

The ABC Model of Resilience: Middle Eastern and North African American (MENA) Counselor Educators Building Community

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Abstract

Counselor educators of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent remain underrepresented in counselor education in the United States. Consequently, there is limited scholarship addressing how these educators maintain their professional identities and wellness and foster resilience amid volatile politics and institutional invisibility. In this collaborative autoethnography, four MENA counselor educators undertook rotating peer interviews, kept reflective journals, and collected identity artifacts, which they then analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. Findings revealed that resilience occurred as a relational, contextual, and politicized process comprised of (1) adaptive resilience, (2) belonging and community, and (3) cultural accountability and professional responsibility, which countered systemic erasure and silencing and supported persistence. Across the themes that emerged, the results illustrate the MENA counselor educators' journey of navigating between invisibility and hypervisibility, managing wellness labor, and transforming surveillance and scrutiny into academic clarity, mentorship intentionality, and coalition-building. Implications are presented for resilience-informed supervision, mentorship, and institutional policy to advance equity, identity, and multicultural and social justice counseling competency-aligned training. Suggestions to reinforce cultural responsiveness, broaching and advocacy within the counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs are also offered.

Keywords: Middle Eastern and North African, resilience, counselor education, professional identity, collaborative autoethnography, qualitative analysis

Introduction

Contemporary scholarship has repositioned resilience as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent, rather than an individual trait. For counselor educators with Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) American backgrounds, this distinction has explicit professional ramifications. Resilience emerges from interactions between people and the systems they inhabit, shaped by available resources, protective relationships, and the very structures that generate risk in the first place (Ungar et al., 2013). In the United States (U.S.), MENA individuals are officially classified as White under federal census race categories, which means they are granted none of the legal protections or data visibility extended to other racial minority groups despite lived experiences of racialization, surveillance, and discrimination (Awad et al., 2019, 2022). However, while research on MENA faculty experiences remains limited (Awad et al., 2022), even less examined are the ways in which MENA counselor educators sustain themselves within this dichotomy, that is, what personal, relational, and institutional resources make professional persistence possible (Awad et al., 2022; Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021). This contradiction between formal classification and lived experience compounds the invisibility described above and paradoxically intensifies the hypervisibility of MENA individuals through racialized geopolitics and Islamophobia.

Existing scholarship on minoritized counselor educators has documented cultural toll, representational burden, and structural barriers in tenure, teaching, and service (Thacker & Barrio Minton, 2021), yet MENA-specific dynamics, particularly regarding the resilience processes that support persistence, identity integration, and ethical teaching and supervision are undertheorized. These gaps constrain the development of resilience-informed models, mentorship, and institutional policy for MENA counselor educators that align with the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) standards and multicultural and social justice counseling competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015). In response to these gaps, this study employed a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) methodology to examine how counselor educators of MENA descent have mobilized their personal, relational, cultural, and institutional resources to sustain their resilience, wellness, and professional identities as tenure-track counselor educators amid politicized and often hostile academic and geopolitical climates.

The study's purpose described above is consistent with research showing that protective factors (e.g., ethnic identity and resilience-related capacities) can serve as a barrier to the psychological effects of racial microaggressions among people of color (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023). Scholarship on resilience also has highlighted that coping and protection are shaped by sociocultural context; for example, qualitative work with Black university students documented the varied "culturally compelled" coping strategies that they employed to manage racism-related stress and aid this group to remain academically engaged (Stoll et al., 2026).

For MENA counselor educators, resilience may include navigating surveillance and scrutiny, cultivating teaching practices that are identity-safe, finding and/or building community, and transforming marginalization into advocacy and meaning-making. Deficit-only framings of MENA counselor educators' experiences can inadvertently reproduce erasure by documenting harm without also highlighting the protective practices that sustain MENA educators in these positions and the structures that could better support them. Such practices underscored the importance and necessity of centering identity in a positive light in research, training, and institutional policy (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023; Ungar et al., 2013). Yet centering identity as a protective resource first requires understanding how MENA identity is racialized and misrecognized in the first place.

MENA Identity, Racial Misrecognition, and Resilience Under Racialized Geopolitics

MENA identity development is complex and fluid, shaped by racialization, religion, gender, and class. Orientalist stereotypes and the "perpetual foreigner" trope predated the September 11, 2001, attacks ("9/11"), but post-9/11 surveillance and securitized discourse have intensified stigma and geopolitical scrutiny for MENA individuals while also enhancing their reliance on community, faith, and collective identity as protective resources (Awad et al., 2019; Jamal & Naber, 2008). Research has consistently shown that stronger ethnic identities and

resilience-related capacities can buffer the psychological effects of racial microaggressions, meaning the same identities that attract scrutiny can simultaneously anchor adaptive capacity (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023). However, this protective function depends on how MENA individuals are permitted to identify: Many MENA individuals have rejected “White” as their sole identity, instead identifying along multiple, intersecting dimensions of race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Within these dimensions, religious affiliation carried particular weight. Muslim affiliation often heightened both stigma and in-group identification (Alsaïdi et al., 2023), illustrating how a single dimension of identity can simultaneously invite discrimination and deepen belonging. These identity dynamics take on added complexity in professional spaces. Negotiating these identities in academic settings is of particular significance, as nationalist scrutiny has produced vigilance, self-monitoring, and pressure for MENA counselor educators to “perform” legitimacy. That is, they are pressured to continually demonstrate competence and belonging in ways not required by their non-MENA colleagues, mirroring patterns identified in racial minority populations in higher education settings (Arday, 2022; Stoll et al., 2026).

