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Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Iranians in the United States*

FOR SECOND-GENERATION IRANIANS IN THE UNITED STATES THE question of identity is not as easily settled as it is for their parents. Their parents claim they are genuine Iranians because they were born and raised in Iran, they relate to Iranian culture more than to American culture, they were active members of the Iranian society for decades, they might still have immediate family members in Iran, and they still hope to go back there someday. Are second-generation Iranian youths able to make these claims? Do they think of themselves as Iranians? Apart from the fact that some were born in Iran, might still know the Persian language, and are familiar with some aspects of Iranian culture, what else about these young people makes them distinctly Iranian?

Sociological studies of immigrants indicate that the first generation’s pattern of adaptation is quite different from that of the second and third.¹ In general, while first-generation immigrants make a concerted effort to retain some elements of their native culture, the second generation tries only halfheartedly to adopt its parental culture. The third generation’s efforts are minimal and often symbolic. An exception to this pattern is the case of those immigrants who have maintained steady contacts with the homeland or have a steady flow of their co-nationals coming to the host society.

The pattern of adaptation of Iranians in the United States seems to be closer to the rule than to the exception. Second-generation Iranians, raised by one or two Iranian parents, living among Americans in urban environments, going to schools with predominantly white middle-class Americans, and increasingly adopting American lifestyles and cultural norms, are developing a unique identity quite different from their parents. Many of these youths were born in the United States and have never seen Iran. Many others have a very vague notion of Iran and the Iranian culture from their early childhood in Iran. Still others can count on their fingers the number of Iranians they know. Given the emphasis that older generation Iranians place on Persian culture and traditions, what is the identity of these youths? To what extent are they responding to parental expectations for maintaining their national heritage?

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* I would like to thank Ohio Wesleyan University for providing funds for mailing the survey on which this article is based, those Iranian cultural organizations and individuals who assisted me in the distribution of this survey, and Maboud Ansari, Ahmad Khalili, and Mehrdad Saba for their assistance and advice in various stages of this project.

This paper examines the concept of ethnic identity, or what most Iranian popular literature has referred to as cultural or national identity, in the context of a national survey of second-generation Iranian youths in the United States.

**The Quest for Identity**

An examination of the bylaws, constitutions, and “the statements of purpose” of twelve Iranian cultural associations in the United States by this author found “preservation of the Iranian identity” to be the most frequently cited rationale for the existence of these organizations and their community activities. The opening song at Iranian New Year parties, *Yalda* Nights, *Mehregan* Festivals, and weekly lecture series in many of these societies is the well known “*Ey Iran*” — a nationalist song eliciting the love of the homeland. The *Iran Times*, the most widely circulated weekly in Persian and English, published in Washington, D.C., and distributed widely among Iranian immigrants around the world, carries a quotation by German novelist Hermann Hesse (1877–1962), describing the love of the homeland as the energy that circulates the blood in one’s body. My examination of thirty-two weekly, monthly, and quarterly Persian magazines published outside Iran found that four poems were frequently cited: “*Ey Iran*” by Hossein Golegolaab, “I Love the Iranian Land Like My Soul” by Adibeh Bromand, “I Love You, My Old Country” by Mehdi Akhavan Sales, and “This Is Not My Home” by M. M. Saloor. The most often repeated theme in the poetry and music of Iranian immigrants is the pain of separation from the native land — a nostalgia for what has been left behind. Relying on the Prophet Mohammad’s saying that “love of the country flows from the faith,” even the Iranian religious papers are full of articles proclaiming the necessity of devotion to the homeland.

How can we explain this widespread sense of belonging to and love of a land which some left voluntarily? It is not hard to understand, if we take into account that the Iranians coming to the United States carry with them a rich cultural background and a strong sense of patriotism. Once in diaspora, Iranians, like ethnic groups in similar situations, attempt to use their cultural heritage both as a support for and as a shield against the challenges of adaptation in the host society. In a pluralistic society like the United States, national or cultural identification becomes an important source of individual and group protection against the forces of assimilation.

2. These organizations were in Ohio, Illinois, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Michigan, Colorado, Texas, South Carolina, Kentucky, Washington, D.C., and Florida.

3. These papers include Aflaab, Asre Emrooz, Asheghaneh, Ava', Ayeneh, Bida'r, Cheka'meh, Gha'sedak, Golchin, Iran News, Iran Star, Iran Times, Iranians, Irankhabar, Isfand, Javanian, Kayhan, Mirass-e-Iran, Naja', Neda, Nimrooz, Par, Parastoo, Payam-e-Ashena, Payvand, Payam-e-Iran, Pazhvack, Rangarang, Rouzegar-e-Now, Shahrvand, Sohre-Iran, and Tofigh Ejbart.

The Persian magazines and journals published by Iranian immigrants exhibit a pervasive desire for future generations to retain the Persian language and culture. Iranian parents do not see their children's Persian proficiency as a marketable skill. Rather, they see it as the only effective medium through which their culture can be transmitted to their children.

