

## DETERMINANTS OF ADAPTATION FOR SECOND GENERATION IRANIANS

Ali Akbar Mahdi  
Department of Sociology/Anthropology  
Ohio Wesleyan University

In dealing with the question of adaptation of second generation immigrants, we need to be careful not to see this cohort as homogeneous. Several distinctions are in order and without these considerations we are bound to make unfounded generalizations. Factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, quality of collective resources, type of reception, length of time in host society, parental activism, and degree of spatial concentration seem to be highly correlated with the differential experiences these young people have. Attention should be given to the effects of each of these variables on the experiences of this generation.

1. *Age of Arrival and Birth Place:* Studies have shown a direct correlation between the age of arrival of immigrants and their success and failure in adaptation and assimilation to the host society. The younger the immigrant, the higher the chance of smooth assimilation and faster adaptation. The older the immigrant, the harder the process of adaptation. Of course, the religious and educational backgrounds are important intervening variables in this regard. This same outcome is true for the immigrant children, i.e., those who come to this country with their parents. In this regard, there is a need to distinguish between the children of immigrants and immigrant children. The former refers to those children who are born in the United States and the latter to those who were born outside of the United States. This distinction will not be important, if the latter have not had any significant schooling in their native country. However, the distinction becomes important if the child has spent a significant portion of his/her youthful age in the native country. Immigrant children have the advantage of having directly experienced the realities of the native culture in its own context. In their case, this experience is not readily assumed. The pattern of adaptation of children born outside of the United States therefore might very well demonstrate some differences from the

pattern of those who are born in the United States. The duration of the early experience of the immigrant children will have considerable effects on their linguistic loyalty, religious orientation, cultural adaptation, and career options.

2. *Gender*: Gender has a very significant role in the development of personality in the Iranian culture. Iranian culture, both in its Iranian and Islamic dimensions, is patriarchal and treats the socialization of males and females quite differently. The restrictions put on the female children are very extensive and go far beyond adolescence. Given this difference and the diametric differences between gender-related values of Islamic and Western societies, there are bound to be some differences in the way in which immigrant parents approach the socialization of their daughters and sons. Observation of parental anxieties seem to indicate a higher level of concern among parents raising daughters in Western nations. These additional concerns and anxieties are caused by normative features of the immigrant's native culture and the structural characteristics of the host society.

3. *Social Class*: Census data indicate that most Iranian immigrants in the United States consist of middle and upper class individuals who are highly educated and have a better than average standard of living. This separates the Iranian immigrants from most other recent immigrants in the United States. Many Iranian immigrants in the United States have come from upper and upper middle classes in Iran. Even those who came from modest backgrounds have been able to secure a solid middle class position for themselves in this country, thanks to their education, dedication, and hard work. These Iranians are highly conscious of the value of education and make every effort to secure a good education for their children and to prepare them for the highly advanced technological society they are living in. A cursory observation indicates that an increasing number of the second generation Iranians are completing degrees in technical, medical, and scientific fields. Given the low economic status of most immigrants in the U.S. in previous periods, the challenge for their second generation youth was to find ways of breaking out of their ascribed status. Many of those young immigrants, such as Latinos, were trapped in inner cities and faced harsh realities of job shortage, economic decline, debilitated housing, poor schooling, gang violence, and declining morals. While there might be some Iranian immigrants who find themselves in similar circumstances, the majority of Iranian immigrants live in suburban areas and hold middle class jobs. Their children attend decent schools and are rarely found in gangs or criminal ranks.

4. *Ethnicity*: Since Iran is a multi-ethnic society, the Iranian immigrants in the United States come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. With the exception of the Persians, who are the dominant ethnic group in Iran and often equate their ethnicity with their nationality, the other ethnic Iranians have a dual identity. Being highly educated, Iranian immigrants from the latter group show a higher degree of ethnic consciousness. As a group, Iranians' attitude toward the concept of ethnicity has been ambivalent. While there is a desire for recognition of their unique cultural and national traditions, Iranians wish to avoid negative implications of such a recognition. There is no widespread expression for an "ethnic" recognition among Iranians,

even though they have a strong desire to maintain some of their cultural heritage and national symbols. While most Iranians are comfortable with the label "Iranian-American," they show little interest in being viewed in the same way other hyphenated minorities are viewed in this country. Many Iranians seem to like to be identified by their achieved status in this society, i.e. as professionals with a deserved status. Their ability to compete in the labor market with the members of both the majority and minority groups in this country has made it possible for many Iranian immigrants to bypass "minority status" entirely. Furthermore, the commitment to professional identity often insulates these Iranians from association with prevailing "ethnic" problems in the United States.

*5. Type of Reception:* The quality of immigrants' life is in many ways determined by the quality of reception they gain in the host society. If the immigrants' culture is viewed negatively, the process of adjustment and assimilation will not go smoothly. By and large, Iranians who came to the United States prior to 1980 hostage crisis did not experience any particular prejudice and discrimination because of their nationality. However, since that crisis and because of the subsequent rise of the Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, the perception of Iran changed. Iranian government is labeled by the U.S. State Department as a "rogue state," and Iranians are often looked at as terrorists, fanatics, and militants. These stereotypes have generated prejudices and discrimination towards Iranians. If this is true, then we need to be able to pinpoint their effects on second generation Iranians because discrimination, real or perceived, affects how children define themselves. Based on the research done for other nationalities and ethnic groups, if the second generation children perceive more discrimination, they will be more likely to define themselves according to their national origin. If they perceive less discrimination, they are more likely to define themselves as American.

*6. Parental Activism:* Regardless of social class, religion, education, and ethnic identity, parental activism and involvement is highly correlated with the development of a national or ethnic identity among second generation immigrants. Those immigrants who are involved in ethnic voluntary organizations or are heavily involved in rituals and ceremonies of their native culture seem to instill a stronger sense of ethnic or national identity in their children. Parents who reach out to members of their extended family and interact with their co-nationals have more resources for providing a sense of community to their children. These family interactions provide an opportunity for second generation youths to actively engage in cultural and social practices that reinforce their native heritage.

*7. Family Cohesion:* There is a high degree of correlation between the cultural identity of the second generation immigrants and their family structure. Cohesive family ties and interaction with co-national immigrant peer groups create an ethos of community and collectivity that enrich the identity of second generation immigrants. To the extent that the first generation Iranian immigrant family remains cohesive and maintains its cultural inheritance, there is stronger possibility of instilling a sense of native cultural identity in its second generation.

Moreover, the larger the number of relative in the states, the more interaction with the kinship group in the homeland, the more travels there, and the more stable the family, the stronger the possibility of keeping the young under the umbrella of native culture.

8. *Role Model:* A major factor in positive reinforcement of cultural identity is role models available to young immigrant children. Successful immigrants who maintain their own cultural identity provide their children with a positive example of Iranian immigrants who have preserved their cultural identity while adjusting to their adapted culture and society. In this regard, the second generation Iranians in the United States are fortunate enough to have many successful parents who are often at the top of their professional ladder. Even those Iranians who have not been able to be professionally successful are often successful in providing a healthy support for their children's economic and educational welfare. In this regard, the Iranian second generation immigrants are clearly privileged.

\*Editor: This article was excerpted from a larger text which included a discussion of the Iranian community and ethnic identity as well as a bibliography.