First Generation Iranian Immigrants and the Question of Cultural Identity: The Case of Iowa

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Based on survey research and in-depth interviews, this article concerns first generation Iranian immigrants in Iowa and focuses on the extent of their integration into the host society's culture. The findings indicate that while the majority of respondents are fully bilingual and receptive of the host society's culture, they are confident enough to bring up their children based on Iranian cultural values. Yet the longer they stay in the United States, the more isolated they become and the lonelier they feel. There are two plausible explanations: first, their middle-class to upper-class status and above-average educational level is a determining factor in reinforcing Iranian ethnic pride; second, despite their educational and professional successes, Iranian immigrants' failure to blend into the society at large signals a more serious problem of prejudice and subtle discrimination against them.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Studies of the processes of social and cultural adjustment for first generation immigrants inevitably have to address the issues of assimilation and acculturation. In general, two theoretical approaches to this issue stand in sharp contrast. The assimilationist perspective, commonly coined as the melting pot approach, espouses the functionalist notion of the necessity of cultural adjustment for new immigrants to survive in the host society. According to the advocates of this approach, assimilation and acculturation is a unilinear process of adaptation and adjustment for new immigrants (Gordon, 1964; Park and Burgess, 1921; Szapocznik, Kurtinez and Fernandez, 1980; also see Ward, 1989: Ch. 5). But many historical studies in the past three decades have challenged the assimilationist theories and have instead portrayed the United States as an ethnic pluralist society. According to this analysis, ethnic groups will hold on to their ethnic identities and resist assimilation and Americanization (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970; Scharg, 1971; Novak, 1971).

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Yet some critics consider ethnic pluralism and its social viability as a romantic intellectual illusion that attempts to espouse an ideal social reality beyond rational reach (Steinberg, 1989: 50).

In response to the shortcomings of the ethnic pluralist approach of the 1960s and 1970s, the bicultural/pluralist approach has tackled the "cultural adjustment" question on the basis of the existence of a dialectical relationship (or at least a reciprocal process) between the host and native cultures. Advocates of biculturalism contend that identification with and adoption of both the American and the native cultures result in healthier adjustment in immigrants compared with complete assimilation (Buriel et al., 1980; Conzen et al., 1992; Szapocznik, Kurtinez and Fernandez, 1980). In another study, Portes and Borocz (1989: 614-620) assert that social and political conditions under which immigrants exit their country of origin, the social class backgrounds, differences in residential environments (i.e., rural vs. urban immigrants) and social, economic and political contexts within which the newly arrived immigrants are received by the host country are all significant variables that contribute to the maintenance of cultural diversity (and not cultural homogeneity) in the host country.

Several studies of the extent and nature of cultural adjustment among Iranian immigrants in the United States tend to support the bicultural/pluralist approach. For instance, in an ethnographic study of intercultural learning among Iranian exiles and immigrants in California, Hoffman (1990: 285-287) concluded that 1) although there were significant cultural conflicts between Iranians and Americans, the process of cultural adjustment for most Iranians was mainly a positive learning experience and not a source of "culture shock, conflict or confusion;" 2) Iranians' adaptation to the host culture was "eclectic," meaning they tended to only select the "positive" aspects of the host culture; and 3) many Iranians in her sample were of the opinion that despite learning the positive aspects of the American culture, "they did not feel that they were in any sense becoming a part of the American system." In another study of Iranians in Southern California, Barati-Martani (1981) also concluded that while there were high levels of structural assimilation, Iranian immigrants displayed low levels of cultural assimilation. His findings also indicated that variables such as length of stay in the United States and English proficiency had no positive correlation with level of cultural assimilation.

