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Caucasians on Camels: Iranian American Intergenerational Narratives and the Complications of Racial & Ethnic Boundaries

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Caucasians on Camels: Iranian American Intergenerational Narratives and
the Complications of Racial & Ethnic Boundaries

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

Sheefteh Khalili

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Ann Hironaka, Co-Chair
Professor Rubén G. Rumbaut, Co-Chair
Assistant Professor Glenda Flores

2017

DEDICATION

To

my mother
for her unwavering support,

and

To the memory of my father
for too many reasons to count.

Seek not water, seek thirst. -Rumi

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I am especially indebted to Ann Hironaka, my mentor and unofficial advisor since my first quarter at UCI. Ann taught me to be a sociologist and I am deeply grateful for her unwavering support of my non-traditional path throughout the Ph.D. program. Also a special thanks to Natalie Schonfeld and Sherwynn Umali for their mentorship for the past 13+ years; you have both provided more guidance, friendship, and support than I could have ever asked for.

I would also like to thank my UCI graduate school friends and colleagues for their support. To the original members of the Race Research Workshop, thanks for helping me find my home within Sociology. I am especially grateful for Lila Faz, Pedro Morgado, Mariam Ashtiani, Edalina Burciaga, Dana Nakano, Kelly Ward, and Matt Pearce for being my constant support system and offering feedback (or distraction) whenever I needed it. Special thanks goes to my dissertation writing partner Jessica Kizer, who spent countless hours with me at coffee shops throughout Orange County in our final year of graduate school. Jessica, you are a real DAB and I'm forever grateful I was able to go through this chapter (Chapters!) of my life with you.

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We are all on our own journey, and I am so grateful to have had you all be a part of mine.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Sheefteh Khalili

EDUCATION

- Ph.D** **Sociology**, University of California, Irvine 2017
Dissertation: Caucasians on Camels: Iranian American Intergenerational Narratives and the Complications of Racial & Ethnic Boundaries
Committee: Ann Hironaka, Rubén G. Rumbaut, Glenda Flores
Field Exams: Race and Ethnicity, Immigration
- M.A.** **Sociology**, University of California, Irvine 2013
Thesis: Politicized Ethnic Identity Among Second Generation Iranian Americans
- M.A.** **Ethnic Studies**, San Francisco State University 2008
Honors Distinction
Thesis: Hostile Homelands: How Second Generation Iranian Americans Construct Identity
- B.A.** **Social Science- Multicultural Studies**, University of California Irvine 2006
Magna Cum Laude
Honors Thesis: Impact of Multicultural Curriculum in a Freshman Living/Learning Community

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Race and Ethnicity, Immigration, Collective Memory, Identity, Political Consciousness, Qualitative Methods.

FELLOWSHIPS, AWARDS & HONORS

- 2017 Graduate Dean's Dissertation Fellowship, *declined*
2017 Associate Dean's Dissertation Fellowship
2016 DECADE Research Fellowship
2016 President's Year Dissertation Fellowship (honorable mention)
2015 Educational Partnership Award: Outstanding Academic Presenter, Global Connect, UC Irvine School of Social Sciences
2015 UCI Sociology Department, Summer Research Fellowship
2014 Educational Partnership Award: Outstanding Academic Presenter, Global Connect, UC Irvine School of Social Sciences
2014 UCI Sociology Department, Summer Research Fellowship
2014 DECADE Research Fellowship, 2 Quarters
2013 UCI Sociology Department, Summer Research Fellowship

- 2012 UCI Sociology Department, Summer Research Fellowship
 2008 Distinguished Graduate Student, San Francisco State University
 2006 Magna Cum Laude, University of California, Irvine
 Phi Beta Kappa, University of California, Irvine
 Honors Distinction, University of California, Irvine
 Golden Key National Honor Society
 National Society of Collegiate Scholars
 2005 Minority Undergraduate Fellowship Program (NASPA) 2004-2005.

PUBLICATIONS

Khalili, Sheefteh. 2008. "Against Gravity: A Review of Farnoosh Moshiri's Latest Novel." *MELUS Journal: A Special Issue in Iranian American Literature*. Volume 33 (3). Karim, P. and Rahmieh, N. EDs.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Lecturer

University of California, Irvine Freshman Edge Program

Pathways to University Success	Uni Stu	Summer 2014, 2015, 2016
Bridges to University Success	Uni Stu	Summer 2014, 2015, 2016

Adjunct Faculty

Everest College (Online Division) Department of Sociology & Student Life Skills

Principles of Sociology	Soc	2014 - 2015 (8 sections)
Strategies for Success	SLS	2011-2013 (24 sections)
Critical Thinking	SLS	2013-2014 (8 sections)