Nonetheless, MENA- and Muslim-focused research has underscored culturally grounded protective factors that support resilience despite discrimination and marginalization. For example, a scoping review of Arab-speaking immigrants and refugees from the MENA region across North America identified risk factors for wellbeing (e.g., migration-related stressors) alongside protective factors such as social support and religious and ethnic identity. The review also detailed structural barriers that prevented help-seeking, highlighting how resilience was shaped by systems and access to resources, not only individual coping (Childress et al., 2024). Similarly, qualitative work with Arab American Muslim adolescents described a range of coping responses to perceived discrimination that were anchored in religion, social support, and self-preservation. These coping responses can foster belonging, emotional support, and agency (Balaghi, 2021). Another qualitative study of Muslim American college students with immigrant origins documented their experiences of discrimination, the emotional impacts of these experiences, and the coping strategies subsequently implemented, highlighting how identity visibility and post-9/11 climates have shaped both the stress and adaptive responses of these students (Colgan et al., 2025).

Muslim couples also have been found to display relational resilience. Carter (2010) examined how Muslim American couples were affected by religious discrimination and how their relational strengths and processes supported their coping and connection; thus reinforcing resilience as relational rather than solely intrapsychic. Finally, research on second-generation Arab Americans illustrated how these individuals integrated their Arab and American identities and resisted discrimination while navigating mental health stigma. This integration, claiming both identities rather than suppressing either, highlighted a strengths-based lens relevant to counselor education with a focus on identity and wellness (Green et al., 2024).

Resilience in Counselor Education: Why a Faculty Lens Matters

MENA counselor educators face both invisibility and political scrutiny while navigating ambiguous racial classification, strained collegial dynamics, and disproportionate service burdens (Barber & Ting, 2025). Scholarship on minority faculty have suggested that racism-related stressors and institutional climate, such as barriers to help-seeking and isolation, can directly shape the wellness and professional sustainability among this academic group (Arday, 2022). Similarly, research on underrepresented minority faculty has highlighted pathways for surviving and thriving in academic settings, emphasizing the importance of mentors, peer support, and leadership in recognizing and countering structural inequities (Hassounieh et al., 2014).

Strength-based interpretations also have underscored that resilience includes the cultivation of meaning, joy, and belonging, not just the endurance of stress. Louis's (2023) counter-narratives of Black faculty members at predominantly White research universities illuminated how experiences of happiness and retention offered actionable implications for institutional leaders seeking to support professional persistence. Ferguson et al. (2023) demonstrated that within counselor education specifically, community and collective meaning-making could function as a tool for navigating the decolonization of academic spaces and oppression, thus demonstrating its

relevance to resilience as a relational process in counselor educators' lives and wellbeing. Taken together, this literature establishes resilience as relational, culturally grounded, and shaped by institutional context, yet it leaves the resilience of MENA counselor educators themselves largely unexamined. The current study addressed that gap.

Study Aims

The purpose of this research was to examine relational, cultural, and institutional resources that counselor educators of MENA descent mobilize to sustain their professional resilience as tenure-track assistant professors amid shifting and politicized contexts. Our research question inquired into the following: How do MENA American counselor educators mobilize personal, relational, cultural, and institutional resources to sustain wellness, teaching practice, scholarship, and professional identity under conditions of geopolitical stress and institutional misrecognition? Our intention in conducting this research was to provide a model for counselor educators, supervisors, program leaders, and policymakers as they develop resilience-informed structures and practices in various institutions and to identify how collective resistance and identity-affirming mentorship can advance MSJCC-aligned training in cultural responsiveness, broaching, and advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015).

Method

Relying on a CAE methodology, we examined how our identities shaped our professional practice, focusing on resilience in this practice as lived and relational. This design is well-suited to linking lived experiences with institutional, cultural, and sociopolitical power dynamics (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020; Chang et al., 2016). CAE has been used successfully and effectively by counselor educators navigating acute contextual stressors and pre-tenure demands (Peters et al., 2022). The method is also well-positioned to reveal relational protective processes, such as community and shared meaning-making, which are relevant to resilience in academic life (Ferguson et al., 2023).

Participants and Setting

The research team was composed of four counselor educators who (1) self-identified as MENA American, (2) held tenure-track appointments in CACREP-accredited programs, and (3) had more than 1 year of counselor education teaching experience. The cultural heritages of the participants encompassed Arab, Persian/Iranian, and American identities. This composition was essential to access and analyze embodied, context-specific knowledge.

Researcher Positionality

The research team consisted of four counselor educators who also served as the study's participants. This strategy was consistent with a CAE methodology, an approach in which researchers have the dual role of investigator and participant (Chang et al., 2016). This dual role supported deep reflexivity and authentic engagement with the data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), as each author reflected on their positionality in relation to the study.

Author 1 is an assistant professor in a counselor education program at a private university in the Northeastern U.S., teaching master's-level students in clinical mental health and school counseling. She holds a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision and maintains an active clinical practice. Her clinical and scholarly work centers on intersectionality, trauma, reproductive and perinatal mental health, and the lived experiences of marginalized communities in counselor education and practice. Author 1 is committed to advancing culturally responsive and socially just counselor education through advocacy and decolonizing frameworks. As a first-generation Iranian American, Author 1's MENA identity informs her dedication to amplifying underrepresented voices. Her lived experience of navigating cultural identity and migration shapes her emphasis on broaching intersectionality and fostering inclusive clinical and academic spaces.