Related to the question of Iranian cultural identity in particular, I have adopted a typology offered by Banuazizi (Meskoob, 1992: 10) identifying four elements that he contends "have traditionally been judged the most salient" for the maintenance of Iranian identity. First is Iran's "pre-Islamic legacy," which spans more than a millennium, from the Achaemenians to the Sasanian dynasty, the latter being defeated by the invading Arab armies.
Second is Islam and Shi'ism in particular as the dominant religion for over 90 percent of Iranians and its "all-encompassing impact on every facet of Iranian culture and thought." Third is a common bond, "fictive or real," which has historically brought various ethnic groups under one social and cultural umbrella in their struggle to survive and cope with various despotic rulers and invading armies. The final element is the "Persian language" or Farsi which despite its dominating power over other ethnic tongues in Iran has nonetheless served as a "national language" in Iran. National and cultural identity is construed here to be a challenging issue of concern for first generation immigrants who are in a transitional stage, and individuals' perception of their ethnic identity is perceived to be a dynamic and constantly changing social and psychological process (see Conzen et al., 1992). It is also assumed here that they all share a common cultural history which in turn provides them with a sense of national identity as "Iranians." It is within the above theoretical context that I shall address the question of cultural identity for Iranian immigrants in rural Iowa.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODOLOGY

Participants for this study were first generation Iranian immigrants 18 years and older residing in a 30-mile radius of Iowa City, a moderate-size university town of about 80,000 in southeastern Iowa. Out of 70 qualified individuals who received the survey packet, 40 returned the completed questionnaire, yielding a 57 percent rate of return. The low rate of return can be attributed to my newcomer and "outsider" status in the community, as many Iranians are reluctant to provide information to a "stranger" about their private lives and are suspicious of anyone who attempts to gather information about them. This is a recurring problem, as other Iranian researchers have also reported the presence of doubt and distrust among Iranian immigrants and exiles (see Gilanshah, 1990:12; Kamalkhani, 1988:112).

The findings in this research are based on the quantitative data, comments made by the respondents, as well as in-depth interviews with twelve subjects who volunteered to further discuss the issues of concern with the author. Participants in this study responded to questions concerning attitudes, beliefs, participation, and socialization patterns on a 1–5 scale, 1 being least important and 5 being most important. Numbers and percentages to various questions in this report are tabulated based on responses to 4 and 5 on the scale for the most important (i.e., "feel comfortable" and "always"), and 1 and 2 for the least important (i.e., "do not feel comfortable" and "rarely or never").

In addition to demographic characteristics, subjects were asked to respond to questions about: 1) the main underlying reasons for their immigration and their long-term commitment to reside in the United States (the question of citizenship), 2) the extent of their attachment and commitment to the cultural values of their home country, 3) the degree of their receptiveness to the host society's dominant cultural values, 4) the extent of their socialization outside the Iranian ethnic enclave, and 5) the prospects of continuity and maintenance of Iranian cultural identity by their children, or the second generation. What follows is a discussion of respondents' reaction to and position on the above-mentioned issues.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Socioeconomic Characteristics of Respondents

Iranians in Iowa constitute only 0.35 percent of all Iranian immigrants in the United States. A distinct characteristic of Iranian immigrants in the United States is their urban residency. Even in rural Iowa, of 787 Iranians only 44 individuals (5.0%) reside in rural areas (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993a:Table 17:50). One of the two largest concentrations of Iranian immigrants in Iowa is in Johnson County, with 167 Iranians residing in and around Iowa City. The respondent pool comprised 25 men and 15 women 18 years and older, representing all age brackets with a median age of 40 years. About 70 percent of respondents are married, two are divorced, and eight have never been married. Of those married, eight, all men, have non-Iranian spouses, which indicates a relatively high degree of intermarriage between Iranians and non-Iranians for this small Iranian community. Also of note is the relatively low rate of divorce, 6.25 percent, compared with 9.46 percent for all foreign-born Iranian immigrants 15 years of age and over in the United States, and 13.1 percent for all Iranians in Iran (in 1988) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993a:Table 1:25; Tohidi, 1993:198).

As for ethnicity, the sample includes 26 Farsis, 6 Azerbaijanis, 1 Assyrian, and 4 individuals each representing Mazandarani, Gilak, Khouzestani/Arab and Lur ethnic groups. Moreover, the majority of respondents are Muslims (35 individuals, or 89.7%), with two Christians, one agnostic and one atheist.

