



From Outsider to Outsider: A Study of Iranian Baha'is' Identity in Iran and the United States

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Negotiating one's identity is a complex process that becomes complicated when a person is ascribed an outsider status because of any one identity. Iranian Baha'is are a significantly understudied population who experience an outsider status, both in their home country where they are persecuted due to animus towards them by the government and religious leaders, and in the United States. They are persecuted in a range of ways, including through denial of education, name-calling, harassment, torture, and killing. Using data from 50 in-depth interviews with first-generation Iranian Baha'i immigrants, I discuss their experience of the denial of a national identity, the importance of their religious identity, and their development of a collective Baha'i identity in Iran. Then I explore their experiences in the United States, including navigating cultural differences between Baha'i immigrants and American Baha'is, spiritual differences across countries, and differences in life experiences. The Baha'i immigrants' narratives and experiences reaffirm and complicate our understandings of how religious, national, and cultural identities are negotiated.

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Iranian Baha'is in the United States have been thoroughly underexplored. Their experiences and unique positionality complicate the existing literature on religious and national identity in the context of immigration. When refugee groups arrive in a new country, they are faced with the challenge of negotiating their ethnic, national, and religious identities. Frequently, this negotiation occurs in a culture that prioritizes these various identities differently from the way their home cultures do. Existing research shows that various immigrant groups develop stronger ethnic or national identities while their religious identities decline post immigration (Massey & Higgins, 2011). Other groups minimize their ethnic or national origins in favor of a pan-cultural religious identity (Ebaugh, 2003; Peek, 2005; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). In both cases, immigrants are seeking to redefine and renegotiate their sense of self and situate themselves in the larger cultural context.

Baha'is have been discriminated against and subjected to hate-fed persecution in Iran since the religion was founded in 1844, which has resulted in a significant diaspora population of Iranian Baha'is around the world. The Baha'i faith has a following of over 5 million members around the world and makes up Iran's largest minority religion (Baha'is of the United States, 2009; Cameron & Danesh, 2008; Kausler, 2012; Morlock, 2021; Rehman, 2019). Iran has a current estimated population of 88 million and over 350,000 of them are official members of the Baha'i faith (Morlock, 2021; World Population Review, 2022). In the United States, the number of official members of the Baha'i faith is ca. 180,000 (Pluralism Project, 2021).

One of the main teachings of the Baha'i faith concerns the oneness of humankind through unity in diversity. The faith also advocates for the equality of women and men, the underlying unity of religions, and the need to eliminate prejudices of all types. This religion strongly promotes the need for universal peace and the importance of human rights (Baha'i World News Service, 2004; Cameron & Danesh, 2008).

The Iranian government and its religious leaders have systematically persecuted and discriminated against members of the Baha'i faith and treated them as a threat even though the foundational beliefs, teachings, and practices are peaceful in nature (Baha'i World News Service, 2004; Hassan, 2007; Morlock, 2021). In my previous work I have argued that one of the main triggers for this systematic discrimination is the result of the fact that the Baha'i faith is younger than Islam (Morlock, 2021). Because of this timeline all members of the Baha'i faith are treated as though they rejected Islam and converted out of the religion. Leaving Islam is a crime in Iran that can be punished with the death penalty (Morlock, 2021; Schirmacher, 2009).

Discrimination and persecution of Baha'is became more systematic in 1955 through a systematic anti-Baha'i campaign (Akhavi, 1980; IHRDC, 2006; Momen, 2010; Morlock, 2021). This violent propaganda encouraged Iranian Muslims across Iran to engage in a range of hate-filled acts including murders, desecration of cemeteries, mob violence, expulsion from employment and educational institutions, destruction of gathering places like Baha'i community centers and homes and forced marriages of women to Muslim men (Morlock, 2021). Throughout the years following the revolution these widespread ideas fueled both systematic and spontaneous acts of hate and persecution (Akhavi, 1980; IHRDC, 2006; Momen, 2010).

Between 1978 and 1998, more than 200 Baha'is were killed in Iran (Baha'is of the United States, 2009). Most of these deaths were executions. However, in the same period, thousands were imprisoned or otherwise persecuted exclusively because of their membership in the Baha'i faith (Baha'is of the United States, 2009). Accurate data for deaths since 1998 is not available. A special United Nations report from 2012 found that close to 500 Baha'is were arrested between 2004 and 2011 (Kausler, 2012).

In 1993, a secret memorandum by the supreme leader Khamenei became public that outlined ways that the progress and development of the religion and people could be contained in Iran (Baha'i International Community, 2010; IHRDC, 2006). This document clearly described the intention of eliminating the Baha'i community in Iran and the historical roots of those members living outside of Iran. This document is also evidence of Khamenei's genocidal intentions against them (Baha'i International Community, 2010; IHRDC, 2006). Because of the traumas associated with their histories of discrimination and persecution, Iranian Baha'i immigrants face significant challenges in the process of starting a new life outside of Iran.

Drawing on 50 in-depth life history interviews with Iranian Baha'is immigrants in the United States, my research shows that Iranian Baha'is tend to emphasize their religious identity while minimizing the role of their national or cultural background. However, their discussions of Iran demonstrated that they remained deeply connected to their cultural heritage, which contributed to their sense of outsider status post immigration. These findings complicate the existing literature on immigrant identities by demonstrating that prioritizing religious identity does not automatically provide insider status in this population's religious community in the United States, and it also reinforces their outsider status in their national or ethnic immigrant community. In highlighting these processes and experiences, I contribute to the growing body of literature on marginalized refugee-immigrant identities. My exploration of this unique case speaks to the need to better understand immigrants' experience of exile, trauma, and religion which demonstrates the complexity of the intersection of these processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

IDENTITY FORMATION AND REFORMATION

Negotiating identity over the life course and within the home culture and society is challenging. This process becomes complicated when a person is ascribed an outsider status because of any one identity, such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or disability.