Author 2 is an assistant professor in a psychology and mental health counseling department at a private university in the Northeastern U.S., teaching master's- and doctoral-level students. To date, she has several years of experience teaching in graduate counseling programs and mentoring future clinicians to integrate cultural

humility, critical consciousness, and clinical excellence into their professional identities. Author 2 is a licensed mental health counselor with diagnostic privilege and an Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing-trained therapist, who is also certified in sex therapy and supervision. Prior to academia, she developed multidisciplinary experience in human resources and law in corporate, nonprofit, and small business settings, which informs her systems-level understanding of power, policy, and workplace culture. She also maintains a private practice and undertakes consulting work focused on supporting individuals and organizations in navigating cultural barriers and identity development. Born to a bicultural family with MENA heritage, Author 2 brings a deeply embodied understanding of intergenerational trauma, migration, and bicultural identity development. Her work centers on amplifying MENA voices and advancing multicultural competence within counselor education and clinical training.

Author 3 is a tenure-track assistant professor in a counselor education program at a large public university in the Midwestern U.S., where she teaches and mentors master's and doctoral students. Her work is informed by her background as a practicing counselor and clinical supervisor with trauma-focused training. Author 3 is of Middle Eastern descent, spent part of her childhood in the Middle East, and later immigrated to the U.S., where she completed her graduate training and established her clinical and academic career. Her research focuses on culturally responsive mental health care for refugee and immigrant communities, with an emphasis on applied, community-engaged work. She has extensive experience working with refugees and asylum seekers, including in international contexts, and has contributed to community-based initiatives supporting displaced populations through mental health services and educational opportunities.

Author 4 is an assistant professor in a counselor education department within a college of education at a public university in the Midwestern U.S., teaching master's-level students in clinical mental health and rehabilitation counseling programs. To date, she has multiple years of experience teaching in graduate counseling programs. She holds a doctoral degree in counselor education and supervision, along with graduate training in community counseling and she has an undergraduate education in psychology and area studies related to the Middle East. Author 4 has extensive experience working within refugee resettlement contexts, providing and supervising employment and counseling services for refugees, immigrants, and individuals impacted by trauma. Raised in immigrant communities in the U.S. as the child of an immigrant parent and now married to an immigrant partner, her personal and professional experiences inform her research focus on the mental health needs of refugee and immigrant populations. Her scholarship emphasizes qualitative inquiry, traditional healing practices, and culturally responsive, community-based counseling approaches within MENA communities.

Consistent with reflexive autoethnographic practice (Lapadat, 2017; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), we treated our own subjectivities as data rather than as contaminants to be minimized. Our team included two researchers at the same institution and two at different institutions, two of whom were non-U.S. born and two U.S. born, with all holding the rank of assistant professor with no prior mentoring or supervisory relationship among us. All of us are active members of an ethnic concerns group for MENA identities affiliated with the Association of Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD), which was the basis for the team's formation. As researcher-participants, we all identify as women, which limits our ability to address gender-based variation in the resilience and coping processes, a limitation we revisit in the Limitations and Future Directions section of the article. Entering the study, our differing religious visibilities, national origins, and immigration histories shaped our differing assumptions concerning identity disclosure and resilience, and we anticipated more overlap in experience than the interviews ultimately revealed. For example, one researcher-participant entered the study assuming that resilience was best expressed through open cultural visibility, writing that she wanted to see MENA culture "celebrated in some way" rather than being forced into an either/or choice with professional identity. Another researcher-participant entered with a more protective assumption, describing MENA identity as something "many of us protect... by keeping it to ourselves" as a matter of self-preservation. These differing initial assumptions shaped how the team members interpreted moments of identity disclosure in our interviews and journal data analysis processes.

We addressed our positionality through reflexive journaling after each interview session and structured team debriefings before and after each session, which allowed us to track how our own reactions to shared political topics or identification with a co-author's account might otherwise have shaped our listening, questioning, or coding. For example, after serving as interviewer in the first session, one researcher wrote that she “felt hesitant to ask more probing or follow-up questions, prioritizing [the interviewee's] sense of safety and emotional comfort,” thus, identifying a live tension between curiosity and care. This tension was raised in the team's post-interview debrief, in which the team collectively named that we did not have the privilege of approaching identity-related questions “neutrally,” since our own identities, politics, and histories entered the room regardless of our intent. Naming this dynamic explicitly informed how subsequent interviewers approached follow-up questioning in later sessions, allowing for slightly more direct probing once the team had acknowledged that hesitation itself was not a neutral choice.

During the analysis stage of the study, our journals also served as a supplementary analytic check, helping us distinguish our own reactions from participant meaning-making and guarding against our premature consensus arising from our shared identities. For example, one researcher's journal entry reflecting on a co-author's account of institutional support, “That contrast made me reflect on my privilege and the role mentorship and department culture play in shaping one's sense of belonging,” prompted the team to attend explicitly to variations in institutional contexts during coding, rather than treating belonging as a uniform experience for the participants.

Methodological Integrity

Due to the nature of this research, which involved our own collaborative autoethnographic exploration and no external participants, institutional review board approval was not required by our institutions to conduct this study. Our methodology aligned with guidance on ethical practice in reflexive qualitative and autoethnographic research, in which co-authors make informed decisions about participation, representation, and risk (Lapadat, 2017; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Ethical considerations, however, remained a priority for us. We attended to several concerns in particular: how the narratives of others were represented within our accounts, the political sensitivity surrounding MENA identities, the tension inherent in occupying the dual role of researcher and participant, and the professional vulnerability we possessed as tenure-track faculty. We collectively determined the boundaries for our disclosure, de-identification of the data, and representation of the data in publications.

