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The Influence of Acculturation on Meanings of Marriage for Iranian-American Women

Golnoush Yektafar-Hooshvar

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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY
School of Behavioral Health
in conjunction with the
Faculty of Graduate Studies

The Influence of Acculturation on Meanings of Marriage for Iranian-American Women

by

Golnoush Yektafar-Hooshvar

A Dissertation Proposal submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy in Marriage and Family Therapy

March 2016

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this dissertation in his/her opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree Doctor of Philosophy.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation committee for the time and energy they have expended to support me through this process. Dr. Fox, thank you for your patience, encouragement, and high expectations, which have allowed me to keep pursuing, creating, and challenging myself. To Dr. Oloo, thank you for supporting me throughout this process. To Dr. Williams-Reade, thank you for providing me with the rigorous research experience to guide me along this journey and for allowing me to trust and confide in you as a friend. To Dr. Lyles, thank you for your time, and words of faith and belief in me. All of your care has given me an experience of safety and hope that will shape my life for years to come.

To my teammate, best friend and husband Kaveh, I could not have completed this chapter of my life without your endless, sacrificial mutual support. Your value of me, my ambitions, my talents, and hopes is a priceless gift that I am so grateful to have as an Iranian-American woman. To my family (Farzad, Veronica, Jacob, and Hailey), thank you for unconditionally loving me and raising me to question, pursue, achieve, and reach higher; thank you Mamany and Babai for the sacrifices you made to let me know that I am capable of doing anything and for providing me with the resources to do so.

To my mommy, I am so grateful God gave me the honor of being your daughter and best friend for a short 28 years. You have taught me the value of always holding strong faith in God, true patience, kindness, and endless love, which I will attempt to carry on for as long as I am alive. Although I cannot begin to express the sorrow and pain I feel so deep in my soul because you are not physically present, I know that you are forever a part of me. You are my mom, my best friend, my reason for breathing and with

every breeze, every ray of sunshine, and whistling of the leaves I will feel you and touch you again and I know you are forever watching over me.

Thank you to the Rezvani, Ghahreman, and Hooshvar families for giving me the strength to move forward and to reach for my goals when all I wanted to do was give up. Thank you to every unmentioned name for walking alongside, supporting, and sometimes carrying me through the hardest years of my life thus far.

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom and to all the strong and independent immigrant Iranian-American women who have helped me complete this project. I would like to thank every woman who allowed me into their hearts and minds throughout this process. You have given me knowledge that I will take with me throughout my career. You have touched me with your commitment and confidence in the process of marriage. Thank you for trusting me.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Influence of Acculturation on Meanings of Marriage for Iranian-American Women

by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Marriage and Family Therapy
Loma Linda University, March 2016
Dr. Curtis Fox, Chairperson

The objective of the current research is to provide a basic framework for understanding the dynamics of Iranian marriage as women acculturate into Western norms and the implications of these experiences for those who work with them in their adjustment process. With the growing population of Iranian immigrants in the United States there is a need to understand the behaviors and values of the Iranian culture and how the culture gets transformed through socialization within the context of North America. It is crucial that a clinician understand the cultural background when working with Iranian couples in order to minimize judgment and pathology.

An interpretative phenomenological methodological approach is used to develop a more complete understanding of the relational and familial dynamics among Iranian American women in their marriages and the evolving meaning of marriage as they acculturate in the North American context. Fourteen participants were targeted to complete face-to-face interviews for the present study. A phenomenological approach was used to group the participants' descriptions into units of meaning. These units of meaning provided the researcher with clusters of themes describing what makes Iranian marriage successful. The researcher then derived multiple theme clusters from the interview results, which provided descriptions of Iranian women's experiences and

perceptions of marriage as they experience them. The study has important implications for research, theory, and practice with this population.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

The demographics in the United States are rapidly changing. By the year 2050, it is expected that 50% of the population will belong to ethnic or racial minorities (Kagawa-Singer, 2001). With this changing demographic comes a need for mental health services that are tailored to and appropriate for diverse populations. In the United States, members of ethnic minority groups neither receive nor provide psychotherapy in proportion to their numbers (Bernal & Scharro'n-del-Rio, 2001). The attrition rates for minorities in psychotherapy are also considerably higher than those for Whites. For instance, 50% of Hispanics, compared with 30% of White patients, drop out of therapy after their first session (Fraga, Atkinson, & Wampold, 2004). Minorities may be more likely to seek psychotherapy and attrition rates might be reduced if treatments were tailored to their unique language and cultural needs.

According to the United States of America Census Bureau (2000), there were 338,000 Iranians living in the United States in 2000. This number is increasing as the United States of America Census Bureau (2010) results indicated 387,722 Iranians living in the United States as of 2010. Many of these immigrants attempt to maintain their cultural identity and values while adjusting to the United States culture, thus trying to find a balance between both their American and Iranian cultures (Vaziri, 1999). Vaziri (1999) found that pressures resulting from immigration enhance stress hormones, resulting in increased medical and psychological complications for Iranians. It is crucial that clinicians be aware of the influence of immigration and adaptation into a new culture

and how they impact existing cultural and behavioral norms, as well as values of this population.

Specifically, with the increase in the immigration of the Iranian population into the United States, there is a need to fill the gap that currently exists in research on this specific population. This includes studying the specific needs of this cultural group in order to better understand relationships and systemic bases that guide the values of this population while living in the United States. It is vital that today's mental health clinicians know the specific personal histories, social class dynamics, gender stereotypes, and overall cultural backgrounds and circumstances when providing services to Iranian couples and families to facilitate positive therapeutic outcomes and to reduce pathology and negative stereotypes, and judgments. According to McGoldrick (2004), culturally informed practice is a main value for the field of marriage and family therapy; therefore, studies on specific cultural groups can help therapist's better serve couples and families.

This study utilizes a qualitative research method and a phenomenological approach in an effort to explore Iranian-American women's experiences with immigrating to the United States of America. This study explores the meaning process employed by these women around their beliefs and values of marriage. Specifically, this study focuses on the interdependent influence of Iranian culture and the Western culture of the United States of America in this meaning-making process. Furthermore, this present study explores the multiple levels of influence and provide a framework for clinicians that will aid them in serving these families in therapy.

The knowledge obtained from this study will also help to minimize potentially negative stereotypes and pathologies that may exist in therapy processes that are not informed by the Iranian culture and the Iranian immigration experience.

Problem Statement

Western culture and norms can invalidate and pathologize other cultures and the human experiences and behaviors of these cultures. For instance, when looking at an Iranian couple, the assumption that they share the same views on issues of gender roles in the United States of America could lead to misinterpretations of their marital dynamics and gender relations, thus contributing to an increase in biases and stereotypes. Therefore, taking a deeper look at the Iranian culture is imperative. There is a need to give a voice to the Iranian people, to allow them a chance to describe what is considered normal or abnormal within their culture.

Theoretical Framework

The major theoretical framework used to view the phenomenon in question for this present study is symbolic interactionism as it can capture the essence of meaning and the evolution of meaning for women in a changing social world navigating from Iranian culture to cultural adaptation in the United States of America. The use of symbolic interactionism as a grand theoretical framework intends to focus on understanding relationships, social action, and language as a product of the times (Gergen, 2003). With the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, it is intended that the meaning and messages behind acculturation, race, culture, and marriage will capture reciprocal

processes between society and how the couple's identity develops. This perspective will enable a focus on how couples dealing with acculturation create meaningful relationships in order to expand a theoretical framework for understanding what works for building and sustaining these marriages. This conceptual framework will be described in-depth in the next chapter.

Objective and Purpose of the Study

The literature indicates that Iranian women have distinctive views of their role in marriage. This present study seeks to examine how Iranian women define and make meaning around what a successful or healthy marriage is. This is a meaning-making process that is influenced by a host of factors in the Iranian culture, and many of these factors are influenced by the acculturation process of immigrating Iranian women. Overall, this study seeks to understand this process, inclusive of the influence of gender, culture, religion, and immigration. The proposed goal of the current study is to identify what characterizes a successful Iranian marriage through Iranian women's eyes, which would inform clinical services to Iranian-American women and their partners.

There is a need to gain an understanding of diverse cultures through each individual's cultural lens. The proposed study will attempt to shed light on Iranian women's beliefs regarding their marriages, and from a relational perspective, explore the lived experiences of these women in their own voices as they explore their beliefs about what makes up a successful marriage in their new cultural milieu. Information gained in this study will help not only Iranian women; it will also help therapists understand the Iranian culture of marriage, as well as how immigration and the acculturation process of

immigrating Iranian families affects this meaning-making process. This information will help inform therapists and hopefully provide them information that will encourage a culturally informed practice when serving Iranian families.

Rationale

A search on EBSCO search engine using keywords such as acculturation, Iran, culture, marriage, and Iranian women yield few studies that focus on acculturation conflicts and stress experienced by Iranian-American women seeking to establish and create meaning in intimate marital relationships. The proposed study, then, aims to provide current data on Iranian women's historical background, subculture values, and unique priorities as they acculturate to Western norms in order to provide the therapist with a sense of Iranian family dynamics. It is critical to explore the cultural conflicts that are experienced by female Iranian immigrants as they work through interpersonal relationships. There is an obvious paucity of empirical studies that focus on acculturation and relational stress of Iranian women in their marriage and family lives. Thus, initiating the proposed study would light on this important topic and offer implications for further study of and best practice with this growing population in the United States of America.

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The current study utilizes symbolic interaction theory to help explain how Iranian women construct meaning of the experience of marriage as they exist in the mist of the intercultural tug from both Iranian and United States of America cultural prescriptions. The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism is used to frame the stories and experiences of these women who voluntarily participated in the present study. Specifically, this conceptual framework helps organize the influence of Iranian culture, Western culture, and the acculturation processes around defining and making meaning of their marriages.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that is influential in many areas of the sociological discipline and across a variety of other disciplines. Symbolic interactionism is derived from American pragmatism and particularly from the work of George Herbert Mead. Herbert Blumer, a student and interpreter of Mead, coined the term *symbolic interactionism* and put forward an influential summary of the perspective: people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them, and these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969). Scholars utilizing symbolic interactionism have researched a wide range of topics through the lens of symbolic interactionism. Due to the paradigms of this theory, the majority of symbolic interactionist research uses qualitative research methods,

like participant observation, to study aspects of social interaction and/or individuals' selves.

Perhaps the most important tenet of symbolic interactionism is the idea that the individual and the context in which an individual lives are inseparable (Mead, 1922). Truth is tentative and never absolute because meaning changes depending on the context for the individual. Theoretical questions about the nature of being are best understood through individual interpretation of reality in a social context (Blumer, 1969). The focus of research is on the nature of individual and collective social interaction. Coming to know entails searching for ways to understand the meaning of a situation from the perspective of the individual and societal groups (Blumer, 1969). As such, the social world exists as a creation of human interactions. Society consists of individuals involved in interaction within larger networks of other individuals and groups. The nature of society is emphasized with the recognition that reciprocal social interaction influences behavior and the character of society (Blumer, 1969).

Symbolic interaction provides a theoretical lens for studying how individuals interpret objects and relationships with people in their lives and how this process of interpretation evokes responses in specific situations. Symbolic interactionism has tremendous potential to increase the understanding of human behaviors by complementing other theoretical perspectives currently used in the field of marriage and family therapy.

Core Principles of Symbolic Interactionism

The core concepts of symbolic interactionism can be summarized as meaning,

language, and thought (Boss, Doherty, //). *Meaning*, or what is understandable and meaningful to us, is not given in the nature of things themselves but emerge in an interpretive process. Mainly this process is driven through verbal and non-verbal language. In other words, human beings are social and reflecting individuals and the interpretive process is based on the use of socially constructed objects or symbols such as verbal and non-verbal communication. To understand and create meaning, we need to think and reflect on previously gained experiences and this process or function is described as the mind (Meltzer, 2003; Smit & Fritz, 2008).

Another central concept of symbolic interaction is *self*. Self is a symbolic representation allowing the individual to recognize both the subjective “I” and the objectified aspect “me.” Self is the result of interaction between the “I” and the “me” and fundamental for the development of an individual’s identity (Benzies & Allen, 2001). The development of the self takes place in a social context through interactions with significant and generalized others. *Significant others* are people who we respect as role-models and consider central for personal development. Significant others are vital in Iranian culture as they often represent parents and grandparents. Moreover, self evolves through interaction between individuals in the specific group one wants to become part of. This group, named the *generalized other*, is influential as it transfers norms and attitudes representative for the existing culture of the group (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). For example, the generalized others are influential individuals after immigration has occurred and acculturation into the new culture has begun. Who those generalized others are depends on the individual and their relationships with those around them.

Applying Symbolic Interactionism in Current Research

Symbolic interaction theory has been employed in a wide range of research studies. However, the majority of research that uses symbolic interactionism as a theoretical lens often uses qualitative research methods. These methods tend to include participant observation, which focuses on aspects of social interaction. Participant observation allows researchers to access symbols and meanings as would be the intent of the proposed study. In alignment with Blumer's (1969) conceptual perspective, the proposed study would incorporate symbolic interactionism and critically evaluate the way Iranian-American women act toward things, including each other, on the basis of the meanings they have for them. Symbolic interaction assumes that these meanings are derived through social interaction with others, and that these meanings are managed and transformed through an interpretive process that people use to make sense of and handle the objects and people that constitute their social worlds.

Summary

The current study analyzes the relational processes and the cultural values and beliefs of immigrant Iranian-American women in Southern California. The different strategies Iranian-American women use in interacting with their spouses to create a sense of meaning within their marriages experienced in a new cultural context will also be explored through symbolic interactionism theory.