Identities are partially negotiated, partially ascribed, contextual and fluid, rather than fixed (Ghorashi, 1997; Mostofi, 2003; Sorenson, 1990). Olick and Robbins (1998) described identities as processes that are continually constructed and reconstructed through narrative. They emphasized that the process of identity formation and reconstruction could take various forms and is not limited to identifying with a given narrative representing a certain history, but also can include rejecting a community's past to situate oneself and one's identity in relation to this community.

Families play a key role in shaping our constructions of the past and therefore our identities (Halbwachs, 1992). Through family narratives we learn to have certain emotional reactions to experiences; they include shame, pride, pain, and fear. Through this community of memory, people learn to feel emotions even about events that may have happened to members of their groups or communities before they became a part of them (through birth or joining). These communities of memory can also provide counter memories, which may often challenge dominant constructions of memories/events (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

Although ethnic or national identity is often a major source for identification, political ideology, and changing experiences in historical moments can outweigh or deemphasize the role of ethnic and national affiliation in identity construction (Sorenson, 1990). Mostofi (2003) and Ghorashi (1997) also emphasized that much of identity formation is negotiated through social interactions, including being ascribed an identity.

Research shows that for second-generation Muslim immigrants in the United States, religion emerges "as the most salient source of personal and social identity" (Peek, 2005, p.215). Peek argued that religious identity development passes through three stages. A person first experiences religion as their ascribed identity, then as their chosen one, and eventually as their declared identity. However, Peek focused on the second generation in her research and appears to have taken for granted the religious identity constancy of first-generation immigrants. She supported past research indicating that first-generation immigrants "react to the alienation and confusion that result from their arrival in a new country by turning to religion" (Peek, 2005, p. 218).

Furthermore, many refugee groups experience status loss in their transitions to safety. For example, the research on Southeast Asians and their strained generational family relationships demonstrates that safety alone is no guarantee of a happy and fulfilling life for refugee groups (Detzner, 1996).

BAHA'IS: AN IMPORTANT AND UNDEREXPLORED CASE

The government and Islamic leaders of Iran see Baha'is as a threat to Islam and have discriminated against them systematically even though Baha'is believe in and teach only peaceful messages (Baha'i World News Service, 2004; Hassan, 2007; Morlock, 2021; Rehman, 2019). Baha'is are

considered to have converted out of Islam, which is punishable by the death penalty in Iran (Schirmacher, 2009). Although animus by the government and religious leaders has always been present against this population, their discrimination and persecution became more intensified after the Islamic revolution in 1979. Post revolution, all non-Muslims in Iran were made second-class citizens, without civil rights (Cameron & Danesh, 2008; Hassan, 2007; Kaussler, 2012). The Iranian government identified a few religious minorities to whom they afforded a limited set of protections: Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians. Although the Baha'is make up the largest religious minority in Iran, they did not receive even those limited rights (Hassan, 2007; Morlock, 2021).

Special "guidelines" were put in place to deal with the "Baha'i issue." This move "represented a state-led plan to repress the Baha'i community. Among other things, it mandated routine surveillance of the Baha'is and imposed severe restrictions on the practice and public expression of the Baha'i faith" (Kaussler, 2012, p. 75). Consequently, many members of this religion have suffered physical violence, had their homes burned down, been fired from their jobs, and had their businesses taken away (Baha'i World News Service, 2004, 2008). In addition, Baha'is have not been allowed to attend universities in Iran or hold religious meetings, all to force them to convert to Islam, a demand they cannot accede to without betraying their faith (Bollag, 1998).

The United Nations' Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur Rehman released a special report on the Human Rights violations in Iran, in which he reported that in 2019 "the court of appeal of Isfahan reportedly condemned, in separate judgments, nine Baha'i citizens to a total of 48 years of prison" (Rehman, 2019, p. 14). Further, Rehman reported that since 2013 there had been over 800 violations of economic rights and that since 2005 over 1,000 Baha'is had been charged with "membership of the illegal Baha'i community and propaganda against the regime by spreading the Baha'i faith in the society" (Rehman, 2019, p. 15).

Again, this systematic discrimination and persecution have resulted in a large immigrant and refugee community of Iranian Baha'is outside of Iran. Their denial of a national identity in Iran, flight from religious persecution, and ultimately alienation in the American Baha'i community significantly challenges our present understandings of refugee-immigrant populations religious and national identity formation and reformation post migration. In this paper, I show how the denial of membership in the national Iranian identity and the resulting persecution of Baha'is has shaped these immigrants' religious identity formation and the role of religious observance in Iran. Further, I examine how their identity and religious observance are changed and disrupted because of their escaping persecution in their home country and settling in the United States.

