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The Lived Experience of Recent Iranian Graduate Student Immigrants in the United States

By **AFARIN RAJAEI, MOHAMMAD NASEH NASROLLAHI SHAHRI and JAKOB F. JENSEN**



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Abstract

Approximately 1.5 million Iranians currently live in the United States with most immigrating for cultural, social, political, and economic reasons. Consequently, researchers, health care providers, and policymakers often struggle to provide support specifically tailored to Iranian men and women following immigration. To mitigate these concerns, the current qualitative study considered the following question: In what ways do Iranian graduate student immigrants in the US see their lives as immigrants in the US and how do these perceptions intersect with gender? This narrative analysis among fifty Iranian graduate student immigrants, men and women, showed Iranian women experience more freedom and greater empowerment than men upon immigrating to the US, and this study discusses the implications of these trends.

Keywords: Foreign students, Iranian students, Narrative Analysis, Immigration and gender identity

Introduction

In the course of the past four decades, three million Iranians have left Iran to settle elsewhere, which makes them one of the largest immigrant groups from the Middle East (Bozorgmehr 2001). The Atlantic (2012) stated that there are an estimated 1,500,000 Iranians in the United States (Esfandiari 2016). Iranians in the US are of varied ethnicities (Mobasher 2006) and the reasons behind their migration from Iran to the US involve a wide range of cultural, educational, social, political and economic factors, commonly known as push-pull factors (Preston, 2014; Tsapenko, 2015).

Iranian students were one of the largest student populations in the US before the 1979 Iranian revolution. As such, a relatively large number of studies focused on their cultural, legal, social and economic adjustment. The flow of immigration was, however, considerably reduced

by the political tensions between Iran and the United States after the Hostage Crisis and closure of the American Embassy in Tehran and the resulting difficulty in obtaining a student visa; this shift was echoed in the amount of research that was conducted, as well. This study revisits this population after a hiatus, exploring a more recent wave of Iranian immigrant students.

Push factors are challenges brought on by a complex matrix of emotional and physical issues faced by immigrants who leave their homelands (Perez Foster, 2001). In the case of Iranian immigrants, these issues are expected to vary by gender given the restrictive sociopolitical circumstances of women in Iran and their long-term effects (Ahmadi, 2003; Darvishpour, 2002; Khosravi, 2009). Despite the sizeable literature on gender as a factor in shaping Iranian immigrants' experiences in host societies, particularly

in Europe, however, the the unique ways that women and men experience challenges remains by and large underexplored in the US (Tafreshi & Yahya, 2014). To this end, the current study is aimed at addressing the following question: In what ways do Iranian graduate student immigrants in the US see their lives as immigrants in the US and how do these perceptions intersect with gender?

The research on immigrants of other nationalities suggests that the loss of familiar social networks is especially stressful for women in a foreign country (Boylan, 1991; Desjarlais et al. 1995). On the other hand, other contributing factors, such as oppression and discrimination directed at women in their homelands, may make immigration a more pleasant experience for women compared to men. These expected patterns of difference complicate the picture of Iranian immigrants, warranting further inquiry. The role of gender in Iranian graduate student immigrants and the way it intersects with human agency therefore comprises the impetus for the current study.

Based on interviews with fifty participants, analysed through a narrative inquiry approach, this study investigates the experiences of recent Iranian immigrants to the United States. The participants' narratives point to gender as a strong mediating factor in shaping their self-understanding as immigrants as well as their resources for agentive action.

Iranian Immigrants in the US and their Challenges since the Iranian Revolution

With urban settlements stretching back to 4000 BC, Iran is one of the oldest civilizations in the world (Daniel 2000). After the 1979 revolution, two waves brought many Iranians to the US (Bozorgmehr 2001); the first one had to do with Iranians who came to the US as students and visitors between the 1950s and 1977, and the second wave of Iranians were students, immigrants and refugees who arrived in the host country during and after 1979 revolution (Bozorgmehr 2001; Jalali 2005).