The gap that currently exists in the literature is research on Iranian women who have immigrated to the United States and are currently acculturating to Western traditions while maintaining some of their traditional Iranian ideals. There is a lack of theoretically

guided research and information on these women's experiences. It is this gap in the literature that the proposed study seeks to fill. It is the intent of the researcher that the proposed study will add to the growing body of research on Iranian-American women and their marriages and give tools to mental health workers to better understand them.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize and critique existing research on Iranian women and couples. As noted below, there are significant limitations in the current approaches and methods used in this research. Therefore, this chapter will also highlight beneficial as well as limited practices in this research. This chapter will also highlight factors that are said to create challenges for Iranian women and couples as well as factors that promote relationship success. Given the current limitations in the current research, these factors are noted with some caution and provide the foundation for this study exploration.

Existing Studies of Iranian Women

As previously mentioned, there is a limited amount of literature on Iranian women. Much of what is known about Iranian women is what is inferred from the writing and research on Middle Eastern women. For example, Aghaie (1995) uses Iranian women and Middle Eastern women interchangeably to describe the Iranian women she interviewed in her study. Due to this interchange in terminology, this researcher uses the terms *Islamic women* and *Middle Eastern women* in identifying literature on Iranian women in general. Further, research done on Iranian women's experiences appears to have been impacted by religious views and political atmosphere. Research on the Iranian population in general has focused mostly on the interpretation of Islamic teachings and has looked at the impact of Islam on their views (Khoei, Whelan, & Cohen, 2008).

It was not until the post-Revolutionary era that more research was presented in Iran that focused on women's everyday lives (Talottof, 1997). Prior to the Revolution, much of the literature focused on political issues, laws, and family expectations of women. It appears that as a result of the change in politics in Iran, more research has been conducted and presented by women themselves, allowing for more detailed research on Iranian women. A review of the literature on Iranian women indicates various topics of focus. These include women's legal rights, gender roles, and right to education and occupation. These topics are discussed in detail below.

Legal Rights

Literature on Iranian women's legal rights describes the law according to what is stated in the Quran (Keddie, 2007). Much of the literature on women's legal rights describes what is expected of women according to the teachings of Islam (Osanloo, 2009). In 1979, Iran adopted a new constitution that was based on Islamic ideology (Hasib, 2004). Arebi (1991) states that Islam seemingly puts women in a position isolation from men, essentially making them powerless, and takes a backseat to men in the social context. For example, in Iran the testimony of one man is the equivalent to that of two women; in the court of law, it is more difficult for women to divorce their husbands than it is for men to divorce their wives (Hoodfar, 2008; Shivolo, 2010).

Gender Roles

Similarly, in regards to gender roles, Rogers (1978) reports that women are bound by the teachings of Islam. Iranian women are seen as secondary members of society and

are at times viewed as non-existent in regards to their roles in society. Aghaie (1995), on the other hand, attempts to counter some of the negative views of Middle Eastern women that portray them as “less than.” The women interviewed in Aghaie’s study (1995) were “far from the subdued and passive individuals they are often perceived to be by outsiders” (p. 39). Iranian women are expected to contribute to their families by working hard at maintaining harmony within their marriages as well as with their extended families. They play a critical role in maintaining peace within their families as well as in society (Sherif, 1999). Iranian women describe the gendered behavior that Westerners often interpret as submissive as purposeful, a way of keeping harmony within a family (Sherif, 1999). Aghaie (1995) concluded in her study that Iranian women have well developed ways in which they reach their desired outcomes and do not depend on “Western-style feminism” for the same purpose (p. 39). In fact, women in Iran fight for their rights in moving towards their desired goals but do so quietly in order to avoid any legal consequences (Tiefenbrum, 2007).

Education and Employment

Regarding access to education and employment, laws indicated that women had to have permission from their husbands to pursue education and/or join the workforce. These laws, however, have changed since the 1979 Revolution (Keddie, 2007). Some of the literature indicates that women are unable to be employed in certain occupations, such as serving as a judge (Shivolo, 2010). According to Tiefenbrum (2007), Iranian women need permission from their spouse to start a business and at times to even gain employment. However, other literature states that women in Iran are not held back from

pursuing fields of study at the university level and are able to choose their occupation (Ghorbani & Tung, 2007). Further, according to Tashakkori and Thompson (1991), the majority of women in Iran aim to achieve higher levels of education. According to Ebadi (2006), over 65% of university students in Iran are female. She also reports that Iranian women are able to study subjects that are traditionally considered male dominated, such as agriculture and mining, and are even able to serve as judges.

As shown above, literature on Middle Eastern women represents widely diverse, sometimes contradictory findings. An in-depth analysis indicates that these differing viewpoints seem to depend on whether the researchers were from a Western feminist perspective (Arebi, 1991) and/or a male perspective versus the perspective of Middle Eastern women themselves (Rassam, 1984). Arebi (1991) proposes that the idea of women in Muslim societies being subordinate is a result of the Western feminist literature. The literature shows that writings by males or by authors who hold Western feminist points of view tend to support the idea that Iranian women assume a submissive role within society. The perspective of Western researchers often portrayed Iranian women as powerless in their roles not only in society but in their marital relationships as well. For example, Rogers (1978), a professor from New York University, points out that a woman is secondary to a man, especially in their societal roles. Although more current research suggests that Iranian women are free to make decisions, it also suggests that if the husband disagrees with the decision, he ultimately has the final say (Aghajanian, 2001). On the other hand, in the literature by Middle Eastern females, Middle Eastern women are portrayed as having much influence in society (Rassam 1984; Ebadi, 2006). Rassam (1984), who used Middle Eastern women as participants in her study, found that

Iranian women see “reciprocity of influences, where men and women inhabit different but complementary worlds, both of which are necessary and important to society” (p. 27).

Keddie (2007), who has a Western perspective on Iranian women, claims that women need permission from their spouse in order to pursue an education. However, Ebadi (2006), an Iranian attorney and researcher, states that Iranian women are permitted to not only attend universities but also make up over half the population of university students in Iran. Thus, a researcher or author’s conclusion on Iranian women’s role in society, legal rights, or right to an education and occupation depends largely on whether the individual comes from a Western feminist or male perspective or Middle Eastern woman’s perspective.

These analyses showed that different findings result from different theory orientations and different research participants. These findings indicate that to truly understand Iranian marriages and Iranian women, researchers have to follow the tenants of social constructionist theories, to study the subjective meanings of marriage in its own context and through the lens and voices of its own people.

The Function of Iranian Marriage

According to existing research, it seems to be a given in Iranian culture that marriage is one of the most fundamental institutions. The legal age of marriage in Iran is 13 while in the United States it is 18 (Shivolo, 2010). All Muslim men and women have the expectation to be married and these marriages have clear legal and social rules (Sherif, 1999). This is distinctively different from the United States where marriage is an option and a legal right. In Iran, marital expectations are typically governed by Islam and

its teachings, which have been largely unchanged over thousands of years (Mawdudi, 1992), while in the Western world the institution of marriage has gone through dramatic changes in its modern history (Rampage, 2002).

Marriage and Religion

A marital relationship in Islamic tradition is a contractual relationship. The bride and groom literally sign a marital contract during the wedding ceremony. In this contract there are rules to ensure an agreed upon set of expectations within the marriage.

Violations of some of these expectations are clearly stated as reasons for termination of the marriage. This contract contains a list of what each spouse brings into the marriage, the agreement that the couple will procreate, the role that both the husband and the wife will take, and the way each will treat the other in the marriage (Curtis & Hooglund, 2008). The role that each spouse plays in the marriage is determined by Islamic beliefs and provides a framework for the couple to set specific expectations for the marriage. This can be anything from whether each spouse will work outside the home or who will look after the home.

According to Islam, there are several functions of marriage, including expanding one's family, procreation, and legalizing sexual relations. Marriage in Iranian culture is based on having a commitment that bonds two people and their extended families for a lifetime. There is a greater emphasis on family involvement in issues between spouses, beginning with parental influence in choosing one's spouse (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985; Azadarmaki & Bahar, 2006). This does not ultimately mean that individuals do not have a choice in whom they marry, but there is a strong influence from the family in who

would be a fit suitor. Iranian marriages are based on companionship and working as a team with one's extended family (Shapurian & Hojat, 1985). Extended family is what bonds people together, and these relationships are of utmost priority in comparison to all other relationships (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985).

Family and Marriage

For Iranians, the extension of one's family allows each individual to increase his/her support network within the community, and marriage is the pathway to developing and expanding one's family. Therefore, procreation is of utmost importance. It is by having children that two individuals expand their resources and work together with extended family members to build their family name (Nassehi-Behman, 1985), develop their children's moral character, and learn how to sustain loyalty to the family (Omran, 1992). Family is able to expand its resources by allowing each member of the family to contribute their skills to helping the family build their assets, which in turn increases the reputation and status of the family in the community. It is through their contributions that children are taught to live by morals that promote helping one's own family.

Children are highly valued in Islam and are at the core of Iranian culture (Omran, 1992). Having children allows for the family to expand within society by increasing the resources and workforce of the family's trade that financially support the extended family. This enables the family to become more successful within the community, therefore increasing the strength of the family unit (Nassehi-Behman, 1985). Having children is at the center of the family and is considered God's blessing (Freidl, 1985).

Children are considered sacred and ensure the family's success will be passed on for generations to come (Gable, 1959). Procreation, therefore, helps the family maintain their standing in society and among the human race.

Marriage and Intimacy

Another function of Iranian marriage is to make it legal for men and women to engage in sexual relations. Women are expected to remain “pure,” or to maintain their virginity before marriage. Sexual intimacy must be shared with one's spouse upon marriage (Aghajanian, 1986). Sexual intimacy is taught to Iranian women as being a “divine gift to be sacredly shared only with her husband” (Priester, 2008, p. 258). In Aghaie's (1995) study, Iranian women indicated that sexual intimacy with their spouse plays a distinct role within their marriage. Many Iranian women's understanding of sex and sexuality are influenced by cultural as well as some religious teachings. Such understanding contributes to how sexually attentive they are to their husbands (Khoei et al., 2008). Being able to satisfy their husbands sexually is seen as part of their role within the relationship; thus, Iranian women are expected to be seductive towards their spouse (Shahidian, 1999).

Although many women have strong religious beliefs, religion is not always the sole reason for being sexually available to one's spouse. In a study of Iranian women living in Australia and the meaning they attach to sexuality, it was found that while some women believed it was religiously proper for them to be sexually available to their husbands, some of them did not attribute their sexual availability to their religious beliefs; rather it is their own personal choice (Khoei et al., 2008). Iranian women also considered

sexual availability as an expression of power over their husbands, who they consider “weak” because they cannot control their sexual impulses. Due to women’s ability to control their sexual urges, they are able to use their sexuality to their advantage (Khoei et al., 2008). This study, however, was conducted on Iranian women outside of Iran. Such findings may or may not be influenced by the participants’ immigration experiences. Thus, when attempting to understand Iranian women, it is necessary to consider religion as a part of what motivates their decision-making. Researchers, however, must take caution not to box all Iranian women into this religious framework.

While the aforementioned expectations are contractually established in an Iranian marriage, it does not preclude certain qualities Iranian women desire in a marriage. It should be noted that these qualities are desired but not a prerequisite to make and maintain a marriage. For Iranians, the marital relationship is preferably based on “love, passion, friendship ... as well as mercy” (Omran, 1992). The words *love*, *passion*, and *friendship* may mean different things in Iranian culture than in Western culture.

According to Iranians, the passion and friendship within the marital dyad is viewed as both partners being tender and understanding to the other person in order for the couple to reach their overall goal, which is tranquility in the marital relationship (Omran, 1992). In Iranian marriage, the concept of *mercy* is defined as understanding, tolerance, and forgiveness towards one’s spouse (Omran, 1992) and consists of having the ability to endure and persevere throughout all of life’s challenges. In the Muslim culture, mercy is defined as having the intentions of bringing good onto others, putting others before oneself, and the willingness to subject oneself to potential harm in order to

benefit the other (Zaid, 2011). The Quran states the following in regards to love and mercy:

And among His signs is this that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts); verily in that are signs for those who reflect. (Chapter 30, Verse 21).

It is important to note that although Iranians desire what Westerners may consider the “ideal” love, lacking this love or passion does not break the relationship. Rather, the focus is on other elements that make the marital bond strong and stable. For some Iranians, a strong belief in what the Quran states as important in marriage is what helps ensure a strong bond between two people. For others it is the personal gender roles that the two people have agreed upon in their marital contract.

Iranian Marriage and Western Values

The functions of Iranian marriages may differ significantly from functions of Western marriages. The differences between Iranian and Western marriages can lead to a distorted or negative view of what Iranian marriage is if viewed through the Western lens that marriage should be based on romantic love. For example, a Westerner may misconstrue an Iranian couple that interacts in a way that appears “business-like” as cold and distant, thus calling into question the quality of their marriage. Thus, in order to examine Iranian marriages, one must take a perspective that allows Iranians to describe their own marriage and the norms in their marriages. The Western lens must be removed when examining Iranian marriage in order to give validity to the Iranian experiences.

Challenges in the Immigration Process

The relocation process that many immigrants experience comes with numerous factors that require adaptation. Among them are financial stressors and family acculturation. It can be particularly challenging to make adjustments in gender roles that are socially, culturally, and religiously defined over centuries. The cultural differences in gender roles between the United States and Iran appear to be greater for Iranian women than for Iranian men (Espin, 1987), as Iran is more of a male-dominated society. The United States, though also a male-dominated society, promotes more egalitarian relationships between men and women (Espin, 1987).

Although some studies show that Iranian women maintain their roles from their homeland (Kelly, Friedlander, & Colby, 1993), others report a shift in their gender roles (Ghaffarian, 1998; Espin, 1987). When the process of acculturation is occurring, Iranian immigrant women's sex-role attitudes and gender roles may change more dramatically than that of immigrant Iranian men (Espin, 1987). Other research has shown that this change is attributed to increased opportunities for women to work outside the home and earn their own income, thus becoming less dependent on their husbands for financial support (Ghaffarian, 1998). Some have found (Kamalkhani, 1988; Bauer, 1991) that coming to a new country has led to an interruption of traditional norms of Iranian women.

