also learned from the media that my identity does not fit into an American girl’s identity. Now I have just learned that images projected in the media are impacting my identity right now and forever…Now, I’ll just be more conscious of it.

Maha spoke of a series of influences that media ideologies have had on her identity construction process, and did so by creating a time line. For example, her first reference to how media ideologies have taught her how to be an American girl, clearly highlights that when she was growing up the images in the media were a teaching tool that educated her on what it was to be an American girl. Notice that a reference is only made to her American identity in this
statement, not to a joint Arab/American identity. So one can conclude that on the timeline of Maha's identity construction, at first, her identity was American. She then moves to a second stage on the timeline where she specifically addresses her Arab identity. In this respect, she argues that the media has also taught her that she was not an American girl.

One could argue that in the shift of her identity construction, where the Arab part of her identity was forming, the media influenced this process by informing her through the lack of images of Arabs in the media that she was not American, as she once thought. The identity she identified with at this time of change and construction was not present in the Western media ideology, and was manifested in the lack of images in the media, which further reinforced her assumptions about not being an American girl.

The third and final stage on the timeline that Maha spoke of in her statement is the one that takes place after participating in the learning activities associated with this project. She has become aware that media images will continue to impact her identity, however now she has become aware that this is a reality, and therefore she will be able to control this impact. By making such a statement, she not only confirms that her identity has shifted and changed through time but that it will also continue to shift and change and that ideologies present in the Western media will continue to play a role in that future process.

In support of this realization is the idea that the media has played a role in what has been identified by Maha as an identity that is constantly changing and developing and is impacted in this shifting process by projected ideologies in Western media. Arwa also spoke to this issue and states:

Well, I know that I’m Palestinian, and that the Palestinian Israeli conflict has had a huge impact on me. But what I did not realize till now is the role the media has played in this process,
and how these negative images have affected what it means to me to be an Arab American woman and what people think of because of them…I have become, defensive, angry, I feel like my voice is oppressed, and that’s just who I am.

In this statement, Maha highlights becoming aware in this project of the fact that images of Arabs in the media have changed not only how she perceives being Arab American but also her identity in the process. She claims her historical connection to Palestine and the representation of the conflict in Western media has played a role in her identity construction. In so doing, she is claiming that the representation of her ethnic identity in the Western media has led not only to a change in her identity, but also in her perception of her own identity. This realization also lends itself to the fact that her identity is in flux because of the negative images in the media. This is evident when she mentions how she has become defensive and angry, and then states, "That’s just who I am."

Samar's final interview also shed some light on the idea of identity and its connection to the media, where she states,

I think the media has given Arab Americans a unified identity…when I think of the media and how it has affected my identity and the identity of all Arab American women and men I know because of the War and the distortion of it in the media, all Arab Americans have put their cultural Arab identities aside and have united as one

Samar's observations during her interview point to the fact that it is her perceptions that Arab Americans have a united identity which one can deduct from Samar's comment is separate or independent from her sense of cultural identity, that she and other Arab Americans share, that tends to unite them. It is important to note that not all Arab Americans are united on any issue, but there is a cultural pressure to be united on this issue, and we see evidence of this in some of
the participants’ comments. This seemingly united identity tends to depart from all cultural aspects that can frame Arab American identity in multiple ways, and tends to encourage a more unified single Arab identity in the face of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

This seemingly united identity is not only a result of the war, but it is also a direct reaction to the media's coverage of this event, arguably making, in this case, a lot of Arab American's feeling the need to unite as a form of resistance and thus forming one Arab identity.

**Beginning to Deal with the Lack of Representation in the Media**

A lack of images of Arab American women in the media has made participants feel that their identity is not seen as particularly significant to the rest of society and that their voice is not very represented in the media; this is why many of them opted to exercise voice in the closing activity of this project. They realized this feeling of insignificance has had a direct effect on their identity construction, and were moving to some degree to want to do something about this. Manal brings this issue to the forefront when she says in her final interview, "understanding the media and how it works has made me realize that because of the lack of images in the media of Arab American women, I believe that as an Arab women I was not important. I mean, I had my culture, religion, and all of that stuff, but I did not see me." This statement indicates that Manal feels that that lack of images in the media, stripped her existence in the media and as a result she feels that she, meaning the Arab American woman has been denied a presences and a voice in the media. This research project began to furnish the opportunity for participants to begin to gain their voice. This was evident in Arwa's, Maha's, Tala's, Fatima's recordings and Aysha's poem where they all used their voices to either define themselves, dispel misconceptions, express emotions such as anger, to highlight specific needs and finally choices that they have made.
Fatima also highlights the issue of representation as an element that has affected the construction of her identity in her final interview. She stated, “I think I know who I am, but when I watch T.V., I do not get any confirmation of who I believe I am. So, I guess, unknowingly, I feel the need to change who I am to fit what I find on T.V.” This statement clearly indicates that Fatima has realized that the media has impacted her identity in that the lack of images of the person she believes she is. One could argue that, the lack of images in the media has also impacted Fatima's desire to have her voice to be heard. She has also felt that need to conform to the images in the media because of the lack of the representational images of Arab American women. The statement also highlights the need and importance of participants having a voice to be able to express to the world who the Arab American woman is and is not.

Although participants in the first interview felt feelings of anger, frustration, and misunderstanding by the media, it is clear that after going through this CML learning process, participants have become more aware of and are linking these experiences to how they have affected the construction of their own identities. They are also conscious of how they view this process and their identity in general. For instance, participants felt that media maintains power and reinforces hegemonic America by transmitting messages that reinforce power to the West and eliminate Arab Americans and specifically women from this circle of power. As Arab American women, this made participants aware that they might not feel less powerful and "less than" their counterpart American White women. Participants also argued that participating in this research project has made them aware of this power structure that exists and is perpetuated through the media. In terms of the media and how it has impacted participants’ ideology and identity, participants acknowledge that the media has had and will have an ongoing effect on the construction of their identity. In this regard, they also highlight that identity construction is a
process where changes happen depending on historical events, culture, and religion, and that the media plays a role in this in-flux identity process. Participants also suggested that the lack of representation of Arab American women in the media has perhaps affected their identity. As a result of the learning activity participants felt the need to have a voice to fully express and define their Arab American Identity.