The invasion of the US embassy (1979) in Tehran made Iran appear to be a dangerous country in the international community (Axworthy 2013). Programs like *America Held Hostage* and *Nightline* aired during the hostage crisis representing Iran as anti-American and aggressive (Axworthy 2013). A week after the embassy occupation took place, images of Ayatollah Khomeini alongside Iranian mobs dominated the image of Iran. The burning of Iranian flags had become a regular pastime by angry mob-like crowds in the US and was faithfully reported as patriotic by the press. Mobasher (2006) mentioned that hostage crisis narratives influenced America's mission in the world and justified actions taken by the Carter administration against the "devilish savages of Islam." Consequently, the hostage crisis had mythological importance and impacted US foreign policy. In short, Mobasher (2006) argued that the hostility between Iran and the US government and the subsequent demonization of Iranians and Muslims shored up American patriotism and justified the harassment Iranians were subjected to in the US. Media treatment served to construct ubiquitous images of Iranians in the US, making Iranian immigrants in the US prone to uniquely challenging hardships. This, coupled with the history of Iranian immigration, gave rise to a peculiar experience for Iranian immigrants in the US.

Baker (1983) asserted that the immigration process involved four stages: pre-migration, transit, settlement, and post-immigration. The pre-migration stage happens when immigrants can be affected by pre-migration factors such as traumatic events in the homeland and feelings of grief that result from the multiple losses endured during migration (Pumariega Rothe, & Pumariega 2005). The transit stage involves the logistical difficulties of moving from one part of the world to another. The settlement stage encompasses the challenges of finding employment, accommodation, etc. in the new environment. Post-immigration is a stage when people leave behind their possessions, homes, work, role, socioeconomic status, life style, language,

loved family members and other close relationships, and other complex losses; for example: "loss of trust in self and others, loss of self-esteem, self-respect, and personal identity" (Baker 1983: 1).

Researchers have reported that immigrant populations from low and middle-income countries experienced more psychiatric problems than native populations; this could have to do with the migration itself or pre- or post-migration factors (Cantor-Graae et al. 2003; Lindert et al. 2008; Steel et al. 1999; Steel et al. 2002; Steel et al. 2002; Syed et al. 2006). Political, economic, and social conflicts occurring in Iran could be contributing factors in the pre-migration stage for Iranians. It is worth noting that these conflicts and factors in Iran are much worse for Iranian women because of oppressive gender-related norms in Iran. For example, Iranian women have to wear a hijab; they do not have the right to divorce or obtain custody of their child after divorce and do not feel safe in society because of the prevalence of harassment (Janghorban et al., 2015).

The transition is the second stage of immigration, which occurs when individuals may have had to leave their country without family and friends. Sometimes members of a family must travel separately (Pumariega, Rothe, & Pumariega 2005). This specific stage creates challenges for Iranians due to the troubled relationship between Iran and the US. Recent legislation has increased the difficulty for Iranians to obtain a US visa. Even when applying for student Visas, Iranians are left feeling sceptical about the security of legally obtaining permission to immigrate until they find themselves on US soil.

The next stage of immigration includes settlement and post-migration. These stages occur when stressors of living in a new country affect immigrants when they settle. Such stressors involve "a language barrier, loss of support, discrimination, unemployment, poverty, acculturative stress, and dealing with the extent of their losses" (van Ecke, Chope, & Emmelkamp 2005). Also, there are other post-migration stressors such as preoccupation with the political condi-

tions in the home country, perceived discrimination, feelings of poor control over one's life, prolonged and delayed procedures in processing refugee applications, and difficulty with immigration officials (Lien et al. 2010).

These two last stages have been hard for Iranians because of misconceptions and stereotypes about Iranians. The relationship between the Iranian American population and others in the US since the 1979 revolution appears to be one characterized by fear and prejudice on the one hand, and by anger and sadness on the other (Bill 1988). Iranians tend to be considered as Muslims, often subjected to a kind of nationwide assumption that identifies all members of their religion as violent fanatics or terrorists (Bill 1988). Moreover, the US government has often reinforced the stereotype that all Iranians are potential terrorists. Some Muslims blame the American media and popular culture for propagating negative stereotypes about their culture and religion. For example, Disney's popular film *Aladdin* features a Middle Eastern character who sings about cutting off ears as a punishment and calls his home „barbaric.“ Middle Eastern critics of American popular culture point to the recent predominance of Arabs or Muslims in the role of villains in movies and television shows. Furthermore, these critics contend in „Media Blitz“ that through the media's reliance on such terms as „Islamic terrorists“ and „Islamic fundamentalists,“ Americans are encouraged to confuse the few Islamic radicals who espouse violence with the majority of the adherents of the Islamic religion who reject violence.