To remain aligned with a resilience-oriented approach that addressed safety and access to support, we established protocols for mutual support and conducted regular check-ins regarding the emotional impacts of the research process. We implemented clear agreements for how the narratives would be shared, analyzed, and included in joint deliverables, and also found the process observer role to be supportive of psychological safety during the interviews. Obtaining consent from each researcher-participant was continuous during data collection, analysis, and dissemination, with emphasis on opportunities to revise, withhold, and further de-identify excerpts throughout the stages of the process.

To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, several strategies were enlisted. Our data collection spanned one academic semester, which aided in capturing experiences in different professional contexts, and the analysis phase spanned an additional semester, ensuring prolonged engagement. We triangulated emerging codes and themes across the interviews, journals, and artifacts, and documented analytic decisions in an audit trail. Multiple data sources were used to triangulate the data. We also reviewed and checked the findings through multiple analysis meetings. All the details of the researchers' identities and contexts are presented in this report to enhance the transferability of the findings.

Design Rationale

The CAE methodology was employed to illuminate how resilience was enacted in everyday academic life while also generating practice-relevant insights for pedagogy, supervision, mentorship, and policy. Positioning the researchers as participants enabled emotionally grounded insights and context-specific accounts of protective

processes, such as meaning-making, boundary-setting, community support, and identity safety, which are often missed by designs distanced from this first-hand approach. Using multiple data sources alongside team-based reflexive analysis provided deeper transparency and methodological rigor for this study,

Data Collection

As stated earlier, data sources for this project included interviews, journal entries, and professional artifacts. The researchers conducted rotating peer interviews (four sessions), in which each researcher-participant cycled through four roles. The roles included an interviewer, who facilitated a semi-structured protocol; an interviewee, who shared experiences tied to the research questions; a process observer, who was responsible for documenting group dynamics, emotional responses, and nonverbal communication; and a transcriber, who monitored the recording and reviewed the automatic transcription for accuracy. Rotating through these roles in the four interview sessions provided multidimensional insights and accountability. The second source of data was journal entries from each researcher, including a reflective journal after each interview session. Debriefing was performed with the team after each interview, and each author completed an individual journal entry (> 16 entries total). Finally, the third source of data included professional artifacts such as teaching statements, research statements, CVs, and evaluations. All materials were stored in a secure, access-restricted folder.

Analytical Strategy

Following Chang et al. (2016), we conducted iterative, team-based analysis, which involved familiarization; collaborative coding; reflexive thematic analysis with memoing to track meaning-making as researcher-participants; constant comparison across data types; negative-case review; and theme consolidation. We maintained an audit trail throughout the analysis, documenting analytic decisions and using member confirmation in which each researcher reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of their own transcribed interview and journal entries, to enhance the credibility of our interpretations and the coherence of emerging themes in the full dataset.

The analysis procedure began with an initial stage of familiarization, which is necessary to ground each researcher's coding in a close, first-hand understanding of their own data before those data were brought into dialogue with the rest of the team: Each researcher read and re-read their own interview transcript, journal entries, and reviewed artifacts closely before individual coding began. Each researcher then independently coded their own transcript for key themes and patterns. These individually developed codes were then brought to three collaborative, one-hour team coding sessions. In each session, every researcher shared their codes with the full team, who reviewed and discussed each code to identify shared experiences, diverging perspectives, and contextual factors. When necessary, the team reconciled the codes across all four transcripts until reaching agreement, with no unresolved disagreements regarding either the codes or the subsequently developed themes. This process culminated in the development of thematic categories through reflexive thematic analysis, with explicit attention to both adversity and resilience processes (e.g., meaning-making, boundary-setting, identity-based resources, relational support, and community strategies). This analytic framing was aligned with resilience scholarship in which resilience is conceptualized as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent (Ungar et al., 2013) and it also aligned with research recognizing ethnic identity, coping, and social support as protective factors in racially minoritized and MENA/Muslim populations (Balaghi et al., 2021; Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023; Childress et al., 2024). Further, this framing addressed collective resilience in collaborative processes (Ferguson et al., 2023).

Theoretical Lenses

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) oriented our analysis toward how mutually constituting identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, gender, nationality, immigration) can shape risk and protection within institutional contexts. We drew on Collins's (2019) perspective of "shifting" identities to examine how MENA individuals are classified as "White" within U.S. racial systems yet simultaneously experience discrimination, hypervisibility, and cultural marginalization (Awad et al., 2019; Awad et al., 2022). We integrated a social-ecological understanding to frame resilience, conceptualizing resilience as dynamic, relational, and context-dependent, shaped by identity-

based support, access to resources, and systems that either constrain or enable wellbeing (Barrita & Wong-Padoongpatt, 2023; Childress et al., 2024; Ungar et al., 2013). Additionally, Middle Eastern feminist and decolonial perspectives (Mohanty, 2003) were incorporated to situate our resilience processes within the broader geopolitical and historical circumstances (e.g., Orientalism, Islamophobia, surveillance, conflict). Finally, we prioritized agency, community protection, and collective resistance as culturally grounded resilience practices (Balaghi et al., 2021; Ferguson et al., 2023; Green et al., 2024).

Results

Employing the CAE methodology led to a coherent set of resilience-oriented themes drawn from our interviews, reflective journals, and professional artifacts to surface. Findings center on the areas of resilience we identified in our data and the actions we took to actively build resilience and coping as a community of counselor educators. These themes are organized around a model we label ABC for (1) Adaptive resilience, (2) Belonging and community, and (3) Cultural accountability and professional responsibility.

Theme 1: Adaptive Resilience

Adaptive resilience captured how participants developed deliberate, self-preserving responses to the pressures of navigating MENA identity within academic and clinical contexts. Rather than simply enduring these identity-related tensions, participants described active choices regarding how to manage their identities, which served as protective practices. Two subthemes were identified for this theme: social hesitation and strategic disclosure.