This paper contends that popular approaches to Iranian national, cultural, or ethnic identity have been essentialist, static, monolithic, and idealistic.\(^5\) These approaches draw selectively on isolated instances of national traditions, failing to contextualize these instances historically, spatially, or conceptually. They often ignore the vast array of patterns and instances that might contradict their claims to a homogeneous, cohesive, and expanded notion of identity. Some even conjure up the "unconscious Iranian identity" of Americans of Iranian origin who identify themselves only as "American," erroneously assuming that the Iranian element in these youths will somehow conquer the cultural influences of the host society. This notion of Iranian national identity also discounts the historical changes in behavioral and attitudinal traits of the Iranian population and ignores the multiplicity of norms, values, and behavioral attributes of the diverse Iranian population. While there are unifying features whose presence make an "Iranian identity" possible, various ethnic, religious, and linguistic Iranian subgroups living in the United States also display distinct features that make broad generalizations problematic. Iranians in the United States are a diverse demographic and sociocultural population who have left their home country under various circumstances, for different reasons, and with dissimilar goals and objectives.

Furthermore, this characterization idealizes the Iranian community and ignores its contradictory normative and behavioral features. Its notion of national or cultural identity reflects an illusory harmonious community. There is no reference to the diversity, contradictions, tensions, and anomalies within this culture. Iranian culture, like any other culture, should be viewed in terms of its diversity, its changing character, and its contradictory elements. Once we take such a dynamic and relational approach to cultural identity, we do not find ourselves in the difficult position of having to explain—as much of the debate attempts to do today—whether Iranian culture is predominantly religious, 

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5. Examples of this notion of identity can be found in the following: Ismaeel Rafiee, "Biganhe Ashen'a" (The Known Stranger) and Masaud Jabani, "Moshkela'te Koodakan-e Irani dar Khaarej az Keshvar" (Problems Facing Iranian Children Abroad), Mirasse-Iran 2 (Summer,1996); Hormoz Mansouri, "Hadaf Chist... Maqsood Kojaa Ast" (What is the Purpose? Where is the Destination?), Mirasse-Iran 6 (Summer 1997); Maboud Ansari, "Iranian dar Amrika, Shenakht-e Waqiatyaneh Jame'e"h." (Iranians in America. Knowing the Facts of Society), Iran Times 26, Nos. 32–42 (October 18–December 27, 1996); Ezzy Yermian, "Sare khod ra' ba'la' begireem" (Let's Keep Our Heads Straight), Ispand 5, No. 17 (1994); Nemat Mirzazadeh, "Baznegari-e Farhang-e Meli," "A New Look at National Identity," Shahrvand 321; and Dr. Hossein Azadi (Zartosht), "Amoozesh va Parwarash-e Koodakan-e Irani dar Amrika" (The Education of Iranian Children in America), Mirasse-Iran 4 (Winter 1996).

6. Ansari, "Iranian dar Amrika."
national, secular, democratic, etc. This unrealistic notion of cultural identity has consistently divided the Iranian community, whether in the context of their attempts to organize life in the diaspora or in opposition to the Iranian government. They have remained divided partly because of their inability to account for this diversity in their political goals and the language they use to articulate them.

I contend that this unrealistic notion of Iranian culture complicates the transfer of culture to second-generation Iranians in the United States. As this study shows, Iranian immigrants have been successful in promoting an Iranian identity among their children. However, such an identity corresponds neither to these immigrants' unrealistic expectations nor their idealistic definition of "Iranian."

Definitions

For the purpose of this study I have adopted Portes and Schauffler's synthetic definition of second generation as "either youths born in the United States with at least one foreign-born parent or youths who were born abroad but had lived in the United States for at least five years." While the concept of "second generation" does not imply any age limit, my empirical reference in the research reported here is a cohort of age 11 to 35 who have either been born in the United States or migrated to this country at an early age along with their parents.

In this study, identity is defined as a concept of how individuals define themselves in terms of their affiliation with and commitment to a social group, sociocultural system, politico-national entity, and ethnic community. Such an affiliation involves behavioral and attitudinal expectations for specific situations. Ethnic identity, as an umbrella concept for both cultural and national identity, refers to the identification with a specific ancestry, ethnicity, history, culture, language, or religion. Cultural identity refers to identification with the symbols of a culture and the acceptance and practice of a large portion of its values, norms, and rituals. National identity refers to allegiance to and identification with a real national entity and its symbolic ingredients.

7. For an excellent discussion of the idea of "national identity" in the context of Iranian history see two issues of Iran Nameh 12, Nos. 3 and 4 (Summer and Fall 1994), and Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Contesting Nationalist Constructions of Iranian Identity," Critique 12 (Spring 1998). For the debate on the religious, secular or national nature of this identity see Ali Akbar Mahdi, "Farhang-e Irani: Orfi, Mazhabi, ya Meli?" (Iranian Culture: Secular, Religious, or National?), Arash 23–24 (January–February 1993).


