

Research Article

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Arab Immigrant Families in Sweden: Integration Opportunities and Parenting Challenges in Relation to Educational Inclusion and Involvement - An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Background/purpose. This article examines the challenges faced by Arab immigrant families in Sweden, specifically in terms of parenting, cultural identity, and educational involvement, in relation to family roles, social capital, and intergenerational relationships. It asks how families emigrating from the Middle East to Sweden negotiate their Arab culture while trying to adapt to the regulations of the new community and involvement in institutions such as the school.

Materials/methods. Using a critical ethnographic approach and thematic analysis, the research draws on in-depth interviews with strategically selected participants, based on their immigration background, family roles, and duration of residence, as well as participant observation methods. Ethical standards included voluntary consent and cultural sensitivity throughout the study.

Results. Findings indicate that Arab immigrant families in Sweden face complex, multi-layered education integration challenges relating to how traditional parenting norms may clash with Swedish institutional expectations and create emotional strain, a destabilization of family structures and weakened social cohesion. Parents can experience a significant erosion of social capital, which contributes to a sense of disempowerment and reduced involvement in education. Mothers emerged as key figures, using "emotional capital" to preserve cultural continuity and support integration.

Conclusion. Emotional and social capital are critical to supporting children's adaptation and sustaining family unity. The study highlights the significance of culturally responsive education policies and inclusive community-based programs in empowering immigrant families and fostering equitable integration through schools and the broader education system.

1. Introduction

A typical pattern in mass flight from war-torn areas or environmental devastation that generate threats to survival is for people first to seek safety in other parts of their country, then to look for refuge in a neighbouring country or countries, and finally, for a smaller of people, to seek asylum in countries further, perhaps with contrasting cultural values and legal frameworks to those of the original homeland, bringing thus potentially tension-filled adjustment challenges (Phoenix, 2019; Moss et al., 2021). Resettlement is a challenge, and with it come new questions- no longer ones about whether to stay, move on, or go home, but rather whether to also uproot family members from their home to reunite the family in the new country. This creates a condition of family reconstruction that involves the homeland, as well as transnational links and connections to it.

The article examines key aspects of this situation and offers an initial framework for analyzing durable solutions for resettled families, particularly those who migrated from the Middle East to Sweden during the post-2015 refugee wave. This period intensified integration challenges, as families navigated new institutional demands while maintaining transnational. Our contribution lies in highlighting how these dynamics unfold in educational contexts and proposing a multidimensional lens to understand the relational and institutional aspects of families resettlement. These challenges are multifaceted, deeply rooted in traditional standards, and often in contradiction with the regulations and societal expectations that prevail in Swedish society, as parental styles, gender roles, and family obligations frequently diverge from Swedish expectations (Bunar, 2010; Gualdi-Russo et al., 2014).

Parenting is a crucial aspect of the integration process for families from the Middle East in Sweden and many Arabic-speaking immigrant parents find themselves struggling with the need to adapt their parental practices to align themselves with the expectations of a society with more liberal values surrounding the education of children compared to the homeland, whilst also maintaining their cultural heritage (Bouakaz, 2007; Dahlstedt, M. 2009; Bunar, 2010). Questions relating to gender roles appear as another focal point of the cultural challenge and the balancing act between the preservation of cultural identity and adaptation to new standards can lead to anxiety and stress, which ultimately has an impact on mental wellbeing (Kavli, 2015; Lunneblad, 2017). Many families of immigrants from the Middle East encounter difficulties as traditional gender expectations collide with this model and women in particular will often undergo increased pressure to transcend cultural borders, looking for a job while managing family responsibilities, which can cause stress and conflicts within the family unit that may disturb its network and reduce families' social capital (Bouakaz, 2007; Poormahmalj, 2014).

Integration in the job market represents an important obstacle for immigrants from the Middle East. Studies indicate that securing employment aligned with the parents' previous qualifications is difficult due to systemic barriers and discrimination (Olaya-Contreras et al., 2019). The lack of recognition of foreign references often contributes to the prevalence of low-skilled jobs, resulting in economic instability and further complicating the integration process (Bunnar, 2010; Behtoui, 2006). This marginalization can catalyse feelings of alienation and worsen the existing challenges of mental health within immigrant families (Mood et al., 2017). Community support efforts play a crucial role in mitigating some of these challenges. Research suggests that social networks among immigrants can provide crucial support and resources, facilitating smoother transitions and integration in Swedish society (Behtoui et al., 2019). However, community dynamics can also lead to "othering", where immigrant descendants feel marginalized and face structural inequalities in education and employment (cf. Alba & Foner, 2015).

It is crucial to consider the intercultural nuances that influence the way of life of the Middle East immigrant parents (Siddiqui et al., 2017). The challenge of adapting to a new cultural framework must

consider not only individual family dynamics, but also wider societal structures that can influence the experience of immigrants (Shmulyar Green & Melander, 2018). This is particularly true in Sweden, where the trajectory of cultural integration for the families of immigrants from the Middle East is complex and fraught with challenges. The convergence of traditional standards with new societal regulations and expectations necessitates a nuanced understanding of their impact on family dynamics, parenting, gender roles, and professional opportunities. Tackling these issues is imperative to promote an inclusive society that celebrates cultural diversity while fostering integration (cf. Phillimore, 2011). However, the integration process, as practiced, can still, and often does, lead to feelings of loss of identity in ways that weaken family unity among Arab parents, who may find it difficult to reconcile their beliefs with Swedish standards (Bouakaz, 2007; Bunar, 2010; Lunneblad, 2017).