Social Hesitation

Social hesitation emerged as one of the earliest and most pervasive adaptive responses. Respondents described an internalized caution and a learned attunement to social contexts that shaped whether and how they disclosed aspects of their identity in professional settings. Importantly, participants framed this hesitation not as defeat but as a form of self-aware navigation and self-preservation. One person reflected on messages she absorbed growing up:

I was very scared and hesitant to disclose this about myself and people just, like, assumed whatever I was, whether I was Italian or they thought I was Latina ... my parents didn't explicitly say, like, don't tell people, but they were just, like, you know, just be mindful.

This early socialization into identity management was carried forward into professional life, shaping how respondents navigated their disclosure in clinical and academic contexts. Another individual described directly encountering this uncertainty in supervision, reflecting on the absence of culturally grounded frameworks for self-disclosure in clinical training:

I wasn't sure how much of my ethnic background to share with my clients. And that was something that I don't think I've ever actually had ... I don't have, like, a framework of how do I even decide that and when do I ... when do I tell my clients about my ethnicity?

The absence of such frameworks underscored how counselor training has historically failed to address self-disclosure experiences of MENA clinicians. Rather than experiencing this management as suppression, participants described it as a practiced awareness, an ongoing reading of social context that protected them from misrepresentation and misrecognition.

Another person discussed this hesitation not as a single decision but as a recurring internal debate that preceded any actual disclosure:

There's a persistent internal debate about when to disclose my identity, how much to say, and how it will be received ... Disclosing can be empowering but also opens the door to assumptions—particularly political ones. My existence is too often read as a statement.

Here, disclosure decisions carried a political weight that was independent of intent: Respondents anticipated they would be perceived as making a statement before they had said anything at all, which intensified the vigilance already required for professional self-presentation. Notably, disclosure was not always a matter of individual choice: One individual reflected on becoming “more aware of how I'm perceived—what assumptions are made about me based on my name, appearance, accent, or research interests.” For participants whose names, accents, or physical presentation already signaled a MENA identity, hesitation could not function as concealment; instead, it shaped how they anticipated and prepared for assumptions they could not prevent others from making.

Strategic Disclosure

The second subtheme, strategic disclosure, encompassed the intentional, context-sensitive choices participants made about when and how to reveal their identities in professional settings, attuned to the reality that divulging a MENA identity is never politically neutral. One person reflected,

I've always had this battle of back and forth, back and forth, like, how I feel about disclosing my identity, who I am, and then what are the assumptions and perceptions of who you are ... there was always a political conflict: If I would say who I am and where I come from, there is this political view of you're representing a political belief.

Participants noted that strategic disclosure required not only self-awareness but a sophisticated reading of how MENA identity was politically received, and a deliberate choice about when visibility served connection versus when it invited unwanted positioning. However, in the classroom, disclosure became a pedagogical act. Respondents described opening class using their full identities on the first day as a way to inspire students, thereby reclaiming visibility as agency rather than risk.

Participants also revealed weighing whether disclosure served a purpose beyond the personal, then disclosing when it could educate or connect and withholding when it could not. One individual reflected, “I noticed that sharing [my] identity was done when it was helpful for others—to educate or to engage others. On its own, it's confusing and isolating.” This distinction between disclosure-as-service and disclosure-for-its-own-sake further differentiates strategic disclosure from social hesitation: Where hesitation reflected caution about how visibility might be read, strategic disclosure reflected a calculated judgment about whether visibility would be useful.

Theme 2: Belonging and Community

The second theme moved outward from individual adaptation to the relational and institutional conditions that either constrained or sustained participants. Where Theme 1 focused on what respondents did to protect and sustain themselves, Theme 2 captured the spaces, relationships, and recognitions that made wholeness possible. Two subthemes were linked with this theme: invisibility, hypervisibility, and safety; and mentorship and fostering belonging.

Invisibility, Hypervisibility, and Safety

Participants consistently discussed a paradoxical position in which they were simultaneously rendered invisible as MENA professionals within institutional structures and hypervisible through political scrutiny and racialized assumptions. This tension shaped how they related to community and belonging. One person described the burden of this dynamic: “Sometimes I feel myself overcompensating ... I avoid the topic just to make it a little more socially acceptable.” The word “overcompensating” reflected an awareness of being watched and evaluated, and the subsequent calibration of self-presentation in response. These experiences of being read through a political

lens, rather than being seen as complete professionals, underscored the community-seeking in which respondents engaged as a counter-practice.

Safety within formal institutional settings was just as often absent as it was present. One individual stated, “I don’t feel like I have safe places to talk about my identity in my department, in my classrooms ... in meetings, in greater settings, I’m definitely scared.” The word “scared” was not used to describe a passing anxiety but rather a sustained relational condition that shaped professional engagement. In response, participants have built alternative sites of safety through peer community and the autoethnographic research process itself. Simple acts of recognition carried significant weight: One person discussed a professor’s matter-of-fact acknowledgment of her layered identity as “the first time someone didn’t make a stupid comment,” pointing to how rarely MENA identities are regarded with care in institutional contexts and how meaningful it is when they are.

This paradox generated an ongoing internal calculus about self-expression. As one individual revealed, “This tension between invisibility and hypervisibility feels like a constant undercurrent—when do I speak up, and when do I stay silent? Who benefits from my silence, and who is harmed by it?” Framing silence as something that could benefit or harm others, not only the self, reflected how respondents experienced this paradox as a relational and ethical burden as much as a personal one.