As a traumatized group, Iranians internalize the representation of challenges and trauma in the media. Their identity is tied to the traumatic event, and their existence is under threat (Mobasher 2006). Therefore, exploring the unique challenges of Iranian immigrants to the US is a vital research concern. On the issue of Iranians' experiences with challenges, Saechao et al., (2012) pointed out that the Iranian participants reported instances of discrimination which contribute to challenges. For example, one of

their Iranian participants said: “I have somebody not work with me because of my accent” (p. 8). Also, about the acculturation factor, one of the Iranian participants faced an issue with taking the bus and argued: “We had brochures. However, that brochure was in English. Which is everywhere you go in all the schools, you have a dictionary; you will have a brochure in Chinese, Vietnamese, Spanish, why except Farsi?” (p. 9).

Immigration studies have found that challenges in mental health are related to several variables including poor social support, economic difficulties, gender, unemployment, poor socio-cultural adaptation, adverse life events after arrival, and pre-migration challenges (Gorst-Unsworth & Goldenberg 1998; Knipscheer & Kleber 2006; Laban et al. 2004; Lavik et al. 1996; Lie 2002; Peterie 2018; Schweitzer et al. 2006; Sundquist et al. 2000). Furthermore, perceived ethnic discrimination is linked to mental health issues in other immigration studies (de Arelano et al. 2018; Metha 1998; Noh et al. 1999), which highlights the importance of the current study.

The Role of Gender in Immigrants’ Challenges

As the above discussion makes clear, Muslim nations including Iranian immigrants are susceptible to a set of unique experiences given the sociopolitical circumstances in the US and the complicated history of the US and Iran. Previous research involving Iranian immigrants has pointed to the ways in which gender plays a role in Iranian immigrant family dynamics in Sweden (Darvishpur, 2002). Among other findings, Darvishpour’s study surfaces the disparities between how men and women not only view their post-immigration existence but the effect of immigration in their lives. Khosravi’s (2009) study approaches gender from a different angle, that of masculinity. Men, the study brings forth, find themselves battling biased media representations of Iranian masculinity in ways that profoundly shape their everyday experiences in several social spheres. According to the author, Iranian immigrant men are rendered invis-

ible in Sweden, an argument supported by vivid recounts of women not looking at them. While not directly concerned with gender differences in immigration, Ahmadi’s (2003) study brings into the picture the role of sexual socialization and how it plays out in the context of Iranian immigrants in Sweden. Overall, interviews with participants show the emergence of more individualistic attitudes toward sexuality, sometimes with direct consequences for their marriages.

Our study was informed by intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), which simultaneously considers the co-existence of various aspects of social location, privilege, and oppression and their crisscrossing intersections. Researchers, clinicians, and legislators may comprehend the complexity of discourses around immigration when adopting a perspective that accounts for intersectionality. Not all immigration experiences are alike and researchers, clinicians, and legislators should be wondering, curious, and humble about understanding each individual’s immigration journey and also the collective experience of a particular immigrant group. For example, perhaps more than other groups, Iranian immigrants are susceptible to marginalization given current sociopolitical circumstances and the complicated history of US and Iranian relations (Mobasher, 2006). Embedded in these experiences is the intersection of gender, nationality, immigrant status and class. In particular, gender mediates the push-pull factors behind immigration as well as immigrants’ agencies as their “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001). Seen this way, human action is constrained by socio-cultural environments (Rajaei & Hodgson, 2019; Rajaei & Jensen, 2019; 2020) in which human agents find themselves. That said, the same environments enable action as well through providing resources and frames that make it possible to act. Agency therefore is situated at the intersection of possibility and limitation, with agents responding to their surroundings. Intersectionality in human experience (gender, immigration status, class, nationality) is analysed in this study through the lens of agency (Ahearn, 2001). In

other words, the participants' intersectional social identities, in particular gender, are seen as a factor constraining and enabling their agencies.