Teaching Assistant

University of California, Irvine, School of Social Science 2011-2016

Courses in Sociology, Anthropology, Chicano/Latino Studies, and International Studies

Latinos in the Workplace	US Race & Ethnic Relations
Sociological Lens on Religion	Global Entrepreneurship
Modern Iran	International Business
Sociology Majors Seminar Capstone	

San Francisco State University, College of of Ethnic Studies 2006-2008

Courses in Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Sociology

Graduate Research Methods
Sociology of Race
Women, Politics, Citizenship

PRESENTATIONS

“Will the Real Caucasian Please Stand Up? Negotiating Intergenerational Racial Discourse.” American Sociological Association, Montreal August 2017 (panel presentation on comparative US Racial Formation)

“Selective Racialization: Reactive Ethnic Options Among Iranian Americans” Society for the Study of Social Problems, Seattle August 2016

“Selectively Racialized, Selectively Politicized? Politicized Ethnic Identity Among Second Generation Iranian Americans.” American Sociological Association, Chicago August 2015.

“Genocide: Globalization and Political Violence.” UC Irvine Global Connect High School Outreach Program: Mission Viejo High School, Laguna Hills High School, March 2015.

“Policing ‘Authentic’ Ethnic Identity: An Ethnographic Study of a Persian Language Class.” Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine. March 2014.

“Race, Culture, Identity.” Guest Lecturer, Social Ecology 199: Moral Development and Just Community. University of California, Irvine, November 2013.

“Appreciating Cultural Diversity.” UC Irvine Global Connect High School Outreach Program: Mission Viejo High School, El Toro High School, Laguna Hills High School. October 2013.

“A Road Map from Student Leadership to the Real World.” University of California, Irvine Spring Leadership Conference. 2011, 2012.

“Hostile Homelands: How Second Generation Iranian Americans Negotiate Identity” National Association of Ethnic Studies Conference, April 2009, San Diego, CA

“Diversity Issues in Higher Education, Cycle of Oppression” Summer Multicultural Leadership Institute, UCI, 2006

Diversity Training Workshops, over 50 presentations on issues of diversity including: UCI Housing, Admin Intern Program, University High School, Student Parent Orientation Program, various clubs and organizations throughout Orange County (2003-2006)

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Panelist: All-University Leadership Conference Alumni Leaders Panel (2015)

Presenter: UCI Summer Session Intern Training (2015)

Presenter: UCI Global Connect Facilitation Training (2014)

Graduate Student Representative: UCI Sociology Colloquium Committee (2014-2015)

Summer Bridge Student Advisor, UCI Student Support Services (2014)

Mentor, UCI Sociology Graduate Student Peer Mentor Program (2015, 2014)
DECADE: Diverse Pathways to Graduate Success Peer Mentorship Workshop, Spring 2013
Organizer, Race Research Work Group, Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine. Fall 2013.
Graduate Council, College of Ethnic Studies. San Francisco State University. 2006-2008.
Graduate Admissions Committee, College of Ethnic Studies San Francisco State University. 2006-2008.
Summer Multicultural Leadership Institute. University of California, Irvine. 2006.
Rainbow Festival & Conference. University of California, Irvine. 2005.
Martin Luther King, Jr. Symposium. University of California, Irvine. 2005-2006

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

ASA: American Sociological Association
Section Membership: Racial and Ethnic Minorities, International Migration
PSA: Pacific Sociological Association
SSSP: Society for the Study of Social Problems
NAES: National Association of Ethnic Studies
MELUS: Society for the Journal of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States
ISS: International Iranian Studies Association

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Caucasians on Camels: Iranian American Intergenerational Narratives and
the Complications of Racial & Ethnic Boundaries

By

Sheefteh Khalili

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Professor Ann Hironaka, Co-Chair
Professor Rubén G. Rumbaut, Co-Chair

My dissertation examines the role of intergenerational immigrant narratives in shaping the identity development of the children of immigrants. Specifically, this study looks at the transmission of narratives relating to race, ethnicity, and racialized discrimination from immigrants to their children. Looking at the case of Iranian Americans, a group that occupies a racially liminal space between white and non-white, I analyze understandings of race and the persistence (or not) of ethnic identity among this phenotypically diverse group. To understand processes of identity construction, I conducted 45 interviews with first and generation Iranian Americans, with a focus on family case studies. My research responds to the limited focus on Middle Eastern groups in scholarship on race and ethnicity, and complicates understandings of whiteness and boundary work. This research has academic relevance to scholars of race and ethnicity who are concerned with racial formation in the context of the United States and the importance of looking at narrative as a location of identity work. Each chapter addresses both theoretical and substantive issues: In the first chapter I discuss the historical context of Iranian immigration to the United States and I describe my methodological approach and research