Furthermore, aside from students, homemakers, and retired individuals, all others are employed. This is in contrast with an overall 7.0 percent rate of unemployment for all Iranians 16 years and older in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993a:Table 4, p.217). Of note is also a rather low level of self-employment for Iranians in Iowa City (10.0%), compared with 56.7 percent at the national level (Light, 1995). The low level of self-employment for Iranians is due to the lack of a larger ethnic niche, which usually provides opportunities for self-employment in metropolitan cities like Los Angeles and New York (see Light, 1995; Light and Roach, 1996; Portes, 1993:Ch. 6). In terms of occupational status, the majority of those who stated their occupation in the survey are highly skilled professionals.
Iranians in Iowa City are also highly educated, which makes this immigrant community quite distinct compared to larger urban concentrations of Iranians such as the one in Los Angeles (see Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 1987). For example, 84.6 percent of respondents have a four-year college degree, 61.6 percent have masters or equivalent degrees, and 33.3 percent hold doctorate or other professional degrees (Iran Times, 1994).

Reasons for Migration and Attitudes Toward Host Society

In the absence of reliable and inclusive data to account for Iranians who are in the United States illegally or on long-expired visitors’ visas, it is difficult to come up with an accurate number of all Iranians in this country and underlying reasons for their immigration. But one thing is clear – that the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which ended the reign of the Pahlavi regime and culminated in the establishment of the Islamic Republic, was a major contributing factor in a sharp increase in the immigration flow to the United States (see Bozorgmehr, Sabagh and Der Martirosian, 1993:73; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993b:46). Survey results tend to support this assumption, as 70.6 percent of the Iowa City sample have come to the United States mainly due to 1) social constraints (23.5%), 2) political repression (17.6%), 3) loss of loved ones/property during the Iran-Iraq War (14.7%), 4) loss of job or confiscation of property (8.8%), and 5) religious constraints (5.9%). The rest (29.4%) have immigrated to seek better education (see Tobidi, 1993:184).

It appears that, once in the United States, Iranian immigrants are not overly anxious to become naturalized citizens. For instance, of all Iowa City Iranians who arrived in the United States before 1980 only 43 percent have become naturalized citizens (compared to 61% for other foreign-born nationalities). This can be interpreted as their ambivalence toward making a long-term commitment to stay in the United States. Moreover, data related to Iranians in this sample indicate that those who came to the United States prior to the 1979 Revolution have a stronger tendency to become citizens compared with all other Iranians in the United States on the one hand (50% and 43%, respectively) and postrevolution Iranian immigrants in the Iowa City area on the other (50% and 11.8%, respectively). The tendency to resist temptations of obtaining American citizenship and enjoying its alleged benefits is based on both nationalist and cultural grounds. For instance, a successful physician who immigrated to the United States in 1982 declared that he still carries a “green card” and so far has resisted the temptation of becoming a U.S. citizen and further stated:

The main reason is my strong sense of nationalism. I believe the longer a nation’s history, the more successful have been its citizens to maintain their cultural identity; Iranians are a proud nation who ardently rely on their ancient history.

Another middle-aged male respondent, a successful academic, explained his resistance to the idea of citizenship in a similar vein:

I have not decided yet to stay in the United States permanently, even though I have been here since 1979. My main rationale for being ambivalent on this issue is my strong cultural attachment to and dependence on Iran and Iranians.

This may be construed as an indication that postrevolution immigrants are still at the stage of ambivalence despite the fact that they have had enough time to change their status from permanent residency to citizenship.2 Of more social significance, is the persistence of half the prerevolution immigrants to maintain their Iranian citizenship given the fact that they have been at least economically established in this country.3

Another important factor to be considered in examining the legal status of Iranians in Iowa City is the distinction between those who came here voluntarily and those who were forced to leave Iran for various reasons (see Ansari, 1975). In this case, seven individuals, or 25.9 percent of respondents, came to the United States against their wishes and so far have not changed their status from permanent residency to citizenship, while all the ten naturalized citizens in the sample have come to the United States voluntarily.