It is vital to examine agency in conjunction with gender when extending research to Iranian immigrants because there is evidence indicating higher levels of oppression, social injustice, and discrimination against women in Iran and thus women's agency may be more negatively impacted by living and socializing in Iran and more positively disposed toward immigration to the US (Steel et al. 2017). Studies on gender roles within the Iranian immigrants are relatively new (Mahdi, 2001). Therefore, existing immigration literature will be strengthened by an empirical analysis of the relationship between gender and immigrants' challenges among Iranian immigrants in the US. The way Iranian immigrant men and women respond to challenges such as immigration has important implications for how to address their needs, possible sources, and health goals.

Methodology

The literature on immigration suggests that there is a dearth of research regarding the challenges of Iranian immigrants in particular (Mahdi, 2001). Several studies have investigated the challenges of Iranian diaspora in the US. However, missing from these is a nuanced analysis of the gendered responses of recent immigrants to their cultural adjustment experiences. To achieve this end, we utilized a method of research that was firmly embedded within a hermeneutic framework, which is an approach to research that is not limited to or content with asking *what* something is, but rather concerns itself primarily with *how* something comes to be or is constituted (Owens et al. 1999; Perez Foster 2001). A primary purpose of the hermeneutic inquiry is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness. In this study, a hermeneutic framework was employed to investigate the "voices" of Iranian immigrants about their own lived experiences and to present glimpses of their world and challenges.

This study uses a narrative inquiry, as methodology, to address our research question. Narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews, in particular, can generate new distinctive knowledge because narratives are grounded in individuals' unique experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek 2007). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research design that involves generating, analysing, and reporting stories "as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007: 42). Therefore, the focus of researchers who use this methodology is not on facts, but rather on understanding people's experiences through a three-dimensional conceptual framework (Clandinin 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), that includes time, place, and context.

Central to a narrative inquiry are questions of self, identity, and everyday experiences, which are derived from the theoretical perspective of philosophical hermeneutics (Kumar, 2000; Lyons & Coyle 2007). Schwandt (2003) argues that understanding is an interpretation, and it is not an isolated activity of human beings. Thus, because this study takes the exploration of lived experiences of Iranian graduate student immigrants in the US as its central focus, a narrative inquiry situated within the hermeneutic interpretive framework is considered most suitable (Mertens 2015; Owens et al. 1999; Perez Foster 2001). This knowledge can help further elucidate the Iranian immigrant experiences and provide a deeper understanding for therapists, researchers, and policy-makers. Therefore, the research question that guided our inquiry was: In what ways do Iranian graduate student immigrants in the US see their lives as immigrants in the US and how do these perceptions intersect with gender?

In narrative inquiry, one's experience is the phenomenon under study (Clandinin 2013). Clandinin (2007) believed that narrative inquiry approaches the phenomenon from the standpoint of both the lived experience and the stories that have been told by participants. In narrative inquiry, Clandinin (2007) emphasized the researcher and participants collaborate to

explore the research question, create narratives through dialogue and make meaning out of the experience.

The Three-Dimensional Inquiry Space

In narrative inquiry, the researcher works with participants to create meaning and understand a particular phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). There is a fluid dynamic between the researcher and participants, which puts the phenomenon within the personal and the social as well as the past, present, and future (Clandinin 2007). The researcher and participants move between phases of inquiry together throughout the study, and participants' experiences from the previous contexts impact the current experience (Kumar 2000).

The Role of the Researcher

One of the unique features of narrative inquiry is the role of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). This methodology is highly collaborative from the beginning to the final steps of representing the data, and, therefore, the relationship between researcher and participants counts as an integral part of the study. Importantly, this may raise some ethical concerns related to boundaries (Green 2013). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that the researcher must be careful about the participants' "voice," which should not become the researcher's voice.