The tension between traditional Arabic parental practices and Swedish cultural norms has become increasingly significant, particularly in relation to family law and its influence on identity, the cohesion of the family unit, and approaches to discipline (Bouakaz, 2007). One example concerns the ban on corporal punishment in Sweden since 1979 that introduced a significant cultural change concerning ways of disciplining children (Bouakaz, 2007; Leviner & Sardiello, 2018) and one which contrasts strongly with some traditional Arab practices, where physical punishment is still a common way of raising up children in some families (Gilbert et al., 2009). In addition, family laws in Sweden prioritizes the rights of children, which challenges parents from traditional backgrounds to adapt their methods (Laird & Tadam, 2019). This cultural dichotomy can still complicate childcare disputes, particularly in cross-border scenarios involving family traditions, which traditionally emphasize paternal rights over their children (Keshavjee & Khalaf, 2020). Thus, the convergence of these contrasting cultural opinions and legal frameworks considerably influences the parental experiences of Arab immigrants in Sweden, promoting the challenges of tension and adjustment (Phoenix, 2019; Moss et al., 2021).

The present investigation contributes to knowledge in this area by shedding light on these and other multifaceted challenges. To do so it makes use of a critical ethnographic approach in conjunction with social capital theory to analyse the importance of shared resources, social networks, and ideologies among immigrant communities, which are often divided during the immigration process as a foundation from which to add further knowledge about the value of flexibility in support system for these families. The social capital theory employed in the study primarily derives from the work of Bourdieu (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986). This theory underlines the role of social capital in providing people with access to resources through social networks. There is a connection to Hanifan (1916), who described social capital in terms of relationships and networks that enhance a community's ability to function effectively. Immigrant families may experience a tangible loss of their social capital, which can lead to increased conflicts due to a sense of weakening family ties and reduced feelings of belonging, thereby pressuring the tightness of the family (cf. Butler & Muir, 2016). The questions answered in this study are the following:

- How do families emigrating from the Middle East to Sweden negotiate their Arab culture while trying to adapt to the regulations of the new community?
- How does the tangible loss of social capital affect their ability to preserve family cohesion and traditions?
- How does the fear of social services interfering in family matters affect Arab families' views on integrating and social coping?

This study aims to highlight these issues and bring forth the complex social dynamics that play a role in the social integration of Arabic immigrant families in Swedish society, with the necessity of preserving traditional family values.

2. Literature Review

The challenges faced by immigrant parents with Arabic background in Sweden are multifaceted. These include linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and socio-economic factors, and understanding these problems is crucial for the development of effective support systems for family members. Linguistic barriers form one obstacle (Bouakaz, 2007; Bunar, 2010; Lunneblad, 2017). They significantly affect the commitment of parents in educational contexts, and many Arabic language parents encounter difficulties in communicating with teachers and accessing information relating to school due to limited competence in the Swedish language (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). This linguistic obstacle often leads to feelings of exclusion, isolation, and frustration, as parents want to support their children's educational journey but are hindered by their inability to fully understand the educational system and its requirements and regulations (Nilsson & Bunar, 2016). Moreover, these parents struggle to navigate the educational system, school culture, and Swedish culture in general. These elements together complicate the parents' ability to fully participate in meetings with teachers and other officials and understand the content of these meetings. (Hedman & Magnusson, 2021).

Cultural differences also place significant challenges. Arab immigrant parents can experience a cultural disconnection from the Swedish educational system within the socio-political process by which dominant and subordinate groups negotiate the terms of social membership in ways that can exacerbate feelings of exclusion (Elmeroth, 2003). This disconnection is reflected in differing parental practices and educational expectations between the home and school environments, and it manifests not only as a willingness to engage but also as an openness and desire to contribute meaningfully to the new society (Moss et al., 2021). While parents try to fill this gap, they often have to reconcile their cultural values with those prevalent in Swedish society. For example, the emphasis on individualism in Sweden can conflict with collective approaches prevalent in many Arabic cultures, which are often oriented towards the typical family, complicating parental involvement in schools (Mazzei, 2023). Furthermore, the public discourse and image of Arabs and Arabness add another layer of complexity, primarily when Arabs and Muslims are suspiciously judged and often perceived as people who have less to contribute and something to hide (Nagel & Staeheli, 2008). These subconscious biases can make the integration of these families within schools and society often difficult, as collaboration with them can be perceived as demanding.

Socio-economic factors also exacerbate the challenges faced by Arab immigrant families by limiting their material access to the resources necessary to engage with institutions and support their children's education (Lindén et al., 2023). These constraints also reduce their ability to involve their children in extracurricular—and in some cases, even regular—school activities, thereby reinforcing existing educational inequalities (Västhagen et al., 2022). Stress associated with financial uncertainty can lead to psychological distress, which in turn affects parents' commitment to their children's education (Baker et al., 2021). However, despite these challenges, Arab immigrant parents express a strong desire for their children to be successful academically in Sweden while maintaining their heritage language and identity (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2004). Parents often engage in community networks to seek support and share their experiences, recognizing the importance of their active involvement in the education of their children (Shehada, 2023). Collaborative efforts between schools and immigrant families, although often hindered by linguistic barriers, exist and strongly facilitate tighter integration of their children through educational means (Mazzei, 2023). The important thing is the meaning and value attached to 'cultural diversity' and how they influence educated Arab immigrants when adapting to a new educational panorama (Jouda, 2022). Their educational aspirations can be in contrast with the systemic barriers they encounter and the opposition to their influence over the curriculum. Parents' experiences with the educational system and the effect of social integration and cultural adaptation on their participation exist within a complex multidimensional dynamic between integration and identity negotiation (Haddad, 2022a, b), where

parents can on the one hand feel left out and marginalized by the school system and other governmental institutions whilst on the other both facing a daily struggle to protect their cultural backgrounds and family values.