Immigrating to the United States adds an acculturation dimension to the experiences of the Iranian women being studied. It is self-evident that international migration is a stressful transition. The stress of being away from one's homeland and feeling the loss of one's familial and community support puts extra pressure on Iranian immigrants (Kelly et al., 1993). To some Iranians, however, the migration is viewed as an

emancipatory experience. This is especially true for Iranian women (Kelly et al., 1993). Some Iranian women feel a sense of freedom when they are exposed to new opportunities and ideologies and are able to make choices in life, particularly the personal decision of whether they will adhere to traditional gender roles.

As was previously described, immigration to a new country and acculturation into new norms and values present newfound opportunities and choices, and many Iranian women appear to choose to adhere to their own culturally defined gender roles. For example, Iranian women living in Los Angeles over the last decade have remained a homogenous group, even in the midst of so many other cultures (Kelly et al., 1993).

Summary

The present review demonstrates that the literature on immigrant Iranian-American women living in Southern California is far from consistent and homogeneous. At times this literature is even contradictory. Looking closely at the literature we can see the different discourses amongst scholars. These results create divergent ideas about the meanings involved in the immigration process as well as challenges related to gender and hierarchy norms between the Iranian culture and the U.S. culture. It then becomes unclear as to how these differences impact the meaning making processes around marriage.

Furthermore, most Iranians come to the United States seeking a better life for their families. They are often pressed to leave their country of origin by the economic hardships caused by political maneuvers and international treaties. Their experiences of coming to the West—travelling individually, as a couple, or with children—are sometimes traumatic and may have lasting negative impact in their lives and in their

relationships. There are significant cultural shifts that occur as Iranian immigrants acculturate into adopting Western norms and beliefs.

All of this can lead to Iranian women feeling torn between being more “modern” (with more liberal and individualistic ideas) and feeling guilty for rejecting the “old” (conservative and collective). This challenge can often be value-laden, with Iranian women experiencing a sense of guilt or shame for leaving the old culture behind and this may even be interpreted as disrespecting their home culture. This is significant issue as respect within the marital dyad; respect in relation to intergenerational patterns; and within the community are important construct for Iranian families.

Although there has been some work to help us understand the Iranian immigration process there are still many unknown issues that need to be explored so that therapists can be informed and offer culturally relevant therapy services. There are two distinct areas of limitations. The first is the lack of pure research on Iranian women. So some of what we know is flawed because it is a mix of different cultures. Secondly, there appears to be researcher bias. As the literature indicates, Western feminist researchers tend to focus on specific factors and draw different research conclusions than Iranian researchers and scholars may conclude. It is valuable to add to the literature on Iranians and to understand the cultural values and norms of immigrants who are acculturating to Western norms. Such knowledge is critical if such multicultural individuals are to be successfully integrated into American society and if the intercultural conflict and distress that often result from adapting to a new culture are to be reduced. Furthermore, culturally conscious therapy can be beneficial for clinicians in increasing psychotherapy compliance with immigrant populations.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

With the scarcity of qualitative studies on Iranian Americans, let alone immigrant Iranian-American women, interpretative phenomenology, one of the approaches of phenomenology, is a fitting methodological approach for the present study as it seeks to examine the lived experiences and understandings of its participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The nuances of culture and immigration as they relate to marriage can be captured through interpretative phenomenology by allowing Iranian-American women to tell their stories from their lived realities and share of their perceptions and views.

Overview

The main objective of this study is to investigate the meanings and experiences Iranian-American women make of their marriages while acculturating to life in the United States of America. This study also seeks to understand how these meanings influence the relational dynamics within the couple and how families are organized around issues of gender and power in their relationships.

The roots of qualitative research originally began in other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and psychology, as a means of investigating the depth of an individual or group's physical answers beyond the content that was straightforwardly presented (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to truly gain a multifaceted understanding of the experiences of the population. This method allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences of the participants while making convergence of data to reflect and seize distinct social phenomena and patterns (Flick,

2007). Through the use of qualitative research, there is an ability to have subjective explanations and analyses of research data (Hseih & Shannon, 2005). In addition, qualitative research methods allow the researcher to become familiar with and explore fundamental patterns that create meaning for participants in a way (Patton, 2002).

According to Rossman and Rallis (2008), qualitative research is recognized for its intricate, humanistic, authentic and organic way of conducting research, which permits the researcher to be a part of the process in which participants explain and explore their personal experiences and meanings. This approach allows the researcher to be momentarily present whether through interviews or field studies and to take in and comprehend the experiences of the participant's as they live and define it. Qualitative research promotes and encourages evolution, growth, and learning from the participants by bringing knowledge to the meanings they create from their experiences (Daly, 2007). Particularly important in regards to this study is the ability of qualitative research methods to provide a depth of evaluation. Additionally, these methods help the researcher approach issues while integrating a worldview that is introspective and reflective in nature. This is absolutely necessary for this study because this study seeks to understand the worldviews of Iranian-American women. Specifically, the frame of this study assumes that these experiences are influenced by many contextual experiences. A qualitative method will allow for the study to consider these many influences as well as the varying effects of these influences from one couple to another.

Phenomenology

While this study will use a qualitative methodology, it will specifically employ a

phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a process-based method of research that is not focused on analyzing or explaining, but rather describing an experience (Daly, 2007). Interpretive phenomenology is used when the research question asks for the meaning of the phenomenon and the researcher does not bracket their biases and prior engagement with the question under study. The basic tenet of the interpretive phenomenological school of thought is that researchers cannot remove themselves from the meanings extracted from the text (Colaizzi, Giorgi, & Van Kaam, 2007). The researcher becomes a part of the phenomenon. Currently there is no scarcity of studies reporting analysis or explanations of conflict or reasons for stress in marriage as a result of immigration. What needs to be known is the direct description and perception of experience and meaning for Iranian-American women. In this way of doing research, phenomenology is “hospitable, accepting, and receptive in its reflection on ‘the things themselves’ and in its care not to impose order on its subject matter” (Wertz, 2005, p. 175). Wertz (2005) captures the essence of phenomenology well, saying that:

Phenomenology does not form theories, operationalize variables, deduce or test hypotheses, or use probabilistic calculations... Phenomenology dwells with and openly respects persons’ own points of view and honors the multiperspectivity found in the life-world. Phenomenology is a low-hovering, in-dwelling, meditative philosophy that glories in the concreteness of person–world relations and accords lived experience, with all its indeterminacy and ambiguity, primacy over the known. (p. 175)

Even with what scholarship has revealed about Iranian-American women and families, the resulting knowledge has done little to promote an effective mental health support system with cultural humility (Vaziri, 1999). This is more than likely due to the limitations in the research noted in the literature review section. Therefore a new track of research, one that positions the inquiry in such a way that it considers the multiple

influences and subjective meaning making process around marriage is needed to better understand these women's experiences (Ortega & Coulborn, 2011). In this way this study will give privilege to the lived experience of Iranian-American women. This will allow family science researchers and practitioners to view these families' experiences in a fresh new way, one that reconsiders mental health support systems in light of stories from the Iranian-American woman herself.

Method Overview

This study will utilize interpretive phenomenological analysis to understand the experiences, perspectives, and attitudes of the Iranian American female participants. Data will be drawn from the in-progress study, "The Influence of Acculturation on Meanings of Marriage for Iranian-American Women," which has been approved by the Loma Linda University Institutional Review Board. Dr. Curtis Fox is listed as the primary investigator and Golnoush Yektafar-Hooshvar is a researcher.

Design

When deciding who should be interviewed in phenomenological inquiry, the researcher should ask "Do you have the experience that I am looking for?" (Englander, 2012, p. 19). Who are the individual(s) who know about this phenomenon of what goes on in the marital relationships of Iranian American women in regard to culture? This study employed 14 face-to-face semi-structured interviews. According to Colaizzi (2008), the best means of data collection in phenomenological studies are face-to-face interviews. It is recommended that researchers expose themselves to the experiences and

meanings that participants make while being involved with them in the process in which they describe such details. These face-to-face interviews will be structured in an open-ended method, and will last approximately 1 to 1.5 hours depending on the participants and the amount of disclosure they wish to share. After the data from the interviews has been analyzed and themes developed, the researcher will provide the participants with a printed table where the themes are presented and discussed.

Participants

According to Creswell (2006), the most advantageous number of participants for a phenomenological study is 10 to 15. Therefore the number of participants in this study includes 14 Iranian-American women in order to gain optimal results. Various inclusion and exclusion criteria must be set up for the participants. The inclusion criterion includes:

1. Participants must be Iranian-born women.
2. They must be married to Iranian-born men.
3. They must be between 18-70 years of age.
4. They are presently living in the United States.
5. They must have immigrated to the U.S. after they were 18 years old.
6. They must be married for at least 2 years.
7. They must be married to an Iranian male at the time of the interview.
8. They must be able to communicate in English (conversational ability).

Exclusion criteria includes:

1. Women who do not have sufficient understanding of the English language.
2. Women experiencing issues of abuse and/or significant mental health concerns.

Excluding women with mental health and abuse issues were to maintain the privacy and safety of the participants, and exclusion of non-English speaking participants is to reduce the possibilities of misreading and misunderstanding the interview questions and conversations regarding experiences with marriage and their views on this topic.

Recruitment Strategy

The researcher recruited 14 women for this study. The researcher has many ties to the large Iranian population living in Orange County, California. I started the recruiting process by introducing myself at the Iranian Professional Women's meetings in Orange County. I was in consultation with the leader during this process. In that initial meeting, I briefly described the purpose of the needs assessment and asked any interested parties to talk to me after the meeting was over. I collected the potential participants' contact numbers and email addresses. I then contacted interested participants personally through phone calls and email to set up appointments, during which I offered further explanations about the needs assessment, described the risks and benefits in the consent form, and asked for their formal consent. I also had a sign-up sheet available, which I collected at the next meeting. As stated above, after finalizing the initial pool of participants, I employed snowball sampling for subsequent participants. These subsequent participants for the snowball sampling were referred from the participants. The researcher has also been involved with this community from the start of her doctoral education and would like to develop a clinical practice in this region with the intended population being studied upon completion of the doctoral degree.

Once a few potential participants are contacted and informed about the study, snowball sampling (Creswell, 2006) was utilized to engage additional participants. Although the study utilized snowball sampling, the researcher was careful in who is included into the study as the Iranian community is a small and close group. Participants likely had preexisting relationship with other participants. Therefore the researcher had to evaluate how the inclusion of a new participant might affect the existing participants, particularly in regards to the participant's sense of safety and confidentiality. Additionally, the specific details of each participant would have to be described in the results section to provide transparency in the relationships between participants.

Procedures

Great care was taken to recruit, collect data, and interact with participants in culturally sensitive ways. Potential participants identified through the recruitment process above were asked to identify a convenient time and place to receive the informed consent process and also participate in the interview.

The informed consent process includes information about the procedures of the study, as well as the limits of confidentiality within the study such as disclosing issues of child abuse, elderly abuse, harm to self and/or others. The consent also informed the participant about the researcher's desire to maintain confidentiality within the study. This included de-identifying all interview transcripts and information and using pseudonyms for all research participants. Participants were also given a reference list of local mental health practitioners within the community if they found a need for such services throughout the course of the study. In addition, participants were given the option of

contacting the researcher at any time during the research process if they had questions about the study or procedures. Providing participants with the researcher's contact information may have helped alleviate any anxieties or concerns those taking part in the study may have and aligned with the researcher's ethical standards of running a study.

After a participant indicated their consent to participate in the study, the researcher collected the participant's contact info and demographic information, which was cross-checked to determine whether the participants met the inclusion criteria. Following the consent process, the researcher began the face-to-face interview. The interview followed the interview guide presented in the Appendix section. Upon completion of the interview the participant was given the opportunity to have the interview transcript mailed to them when it was fully transcribed in order to guarantee transcript accurateness and truthfulness. After completing the interview and after the interview data had been analyzed, the participants may be given a list of the emerging themes upon request.

Consistent with Colaizzi's (1978) interpretation of phenomenological research, the collecting of data and data analysis necessitates the researcher's ability to develop and delve deeper into the original dialogue that the research participant and the researcher engaged in. If at any point during the data analysis process something is unclear or confusing for the researcher, she or he must contact the participants to clarify and this will be done in the proposed study if necessary. The researcher would need to maintain her or his dialogue and professional relationship with the participants throughout the data analysis process and up until the point in which saturation of themes has been

accomplished, which would align with the desired “constant comparative method” of research analysis for this phenomenological study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Once the data was analyzed and evaluated, this stage of the research has been completed, and the researcher notified all research participants that the study was concluded. The researcher personally thanked the participants for taking part in this study and may call, email, or send a card appreciating the time they have taken to be involved in the current study.

Interview Guide and Measures

The full list of interview questions is provided in Appendix A. The interview began with “stem questions,” including things such as: “what messages were you given by your family or socio-cultural surroundings that have shaped your perceptions of what it means to be married?”; “what were your thoughts about the characteristics that make a marriage successful prior to your immigration to the United States and now that you have been living in Western culture, how have those characteristics changed?” These stem questions were sometimes followed by sub-questions, which would depend on the responses received. If a participant explained a stem question in its fullest extent, the follow up questions were bypassed. The interviews were recorded in their entirety using a digital tape recorder. Approximately 10 demographic questions were asked, which are listed in Appendix A. The information collected with the demographic questions serves as a way of organizing the interview data. Also, some of the demographic information can contribute to analysis; for example, perhaps there are differences in marital conflict dependent upon level of educational background.

Self of the Researcher

I, Golnoush Yektafar-Hooshvar, am the main interviewer for this study. I am a second generation Iranian-American female who grew up in the Iranian-American cultural communities of Southern California. My own personal interest in this topic began years ago when I was working with immigrant families at a local mosque.

What I heard was story after story of young Iranian-American females struggling to connect with their spouses and children and feeling at a loss for how to parent and relate to their spouse without losing their values to another culture. There was so much pain and loss yet at the same time so much longing and hope for connection and closer family relationships. Working alongside mosque leaders, I found that many felt ill-equipped or that they did not know how to support these women and their families toward healthier relationships. Often times, leaders knew only how to address these issues from a religious or spiritual standpoint and did not know how to tend to the cultural and relational dynamics.

