Citation

“For her outstanding and innovative leadership in addressing the mental health needs of Muslim and Arab Americans. Mona M. Amer has been a pioneer in developing cultural competence training for providers offering mental health services to Muslim and Arab Americans. She has gained wide-reaching recognition for her efforts to disseminate knowledge about these groups and increase mental health awareness. She has established creative community-based outreach programs, directed national and international conferences, and worked with a team to introduce an international journal devoted to Muslim mental health issues. She is a dedicated clinical researcher, a compassionate practitioner, and a force for change in mental health service for Muslim and Arab Americans.”

Biography

Mona M. Amer’s childhood was a whirlwind of cultural diversity. She was born in Detroit, Michigan, to immigrant Egyptian physicians and soon afterward relocated to an international compound in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. By the time she was 12, she had visited countries in Europe, Asia, and North America and had made countless friends who taught her about different languages, religions, and ethnic traditions. Her family then moved to Cairo, Egypt, where she attended an international school, spending vacations at her homes in Riyadh and Florida. These travels, along with her parents’ promotion of community service, raised Amer’s interest in individual differences and serving those who are less fortunate.

Amer applied her interests in cultural differences to the studies of psychology and literature at the American University in Cairo. There she held several elected student government positions and cofounded the Psychology Club. With Josette Abdalla’s guidance, Amer tackled controversial mental health issues and directed well-publicized charity drives and human rights campaigns for institutions serving marginalized groups, such as the leprosy colony, psychiatric hospitals, street boys shelter, and AIDS hospital. With Nicholas Ciaccio’s supervision, Amer completed a clinical practicum at Mother Teresa’s missionary shelter. She also began working as a paraprofessional at a public psychiatric hospital, where she was exposed to shockingly destitute conditions.

Amer now felt an even deeper urgency to address issues of poverty and stigma, particularly for psychiatric patients who seemed to her to be the most powerless and misunderstood. She grew frustrated with the overwhelming cultural and institutional barriers that obstructed her grassroots efforts, and she drew closer to the themes of social justice, gender equity, and scientific inquiry inherent in the Islamic faith. At Amer’s commencement ceremony, she was elected by her graduating class to receive the Parents Association Cup for excellence in academics and activities, and she was selected by the university to receive the Ahmed El Mehallawi Award for outstanding community service.

Although psychology had meager and low-salaried career options in Egypt, Amer continued in the field and applied for an assistant psychologist position at the Behman Hospital in Helwan, Cairo. Accredited by the British Royal College of Psychiatrists, it is the oldest private psychiatric hospital in the Middle East, and its state-of-the-art facilities and educational programs were a stark contrast to the abject poverty Amer saw in the public sector. She provided psychological assessment and counseling to patients of diverse international citizenships under the supervision of Ahmed Fayek and hospital director Nasser Loza. During this time, Amer also participated in a psychosocial needs assessment coordinated by Mandy Brauer at the pediatric units of the National Cancer Institute and served on the Middle East research team for the United Nations Drug Control Programme’s global study on illicit drug markets.

After nearly two years at the Behman Hospital, Amer was eager to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology. She accepted an offer from the University of Toledo (U.T.) after Joseph Hovey, who became her ongoing mentor, invited her to conduct acculturation and mental health research with the Arab American community. Dismayed to find mental health literature on Arab Americans virtually nonexistent, Amer decided to develop measures of acculturation and mental health for her master’s thesis. Dissatisfied with what classical test theory offered, she obtained...
instruction from Christine Fox in the applications of Rasch rating scale analysis. This work with Rasch modeling was awarded first prize at a regional graduate student research competition. Amer’s dissertation, a comprehensive structural equation modeling study of Arab American acculturation and mental health, built on her thesis. As featured in gradPSYCH (Vol. 3, No. 1, January 2005), with over 600 participants from 35 states, it represents the largest and most diverse Arab American mental health sample surveyed to date.