When speaking to the issue of voice it is important to highlight that throughout all of the above themes, there is an on-going underlying theme which is the fact that participants who decided to take action, discovered their voice as Arab American women. This was evident because all of the women made specific reference to finding their voice as a result of participating in this study; they also made references to how they wanted to use their voice that was instrumental in developing the above themes.

Summary

In summary, Chapter Six focused on four areas. These areas included a preview of the discussions that led to participants deciding to take action in this learning activity. A preview of the learning activity and the emerging themes from the final interview was presented. This included the fact that media images maintain power and reinforce hegemonic America, with participants discovering the connection between media and their identities the struggles participants are faced with because of media images. These themes all had one common denominator; participants found and used their voice. Also, through this action research project, they have become aware and conscious of the relationship between the media and their identities, and this consciousness, in some cases, led to wanting to take action against these effects. In other cases, the activities have increased participants’ awareness that will likely alter how the media
will influence them in the future. The following and final chapter, Chapter Seven, will highlight a discussion of the findings in light of the literature and recommendations for practice.
The purpose of this action research study was to examine how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identities in living in the U.S.; how they think media and popular culture have affected their identity construction; and then, through action research how these women continue to construct their identity while participating in a critical media literacy (CML) process of viewing and discussing movies portraying Arabs and Arab American women. The research questions that framed the study were the following:

1. How do Arab American women negotiate their identity in the U.S.; and what is their perception of the role of the media in relation to their construction of identity, and in the practice of adult education?

2. How does discussion of media portrayals of Arabs and Arab American through a critical media literacy perspective act as a pedagogical tool for Arab American women?

3. How do the participants in this action research study believe that the action research process affected their ongoing construction of identity?

Before beginning the discussion of the findings, it is useful to briefly review the assumptions underlying the framework of the study. Although only Arab American Muslim women participated in the study, a basic assumption underlying this study was that images of Arabs in the media have influenced the perception of both Arabs and non-Arab Americans alike and, as a result, this influence of perception has affected the identity of Arab American women. In addition, it was assumed that the women selected in the purposeful sample wanted to contribute and participate in the goals and research of the study, and that they would have the
freedom to express their own views, feelings, and thoughts throughout the action research process. The last assumption of this study was that knowledge is constructed socially, and therefore, participants would make further meaning from their experiences in the action research phases of the study and gain new insights into the process of their identity construction.

The expectations of the study were two-fold: first, that the findings of this study would make a contribution to the existing literature about Arab American women and the construction of their identity in relation to media; and second, that this study would suggest new possibilities for media literacy education practice in higher and adult education, especially related to Arab Americans and specifically Arab American women.

This action research process began with a preliminary interview with the seven Arab American women participants that focused on family background, how the grew up in relation to the media, some aspects of gender and culture, and the role of media in relation to their construction of their identity. It then included four cycles of action research, where together we, as researcher/facilitator and participants, explored how we construct and view our identity and how the media influences this process of identity construction. These discussions were framed in light of some basic aspects of critical media literacy theory at the outset, and then a discussion of a movie at each session that featured Arabs or Arab Americans. The study concluded with a final session involving action and a closing interview.

In this chapter, I first provide a summary as it relates to the research literature, followed by a discussion of the study in light of the critical media literacy perspective, which will be informed by critical and feminist theory and pedagogy. Next, I consider implications for the field of adult education, followed by the limitations and strengths of the study, adding questions for further research. Lastly, I offer conclusions and final reflections on the research process.
The Study in Light of the Research Literature

There have been several authors in recent years within the field of adult education and related areas who have written about critical media literacy or public pedagogy (Guy, 2007; Sandlin & McLaren, 2009; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), with some authors specifically focused on the role of media in examining identity (Guy, 2007; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Wright, 2007). As noted above, this action research design incorporated CML into the ongoing process of understanding media and identity construction. The main focus was to understand how Arab American women construct their identity and use critical media literacy theory to better facilitate a learning process and the ongoing construction of identity for these Arab American women.

The findings from the initial preliminary interviews revealed four themes in relation to participants' initial perceptions of media in relation to their identity: (a) their experience of being the other; (b) their experiences surrounding the backlash of 9/11; (c) their frustration with Western media; and (d) the complexity of an “Arab” and “American” female identity. During the four sessions of the CML learning process, which included watching movies, discussion, and analysis, participants were able to critically analyze the media and became conscious of the influence and role it played in their identity construction process in ways they were not conscious of before the process; chapters four and five highlight the learning sessions that were part of the action research process, whereas chapter six focuses on the final session and interview that gets at their learning overall. The entire process indicated that participants became aware of their identities and the construction process through the CML process. The findings from the final interview focused on their understanding of: (a) how media images maintain power and reinforce hegemonic America; (b) the impact of media on ideology and identity; and (c) how they are beginning to deal with their lack of representation in the media, particularly in relation
to their construction of identity. An underlying theme throughout the themes was the fact that participants that had decided to take action had found their voice and expressed the fact that finding their voice gave them a sense of freedom to express their opinions.

In general, the findings of this action research study are consistent with the research literature, including the fact that popular culture, which includes the media, is a form of adult education (Wright & Sandlin, 2009); the fact that media plays a role in identity construction (Guy, 2007; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Wright, 2007); and the fact that Islam has a role in the cultural construction of Arab Muslim identity (Ajrouch, 2007; Kanjwal, 2008). While this study focused more on culture than religion, the fact that these women were also Muslim obviously relates to their identity construction; this was apparent to some degree though perhaps not as strongly as one might expect. One area of difference between the literature and the findings was, in some cases, culture and religion in the media did not appear to as strongly influence the identity construction process when the images were in opposition to the Arab American culture and religion. For instance, when it came to the discussion of bicultural marriage in the movie *Body of Lies* participants, with the exception of Manal, were more likely to adhere to their Arabia culture when it came time to partner selection.; they opted not to marry outside of their religion and culture. Additional comparisons between the literature and the findings are explained below.