Over the years there has remained a scarcity of both academic and lay resources in how to best support these women and their families and communities. It is my personal hope to contribute to the literature in telling about the lived experiences of Iranian American women.

Reflexivity and Assumptions

It is important for the researcher to be in a process of reflexivity, and to remain critically conscious of the researcher's own role in the study (Daly, 2007). For this particular study, it is important for the researcher to be an insider in this community with

the participants. Iranian women are known for their value of 'ertebaat' nmm, or relationship (Azizi, 2011). It means a lot to develop trustworthy relationships, and trust is often given to those whose background is more similar. Thus it is more comfortable for the Iranian family member to be interviewed by someone who is also Iranian from within the Iranian community than an outsider where little trust has been established.

Using interpretative phenomenology, it is important for the researcher to be aware of the cultural positions of the participants and to engage with them with respect and honor. It is highly likely that participants would resort to saving face and hence be reluctant to divulge sensitive and negative information about their husband and family. Because of the cultural congruence between the researcher and the participants, there is likely to be an unspoken understanding that I would understand and uphold these values. To decrease the participants' distress, I can reassure the participants about the purpose of the study, the confidentiality code, and how the research will benefit their communities and families.

Also, in recruiting participants, was important to go through professional leadership organizations as well as through snowball sampling. Since Iranian communities function around *ertebaat*, close trusted relationships, and authority, participants are more likely to openly participate if professional members of the Iranian community are on board with the research study or if their friends invite them to join.

As it is important for the researcher to be aware of how I engage with and impact the participants and research process. Also, I need to know what assumptions I hold that also impact this process. As a marriage and family therapist and Iranian female who has a strong personal interest and doctoral training in issues of social justice and social context,

I know that these are the lenses through which I will research, understand, and analyze the data. As discussed in Chapter Two, I will have a heightened awareness of the many symbolic meanings that people develop and rely upon in the process of social interactions and contextual systems impacting the participants and the meanings they create (symbolic interaction theory).

Risks and Benefits

The risk/benefit analysis of participation was informed by two basic principles that stipulated the obligations of researchers to their subjects: beneficence and non-maleficence. King and Churchill (2000) have defined “non-maleficence” as the duty to do no harm. Beneficence describes the active duty to seek an enduring good for the sake of others (King & Churchill, 2000). Through adhering to these two principles, this needs assessment aimed to decrease the stigma of participation and to empower each participant to voice her unique perspective.

The study also informed the participant of the possible risks of participation in a qualitative needs assessment, such as the experience of vulnerability. For some participants, immigration may have left deeply felt emotional scars. For some participants, immigration and acculturation in relation to their marriages may have been a traumatic experience. Interviews that asked participants to recall met and unmet needs as they experienced immigration and acculturation could potentially reactivate the participants’ feelings of helplessness, despair, and depression. However, as Collogan et al. (2004) observe, if the research procedures are planned, predictable, and controlled,

participants may avoid the reactivation of a traumatic experience, even if they may have strong reactions to the questions (p. 367).

As a mandated reporter, I also made known to participants my potential obligation to report suicidal intent, homicidal intent, child abuse, or elderly abuse. I also let the participant know that the protection of their privacy was of the utmost importance. This study removed data any information pertaining to personal identification (Collogan et. al., 2004; Kavle, 1996; Goodwin & O'Connor, 2006). In order to protect the participants' privacy, I gave each participant a pseudonym.

Data Creation and Analysis

This particular study is unique in that it is seeking to understand the lived experience of one group of participants. In the analysis phase of interpretative phenomenology, I transcribed, read, analyzed, and interpreted the data throughout the interviewing and data collection process. During the interview process, I moved forward and interview immigrant Iranian-American females until saturation occurred. This means that after having repeated conversations and interviews with the participants, I asked myself if I had a sense of understanding their experiences as fully as possible (Daly, 2007). In this way, as the researcher is gaining new insight throughout the analysis occurring in between interviews, and these insights were applied to the following interviews such that questions can be better shaped to capture the participant's lived experiences.

Transcription and Data Storage

Written notes, contact information, and demographic data of all participants will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the principal investigator's office (Dr. Fox). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, removing all identifiers from data that could compromise anonymity of participants. The digital recordings of the interviews were destroyed once the transcriptions were completed. Responses from demographic sheets were collated into one spreadsheet and stored in the principal investigator's office in a locked cabinet. After the data from the demographic sheets were tabulated in the dataset the paper demographic sheets were shredded. The two investigators were the only individuals who had access to the tapes and protected confidential information of the participants. Transcriptions were completed by the student investigator, who will maintain confidentiality of all participant information.

Steps of Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2009) described six steps in interpretative phenomenological analysis: (1) reading and re-reading, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) moving to the next case, and (6) looking for patterns across cases. This analysis is an iterative process that requires "flexible thinking, processes of reduction, expansion, revision, creativity and innovation" (p. 81).

The different qualitative methodologies share common emphases in that the analysis and interpretation process occur as data collection progresses. Daly (2007) describes this as "the intertwined braid of collection analysis and interpretation that is

central to carrying out research that has an emergent and inductive orientation” (p. 219). This analytic process is meant to be reflective and engage the researcher in the participants’ stories. Although the focus is on the participants’ experience and their meaning-making of the experiences, the outcome is an account of the researcher’s analysis of the participant’s thinking. Even though the outcome of this process seems to be subjective, it is “dialogical, systematic, and rigorous in its application” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80).

Step One: Reading and Re-reading

Once the interviews have been transcribed, the researcher will assume an attitude reflective of the phenomenological method. In this case it was crucial to read and reread the transcript to get a sense of the whole in order to “understand the meaning of the experience in terms of the standpoint of the [participant] and not in terms of the researcher’s theory about the topic under study” (de Castro, 2003, p. 50). This part of the analysis is about following the participant’s experience through his/her intentionality, rather than inputting the researcher’s own intentionality into the participant’s experience.

In this first step of phenomenological analysis, the goal is not to make any interpretation about the participant’s experience, but rather to attain a sense of the whole experience of the participant. In order to do this, it is common to listen to the audio recording of the interview before transcribing. In this case the researcher was aware of the parts of the interview that were particularly powerful or impacting to the interviewer, and bracketed these off for the time being so that the researcher could allow the text/data to speak and not prematurely move towards making connections.

Step Two: Initial Noting

After much reading and immersion in the transcription, the goal of the second step is to come up with a comprehensive set of notes and comments on the text. In this case the researcher seeks to keep an open mind and jot down notes about anything of interest in the transcript. Some ways to do this include describing what is important to the participants, and what meaning things have to the participant. Three types of comments can be helpful: 1) descriptive comments, which are essentially a describing of the participant's spoken content; 2) linguistic comments, which explore the language used by the participant (pronoun use, repetition, metaphor, pauses, etc.); and 3) conceptual comments, which move to a more interrogative and conceptual level, attempting to get at the participants' central understandings.

Step Three: Developing Emergent Themes

During this third step, the focus was mostly on the set of provisional notes from step two, and the researcher attempted to map out the "interrelationships, connections, and patterns between exploratory notes" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). These themes will be expressed as phrases, capturing the participants' original words/thoughts as well as the researcher's interpretations. As a whole, these themes should encapsulate and show comprehension of the data.

Step Four: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes

The fourth step includes mapping how the list of themes in step three come together. The hope is to produce some sort of structure for the themes, such that the most

important pieces of the participant's account are captured. This was done by typing the themes into a list in chronological order, and then clustering the related themes. During this step, attention was paid to the contextual and cultural themes through the theoretical lenses discussed in chapter two. For example, there may be themes related to the participant's experience as a minority Iranian American, or there may be themes about experiences of discrimination or confusion around multiple identities.

Step Five: Moving to the Next Case

At this stage in the data analysis the analysis moves back and forth from interviewing and transcribing cases. As this is done the researcher treats each case on its own terms, trying to remain true to each participant's lived experience.

Step Six: Looking for Patterns Across Cases

This study utilized the adaptations of phenomenology from Smith et al. (2009). These adaptations help integrate a systemic, contextual way of interacting between the participants of this study. Specifically in this stage the researcher will look at patterns and connections between the emergent themes between participants. This might include comparing and contrasting their lived experiences and interpretations of those experiences. The researcher specifically looked for ways that participants differ or share similar experiences in regards to family issues, marriage, and their experiences as a minority in America.

Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Transferability

Whereas quantitative researchers use the term validity, qualitative researchers think in terms of trustworthiness and credibility. I used the following procedures to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of this study: triangulation, clarifying researcher bias, and member checks (Armour, Rivaux, & Bell, 2009). Through the use of investigator triangulation, I corroborated evidence and analysis with the principal investigator to have his contribution of different perspectives, questions and interpretations. In order to clarify researcher bias, I will present any prior preconceptions that would impact the data collection and analysis process. Additionally, member checking, or presenting results to participants for their feedback on how the results compare with their experiences, took place after all interviews were conducted.

In qualitative research, instead of thinking in terms of generalizability, we pursue transferability. “The reader makes links between the analysis..., their own personal and professional experience, and the claims in the extant literature” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). As the researcher provides a contextualized, rich analysis of the participants’ experiences, this allows readers to evaluate whether or not this analysis is transferable to people of other similar contexts.

Researcher’s Assumptions and Biases

Acknowledging a researcher’s assumptions while conducting research is central in phenomenological research (Field & Morse, 1985). It is important to make known the initial assumptions that are present. The researcher of this study comes with certain biases and assumptions about the Iranian population and the role Iranian women play in their

marriage. Being married to a non-Iranian-born man means that this researcher has to adjust to the perceptions and expectations of an Iranian-American husband. Coming from Iranian culture gives this researcher an insider perspective into the Iranian community and Iranian marriage.

Through personal involvement, this researcher has been able to experience marriage in a way that has been described as the “Iranian way.” What this means is that both partners are to play a specific role within the marital relationship. There is also an understanding that each partner respects the other for their role and what they bring to the marriage. Although this researcher has this personal perspective, it is important to recognize that it is still to be considered an outsider’s view since this researcher has spent the majority of her life in the United States of America.

One assumption that the researcher currently holds is that Iranian women are held to a high standard in education. It is the researcher’s assumption that what makes Iranian women well respected in their families is whether or not they received higher education. Having a higher education also contributes to satisfaction in their relationships. Another assumption is that a shared belief in culture and/or religion makes marriage successful. It is also assumed that in Iranian marriages, having a strong faith in “traditional” gender roles keeps Iranian couples’ bond strengthened. The researcher’s final assumption is that Iranian women assert their power in a marriage through behaviors that appear to be submissive to Western eyes. This seemingly paradoxical dynamic, to gain power by submitting power, may lead Westerners to label these women as powerless in their marriage, which in turn would lead to unhappiness. It is crucial to put forth these

assumptions in order to be aware of possible biases and judgments that may place a gap between researcher and subject.

Limitations

There are a few potential limitations to this phenomenological qualitative study. One limitation is that since this study is proposing to recruit voluntary participants who are mainly English speaking, it may not be able to hear the stories of those whose primary language is Farsi. This may influence their representativeness to other, broader Iranian immigrants and would raise questions such as the following: would Farsi speaking participants be more or less acculturated in comparison to individuals whose primary language is Farsi? If so, this may limit the transferability of this particular study. Also, these Iranian-American women who volunteer to be interviewed may have “less to be ashamed” about because they are open to talking about their spouse and family to a non-family member, thus leaving out a sample whose relational challenges might be greater. Another limitation is that the participants of this study will most likely come from the Southern California geographic area and, thus, the results may not be directly transferable to immigrant Iranian American women in other parts of the United States. Lastly, as a pilot sort of qualitative study, this is only one of hopefully many future studies to be conducted with the Iranian-American populations. It may not capture the breadth of issues within this community, but it will certainly begin to delve into the depths of family life as it relates to Iranian culture.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

Overview of Results

In this chapter, the results of the study will be reported. The following outline will be used: participants' general background information, table of participants' demographic information, participants' individual descriptions, and the major themes derived from the data. In order to protect the participants' confidentiality, each participant was given a fictitious name. Participants were identified by the following names: Ariana, Brianna, Claire, Donna, Evelyn, Francesca, Gina, Hannah, Inez, Jessica, Katy, Laura, Monica, and Nicole. These names were assigned to each participant in the order the interviews were conducted during the study.

Each woman's story presents a unique view of her experience as she acculturated to life in America. Overall, however, these women's views of themselves were influenced predominantly by their relationship with their partners and by their sense of personal identity within the cultural community. These two factors enabled them to construct alternate views of their self-identities. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was conducted on each of these women's stories to uncover these major themes.

Data Analysis

Using the methodological approach of interpretive phenomenology, four major themes emerged: (a) cross cultural adaptation and awareness, (b) marriage as an

egalitarian union (change in gender roles), (c) re-anchoring of marital influence (in-laws), and (d) emerging self in relational identity (third culture).

Theme I. Cross Cultural Adaptation and Awareness

The first theme that emerged from the review of the qualitative interviews was cross-cultural adaptation and awareness. From the transcripts it seemed that women were clear in their expression of their understanding, awareness, acceptance, open-mindedness, non-ethnocentricity, and their willingness to learn new ways of being and relating in the new culture. Some of these adaptations came easily, and others with significant struggle and deliberation. The participants had to navigate around their different cultural practices and adapt to the dominant culture's life, whether it was through acclimatizing to their practices or having an understanding towards their preferences. Further, being aware of differences was identified as the first step followed by being sensitive and accommodation to cultural differences. Most of the participants demonstrated a heightened level of awareness towards particular aspects of cultural differences, especially in relation to family life. For example, the participants understood the collectivistic nature of the Iranian culture and they understood the individualistic parts of Western culture and negotiated around these differences as they lived life between the influences of both cultures. Some participants discussed having to adjust to the long distance phone calls to extended cousins in Iran and attending multiple Iranian family functions. But through negotiations, the participants and their partners came to understand the cultural importance and personal value of these phone calls and family events to their partner. The participants discussed accommodating to their husband by helping set boundaries and prioritizing the events, which eventually protected their sense

of autonomy and independence. The participants were able to describe other differences in the cultural practices and behavior that demonstrated the participant's and couples' level of awareness, understanding, and adaptation.