questions. In Chapter Two, “Will the Real Caucasian Please Stand Up? Negotiating Intergenerational Racial Discourse,” I examine the discourse that exists around race and whiteness in the Iranian American community, and how Iranian Americans experience and construct racial boundaries, both by claiming whiteness and distancing from the Middle Eastern label. In Chapter 2, “Once Upon a Time in Iran... Intergenerational Immigrant Narrative & Ethnic Boundaries.” I look at the role of intergenerational immigrant narrative on the significance of ethnic identity among second generation Iranian Americans, and I argue that it is the combination of ones’ personally acquired memories as well as the inherited or appropriated memories of their parents that factor into the way these individuals draw boundaries around “Iranianness” within their generation. In my third and final empirical chapter, “Selectively Racialized, Selectively Politicized? Politicized Ethnic Identity Among Second Generation Iranian Americans,” I examine the mechanisms, both direct and indirect, that activate ethnic political consciousness among second generation Iranian Americans. I find that a direct experience with racial discrimination, and a strong connection to ones’ family immigration narrative, especially when the narrative includes struggle in the context of departure from Iran or upon arrival into the United States, can politicize an individual even in the absence of a negative personal experience. While this study takes on the case of Iranian Americans, the implications of this study are not limited to this population. I argue that looking at intergenerational family narrative as a site of identity work broadens our understanding of how individuals draw on various sources of potentially conflicting discourse to ultimately situate their own experience in the context of race/ethnicity in the United States.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

When people take on, create, or assign an identity, part of what they do—intentionally or not—is take on, create, or assign a story, a narrative of some sort that captures central understandings about what it means to be a member of the group.

We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity
Stephen Cornell, 2000.

How do we make sense of identity? Scholars have shown that different types of narratives play a key role in identity development. There are many types of narratives available in the process of forming ones identity; as Cornell (2000) states, taking on these narratives may be intentional or not but they play a central role in identity formation. In the case of race and ethnicity, specifically looking at recent immigrant groups, there are multiple competing narratives, namely those that exist within in the US context and those brought over from the country of origin. This dissertation is about the stories we tell that give meaning to race and ethnicity, and how are individuals are using these potentially competing narratives in their own identity work.

Thinking about the US context, there are a specific set of broader social narratives about race and the racial hierarchy. With regard to racial identity, multiple studies discuss the way racial categories are socially constructed and given meaning over time in different ways. Race and racial meanings are neither stable nor consistent (Omi and Winant 2014), but hegemonic narratives around race (and ethnicity) are difficult to shift. For example, who is considered white? Haney-Lopez and other scholars have shown that the legal and social boundaries of whiteness have shifted and changed over time, with the social boundaries of whiteness extended

for a few groups historically like Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, Alba 1985, Ignatiev 2008, Guglielmo 2004, Brodtkin-Sacks 1998). However, a quick Google search will land on the official U.S. Census definition of “White” as the “original peoples of Europe, North Africa, or the Middle East,¹” but there is little scholarship on how North Africans and Middle Easterners actually fit in to whiteness, if at all. What narratives exist within these groups about their own racial positioning, and how has that shifted, or been re-narrated, over time? Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Karen Glover argue that racially stratified United States is shifting from a biracial (black/white) paradigm to a tri-racial paradigm which has “whites” at the top (meaning European Americans), followed by a group they call “honorary whites” and then “collective Black” falls to the bottom. They include Middle Eastern Americans in this category of “honorary whites” which may be afforded some of the privileges of whites in terms of social class, education, etc. with some even being adopted into the “new white” category in the future (similar to Irish Americans and Jewish Americans), but they contend that the honorary status is “tenuous at best” since it depends on the wishes and practices of whites. The scholarship (see Bonilla-Silva 2004, O’Brien 2008) that does acknowledge the unique experiences of groups who fall in the “racial middle” center on the experiences of Latinos and Asian Americans in the United States.

For many years Arab American activists have argued for a distinct racial category (Balkalian & Bozorgmehr 2009), which may become a reality on the 2020 Census.² On the other hand, the category “Middle Eastern” encompasses 30 ethnic and national origin groups that span

¹ <http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>

² Washington Post October 22, 2016: The Census Bureau’s working MENA classification includes people with origins in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates or Yemen, as well as those who identify as Amazigh or Berber, Arab, Assyrian, Bedouin, Chaldean, Copt, Druze, Kurdish or Syriac.

multiple languages, religions, and phenotypes—some of whom make a claim for whiteness and therefore reject this categorization. For example, Iranian Americans have been largely absent from these discussions, actively resisting being lumped together as a Middle Eastern minority group (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr 2009), often using biological/ancestral arguments that they are from the original “Caucasian” race originating in the Caucasus Mountains of Central Asia (Zia-Ebrahimi 2011, Shams 2012).