Language barriers and lack of knowledge of Swedish education can create feelings that undermine parents' self-esteem and capacity to participate fully in their children's education (cf. García-Cano Torrico et al., 2017). The importance of social capital is one of them, as identified in a study by Jonsson & Rudolphi (2011), which noted that immigrant parents in Sweden have less extensive networks with members who have high levels of familiarity with the Swedish educational system and may become less involved in raising their children due to the lack of network within the Swedish society and can minimize their chances to get integrated and help their children be a part of the society.

Research show that lack of social capital is particularly apparent among non-European immigrants, who may encounter more social and economic obstacles which make it difficult for these families to provide a good education for their children and raise them in a way that fits their cultural beliefs, in addition to trying to understand and maybe even negotiate the laws and traditions of their new country. Dahlstedt and Bevelander (2010) emphasize the importance of bridging cultural and social divides. They emphasize how crucial it is for immigrants, governmental institutions, and educational institutions to encourage parents to be involved in their child's education and they advocate for programs that can improve trust and communication between schools and immigrant families and help parents to feel more valued and involved in their children's education (Cf. Garcia-Cano Torrico et al., 2017).

Guidance from neither the perspective of equality and inclusion nor that of cultural pluralism, but of both, is important; and worked with from a relational pluralist approach to understanding group authority and its democratic virtues (cf. Olssen, 2001). Immigrant parents in Sweden navigate a complex panorama of challenges concerning the education of their children, modelled by the language, culture, and socio-economic status. Tackling these problems in a holistic manner is essential to promote environments in which these families can thrive academically and socially, benefiting both children and the broader Swedish educational system and society.

3. Theory: Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory is used in this study to understand how family dynamics and community involvement favour families, individual, and collective development. Hannifan (1916) described social capital as the relationships and networks that enhance an individual's or community's ability to function effectively. Bourdieu (1986) underlined the role of social capital in providing people with access to resources through social networks. This study examines the intersection of family interactions and community involvement in the cultivation of social capital, as well as its broader implications for integration in Swedish society. According to Behtoui (2022), the networks formed within immigrant communities in Sweden significantly influence access to opportunities in integration processes and create trustworthy social connections that can facilitate the building of social capital.

Family dynamics have a significant influence on the development of social capital within communities, particularly in terms of confidence, support networks, and resource sharing. The quality of family relationships influences the socialization practices of children and their subsequent involvement in community life (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Research indicates that children who are engaged in family support environments are more likely to develop the social skills necessary for interaction in the community, resulting in greater social capital (Leonard, 2005). For example, Jarrett et al. (2005) found that children who participate in programs of organized young people developed

networks that have not only strengthened individual skills, but also contributed to the cohesion of the community.

The involvement of the community acts as a catalyst for the development of social capital by creating platforms for social interactions and collective action. Wollebæk and Selle (2007) have highlighted how participation in community institutions can encourage social ties that improve individual wellbeing and collective effectiveness. The institution of trust and reciprocity between community members is fundamental for this process, as noted by Portes and Mooney (2002), who claim that social capital acts as a crucial resource for community development. Dhesi (2000) underlined the importance of community development initiatives in facilitating social capital. These initiatives often involve families and young people, filling the gap between individual aspirations and collective objectives. In light of this, Schaefer-Mcdaniel (2004) suggested that organizations play a vital role in conceptualizing and nourishing the social capital among young people, thus opening the way to their active participation in society. The impacts of social capital are profound, extending beyond individual success to encourage community resilience and collective wellbeing. Fafchamps (2013) observed that companies with high levels of social capital are often better equipped to face economic and social challenges. Ungar (2011) argued that social capital within the community provides protective factors for young people, allowing them to thrive even in adverse situations.

The interaction between family dynamics and community involvement is an integral part of cultivating social capital, which in turn significantly influences individual and collective development. Recognizing the fundamental role that these sectors play in the promotion of social connections is crucial for politicians, educators and leaders of the community engaged in efforts to improve the social capital for the development of the community.

4. Methodology

4.1. Critical Ethnography

The research employed a critical ethnographic approach, which allows the researcher to spend as much time as possible in the field, meeting participants several times and gaining a deeper understanding of their lived situations. According to Thomas (1993, 2001), critical ethnography is a research methodology that offers basic metaphors, pictures, and comprehension of the social world. In critical ethnography, researchers employ more than description; they critique and address power disparities, social injustices, and inequality within the society under study. This methodology is grounded in critical theory, which emphasizes social criticism, opposes repressive systems, and promotes revolutionary social change. Though there are differences in critical ethnography manifest in different investigations, broadly speaking all critical ethnography uses traditional techniques like participant observation, interviews, and fieldwork to which some researchers add a layer of criticism that aims to expose and challenge social disparities within the scope of work (cf. Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021, 2024), and most also disclose the researcher's or the research subjects' underlying presumptions (Thomas, 1993). The research is thus not only about identifying and describing social inequalities and the factors that contribute to them (Thomas, 2001). There is also a demand to break free from assumptions and preconceived ideas and 'creating new assumptions that align better with the meanings of our subjects' (Thomas, 1993, p. 12).

Critical ethnography thus requires intellectual rebellion and resisting the conditioning of thought and behavior to conform to dominant norms and expectations (cf. Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2024) and adapting thought and behavior toward social responsibility. Researchers often 'study things in isolation from their real context' (Thomas, 1993, pp. 9-10). Critical ethnography entails moving outside this comfort zone and requires that researchers should utilize their skills, resources, and privileges to give voice to those whose stories are often constrained and difficult to access and help them to assess and attain, when appropriate to democracy, their visions of a better future (Thomas,

1993, p. 20). What critical ethnography emphasizes is increasing the participation of the studied sample, not only comprehending and addressing the social realities of disadvantaged people. It actively supports oppressed groups in their fight for freedom rather than only researching them. It aims to empower individuals to resist repressive forces and liberate themselves from domination structures that unfairly restrict their freedom and opportunities. It is about breaking free from restrictive behaviors or cognitive patterns that make it hard to recognize and pursue alternative solutions (cf. Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2024). Although those who adopt critical ethnographic approaches often speak of intellectual liberation, empowerment, social change, and the need for action, they do not always discuss how to implement this social change in the field. Instead, they frequently leave the conversation about practical steps and methods to those directly engaged in social change efforts, particularly those involved in action research (Beach & Vigo-Arrazola, 2021).