For adolescent and young adult second-generation Iranians it becomes extremely important to develop a positive and coherent sense of identity that responds not only to their developmental needs but also to their roles as sons or daughters of Iranian immigrants. Although this article avoids theoretical discussion of issues surrounding the concept of identity, several points must be mentioned in passing. First, the process of identity formation is not unilinear; identity is a multilayered phenomenon. Second, most individuals have multiple identities and use them intermittently. Third, identities are largely social constructs and subject to situational and historical change. Fourth, identities are discursive and subject to negotiations in situations of both opportunities and constraints.10

Sample and Methodology

A questionnaire with 50 closed-ended questions was designed in order to assess the Persian language proficiency of second-generation Iranians in the United States, identification with Iranian culture, ethnic attachment, and practice of religious duties. One thousand copies of this questionnaire were distributed among subjects in 44 states in 1997. Four hundred and one completed questionnaires were received, representing a respectable return rate of 40.1 percent.

Since obtaining a large random sample of youths of Iranian descent in the United States was beyond the means of this project, contact people were identified in 44 states who could distribute the instrument among Iranian youths in their communities. Most contact persons were individuals involved in cultural or educational activities with Iranian youths. Twenty-nine percent of the questionnaires were distributed in Persian language classes being taught during weekends in various communities around the country, 28 percent were mailed directly to members of Iranian cultural associations, 31 percent were distributed in the monthly meetings of these associations, 8 percent were distributed to youths present in various settings where the researcher was present, and the remaining 4 percent responded to a call on the Internet.

In all cases, respondents were provided with an addressed and stamped envelope in order that their completed questionnaire could be easily and anonymously returned. Respondents were told that they could receive a copy of the results if they sent their address either with the questionnaire or separately. Thirty-seven of the 48 respondents who seized this opportunity were interviewed by phone in a follow-up inquiry. These included 11 females and 26 males aged 17 to 26. The interviews focused on respondents' perceptions of Iranian culture and identity and social problems facing Iranian youths in the United States. The closed-ended format of the questions in the instrument, which was chosen in order to increase the response rate among young respondents, limited respondents who might have wished to elaborate their responses. The follow-up interviews counterbalanced this limitation to some extent.

Since the selection of respondents was in part determined by their participation in Iranian cultural or organizational activities, the sample is biased against more assimilated Iranians who avoid these organizations and activities. A second form of sample bias is geographical distribution. A little over 15 percent of the respondents lived in California and slightly less than 14 percent in Ohio, while the remaining states each represented between 8 percent (Michigan) and 0.5 percent (Vermont) of the sample. This sample, of course, does not correspond to the geographical distribution of Iranians in the United States.¹¹

The sample size of most studies of Iranian immigrants has been small.¹² Still, given the non-random nature of the sample, the results of this study are suggestive rather than definitive. Clearly, more research on this subject is needed.

The Profile of Respondents

The sample included 183 (45.6%) male and 218 (54.4%) female respondents with a mean age of 17.6 and median of 17. Half of the sample (51.3%) was born in Iran, 45 percent in the United States, and 3 percent in other countries, the largest of these being the United Kingdom (1.5%). About 85 percent of respondents had parents born in Iran. If the parents were not Iranian then they were most likely American (85%), British (8%), or one of four other nationalities. For those born in Iran, the mean age of arrival in the United States was 4.3 years; their stay here amounted to an average of 13 years. Given the mean age of the sample, this statistic demonstrates that the majority of respondents have spent most of their lives in the United States.

The majority of subjects in the sample (59.7%) were Muslim, 8.2 percent Christian (of various denominations), 4.3 percent Jewish, 4.1 percent Zoroastrian, and 4.3 percent Bahai. The remaining 20 percent of the sample chose "other" as answer, specifying that they "do not believe in religion." More than one-fourth of the sample (27%) were in middle school, one-fourth in high school (27.6%), and the rest (45.4%) were either in college or had already completed a college degree. Two thirds of the sample were U.S. citizens, one-fourth legal residents holding green cards, while the legal status of the remaining 6 percent was unclear. These respondents were either in a transitional stage from one type of status to another, citizens of countries other than the United States or Iran, or living in the United States with temporary visas.

While two-thirds (65.7%) of the sample planned to stay in the United States permanently, close to one-third (29.1%) were undecided on this issue, and only 5.2 percent were determined to go back to Iran. Some 91 percent of the

¹¹ See articles by Bozorgmehr and Modarres in this issue.

respondents had relatives in the United States, indicating both a chain migration and the existence of some family support, though more than half of these relatives (55%) lived in locations different from those of the respondents.