Figure 1.1 Map of Caucasus Mountain region in Central Asia

While many Iranian Americans and other Middle Eastern Americans can visibly pass for white (Euro-American) with their phenotypically light features, others report experiences of racially-based prejudice that are more similar to that of non-whites, especially in a post-9/11 context (Jamal and Naber 2008, Bakalian & Bozorgmehr 2009, Tehranian 2009). So this group is legally white but viewed as non-white (Middle Eastern) by common knowledge boundaries—how are they dealing with these conflicting narratives of race? This dissonance between classification, historical narratives and lived experiences among a phenotypically diverse group

provides a distinct case for studying racial and ethnic identity. With a large 1.5 and 2nd generation of Iranian Americans now in adulthood, there is a unique opportunity to examine the experiences of individuals who were raised with potentially conflicting family and historical narratives and their own lived experiences. This dissertation not only looks at the influence of these official designations but also the role of intergenerational immigrant narratives relating to race, ethnicity, and racialized discrimination from Iranian immigrants to their children.

In looking at the case of Iranian Americans, my dissertation speaks to the broad question: How do intergenerational immigrant narratives passed from parent to child shape the identity of 1.5 and 2nd generation immigrants in the United States? Further, how are the adult children negotiating the potentially conflicting narratives they receive from their families, from the media, and other sources? Thus, this dissertation asks the following set of research questions in three separate empirical papers:

- 1) What discourse exists around race and whiteness in the Iranian American community?
How do Iranian Americans experience and construct racial boundaries?
- 2) What is the role of intergenerational immigrant narrative on the significance of ethnic identity among second generation Iranian Americans? What narratives exist and how are they used to draw boundaries both within (and outside) the Iranian community?
- 3) In which cases do these narratives of race and ethnicity activate ethnic political consciousness?

Methodology and Data

To answer these questions, my dissertation uses a qualitative, cross-generational analysis of Iranian American families. The data in this dissertation draws from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 45 first and second generation Iranian Americans in Orange County and Los Angeles County. This sample was accrued via snowball sampling, with a focus on families. Once I conducted the interview with my contact (usually a second generation Iranian American), that person facilitated introductions to their parent(s) and sibling(s) and often organized a mutually beneficial time for their family members to all be present for a group discussion. The adult children were interviewed individually, then they participated in a group discussion with one or both of their parents. Individual interviews took place in personal homes or coffee shops, and only in one instance a parent of a respondent skyped into the discussion as it was the only time all family members were available.

The basis of my interview focused on my respondents sharing their life history—I also asked questions focused on racial and ethnic identity and cultural practices but left much of the discussion open-ended to allow conversations to unfold particularly in the group interviews. While stories/narratives, can sometimes be ambiguous, unclear, and one-sided, Polletta et. al (2011) discusses the usefulness of narrative; stories are often told in ways that depart from normal convention, often relying on the interlocutor to complete the narrative, and that the ambiguity of the story can be quite powerful in that it forces the listener to work to grasp the meaning. So much of qualitative research in all forms is about implied meanings and reading between the lines, and storytelling is a perfect example of that.

We discussed identity development as well as how they think about their identity now; we also discussed key life events (e.g. the Iranian Revolution) that served as pivotal shifts in thinking in some cases. I asked my second generation respondents about their race, what box they would check on the census, whether they consider themselves to be Middle Eastern, whether they had ever experienced racism or discrimination of any kind, and finally what they think their parents would answer given the same set of questions. We also discussed political engagement and activism, which is the focus of Chapter Four. I interviewed their parent at a separate time but the respondent was usually present and wanted to listen to the discussion. On multiple occasions I had entire families at the dinner table at the same time listening to the interviews. This led to some interesting conversations between them, and sometimes the son or daughter would take over and ask follow up questions of the parent(s) which I allowed to happen naturally and transcribed in full.

I conducted the majority of the interviews in English, and two in Persian (the respondents native language). The interviews lasted between 1-2.5 hours-- I tape recorded and later transcribed all of the interviews, attempting to meticulously capture the nuance of conversation between the family members. I took fieldnotes immediately following each interview and used open coding to find prevalent themes. The family case studies really allowed me to delve deeper into how members of the same family negotiate the same narrative in different ways—as well as how the information gets filtered through their own life experience. In the next section I provide a brief overview of Iranian immigration to the United States as well as key events in Iranian history that are often touched upon in the later chapters. This is followed an overview of the dissertation, briefly outlining the content of the substantive chapters to follow.

Historical Context

There are two historical time periods that are important to understand in order to situate the Iranian American experience in the broader context: the first is contemporary, approximately 1977-1990 during the largest wave of immigration out of Iran to the United States and other countries, as well as post-9/11 up to present day. The second is the ancient history of Iran and the Persian Empire just before the expansion of Islam into the country. While these two time periods are thirteen hundred years apart, both play an important role in understanding the language and discourse Iranians use to describe their racial and ethnic identity, their heritage and origins, and the types of stories they tell about where they are from (both recently and ancestrally).