**9/11 and the Ongoing Struggle of the Arab American Identity**

One of the initial themes that emerged from the study was the backlash from the events of 9/11 and those immediately following that day. In the context of this theme, it was evident at all stages of the learning sessions that media played a role in the construction of the Arab American women’s identity for the participants. Their frustration with media images and how these images
directly influenced their lives showcased this process. As one participant stated in reference to the events of 9/11 and to the media images that were generated as a result of this event, “It was one of the hardest times living in America, and it still affects me today.” In this context, Willis (2002) suggests that 9/11 and the events that followed single-handedly changed the national identity of all Arab Americans. He highlights that the constant negative images of Arabs in the media played a significant role in altering the perception of what is an Arab and, by extension, an Arab American.

For all of the Arab American women participating in this study, the events of 9/11 represented a changing point that affected their identity construction process. As Aysha discusses, after experiencing the events of 9/11, although she was a young girl at the time, she clearly recalls going from being a “popular” kid to feeling like an “outcast.” The literature on Arabs and 9/11 points to fact that the events of that day affected the identity of most Arab Americans, because it shifted the “Arab American identity” to “Arab,” and in doing so, tended to isolate “Arab American” from “American,” thus making them an “other” (Haddad, 2004; Naber 2006). Similarly, in the present study, participants experienced some of the same feelings as a result of 9/11, as highlighted above. In this study, Arwa speaks to the negative feelings she associated with being Arab American after the events of 9/11, “I always thought of myself as Arab American. After 9/11, I began to see that the people and I separated the two.” She believed, for the first time in her life that having an Arab identity meant that she could no longer have an American identity simultaneously. What is also of interest is the fact that after 9/11 participants felt that they had to negotiate or sometimes even hide their religious and cultural identity to some extent, although it is important to mention that women wearing the hijab did not at all opt to stop doing so. But several of the participants spoke of fears of going to the mosque, and said that they
went less than normal; hence, they refrained from participating in their “normal” religious and cultural activates, and the fear that they would be subjected to ridicule and danger. Thus, their religious and cultural had to be negotiated in new ways as a result of the events of 9/11.

With respect to the struggle of Arab American identity in light of the events of 9/11, through a critical analysis of events, Wodack (2010) examined the effects of the American media on the international perception of the “American” post-9/11. By examining the show *The West Wing* Wodack investigated how the globalization of the American media played a significant role in the perception of the ideology of the American post 9-11. She draws on a specific episode of *The West Wing* to make her argument and suggests that because the show mimicked a specific real incident in the history of the United States the content of the show was seen by viewers worldwide as mimicking the views of the American public at the time. She argues that the Western media played a significant role in the perception of the ideology of the “American” after 9/11. Participants in the study also spoke of the issue of the Western media presenting an image of the “good American,” and in so doing, tended to contrast and to a large extent, reject Arab identity. In this regard, Tala highlights the fact that after 9/11, the government announced “the War on Terror.” In her perspective, this felt like a personal war was waged against her, because she felt that media images had successfully and largely isolated her identity into one Arab identity and then declared war upon it.

Despite the ongoing struggle that the participants had with the way they perceive that media constructs an image of Arab identity, the findings of this study highlighted the fact that participants are still maintaining their own more positive Arab identity despite predominant images in the media. Fatima speaks to this when she stated, “No matter what they say or do…I will always have Arab in me, and I was born here, so I will always be American.” Shaheen
of Arab American identity, there will always be elements that make Arabs who they are.

**Media Used as a Tool to Reinforce Hegemony**

In the findings of the study as a whole, one major theme was that participants came to see how media images largely maintain power and reinforce hegemonic America. As discussed in previous chapters, Gramsci (1971) was instrumental in highlighting the how a dominant ideology can work to enable oppressive structures. He discusses the concept of hegemony, which is a process of ideological control and consent of the majority. He believed that governments were able to maintain themselves through popular and majority support by putting forth a dominant ideology. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1944/1977) critique of the culture industry, they reaffirm this idea by suggesting that media is able to control and condition the masses, so that they, in return, follow the established social structure, thereby maintaining the status quo. While there are clearly media that challenge dominant ideologies in various ways, the findings of this study indicate that the participants largely agree that media supports the dominant culture. For example, Samar stated, “I realized from this learning activity that the media is a tool…[later, specifically speaking to the effects of this tool] growing up I felt like I was nothing. I did not exist.” This finding reinforces the work of Tisdell (2008), who in a cross-analysis highlighted the role media plays in facilitating “othering” and marginalization, though she also highlights the fact that there are media that operate specifically to resist the dominant narrative. My study shows findings in regard to how media can facilitate othering, but more specifically how it plays out for Arab American women. As Tala for example, stated, “I had no images, no voice, and no power.” Although not a recurring theme in the literature, in this study, it was clear that through
the cycles of the learning activities, and in the findings, that participants realized the way they tended to feel less empowered with regard to the images that were projected in the media.

Not all media in the study reinforce the dominant ideology; there were several instances throughout the study where participants felt that the media reinforced their cultural identity and worked to resist the dominant culture. Such instances for example where when in the discussion of *Body of Lies*, Manal felt that the intercultural relationship challenged the common belief that Arab American women only marry from their culture and religion; this was also a reflection of her own circumstances in that she married outside of her culture. Also the movie *The Kingdom* displayed Arabs in a variety of images, and social roles that were more reflective of reality. These images also worked to challenge the dominant cultural perspective. There are also numerous examples in the literature about ways some media resist the dominant culture and present a strong counter-narrative, such as in *The Avengers* and the presentation in the 1960s of the feminist image of Cathy Gale as Wright (2007) discusses. Similarly, as Sandlin (2007) notes, culture jamming in the media and popular culture in its numerous examples serves as a means to challenge hegemonic portrayals and ideologies. In the same respect, the present study provided the platform and opportunity not only to conceptualize the idea of hegemony, but also to furnish the opportunity and choice to resist hegemony in the form of providing a venue for participants to use their voices and to stand up to hegemony by giving participants the chance to express and identify their identity using their voice. In fact, four of the participants chose to do so, as discussed in the previous chapter.