4.2. Data Collection, Procedure and Analysis

The study of Arabic immigrant families in Sweden uses critical ethnography to capture the complexities of experiences, particularly in the context of raising children and struggling for integration in a worthy society. It involved in-depth interviews, allowing participants to articulate their personal narratives and challenges (Dryden-Peterson, 2015) and involved ten families, where both mother and father were interviewed together and separately several times over about 50 minutes each time. The total interview materials comprised 25 hours of digitally recorded conversation. The method proved to be effective in exploring delicate issues, such as perceptions of education and cultural identity, integration, migration, and children's upbringing models, highlighting the diverse perspectives of Arabic-speaking parents, as discussed also in Nilsson and Bunar (2016).

The selection of participants implied a strategic sampling approach where individuals were chosen based on their migratory status, parenting role, and the duration of residence in Sweden, to guarantee a representative spectrum of experiences (Västhagen et al., 2023, 2022). The inclusion of newcomer refugee families offered information about their resettlement processes and integration challenges (Mangrio et al., 2020). Families were contacted through their children school by sending them a letter asking them for participation in the study. About 20 families expressed their wish to be part of the study. Ten families were able to be part of the study. Interviews were held in Arabic and then translated into English by an authorised translator.

The study employed thematic analysis as its primary analytical method, supported by the use of NVivo software to manage and code qualitative data. Thematic analysis enabled the identification, organization, and interpretation of recurring patterns within the interview transcripts, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how immigrant parents experience and navigate the Swedish educational system. NVivo facilitated systematic coding and comparison of themes across different data sets, enhancing the rigor and transparency of the analytical process. Through multiple rounds of coding, the analysis highlighted the socio-economic and cultural challenges that shape immigrant families' integration and parental engagement in schools (Behtoui et al., 2019; Jonsson & Rudolphi, 2011; Bunar, 2010; Bouakaz, 2007). Four Key themes that emerged 1. Parental Adaptation and Role Negotiation in a New Educational Landscape, 2. Family Strain, Shame, and Cultural Tensions, 3. Socio-economic Hardship and its Impact on Parental role, 4. Protective Strategies and Aspirations for Children's Futures. These findings reveal the complex and ongoing negotiation of identity, belonging, and participation among immigrant families adapting to a new educational and cultural environment (Haddad, 2022a, b; Jouda, 2022; Mazzei, 2023). Key themes included: perceptions of the Swedish school system, parental roles in education, cultural and identity negotiation, and challenges in integration. *Sample questions included: "Can you describe your experiences with your child's school in Sweden?", "How do you try to support your child's education?", and "In what ways do you feel your cultural background is acknowledged or overlooked by schools?"* These questions aimed to elicit rich, narrative responses about participants' lived experiences. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the

process to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in participants' narratives and respectful of their diverse backgrounds.

The study closely complied with ethical standards, which include voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed written consent. The objectives, methods, and rights of the research were fully explained to the participants. Participants were free to leave the study without repercussions, and precautions were taken to preserve sensitive information. One of the expected bounds of the study is the researcher's bias due to having a shared background. To reduce these boundaries, efforts were made, such as using the help of colleagues from different backgrounds to eliminate bias and cultural sensitivity. Regardless, it has been admitted that some levels of subjectivity and interpretation may have affected the results.

ChatGPT, an AI language model was used for grammar correction for some of the parts. All substantive content remains the responsibility of the author.

5. Results

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed four central themes that reflect the lived realities of Arab immigrant parents navigating the Swedish context:

1. Parental Adaptation and Role Negotiation in a New Educational Landscape
2. Family Strain, Shame, and Cultural Tensions
3. Socio-economic Hardship and its Impact on Parental Agency
4. Protective Strategies and Aspirations for Children's Futures

These themes are detailed in the sections below, supported by participant narratives that illustrate the complexity and nuance of their experiences.

5.1. Parental Adaptation and Role Negotiation in a New Educational Landscape

5.1.1. Multifaceted Parental Involvement

The families of immigrants often meet important challenges in navigating education and the uncertainties of employment, with deep implications for parents and children. Parental concerns mainly result from a lack of understanding of the education system and the employment landscape, exacerbated by the societal perceptions of immigrants (Bouakaz, 2007; Bunar, 2010; Lunneblad, 2017). A solid family-community collaboration is crucial to facilitate positive experiences for families and their children (ibid). The emotional wellbeing of these families is deeply affected by immigration policies, affecting the future of children in transcultural contexts (Torres et al., 2018; Orellana, 2015). In the end, noting these challenges with multiple facets is essential to promote success in the families of immigrants (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 2022).

This inconsistency makes it hard for immigrant families to answer challenging questions. For example, how can parents encourage their children to put in much effort in school when a good education may not guarantee employment? They also find it difficult to prevent their children from being seduced by quick and straightforward ways to earn money, particularly if the family has financial difficulties. Additionally, these parents must confront the risk that their hopes for a safer and better life for their family, which motivated them to relocate, may not come to pass. It is difficult for them to support their children's stability and success now that they are in a different setting. Since the answers to these emotional concerns rely on parents and their children's resources, parents frequently worry about them. Schools and governmental institutions responsible for the family may seem to some families an unfamiliar world. According to some, young people from Arab backgrounds may be viewed as "*People with no Future*". They are then left with limited choices, including staying at home or venturing through the dangerous street culture. The familiar feeling of a parent, Abdou,

represents worry about his personal and family's future. "I left my future behind me, and now I am worried about my children's future." The considerable difficulties parents encounter in shielding themselves and their kids from the intricacies of the educational system, their immediate neighborhood, and the extensive social scene are validated by this story.