This dissertation looks specifically at Iranian immigrants who arrived in the United States during the Iranian Revolution, Iran Hostage Crisis and Iran/Iraq War (approximately 1978-1988) to try and capture a specific context of reception while looking at the unique perspectives brought by the diverse family backgrounds. Iranian immigration to the United States can be divided into two main phases: the first phase, from the 1950s until 1977, which consisted mainly of students and visitors, and the second phase, from 1978 onward, which consisted of political refugees or exiles, and often entire families that came together. Some Iranians migrated to the United States for purely economic reasons before and after the revolution, but after the revolution, many more came for political reasons (Ansari 1998, Bozorgmehr 2001). The table on the following page provides some descriptive statistics of the Iranian American population.³

³ Table is from the unpublished dissertation of Golnaz Komaie, *The Persian Veil: Ethnic and Racial Self-Identification among the Adult Children of Iranian Immigrants in Southern California*

Demographic Characteristics of Iranian Americans, by Generational Status

Selected Characteristics		Iranian American			U.S.
		First Generation	Second Generation	Total	Total
Total population:	N	245,020	267,851	512,871	292,524,025
Age (in years):		54	23	38	36
Sex:					
Female	%	51.1	49.1	50.1	51.0
Male	%	48.9	50.9	49.9	49.0
Marital and parental status:					
Never married	%	8.1	75.7	43.4	44.0
Currently married	%	74.7	20.6	46.4	41.9
Divorced, separated, widowed	%	17.2	3.7	10.2	14.1
Has one or more children	%	50.8	15.1	32.2	29.3
Educational attainment (25 and older):					
High school graduate or less	%	37.5	12.5	30.2	46.3
Some college	%	17.7	13.2	16.4	25.5
Bachelor's degree	%	25.5	45.7	31.4	18.4
Advanced degree	%	19.3	28.6	22.0	9.7

Source: Current Population Survey, 2003-08.

The Iranian Revolution (also called the Islamic Revolution) started in 1979 when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini stepped into power, forcing Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his regime out and sending the Shah into exile. Khomeini and his supporters changed Iran into a theocratic state almost overnight, creating an Islamic Republic (Bozorgmehr 1991, 1997; Tyler 1989, McCall 2004). Many of Iran's religious minorities (Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians) were among the first to leave the country and were soon followed by student activists and protesters,

families with boys who would be forced to join Khomeini's army, and many secular Muslims who were worried about the new restrictions and punishment instated by the Islamic Republic.

Looking at both context of arrival and departure, as Iranians were leaving the turmoil in Iran, they were forced to deal with a hostile welcome in the United States due to the heightened tension between the United States and Iran during the Iran Hostage Crisis. The hostage crisis lasted for 444 days between 1979-1981, and included the holding of 90 U.S. diplomats and citizens inside the American Embassy in Tehran, all of whom were eventually released. During the hostage crisis, the attitude of Americans towards Iranians living in the U.S. was exceedingly hostile (Dumas 2003). It has been suggested that media portrayals and the political handling of the events surrounding the crisis was exaggerative and hostile, and instilled a generalized fear and/or hatred of Iranians into the American public (Kelley, 1993). Americans' reaction to the hostage crisis was outrage, anger, and frustration channeled into an economic and a political "miniwar" against Iran and Iranians in the United States (Mobasher, 2006: 107).



Figure 1.2 Protestors in Washington D.C. during the Hostage Crisis

Hundreds of American demonstrators burned the Iranian flag and carried placards reading “Go Home Dumb Iranians,” “Have a Happy Thanksgiving—Hold an Iranian Hostage,” and “Deport Iranians.” Additionally, some Iranian stores were boycotted, Iranians were denied housing, and other forms of large-scale discrimination occurred as a result of the American reaction to the Iranian Hostage Crisis. On the heels of the hostage crisis came the Iran/Iraq War, lasting nearly eight years with regular media coverage in the United States reinforcing the political unrest of the region and impacting the Iranians who were trying to settle into life in America. Many studies were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s to examine how Iranians were coping with the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution and the hostile treatment they often received in the United States after the Iranian Hostage Crisis. These studies focus on many points that are relevant to this research, particularly the immigration experiences of Iranian families and their adaptation to life in the United States. Khalili (1998) argues that after the revolution and the hostage crisis, many Iranians who wanted to avoid repercussions of the Iranian regime’s actions identified themselves as Persian (or another ethnic group from Iran including Azari, Kurdish, Baluchi, etc). Others suggest that many Iranians remain detached or felt ambivalent about their identity because of factors such as racial tension and lack of community response to issues (Bozorgmehr 2001, Mahdi 1997, Karim & Khorrami 1999, Khalili 1998).