Mentorship and Fostering Belonging

The second subtheme, the absence of formal mentorship, was named directly in the data, and its naming functioned as a call to action as much as a description of experience. One person stated, “I don’t have any teaching mentors.” Yet participants did not remain passive in the face of this absence. They built lateral peer-based mentorship structures and became the mentors their students needed. Central to this were years of collective work to establish an ethnic concerns group for MENA identities in the AMCD. One individual described its impact: “That ethnic concern group has been the best part of my journey. If I didn’t have those safer spaces, I don’t think I’d feel as whole as I do now.”

The language of wholeness used in this quote was significant: Belonging was not merely supportive but constitutive of identity and professional wellness. Participants also named collectivist values as both a cultural resource and a structural challenge within hyper-individualistic tenure processes, describing collaborative research as essential to sustaining professional identity and wellbeing in ways that dominant academic models do not consider. Continued scholarly productivity amid institutional pressure also was named as its own form of resilience, reflecting a refusal to fold under conditions of stress.

However, the absence of formal mentorship carried a relational cost that respondents cited directly. One wrote, “It’s isolating—this sense that we are expected to be bridges, to educate and hold space, without always having that support returned.” Belonging, then, was not simply present or absent for participants; it had to be actively constructed, as reflected in the collective effort behind the AMCD ethnic concerns group described above, to offset the real cost of continuing to progress without institutional mentorship.

Theme 3: Cultural Accountability and Professional Responsibility

The third and final theme revealed how respondents translated their adaptive strategies and relational belonging into professional practice, enacting resilience as a form of accountability to their students, their communities, and their fields. This theme captured the outward-facing dimension of resilience: How MENA counselor educators transformed their own experiences of marginalization into intentional pedagogical and scholarly commitments. Four subthemes comprised this theme: multiple worldviews, neutrality and positionality, role modeling and promoting connection, and research as identity.

Multiple Worldviews

Participants described a sustained commitment to expanding the cultural landscape of their classrooms, which was grounded in both professional values and lived experience. One person articulated this practice directly: “I share, like, examples from working with my clients ... so that they understand the different cultural

perspectives and cultural values.” Rather than treating multicultural content as supplemental, respondents wove it into the fabric of their teaching, drawing on personal and clinical experience to model what culturally responsive practice looks like in action. Another individual framed the political climate not as a threat to be avoided but as a pedagogical opportunity: “I’m thinking about how do I get students to have the types of conversations that I think are helpful for them to be better counselors?” This orientation of turning toward difficulty rather than away from it reflected the resilience embedded in professional responsibility.

Participants described this resilience as inseparable from their full professional presence rather than an added instructional technique. One explained, “As a counselor educator, I bring my full self into the classroom—my multicultural lens, my commitment to social justice, and the hard conversations that come with that.” She characterized this presence as meaningful but effortful, positioning multicultural teaching as an extension of professional identity rather than a neutral technique, an extension that required her to remain visibly and personally invested rather than instructing from a distance.

Neutrality and Positionality

One of the most analytically rich subthemes involved respondents’ critical engagement with the construct of neutrality in counseling, a concept they described as both a professional expectation and a form of cultural erasure. One individual directly challenged this expectation: “It’s this assumption that I’m going to come in with a blank slate, a neutral position ... that’s all nonsense anyway. You’re not coming in neutral at all.” This direct challenge to the myth of counselor neutrality reflected a positionality-informed practice grounded in social justice frameworks. Another person discussed the tension of navigating institutional expectations of restraint while retaining a sense of professional obligation toward underserved students: “Or should I be trying to do more until I bridge this gap? It just feels like students don’t have an understanding of the context enough to even engage in it.” Naming and challenging neutrality was regarded as a resilient professional act.

For at least one participant, this challenge to neutrality was inseparable from a broader question about professional obligation: “When neutrality feels like complicity, what is our role?” Posed as an open question rather than a resolved stance, this conundrum captured how rejecting neutrality remained an ongoing negotiation for respondents rather than a settled position.

Role Modeling and Promoting Connection

The next subtheme captured deliberate practices for making participants’ identities visible as a form of relational and professional responsibility, particularly in the classroom. One individual offered the following:

I would like to see our culture to be celebrated in some way. And not have it be this, like, you have to pick one or the other ... We have some space where we can influence the culture here, just like other groups have. In a positive way.

These statements reflected the refusal of the either/or positioning that MENA counselor educators often face, that is, the pressure to choose between professional legitimacy and cultural authenticity. Instead, respondents modeled integration, visibility, and pride as professional acts. When the political context demanded a response, participants brought it into the classroom: “When the ICE raids were starting ... I brought it up the next class and let my students talk about it.” This aspiration to influence academic culture, not simply survive it, signals a generative, future-oriented form of resilience.

When this visibility was well received, participants described it as reinforcing rather than depleting. One person recalled a job interview in which authenticity was met with acceptance: “Being myself—sharing my cultural background, speaking from my truth—was met with support and openness. It’s a breath of fresh air when that happens.” However, she noted that such moments felt “rare and fleeting” rather than being the norm; a reminder that respondents continued to choose visibility and authenticity despite inconsistent institutional reception, not because that reception was reliably positive.

Research as Identity

The fourth subtheme extends the outward-facing orientation of Theme 3: Participants treated their scholarship as an act of accountability to their communities and to the counseling field, not merely as an individual career requirement. They described their scholarly work as inseparable from their MENA identities, positioning research not as a tenure requirement separate from self but as a form of cultural accountability and identity expression. One individual reflected on the deep alignment between personal origin and professional calling: “I became a counselor because of how I saw people in my community, the way that they interacted with each other, the way that we support each other.” The cultural value of service, explicitly named as such by another person, further grounds scholarly work within a communal ethic that contrasts with the individualistic productivity metrics of academic institutions:

I think that’s a cultural value for me too, is, like, to be of service. And that’s the part that being on the tenure track is really difficult ... to me, teaching, being in service of students, that’s also not valued anymore as much in this position.