**Ethnic Identity and Culture**

The majority of the subjects were comfortable in basing their master identity, i.e., the identity that stands out in most situations, on their Iranian roots. Respondents were asked to identify with one of the following four categories: "Iranian," "Iranian-American," "American," and "other." Half of the respondents (51.8%) identified themselves as "Iranian-American," a third (32.4%) as "Iranian," and only 10.7 percent as American. The remaining 5.1 percent chose "other," with only three specifications: Iranian-British, Iranian-Arab, and Kurdish. Identification with Iranian roots was not limited to those who were born in Iran. In fact, of those who were born in the United States only 16.2 percent identified themselves as American. About the same number (17.7%) viewed themselves as "Iranian," while 61.6 percent considered themselves "Iranian-American." Interestingly, of those born in Iran, only about half (48.0%) viewed themselves as "Iranian." The majority of the remaining respondents viewed themselves as "Iranian-American" (61.6%). Similarly, the majority of respondents (76.0%) considered themselves bilingual, 20.2 percent as English-speaking, and only 3.8 percent as Persian-speaking. Interestingly enough, there was no significant variation in responses in terms of gender. There was about a 5 percent decrease in female identification as "American" which was compensated for in a 5 percent increase in the "other" category.

Figure 1 presents correlation coefficients between ethnic identification as Iranian and other variables. As shown in this figure, there is a strong relationship between ethnic identification and the concentration of co-ethnic population. In California, where one-third of Iranians reside and where Iranians interact more often, the percentage of those identifying themselves as "Iranian" is 21 percent higher. Similar results are seen in northern Virginia and Washington, D.C., where there are larger concentrations of Iranians with the facilities for teaching Persian, developing cultural activities, and organizing national festivities.

There is also a moderate level of correlation between identification of oneself solely as either Iranian or American and the tendency to speak only Persian or English. One's legal status also has a slight connection with one's identification. Those who have not obtained permanent residence status in the United States or are unsure of their future status are more likely to identify themselves as "Iranian" rather than "Iranian-American." There is also a moderate correlation between parental place of birth and identification with country of origin.

There is a moderate correlation between identification as American and the amount of time spent in the United States. The greater the number of years lived in the United States, the less likely is the individual to identify himself or herself only as "Iranian." While 62 percent of those having stayed less than 10 years in the United States identified themselves as "Iranian," the figure for those having stayed 11 to 28 years was 31 percent. Conversely, while no one with less than 10 years of stay in the United States identified himself or herself as
Figure 1

Correlates of Iranian Identity Among Second-Generation Iranians in the United States

- Speak Persian at Home: 0.357
- Parents Speak Persian at Home: 0.338
- Speak Persian with Friends: 0.303
- Parents' Birth Place: 0.280
- Speak Persian in Presence of Americans: 0.264
- Time in the U.S.: -0.252*
- Legal Status in the U.S.: 0.191
- Initiate Dialogue in Persian: 0.137
- Attend Iranian Ceremonies: 0.125
- Have Iranian Friends: 0.116
- Taken Language Lessons: 0.100**

* This is a negative correlation.
** All significance levels at 0.01 except this one at 0.05.
“American,” 13.2 percent of those with 11 to 28 years of stay identified themselves as “American.”

Identification with the Iranian culture/nationality is also correlated with a host of interactional factors facilitating the application of Iranian cultural elements. The frequency of these activities is reported in Table 1. These factors include the number of one’s Iranian friends, whether one speaks Persian with parents at home, whether one’s parents speak Persian with each other at home, whether one initiates conversation in Persian at home, whether one is comfortable speaking Persian in the presence of American friends, and whether one attends Iranian ceremonies and cultural activities. The more respondents were engaged in these activities, the more likely they were to identify themselves as either “Iranian” or “Iranian-American.” The more parents had engaged their children in cultural and social activities associated with Iranian culture and community, the more successful they were in creating a sense of appreciation for their culture among their children. This was especially true for activities in which the native language was used as the medium of interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Never (%)</th>
<th>Rarely (%)</th>
<th>Sometimes (%)</th>
<th>Regularly (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious Duties</td>
<td></td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Sacred Book</td>
<td></td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>07.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussing Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending Iranian Festivities</td>
<td></td>
<td>05.1</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>48.3</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Lessons in Persian Language</td>
<td></td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>33.5*</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Reading Persian to Children</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>35.4**</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These percentages are based on responses to the categories of “never,” “several months,” “about a year,” and “several years.” Changing the latter three categories to present ones is a post-facto adjustment for presentation of the material in the same table.

** The original categories for this question were “never,” “rarely,” “once a while,” and “every night.” Their representation in the above form is for summary presentation in the same table.

In the follow-up interviews, respondents were asked to use three words characterizing an Iranian, as opposed to an American. The responses of all 37 subjects can be categorized into 19 words and 28 phrases. Of all characterizations offered by respondents, there were only four that occurred five times or more: emotional, suspicious, polite, and hospitable. Over half of the respondents could not come up with more than two words. More than one-third of responses contained some kind of reference to the significance of “family” among Iranians.
One-third of the characterizations were negative, such as "noisy," "chauvinist," and "hypocrite."