Although some of the negative attention subsided with the passage of time and Iranians were able to settle into life in the United States, as soon as the World Trade Center was attacked in 2001, the hostility resurfaced. After 9/11, Iranians, Arabs, South Asians, and others who fit the dominant image of the "Islamic fanatics," were scrutinized and attacked—i.e. through physical or verbal assault, suspicion, additional searches in airports, phone taps, and other measures that violate their basic rights as so-called Americans. (Balkalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). The

stereotype of Middle Easterners as terrorists, Muslim fundamentalists, and a range of related stereotypes, have become so ingrained in the popular imagination in the U.S. that nearly every time an act of violence is perpetrated against Americans, Middle Easterners are blamed or at least initially suspected. As Mehdi Bozorgmehr claims, “Americans cannot make a distinction between the actions of the Iranian regime and sentiments of Iranian immigrants, particularly in times of crisis when they become aware of Iranians amongst them...Most Americans cannot distinguish Middle Eastern groups from each other due to unfamiliarity with the region and the diversity of its immigration (2001 p. 3). With the representations in the media of the “Axis of Evil”⁴ and constant mention of the fear of Iran’s nuclear programs, and the recent scare after President Trump’s executive orders banning visitors from Muslim majority countries including Iran⁵, the current situation for Iranians in the U.S. is, in many ways, comparable to the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. The young adult population of Iranian Americans being raised in the United States is thus coming of age in a difficult sociopolitical environment.

Iran Pre- and Post-Islam

Just briefly, it is important to understand a few key events in ancient Iranian history. Islam spread into Iran as a result of the Arab Muslim conquest of Persia in 651 AD and subsequent fall of the Sasanian Empire (Morony 2011). Before this time the major religion in Iran was Zoroastrianism, with smaller populations of Christians and Jews, with some Buddhists in the area that is now Afghanistan (Keddie 2006). While initially resistant and hostile, the

⁴ Axis of Evil is a term coined by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002 to describe governments he accused of helping terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. He named Iran, Iraq, and North Korea in his speech as part of the Axis of Evil.

⁵ Trump footnote

majority of Iranians ultimately accepted Islam and after the rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1501, Shi'ism became the official religion (Keddie 2006). However, Iranians, while adopting a writing system based on the Arabic script, made a concerted effort to maintain the Persian language and culture and in many ways adapted the original Arab Islam to an Iranian Islam (Lewis 1993). The specifics of the events that led to the rise of Islam are not the key point here—for the purposes of this dissertation I am interested in the discourses that exist around these events and how those have been passed down through the generations. For example, in 1971 the former Shah of Iran, Reza Pahlavi, hosted a 2500th anniversary celebration for the Persian Empire to highlight all the contributions of the ancient Persians (poetry, music, art, etc.), before the influence of Arabs and Islam. The discourse around nationality, race, and religion in Iran has shifted in the time since the founding of the Islamic Republic, however even now the history textbooks focus on the specialness of the Iranian identity and the ancient history and culture pre-Arab influence.⁶

Overall these two time periods help situate the experiences of Iranian Americans in the broader American context, as well as provide background on the types of information potentially being drawn upon in the formation of the narratives passed down between generations. In the next section I go over the organization of the dissertation and the specific chapters, each looking at different types of narratives and the ways they are utilized in relation to various identities (racial, ethnic, political).

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation seeks to understand the processes of constructing and expressing racial and ethnic identity for Iranian Americans, specifically looking at the role of the intergenerational

⁶ <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iranian-identity-ii-pre-islamic-period>

immigrant narrative. Each chapter addresses both theoretical and substantive issues. In my first empirical chapter, “Will the Real Caucasian Please Stand Up? Negotiating Intergenerational Racial Discourse,” I look at the discourse that exists around race and whiteness in the Iranian American community, and how Iranian Americans experience and construct racial boundaries. I find that there is a process of upward boundary work, with Iranians claiming membership in a racial category they know to be at the top of the racial hierarchy (white/Caucasian) while also distancing from a targeted group (Middle Eastern and more specifically Muslim), particularly in the post-9/11 context. These processes look different for the first and second generation, with the latter having a complicated relationship with the racial categories, often going back and forth about how they identify. This research complicates the story of how people come to understand their racial location—these distinctions they are claiming are not just rooted in an attempt to claim whiteness in the United States but also distance themselves from a panethnic category (Middle Eastern) that carries stigma and historical trauma, particularly for the first generation Iranians who fled Iran during the Islamic revolution and Iran/Iraq war.