In naming this tension between institutional priorities and cultural values, respondents illustrated how research and teaching as identity work function as forms of resilience, acts of repudiation against systems that ask MENA scholars to leave themselves at the door. Nonetheless, such acts involved a professional cost that participants directly cited. One wrote, “I find myself wanting to write about the things that matter most to me—political issues, displacement, oppression—but fear they’re too ‘controversial’ to be published ... we censor ourselves to survive.” Naming self-censorship as a survival strategy rather than a preference situates this scholarly choice as a tension between cultural accountability and institutional risk.

Discussion

The CAE methodology utilized in this study illuminated resilience as a relational, contextual, and politically situated process for the four MENA American counselor educators who participated. Extending existing scholarship, the ABC model of resilience centered the agentic and collectively enacted dimensions of MENA counselor educator experience. Rather than an individual trait or a passive response to adversity, resilience emerged as a dynamic set of practices the educators mobilized across personal, relational, and institutional domains. The three themes that were identified traced how these faculty navigated invisibility and hypervisibility, built community where institutions proved inadequate, and transformed their lived experiences of marginalization into intentional pedagogy and scholarship. Each theme is discussed below and analyzed in relation to previous studies.

Adaptive Resilience

The first theme, Adaptive Resilience, encompassed two subthemes, social hesitation and strategic disclosure. Together, these subthemes reflected what Ungar et al. (2013) described as context-dependent resilience, in which individuals navigate systems that simultaneously produce risk and constrain their wellbeing. The participants’ careful calibration of identity visibility grew out of internalized cultural messages and the political weight of their MENA identity in post-9/11 contexts. This calibration mirrored the adaptive coping Colgan et al. (2025) documented among Muslim American students responding to a hostile sociopolitical climate. The four faculty in the current study also named the absence of culturally grounded self-disclosure frameworks in their clinical training, a gap in counselor education that this study highlighted. Nonetheless, when the disclosure of these educators became a pedagogical act in the classroom, it aligned with Balaghi’s (2021) account of self-preservation and social connection as anchors of resilience, reframing visibility as a resource for both educator and student.

This pattern of purposeful disclosure extended Jamal and Naber’s (2008) account of how Arab American identity has been negotiated through contested forms of visibility since 9/11. For our participants, disclosure

was rarely a neutral act of information-sharing but a decision they anticipated would be read politically. This is consistent with one person's observation that her existence was "too often read as a statement." Similarly, respondents distinguished between their disclosure that served a purpose (to educate or connect) and their disclosure that did not. This distinction echoed Stoll et al.'s (2026) documentation of "culturally compelled" coping strategies among Black students. In that study, coping was selectively deployed to support engagement rather than applied uniformly as a form of self-protection. Taken together, the parallels between the current study with prior scholarship suggested that adaptive resilience for our MENA counselor educators functioned less as avoidance and more as strategic, purpose-driven engagement with a hostile sociopolitical landscape. This pattern also was visible in Green et al.'s (2024) account of second-generation Arab Americans who integrated rather than concealed their identities as a means of resisting discrimination.

Belonging and Community

The second theme, Belonging and Community, captured how participants actively constructed belonging in the absence of institutional support. Their efforts reflected what Hassouneh et al. (2014) identified as critical pathways to professional persistence for underrepresented minority faculty, including peer support, mentorship, and structures that counter structural inequities. This paradox of invisibility and hypervisibility was consistent with Collins's (2019) perspective on shifting identities and with Awad et al.'s (2019, 2022) account of how classification of MENA Americans as "White" rendered this community simultaneously overexposed and under protected. When confronting this paradox, the four faculty in the current study turned to collective spaces of their own making. The significance they placed in the AMCD ethnic concerns group resonates with Ferguson et al.'s (2023) finding that community and collective meaning-making served as tools for navigating oppression in academic spaces. It also extends Louis's (2023) counter-narratives of faculty resilience by centering MENA coalition-building as proactive and relational practice. The collectivist orientation the participants brought to scholarship and mentorship further contests the hyper-individualism of tenure structures, indicating that for the MENA counselor educators in this study, resilience operated as an inherently communal process.

The relational cost of the lack of mentorship also was named directly by the participants. They described being expected to serve as a bridge for others "without always having that support returned;" a phrase that suggested relational resilience depended not just on relational connection but on reciprocity. This finding extends Carter's (2010) discovery, which showed that resilience among Muslim American couples operated relationally rather than as an individual attribute. In the current study, relational reciprocity was experienced in the academic community rather than the family, and the absence of reciprocal support from colleagues and institutions was experienced as isolation rather than merely as a gap in career support. This cost also is consistent with Barber and Ting's (2025) documentation of the representational burden carried by Black women faculty in counselor education, whose professional persistence similarly required navigating institutional expectations to educate and represent without commensurate structural support. This dynamic is not unique to MENA counselor educators; it reflects a broader pattern facing minoritized faculty who are asked to perform relational labor that is rarely institutionally reciprocated.