**Prejudice Against Iranians**

Respondents were asked whether they were treated differently in school because of their parental national origin. Contrary to the popular perception that all Iranians are subject to widespread prejudicial attitudes because of hostile relations between the United States and Iran, the data indicate that such attitudes, while frequently present, are not as pervasive among youths as commonly thought. The responses to this question were: 2.8 percent all the time, 2.1 percent most of the time, 27.7 percent sometimes, 29.6 percent rarely, and 37.8 percent never. These results did not vary significantly by gender. When asked whether they have suffered derogatory remarks because of their national origin, 36.8 percent of the respondents answered "yes." Those who were called names were asked to specify what names had been used for them. In total, 49 different names were cited, of which only four names had a frequency of more than ten. These words were "terrorist" (frequency = 45), "camel jockey" (36), "Arab" (12) and "sandnigger" (10). Over one-fourth of those subjected to this name-calling commented that the labels had been used in a friendly and joking manner.

**Transfer of Ethnic Culture**

As indicated earlier, Iranian parents have a strong desire to transmit their values and culture to their children. A set of questions was developed regarding parents' desire for transferring their native language to their children, their efforts to educate their children about their culture by taking them to Iran, reading magazines, books, and religious scriptures to their children in the native language, discussing religion at home, performing religious duties, attending language lessons, and family interaction in the United States.

As table 1 indicates, Iranian parents in the U.S. do not try seriously to discuss or transmit religion. While they have a better record in reading Iranian books to their children, they have little success in getting their children to read Iranian magazines and books. Given their low language competency, the ability of these children to access religious books on their own is limited.

In terms of their knowledge of Persian, on a scale of 1 (none) to 6 (excellent), respondents characterized their listening as "very good" (Mean = 5.04, S.D. = 1.19), speaking as "good" (Mean = 4.47, S.D. = 1.25), and writing as "fair" (Mean = 2.99, S.D. = 1.53). While more than half (53.6%) of these respondents would "love to know Persian well," close to another half (44.5%) finds no time for or no interest in improving their language competency. Parents' reaction to their children's level of language competence is not much different, as reported by their children. Reportedly, while half of the parents (54.7%) wished their children knew more Persian, 21.5 percent had neither time nor opportunity to help their children learn more, 19.9 percent were satisfied with their children's current level of competence, and the remaining 3.9 percent of parents did not care.

As for the number of visits to Iran and the duration of those visits, two-thirds of the sample had visited Iran for an average of two times. The average
stay for each visit was two months. Given that the respondents who were born
in Iran have stayed on average 13 years in the United States and that mean age of
the entire sample was 17.6 years, the number of visits to Iran and the duration of
those stays in Iran were surprisingly low.

Ethnic Identity and Stereotypes of Iranians in the United States

For Iranian youths, the process of identity formation has added difficulties and
challenges because of the very nature of the culture and society from which their
parents originate. In securing an identity for themselves, second-generation
Iranians have to confront several problems. Given the history of strained
relations between Iran and the United States, ever since the Iranian revolution,
and in particular the seizure of the American Embassy in 1980, images of
Iranians as terrorists, fanatics, anti-American, unpredictable, and wild have
dominated the minds of the American public.  

These negative images have affected Iranians in the United States in different
ways. On the one hand, it has made them more conscious of their own identity,
thus necessitating self-reflection and identity-preservasion. Out-group hostility of
one group often generates in-group solidarity in the other group. Faced with a
cool reception during the time American hostages were held in Tehran in the
early 1980s, many Iranians looked to each other for protection and support.
Becoming victims of a hostility rooted in ideology, history, and nationalism,
and labeled as “terrorists” and “camel jockeys,” Iranians began to reflect more on
their cultural resources as sources of pride and self-preservasion.

On the other hand, these negative experiences have taken their toll on
Iranians, especially during the hostage crisis when prejudice and discrimination
against Iranians became more pronounced. This is especially difficult for second-
generation Iranians, who have been raised in a negatively charged environment
through no choice of their own. They have to shoulder the weight of the
negative images associated with their parents’ nationality, despite being born or
raised in the United States.  

Even though the data in this sample indicate that
the magnitude of discrimination and prejudice is not as high as parents often
think, these negative images still have a serious impact on the Iranian youths’
identity formation. Confrontation with these stereotypical images may result in
a stigmatized and depreciated identity.

Iranian Identity and Cultural Conflicts

Aside from the general conflicts of values, fear of change, and pains of growth,
Iranian immigrants’ lives have been overshadowed by the experience of conflicts
arising from the tensions between tradition and modernity, religion and state, and
East and West. These conflicts affect the way in which these parents raise their
children, thus influencing these children’s nascent identities. For example, the

13. See chapters by Jane Campbell, Linda K. Fuller, and Hamid Naficy in Yahya R.
Kamalipour, ed., The U.S. Media and the Middle East: Image and Perception
(Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997). Also see Y. R. Kamalipour, “Window of