**Popular Culture, Public Pedagogy, and Identity**

The findings of this study specifically highlighted the impact of media (popular culture) on ideology and identity. In considering visual culture and media as a form of popular culture
that is ubiquitous and political in nature, many authors, including those contributing to Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick’s (2010) collection on public pedagogy, have directly argued that media and popular culture act as a form of public pedagogy. This notion of the media as a form of public pedagogy was critical in this learning activity, because it gave insight into the nature of the media acting as an educating (or mis-educating) mechanism. Participants felt that the media they grew up watching, continued to watch, and then analyzed in the learning process partially taught them what it meant to be Arab, American, and female, and what was not acceptable in the parameters of these identities. This study demonstrated how media had a direct impact on how participants’ identities were formed from their perspectives.

In this context, the study also found that the media played a role in working to create a somewhat unified identity among Arabs that are culturally, and politically engaged in the Israeli-Palestinian war. This identity is one that forms in resistance to the current events in the conflict area and what they believe to be the skewed images that portray the conflict. The findings of this study also found a connection between media’s role as a pedagogical tool and how it then helped to form a seemingly unified identity for many Arab Americans, particularly in regard to the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

The findings of this study also found that participants learned how to be Arab, American, or the fact that they were neither, at times, from the media. This finding was consistent with authors in adult education (Guy, 2007; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011; Storey, 2006), who assert that media influences social norms concerning gender, race, class, nationality, and other aspects that constitute identity. However, these authors and prior studies did not examine how media can perhaps influence the ways that ethnic groups can begin to take on a somewhat,
though not totally, unified identity at least on a particular issue. While it would be dangerous to draw conclusions here, as this would need to be the subject of further research, it appears that the media, and discussion of it, and its generalized portrayals may have the power to influence the development of a group identity. This appeared to be the case here in this study in light of perceived hegemonic images of the ongoing war between Palestine and Israel.

The study also found that participants’ identities had shifted and changed from American to Arab and in some cases to a combined identity of Arab American. For instance as stated by Manal, “I have learned how to be an American girl from the media. At other times, I have also learned from the media that my identity does not fit into an American girl’s identity.” These shifts and changes found in the identity construction process among participants were a direct result of media and the images it reflected or did not reflect, and the ways they became conscious of thinking about it throughout the study. In their discussions of the overlap of adult education and adult development, Clark and Caffarella (1999), Rossiter (2007), and Tisdell (2001) discuss the non-unitary self, or the notion of constantly shifting identity as being constantly challenged within the various ways of knowing from a feminist perspective. However, these earlier discussions did not identify media as playing a role in identity construction More recently Sandlin, Wright, and Clark (2011) directly discuss how identity is shaped by media and other forms of public pedagogy, and tie their discussion into various theories of adult development and learning.

Participants in the study also clearly became aware of the fact that their identity is in constant flux, and that this flux is influenced by media images. In Maha’s final interview, she speaks of the various steps and changes that her identity has gone through and how the media influenced these changes. She specifically speaks of having an Arab identity at times and, at
other times, having an American identity. This finding and realization is consistent with the literature (Butler, 1999; Clark, 1999; Ewing, 1990; Rossiter, 2007), in that all speak to the notion that identities are constantly changing and shifting.

With respect to media literacy, this study found that in going through the process of the critical media literacy learning activities throughout the action research process, participants were clearly able to make connections to different elements of their identity depending on the images.

The variety of images that were consumed by the participants gave them an array of narratives; these narratives impacted various stages of their identity. For instance, one of the participants stated, “the media taught me how to be American,” and then she states, “I learned that I was not American from the media.” This is consistent with Tisdell (2008), who performed a cross analysis of three research studies and found that media could give adult viewers “alternative narratives” (p. 57). The present study takes these findings one-step further with respect to identity. This study found that these alternative narratives gave participants a model that impacted, influenced, and shaped their identity. As Maha stated, “Now I have just learned that images projected in the media are impacting my identity right now and forever.”

Critical media studies on identity construction and resisting popular culture that arguably affects identity have covered a variety of topics and peoples. However, it is important to note that within the literature there was a lack of discussion in addressing critical media literacy in relation to the identity construction of Arab American women. This study was able to add to the existing body of literature, because it specifically addressed the issue of Arab American women’s identity construction in the context of media. In this respect, the research was able to shed some much-needed light on these issues.
The Impact of Negative Images and Stereotypes on Arab American Women’s Identity

Findings from this action research highlight specific influences media images have had on the identity construction process of the participants. Fatima stated, “I think I know who I am but when I watch TV, I do not get the confirmation.” In the action part of the research, Tala spoke of hardships, such as losing her best friend of seven years as a result of the repetitive images of Arabs as terrorists in the media. It is clear that these hardships have framed her identity. In the literature that specifically addresses media portrayals of Arabs and Arab Americans in the media, Paul (1998) posited that stereotypes in the media were created in order to justify social inequalities. The negative images that participants viewed and analyzed in this study can all be classified as stereotypes of Arabs in the media, though as noted earlier there were positive images as well. Participants found that the largely negative images made them, as Tala stated, “defensive and angry,” and she argued that these images then became who she is in her own mind.