In Chapter 3, “Once Upon a Time in Iran... Intergenerational Immigrant Narrative & Ethnic Boundaries.” I look at the role of intergenerational immigrant narrative on the significance of ethnic identity among second generation Iranian Americans, as well as what narratives exist and how are they used to draw boundaries both within (and outside) the Iranian community. I argue that the severity of the circumstances around the family departure from Iran as well as the regularity of recollection of this story are both important factors in the way second generation Iranian Americans situate themselves within the broader context and connect to their ethnic identity. Further, the way the family talks about Iran and whether they have traveled there since the initial departure are both central to how second generation respondents

navigate this information for themselves. Taken together, I argue that it is the combination of ones' personally acquired memories as well as the inherited or appropriated memories of their parents that factor into the way these individuals draw boundaries around "Iranianness" within their generation.

In my third and final empirical chapter, "Selectively Racialized, Selectively Politicized? Politicized Ethnic Identity Among Second Generation Iranian Americans," I examine the mechanisms, both direct and indirect, that activate ethnic political consciousness (*politicized ethnic identity*) among second generation Iranian Americans. I find that two main mechanisms emerged as more prominent in relation to politicized ethnic identity. The first is a direct experience with racial discrimination, which is consistent with the theory of reactive ethnicity. The second, I argue, is a strong connection to ones' family immigration narrative, especially when the narrative includes struggle in the context of departure from Iran or upon arrival into the United States, can politicize an individual even in the absence of a negative personal experience.

My dissertation examines to role of intergenerational immigrant narrative in the identity development of second generation Iranian Americans. Using this cross-generational qualitative approach to examining understandings of racial and ethnic identity, I highlight how the different types of narratives, ranging in severity and scope, impact these individuals, and how they are understanding what it means to be Iranian American through a dual lens: their own and that of their parents. While this study takes on the case of Iranian Americans, the implications of this study are not limited to this population. I argue that looking at intergenerational family narrative as a site of identity work broadens our understanding of how individuals draw on various sources

of potentially conflicting discourse to ultimately situate their own experience in the context of race/ethnicity in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO:

Will the Real Caucasian Please Stand Up? Negotiating Intergenerational Racial Discourse

Interviewer: What is your race? What box do you check on the census?

Mariam Omid (mother): White.

Azadeh Omid (daughter): Mom, why do you think we are white?

Mariam Omid: Because we are Iranian, the original Aryan people.

Azadeh Omid: But people here don't treat us as white. When you see the discrimination against Middle Eastern people it doesn't make you think you aren't white?

Mariam Omid: No. It just shows a lack of education. They don't know we are Aryans like them.

The above excerpt is from an interview with an Iranian mother and her second generation Iranian American daughter. In this conversation these two individuals are drawing upon historical information, official census designations, and personal experiences to try and make sense of race, and more specifically, whiteness. In this chapter I explore how Iranian Americans are negotiating these conflicting narratives⁷, and more specifically how first and second generation Iranian Americans experience and construct boundaries around race and racial identity. In particular, this chapter addresses the following questions:

- 1) What discourse exists around race and whiteness in the Iranian American community?
- 2) How do Iranian Americans experience and construct racial boundaries?

I begin with an overview of the literature on racial and ethnic boundary work, particularly focusing on the shifting boundaries of whiteness and how various groups have “gained access” to this category while others have not. In this chapter, I describe my respondents conflicted narratives around race, and argue there is a process of upward boundary work, with Iranians

⁷ In this chapter I use the word narrative largely to mean discourse, but in some cases I use it to mean stories (i.e. family narratives). While I do not intend to conflate the two, I find it is useful to refer to both as narrative as opposed to strictly using “discourse” or “story telling” to differentiate them as they are often happening simultaneously and cannot be easily disentangled.

claiming membership in a racial category they know to be at the top of the racial hierarchy (white/Caucasian) while also distancing from a targeted group (Middle Eastern and more specifically Muslim), particularly in the post-9/11 context. These individuals draw on different types of discourse in their attempt at gaining closeness to whiteness and distance from “Middle Eastern” (or arguably brown-ness). The discourse for the whiteness boundary work is largely based on historical/ancestral claims and the discourse around distance from Middle Eastern identity is based more in common knowledge and contemporary issues surrounding the Middle East (particularly post 9/11). These processes look different for the first and second generation, with the latter having a complicated relationship with the racial categories, often going back and forth about how they identify. This research complicates the story of how people come to understand their racial location—these distinctions they are claiming are not just rooted in an attempt to claim whiteness in the United States but also distance themselves from a panethnic category (Middle Eastern) that carries stigma and historical trauma, particularly for the first generation Iranians who fled Iran during the Islamic revolution and Iran/Iraq war (Keddie 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal and Social Boundaries of Whiteness