Participants

To be eligible for the study, participants had to be eighteen years or older, of Iranian nationality, a US graduate student who has immigrated to the US in the last ten years, and have lived only in Iran before immigrating to the US. The final sample was comprised of fifty Iranian individuals (twenty-five females and twenty-five males) who lived in the US, with ages ranging from twenty-one to thirty-six years. Participants lived in diverse geographic regions of the US. Numerous interview questions inquired about the general experience of immigrating to the US, and potential stress experienced as a minority immigrant.

These questions included but were not limited to the following: Have your beliefs and perception of the US and its people changed since your arrival? Have you experienced discrimination, prejudice, and racial profiling in the US because of your nationality, ethnic heritage, or religious orientation? If so, what did you do about it?¹

Procedure

The main method of collecting data involved semi-structured interviews with each participant, supplemented by field notes. During face to face and phone conversations, several open-ended questions were asked to encourage the telling and re-telling of life stories. Participants were informed that the purpose of this study was to gain insight into how Iranian graduate student immigrants in the US have experienced the process of immigration and living in the US. The primary investigator (PI) conducted an open-ended interview that lasted approximately fifty to sixty minutes. Participants were notified that the conversation would be audio-recorded and handwritten notes would be taken during the interview. The PI also asked participants to complete a brief survey questionnaire that focused on gathering information about them and their immigration experience.² The PI kept their identity confidential and anonymous. Participants were compensated with a five dollar Starbucks gift card after the interview.

Analysis and interpretation of the data were conducted by following rigorous and logical established guidelines (see Merriam & Tisdell 2016). The researchers analysed transcripts of interviews and overarching narratives were identified via inductive coding strategies (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis was employed, which involved manual coding techniques to facilitate the identification of patterns in the data that could be identified as common themes (Aronson 1995; Creswell & Poth 2018). The focus

¹ (see appendixes)

² The survey questionnaire is included in the appendix.

was on discerning patterns in ways in which the participants discussed their capacity or inability to act. An inductive coding procedure was used to create codes from the participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke 2006). Initial coding included reading the transcripts and making notes, as well as noting observations made during the semi-structured interviews and transcription. The final step in interpreting the data involved the development of themes from the research findings, a process that accounted for researchers' professional psychological and relational knowledge.

Trustworthiness

The term *trustworthiness* is frequently used in qualitative research to indicate quality and reliability (Schwandt 2015). Trustworthiness in the context of Iranian immigrants' life stories meant making sure that their experience was not objectified. This was achieved with an authentic solicitation of Iranian immigrants' experience by gathering data through unstructured interviews before interpreting their stories in a way that was supported by evidence (Schwandt, 2015). In addition, a careful examination of interview transcripts was conducted (Green 2019; Poland 1995).

Freedom or oppression? A question of gender

Two themes emerged from the analysis of the participants' discourse: (1) A journey from oppression to freedom for women, and (2) a sense of powerlessness for men. As can be seen, they point to markedly different experiences for men and women.

A Journey from Oppression to Freedom for Iranian Immigrant Women

Women participants expressed feeling a sense of freedom and independence upon immigrating to the US. One female participant explained: *"I felt fear when I was living in Iran. As a woman, you need to get permission for everything from your father or your husband! Society does not support you, rules and policies do not support you, and even your family, if they are traditional, will not*

support your freedom of thought." Such sentiments were usually followed by a contrasting view of their newly-found circumstances in the US, as stated below:

"Now, I am an independent woman here in the US. I don't need to get permission for going to a party, another city or country whatsoever! My boyfriend is my boyfriend here, not a prison warden or a boss. Actually, I am his boss [laughing]."

As can be seen, many such accounts reflected contrasts, highlighting the remarkably different situation in the present in the US compared to previous feelings about Iran. Similar feelings of increased empowerment and safety were expressed by many other females, sometimes underscoring the sexist nature of discourses they were subjected to previously in Iran:

"I work in a lab now with 8 other male post-docs. I am respected here; no one says, 'hey, you girl, you do not know anything about science, do you? Go and buy shoes and bags instead of giving us a lecture'. Those were the actual words that I heard in a lab in Iran."