5.1.2. Parents Facing a New System

Abdou says that the school cannot be trusted and that meaningful cooperation cannot be established. Even though his children still attend school, he doesn't believe they will have a better future than his older children. He feels that the school is suspicious of parents and doesn't respect their parenting styles or ability to care for their children.

How can I trust the school and social authorities when they've taken away the authority I once had? I feel entirely out of control, as if I were a passenger on a ship with no one at the helm. When I told my son not to come home late at night and ordered him to stay out after he returned late one night, he didn't come home the next day. Instead, he went to school and told his teachers that I was abusive. He said I hit him, wouldn't let him have any fun, and even kicked him out of the house. I tried to explain what happened, but the school officials believed my son instead of me. They sent him to a unique home for troubled kids in Lund a few weeks later. The strange thing is, I later got a call from that home saying my son was also coming home late! It's the same problem I was trying to solve, but nobody seems to care about my side of the story. Now I feel like I've lost my son. I feel powerless to protect him and worry I'm just his biological father, not his real parent. It concerns me that I might go to jail for something I didn't do. (Abdo, interview)

Some parents believe the decline in children's respect for their parents is not solely the school's fault. They point to various factors contributing to this issue. Nader highlights how information about how schools and other authorities treat parents spreads within communities.

We hear about the school, social services, and the police taking on the role of parents in raising children by excluding parents and limiting their authority in raising their children. They criticize our way of raising our children, saying no one should punish or even yell at them. We cannot raise our children if we do not use our methods. Girls are encouraged to place themselves in homes other than their parents' homes, especially if they feel that their parents are limiting their freedom (Nader, Interview)

Nader observes that in some Arabic-speaking families, parents feel completely powerless over their children. Schools, social services, and other authorities treat children as belonging to the state, not their parents. This makes it extremely difficult for parents to participate in their children's education actively. Nader argues that the root of many family problems lies in the barriers that prevent parents from participating in their children's lives at school and in other areas. According to him, schools and other institutions should collaborate with families rather than against them, and parents should be actively involved in their kids' education. These organizations should work with parents to steer kids away from bad influences and keep them from committing crimes. Nader warns, "The day will certainly come when no one will be able to stop these lawless youth, who will be stronger than us (the parents), the school, and the police."

Instead of simply blaming the lack of parental involvement and the problems some young people face on cultural factors or a decline in parental authority (especially fathers), we need to delve deeper into the root causes. We can't simply compare families struggling with difficult circumstances to those in more comfortable situations. However, we cannot ignore the real challenges families living in remote and isolated areas face. There is a concern about a decline in moral values among some parents whose children struggle in school. This may be partly linked to many of these families living in "Million Program" housing areas. These areas, often described as "open-air prisons," were assembled in the 1960s and 1970s to house the rapid migration of people from rural areas to the city

and the post-war population boom. Parents not being involved enough in their children's education, and the social problems mentioned seem to have primarily social and economic causes rather than purely ethnic ones. Once mainly affecting the Swedish working class, this issue now affects "immigrant" populations. This implies that the fundamental problem is a mix of class and ethnic prejudice.

5.2. Family Strain, Shame, and Cultural Tensions

5.2.1. Family Crisis and Core Concerns

Parents with origin in Arab countries who participated in this study said they felt less connected to others and lacked a strong family network to serve as psychological support for their children. To preserve their cultural identity, Arab families have historically maintained extensive social networks that included grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Unfortunately, a lack of support results from many of these families being cut off from their extended family. Parents feel several factors have contributed to the decline of Middle Eastern Arabic-speaking families. The importance of family relationships, extended family ties, and traditional family structures is diminishing. The father often played a central role in the strong family network in their home countries. However, this substantial family structure is now brittle and prone to dissolution. Ibrahim thinks that the disintegration of family unity and the ambiguity of responsibilities within the family make it difficult for parents to be involved in their children's education. He clarifies, "Family values have been lost here, and it's difficult to pass on our traditions to our children."

There is a serious problem with parents not being involved enough in their children's lives at school and outside. This is a significant concern for many parents, especially when they see news reports about children struggling in school or getting into trouble with the law. Migration changes parents' behavior (Bourdieu, 1986; Sayad, 2004). This includes shifting the rules, beliefs, and customs that Arabic-speaking families follow. Parents bring their ideas about education and raising children from their home country. However, they often find it challenging to apply these ideas in the same way in Sweden. These parenting methods become less valuable in their new environment.

Problems like deviance and drug use are often discussed both inside and outside of school. Dahman suggests that parents struggle to guide their children effectively because traditional family values are no longer as strong as they used to be. He describes this as a "crisis of the parental model" or a "breakdown of the family," where parents feel helpless or overwhelmed. This is partly because the way parents used to raise children in their home country doesn't always work the same way under Swedish law. This might explain the "crisis of authority" experienced by some Arabic-speaking families in the study. It connects to their beliefs about how children should be raised, which are often challenged or even rejected by schools and other institutions in Sweden. Because of this, parents sometimes feel they have to give up their traditional roles to avoid conflict. Dahman compares his situation before and now:

Back home, everyone in our community knew the teachers at our children's school. While the school and home didn't work together closely, a strong sense of community helped guide children's behavior. You could even talk to teachers about your child's progress at the local market. Even though there were some barriers between school and home, there was always a sense of communication. Children understood that their parents and teachers were working together, which motivated them to do their schoolwork and follow the guidance they were given. Once you arrive in this country (Sweden), things are much less clear. It isn't easy to understand how the school system works. Here, it often feels like children are in charge. They learned about their rights in Sweden before we, as parents, even had a chance to understand the system entirely. (Dahman, interview).