METHODS

The sample population for this research consisted of a snowball sample of 50 first-generation Iranian immigrants in the United States who are members of Baha'i families and thus were born into the marginalized religious group. This sample included 29 women and 21 men ranging from 18 to 83 years old. Thirty-eight percent of the sample lived in Washington, 38% in Colorado, 14% in the San Francisco Bay Area, and 10% in New Mexico at the time of the interview. Their dates of arrival in the United States varied from as recently as 6 months prior to the interviews to before the 1979 revolution in Iran. There was a significant range in terms of their age at departure from Iran, as well. Some were only teenagers, whereas most were in their thirties to fifties. The participants' persecution histories also varied greatly, although all had experienced at least some level of consistent discrimination and oppression while living in Iran because of their religion.

The life-history interviews were collected from 2010 through 2014 using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The use of semi-structured interview protocols allowed for flexibility in adapting the questions to follow a more natural conversation flow, which is vital to building rapport with participants (Baca Zinn, 2001; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This approach also allowed for additional unanticipated information to be shared by the interviewees, making the collected data more comprehensive and reflective of their experience. The interview schedule included questions concerning the experience of discrimination in Iran (ranging from more subtle experiences like microaggressions all the way to torture and executions); the challenges of emigration; the importance

of religious observance; and the survivors' views on the significance of religious preservation and retaining the memory of trauma in the family (see appendix for full semi-structured interview guide). Follow-up interviews were conducted (when necessary) during the interview transcription process to ensure the participants' stories were captured fully and accurately.

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to be cautious about the possible impact of the researcher's personal biography on the research. Interviewing survivors of discrimination and religious persecution requires a great deal of sensitivity, and I worked to minimize the impact of my presence on the interview process to the extent possible. Being an insider as a first-generation immigrant and an Iranian Baha'i was highly beneficial for me as a researcher (Baca Zinn, 2001).

My fluency in both English and Farsi allowed me to conduct the interviews in the language most comfortable for the participants, many of whom preferred to conduct the interviews in Farsi or a mix of Farsi and English. Most of the interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Farsi, but 70% were conducted primarily in English and 30% primarily in Farsi. Further, 78% percent of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and 22% were completed with the assistance of a video chat or phone. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 6 hours, with an average length of 2 hours. After the data collection was complete, the interviews were coded and analyzed.

Data analysis took place in several phases. First, the interviews were translated, if necessary, and transcribed verbatim. During the transcription process, all names from interviews were replaced with pseudonyms (whereupon all interview quotes contain only pseudonyms). After transcription, the data were coded in multiple stages. The concepts were then analyzed into a theoretical framework to describe the relationship among the discovered categories (Charmaz, 2001; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Overall, this research was based on a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2001; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). My analysis confirmed both perceptions I already held and new themes that confounded my initial expectations.

FINDINGS

Negotiating identity is a complex process that becomes complicated for someone who is ascribed an outsider status because of any one identity. Iranian Baha'is experience this outsider status both in their home country where they are persecuted and in their new host country of the United States. I demonstrate in this paper that Iranian Baha'is experience the denial of a national identity in Iran, which results in the development of a collective Baha'i identity in Iran.

Many immigrants struggle with maintaining their identities in a new culture and often find themselves renegotiating their own cultural identities as they build new lives for themselves in a new country. For Iranian Baha'is, who were denied full citizenship and the right to practice their faith openly, their escape to the United States was deeply interwoven with the hope of a life in which they would be free to practice their faith openly and where their religious lives would no longer be limited and constrained by outside forces.

I show that the Iranian Baha'is' experiences in the United States, including cultural differences between them and American Baha'is, spiritual differences across countries, and differences in life experiences result in a feeling of alienation and outsider status among the American Baha'i community. The Baha'i immigrants' narratives and experiences reaffirm and complicate our understandings of how religious, national, and cultural identity is negotiated.

INTERNAL EXILE: OUTSIDER STATUS IN IRAN

An inclusive national identity did not exist in Iran prior to 1935 (Yarshater, 1989). Individuals identified with the regions in which they were born and lived. Then in 1935, Iran began requesting that other countries discontinue using the name Persia in official communication and instead refer to the country as Iran (Yarshater, 1989). In the following years, regional identity became deemphasized, and a larger Iranian national identity was developed.

With the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iranian national identity became replaced by a national Islamic identity. More specifically, Iranian and Muslim have become conflated and are perceived as interchangeable throughout the world, including in Iran (Humes & Clark, 2008; McAuliffe, 2007). As the national Islamic identity became solidified, those who did not—or were not allowed to—share the Islamic membership were labeled as “other” and were denied full citizenship rights and “true Iranian identity,” defined by Islam (Humes & Clark, 2008; McAuliffe, 2007). A few religious minorities became classified as “tolerated” with limited rights, but Baha’is were not (Schirmacher, 2009). Not only is the Baha’i faith not recognized in Iran as a “real” religion, but members of this faith have also become defined as anti-Islamic and therefore anti-Iran.

Consequently, the Baha’i community had to renegotiate its collective identity to be rooted fully in their own religious community and practice. The Baha’i faith was founded in Iran and its followers honor its founding place and the birthplace of their prophet. Seeing it become redefined by a fundamentalist regime that stands in direct opposition to their own beliefs was a tremendous cultural loss.

The systematic erasure of Baha’i history through the destruction of religious sites, along with the continued discrimination against and persecution of the members of this religion, has created a type of internal exile for Baha’is in Iran. Farid, one of the respondents who continually spoke about how much he loved Iran because it is his and his religion’s birthplace, described the experience of living in Iran as being “like living as a sheep among wolves in sheep clothing” (personal communication, 2010–2014). This suggests that although everyone looks the same ethnically, Baha’is can never know who is safe or dangerous. He also explained that although Baha’is come from the same ethnic group as Iranian Muslims, they no longer hold the same rights and protections under the law as their Muslim counterparts.