In addition, among the findings of this study is the fact that the lack of or limited number of positive images in the media of Arabs made participants feel that their identity, and by extension, their existence, was insignificant. Shaheen (2001), Paul (1998), and Arbreu et al. (2003) all speak to the issue of the portrayal of Arab stereotypes in the media and the various effects these stereotypes have on the perceptions of non-Arab Americans about other Americans. But it’s important to again point out here, most of this literature about Arabs in the media does not address gender, nor Arab American woman’s identity construction in the context of media images.
The findings of this study specifically addressed identity construction of the Arab American woman in the context of media images and stereotypes. For instance, in the final action part of the study, when some participants decided to take part in the oral storytelling, Tala explains the loss and pain that she has experienced as a result of negative media images, and how that loss and pain has framed her identity. It is evident in Tala’s audio recording, as discussed in Chapter Six, that she currently defines who she is as part of the pain she has experienced as a result of the negative and stereotypical images in the media. Further confirming this finding is Aysha’s poem, where she wrote about the media in the context of her identity construction. She stated, “What have you done to me, I wanted to be you, you wanted me to be the other.” While these examples only focus on a moment in time, and don’t necessarily get at the complexity of multiple media portrayals and tend to focus more on the negative stereotypes, these statements do indicate awareness of how they have been affected by these stereotypical images.

Although participants believe they have had negative experiences because of media portrayals, it is also important to remember that participants also recognized their identities as shifting. In this respect, when participants discussed their identities in the context of being American, the study found that an action research study facilitating the development of critical media literacy worked as a positive pedagogical tool to teach participants positive things about their identity. For instance, in respect to gender, participants felt that the strong female images in the media of American women, such as Janet Mayes in the *The Kingdom* (2007), supported participants in having the freedom of having a choice and doing whatever they wanted in life; discussion of this portrayal appeared to enhance their ability to have free choice and to have a voice, as opposed to the images in the media that portrayed women as weak and submissive.
The Role of Media in Framing the Cultural and Religious Identity of Arab American Women

A significant finding of study was the fact that media images can affect Arab American women’s ideology in a positive way when the images reflect positive images of Western non-Arab women. This finding was similar to Wright's (2007) study. Although Wright’s study focused on British women, Wright concluded that some media could have a positive influence on the construction process of a women's identity.

It is important here to bring up the issue of religion. Participants seemed less likely to be influenced by media images of religion, even if, at the outset, they seemed to be positive. This finding reflects similarities with Ajrouch (2007) and Ajrouch Kusow (2007), who found that when it came to media images impacting religion and its practices, media images appeared to have little effect on Arab Americans practicing their religion. In this regard, although Fatima was the only participant in the group that wore the hijab, there was no evidence to suggest that media images had impacted her choice to wear the hijab. Therefore, this finding appeared consistent with prior studies, though this study’s intent was not specifically to examine how participants felt that their religion was impacted by the media; hence this would need to be the subject of further research.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Research

The study offers some interesting insights for theory, practice, and further research in the area of critical media literacy and identity construction.

Implications for Theory

As noted throughout this study, the theoretical framework for this study is grounded in critical media literacy theory as related to Arab American women. Critical media literacy in this
particular study was informed by the discourses of critical, feminist, and engaged pedagogy (Freire; 1970; Giroux, 1999; hooks, 1994; Tisdell, 1998), critical media literacy as a form of pedagogy (Guy, 2007; Kellner & Share, 2007; Tisdell & Thompson, 2007), and the literature on popular culture and public pedagogy (Giroux 1999; Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010; Wright & Sandlin, 2009), and identity as developing and shifting (Clark, 1999; Rossiter, 2007; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011). Therefore, concepts such as criticality, pedagogy, and popular culture were central to this study. Critical media literacy with all of the above listed components challenges the dominant culture. Underpinnings of the above philosophical perspectives are: a) developing an awareness of the effects of the media on identity construction and gaining a critical conscious through media education; b) education as being a means of empowering learners to become aware of being oppressed by the media all the while making them conscious of their oppressors; and c) through critical media literacy, giving voice to those who are traditionally silenced and the importance of taking action.

The study was framed through this lens and the findings were discussed above. As a result of this theoretical lens, the theoretical implications are embodied in the fact that many data-based critical media literacy studies are done in formal classrooms, though Wright’s (2007) study was done more from a critical informal learning perspective; the British women participating in her study learned from watching what they saw as a positive role model and how it affected their identity. However, this study brings to the forefront the theoretical issue of Arab American women’s identity, which has not been theorized in regard to media.

This study offers insight for further theoretical development in that it highlights the fact that a theory that specifically addresses Arab American identity and other hybrid identities needs to incorporate a perspective that deals with the hybrid nature of bi-cultural identities. It also
needs to take into account the intersection of religion, culture, and terrorism in a country that is constantly concerned with terror attacks by Arabs and Arab Americans.

Further development of such a theory would include not only issues of representation in the media, but it would also include the ability to analyze Arab identity as multiple; as Newman (2004, 2006) suggests identity encompasses a number of different, matching, opposing, intersecting and separate concepts of self, and for Arab American women this would include religion, culture, gender, and country of origin. Within this realm, this theory would be able to differentiate, analyze, and discuss, as Rossiter (2007) suggests, various possible selves. This is relevant because just looking at “Arab American” we can instantly extract two intersecting identities, Arab and American, and of course, there are many other intersecting possible selves in light of gender and other influences of identity, including historical events that affect how identity is constructed, as well as factors of culture, and religion. As a result of 9/11, for example, many Arab Americans have faced issues of discrimination and outright hostility, which has affected their identity and how they navigate power relations in society. Therefore, incorporating such elements in a theory would be absolutely necessary to be able to understand and deconstruct the Arab American identity.

In addition, a theory that looks at the identity construction process of Arab American Muslim women must take into account the role of Islam as a factor that plays an important role not only in the identity construction process but also in many facades of the Arab American identity and way of life. Saadawi (2010), an Egyptian feminist suggests that Islam plays a significant role in the construction of Arab women’s identity. However, she is quick to also point to the fact that how Islam affects Arab women construction of identity varies. Understanding the
various ways and degrees into how Arab American identity is affected by Islam will be a critical element of analyzing the Arab American identity.

**Implications for Research**

This action research study shed some much-needed light on the link between identity construction and media images in movies, specifically for Arab American women. However, as this study addressed specific issues related to this topic, in the process of conducting this study and exploring the findings, many questions arose as a result. The following questions could represent possible suggestions for further research in the area of understanding how Arab Americas construct and view their identity vis-à-vis media images.