Iranian revolution has made many Iranians hostile, suspicious, or indifferent toward religion. Approximately 20 percent of the respondents in this study indicated that they do not consider themselves adherents of any religion. The post-revolutionary flight of a large number of Iranians abroad is partially due to the Islamization of the Iranian society. Many of these Iranians have chosen to live in the United States or in other Western countries because they reject living in a theocratic society. As Sabagh and Bozorgmehr have shown, given the choice between a religious and a secular national identity, only a small number of Iranians in Los Angeles identify themselves as Muslim. Data presented in table 1 reveal a low level of religious activities among the respondents. Most Iranian immigrants, even those with religious convictions, are basically secular and do not wish to mix religion with politics and education. Disillusioned with the religious establishment in Iran, most Iranian immigrants emphasize culture more than religion in their children’s socialization. In the absence of clear direction from their parents, second-generation Iranians must guess their parental religious orientation and develop their own notion of Muslim identity.

Related to these problems are the differences between cultures. Though familiar with most of the material aspects of modern life in the West, many Iranians are uncomfortable with some of the values and traditions of their new host country. While first-generation Iranians continue to maintain many cultural values and practices in all areas of their life, second-generation Iranians are inevitably touched, influenced, and sometimes even bound by these values and traditions. However, some of these values and practices are diametrically opposed to the American way of life and are not readily accepted by Iranian youths. Some Iranian youths have difficulty resolving the different and sometimes contradictory cultural demands made on them. Two of the respondents’ comments illustrate this well:

My parents are concerned about their cultural survival. I am about mine. I know and care a lot about their culture but they know and care little about mine. They think they are still in Iran. They have to understand that they have no choice but to soak up Americana—it’s our future. They may choose to be buried in Iran but I know no one in Iran. I was born here and will die here too.

My parents expect too much. They want me to be exceptional. They want a girl who knows all Iranian social etiquettes. They want to control my sex life. They want me to come home right after school and still be ahead of everybody else in the classroom. They cannot see how unreasonable their demands are.

While the high achievement of many second-generation Iranians in the United States indicates that many of them have apparently managed this tension successfully, some have experienced considerable difficulties reaching a happy medium between these divergent demands. The latter are often haunted by feelings of betrayal, shame, and ostracism. These concerns have serious consequences for the growth and development of the personalities of Iranian youth in the United States.

The Reality of the Ideal Culture

Based on what we know so far about Iranian youths, they are drawing some ideas from the stock of their parental culture. Their references to these cultural objects and symbols are selective, situational, interpretive, and often symbolic. They understand Iranian culture in their own terms, relating to it when suitable and appropriating from it what is relevant to and desirable for them. Here is how two respondents defined their Iranian identities:

I am an Iranian because my parents are from Iran and I love Iranian food and music. My uncles live in Iran...and my dad still owns some property there.

I am an Iranian because my name is Iranian, we talk Farsi at home, we believe in Islam, we have many Persian paintings and handcrafts, and we eat a lot of Persian food. I have never visited Iran but I am told it is a heaven of love and hospitality.

This selective and interpretive identification is not unique to these youths; their parents’ representation of Iranian culture in the United States also conforms to this pattern. All the observable elements of Iranian culture in Southern California, where the most concentrated and largest Iranian population is located, are indicative of a “transplanted culture.” As a reconstituted reality, these cultural elements are selective, more appropriate to the lifestyle of the immigrants in the host society, and consistent with their outlook on Iranian culture.

In many cases Iranian immigrants even give new meanings to some of the traditional concepts in Iranian culture. For instance, disapproving of the Islamic Republic in Iran, many Iranians begin their cultural festivities in the United States not with the official national anthem but with the "Eye Iran" song. The flag used in these ceremonies represents neither the present nor the past government in Iran. This newly constituted "imagined culture" is, of course, reproduced in terms of its desirability, feasibility, and appropriateness in the new


cultural context. These creative interpretations and transformations take place in a cultural gray area where norms and values are blurred and structural controls are minimal. The new bicultural literature is full of examples of experiences in these free zones where values and norms overlap and provide opportunities for creative synthesis.18

Survey data also show that there is a relatively strong relationship between a higher degree of familiarity with the Iranian culture, residential concentration, and frequency of interaction. Respondents living in California, where there are a large community of Iranians and more interaction between Iranians, show a better understanding of Iranian culture and language than those living in isolated communities where there are fewer Iranians. Of course, respondents' sense of Iranian culture and its relevance to their personal and social identity varies widely depending on the characteristics of their family, such as ethnicity, class, religion, and degree of geographical isolation.

In spite of its elusiveness, the popular notion of Iranian culture has permeated most Iranian immigrants' perception of their cultural inheritance. Many parents invest time, money, and energy promoting the idea of "Iranian identity" among their children. As the data indicate, the more second-generation Iranians are exposed to their parental native language, the more likely they are to identify themselves as Iranian or Iranian-American and be proud of their ancestry. Interaction with Iranian friends and relatives also helps these youths to develop closer affinity with their parental roots.