5.2.2. Shame and Stigma

Parents whose children are labeled troublemakers sometimes avoid contact with the school because of embarrassment. Their child's behavior may cause them to feel stigmatized and fear condemnation from others. This shame can lead some parents to distance themselves from their child's education and even deny responsibility for their child's actions. These areas often have a high concentration of minority families, which can lead to feelings of isolation and stigmatization for some residents. The outmigration of Swedish families from these areas further reinforces this sense of isolation and can diminish the symbolic benefits of having a diverse community. The concentration of minority families in every sector of the city deprives the Arab families who arrived there first in the capital of seniority: "In the past, we were the only Arabs in our building," they say, to indicate that they were among the first arrivals and did not choose to live in a "minority area." Abdou says, "The snow is no longer as white as it used to be; it has become gray in the neighborhood now," metaphorically expressing the departure of white Swedish residents and their replacement by dark-skinned immigrant residents. This concentration of minority families has not contributed to family solidarity or local solidarity, including families from the same country of origin. Living in these areas for them is akin to being under house arrest, a "compulsory stay among Arabs" and other minorities, with little chance of living and integrating with the Swedish population. As described by Bahia:

They've put us under house arrest. Why do they allow all Arabs and minorities to be gathered in one place? This is not fair. Even if we wanted to move, it's not easy. It's hard to find a house for a large family. So once they hear you live in that area, no company will rent to you. We're trapped here, and our children aren't learning anything. We cannot keep them at home; they go out and play with other children and might learn countless bad things. (Bahia, interview).

Many families attempted to move out of neighborhoods with high immigrant populations, but most requests were ignored. They understood their low chances of being accepted into a new community, finding a more peaceful living environment, and securing better schools for their children. Since they reside in the most disadvantaged areas, some even expressed a yearning for the temporary housing (refugee camps) they initially lived in upon arriving in Sweden. Now, living in another Getho, they wished to escape this situation. However, despite this, some mothers were afraid to move to another part of the city because it meant uprooting their lives again. This conflicted with their husbands' desire to move to a different area or leave the country entirely. The others strongly objected to the negative stereotypes about them as Muslim women of Arab origin.

5.3. Socio-economic Hardship and its Impact on Parental Role

5.3.1. Parents Facing Difficult Living Conditions

Because their living conditions mirrored those of other minority families, mothers were generally more understanding than fathers towards children who struggled in school. The social environment made mothers feel more threatened, and they thought it made parenting more difficult. Despite the difficulties brought on by misbehaving children, mothers were essential in preserving family ties. To protect the family from the embarrassment of their children's misbehavior or drug usage, they showed a great deal of support.

Bahia publicly criticized parents for their inability to discipline their children and voiced her distaste for young people who break the law. She was among the few Arabic-speaking mothers participating in the entire home-school mediation program. She stated, "The fear of shame often stops Arabs from attending and voicing their opinions." She almost immediately agreed to my interview to continue our conversation about the school and the surrounding area. She highlighted the disconnect she felt with these young people. She expressed her disapproval of the growing divide between Swedish teachers at the school, who complained about the lack of involvement from Arab parents. These parents, she claimed, were silenced and made to feel guilty and ashamed.

Ibrahim expressed strong disapproval of parents who "neglect their children." He insisted that "there is no justification for parents not being concerned about their children." His words mirrored the frustration of teachers at the school and social workers in the neighborhood. While speaking, he seemed necessary to give me an example to prove that "not all Arabs should be treated the same." Unlike his wife, Ibrahim did not feel solidarity with those parents who let their children do whatever they wanted. Between him and those he spoke about, there seemed to be a complete divide separating the working, stable Arab man from the unemployed Arab man, and those Arabs who care about their children and do their best to give them a good education from those who have placed the responsibility of their children's education on the school or other government agencies.

Mrs. Najwa, Ibrahim's wife, doesn't understand why these young people receive so little attention and support. She believes they are not "troublemakers" but "young people deprived of everything." She considers their unemployment not due to a lack of willingness to work but to a lack of opportunities and recreational facilities. She points out that even simple, manual labor jobs like cleaning or sweeping are not available to them. Najwa is bothered by the noise in the hallway near her building, but she acknowledges that these young people have nowhere else to go. Their only locations to congregate are either the streets or deserted buildings. She believes that efforts to keep them out of their only spaces—building entrances and other areas—exclude them. She says, "If they break things, it's their way of lashing out at the difficulties they face." Her comprehension of their annoyance and the effects of their social marginalization is evident in her statement.

During discussions about raising children and integrating into society with a group of mothers waiting for their children to finish classes at the supplementary school, the prevailing sentiment was that some young people were acting out against society due to their hopelessness. Most mothers agree with this view. They observed that their children and other children, even those with good educations, remained unemployed. One mother said, "One should understand them," and spoke about "sacrificing everything" so that her children could continue their studies (her husband was unemployed). However, she worried that they would become frustrated later due to unemployment and the racism they might face when seeking jobs. The mothers had heard from their children and their friends about young people who were not hired because of their Arab background. Even graduates with good educations struggled to find work. They believed living in these areas carried a negative stigma that automatically disqualified them from job opportunities. Due to their participation in protests, these young people were often labeled as "troublemakers" and denied employment opportunities.

Mothers strongly support their children, unlike fathers, who often feel embarrassed to help them openly. Mothers stay connected with their children even when they're in jail, always welcome them home late at night, and protect them from their father's anger. Some mothers even sleep near the front door to keep their children from going out late at night, worried they might get into trouble or use drugs. This motherly involvement is a good example of what Reay (1998) calls 'emotional capital.' These mothers pour all their emotional energy into improving their kids' lives.