This action research study contributed to the study of the learning and teaching of Arab American women by offering a beginning understanding of how Arab American women construct their identities through media images, and how they develop an understanding of media literacy throughout the process; however these findings are not generalizable to all groups. It would be interesting to conduct further research on this topic while changing the group’s gender dynamics. For instance, it would be interesting to expand the exploration of the critical feminist pedagogy lens of this study, to include one that would include Arab American women and men and draw a comparative analysis between the two groups in terms of how each gender responds to the images in the construction process of their identity in relation to one another and/or independently. It is my belief that adult educators and learners would benefit from an analysis that would incorporate the perspectives of both genders. In so doing, the male voices can also be added to understanding the construction process of the Arab American identity via media.

It would also be interesting to conduct a qualitative follow up research study on the participants of this study, to gain understanding and insight into how these women continue to
construct their identities after participating in the first CML action research learning process. This would add to the current study in that it would give insight into how Arab American women construct their identities over a longer period of time and how participating in a study that highlights the role media plays in this process affects this future process of identity construction. It would also be interesting to see if the women that decided to take action in the first study, the current study, continue to feel compelled to do so, and if the remaining two participants in the study ever decide to take action whether in a formal or informal way. Also, it would be interesting to compare the findings of both studies to see if the findings of the first study will be part of a continuum of finding or if new findings emerge as a result of events, such as how these women respond to the new reality show now on television called *All American Muslims* (2012). It would also be interesting to see if news media images of current political shifts and changes in the Middle East resulting from the Arab Spring taking place in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Syria, would play a new role in how Arab American women continue to construct their identities. Although not the focus of this study, it would be interesting to investigate the impact of age on the construction of the Arab American woman’s identity. As noted in chapter six, the women that decided to take action were the younger group of women, in contrast to the older women who opted not to take action, with Aysha also not wanting to share her action with the group.

Another suggestion for future research is a result of an ongoing theme in this study, which was the significant role religion and culture played in the identity construction process of the Arab American participants. Keeping in mind that the participants of this study, with the exception of Tala, were first generation Arab Americans, a further study could draw a comparative analysis of the role of culture and religion on first, second, and third generation Arab Americans. It would be beneficial to the critical media literacy body of literature and to
adult educators alike to understand the role of religion and culture in the construction process of the Arab American identity. It would be interesting to gain insight into whether or not religion and culture would have such a significant role in the identity construction process if there were a change in generation; or, if the case would be that Arab Americans are able to maintain their Arab cultural and religious identities through time and generations. If so, it would be interesting to understand how Arab Americans were able to maintain these cultural and religious aspects of their identity through the generations. If the case was that there was a change in the value of both culture and religion. It would be interesting to know what took precedence in their identity construction process. This would also help educators to gain a better understanding into the fact that variables that affect a specific ethnic group are not always the case for each generation of a specific group and will add nuances to the findings regarding Arab Americans.

Further research could also explore other variables in Arab American identity, from a qualitative, quantitative, or action research perspective. It would be possible to incorporate an analysis that would examine how variables such as age, immigration history (i.e., whether the participants’ family immigrated as a result of a war, poverty, education, etc.), or country of origin impacted the identity construction process. From an adult education perspective, it would also be interesting to explore participants’ perceptions and experiences of how such issues are dealt with in various kinds of adult education venues, from formal classrooms in universities, and in less formal educational settings such as in ESL or in community education settings.

Further research could also look into how variables within the Arab American community that are fueled by religion and culture oppress the Arab American women’s identity, for example forcing women to wear *hijab* or marry from specific families, or adhere to specific costumes, etc.
Implications for Practice

Much of the approach to understanding the role of media in adult learning from a critical media literacy perspective is on how media functions as a popular culture pedagogical tool, and facilitates adult learning. This tool is able to work in the interest of the dominant culture, or to resist it; it can be used to educate or miseducate those who consume it (Hall, 1990; Kellener & Best, 2001; Sandlin, 2007, 2010; Shultz & Burdick: 2010; Story; 2006; Wright & Sandlin: 2009). There is only a small body of literature specifically in adult education that links critical media literacy to learning as it pertains to identity construction (Guy, 2007; Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2012; Tisdell, 2008). This action research study used critical media literacy in a non-formal educational setting with Arab American women to uncover the connection between the two, specifically by watching, discussing, analyzing, and finally taking action in the form of giving voice, so the participants could give an illustration of aspects of their identity in relation to media. Nevertheless CML can be used in infinite ways within adult non-formal learning environments and in higher education.

Symbols as a way of knowing. Media is all about visual culture, and the use of image and symbol. As Stuart Hall (1997) notes, people negotiate and decode symbol in multiple ways. The analysis of image and symbol in critical media literacy is a powerful way to come to understand how people create meaning, for any group, including the Arab American women in this study. This was clearly displayed in the discussions that took place throughout the learning cycles of the study. One example was in the discussion of Sex and the City 2 (2010), in which participants felt that the cultural symbols of the abaya, the traditional Muslim female garb, and the niqab, the face cover, worked to help the women draw a variety of comparisons between their Arab identity and the identity of the non-Arab American women in the movie. This was
also the beginning of the meaning making process for the participants. It also allowed women to look for deeper meaning in the learning context and connect this meaning making process to their learning.

In any higher education class, or non-formal educational setting such as the one in this study, exploring these and similar cultural symbols from Arab or other cultural groups from multiple perspectives can clearly enhance learning. This would need to be contextualized of course in light of discussions of hegemony and critical media literacy theory or semiotic theory, which focuses on symbols. One could display a short film that exemplified the dynamics of the concept and ask participants to give an example of one symbol or two that they felt reflected hegemony and to discuss and share with the class why they thought this was the case. The professor (in a formal setting) or project coordinator (in a non-formal setting) could also do the reverse, which could involve introducing the movie and then choosing specific symbols in the movie as points of discussion, and asking participants specific questions related to the symbols. Students and learners could then begin to decode these media symbols and make meaning that is directly related to the concept of hegemony. This concept could also be applied to music in the media, in terms of understanding and making meaning from its interpretations.