Nevertheless, several factors are working against Iranian immigrants' desire for transmitting a satisfactory degree of their cultural heritage to their children in a desired manner. The diversity and pace of modern life in the United States have taken a toll on many of these immigrants, who have come to the United States in their early to middle age and have had to work hard to achieve their professional goals in a short period of time. Their professional status and middle-to upper-middle-class lifestyle do not leave much time and energy for a dedicated and focused attention to the transfer of social and cultural skills not relevant to their immediate concerns of daily life.

The Myth of the Ideal Culture

As argued earlier, much of Iranian immigrants' sense of native culture and ethnic identity is rooted in nostalgia and idealization of their homeland. To a great extent, the characteristics of this "culture," and the subsequent "identity" it is meant to generate, are "imagined" and perceived in contradistinction to an "other."19 The kind of "culture" referred to in the popular literature dealing with

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18. The most dynamic and representative examples of this experimentation can be found in The Iranian and Chanteh, where second-generation youths are engaged in lively dialogical interpretation of their parental culture and history. For theoretical works on this issue, see Hamid Naficy, The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles; and Homi K. Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between," in Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, eds., Questions of Cultural Identity (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 53-60.

19. Although my discussion is based on Anderson's theoretical works, my argument here applies only to the characterization of the Iranian culture by the
the question of the identity of Iranian children does not correspond to a concrete historical entity found in a specific time and place in Iranian history. It is imagined in the sense that it is selective, abstract, idealized, and partially reinvented. This literature does not make clear what it is that makes these youths Iranians rather than Americans. For example, an educator identifies Iranian values that, along with other elements of the Iranian culture such as history and religion, should be transmitted to the second generation. These values include good deeds as prescribed in Zoroastrian religion, national solidarity, public service, modesty, and a happy and positive outlook on life.20

Some of the most observable elements of this culture are Iranian poetry, Persian language, and a constellation of socioreligious norms about which there is little consensus among Iranians themselves. While these elements do indeed form part of a Persian national heritage, the values characterized as Iranian are in fact found—to different degrees—in all cultures. An emphasis and de-emphasis on them can be found in the historical ebb and flow of each society. The moralistic values juxtaposed to the dominant values of the host society to which many respondents resorted can in fact be found both in Iran and the United States. The degree to which characteristics such as honesty, respect for the elderly, and concern for the family are prevalent in Iranian society and absent in American society is difficult to assess. The ambiguity, arbitrariness, and imagined aspects of this “culture” are not lost on the second generation. Here is how a respondent characterized Iranian culture:

I really do not know who an Iranian is. To me Iranian probably means contradiction. My dad is an Iranian who moved his business to this country fifteen years ago. He says he is an Iranian and would be mad if one was to characterize him differently. He has become an American citizen, changed his name, become a strong Republican who wishes the invasion of Iran and the replacement of mullahs’ government by the United States, transferred all his assets to this country, assisted the departure of all his family members from Iran, and watches the most vulgar shows on television. You tell me what of this is Iranian. I understand that he believes his generosity toward his family is a great Iranian tradition, but I see a lot more selfishness in him than generosity. He is only Iranian in the sense that he cares about his own family a lot and loves chelow kabab. I guess if I can deduce anything Iranian from his behavior it would be contradiction.


The notion of "Iranian identity" found among second-generation Iranians is more symbolic than behavioral.²¹ It is symbolic because values, norms, and symbols representing Iranian culture are not as easily accessible to these youths as they are to their parents. One's cultural identity is often determined by the degree to which one gains access to the objectified elements of a culture. This behavioral access is possible only through contacts, practices, and use of those norms, values, and symbols, which are unavailable to Iranian youths in diverse U.S. communities. Los Angeles is the only American city that offers such a community.

Given the uprooting of their parents, the globalization and pluralization of American society, and the absence of local and regular interactions with fellow Iranians, second-generation Iranians find their identity subjected to the divergent claims of two cultures, two generations, two social contexts, and multiple factors arising from the intersection of their unique parental biography, social class, and cultural heritage. These youths ask themselves, "Why do Persian people look at me as American and Americans look at me as Persian, or Iranian?"²² As one youth put it:

I was in pain and I was confused, torn between two different worlds. . . I existed as an entity in search of a self. . . I struggled with the question of how I could even succeed being Iranian, while living in an American world.²³

Furthermore, the identities of these youths are influenced by the hegemony of a utilitarian attitude toward communal obligations and social interaction in the United States. Identity is usually anchored in the relationships from which it draws its content, i.e., the relationship with one's "significant others." If much of Iranian youths' daily interactions and conversation are in English and with "others" who lack appreciation of their parental culture, they may find it difficult to relate to the Iranian culture. Says one of the respondents:

I am an Iranian by birth, an Iranian-American at home, and an American in the public. Overall, I am an American because I carry American thoughts and assumptions with me, even when I am looking at Iranian culture. I don't know how to think like Iranians.