5.3.2. Dealing with Unemployed Young Adults

When adult children are unemployed, it creates more problems for their parents. Parents struggle to find the right way to deal with adult children who can't find work. It's unfair to blame the children for being unemployed. And it's hard for parents to motivate their younger children to study hard and behave well in school when they see their older siblings struggling. Amin struggled to decide how to handle this situation with his children. He accepted the problem instead of forcing his children to leave home.

Parents' only option with their adult children is to try and push them to find a job and become independent. However, with so many people out of work, it's tough for young people to find

employment. And even if they see something, it usually doesn't pay well and is often only temporary. Parents in this situation might feel they have to keep their adult children at home to take care of them and continue to do so without a solution in sight. They try to protect their children as much as possible, partly because they do not consider them entirely at fault for not finding a job or even looking for one. Parents often complain that their social networks aren't beneficial for finding jobs for their children. Even if their children know people with jobs, it's usually just in low-paying places like fast-food restaurants, such as "falafel" and "kebab", where they work long hours for little money. Their children also see that even college graduates can't find jobs. When parents seem to support their children staying at home, they might try to convince themselves (and their children) that there's no other option. This kind of support from parents might not be obvious, and some parents may not have the skills to help their children succeed in today's world. Parents attempt to avoid conflict and acknowledge that their family is challenging because they fear their children will ultimately leave the family.

Young people who have not finished their schooling and are in their twenties or older frequently spend much time alone in their rooms. To avoid feeling evaluated by their parents, they might play video games, watch TV, or listen to music. Sometimes, this seclusion can result in issues like drug use or gang membership. Despite the fact that their children are not members of the family and spend a lot of time alone, parents frequently feel compelled to accept this circumstance. Families can become distant when parents try to avoid arguments with children who haven't grown up. Amin, the father, believes that raising his voice would only worsen things with his children. So, he tries to stay calm even when he sees them wasting their time on the streets. He sees them struggling, but he doesn't know how to help. If he tries to advise them, they might get angry with him. This can make the home feel cold and unwelcoming, which is a scary thought for children who might otherwise end up living on the street.

Amina's unemployed children, deprived of financial independence, usually depend on their parents for financial support. Amina and her husband say they can provide food and clothes for their children. Amin believes he's doing everything he can to protect them from the dangers of easy money. Amin and his wife understand that parents who want to keep their children out of trouble are prepared for the worst. The streets offer secret sources of income through drug trafficking, theft, or other criminal activities that young people can easily succumb to, especially with the lack of job opportunities that have become common. Parents may start to feel helpless and resigned to this situation. They worry that even if they try to help their children get a good education; the system is working against them. They feel like their efforts to protect their children might not be enough.

5.4. Fear of Negative Influence on Children and Strategies to Protect Their Children

For Samira, allowing her children to play with other children in the neighborhood seems out of the question.

I am no longer sure I can afford to let my children play outside independently. I am very cautious about letting them be alone at the playground. I don't want them to be around children who commit crimes, steal, or use drugs. You can't trust anyone here. Even our closest relatives have experienced academic failure and drug addiction in their families (Samira, interview)

Parents worried that their children might make bad choices with their friends, like getting involved with drugs if they hung out in specific neighborhoods. They also saw how other kids in the family struggled in school or got into trouble and feared this would negatively influence their children. Some parents felt that problems within their families, like a lack of strong family ties, set a bad example for their kids about how to live. The long periods of unemployment among parents and

young people created a lot of stress and uncertainty, especially for families with teenagers at home who needed to find work.

I would stay for long periods, monitoring my children from a distance every time I left them at school. I couldn't go to the schoolyard and wondered if I would be allowed to enter. I wanted to be there to check on my children, to see who they were playing with and who they were talking to at school. My primary concern was to ensure they weren't hanging out with the wrong crowd (Hamed, interview).

Hamed developed his ways to take care of his children at home. He wanted to find a job and move away from the area, which he thought was dangerous and not a good place to raise kids. He worked hard to give his children a good education because he worried they might get into trouble. He believed this was a problem because there wasn't enough police or parental supervision in the area, and parents didn't always know about the dangers their kids faced at school or in the neighborhood. He said, "We often hear about problems in the area and at school from friends or other people."

Samira moved to the city in 1990 and is part of an Arab family whose children have stayed on the right track. However, she still worries about the dangers her children face, like getting involved in crime. She's seen how hard it is for young people, especially Arabs who didn't finish school, to find jobs because of discrimination based on their looks or names. She recounted that she was in daily contact with mothers who have had bad experiences with their children, like drug addiction or other problems.

This mother did everything in her power to keep her children safe. She wouldn't let them hang out on the street after school, signed them up for judo lessons, made them change into comfortable clothes as soon as they got home, and spent as much time with them as possible. She wanted them to succeed in life. She carefully reviewed their homework, never missed school meetings, and even scheduled extra meetings when needed. Hania clarified that she never argued with the teachers or disagreed with what they asked her children to do. She always told her children to behave well and respect their teachers.

This family was focused on helping their children succeed in school and didn't plan to stay in their home country. They used most of their money to ensure their children's good future in Sweden. Because of this, they stopped making yearly payments back home. All five of her children live with her. Three of them went to college, just like their parents wanted. The area where they lived reminded the parents of sad things. Even Hania felt she couldn't keep her children safe there anymore. The oldest child did better in school than the younger ones. The quality of education was getting worse because of the changes happening in the area.