Discussing symbol and semiotics could also be used in a non-formal learning setting that contains Arab Americans or other ethnic groups to better understand existing ideologies in the community. For instance, the goal could be helping people understand their misconceptions about Islam, Arabs, culture, terrorism, and negative reactions from the community, an issue that all participants complained of in the study. One could just ask the group to give or bring a symbol of how they feel about a particular experience. The symbol would give the opportunity to open the door to talk about one’s experiences. The point is to find a symbol that allows one to
gain understanding and make meaning that is deeper than what appears on the surface of the symbol, and this would be a helpful tool in many educational settings.

**Media images to describe concepts.** There is lack of research using media images in order to understand the construction process of the Arab American identity. Yet people constantly use media images in education to explain concepts such as sadness by showing a woman crying, for example. From the study and the literature reviewed for the purpose of this study, it is clear that images in the media have multiple possible interpretations just from a brief image in a movie. Using media images to explain and introduce complex concepts is useful, because an educator in a formal or non-formal setting could talk about a dense concept such as ideology, hegemony, power, or they could start with a short movie that embodies these aspects. For instance, the movie *The Truman Show* in which the actor Jim Carry begins to question his reality and realizes that his entire world is controlled for purposes of producing media entertainment. This movie is an excellent tool, to discuss concepts such hegemony, power, class, and gender. Attempting to explain these concepts outside of a visual aid is very difficult and complex.

**Including images of Arab Americans and identity issues.** It is important to note that if visual media is to be used in a media literacy class and non-formal educational settings such as this study, it would be essential that some of the movies incorporate attention to how different groups are portrayed, including but not limited to Arabs or Arab Americans. Participants expressed that they felt disconnected from the images in the media that they watched growing up, because of the absence of images of Arab Americans reflected in them. They expressed their feelings that, “That’s not me, that’s them.” And, as a result, they felt a cultural disconnect from the images. As previously discussed, religion and culture are a big part of the Arab American
identity. Therefore, one could argue that for participants to feel connected to the learning process that incorporates media, it would be valuable and worthwhile to try to find media that incorporated Arab Americans, and other groups, depending on how a particular group is configured. In that way, participants would find the concepts relatable and necessary to their personal learning experience. So, if educators are to use the media as a pedagogical tool, it is important to take into account the audience’s religious and ethnic identity in this particular case, the teaching and learning of Arab American woman.

Another implication for practice in formal and non-formal learning settings to consider is the fact that participants need to discuss their identities. In this way, when they are given the floor in the learning context, knowledge is constructed through their identities, and they are given the voice and space to do so, when speaking to specific concepts, ideologies, experiences, etc. They can say for example “I” as an Arab American", "I as a White American", " I as an Indian", etc., and perhaps they can then feel that their identity and concepts such as religion and culture or lack thereof that are so important to their identity is incorporated into their learning.

Strengths, Limitations, and Conclusions

Although this action research study addressed the identity construction process of the Arab American woman via the media, similar to other studies, this study contains strengths and limitations. These strengths and limitations will be discussed before drawing conclusions of the research.

Limitations of the Study

Listed below are four limitations that were recognized in the study. Some appeared during the action research process, and others were limitations of the design of the study or that emerged after the study was concluded. This research aimed at analyzing how media affects the
construction of Arab American women’s identity, and although this study will add to the literature on critical media literacy and the identity construction process of Arab American women, as previously mentioned, there were limitations. These limitations included the following: the action research study provided a limited amount of cycles; the sample used was limited to Arab American Muslim women; the sample included only one socioeconomic class; and participants had the choice to withhold information.

First, the implementation of the four action research cycles required a significant amount of time; each cycle took around three hours or more to conduct. It also takes time to build rapport and in the first two cycles, it took participants time to warm up to one another. By the third cycle, participants were visibly more comfortable with one another, but this was the last cycle that took place face to face. The final cycle was conducted through online discussions, and therefore participants did not interact face-to-face as in the first three sessions. Expanding the study over a longer period of time and adding additional cycles would have given participants the opportunity for more in-depth analyses of movies. Also, more repetition of cycles could have had the potential to reveal more findings. In addition, additional repetitions would have furnished the opportunity for participants to gain larger comfort measures with one another. This comfort could have led participants to revealing more in-depth information about their identities and the elements that affected its construction. During the final interview, both Tala and Fatima made remarks to the effect that they had just became comfortable and familiar with the learning process, “and now it’s done.”

Second, the religious dynamic of the group was limited to Arab American Muslim women. If this group of women reflected other religious sects and groups in the Arab American community, such as Shiites, Christians, Jews, and Kurds, perhaps the findings of the study would
have changed and encompassed more findings. Although I attempted to recruit a variety of Arab American women, the community in which I lived and in which the study was conducted has a larger community of Muslim women than any of the other religions. Also, although the community center that is part of the mosque is open to all Arabs, the larger pools of people participating in the community center at the mosque are Muslims.

Thirdly, geographically this study was conducted in a local area with a group of women of similar socioeconomic backgrounds, and who are all members of the same community center and mosque. If the pool of women were from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and social class groups might result in different findings. No qualitative study is generalizeable; hence, it is important to point out the study does not attempt to suggest that the findings of the study could be applied to all Arab American women, particularly those from other social class groups. The particular nature of a purposeful small sample that aims to get at the particular in depth is a limitation of all qualitative studies including this one.

Fourth, the women in the study did not speak of their religion and culture in a negative way. Nor did they report having negative or oppressive experiences as a result of growing up and living in an Arab American community or culture. However, this does not necessarily mean that women in Arab American communities living in the U.S have not encountered experiences of oppression and discrimination related to gender or other factors a result of their culture and growing up in an Arab American community. This could be the subject of further research.