It is important to note that the existence of a harsh social and political environment in the home country seems to be a determining factor for women to emigrate from Iran. One homemaker and part-time worker indicated that her chief reason to leave Iran was to “escape from harsh social reality.” She further added that her decision to stay permanently in the United States was made due to “the lack of security and oppression of women in Iran.” Another highly educated and successful career woman also cited “social and political constraints” as reasons for her immigration, but nonetheless expressed her displeasure and frustration in her inability to adjust to the American social values:

Even after being here for fifteen years, I still don’t have a sense of belonging to this society. I feel I am caught between two possibilities. On the one hand, even if I crave for returning to Iran, I realize that it is no longer a realistic option. On the other hand, if I stay here permanently I feel being socially and culturally marginal to the American society.

2Since the Iranian government does not recognize dual citizenship for Iranians, many immigrants who still have savings or property holdings in Iran fear losing them once they become American citizens. Thus, many who left Iran even voluntarily have some reservations about American citizenship out of economic concerns.

3It is to be noted that as of March 1996, at least 5 permanent residents who participated in the survey have become naturalized citizens, thus changing the proportion of citizens to noncitizens.
Thus, it appears that first generation Iranian immigrants are torn between an idealized and increasingly unattainable cultural past and the reality of living in a society in which their "Iranianess" is tolerated but neither appreciated nor promoted.

**Attachment to Iranian Cultural Values**

One crucial cultural tool for first generation immigrants is their use of native tongue to communicate with other co-ethnics or conationalists, as well as shape their cultural perceptions and attitudes (Steinberg, 1989:46). Similar to many other first generation immigrant groups, Iowa City Iranians seem to be highly attached to the cultural values of the home country. For example, the majority of respondents (77.5%) declared that they "always" or "almost always" speak Farsi or other ethnic languages such as Turkish and Gilak at home. However, when the data are controlled for residency status, 92.6 percent of permanent residents do so compared with only 50 percent of naturalized citizens. One possible reason for the difference is a higher rate of exogamy between naturalized Iranians and non-Iranians, as well as a symptom of a larger transformation in the nature and content of ethnicity. In an interesting analysis of the use of Farsi or English among first generation Iranians in the United States, Hoffman (1989) examines the relationship between language use and second culture acquisition and suggests that Iranians speak Farsi for three reasons: 1) as a "means of discovering and reasserting a threatened cultural heritage"; 2) as a symbolic vehicle for the expression of attitudes toward cross-cultural adaptation; and 3) by often interjecting English words and terms during a conversation in Farsi, they facilitate a process of cultural mediation or translation, creating an intercultural perspective that allows Iranians to integrate certain dynamics of meaning and value from American culture within an Iranian frame of reference" (p.130). Hoffman's analysis is also congruent with the way Farsi is being utilized by Iranians in this community.

One qualitative aspect of national and ethnic identity is adherence to and observance of traditional secular and religious rituals and events. Related to this issue, several questions in the survey were designed to examine the extent to which first generation Iranians observe or celebrate major mainstream secular cultural and religious events. The findings indicate that not all Iranian immigrants observe traditional events. For instance, regardless of their ethnic/religious backgrounds, all Iranians in this study reported that they celebrate No Roz, the Iranian new year and an important secular tradition. But when it comes to the observance of other secular events, religious holidays, or the death of key religious figures (such as the Prophet Mohammad and Imams for Muslims), the participation rate drops to less than 25 percent. (For a similar discussion of ethnicity among American Jewry, see Gans, 1979.)

A closer look will also indicate that religious convictions seem to be less decisive in affecting their day-to-day activities and socialization with other Iranians. For example, even if the majority of respondents declared themselves as "Muslims," only 23.7 percent stated that they observe all religious rituals such as prayer and fasting and attending the Mosque on a regular basis (see Kelly, 1993a:89; Tohidi, 1993:195; Ansari, 1990). Of note is the statement made by a middle-aged physician who declared himself as an "atheist" in the survey:

At the age of fourteen my religiosity reached its climax. When I was fifteen or sixteen I began to question religion but was uncertain how it could be replaced by other ideologies. At the age of twenty I came to the United States, which had an indelible effect on my thinking. As I became more familiar with at least ten different cultures and lifestyles, all religious creeds lost their validity - I now reject religion in all its forms.