Hamid, another interviewee, explained that the constant othering and exclusion from normal Iranian life has created difficulties in his own identity development.

I really had to struggle ... to find my own identity. There is a feeling, a lack of confidence created in you that you really have to work hard at because of the persecution. When a kid at a young age is told that you are no good, that you have to be scared all the time, I think that has deep psychological roots in your mind. However you want to take it, it’s fact. I always felt that something is wrong with me, especially being a minority. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

About a third of the respondents described similar struggles in developing and maintaining their identities growing up.

Many of the respondents described having learned at an early age to identify deeply with the “heroes and heroines” of the Baha’i faith through the coaching of their parents. Those who learned this strategy early on seemed to hold firm to their Baha’i identity even under severe experiences of persecution, whereas those who were more conflicted did not develop a strong religious identity until after they had left Iran. In the following example, Peyman credited his parents with preparing him for the challenges of living a Baha’i life in Iran, saying:

We probably owe it to my parents to equate this persecution as a gift from Bahá’u’lláh [the prophet and founder of the Baha’i faith]. In one of his writings he gives jubilation to tests of his loved ones. I guess my parents prepared us very well with that. So because we are loved by Bahá’u’lláh, that’s why we are tested. It is a reward. It wasn’t looked at as a punishment, which is very different psychologically than if you look at it as a punishment; it’s huge. No, we actually looked at it as grace ... You always compare yourself with the heroes and heroines of the faith. That’s just huge. It’s a very different psychological approach. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Learning from a young age to attribute tests and difficulties as a blessing (and evidence for love of [G]od and his prophet) prepares young children for the harsh realities of living as Baha’is in Iran. Being united in their suffering has become a main source of strength and support for this community. Therefore, identifying not only as a Baha’i but also as a persecuted group who suffers in service of their faith was a significant source of identity for Baha’is before they fled Iran.

In response to the discrimination and systematic persecution by the Iranian government, religious leaders, and religious followers, Baha'is in Iran developed a collective identity defined by service and dedication to their faith. A person cannot choose to both be safe and live as a Baha'i in Iran (Morlock, 2021). Therefore, having a unique perspective from which to evaluate one's suffering—including the smaller daily experiences, as well as the more severe and life threatening or ending ones—allows members of this community to make sense of and give meaning to their experiences (Morlock, 2021). Bek-Pedersen and Montgomery (2006) argued that immigrants construct their identities through narratives of the past. This research supports this finding through the ways in which Baha'is construct a collective identity through their stories of practicing their faith in Iran and the persecution they experienced. Most respondents talked about the Baha'i faith as their life. "In Iran the faith is a real part of you, it's part of your DNA" or "in Iran the friends [Baha'is] sacrifice everything for the faith and each other" were commonly expressed sentiments. Some of the respondents claimed that their primary identity was that of being a Baha'i first; then other roles such as being parents, siblings, and so forth follow. In a context where everything in life, including the lives of spouses or children, could be taken from a person at any moment, it seems understandable that they would define themselves as Baha'is first.

Even in the most devout individuals, the tension between the various roles they occupy is clearly visible. As one participant explained:

I thought to myself, and I prayed all the time. I told Bahá'u'lláh ... everything I have, even my husband's life, my life, and ... my child's life, is in your hand. I don't care if we be killed or everything destroyed. The only thing I ask you—I don't want they come and touch me or my daughter. They hit me, they kick me, they kill me. They put, you know, whatever they have, shovels and things and hit me, kill me and my daughter in front of me. I don't want they sell her, kidnap her, or rape her or rape me. Please. The only things I don't want my daughter be raped or kidnaped. Then whatever you want to do, do it. If they want to kill her. Kill her in front of me. I want to see it. To be sure that she is not in their hands. (F., personal communication, 2010–2014)

In the above excerpt, Fariba argued that she was willing to sacrifice everything, including her life or the life of her child, for the Baha'i faith. The only exception was that she did not want her child or herself to be abused sexually. This attitude demonstrates that there were limits to her willingness to sacrifice and that she did, in fact, wish to protect her child (and herself) from what she believed to be the worst experiences.

Fariba, like many other Baha'is living in Iran, had in fact sacrificed a tremendous amount throughout her life. When I asked her why she was willing to sacrifice so much for the faith, she explained:

As I said, I'm proud. I thought, you know, I have something they don't have it. As my father always used to say when I became a Baha'i, I think I have a big diamond in my hand. I want to share this diamond with everyone. That's why I teach. I have something in my heart, a treasure: that I'm Baha'i. I felt because I am Baha'i, I feel very strong, very proud. At the end of my life, if I look back, what have I done for Baha'i faith? At least I did a little thing. Otherwise, with empty hands I go to the other world. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Fariba believed that having sacrificed so many things throughout her life meant that, when she died, she would be able to show that she lived steadfastly as a Baha'i and that she was a true believer. She did not want to be perceived as someone who was selfish or took the easy route.

Arezoo, a young woman in her twenties, who escaped Iran in her mid-teens, describes the meaning of being a Baha'i in Iran as follows:

In Iran, being a survivor of persecution, it gave you identity. That's something I've been thinking for a while, because it's so different. Your identity is part of your experience, part of your faith, the beliefs that your parents raised you by. But the experience ... that's when your beliefs are actually tested. And that's the time you make the decision for yourself, and you get to shape who you are. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Many respondents, including Arezoo, believed that one of the main differences between Baha'is in Iran and outside of Iran was that those living in Iran were actually tested in regard to their beliefs. In many cases, the interviewees seemed to feel that having had an opportunity to prove their faith had made them stronger and more devout. They described situations in which they demonstrated great bravery in the face of danger and explained that [G]od either spoke through them or gave them the strength to act in the ways they did.