While their parents have realistically lost their "home," these youths have a vague notion of parental "home" and a relatively ambivalent feeling about it. While "home" is here, they are expected to give allegiance to the "home in the distance." What aspects or elements of this distant home resonate within them? Where is their language of self-identification grounded, in the culture of the

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21. Ansari, "Iranian dar Amrika."
“imagined home” or the “extant home”? Some Iranian youths have shown an ambivalent sense of their heritage. While they are proud of their family roots, they are not quite sure what those roots consist of. Many have never seen their relatives and grandparents. Many speak of “a hole in their memory” and “blurred lines in their past.” A second-generation Iranian writes:

I now understand why going to Iran has been so important to me in these past years. It is not going to a place where everyone speaks your language. English is my language as much as Persian is. It is not going to be a place where you feel you belong. I feel very attached to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and know its streets probably better than I know any street in Tehran. It is definitely not going among people who are culturally close to me. The multicultural environment I live in here is more sensitive and more tolerant than any community I am a part of in Iran. It’s strange because as a second-generation Iranian, the States has a more permanent feel to it than Iran does; I am always a guest in Iran. More than anything else, the attraction is that Iran is and contains my beginning, my history, and my past.24

Given that most Iranian youths’ exposure to the Persian language is oral rather than written, and given the generally low level of proficiency of these youths in this language, it is difficult to imagine how these youths can maintain the elements of a culture that they cannot fully understand, and a culture whose semantic community they are not sufficiently in contact with. Language is an important element of identity and a medium for expressing one’s experiences, perceptions, and desires. First-generation immigrant parents often continue to converse in their native language to remain in contact with their native culture and to draw on its cultural objects for the construction of their lives in their new host country. However, for second-generation Iranians such actions are extremely difficult, if not impossible. Not only are their linguistic and cultural interactions with their parental culture very limited, but their access to a linguistically Iranian community in the United States is also limited by their geographical dispersion.

Since second-generation Iranians in the United States live among people with values different from those of the idealized culture, and since they are often suffering from an interaction deficit with their fellow Iranians, thus not practicing and reinforcing the norms and values of the idealized culture, they must discover for themselves what it means to be an Iranian, a Muslim, or an Iranian-American.25 Thus, it is not surprising that we find a very individualized and even segmented notion of identity among second-generation Iranians who write about their identity in the diaspora. Respondents’ definitions of “Iranian,”


as some quoted here, are so varied, interpretative, and arbitrary that it is hard even to categorize them.26 The desire to have an individualized notion of identity represents the paradoxical nature of biculturalism. While these immigrants want to disassociate themselves from traditional affiliations, they also desire some connection with their ethnic community.

Conclusion

The record of Iranian immigrants in developing a sense of ethnic identity and community is mixed. While they often express a strong desire for the preservation of their cultural heritage, they show no significant resistance to the assimilating forces of the host society. The diversified occupational character of these immigrants, along with their high rate of mobility, has worked against a singular geographical community. Though it is not necessary for a community to share a territory in order to demonstrate its collective consciousness, residential diffusion does reduce the intensity of social interaction, thus weakening the sense of ethnic identity. As Portes and Schauffler have shown,27 immigrant children who live in predominantly English-speaking communities lose their native language skills much faster than those immigrant children who reside together with a large contingent of their co-nationals. As the data in this study show, while the majority of respondents in the sample could speak and comprehend Persian, more than 60 percent could neither read nor write it. For these youths to have a better sense of their parental culture and history, more concerted efforts are needed.

Given the twenty years of political hostility between the United States and Iran, which has had a negative effect on the movement of people between the two countries, and most Iranian immigrants’ dislike of the Iranian culture represented by the Islamic Republic government in Iran, second-generation Iranians have come to have a less clear perception of their ancestral land and its cultural dynamics. A strong desire to transfer Iranian culture to the second generation is the first necessary step for encouraging the second generation to develop an Iranian identity. However, such an identity cannot develop in the absence of a clear definition of Iranian culture and its structural elements in a foreign country. The Iranian immigrants’ notion of their culture and desire to develop an Iranian identity among their children have been excessively idealistic. Second-generation Iranians have shown a strong interest in maintaining a sense of their ancestral roots and culture. However, such a desire is predicated on an Americanized understanding of Iranian culture and conditioned by the characteristics of the American multicultural society.


To capture the essence of my argument, I end with an exemplary poem by a second-generation Iranian:

My father has shown to me the brushstrokes of over ten artisans in a Shahnameh manuscript
calling the artists my brothers.

My father has shown to me the mighty sculptures of the Apadana in Persepolis
calling this the home of my ancestors.

He has shown to me the symmetrical designs of Nishapur ceramics.

He has read to me the poetry of Hafez, Khayam and Saadi that I was not able to understand and said to me

my daughter, this is Iran.

My elementary schoolbooks called Iran “Formally known as Persia, with a 2,000-year-old history. Today in political and religious turmoil.”

In college, Iran was “dangerous, going through severe changes, anti-west, and involved in many terrorist attacks.”

Where in my heart and mind do I mesh my idealistic and realistic visions of my motherland, Iran.28

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