Jessica, an accomplished academic professional born in Iran who migrated to the United States at the age of 21, reported her experience with this transition. The initial transition to the United States from Iran as one where she experienced a conflict in her beliefs and values. She explained the need to adapt to a new culture as such:

I think in order for me to make some kind of meaning in my marriage I had to first open my eyes, my ears, and my mind to the American culture. I thought my relationship with my husband would be the same once we moved to America but boy was I wrong...I had to learn to accept the different ways men and women related to one another in America and make it fit with the way I had learned to relate to husband which was taught to me by mother and to her by her mother. I had to be open to changing my values so that it could somehow fit with this new culture.

Another participant, Evelyn, explained the shift in the way she developed meaning her marriage after immigrating to the United States by being mindful of the different cultural values and norms that she was exposed to in the United States.

Coming to the United States meant re-marrying my husband. I had been used to doing things in such a specific way for so long that now I had to change the way I related to him in this new world...I started experiencing myself in a different way based on my interactions with others...I saw how he slowly began changing because he was accepting American culture and I knew I had to learn to accept this new culture and mix it with what I had learned in Iran if I wanted our marriage to make sense in America...What I mean is, in America not everything is about your entire family as it is in Iran and so I had to just learn to deal with this 'one man for himself' mentality and other things that were very Western in order to make sense of my marriage.

Hannah, another participant emphasized the need to become aware of the cultural differences and to adapt Iranian and American norms in the way she relates to her husband to create a new meaning in their union. She explained this phenomenon as such;

In Iran everything is always done together...you have aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, and so many others involved in your everyday life and here in the United States it's very different...you see parents and their kids...I had to really adjust to these different things I saw in America and not just see them but start doing things in my own family life to really make my marriage signify anything...honestly if I had kept the mentality I had in Iran and how I was as a wife I couldn't be married in America. I had to learn to accept American culture and mix it with my 'Irooni' self and that's how I think I have made sense of a meaningful marriage.

This theme, cultural adaptation and awareness, was pervasive from the transcripts analyzed for this study and spoke clearly to the changes and adaptations that had to do with their self in the context to their marriage relationship. The cultural mores of both cultures featured in their experience but was significantly shaped by the new experience of living in the United States of America. This theme coincides with some of the previous literature on the immigration process and marital adjustment (Seward, 2008; Tseng et al., 1977).

Theme II. Marriage as an Egalitarian Union

Another major theme that was extracted from the transcripts of the participants was marriage as an egalitarian union. In the old country there was obvious dominant patriarchal values that influenced relationships, roles, and expectations. Many of the participants experienced a journey toward a more balanced or egalitarian relationship in actuality or in fantasy.

Iranian family structure is specifically a patriarchal family structure that is privileged (Farkhojasteh, 2003) with men and women allotted different responsibilities and rights. Fathers and husbands are legally, religiously, and socially acknowledged as the head of both the family and the marital partnership with responsibility for the

leadership and economic well-being of the family. For women, the primary and most valued responsibilities are housewifery and motherhood. The social reinforcement of this gendered division is evidenced in law. For example, males maintain a legal right to prevent their wives from undertaking or continuing paid employment (Ahmad-Nia, 2002). If women do engage in paid employment, the social expectation is that this is for the betterment of the family rather than personal preference. In a study comparing women in and not in the labor force, family financial needs figured prominently in labor force participation; whereas, disagreements with husband and priority given to housewifery and childcare figured prominently as reasons for remaining out of the labor force (Ahmad-Nia, 2002). A female's paid employment may well reflect negatively on the husband. The differential positioning of men and women is also illustrated in laws governing divorce and polygamy (Kar, 1999). Men have relatively easy access to divorce while women can only obtain a divorce under limited conditions. In addition, among the majority Shiite Muslims (89% of the population), men have the religious and legal right to have up to four permanent and a limitless number of temporary wives. This is not the case for women. While these practices are rare and require permission of the court (Rariiezan-nargesi, 2005; Safaie and Imami, 2003), they remain a legal right of men.

While these laws and customs set the basic framework for gender relations in Iran, there is considerable variation in how they are followed, both in the home and in public. In the experience of the researcher, marital relationships in Iran vary widely. In some, husbands and wives respect and treat each other as equals. Other couples, however, follow traditional teachings more strictly and reject egalitarian relationship styles. In this study participants expressed the shift into egalitarian relational dynamics as a source of

creating meaning in their marriages. Gina, a 63 year-old Iranian-American woman married in her early twenties in Iran and migrated to the United States, expressed the marital role shift occurring years after immigrating.

We married when we were very young and in Iran back then we each had roles...I had children very soon after marrying and I was always at home taking care of home...when we moved to the United States my husband had a difficult time finding work so I began working...we both valued each of our paychecks...he began helping with the kids at home which he had never done when they were born in Iran...things began to feel more balanced and I felt we were on a team...I would definitely say in America our marriage has become a balancing act between the two of us.

In regards to the theme of marriage as an egalitarian union, many participants articulated on the equality in their marital dynamics, which was expressed as the formation of relational bonds through mutual respect, honesty, trust, and loyalty. These participants identified the following characteristics as necessary to their marital adjustment, marital satisfaction and egalitarian unions: respect, honesty, trust, and loyalty. These participants saw cultural differences as a primary issue to the foundational shared values, representing their strong interpersonal foundations. The participants discussed strengths or positive relational qualities within their marital foundation as a source of enrichment along with identification of cultural differences between Iran and America. Some participants identified aspects of cultural issues but mentioned dealing with them as they would any other issues in their marriage through mutual respect, communication, compromise, and understanding, which were a part of egalitarian unions adopted as a result of living in the United States. Participant responses revealed that having similarities in beliefs and values, shared communication, mutual respect and understanding, and the willingness to make compromises were necessary in a marriage

after immigration and adaptation into a new culture. For example, one participant (Monica) shared the following:

I would say culture is secondary. For me, to use culture as an excuse of, or reason, to say you don't get along is lame. It is a cop-out. But let me qualify that: I have the benefit of having met someone who is completely open to other cultures. I mean, there are couples who struggle with this, but if you try to get over those things and do look at what you have in common, if you fundamentally respect each other, all the other issues are secondary. The hierarchy of the important things that are critical: it's respect, and I'd swear culture is secondary.

The “marriage as an egalitarian union” theme is an extension of the cross-cultural adaptation theme, and was expressed by participants as shared meaning through agreements, compromises, and communication about various ideologies. Participants gave examples that demonstrated the development of their unity through communication and compromise. These participants saw themselves as united and their roles in the relationship as equal, indicating they felt it was required from themselves and their partner to make compromises and to make an effort to understand the other spouse. This was expressed to have shifted after immigrating to the United States. Participants shared that their adjustment was influenced by allowing for the discussion of their different realities and ultimately the co-creation and co-construction of a new reality and shared identities. Through this process, it appears that individual realities were integrated, thus creating a unity that withstands and embraces cultural differences between Iranian and American culture. For example, Katy defined her cultural experience as such:

Iranian women in America today assert their right to want and to expect more from their husbands. If their husbands are educated, open-minded and believe in these things [women's rights], the couple compromises and deals with the new situation. However, if the husbands are close-minded and cannot accept these rights for women, such ' as the style of dress, social relationships, working outside the home etc., it may cause problems...being equal is a melding of thoughts and ideas and lots of compromises and lots of understanding on both sides. We need to talk these things out, and I may not be as great at that as I could be, more

accepting than questioning. But if you are not “accepting,” then you need to talk these things out, because if you don’t then it’s liable to become a rift there. That will be problematic.

Most of the participants in the study discussed the issue of living the tension between patriarchy and egalitarianism. Living in this tension appeared to be very significant as these things altered expectations, roles, marriage, and the meaning associated with dynamic intimate relationships. It appeared that the satisfaction derived from these marriages shifted on account of the expectations shaped by new culture. Such results are not surprising.

Theme III. Re-anchoring of Family Influence on Marriage

The third theme noted in this present study is referred to as re-anchoring of family influence in the shaping of the marital dynamics and process. This theme refers to the reallocation of power and influence from the family to the couple relationship. In adjusting to the new culture that is radically individualistic, couples had to renegotiate the often dominant and centralized influence of the larger family system in favor of a move to a greater influence by the couple system. The literature on collective cultures such as Iranian culture emphasizes interconnectedness and interdependence between family members as well as their community (Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Trumbull, 1999). Family members rely on others within the family and/or community to help make decisions and are open to outside influence. The notion of interdependence is frequently discussed in writings about collective cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Raeff, 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995) in contrast to independence, showing that particular cultures live either in independent or interconnected ways. Not much writing is on

boundary keeping in different cultural contexts. Findings of this study, however, indicate that within the interconnectedness of the culture there is a need to establish and maintain boundaries.

Iranian culture is family oriented and places a high value on strong family ties. Marriage binds not only two people, but two families. The family determines the social status of the individual and serves as the foundation of both social life and social support (Azadarmaki et al., 2000; Mohséni and Pourreza, 2003). In the absence of government supported social services and economic safety nets, it is family members who are turned to not only for advice and guidance, but for material assistance. Given the culture of modesty that prohibits discussion of personal life issues with others, it is the family that is the place where problems are disclosed and assistance in solving personal disagreements is sought.

The social time that extended family members spend together builds strong ties and a sense of mutual obligation and concern. Time spent together, and knowing that emotional support is available through the family network guards against loneliness and a sense of "aleness," ensures each family member knows that someone is there to provide help when needed. For women who face more restrictions on their ability to establish their own support systems outside the family and who do not have access to cultural or government support to live independently, the extended family is necessary for survival.

A third theme identified was the prominent role extended families played in the lives of Iranian-American families and couples. Often they share responsibilities for children's lives and well-being and get involved when a marriage is in trouble (Carson &

Chowdhury, 2000; Mittal & Hardy, 2005). Older family members generally have greater authority than younger members, and over time adults grow to respect the wisdom of the elders (Juvva & Bhatti, 2006; Nath & Craig, 1999; Rastogi, 2007). The oldest member often makes the decisions, and with time the wife may have a say so as well (Das & Kemp, 1997; Durvasula & Mylvaganam, 1994; Medora, 2007). Some immigrant families lack the support system of extended families because of emigration, and this can lead to new sources of conflict (Baptiste, 2005; Khanna et al., 2009). Recent trends to move to a nuclear family have caused a crisis for older adults who depend on family for stability and safety (Rastogi, 2007).

The collectivist nature of Iranian-American families means that in both traditional and modern marriages, parents and extended family often influence an individual's choice in spouse as well as how the marriage functions (Medora, 2003; Verma, 1989). It is common for couples to view marriage as marrying two families together, not just two individuals (Durvasula & Mylvaganam, 1994; Khanna et al., 2009; Medora, 2007). However, the combination of families can create role strain, and problems with in-laws often lead to marital and family conflict (Carson & Chowdhury, 2000; Mittal & Hardy, 2005). The bride and mother-in-law may struggle in regards to issues of power and authority within the new household. Sonpar (2005) suggests that the mother-in-law will usually have more authority at the beginning of a marriage, and some of this power will shift to the new bride when she has children. A number of studies identify in-law issues as one of the most significant factors impacting a marital relationship.

Throughout the participants' interviews, almost all of the women described Iranian marriages as collectivist, referring to the involvement of extended family and in-

laws. The participants noted the powerful impact this involvement had on their marriages and stated that setting boundaries with in-laws was crucial to a successful marriage which resulted in the “re-anchoring of marital influence” theme. They explained that it was important that in-laws kept their boundaries with the couple, and many felt it was the husband’s role to keep those boundaries. The participants described the collective culture in which Iranian marriages are embedded:

“We don’t have ... psychologists or counselors in Iran. We have families that interfere, and they come and say, ‘What’s wrong with you, why are you doing this?’ ... Everybody gets involved.” (Jessica)

“For us—we have to be in each other’s lives, that’s our culture. I mean we make everything our business.” (Francesca)

“Persians – I guess they tend to get involved a lot.” (Evelyn)

The participants described the powerful impact of in-laws as:

“They [in-laws] definitely could affect the marriage, if they are too involved ... or if they are not even too involved. It depends if they show their support or if they don’t show their support, you know both ways I think could affect the marriage.” (Hannah)

“In Iran, your husband’s family has so much say and they can rule your marriage. They can really do whatever they want, and you have to follow. ... His parents had so many expectations from me and I was watched, even from my husband’s side and his parents.” (Ariana)

“My mother in-law was not here for our wedding [but] she was like stressing me out long distance even. But ... I think people have to stay out of it because you don’t know the story.” (Evelyn)

Many of the women expressed the importance of maintaining boundaries with their in laws and re-anchoring their relationships with their in-laws to create balance within their marriages. Claire’s solution: “not having in-laws.” The others explained:

“There’s been times that his parents have expressed an opinion that upset me and so then also having kids they are always expressing opinions on my parenting skills. And so all of that takes a toll sometimes, if those opinions are sometimes

harsh, it takes a toll because you can't take it out on your in-laws so you end up taking it out on your spouse." (Brianna)

"I mean marriages are different you know, it's like they [Americans] don't get into each other's lives but ... for us his parents stay out of it and my family stays out of it." (Francesca)

"In-laws have to stay out of it. ... But I'm kinda lucky, my mother-in-law is not here." (Evelyn)

"Sometimes the husband's family worries and wants to tell your husband what to do. But he should never listen to them. My husband – he never listened to his family. He ignored them. He said 'no, this is my wife, and you shouldn't disrespect her.'" (Gina)

"I think husband and wife – both – they can get advice. But they don't [get] influenced by other people." (Donna)

"I get that you're not supposed to talk back to your in-laws and that's something I don't do, and the same goes with my husband. He is good with that; he never talks back to my parents. He lets me handle it." (Brianna)

It was interesting to listen to the participants in this study discuss some of the changes that happened in their marriages over time as it related to a lessening of the influence of the dominant family influence typical of Iranian culture. The influence of the individualism appeared to have a certain mark on the way they came to view their marriages and their relationships. This theme spoke to some of the transformations in meaning of marriage as well for these women.