Furthermore, the Baha'i community in Iran provided access to an important social network that offered employment opportunities, assistance in times of need, communication about Baha'i activities and other communities around the country, and safe friendships. When I asked the respondents about their first memory of being a Baha'i, they often answered with either memories of discrimination and persecution or memories of attending children's classes. In the case of the latter, these children's classes provided religious training for the community, but more significantly, they provided spaces where the children felt they could belong. In these classes they played, they learned, and they could be themselves. The times spent with their friends allowed them to feel part of a community in the way that Muslim children may have felt in school and in the larger society. Therefore, religious practice both affirmed and reinforced Iranian Baha'is identity and served as a critical tool in the preservation of the religion and its history. Because religious identity is central to the experiences and survival of Baha'is in Iran, religious practice and preservation remained priorities for this group in exile.

OUTSIDERS IN EXILE: BAHÁ'ÍS' IDENTITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Baha'i immigrants arrived in the United States seeking a life free of oppression, discrimination, and persecution. Many of them believed that coming to the United States would mean joining a vibrant American Baha'i community where they would be able to practice their religion openly and fully. At first, the immigrants felt welcomed by their new Baha'i community and were valued as experts on the faith. After an initial phase of other Baha'is reaching out and looking after the new arrivals, many respondents began to feel more isolated as their host community became caught up in their daily routines and life responsibilities. After being in the United States for a time, many of the respondents were surprised by the differences they perceived between their communities in Iran and the American Baha'i communities of which they were now a part. These differences were described as cultural, spiritual, and experiential.

The first differences that they observed were cultural. They described religious practice in Iran as being very strict, because the community was under so much scrutiny by the larger society. In the United States, children often were not expected to participate in prayers or other religious programming; instead, they were entertained with arts and crafts or other play. For the Iranian Baha'i immigrants, this was very surprising, as even small children in Iran learned to sit still and participate in all the religious activities. Doing so was considered a vital part of their religious upbringing and deepening. Hamid provided one example of the cultural difference he experienced in the United States:

Conducting a feast [monthly Baha'i gathering with prayer and consultation section], I remember in Iran everyone sits properly and have their hands and feet all in proper positions during the feast; so if you see a kid here that is spreading his legs open or slouching down and not sitting properly, you could feel like it's disrespectful. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Like Hamid, Shahnaz, who had been in the United States since the late 1970s, observed that some of the differences in the American Baha'i community seem disrespectful. She described one such example here:

It's kind of a disappointment. For example, traditionally you hold observances for martyrdom of the Báb [one of the two prophets of the Baha'i faith] or ascension of Bahá'u'lláh or any of the other holy days, but especially these two. Because they gave up so much for us. And we say the tablet of visitation which is something that they always

did in ... in Iran, and at the shrines they do that. I think a lot of Baha'i groups do that. So when someone [in the American community] says we don't have to say it, [that] it's not an obligatory prayer, or why do we have to stand up, you know ... it is something very little that we give up if we stand up for three or four minutes in discomfort; I mean you even see old, old people stand up in Iran because that's all they can give right now. So that kind of disappoints me. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Many of the interviewees articulated that American Baha'is who have so much freedom in the United States do not truly know the value of their religion. Thus, the immigrant Iranian Baha'is feel a responsibility to those who are still oppressed in Iran to continue the practices that connect them to their former lives. These practices also represent a form of service to their community.

Members of this group are faced with cultural differences that alienate them not only from American society in general but also from the American Baha'i community. This study supports the findings on the older generation's concerns about children and grandchildren becoming "Americanized" and drifting too far away from the home culture. In addition, the data also reveal that some members of the younger generations of Iranian Baha'is are concerned about the ways in which American Baha'is have "Americanized" the religion and that this dilutes it or takes away from its purity.

Unlike other immigrant groups, Iranian Baha'is do not build religious institutions like churches to recreate their cultural communities in their homeland, because the organizational structure of the Baha'i faith prevents this kind of separation by cultural background. The Iranian Baha'is do seem to attempt to hold on to their cultural practices by trying to maintain the traditions of religious observance from Iran without having separate places of worship. As a result, the Baha'i immigrants' narratives and experiences both support and complicate our understandings of how religious, national, and cultural identities are negotiated.

Other groups, such as Iranian Jewish immigrants in the United States, had similar difficulties relating to and connecting with the American Jewish community (Soomekh, 2012). Within the broader Jewish community, Iranian members share a distinct cultural heritage and practice that has caused them to be labeled as outsiders within the larger American Jewish community. Although similar in being outsiders, Iranian Baha'is seem to self-isolate or distance themselves from American Baha'is because of the cultural differences they perceive. Finally, Ebaugh (2003) argued that immigrant groups often incorporate their ethnic practices into their religious ones, to create a stronger sense of "home" in their host societies.

In addition to the perceived cultural differences between American and Iranian-born Baha'is, many of my respondents noted that they see the two communities as spiritually different. They perceived that their home communities are more devout, educated in the religious teachings, and in many ways closer to the religion than their host communities. Further, although they showed acceptance for the American Baha'is by commending them for having found the faith on their own rather than being born into it, they valorized Iranian Baha'is religious lineage and assumed heritage of religious piety.