Amer participated in other projects as a graduate student. She joined Robert Elliott’s Center for the Study of Experiential Psychotherapy as a research psychotherapist and was project coordinator for its psychotherapy effectiveness study. She participated in a weekly process--experiential workshop, a powerful influence on her developing therapy skills. Amer began her clinical externships one year earlier than is typical, working at a university disability center and two community mental health agencies. Throughout this time, her multicultural skills were nurtured by Larry Hamme, Paula DuPuy, and Mojisola Tiamiyu, and she obtained professional development support from Jeanne Funk.

September 11, 2001, was a turning point for Amer, as it was for many Muslim and Arab Americans. Amer saw an increase in community-wide psychological distress, although stigma and institutional insensitivities continued to prevent professional service access. Amer decided to develop a cultural competence training model for providers working with Muslims or Arabs. At that time, the handful of published articles and professional speakers available rarely bridged the gap between basic religiocultural information and specific therapy recommendations. Amer developed training curriculums based on her experiences in Egypt, interviews with therapists and Muslim clients, and cultural competence curriculums for other underserved populations. Her trainings were provided to diverse audiences such as police officers, nursing students, and psychiatrists.

When Amer’s work rapidly gained attention in northwest Ohio, she took on the challenge of directing a full-day accredited conference with national speakers that could be accessible to many agencies at one time. After several hospitals and agencies turned down her proposal, she obtained the sponsorships of the Medical College of Ohio and the Islamic Social Services Associations of the United States and Canada. The training was a major success, with about 170 registrants representing all public mental health agencies in the region; psychological and medical private practice groups; local hospitals and hospices; Lucas County Children’s Services; the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill and other advocacy organizations; students, faculty, and staff from universities in the region; and the Ohio Department of Mental Health.

Parallel to working on increasing provider competence, Amer aimed to reduce community stigma and increase awareness of mental health issues through outreach and education at the mosques. She directed a community behavioral health needs assessment in northwest Ohio aimed at prioritizing social service planning, which included focus groups and a survey of about 300 ethnic minority Muslims. She worked with a team to introduce topical workshops (on, e.g., child substance abuse and women’s mental health) and oversaw a culturally modified National Depression Screening Day program.

The dearth of academic literature on Muslim Americans was a constant hindrance in Amer’s activities, and she decided to initiate projects that would encourage generation and dissemination of knowledge. She won a competitive bid to host the 4th Annual Islamic Social Services Association conference, directing a committee of more than 50 volunteers in all aspects of local planning. About 350 social service workers participated in the conference. She also joined a team of young Muslim professionals to establish the peer-reviewed Journal of Muslim Mental Health, for which she is currently an associate editor.

Support from the U.T. Department of Psychology and the local media convinced Amer of the importance of continuing projects relating to Muslim and Arab American mental health after leaving Ohio for her predoctoral internship. Amer completed her internship at Yale University School of Medicine, providing clinical services to low-income urban clients at the Connecticut Mental Health Center. Part of her training was at The Consultation Center, where she participated in program evaluation projects and served as associate editor for APA Division 27’s publication The Community Psychologist. She was appreciative to for the first time obtain formal training in community psychology and mentorship from Cindy Crusto, Joy Kaufman, and Nadia Ward.

The community psychology training Amer received during her internship year helped inform the Arab and Muslim community outreach, programming, and consultation activities that she had continued to organize throughout graduate school. Although balancing these extracurricular activities with her academic work and predoctoral internship was challenging, Amer graduated with a perfect grade point average, having been the first student in the U.T. clinical psychology program’s history to receive a “pass with honors” distinction on all major program components: master’s thesis, professional development projects, and PhD dissertation.

To enhance her research skills for a blended career in academia and clinical–community service, Amer decided to pursue postdoctoral training. In 2005, she was awarded the APA Minority Fellowship Program’s Postdoctoral Fellowship in Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. She is currently at the Yale Program for Recovery and...
Community Health, directed by Larry Davidson, where her fellowship focuses on eliminating racial/ethnic disparities in behavioral health through culturally competent and recovery-oriented care. With the mentorship of Miriam Delphin, Amer’s tasks include policy work at the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, research projects funded by the National Institutes of Health and private foundations, and clinical service. In many ways, Amer feels that she has come full circle—her current work with economically disadvantaged persons with mental illness so similar to the experiences that captured her heart in Egypt so many years ago.

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