The majority of Iranians (92%) also seem to be at ease with expressing their ethnic values and religious beliefs outside the "ethnic enclave." One may conclude that the Iowa City Iranians, particularly the Muslim majority, adhere more to a kind of "civil religion" (Bellah, 1980) and are attached to and affected by cultural precepts of Islam rather than its theological premises.

In addition, three out of four feel comfortable to speak their native tongue or express their religious beliefs in the presence of Americans (i.e., non-Iranians). Of those who had some reservations about expressing their ethnic-specific values, few thought of it as being "impolite," for example, to speak Farsi in the presence of English-speaking Americans rather than believing that Farsi is inferior to English. For instance, an educated couple who are fluent in English also indicated that they have "no problem whatsoever" speaking their native tongue in public, but they will switch to English when and if "English-speaking Americans are a minority in a social setting." To sum up, respondents appear to be committed to maintaining their Iranian cultural identity but take a more liberal position on their religious beliefs. One possible explanation for this phenomenon can be the middle-class and upper-class status and higher than average level of education for this particular group of Iranian immigrants. The class base of maintaining ethnic identity is stressed, for example, by Steinberg (1989:256), who argues that in an unequalitarian pluralist society such as the United States, the poor and working-class ethnic groups have "little reason" to bolster their ethnicity:

... when ethnicity is associated with class disadvantage - with poverty, hardship, a low standard of living, and so on, the powerful inducements exist for the members of such groups to assimilate into the mainstream culture.

If Steinberg's hypothesis is correct, then preservation of Iranian identity becomes a middle-class and upper-class preoccupation, and therefore it can be argued that the poor and working-class Iranian immigrants may have a...
Adapting the Host Society's Dominant Cultural Values

The assimilationist perspective would assume the tendency and ability of immigrants to speak only the host society's dominant or official language as an indication of assimilation. In our sample, only 18 percent stated that they "rarely" or "never" speak their native tongue at home, meaning that they communicate with other family members in English. But when the data are controlled for residency status, 40 percent of naturalized citizens speak English at home all the time, while none of the permanent residents do so. Despite this apparent resistance to linguistic assimilation, Iranians are receptive of the American culture. For instance, about half the Iranians in the Iowa City sample celebrate or observe American religious and secular holidays such as Christmas, Halloween, or Thanksgiving. Many, especially women, adore Christmas trees and their ornamental and decorative beauty, and one can find Christmas trees in some Muslim homes during the holiday season. Several American holidays so that her kids "learn celebration of happy events is a human thing, and that they also learn not to be alienated from the American culture." A young college student also indicated that she considers all American holidays as "nonreligious" and "nonpolitical." The declining social and historical significances of the American national holidays and rituals are also echoed in the works of American scholars of race and ethnicity. For example, in his analysis of the attitudes of the American working class toward ethnicity, religion, and national rituals, Halle (1984:Ch.15) contends that American national holidays and occasions have been stripped of their true social and political meaning within a historical context and as such have been "trivialized." This trivialization, often reinforced by the media and market forces, allows the newly arrived immigrants to enjoy these occasions without actually appreciating and internalizing their social and historical significance.

Another aspect of an immigrant group's structural integration into the host society is the extent to which its members have managed to establish professional, social, and political ties with others outside the ethnic enclave through networking and membership in mainstream associations and organizations. (See Moslehi, 1984, for a discussion of the importance of a growing organizational consciousness among Iranians, indicating both a need for and a desire to create a sense of cultural connectedness.) Data from the Iowa City sample indicate that only four individuals, or 11.7 percent, belong to any mainstream organization. Of these four, one belongs to a career-related professional organization, one to the Rotary Club, one to the Lions Club, and another to the Optimist Club. This clearly indicates, that despite a high level of professionalism among Iranians, the majority are "professional loners" who perform their tasks in isolation from professional networks and associations. The absence of professional networking among Iranians in Iowa City is a rural, small town phenomenon, however, as Iranians in major metropolitan areas tend to be more socially involved and organized. (See Kelly, 1993b:272, for a discussion of professional networking among Iranians in Los Angeles.)