Interestingly, across these accounts, the participants pointed to a sense of control over their lives, what could be seen as an increased agency, as there was no one to dictate to them what to do:

"Going out to parties was a nightmare in Iran. There was always someone —my mom, my dad, my brother— someone but me who told me, 'your dress is really revealing, go and change it' and I was twenty-seven years old, not a teenager. Still, everyone thought they could comment on my life. I was like, 'I didn't ask you, did I?'"

Another salient issue across the comments that pointed to freedom was choice. Such comments attested to the participants' perceptions of increased agency. Female participants spoke of having been given a choice mainly because they lived away from their families and thus did not have anyone controlling them:

"One of my Iranian male friends once told me 'the fact that you are alive today and survived that situation as a woman in Iran is a miracle!' Even men understand that about us. When you are a wom-

an in Iran, you do not have freedom; you cannot choose your way of dressing, thinking, living, etc. I couldn't even choose my way of praying! What if I want to pray without a hijab? Do they let you do that? No. here, I am who I am, and that is a relief."

The choice of the terms "miracle" and "survive" conveys something of the transformation the participants described. It is a testament to the depth of this particular participant's feelings in this respect. On several occasions, the participants invoked their financial independence to account for their freedom. Given the profile of the participants of this study, this was not surprising. The participants enjoyed university funding through assistantships. Consider the following illustrative example:

"I have an income here. I do not need to ask for money from my dad or husband. That is a gift. I am an independent woman. Do you know why? Because the society [here in the US] has that option for me."

Interestingly, these comments were echoed by male participants as well about the experiences of women, suggesting that rather than being private sentiments, they were culturally shared discourses. One participant reported that he had started to think about *"how life was bad for women in Iran"* and added, *"it is like I did not notice these things until I came here and now I am a man from the Middle East...whenever I see a police car here, I get anxious that they have biases against me. Who knew life could get this challenging in the US?"*

Such references to the life of Iranian women manifested more explicitly in other comments. In fact, all the male participants were unanimous in their belief that Iranian women had it much better than men as illustrated in the following excerpt:

"I'm a Muslim man from Iran in the US. What do you think about my experience? People look at me, and they see that I am different before even I speak, and they see my accent. You know that is not the same thing about my Iranian girlfriend. She does not have a hijab, so I guess with shorts and tops, people do not assume that she is a woman from

Middle East on the first look. She is not a threat to them; I am, and that sucks."

In summary, the female participants expressed a sense of appreciation for their new circumstances as it offered them more freedom than before. They raised issues of choice, financial independence, and control over their lives as the desirable consequences of their immigration to the US. Two points need consideration in respect to these findings. First, the female participants' responses are not congruent with some research reviewed earlier. Specifically, the participants in the current study emphasized the ways in which immigration changed their lives for the better in contrast to the dominance of challenge as the central theme of some earlier research. This may be accounted for mainly by the participants' socio-economic status as well as their perceived upward trajectory. All participants were either enrolled in advanced degree programs or had recently graduated from such programs.

Equally important is the question of agency in the participants' perceived achievement. More specifically, were the participants' upward trajectories a product of their agentive actions or were they merely beneficiaries of a more effective system? Ahearn's definition of agency becomes pertinent here: through their own actions, the participants were able to avail themselves of resources available in the new milieu, resources that were either missing or ones they were deprived of before immigration.

A Sense of Powerlessness for Iranian Immigrant Men

Conversely, male participants reported feeling less powerful in the US. Their discourse spoke to a sense of attenuated agency because of their new circumstances as immigrants. They said that they did not expect the challenges they currently face.

The allusion to the sense of threat others may feel at their presence was a common thread in the male participants' comments, with the participants narrating a harrowing scene from the media depicting people of colour being shot.

The participants were keenly aware of the shift in their status, sometimes commenting that they felt compelled to eliminate all cues evoking the Middle East, including their names.

