

Work to Address Stereotypes Toward Arab Americans
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Ron Stockton

“Look for what surprises you.”

It is the advice I give my students when I tell them to read something they already think they understand. It was advice I had to take myself when I began to analyze 1,016 in-depth interviews my colleagues and I had conducted in 2003 with Arab Americans and Chaldeans in the Detroit area.

The first surprise was what happened after September 11.

We asked people two questions about that terrible day. One was whether they had any ‘bad experiences’ afterward. About 15 percent had. While a few described violence or vandalism, most reported nasty words about Arabs or Muslims. These incidents were well known.

What was surprising was how people answered when we asked a second question. Whether anyone “not of Middle East background” had offered support or solidarity. Over a third said yes, twice the ‘bad experience’ rate. Most were simple acts of kindness. A neighbor says, “We know you were not responsible.” A classmate says, “Islam is a good religion.” A boss says, “if anyone bothers you let me know.”

People seemed touched by these experiences and were eager to talk. One person said, “I am glad you asked me that question.” Several mentioned how African-Americans in particular had gone out of their way to be supportive. Others mentioned those in the Jewish community. Many mentioned the extraordinary efforts of churches to reach out. Others mentioned customers, classmates, or even supermarket checkers.

One anecdote struck me. One person who was interviewed said a co-worker had remarked, “We know you are an American.” The person who told that story was obviously moved and a bit surprised by the comment. I was not surprised at all.

Back in 1858, Abraham Lincoln had delivered a speech commenting on the waves of immigrants then pouring into the country. He said that while half the population could trace its ancestry back to the original settlers and the others could not, all were Americans because America was not an issue of “ancestry” but a set of ideals outlined in

the Declaration of Independence. All who share those ideals are Americans, equally “blood of the blood.”

Lincoln was right. It is our openness and sense of fair play, not our power or wealth, that make us great. Think of the story those anecdotes tell: America suffered a grievous wound delivered by Arabs in the name of Islam and yet many Americans spontaneously reached out to their Muslim and Arab neighbors to reassure them. It was an instinctive reaction rooted in the best of our traditions.

Is it then any surprise that when we asked Arabs how much confidence they had in the institutions of American society (schools, police, the legal system) they actually showed more trust than non-Arabs? (We interviewed 508 non-Arabs for comparison). Is it any surprise that when we asked whether they felt at home in America, almost all said yes, and when we asked if they were proud of this country, about 90 percent were?

But other findings were not so reassuring.

On preventing future terrorist attacks, Arabs and non-Arabs were nearly identical in their willingness to do what was necessary. They would yield up some civil liberties to protect the country, would approve of increased surveillance of citizens and would allow the police to stop and search suspicious people.

But not everyone believes Arabs are sincere in wanting to defend the country. When asked if Arabs were doing all they could to fight terrorism, almost all Arabs thought they were, but the general public was closely divided. This doubt seems to produce an environment in which actions against Arabs might be acceptable.

We asked if individuals would allow the police to stop and search or even detain suspicious Arabs or Muslims without sufficient evidence. Few Arabs would support such sweeping powers but the general public was far more willing to do so.

What interesting creatures we are. We will go out of our way to reassure a neighbor or classmate of our support but might lock up that same person on the basis of a vague unsubstantiated ‘suspicion.’

One of my colleagues on our research team summarized this contradiction in a very eloquent way: Most Arabs have more trust in America than many Americans have in them.

Let’s all work on that.