One account of such contrasting views of the way the religion is practiced is found in the following narrative:

Well, in Iran, it was really happening. It's not like here. Here you just read stuff and there is no spirituality to it. I don't like the functions here at all. It's lax spirituality, big time. Well, all of them [holy days] are special in Iran. The feast was so special; everything was special, not just holidays. Everything Baha'i related was so connected to your heart back home. There was something about the environment, something about the country. I never felt a connection here. (B., personal communication, 2010–2014)

The data reveal that the respondents had the perception that spirituality in Iran was connected to the heart and defined their entire lives, as opposed to being just one small part of life. Other interviewees described prayers in Iran as being more emotion based. According to numerous

respondents, people in Iran would have tears in their eyes and feel the prayers, rather than just read the liturgy. Some of these perceived differences could be cultural differences in expression, but many of them are likely due to the differences in the adherents' life experiences that shape the kind of relationship religion plays in their lives. As discussed earlier, for Baha'is in Iran, their religion and community defined their identities, whereas in the United States, American-born Baha'is seem to have connections to multiple communities.

Many of the interviewees lamented that American Baha'is always use busyness as an excuse for not being more active in the faith. Khatereh described this pattern:

"I guess for Baha'is in Iran, service is really important. But here, it's a busy life. Everyone has so much (sic) things to do ... boom boom boom just going ... go to school, go to work, go to school, go to work, and then faith maybe comes next, I guess. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Others, like Khatereh, describe families as going from school, to soccer practice, to music lessons, and therefore they do not find time to attend Baha'i activities, which are not their priorities. Research on various immigrant groups has resulted in contradictory results regarding religion and immigration (Massey & Higgins, 2011). For example, data from the New Immigrant Survey found that among Christian immigrants (from all over the world), immigration disrupts religious practice and leads to lower levels of religiosity and religious practice among Christians coming to the United States. Disruption occurs because of both the processes of immigration and the immediate needs of the immigrant families, but also because the loss of previously strongly connected religious communities after Baha'is leave their home countries (Massey & Higgins, 2011).

A researcher exploring Muslim immigrants found that immigration functions as a protective measure in religiosity, leading to higher levels of religious identification and practice in the United States than in the home country (Peek, 2005). The findings on Muslim immigrants also remain constant when compared to those regarding different Muslim home countries, as well as to receiving host countries (Ebaugh, 2003; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). The first-generation Iranian Baha'is in this study appeared to remain as religious as they were in Iran, and in some cases they became more religious after coming to the United States. Although a few of them stated that they had to actively resist assimilating to what they perceived as American's lower level of religious practice, they emphasized the importance of their religion and often adhered to the traditional forms of religious observance they practiced in Iran.

Mahvash, who lives in a community where children's classes have been discontinued because of a lack of interest, expressed concern about her children's spiritual development, saying:

Imagine when you live somewhere where there's so much oppression and you are so limited in what you can do and people are still able to ... or they maybe work hard to be able to meet; still, even if secretly, it's hard to imagine to go to a place where there's religious freedom and then maybe people don't practice so much. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Some of the respondents reported that even some Iranian Baha'is who were dedicated and who served their faith in Iran have also become distracted from the faith and now desire to pursue material over spiritual rewards. Shayan, for example, talked about the Baha'is with whom he escaped and who now are no longer active in the Baha'i community in the United States. He said:

My experiences have had a huge impact on my identity. Bad and good—both. The sense of insecurity never left. The appreciation for freedom, 10,000-fold. And I saw what it means and what it is. Human rights is a big thing for me ... But mind you, I have seen people who just didn't realize what the heck is happening. They have food on the table and a woman in bed that that's it, life is good. I've seen people who just never look back as though there is nothing to care for. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

For many of the respondents, being devout and active Baha'is is a responsibility toward those whom they left behind in Iran. For these respondents, it is important not to get too caught up in or attached to materialism, because everything is temporary except for their faith. At the same time, the respondents recognize that they themselves sometimes get caught in this pattern and lament the impact that Americanization has had on their spiritual lives. Shayan is most concerned about Baha'is who lose sight of their faith or whose priorities change after they gain freedom. He feels it is Baha'is' responsibility to be agents of change:

So the fact that these are happening, it's heartbreaking. The fact that you see, we Baha'is are busy with life, it's heartbreaking. Because we are supposed to be elements of change. If the element of change is me, that world is not going to change, it's not going to do jack. If our Baha'i youth, their aim and ambition is to buy a truck ... that's the Baha'i youth. There is no Baha'i family [community] here. What hope is there for his life? Or this Baha'i girl who says, "I don't want to be a Baha'i." So what do you do? I think all humanity has a horrible, horrible future. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Like Shayan, many immigrants felt that it is their duty to work toward positive social change, especially by drawing attention to the ongoing discrimination against and suffering of their group in Iran. They explained that they had no voice in Iran but that, now that they are free, they feel it is important to use their voice. Some of the more recent immigrants listed their lack of English and inability to use their voice as one of the most difficult challenges since coming to the United States. They expressed feeling limited in their ability to act as Baha'is because they cannot communicate their thoughts. For these respondents, it was especially difficult to understand why American Baha'is are not more active in working toward social change—especially regarding the discrimination against and persecution of Baha'is in Iran.