“Living in the US is challenging, and it is not heaven, but you see how they respect women the way it should be. I know, you are going to say we still have a long way to go, our rights are not equal or whatever, but you know I am talking about the level of difference in Iran vs. here. It is bad for me [laughing], I don’t have the power that I had in Iran [laughing], but no, seriously, it is good to live in a more developed society. I just need to change my name from Ali to Max or something American! That gives me some power on paper at least [laughing].”

The next excerpt extends the comparison between Iranian men and women in the US to Iranian men contrasted with American women. The negative associations attached to their Iranian men’s ethnicity and identity as can be seen below:

“Can you believe that an American girl in a bar told me, ‘you are going to buy me drinks, or I will scream that you touched me.’ I was like ‘what?’ She laughed and said, ‘I’m joking, but that is a good idea. Who do you think they’d believe the most? Me or a man from the Middle East?’ She is right; everyone would believe her and not me. I am Mr. Nobody here.”

Woven into their talk about their circumstances in the US, there was a sense of duality: on the one hand, they were painfully aware of the discourses that painted them as threats, but on the other hand, they acknowledged the advantages of their immigration to the US. In terms of their mediated capacity to act, they recognized the constraints associated with being a Middle Eastern immigrant as evidenced below:

“I picked a nickname for myself because I’ve noticed that there is a difference between saying hey, ‘I’m David’ versus ‘Hey, I’m Mohammad.’ It is funny because I thought my life would be so much better here and maybe somehow it is but so much harder as well. I do not know. Maybe even the name does not matter. At the end of the day, I am a man from Iran. And that brings stigma and limitation with itself.”

The male participants’ sense of disappointment at their identity in the US and its marked contrast with Iranian women was eloquently articulated by the following participant:

“There were 3 or 4 times that I got pulled over because of nothing. They just asked for documents and ID. Funny story, my Iranian female friend didn’t stop at a stop sign, and the policeman just smiled at her and said, ‘Please be careful next time.’ Do you see how biased they are? That story will never ever happen to me. I mean that makes sense, a woman who does not wear a hijab and looks like a western woman is not a stranger, but we, Iranian men, are strangers who lost their identity and power here. I do not know. Maybe I am wrong.”

In summary, the male participants expressed the view that they had lost their status and agency as a consequence of going to the US. The participants referred to a range of social cues that may attract negative attention. This belief, however, was to some extent mitigated by a belief that their lives had also improved mainly because of the educational opportunities of which they were able to avail themselves. Among the female participants, on the other hand, there was a keen awareness of how women’s lives have improved, a feeling that surfaced in the participants’ discursive juxtapositions of their difficulties with women’s better circumstances.

Discussion

The authors call for caution when interpreting the findings, in particular the sentiments expressed in the interviews that may not be generalizable to the entire population of Iranian immigrants. They are not meant to reflect a purely positive/negative dichotomy between the US and Iran. Indeed, although many women reported feeling more empowered in the US, this is not meant to suggest that immigrants and minorities do not experience extreme discrimination and oppression at times in the US. Moreover, although participants largely conveyed that women in Iran feel disempowered; this does not suggest, however, that all women in Iran feel they do not have freedom of choice.

Most previous studies addressing the role of gender in the process of immigration have concluded that women tend to experience more immigration-related psychological distress than men (Buckner, Beardslee, & Bassuk 2004; Foster, Kuperminc, & Price 2004), a finding some explain as having to do with women being prone to specific vulnerabilities which become salient through the stresses of immigration. The underlying assumption in such studies is that women constitute a natural category separate from men who are said to experience less turbulent immigration trajectories. Men, the logic goes, are endowed with dispositions that shield them to a greater extent than women from the challenges of immigration.

Note that the narrative that emerges from this line of reasoning stresses men's and women's natural dispositions as an explanatory variable. In other words, the narrative emphasizes the disparities in the internal reserves of men and women. Accordingly, there is an assumption that such differences are natural, hence their emergence across contexts.

Furthermore, their discourse displayed a keen awareness of this disparity relative to men. In fact, women in this study were able to articulate with impressive clarity why Iranian men are faced with more perceived discrimination in the US and conversely why they tend not to experience as much prejudice.