Theme IV. Emerging Self in Relational Identity

The fourth and final theme was the emerging of self in relational identity. This theme was expressed by participants' adaptation and integration into new cultural worlds and cultural identities, thus creating a "third culture" that incorporates each spouse's individual identity. In many cases, the participants seem to have acculturated fairly well

to Western cultural practices, norms, and customs, especially to those particular aspects of the culture that were important or significant to their partner. For example, the concept of building a third culture and creation of a balance was mentioned in the below quotations by one participant:

“In our marriage, we may have created such a third culture that has integrated both cultural identities (Iranian and American); hopefully with being very selective with our choices that please us as a couple, but not always makes others happy. For example, we have to be aware mainly of unrealistic expectations of other.” (Claire)

“Yes, we are always seeking to balance life between our joint cultural expectations. My husband has become American... very independent and self-reliant. My culture as I am still very Iranian is more socially dependent; therefore, we have to be balance that and be more flexible with other’s request.” (Brianna)

The overall aspects of acculturation presented in the study revealed variation within the occurrence of acculturation. Half of the participants identified and adapted to the cultural practices of the West before their marriage, as most participants were going to school, working, and living in the United States before returning to Iran to marry. Conversely, the other half of the participants identified a higher degree of acculturation occurring after marriage as they had not lived in the United States prior to marriage. One participant explains her experience upon immigrating to the United States as one in which self exploration was necessary to find her self-identity.

“Most women in Iran get married and become whoever their husbands are...when I came to this United States I had to find myself and how I fit in with this new place....I had to be around people, and talk to them, and live in this new country in order to allow myself to exist as an individual while I was a part of a team with my husband.” (Francesca).

Some experienced acculturation to Iranian culture while living in Iran prior to the revolution. For a few, travels to visit the country, even after the Iranian revolution, as was the case of one participant, sparked the process. Many experienced some adaptation and

acculturation to the culture through exposure to their spouses immediate or extended family or Iranian social circles.

Tarof

A cultural nuance that was highly recognized by the participants in the study as it relates to self identity is the customary practice of *tarof* in the daily lives of Iranians. The word *tarof* (ta'arouf), by definition in Farsi, literally means "offer." It is a concept that demonstrates a traditional role play that ensures everyone has the chance to be on equal terms (Burke and Elliott, 2008). Although *tarof* can be about politeness, modesty, and equality, the competitive practice of *tarof* can sometimes lead to feelings associated with guilt, obligation, or imposition. Furthermore, because *tarof* embodies modesty and politeness, it can also present itself in situations whereby one is likely to hold back the truth for the sake of demonstrating politeness. It was a cultural concept discussed to great length by the participants interviewed as it pertains to a style of communication between partners. In this study, aspects of communication in adjustment from Iran to the United States were discussed as representing the very nature of high-context versus low-context communication between Iranian women, their families and their husbands. In other words, many of the participants revealed communication issues with one another, as well as between them and their extended families.

When exploring the concept of *tarof* as it relates to self identity, it was discovered that most often the participants had a good understanding of this concept and had developed an association between *tarof* and hospitality as they had learned in Iran. Furthermore, the participants also knew that the concept of *tarof* did not fit very well with

Western customs, as it challenged the ideologies of independence and respect for the individual's wants and needs. Most of the participants often tried to assist with or help bridge the acquired understanding to others and to one another. For example, in the narrative below, such understanding is made through a participant to members of her family.

“I see it more of a way to show hospitality and also a generational thing.” (Gina)
“For example, when my parents were here to visit, my mom was like, “ask your husband to come and eat,” or, “offer him this.” And I was like, “okay Mom, it is his house and he knows what he wants to do and if he doesn't want to eat, then he doesn't want to eat.” And she was like, “no, maybe he is doing tarof.” (Evelyn)

The participants' understanding of tarof as a cultural concept is tied very much to politeness as rendered by particular generations. However, the practice of and the adaptability to a particular cultural norm such as tarof may be difficult to achieve as it challenges the nature of one's identity or personality and, ultimately, one's own cultural norms.

Transculturation

Another term often used for the individual level of acculturation is “transculturation,” a term coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1947 to describe the phenomenon of merging and converging cultures (Lull, 2000). The concept of transculturation as described by Lull (2000) is a process by which all cultures influence one another and are constantly changing. This concept is not new; Boas (1940) believed that all people acculturate, and originally conceptualized it by saying. It is not too much to say that there is no people whose customs have developed uninfluenced by foreign

culture, that has not borrowed arts and ideas which it has developed in its own way. (Boas, 1940, p. 631-632).

The above description of acculturation indicates a two-way process of change; yet, most of the contemporary literature on acculturation has focused on immigrants and other minorities in response to their contact with the dominant culture. This two-way acculturation process can also be compared to what Bochner (1986) referred to as second culture learning as a social skills model. This second culture learning may be a necessary approach said to “avoid the ethnocentric trap of the adjustment model, since learning a second culture does not necessarily imply abandoning or denigrating the earlier one; and nor does it stigmatize those unable to cope due to lack of learning and training opportunities” (Bochner, 1986, p. 350).

In this study participants revealed that globalization has exposed many Iranian families to western culture, values, and lifestyle and created new sources of conflict for families (Carson & Chowdhury, 2000). Levels of acculturation, or adoption of the host culture, can vary among Iranian Americans, depending on education, migration history, family size, economic support, levels of religiosity, and other factors (Almeida, 2005). Research indicates Iranians tend to retain “central values” (such as sex role expectations) while adopting “pragmatic values” like dress style (Dhruvarajan, 1993; Inman et al., 1999; Sadowsky & Lai, 1997). First generation immigrants usually have a stronger desire to retain a distinct cultural identity than subsequent generations (Das & Kemp, 1997). Das and Kemp (1997) note that this can cause conflicts between parents who try to raise their children with similar cultural identities and children who want to fit in with everyone else. Conflicts noted in the literature include those involving sex role

development, dating, and marriage (Wakil, Siddique, & Wakil, 1981). Iranian-American immigrants who have acculturated to the American culture do not consider caste to be important in terms of compatibility and success in marriage. What was found was that the participants in the current study sought to find their personal identities based on their traditional Iranian values and the integration of Western values into a “third-culture identity.” This was detailed by a participant who discussed finding meaning in her marriage after immigration by finding her self-identity in a way in which she absorbed both Iranian and American culture.

“I think how I have made sense of my life and my marriage is by finding out who I am...not who my husband, or mom, or kids want me to be but finding out what I want to value from my culture and this culture here...knowing who *I* am has helped me relate to my husband in a way that works and is comfortable for me.” (Katy).

Summary

Results of this study revealed four major themes. In this study, the participants were given an opportunity to provide information about what makes Iranian marriage successful without the judgment of any Western standards. It was the researcher’s intent to focus on the strengths of Iranian women and to shed light on what their role is in making new meanings of their marriages in a new cultural context.

Participant’s Background Information

The participants in this study were between the ages of 32 and 68. The median age of the participants was 48 years and a mean of 47.5 with a standard deviation of 14.1, and all of the participants were born in Iran and immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 18 or older. Participants’ years of marriage ranged from 4 to 46 and all but one participant

chose her spouse. All participants were currently married and classified themselves as being in “successful” marriages. One had a marriage arranged by her parents while living in Iran. Two of the 14 participants identified with the Baha’i religion, but one stated she was no longer a “practicing Baha’i.” The remaining 12 participants were Muslim. The participants’ education levels ranged from high school to Doctorate level degrees, and all participants’ household income levels were \$50,000 or greater.

The following is a brief demographic description of each participant. Each description includes age, years married, where they married, age when they immigrated to the United States, religion, education level, and annual household income. Participant’s pseudonyms are used in order to protect participants’ confidentiality. Following the individual descriptions is Table 1, showing a list of participants and each participant’s demographic information.

Participant A: Ariana

Ariana is 68 years old. She emigrated from Iran at when she was 26 and has been married for 46 years. She was the only participant in an arranged marriage while living in Iran. She identified as a Muslim as her religious background. Her highest level of education is a Master’s degree. Her annual household income was reported as over \$75,000. She has two children.

Participant B: Brianna

Brianna is 37 years old. She emigrated from Iran when she was 18. She has been married for 10 years and married in the United States. She identifies as a Muslim. Her

highest level of education is a J.D. and reports her annual income as over \$75,000. She has two children.

Participant C: Claire

Claire is 59 years old and emigrated from Iran to the United States at age 18. She has been married for 40 years and got married in Iran. She identifies as a Baha'i but states that she is no longer practicing. Her level of education is high school and reports her annual household income as over \$75,000. She has two children.

Participant D: Donna

Donna is 62 years old. She emigrated from Iran at the age of 24. She has been married for over 20 years and married in Iran. She identifies herself as a practicing Baha'i and her highest level of education is high school. Her annual household income is reported as \$50,000-\$75,000. She has three children.

Participant E: Evelyn

Evelyn is 32 years old. She immigrated to the United States at the age of 19. She reported being married in the United States between 6 to 12 years ago. She identifies as a Muslim. Her highest level of education is a Master's degree. Her annual household income is \$50,000-\$75,000. She has one child.

Participant F: Francesca

Francesca is 39 years old. She immigrated to the United States at the age of 18. She has been married for 6 to 12 years and married in the United States. She identifies herself as a Muslim. Her highest level of education is a Bachelor's degree. Her reported annual household income is \$50,000-\$75,000. She has one child.

Participant G: Gina

Gina is 63 years old. She emigrated from Iran at the age of 26 and has been married for over 20 years. She married in Iran prior to coming to the U.S. She identifies herself as a Muslim. Her highest level of education is a degree from a trade college, and she is employed as a cosmetologist. Her annual household income is over \$75,000. She has three children.

Participant H: Hannah

Hannah is 29 years old. She immigrated to the United States when she was 18 years old. She has been married for six years and married in the United States. Her highest level of education is a Bachelor's degree in animal physiology and a minor in psychology. Her occupation is a research associate. She identifies herself as a non-practicing Muslim. Her annual household income is over \$75,000. She has one child.

Participant I: Inez

Inez is 29 years old. She was 20 years old when she immigrated to the United States. She has been married for 3 years. She does not identify with any particular

religion; however, she states “I just believe in trying to be a good person.” Her highest level of education is a Bachelor’s degree, and she works as a financial analyst. Her annual household income is in the \$50,000-\$75,000 range. She has no children.

Participant J: Jessica

Jessica is 57 years old. She came to the United States at age 21. She has been married for more than 20 years. She identifies herself as a non-practicing Muslim. Her highest level of education is a Ph.D., and she works as a researcher. Jessica declined to report her annual household income. She has two children.

Participant K: Katy

Katy is 42 years old. She came to the United States of America at the age of 31. She has been married for 28 years. She identifies herself as a moderately religious Muslim. Katy’s highest level of education is a Bachelor’s degree, and she works in retail. Katy’s annual household income is in the \$50,000-\$75,000 range. She has three children.

Participant L: Laura

Laura is 51 years old. She came to the United States at the age of 20. She has been married for more than 20 years. Laura is a non-practicing Muslim. Her highest level of education is a Master’s degree, and she works as an accountant. Laura’s annual household income is above \$80,000. She has two children.

Participant M: Monica

Monica is 45 years old. She came to the United States originally at the age of 15 and returned back to Iran. She permanently returned to the United States at the age of 22. She has been married for 17 years. Monica is Muslim and is somewhat involved in religious activities. Her highest level of education is a Bachelor's degree, and she works as a medical biller. Monica's annual household income is above \$75,000. She has one child.

Participant N: Nicole

Nicole is 41 years old. She came to the United States at the age of 23. She has been married for 19 years. Nicole is Muslim and is not involved in religious activities. Her highest level of education is a Master's degree and she works as a financial consultant. Nicole's annual income is above \$75,000. She has two children.

Table 1. *Participant Demographic Summary*

Participant	Age	Age Immigrated to United States	Years Married	Religion	Education Level	Household Income
(A) Ariana	68	26	42 years	Muslim	Master's	Over \$75K
(B) Brianna	37	18	10 years	Muslim	J.D.	Over \$75K
(C) Claire	59	18	42 years	Baha'i (non-practicing)	Bachelor's	Over \$75K
(D) Donna	62	24	More than 20 years	Baha'i	H.S.	Over \$75K
(E) Evelyn	32	19	6 years	Muslim	Bachelor's	\$50-75K
(F) Francesca	39	18	6-12 years	Muslim	Bachelor's	\$50-75K
(G) Gina	63	26	More than 20 years	Muslim	Trade School	Over \$75K
(H) Hannah	29	18	6 years	Muslim (non-practicing)	Bachelor's	Over \$75K
(I) Inez	29	20	3 years	None: "spiritual"	Bachelor's	\$50-75K
(J) Jessica	57	21	More than 20 years	Muslim (non-practicing)	Ph.D	Declined to Answer
(K) Katy	42	31	28 years	Muslim (moderate)	Bachelor's	\$50-75K
(L) Laura	51	20	More than 20 years	Muslim (non-practicing)	Master's	Over \$75K
(M) Monica	45	15/22	17 years	Muslim (moderate)	Bachelor's	Over \$75K
(N) Nicole	41	23	19 years	Muslim (non-practicing)	Master's	Over \$75K

Table 2. *Themes Endorsed by Participants (by initial)*

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
Boundaries with in-laws	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Compromise	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Patience and tolerance	X		X			X			X			X		
Trust		X	X			X		X		X				
Respect		X		X		X		X		X				
Work at it	X			X		1				X			X	X
Love		X			X				X			X		
Honesty	X					X		1		X			X	
Supportiveness		X		X			X				X			
Friendship	X				X				X			X		
Independence/egalitarian relationships			X			X		X			X			
Unchanged beliefs		X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X

Observations

This researcher made several observations throughout the study. The first is the participants' description of "love." The women discussed having a view of love similar to Westerners' view of love: as a "romantic love." An interesting observation was that some of the women spoke of love in a way that fit what Westerners would define as "like" rather than "love." One of the women corrected this researcher when asked about the love for her husband. She stated clearly, "I don't love my husband, I like my husband." This response, in addition to the descriptions of the other women, gave this researcher the impression that their way of describing love consisted much more than what Westerners might describe as love. Their love consisted of other qualities after the "romantic love" faded in the marriage. They relied on tolerance, mutual respect and compromise to make

a successful marriage. Their idea of what makes a marriage work depends on the qualities that benefit the future of the relationship rather than the immediate gains.