6. Discussion

Migration is not only a people's movement from one place to another. It is a deep reconfiguration and reconstruction of relationships, identities, and new daily life routines. For Arab immigrant families in Sweden, this journey deeply affects what Bourdieu (1986) and Hanifan (1916) calls social capital—the resources embedded in family ties, community networks, and shared cultural understandings of values and norms. This study reveals how those resources, while resilient, are often strained by unfamiliar institutions, socio-economic hardship, and the challenges of navigating cultural dissonance.

One of the most persistent themes that emerged in the interviews was the experience of parental disempowerment. Parents described how their authority over their children was diminished, not by lack of care or engagement, but by structural and linguistic barriers. Children often adapted more quickly to Swedish norms, leaving parents struggling to interpret school policies or engage with

teachers (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Hedman & Magnusson, 2021). This mirrors earlier findings by Jonsson and Rudolphi (2011), who showed how immigrant parents are often excluded from full participation in their children's educational journeys, weakening what Leonard (2005) terms bonding capital—the internal cohesion that holds families together.

Mothers, in particular, played a powerful role in maintaining cultural and emotional continuity within the family. Their efforts often went unrecognized by institutions, yet they served as vital sources of what Reay (2004) calls emotional capital. Through familiar routines, storytelling, and values-based parenting, these women created stability for their children. This kind of work—quiet, every day, deeply relational—is often overlooked in policy discussions but forms the backbone of family resilience during the migration process.

Schools and social services institutions, in this context, often became sites of both exclusion and possibility. Many parents reported that their efforts to engage with schools were met with indifference or cultural misunderstanding. As Forsberg (2022) and García-Cano Torrico et al. (2017) have noted, immigrant families are frequently invited to participate in schooling, but in ways that fail to genuinely include their perspectives or knowledge. This duality is echoed in Bunar's (2010) work, which shows that even well-meaning policies of inclusion can perpetuate inequality when they are not matched by relational, culturally sensitive practices. Instead of building what Portes and Mooney (2002) refer to as bridging capital—connections across difference—schools can become spaces of symbolic exclusion.

Cultural misrecognition was another recurring experience. Arab families often bring with them collective values rooted in interdependence, shared responsibility, and moral education (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2004; Mazzei, 2023). These values frequently collided with the highly individualistic and bureaucratic norms embedded in the Swedish school system (Olssen, 2001). As Elmeroth (2003) and Moss et al. (2021) point out, the distance between home culture and school culture is often underestimated, and it is in that space that miscommunication, frustration, and detachment take root.

Economic pressure compounded these challenges. Several parents shared stories of their jobless young people or not being able to afford basic school supplies, extracurricular activities, or even transportation. These material constraints do more than affect academic performance—they also reduce parental agency and undermine family confidence (Lindén, Skoog, & Kapetanovic, 2023; Västhaagen et al., 2022; Baker et al., 2021) emphasize how financial stress erodes emotional wellbeing, which, in turn, limits a parent's ability to advocate or engage effectively. As Fafchamps (2013) argues, without a base of material and emotional security, social capital becomes difficult to sustain.

Yet the findings also revealed quiet acts of hope. Some parents described meaningful connections with teachers or school staff—moments of trust and respect that created bridges. These encounters, though rare, align with Mazzei's (2023) argument that culturally affirming engagement can help rebuild trust and restore parents' roles as educational partners. Likewise, Behtoui et al. (2019) stress the importance of systemic support in enabling immigrant families to convert their cultural capital into institutional recognition and influence.

Perhaps most powerfully, families turned inward and toward each other. Informal networks—friends, neighbors, extended family—emerged as key sources of support and information. This echoes the findings of Stanton-Salazar (1997) and Schaefer-McDaniel (2004), who show that in the absence of formal inclusion, immigrant communities often build their own pathways to support and solidarity. These structures cannot replace institutional efforts to secure the integration of these families within the Swedish system and society, but they demonstrate the resilience and ingenuity that exists within these families.

The use of critical ethnography in this study was not incidental. It allowed for a layered, empathetic, and power-aware exploration of participants' lived realities. As Thomas (1993, 2001) and Beach and Vigo-Arrazola (2021, 2024) suggest, critical ethnography pushes beyond description to question the social norms and systems that produce exclusion. It also highlights the potential for transformation—not just of research practice, but of the institutions that shape daily life.

In conclusion, what the study shows that social capital is not fixed or guaranteed. It is shaped and reshaped in real time, through policies, interactions, and everyday acts of care and resistance. Arab immigrant families in Sweden are not passive recipients of integration efforts—they are active, intentional, and emotionally invested in building meaningful lives. But they cannot do it alone. To truly support these families, schools and institutions must listen—not just to what is said, but to what is lived.

7. Conclusion

Arab immigrant families in Sweden face complex challenges such as cultural dislocation, economic precarity, and institutional misunderstanding. This study has shown that social capital—so often taken for granted in mainstream contexts—is not simply available to all. It must be continuously nurtured, negotiated, and, in many cases, defended.

Through the lens of critical ethnography, we have seen how parental roles are redefined, how emotional and cultural resources are mobilized in everyday life, and how systemic barriers continue to challenge inclusion. Yet amid these struggles, families remain active agents—preserving identity, building resilience, and seeking meaningful engagement with the institutions around them.

True inclusion demands more than open doors; it requires genuine recognition. It calls for schools and public systems to move beyond procedural gestures and toward relational, culturally responsive practices that honor the knowledge, values, and dignity that immigrant families bring. Only through such intentional co-creation can we begin to rebuild trust and foster a more just and inclusive educational landscape—one where all families, regardless of origin, are seen, heard, and valued.

8. Limitation

The present study was conducted within a single municipality in Sweden, which may limit the broader applicability of its findings to other regions. Replicating this research in different localities with varying demographic and cultural contexts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of family experiences. Additionally, the generalizability of the results is influenced by the quality of the interview design and the depth and honesty of participants' responses during the interviews.

Declarations

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