Finally, subjects were asked about their preference for the way they should be identified/labeled in the United States, for example, as an "American," as a "hyphenated American," or as an "Iranian." Of the 35 individuals who responded to this question, only one individual, a naturalized citizen, preferred to be classified as an American, while eleven (30.5%) considered themselves as "Iranian-Americans" and 24 individuals (66.7%) preferred to be identified as "Iranian." Of note are a sharp decline in numbers of naturalized citizens who still prefer to be classified only as "Iranian" and a strong tendency among permanent residents to maintain their Iranian identity. Among those who had preference for an Iranian-American identity, one long-time resident expressed his sentiments this way:

I would rather to be identified as an Iranian-American. I believe that I have been heavily influenced by the American culture and see myself as being detached from my Iranian past. I am also married to an American and believe this has had a great cultural impact on me.

In contrast, a physician who came to the United States after the Iranian Revolution indicated that he has a vested interest in the Iranian way of life, as he is "carrying 40 years of Iranian cultural baggage." Another highly educated professional clearly indicated that he will not let his Iranian identity go, and that even if he has applied for citizenship, it is purely for pragmatic purposes on his part "in order to secure government jobs and contracts in future." Finally, the significance of maintaining Iranian cultural values and at the same time being influenced by those of the host American society is clearly demonstrated by a young male college student who stated that he thinks in English and is influenced by the American culture. But in terms of cultural identity he stressed that he would "definitely choose the Iranian side," as "Iranian culture is more stimulating."

5Since membership in many professional and business-related organizations requires political participation and commitment, it may be argued that low level of membership in professional associations for the Iowa City sample is due to low rate of citizenship among Iranian immigrants.
Socialization Outside the Ethnic Enclave

Another criterion considered to be significant in this study in examining the extent and importance of maintaining ethnic and cultural identity is the nature and level of socialization between Iranians and others. More than one-fourth (11 respondents) stated that they socialize with their American (i.e., non-Iranian) neighbors "all the time." When the data are controlled for residency status, the ratio changes to 21.4 percent for permanent residents and 50 percent for naturalized citizens. Again, a higher rate of socialization for citizens is in part due to a higher rate of marriage with non-Iranians. But in several instances the interviewees referred to the "superficial nature" of their relations with Americans. For instance, a clinical chemist who has been in the United States since 1949 explained the nature and extent of his socialization with his neighbors:

Since I am married to an American, I sometimes socialize with American neighbors. However, no friendship is established between me and my neighbors since our cultural differences define "friendship" quite differently.

Another couple who had recently bought a house where they "know none of their neighbors" also indicated that before moving to this house they lived in an apartment complex where they "socialized with a Japanese couple" but "never with Americans." In general, about half the respondents, 47.5 percent, have American friends with whom they have established intimate mental and emotional ties. But during the interviews it became clear that many of these close friendship ties were with Americans of non-European origin. Several couples indicated that they have Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, Korean and Japanese friends, but not "Americans," and believed that "Americans are cold and unfriendly." Several subjects cited cultural differences which define intimacy and friendship in divergent ways. For example, a young male respondent indicated that he had intimate American friends, but they "tended to open up" more than he did. He further added that he is "more intimate and feels more comfortable" with his Iranian friends. Another long-time resident stated that "too much intimacy with Americans can be interpreted as being 'nosy,'" while he has more things in common and can be less restrained in his relationship with Iranians.

Gender also seems to play a significant role when it comes to socialization in the workplace. Whereas Iranian men and women have similar rates of socialization with their neighbors (28.0 and 26.7%, respectively) and in establishing friendship ties with non-Iranians (48.0 and 46.7%, respectively), Iranian men seem to socialize with their coworkers at a much higher rate compared with women (38.0 and 15.4%, respectively).