This rather unexpected picture appears to be associated with their previous lived experiences in Iran, which were saturated with self-reported discrimination and oppression for women linked with patriarchal hierarchy, an observation evident in women's discourses around their life histories. The invocation of their lived experiences in Iran is crucially important because it throws into sharp relief the role of immigrants' past material conditions and socioculturally constituted circumstances in determining their immigration trajectories and the feelings such trajectories provoke. In light of this finding, the generic narrative that women immigrants are more vulnerable begins to crumble. In other words, it is

not gender alone, the study suggests, but rather a complex combination of socioculturally shaped subjectivities and the conditions of both home and host societies that shapes immigrants' perception of their adversities and status. This is, in fact, in alignment with Mobasher's study (2018).

More than anything else, the study bears testimony to the fluidity of gender identity, showing that it is a mistake to make sweeping statements about the immigration trajectories of women or men for that matter (Robinson 2019). Instead, what drives subjective experiences of one's circumstances post immigration is the effect of discursive norms one finds oneself in combination with the material conditions of the host and home countries. In the case of the participants in this study, men appear to be confronted with a discursive regime in which they are perceived as threats in ways that are painfully clear to the participants themselves and at times leading to strategies to ward off such positionings. Women, by contrast, are not easily associated with the threat seen to emanate from the Middle East. The reason may be that the participants of this study do not exhibit the social cues associated with Middle Eastern and Muslim identities such as Hijab. As some of the participants noted, the most prominent discursive category in which they found themselves placed was South American or Eastern European, underscoring the fluidity of gender identity in relation to immigration processes.

It is important to note here that for both groups the material conditions before and after immigration were decisive as is evident from women's lived experiences of discrimination back in Iran. It is also worth considering the role of class in an intersectional analysis. Despite echoes of previous research in respect to the role of gender in the findings (Ahmadi, 2003; Khosravi, 2009), unlike previous research into both Iranian and non-Iranian immigrants, participants were all educated in US universities. While many were recipients of graduate school funding, some had financed their own education, raising questions regarding disparities in their socioeconomic

background as compared with participants in earlier research. While this is a difference worth flagging when interpreting the findings, the fact that gender proved to be so visibly implicated in the participants' accounts in accord with such research must be seen as even more convincing evidence for the role of the dynamics of gender in shaping immigrants' lives.

Implications

The findings of the study are likely to inform our understanding of Iranian immigration and the role of gender, which can enhance our knowledge about Iranians in the US. Most research in the past has suggested that women tend to experience more psychological tension as a result of immigration (Buckner, Beardslee, & Bassuk 2004; Foster, Kuperminc, & Price 2004). This study, however, provided a contrasting perspective that may have significant implications for researchers, clinicians, and legislators. This work may inform therapists, researchers and policymakers, who each strive to improve the lives of immigrant individuals and families. Future research should attend to how gender may be relevant in other studies of immigration and potentially trauma.

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Appendix

Research Question - Interview Questions

"What is the lived experience of Iranian graduate student immigrants in the USA?"

- Please tell me about what the process of immigrating to the U.S. was like for you.
 - What was one of the biggest challenges you had to overcome in the immigration process?
 - What other challenges did you face?
 - What was one of the most positive experiences you had in your immigration process?
- What has it been like for you to live in the U.S.?
- How would you describe American culture?
 - How have you experienced American culture since your arrival?
 - How consistent was your experience with American culture with what you had expected?
 - How have you experienced the American people?
- What has it been like for you to be an international student in the U.S.?
- What has been your level of interaction with Americans outside of academia?

- How do you ethnically identify yourself to Americans? (Iranian, Persian, Iranian-American, Persian American, Middle Eastern, etc.)
 - Tell me more about that.
- What has been your experience with any discrimination, prejudice, and racial profiling in the US?
 - How have you responded to such issues?
 - Can you provide an example of any stigma you have experienced since being in the US?
- What was the source of the stigma?
- How did you cope with the stigma?
- Given your personal experience and the current American socio-political climate, what recommendations do you have for other Iranian graduate students in the U.S.?
- Is there anything else that you want me to know about your experience in the U.S.?

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