Many of the interviewees reported that they felt that the Baha'i communities in Iran were stronger, more devout, and more willing to sacrifice themselves for the prophet and their faith. They learned growing up that the more they were tested in their faith, the greater [G]od's love for them must be. Therefore, devotion to their faith was seen as both a service and their life's calling. Yet American Baha'is do not seem to them to share this perception. The topic of a perceived disconnect between religious freedom and limited religious practice in the United States arose many times during my interviews. For a population that fled their home country because of a lack of religious freedom, it is exceedingly difficult to relate to a community that does not prioritize their religious practice more than anything else. Shahab, who suffered intense persecution in Iran, explained:

There is a big difference. Really ... I don't wish to offend Baha'is here, but spiritually Baha'is in Iran are much stronger. Their faith is stronger. Prayers are different; they mean more. Here it's good too, not that it's bad. It has freedom. But the spirituality, I feel, is less here. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

In trying to make sense of why Baha'i spirituality seems weaker in the United States, many of the respondents concluded that it may be because the Baha'i faith was founded in Iran, whereas the religion is new to the United States. This perceived lack of "being a Baha'i first" has led many of the respondents to view the American Baha'i community as "loose" and not as devout as the Iranian community. Although they often emphasized the importance and beauty of freedom, they seemed conflicted about the worth of freedom if "everyone is too busy to take advantage of it." As a result, several of the interviewees expressed regrets about leaving Iran. Life in the United States seemed less meaningful to them than in Iran because they did not feel that they could serve their faith in the same way.

Another challenge in connecting to the American Baha'i communities lies in the fact that many American Baha'is cannot relate to or imagine the severity of the hate-based persecution that these Baha'is experienced in Iran. Shideh, a young woman who came to the United States after completing high school in Iran, described her boyfriend's misperceptions of the status of Baha'is in Iran:

Sometimes I feel like people here, especially Baha'is who were born here, they don't take the persecution seriously. Like my own boyfriend sometimes says Baha'is get too much international attention in Iran. He says they're not in any danger. So I explained to him how the little things affects each person's life. And how a person who was born here as a Baha'i ... how their life is so different compared to a person in Iran ... Persecution stops a person from being who that person could be ... And it can, if we don't stop it, it can go on forever. (personal communication, 2010–2014)

Shideh, whose mother was paralyzed for over a year because of a brutal beating by Muslims in her community in Iran, tried to explain to her boyfriend that her life experiences are significant and that Baha'is are truly suffering in Iran. She told him that she was prepared for non-Baha'is to have misconceptions about the plight of Baha'is in Iran, but that it was difficult for her to realize how different American Baha'is were from her community at home. Because of experiences like this, a large number of interviewees stated, they feel like outsiders in the American Baha'i communities and are concerned about ever finding true belonging again.

Many of the Baha'i immigrants came to the United States with hopes for a better future and an underlying hope for freedom and belonging. After living as outsiders in Iran, many of them yearned for a sense of belonging now that they were in the United States. However, because of a lack of a collective Baha'i identity in the United States, these immigrants often found themselves as outsiders even within the religious community, which in Iran provided a reprieve from their outsider status.

This search for belonging and the fears attached to never having a home were common among first-generation exiles. Consistent with Ghorashi (1997), interviewees felt concerned about their future regarding belonging in the United States. The future was the most difficult topic for them to discuss, even more so than the oppression and difficulties they faced that led to their fleeing from Iran.

Because of their outsider status, even in the United States, many of the respondents in the study emphasized the importance of continuing to practice their religion as they did in Iran as a way of maintaining their identity as an Iranian Baha'i. Farrah explained that "you're not Iranian anymore, and you're not American, and you're not Iranian-American ... it's hard sometimes to give up what was familiar, but the way Iranian Baha'is lived in Iran, that's not believable to the culture you're living in now" (personal communication, 2010–2014). She clearly understood that there was pressure to assimilate to the American Baha'i community, but also expressed how difficult it was to give up such a deeply rooted part of herself.

Whereas some of the younger immigrants tried to adapt their practices to fit more closely with their new American community, many older ones seemed to live with the disappointment of having been wrong in their expectations of what their new life would provide for them and their children. Much as the respondents in this study did not talk with their family members and friends in Iran about the challenges of religious practice in the United States (both a face-saving practice and from not wanting to sound ungrateful for their freedom), they had not learned about these difficulties from previous immigrants. Frequently they were left yearning for the deep connections they had with their Baha'i communities in Iran. The importance of religious life to their identity and sense of self ultimately created a sense of ongoing alienation and exile for many of these immigrants who have not found a supportive religious community in the United States. Mostofi (2003) found in her work on non-Baha'i Iranian Americans that identity formation for immigrants not only involves internal influences guided by memories of the homeland, experiences of immigration, and from members of the ethnic group itself but also by outside influences—from the members, laws, and circumstances of the host culture (p. 969).

Consistent with Mostofi's conclusions about identity formation, this research found that as Baha'i immigrants began to see themselves as outsiders even within the American Baha'i community, they began to define themselves not just by their religious membership but also by being an Iranian-Baha'i, specifically.

CONCLUSION

My research shows that Iranian Baha'i immigrants, who are a unique and underexplored population, experience an outsider status both in their home country where they are persecuted and in the United States. I have demonstrated that upon settling in the United States, Iranian Baha'is tend to emphasize their religious identity while minimizing the role of their national or cultural background, despite their deep attachments to their cultural heritage. Given the denial of their national Iranian identity while living in Iran, their religious identity truly became their primary and exclusive identity.