Intergenerational Cultural Continuity

The last aspect of the maintenance of ethnic/cultural identity is the degree to which the first generation immigrants are committed to socialize their children based on Iranian cultural values in order to guarantee some degree of ethnic and cultural continuity. In my sample, 76.9 percent of respondents stated that they are "fully committed" to install the sense of ethnic pride and identity in their children. Women appear to be more committed than men to raise their children based on Iranian cultural values (85.7% and 72.0%, respectively). In response to desirability of intermarriage between Iranians and Americans, 30 percent of Iranians approved of such union in general, while 36.9 percent indicated that they will respect their children's decision to marry non-Iranians. Despite a relatively high level of approval for interethnic marriage outside the Iranian enclave, it became clear during the interviews that when Iranians approve of exogamy, they prefer non-American (i.e., non-European) partners to Americans of European origin. Iranians' opposition to intermarriage is based on personal experience, known examples of failed marriages, and perceived attributes and moral values of "Americans." For example, a mother of two boys strongly believed that "American women are not committed to a long-term relationship," and that they are not "as clean and chaste" as Iranians. She further asserted that "Iranian boys will later feel a loss of not being married to Iranian girls." Her position, however, was challenged by her husband on more pragmatic grounds, who believed "marrying with an individual from a 'noble' American family would probably get his family closer to the American society at large." Another highly educated respondent bluntly stated that he is dissuading his daughters from contemplating the possibility of marrying an American, as "intermarriage will completely disrupt the integrity of Iranian families." Although the data for the Iowa City sample are inconclusive, one general observation can be made: the majority of prerevolution immigrants (80%) came to the United States as students and hence were not constrained by family pressures to marry Iranians. In sharp contrast, most of the postrevolution immigrants came with their families and gradually settled in this country (see also Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 1987). It is too early to study the rate of exogamy for the children of postrevolution immigrant families, as many of

6To be "clean and chaste" in the context of sexuality and sexual relations (paki vs. nejbat in Farsi) is considered an invaluable social virtue by many Iranians and a prerequisite for establishing a successful and happy marriage, particularly for women. In particular, "clean and chaste" girls are the ones who abstain from premarital sex.

7The term "noble" is a literal translation of asil in Farsi, meaning someone who comes from an aristocratic family or families with "old money." But in general, the term refers to socially and economically established middle-class to upper-class families.
them are in their teens or just entering the job market, colleges, and universities. As both high rates of intermarriage for long-time Iranian immigrants and relatively high rates of approval of immigrant parents for their children’s decision to marry non-Iranians indicate, the second generation of Iranians will tend to have a more relaxed attitude toward exogamy.

CONCLUSION

The small size of the sample, much higher than average levels of education and income, and the nonrepresentative nature of the sample prevent us from making any generalizations about Iranian immigration experiences in the United States. However, I shall attempt to draw five tentative conclusions.

First, Iranian immigrants in Iowa City have come to the United States to advance their education and to escape the social, economic and political hardships in Iran particularly after the 1979 Revolution. Second, the majority of Iranians are fully bilingual in Persian and English, the former being used mostly at home and with relatives and Iranian friends, and the latter utilized at work and society at large as a cultural tool for social/economic survival and advancement outside the ethnic enclave. Third, Iowa City Iranians tend to be receptive to American secular and religious events and rituals. However, none of these events or rituals have become internalized in terms of their social, historical and religious significance. Fourth, the majority of Iranians refuse to be acknowledged as “Americans,” a populist and, at times, patriotic honorable label given to fully assimilated and settled immigrants. Fifth, they tend to socialize and establish close and intimate friendship ties mostly with Americans of non-European origin. Finally, the majority of parents raise their children (or intend to do so in the future) based on Iranian cultural values.

A final note on the findings in this project – when asked to rank order the most pressing social problems facing Iranians in the United States, respondents identified “adjustment to American society” (68% of men and 60% of women) and “social isolation and loneliness” (52% of men and 46.7% of women) as two most important issues of concern. While a longer stay in the United States for pre-1979 immigrants seems to have eased the problem of isolation, psychological depression, and loneliness may signal a more serious problem of the existence of a subtle but pervasive forms of prejudice and discrimination against them in rural areas on the one hand, and their failure to blend into the greater society on the other. Added to this problem is the introverted and reserved nature of the Iranian social and cultural values that do not sanction professional counseling for the socially distressed and emotionally depressed Iranian immigrants. This important issue has not been seriously researched and merits close and careful attention by scholars interested in Iranian immigrants’ social experience, well-being, and mental health in the United States.

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