Another note this researcher made was the omission of the mention of sex by all participants. While this researcher expected to hear more about the importance of sex, it is understandable that the women would feel uncomfortable speaking about their ideas of sex with a complete stranger. One participant did mention that sex was important in her marriage but only after the researcher turned off the tape recorder. She did not display any discomfort speaking about sex but rather it simply was not the first thing that she thought to mention when speaking about what makes a marriage successful. It was not that sex was not important to the women in this study, but perhaps it was not something they would talk about as an indicator of a successful marriage.

CHAPTER SIX

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

An interpretive phenomenological approach has yet to be used in studying acculturation and meaning on marriage of Iranian American women. Quantitative studies have identified the various factors that contribute to marital conflict and culturally influenced dynamics in these marriages; however, none of these studies have been able to capture their felt and lived experiences. Phenomenology is distinct from other qualitative analyses in that it seeks to “preserve what is uniquely human” and provides a coherent sense of the experience of the participants (Fischer, 1984, p. 163). This phenomenological study will hopefully contribute to the field of marital and family therapy in two significant ways: give voice and validation to a community whose experiences are hardly known, and provide culturally and contextually rich information for academics, researchers and clinicians to better bridge the gap with the Iranian community.

Discussion

This study was one of few studies to explore Iranian women’s experiences in marriage through Iranian women’s eyes. It sheds light on how Iranian women define successful marriage and their roles in keeping their marriage successful. This chapter will discuss the findings of this study in relation to the research presented in the literature review. Limitations to the study will also be presented. This study consisted of women who all immigrated to the United States after the age of 18. The intention of this was to

have participants who have spent most of their developmental years in Iran, therefore carrying more of their cultural identity.

Symbolic interactionism was the guiding theory of this research of Iranian women. Thus, the purpose of this study was to give a voice to Iranian women, allowing them to speak freely about their thoughts and experiences regarding their marriage. In this study, the participants were given an opportunity to provide information about what makes Iranian marriage successful without the judgment of any Western standards. It was the researcher's intent to focus on the strengths of Iranian women and to shed light on what their role is in making their marriage work. The goal was not to look for pathology in the Iranian marital dynamic but rather to expand on the understanding of what contributes to success in marriage.

The most prevalent finding that emerged from this study was the concept of boundaries within the Iranian collective culture. The participants recognized that collective culture is a part of being Iranian. They demonstrated acceptance of this culture, recognizing that there are good intentions behind families getting involved in their marriages. The women, however, also acknowledged the need to set and maintain certain boundaries. This concept of boundaries is complex, and keeping these boundaries requires intricate skills. Many of the women indicated they found it difficult to balance accepting in-law's involvement and at the same time keeping the boundaries.

These women seem to have developed the skills necessary to manage boundaries with their in-laws. One dimension of keeping boundaries that the women repeatedly talked about was the importance of respecting their in-laws. Many of the women felt that, within the Iranian culture, it is not appropriate to "speak up" to their in-laws; this is

considered a sign of disrespect to the in-laws as well as to the husband's entire extended family, which may lead to conflict. The women also described the importance of handling boundaries with care to ensure they were not crossing the line with their in-laws. To avoid conflicts within the family, the participants mainly relied on their husbands to maintain this boundary with his side of the extended family. For example, if there were a conflict between wife and mother-in-law, the wife would not directly confront her mother-in-law. She would discuss the issue with her husband so that he could handle the situation with his own mother. The women also stated that this is expected of their husbands as well. If there was any conflict between husband and his in-laws, the expectation of the couple was that he talk to his wife about it and have her deal with her own parents. The purpose for this is to minimize the confrontation that may arise due to the parents feeling offended by their son or daughter in-law. This is done to prevent conflict in the extended family. This demonstrated that these women have immense amount of maturity and subtlety. The women formulated ways of getting their needs met while also maintaining a respectful relationship with their in-laws.

The literature written on collective cultures tends to emphasize interconnectedness and interdependence between family members as well as their community (Rothstein-Fisch et al., 1999). Family members rely on others within the family and/or community to help make decisions and are open to outside influence. The notion of interdependence is frequently discussed in writings about collective cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Raeff, 2006; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995) in contrast to independence, showing that particular cultures live either in independent or interconnected ways. Not much has been written on boundary keeping in different

cultural contexts. Findings of this study, however, indicate that within the interconnectedness of the culture there is a need to establish and maintain boundaries.

Many of the women in this study discussed the importance of compromise in marriage, including the need to be tolerant towards their spouses. Findings from this study seem to suggest compromise and tolerance within Iranian marriage is not a concept that is separate from one's individual needs. Compromise is a voluntary process in which each spouse cares for the other, therefore creating the reciprocal act of giving. The women do not see their needs as more important than their spouse's. The women saw compromise as an integral way of maintaining a long lasting harmony in which their individual needs are met. The participants demonstrated a commitment to doing whatever is best for the marital dynamic in order to ensure its longevity.

The women recognized that making the marriage successful is not an immediate process; rather, they viewed the relationship as one that needs to be nurtured to last. They recognized the road to building a successful marriage is a long one and is not created in the short term. Thus, the women noted, patience is required for a successful relationship. These findings support Omran (1992), who described the importance of tolerance and understanding toward one's spouse in order to make the relationship work.

The finding that tolerance is a part of love in the marriage further supports Omran's (1992) idea that love is defined as having tolerance in the marriage. These women, who all categorized their marriage as successful, gave credit to their husband's contribution to the success of their marriage and emphasized the importance of the husband's willingness to compromise. This research seems to indicate that these women think collectively and systemically, seeing that a marriage is built by teamwork. They

recognize a successful marriage requires both husband and wife to behave similarly in the relationship to ensure both parties get their needs met. The women viewed their roles in the marriage as equally as important as their husbands' and recognized that marriage takes work. The women portrayed themselves as an integral component that contributes to having a successful marriage.

The concept of "working at it" was another contributing factor of a successful Iranian marriage found in this study. The women discussed the importance of treating the marriage as they would a job: the marriage needs to be evaluated regularly and needs to be the focus of both partners. They discussed how crucial it is to not "give up" and to allow the relationship time to build into a dynamic that works for both husband and wife.

The women discussed how working at the marriage was a part of their role as a wife. These findings were in support of Aghaie's (1995) view of Iranian women's roles in their families. Aghaie (1995) indicated that Iranian women are expected to contribute to their families by working hard at maintaining harmony in their marriages. Many of the women in this study felt that the wife's role was central to making the marriage and family function successfully. According to the women in this study, much of what makes the household run smoothly was their role and the amount of effort put towards being patient with their spouse. The way the women spoke about how they handled themselves within their marriage was sophisticated; their determination to make the marriage work regardless of the difficulties gave them the ability to tolerate any challenges within the marriage and still maintain a successful relationship.

Another important finding of this study is that love in Iranian marriage is much more inclusive than just romantic love. Loving their spouse consisted of having a

friendship with their husbands, accepting him for who he is, tolerating his imperfections, and respecting what he has to contribute. It includes respect – not only to the husband, but also to his family. It was important for these women to know and genuinely like their partner. The way these women described their relationships seemed to indicate “liking” their spouse is more important than romantic love and was seen as a major contributor to making a marriage work. The Iranian spousal relationship seems to be built on friendship, respect, and acceptance of each other.

In this study, the participants who were married only a short time expressed the same view of the concept of love as the participants who were married for a long time. This seems to differ from Western marriages. Studies have shown that couples in the United States often get married based on a physical attraction to their spouse, more of a romantic love (Epstein, 2012). However, Lauer, Lauer & Kerr (1990) interviewed U.S. couples who were married 45 years or more. These couples stated that what made a successful marriage was having a partner they liked and enjoyed being with and someone who was committed to the relationship. These couples that were married a long time thus attributed a successful marriage to a love similar to that of the Iranian women in this study, while new couples in the United States often married based on feelings of romance and passion.

Support and independence were also described in this study as being essential in marriage. The women described the importance of their husbands giving them space in the marriage. They spoke of being able to make their own decisions, not only within the marriage but in society as well. The women also suggested they wanted to maintain their independence in order to preserve their sense of self and to be respected for what they

offer to the marriage and to society. The need for independence in their marriage and other areas is consistent with the work of Aghaie (1995), where she says Iranian women value independence and use it as an indicator of how strong they are in their role as a woman. This is also consistent with Rassam's (1984) and Ebadi's (2006) writings, which indicate that Middle Eastern women have great influence and play a large role in society.

Although the focus of the study is about what contributes to successful Iranian marriage, and the researcher did not ask the question of the purpose of marriage. The participants, however, indirectly hinted at the purpose of marriage. For example, this researcher asked the women what the husband's role was in making the marriage successful. Some of these women talked about the importance of their husbands being good fathers. This seemed to be of utmost importance in regards to the husband's role within the marriage. Ariana, who had an arranged marriage, stated, "To me it is that important when I see him being so caring and so loving to the kids, it fills my heart; to me, this is love [to me]." This seems to indicate that these women see their husbands' contribution to their children as their contribution to the marriage, and they do not separate the quality of their marriage from the quality of their family.

Many of the sacrifices they made along the way for their marriage were done to ensure that they provide their children with a stable environment and a "better life." To many of these women, how well their children turned out is a reflection of the success of their marriage. This seems to indicate that these women, although living in the United States, view the ultimate purpose of marriage the same as their sisters in Iran do: raising healthy children, developing their children's moral character, bringing the children up to

be loyal to the family, and to increase the reputation and status of the family within their community (Omran, 1992).

The women in the study were asked whether their ideas about what makes marriage successful had changed since moving to the United States. The majority of the women stated that their ideas did not change. This may be due to the fact that this study recruited women who had migrated after the age of 18. Their cultural beliefs about marriage had been well established as they spent most of their developmental years in their homeland before coming to the United States.

It is also important to note that the participants in the study did not address all areas discussed in the literature. For instance, the role of sex in the marriage was not discussed by any of the women during the interviews. One participant mentioned that sex was important in the marriage but only after the tape recorder was turned off. The reason for sex being omitted from the discussion may be because of the women's shyness discussing sexual matters, especially on audiotape. Another reason to consider could perhaps be due to the cultural belief that sex is not talked about with outsiders. For instance, expression of any sexuality with anyone outside of the marriage is considered extremely inappropriate and not within the code of conduct when it comes to the day today practices of sexuality (Okazaki, 2002).

Another area not discussed by the participants was the role of religion in their marriages. None of the 10 participants mentioned religion as an integral part of what makes their marriage successful. Past and present literature has suggested that women and families are bound by the teachings of Islam and that Islam limits the decision-making process (Rogers, 1978; Aghajanian, 2001). However, the participants in this

study did not convey this influence of religion on their marriage. It is important to note, though, that this may be because these women are residing outside of Iran, where religion has much more influence.

It should be noted that the participants were asked certain stem questions in their interviews; however, because the responses were minimal, they did not constitute themes. The women were asked how they formed their ideas of marriage. Some of the women formed their ideas of marriage by seeing older family members and friends get married, while others stated they just thought getting married was expected of them when they got older. Still others could not point to specific things that formed their idea of marriage. The researcher also asked the women what their desires or motivation was to get married. Responses to this stem question varied. Some women were motivated by societal expectations to get married, while others were motivated by their desire to have children.

Strengths and Limitations of this Study

The women in this study were all highly educated and had an annual household income of at least \$50,000. Iranian women in the United States who come from lower levels of education and socioeconomic status (SES) may have a different view of what makes marriage successful. Iranian women residing in Iran with similar levels of SES and education may also have differing views on what contributes to successful Iranian marriages. The women in this study were all fluent in English. Because English was their second language, however, their vocabulary was at times limited. As a result, the participants may have had difficulty expressing exactly what they wanted to say.

Their inability to speak in their primary language may also have altered what they said because of the difficulty translating from Farsi to English. This researcher, as an insider to the Iranian community had its benefits in that the women established a sense of trust. However, a limitation to this is that because of the fact that this researcher is Iranian, and has lived and studied in the United States for a majority of her life, the women could have felt limited in what they responded, thinking that this researcher would not understand their nuances or ways of speaking about particular topics due to acculturation into Western norm and beliefs?

Contribution to Literature

The main clinical implication of this research is that there may be clinical benefits to understanding how Iranian marriages work and looking at Iranian women's perspectives on what makes marriage successful. This study may also educate clinicians about important areas to be addressed when working with Iranian couples, enabling them to better serve the Iranian population. Clinicians need to be aware of their Western lens when working with Iranian couples to avoid comparing the couple's marital dynamics to those of Western marriages. Removing this Western lens minimizes judgment of Iranian couples when they appear different from the Western standard. It is important that clinicians learn about Iranian marriage, especially when it comes to their ideas of "love."

When working with Iranian couples, it is vital to expand the clinician's definition of love to include respect, tolerance, compromise, and friendship. Including these concepts in their definition of love can help avoid judgment and pathologizing the fact that some women may say they "like" their husbands.

Another implication is the understanding of boundaries within the collective culture. It is important to recognize the complexity of these boundaries; for example, how these boundaries are set with in-laws and extended family members while still showing them respect. It is important that clinicians do not see as “triangulation” the dynamic between husband, wife and extended family when the wife asks the husband to speak on her behalf when conflicts arise.