Cultural Accountability and Professional Responsibility

The third theme, Cultural Accountability and Professional Responsibility, captured the participants' commitment to promoting multiple worldviews, challenging counselor neutrality, modeling integrated identity, and anchoring research in MENA community experience. Together, these commitments constituted what we understand as culturally accountable practice and they aligned with MSJCC frameworks calling for active advocacy and broaching (Ratts et al., 2015). Our participants' direct challenge to neutrality as a form of cultural erasure drew on decolonial feminist perspectives (Mohanty, 2003) and reflected the applied intersectional consciousness that Crenshaw (1989, 1991) described. By reframing the political climate as a pedagogical opportunity, the four faculty in this study illustrated what Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt (2023) identified as ethnic identity functioning as a

protective factor. For these individuals, identity was not a liability in the classroom but a generative resource for student learning and counselor development.

Our participants' refusal to be neutral was captured in one respondent's question, "When neutrality feels like complicity, what is our role?" This finding extends Barrita and Wong-Padoongpatt's (2023) protective-factor framing concept beyond individual coping. It positions ethnic identity as a resource for taking a professional and pedagogical stance rather than only enacting personal resilience. However, the self-censorship our participants described in their scholarship like avoiding topics they considered too "controversial" to publish, pointed to a systemic barrier. This barrier was consistent with Childress et al.'s (2024) documentation of structural obstacles that shaped how MENA communities sought help from and engaged with the institutions meant to serve them. In the present study, the institution in question was the scholarly publishing apparatus of the counseling field itself, a knowledge production barrier in addition to the help-seeking one just mentioned. Therefore, the current educators experienced a bind in that the identities that grounded their scholarship also raised the cost of publishing about their identities. This tension between authentic identity expression and institutional risk further was consistent with Green et al.'s (2024) account of second-generation Arab Americans integrating rather than compartmentalizing their identities. This suggested that our respondents' professional cost of visibility did not deter their integration so much as shape where and how that integration was expressed.

Implications

The ABC model of resilience has direct implications for counselor education programs, supervisors, and institutional leaders. Supervisors and counselor educators may lean on this culturally grounded framework to support identity-related self-disclosure, thus equipping MENA trainees to navigate when and how to disclose their identities without defaulting to assimilationist or universalized approaches. Professional organizations should formally recognize and structurally support community-building efforts such as the AMCD ethnic concerns group, rather than leaving coalition work to emerge in the face of institutional inaction. At the institutional level, CACREP-accredited programs should examine how tenure and promotion structures reproduce the hyper-individualism that conflicts with the collectivist values held by many MENA counselor educators. This would allow such programs to meaningfully value service, mentorship, and community-engaged scholarship in the tenure and promotion review processes. Finally, counselor education curricula should explicitly address MENA identity, racialization, and the intersection of geopolitics and clinical practice to prepare future counselors to competently and responsively serve MENA clients and their communities.

Limitations and Future Directions

As this study involved a CAE methodology conducted by only four researcher-participants, the findings reflect specific positionalities and institutional contexts and are not intended for broad generalization. This small sample size ($N = 4$) limits the transferability of the results and precludes claims about MENA counselor educators in general. Additionally, because the same four researcher-participants were responsible for all aspects of data collection, analysis, and data interpretation, the study is vulnerable to threats to internal and external validity. Such threats stem from the researcher-participants shared blind spots and the possibility that our collective positionality shaped both what we disclosed and how our team interpreted those disclosures. The reflexivity practices described earlier were intended to mitigate, though not eliminate, this risk. The diversity of our team's MENA identities across national origins, religions, generations, genders, and immigration status also was not fully captured, and future research could address these intersectional dimensions with greater breadth. Future studies using phenomenology, narrative inquiry, or focus groups with a more diverse MENA counselor educator population would deepen the empirical base. Additionally, longitudinal designs tracking MENA counselor educators across pre- and post-tenure and promotion phases would illuminate how resilience processes evolve over time and with shifting political climates.

Conclusion

This CAE study offers the first structured resilience framework grounded in the lived experiences of MENA American counselor educators. The study focused on “How do MENA American counselor educators mobilize personal, relational, cultural, and institutional resources to sustain wellness, teaching practice, scholarship, and professional identity under conditions of geopolitical stress and institutional misrecognition?” The ABC model of resilience that emerged from the data reframes MENA counselor educators’ experience by transforming that experience from a deficit narrative of challenge and survival to a strengths-based account of agency, coalition, and advocacy. It appears that our MENA counselor educators did not simply endure the conditions of academic life; they transformed them, building community where their institutions promoted erasure. They also modeled identity integration where the field demanded neutrality, and they grounded their scholarship in a cultural ethic of service. As counselor education in the U.S. continues to grapple with questions of equity and social justice, centering the resilience of MENA counselor educators through the ABC model of resilience discovered in this study can serve to challenge institutions to dismantle structures that produce unnecessary strain and provide a resource for these educators as well as MENA supervisors and program leaders who seek language and a community for their ongoing work of professional persistence.

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Data Availability Statement

The data collected in this study consists of collaborative autoethnographic materials (peer-interview transcripts, reflective journals, and identity artifacts) that contain inherently identifiable information. To protect author-participants’ privacy and confidentiality, these materials are not publicly available.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this work. There are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be perceived to influence the findings. All relevant institutional affiliations have been disclosed; these affiliations did not shape the analysis or interpretations presented.

Ethical Approval Statement

This study followed the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics (2014) for research and publication. Because the researchers were the sole participants and no identifiable data about individuals beyond the authors were collected, the project did not require institutional review board approval under our institutions’ guidance for autoethnography; therefore, formal approval was not sought. All co-authors provided informed consent to participate, reviewed their own transcripts and materials, and approved the inclusion of de-identified excerpts. Throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting, the team safeguarded confidentiality of any third parties, removed potentially identifying details, and stored all materials on secure, access-restricted drives.

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