Iranian Baha'is cannot separate their Baha'i identity from their cultural one to find belonging in the Iranian-American community. For these immigrants, because of their experiences in Iran and the continued threats to their family members there, non-Baha'i Iranians often represent unpredictable and potentially unsafe relationships, preventing many Baha'is from looking to non-Baha'i Iranians for community.

However, for this population, unlike for other immigrant groups, emphasizing their religious identity does not lead to a feeling of connection and true belonging in the American Baha'i community, either. On the contrary, because of cultural differences between Baha'i immigrants and American Baha'is, spiritual differences across countries, and differences in life experiences, Iranian Baha'is undergo significant feelings of alienation from their American peers. Further, this deemphasis on their national identity—because of their prioritizing their religious identity—reinforces their outsider status in their national or ethnic immigrant community.

These findings complicate the existing literature on immigrant identities by demonstrating that prioritizing their religious identity does not automatically provide this population with an insider status in their religious community in the United States. By highlighting these processes and experiences, I contribute to the growing body of literature on marginalized refugee-immigrant identities.

There are a few important limitations to consider. One drawback of this research is that the sample focused only on participants in metropolitan areas and excluded Iranian-Baha'i immigrants who resided in more rural areas. Therefore, potential differences between these populations could not be investigated. However, most of this specific immigrant population lives in larger metropolitan areas, including in the research sites, and thus their experiences better reflect the broad experience of Iranian Baha'i immigrants to the United States. Another shortcoming is that this research did not include the stories of those Iranian Baha'is who chose not to be interviewed. In trauma research, a person's choice to remain silent or not share their story can be significant (Jacobs, 2002, 2010; Langer, 1991). Differences between these individuals' experiences and those of the sample cannot be determined.

In thinking about future directions, one meaningful expansion of this research would be to research the experiences of Iranian Baha'is who settle in nonmetropolitan areas to investigate how their experiences compare to those of Iranian Baha'is who live in larger cities. Furthermore—as this study has demonstrated—the intersection of exile, trauma, and religion is complex in ways that we have yet to fully uncover. With the recent significant increase in refugee-immigrant populations around the world, it is critical that scholars continue to investigate the various dynamics and difficulties members of this population encounter in finding community and belonging in their new host countries.

APPENDIX

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: BAHÁ'Í CULTURAL MEMORY QUESTIONNAIRE

Intro: Ask a series of questions – pertaining to your up-bringing, your religious identity and your parents; – answer only those you feel comfortable responding to.

Religious Identity

- In what religion were you raised? (do you identify as Baha'i, when did you become a Baha'i if was not raised one)
- Do you believe in God? What is your conception of God?
- What does being a Baha'i mean to you?
- Would you call yourself a religious person? Why or why not?
- What rituals or holidays are most important to you?
- If you did, how did you practice your religion in Iran?
- How do you practice religion here in the U.S.?
- How do you see yourself practicing/identifying with your religion differently now than when in Iran? Do you see any differences in the way you practice religion in the U.S. compared to in Iran?
- What is your first memory of being a Baha'i in Iran?
- When (at what age) did you realize for the first time that Baha'is are not accepted? How did you learn about this? From whom?

Persecution History

- First memory of fears of exposure? Did you have any? Do you have any now?
- Does your family (do you) discuss your persecution in Iran? How? Why or why not? (for children: could you ask your family about their experiences of religious persecution?)
- Which experiences/memories affected you the most growing up?
- Which experiences/memories affect you the most today?
- How do you think this experience of religious persecution has impacted your relationship with your family? (For 2nd generation: how do you think being survivors of religious persecution has affected your parents? Has affected their parenting and attitudes toward children and family? Do you think that being a child of/a survivor of religious persecution has influenced your religious upbringing/identity?)
- Do you have siblings? If so, has this family history affected them as well? Differently or the same? Do you ever talk about it?
- Do you have children? If so, how many – gender?
 - a. Do you know when they first learned about the persecution of Baha'is in Iran?
 - b. Did you tell your kids?
 - c. Do you discuss it with them? What do you think they should know?
 - d. Do you think it has an influence on your own parenting?
- Do you think being a survivor (descendent of survivors) of religious persecution has had an impact on your sense of self? Your values, fears, etc?
- Are you concerned about religious persecution or discrimination locally, nationally, globally? What about being Iranian?
- For women: what were your feelings about wearing a chador or headscarf (ruh-sarrih) in Iran? How do you feel about it now?

Leaving Iran

- When did you come to the U.S.
- How did you come here?
 - a. Can you tell me about the immigration process as far as you know?
 - b. What led up to leaving Iran and coming here?
- Which members of your family have left Iran?
- When did they arrive in the U.S.?

- What were your biggest worries about being in Iran?
- What are your biggest worries now?
- What is the most difficult aspect of being in exile?

Iran

- What are your feelings about Iran? What does Iran mean to you?
- Do you think your feelings about Iran have been influenced by your family's history of persecution?
- Have you returned/visited Iran since fleeing/leaving?
 - a. 2nd generation: been to Iran?
- How do you feel about the Iranian government?
- How do you feel about the members of the police and other individuals who carried out the persecution of Baha'is in Iran?
- How do you feel about Muslims in Iran? In the U.S.?

Healing

- Do you think you can ever heal from this? Is healing desirable or necessary?

Is there anything else that I have not asked you that you would like to share?

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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This research was based on the author's dissertation research.

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