This researcher suggests that it is important to ask exploratory questions as well as coming from a place of not knowing, and allowing the client to teach us what her marriage is all about. Some examples include the following: watch the words that they use to describe their relationship. If they use the word “like” not “love”, do not be alarmed, but use the same word as they provide. What does love/like look like in your marriage, and how is that conveyed? Do you feel respected by your spouse and his/her side of the family? What kind of compromise does each of you make to make the marriage work? Who do you usually go to when there is conflict in the marriage? Do you go to other members in the family?

Suggestions for Future Research

Subsequent research on the topic of successful marriage in Iranian couples would aid in enriching the quality of understanding Iranians’ cultural beliefs and how these beliefs contribute to successful marriage. It would also be beneficial to replicate this study with Iranian men. This would allow for a better understanding of the other half of the marital dynamic and how each half works in conjunction with the other’s perceptions and expectations in marriage. Research focusing on participants who emigrated prior to

18 years of age could also explore how much of an impact the Western world has contributed to the women's expectations of marriage. Conversely, research exploring the views of Iranian women currently living in Iran could offer insight into the women's views without the Western influence. Another important factor that would be worth researching is the involvement of religion in Iranian women's perspectives on marriage.

To be able to explicitly ask what role their culture and/or religion plays in their marriage as well. Finally, replicating this study with the researcher speaking Farsi may allow the women to speak in their native language, thus allowing them to more accurately convey their views.

Voice and Validation

Numerical data and statistics often speak on behalf of the research participants involved. This phenomenological study allows for the voices of Iranian American women to be heard and for their experiences to be known. First, this study has the capacity to impact individuals; knowing the experiences of another immigrant Iranian-American woman can support these individuals in "creating and managing their own identities." They may not realize that other individuals like themselves share the same struggles and complexities (Meisenbach, 2010, p. 16) in the dynamics of culture. It is the hope of the researcher that the findings from this study will first be published in journals read by therapists connected to the Iranian American community, but beyond that, that a book will eventually be published that is accessible by Iranian American immigrants. Second, this can encourage Iranian American women, couples, and families who are grappling with similar cultural and faith-related issues. As a whole family unit, they can see and

hear about other families who have similar acculturation struggles, perhaps issues they would have never heard about through any other venue because of the cultural expectation to save face. This can feel so relieving and lessen the pressure and burden they feel.

Conclusion and Clinical Implication for the Field of Marriage and Family Therapy

Exploration of existing literature reveals that there is a gap in the research on Iranian women and the conflicts that arise while acculturating to new ideologies in Western culture as it pertains to intimate relationships such as marriage. The goal of the proposed study is to critically analyze the meanings Iranian-American women make of marriage as they are living in a new socio-cultural environment. The contribution of the current study to the field of marital and family therapy would be to present a fundamental understanding of the basics around the marriages of female Iranian immigrants as viewed by them. Furthermore, this study would provide information on the gender specific roles required of Iranian-American women while acculturating in a sociocultural environment and the women's delineation of characteristics that make up a successful marriage. The study also intends to make available data on Iranian women's cultural and historical backgrounds as it relates to their subculture, and the unique connotations they make of their marriages while acculturating to Western norms and beliefs. The practical implications of the aforementioned information would be to give clinicians some insights into the varying familial and relational dynamics that exist in the Iranian population.

Additionally, the analysis of data gathered in the current study will provide clinicians with better insights when working with couples who are of Iranian descent.

It is crucial to note the cross-cultural contradictions that become evident for married Iranian women who immigrate to the United States. It is also important to be aware of the fact that there is a lack of extensive research on Iranian women and the Iranian population in general. Furthermore, matters of marriage and relational dynamics as it pertains to immigration and acculturation have not been researched in the Iranian population.

Clinicians must be conscious of the stereotypes and judgments that exist within their own frame of thinking in regards to Western norms and values as it concerns marriage in Western culture. There are significant cultural and religious differences that make marriage according to Iranian standards different from relational dynamics that are experienced in Western marriages; therefore, it is important for clinicians to be aware of the lens that may favor Western culture (Tashakkori & Thompson, 2011). Minimizing judgment when it comes to working with Iranian couples can occur when clinicians broaden their cultural lens and accept values and beliefs that do not fit the standards of Western culture. Valuable information can be absorbed on the clinical realm in the way in which Iranian women define the meaning of marriage and “love.” This information can be useful in clinical work with Iranian couples and would require the clinician to expand her or his own classification of love to include friendship, companionship on an intimate level, compromise, patience, and most importantly, respect (Vahdat, 2002). If clinicians incorporate these characteristics into their personal definitions of empathy when working

with Iranian couples, the clients who are pathologized can be diminished when they do not express characteristics that are more apparent in Western marriages.

The proposed study's emphasis on making meaning of Iranian women's experiences in marriage as they are transitioning between two cultures can guide clinicians in addressing gender role contradictions when working with Iranian women and couples. It is common for women who immigrate to the United States from Iran to experience the impact of Western norms and ideals onto their identities as they embark into the work force, and as they redefine themselves as relational beings (Aghaei, 2005). Clinicians must be cognizant of these shifts in role identification and have the ability to work with Iranian women and their partners as they are acculturating to Western values that are different from those of their original culture.

Since the proposed study's primary focus is on the experiences and meanings of marriage in the female immigrant Iranian population, it is necessary for clinicians to be conscious of various factors impacting relational dynamics including the following: existing power differentials that are culturally based, hierarchical nature of traditional family systems, gender norms and roles, and the general role of nuclear and extended family members in the lives of couples. It is crucial for clinicians to be sensitive and knowledgeable to the stage of acculturation which the client is experiencing, in order to avoid placing a label of pathology or judgment onto the client(s) which align with Western norms and expectations. In addition, it is valuable for clinicians to create a space where clients can explore their desire to acculturate and gauge their level of acculturation based on their individual needs as it pertains to their relational dynamics with their spouse. Clinicians can ultimately expand their cultural horizons and adapt a multicultural

lens which allows them to help their Iranian clients struggle with insights into themselves as it associates with their culture of origin, Western culture, and the connection between the two cultures which can often be oppressive in nature.

So how can the field of marital and family therapy begin understanding how to best meet the needs of these individuals and their families? As proposed in this paper, the best place to start is to ask these family members and the pastors who guide them about their lived experiences. Once their experiences and the meaning of their experiences are known from their perspectives, researchers and practitioners can then begin to collaborate on mental health support that is sensitive to culture, faith, and generational relationships in these Iranian-American participants and their families. This paper has described not only the relevance, but also the need for a phenomenological approach to be used to study culture in the context of relationships in Iranian American marital relationships. As this is done, these individuals, their families, and their communities will have their experiences known, heard and validated, and thus more effective practices and policies can be implemented to support their needs. With a phenomenological qualitative approach, research does a fuller justice to the human phenomena as lived (Fischer, 1984).

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Dear potential participants,

I wanted to introduce myself and then give an introduction to this study. I am a second generation Iranian American woman who is currently married to a second generation Iranian American man. We have been married for 1 year but have been together for 4 years. I am conducting this study to shed some light on Iranian women's experience in marriage and what makes Iranian marriages successful. My hope is that the information gathered from this study will provide mental health counselors with a deeper understanding of Iranian marriage and Iranian culture. Your participation in this study would be most appreciated. Throughout the study please feel free to call me or email me with any questions you might have. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Golnoush Yektafar-Hooshvar

gyektafar@gmail.com

(949) 344-5580

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT



LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

School of Behavioral Health

Informed Consent

The Influence of Acculturation on Meanings of Marriage for Iranian-American Women

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Dr. Curtis Fox, Professor, Department of Counseling and Family Sciences, School of Behavioral Health

10655 Campus Dr., Griggs Hall #207

Loma Linda, California 92350

W: (909)558-4547 x47025 C: 909.238.9139

cfox@llu.edu

PURPOSE AND PROCEDURES

This is a student dissertation study conducted by Golnoush Yektafar-Hooshvar under the guidance of Curtis Fox, PhD. This study examines how immigration and acculturation impact the meaning of marriage for Iranian-American women.

With your help in this study, you can help us better understand how Iranian immigrants' lives are impacted by immigration and the acculturation process and how culturally sensitive therapy may support Iranian immigrants to life in the United States of America.

For this project, we are recruiting adult female participants between the ages of 18 and 70 years who are Iranian-born immigrants and are married to Iranian-born males. Participants must be able to speak and write in English. If you decide to participate in this study, you will take part in an audio recorded interview, which will each last approximately 45-90 minutes. You will be asked questions about your marriage, beliefs, relationships, and experiences immigrating to the United States of America. The audio-recorded interview will take place at a site that is private and convenient for you.

If you decide to participate, we would like to interview you at your earliest convenience. In return for your time and participation, you will receive a \$10 gift card after your participation in the study.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The primary risk of participating in this study is that your confidential answers could be compromised. In order to minimize this risk, every effort will be taken to ensure your

privacy. In order to keep your answers confidential, we will not include your name or any personal information in the interview record, and this consent form will be kept separately from the written record of your answers. The interview will be audio recorded and your answers will be typed into a document. The recording and document will be stored in a locked cabinet. If material is stored on a computer the computer will be password-protected. Only the PI and doctoral student will have access to your answers. The transcripts, Informed Consent Document, and demographic questionnaire will be kept for three years. If the results of the research data are published or discussed at conferences, no identifiable information will be used.

Your family members will not know if you choose to participate or not. If you have any concerns at any time about your privacy or any questions about the study, please contact Golnoush Yektafar-Hooshvar (student researcher) at (949) 244-5580 or Dr. Curtis Fox at the School of Behavioral Health, Loma Linda, California 92350 by phone: (909)558-4547 x47025 for more information. If you wish to contact an impartial third party not associated with this study regarding any questions about your rights or to report a complaint you may have about the study, you may contact the Office of Patient Relations, Loma Linda University Medical Center, Loma Linda, CA 92354, phone (909) 558-4647, e-mail patientrelations@llu.edu for information and assistance.

BENEFITS

The individual interview offers participants the opportunity to discuss their immigration experiences with others who are willing and eager to listen. The sharing of personal experiences, concerns, and stories is sometimes beneficial for those who participate. You will also help others better understand the potential benefits of individual and family therapy as well as the emotional and relational impact of immigration and acculturation and for immigrants, their spouses, and their family members.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHT

Participation is completely voluntary. At any time during the interview, if you do not want to answer a question, just let us know and we will move on to a different question. You may choose to stop participating in the interview or research study at any time. Given the nature of the study, participants may discuss sensitive subject matters during the interview. We will provide you with referrals to psychotherapy if necessary.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

By signing this consent form, I am giving my permission to be interviewed about my immigration to the United States, my marriage, and experiences dealing with acculturation. I understand that I may choose not to answer any question and that I may stop participating at any time. I also understand that while confidentiality cannot be fully guaranteed, every effort will be made to protect my personal information and to keep my answers confidential.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have listened to the verbal explanation given by the interviewer. My questions concerning the interview have been answered to my satisfaction. I hereby give voluntary consent to participate in this interview.

Signature of Subject

Printed Name of Subject

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT

I have reviewed the contents of this consent form with the person signing above. I have explained potential risks and benefits of the study.

Signature of Investigator

Printed Name of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

This is a study that will help us to better understand the meanings behind successful marriages in immigrant Iranian American women's experiences. We will ask you a series of questions that are worded in such a way to help you think out loud about some of the realities of your marriage. There is no right or wrong answer—we are interested in learning how you think: your opinions, experiences, and your unique ideas. We will ask you some questions that invite you to think aloud about a wide variety of ideas that come to mind about these issues. I am interested in hearing all of your thoughts about these complex questions. Please take your time answering these questions.

We will start with a few brief questions that will help us understand you a bit better:

Demographic Questionnaire:

1) What is your age? _____

2) What is your spouse's age? _____

3) Please specify your ethnicity. _____

4) Education: What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? *If*

currently enrolled, highest degree received.

- No schooling completed
- Nursery school to 8th grade
- Some high school, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate degree

5) What is your occupation? _____

6) What is your total household income?

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 to \$19,999
- \$20,000 to \$29,999
- \$30,000 to \$39,999
- \$40,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$59,999
- \$60,000 to \$69,999
- \$70,000 to \$79,999
- \$80,000 to \$89,999
- \$90,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 or more

7) How many children live in your household? _____

8) How many children live in your household who are:

- Less than 5 years old? _____
- 5 through 12 years old? _____
- 13 through 17 years old? _____

9) Please write the number of years you have been living in the United States of

America. _____

10) How involved are you in religion:

- Not at all
- Somewhat involved
- Involved
- Very much involved

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW GUIDE

- 1) What will you say are the circumstances that prompted your immigration to the United States of America?
- 2) In your experience, how would you talk about how your relationship has changed over the years since coming to the United States of America?
- 3) As you think back in time, where will say your early thoughts about marriage came from?
- 4) What were some of the very early lessons you learned about marriage or how to be a good spouse?
- 5) In general, what are some of your thoughts on what makes a marriage successful?
-How has your opinion about what makes a successful marriage changed after living in the United States?
- 6) In most marriages, men and women tend to play different roles. What will you say a wife ought to do in order to make a marriage successful?
-Please talk a little about how your roles and expectations in your marriage may have changed after you moved to the United States?
- 7) Now, I would like for you to talk about what a husband ought to do in a marriage to make it successful.
-Please share how your opinions about what a man should do have changed since living in the United States of America.
- 8) There are many factors that lead people to get married. Please discuss what you think were some of your motivations for your getting married.
- 9) Here is a very personal question, but, please share with me what your own personal experience with marriage has been.

-At the present time, what do you think your roles are in your marriage that helps to make the marriage successful?

- 10) At the present time, what does your husband do in the marriage that helps make the marriage successful?
- 11) Our society or community may play a role in our marriage experience. Outside of your immediate relationship, who and what are important in helping to make your marriage successful?
- 12) All couples may have challenges and difficult times in their marriage, and these may be caused by the challenges experienced in moving to a new country with different thoughts and beliefs about marriage. How will you talk about these experiences regarding your own marriage?