Lastly, because the study was in fulfillment of a dissertation, and it involved taking notes, and in some instances recordings, participants were perhaps less likely to disclose information. This was noticeable in the fact that when I had the opportunity to speak with the participants one-on-one, on subjects unrelated to my dissertation or in smaller groups when I was not taking
notes or recording, participants spoke more candidly about their experiences and interpretations of images. But, because the information they were giving me was specifically for my dissertation, the information and knowledge that was extracted for the purpose of this study was limited to what participants decided they wanted to share with the group and the dissertation publication. This limitation directly impacts me as the researcher, because these constraints limited my ability to know if participants withheld information, and the degrees to which this information was withheld.

**Strengths of the Study**

In spite of the limitations, this study exemplified a variety of strengths, which included: that the methodology used for the study proved to be fitting for the purpose of the study; that creating a safe place for participants to think freely and to critically analyze and reflect was important; and that CML played a role in questioning existing ideologies.

First, the purpose of action research is to facilitate a process and to make something happen. This study clearly did that, and hence accomplished one of its major goals. This was in part due to the methodology. The methodology of the action research study was fitting for this particular study, because in the planning phase of the learning activity, during the preliminary interview, participants were able to begin to discuss important elements about their identity and media that were directly related to the construction process of their identities. These preliminary findings from the first interview and first learning cycle were then used to plan the following cycles of the learning activity. Also, the fact that the study contained seven participants was also appropriate for this study. Participants were able to add a tremendous amount of knowledge to gaining a better understanding into how Arab American women construct their identities vis-à-vis the media.
Secondly, the inclusion of critical media literacy as the theoretical lens allowed participants to question many existing stereotypes and images about Arab American women. The CML aspects of this study allowed participants to openly discuss these images and exchange views on the effects these images have had on participants and their daily lives. By using movies in the learning activity, participants were able to analyze, think, reflect, and in some cases, take action against the images that have affected them for their entire lives. Also, they were able to give voice to these experiences and add to the body of knowledge that exists about Arab American women in general and, more specifically, about their identity construction.

Lastly, it is likely that all participants benefited from participating in the study to some degree. The study provided a safe place for participants to talk about sensitive issues that affected their daily lives; in some instances it provided a support system. Fatima states, “I’m not the only one in this,” which indicates that participants felt that their experiences were shared by other members of the group. The study provided a place that was safe for participants to share information, critically analyze and dialog, and give voice to their experiences and understanding of media also gave them further insight that helped them think about their identity and what it means to be Arab American female in new ways. In terms of voice, although one could argue that the women that did not participate was a result of cultural pressure, although not the topic of this study, it is important to note that the younger participants that participated in the final preliminary action acknowledged their voice and the power it gave them to speak their thoughts and express themselves so candidly as discussed in chapter six.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this study sought to examine how a group of Arab American women view how they have constructed their identities in living in the U.S., and how they think media and popular culture have affected their identity construction process. The study also aimed to see how these women continued to construct their identity by going through a critical media literacy process of viewing and discussing movies portraying Arabs, and Arab American men and women. Based on the findings of this study, which were presented throughout this chapter and chapter six, much can be gathered about the construction process of the Arab American woman identity. In addition, a number of pedagogical, theoretical, and research implications emerged. In terms of pedagogical implications, it is clear that Arab American women construct knowledge while processing media images, and this knowledge in turn affects the various stages of the construction and development process of their identities. The study found that the events of 9/11 although in the past presented an ongoing struggle in the construction process of the Arab American identity. Another pedagogical tool that was realized by the participants is the fact that media is used as a pedagogical tool that reinforced hegemony. Also, participants found that popular culture formed a public pedagogy that shaped their identity in various ways. Participants found that negative images and stereotypes also influenced and shaped the Arab American identity.

In terms of theoretical implications, as noted throughout this study, the theoretical framework for this study was grounded in critical media literacy theory as related to Arab American women. However, this study brings to the forefront the theoretical issues of Arab American women’s identity, which has not been theorized in regard to media, and adult learning and development. This study adds direction for developing a broadened theoretical perspective
that can foreground Arab American identity in relation to critical media literacy in adult education, while also drawing on critical and feminist theory and media studies. Such a framework also needs to take into account the intersection of religion, culture, gender, and terrorism in a country that is constantly concerned with terror attacks by Arabs and Arab Americans.

In conclusion, this study has provided a number of implications for practice, theory, and research in the hopes that this will act as a springboard into further study of Critical Media Literacy and Arab American Identity construction. It is through future research and greater understanding of these findings and implications that we have the hope of taking action to not only facilitate greater understanding of critical media literacy in general, but also to facilitate the development of more complex and multiple media images that offer hope and inspiration in an increasingly media complex world.

Final Thoughts

My interest in conducting a study about Arab American women stemmed from a critical media literacy class during my first semester as a doctoral student. This interest was further ignited by the fact that I grew up in the Middle East to parents that were American but had converted to Islam. From a very young age, I have been involved and interested in the Arab community. This interest remained even after I moved to the U.S. in 1997, and married an Arab American in 2003. The drive behind the study not only stemmed from the possibility of shedding light on Arab American women and how they construct their identities and knowledge, but also to explore within this context concepts such as hegemony, power, religion, culture, and gender. From the onset of conducting the study, the way I view my own identity has changed, I think differently about elements such as religion and culture and how they intersect with media, and
the role that intersection plays in influencing and shaping identities. Conducting this study also propelled me to take action not only in the form of this study, but to become more active in the Arab American community in New York, and made me wonder if other Arab American women would take action to change perceptions that develop from media images. The findings of this study support the fact that given the opportunity a percentage will. It is my hope that participants continue take action. It is also my desire from here on out to be involved in the Arab American community and to be able to make a difference after taking on this research effort.
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Appendix (1)

Critical Incident Questioner (CIQ)

1. At what moment in the movie did you feel most engaged with what was happening?

2. At what moment in the movie did you feel most distanced from what was happening?

3. What action that anyone (facilitator or participants) took in the learning activity this week did you find most affirming and helpful?

4. In the movie what did you find most puzzling or confusing?

5. What about the movie? Learning activity this week surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)
VITA

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