Race and racial meanings are neither stable nor consistent (Omi and Winant 2015), but within the context of the United States the white racial group is undeniably at the top of the hierarchy. The legal boundary of the racial category “White” has shifted over time, and as of the 2010 census the white category includes:

“A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. The white racial category includes people who marked the “White” checkbox. It also includes respondents who reported entries such as Caucasian or White; European entries, such as Irish, German, and Polish; Middle Eastern entries, such as

Arab, Lebanese, and Palestinian; and North African entries, such as Algerian, Moroccan, and Egyptian.⁸”

The 1909 case for naturalization of Syrian immigrant George Shishim set the precedent for all Middle Eastern (and North African) groups being officially designated as White/Caucasian, and therefore eligible for citizenship (Haney Lopez 2006). Haney Lopez (2006) discusses the process whereby the courts constructed the legal bounds of whiteness by deciding “on a case-by-case basis who was not white” and therefore ineligible for naturalization. Haney Lopez goes on to explain,

“The courts...had to explain the basis on which they drew the boundaries of whiteness. The courts had to establish by law whether, for example, a petitioner’s race was to be measured by skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry, the speculation of scientists, popular opinion, or some combination of these factors... The courts were responsible for deciding not only who was white, but why someone was white.” (2006: 2).

However, it is important to distinguish between the legal boundaries set by the court, and the informal social boundaries of whiteness, which Haney Lopez argues are maintained through “common knowledge.” Scholars argue that beyond just a racial identity, whiteness is a combination of or social location, racial ideology and a set of unmarked cultural norms and practices (Frankenberg 1993; Lewis 2003). The social boundaries of whiteness have been extended for a few groups historically, for example the Irish were an inferior race in the eyes of the English in the 18th and 19th centuries, but were eventually clustered with other European Americans upon immigration to the United States (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). Early Italian and Jewish immigrants were similarly able to “secure” their place within the social boundaries of whiteness (Alba 1985, Ignatiev 1995, Guglielmo 2004, Brodtkin-Sacks 1998). While some scholars (primarily those focused on processes of assimilation) suggest that certain ethnic groups

⁸ <http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>

can “achieve” whiteness, or “honorary whiteness” (Yancey 2003, Lee & Bean 2010, Bonilla-Silva 2004) in the way that early immigrants like the Irish and Italians were able to, others argue this is not a useful way to discuss the experiences of non-white groups (Rodriguez 2000, Rumbaut 2009, Jimenez 2009, Tuan 1998). These studies on groups such as Mexican Americans and Asian Americans are useful in order to understand the limitations of early theoretical work on whiteness, however very few studies actually look at Middle Eastern groups from this framework.

Often called an “invisible minority” (Jamal & Naber 2008, Tehranian 2010), Middle Eastern Americans are largely absent in the dominant U.S. discourse on race and ethnicity and in many ways this group does not fit into preexisting theoretical frameworks on racial and ethnic identity formation. While many Middle Eastern Americans can visibly pass as white (Euro-American), others report experiences of racially-based prejudice that are more similar to that of non-whites, especially in a post-9/11 context⁹ (Jamal and Naber 2008, Bakalian & Bozorgmehr 2009, Tehranian 2009). In addition to the ethnic heterogeneity represented in this blanket categorization, these individuals vary significantly in phenotype, covering the full spectrum from light to dark. According to the latest FBI annual hate crime report, in 2016 hate crimes against Middle Eastern Americans (or those incorrectly perceived as such) hit the highest mark since the period immediately following the attacks on 9/11,¹⁰ but many individuals may be passing and never experience this type of discrimination personally.

While some Arab American groups have argued for a distinctive non-white category on the census to capture forms of discrimination exemplified by hate crimes and profiling (Omi and

⁹ In the time since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 Middle Eastern Americans have continually faced racial profiling and discrimination including hate crimes (Jamal & Naber 2008)

¹⁰ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/14/us/fbi-hate-crime-report-muslims/>

Winant 2014), others have been largely absent from these discussions, often actively resisting being lumped together as a Middle Eastern minority group (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). While scholars have shown that panethnicity (Lopez and Espiritu 1990) is a possible outcome when individuals are forced to reconcile the racism and discrimination they encounter as a result of their “observed group,” thus increasing the necessity of mobilization across group boundaries, there is little evidence of the emergence of a Middle Eastern American pan-ethnic group (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). The label “Middle Eastern” is used to describe groups from 22 nations that make up the Arab league, as well as the three non-Arab countries of Iran, Israel, and Turkey (Bozorgmehr 2015). While there is some Pan-Arab mobilization, the cultural, linguistic, and religious differences between the Arab and non-Arab “Middle Eastern” people (and even within group heterogeneity) is a significant barrier to mobilization. Interestingly, in a 2010 campaign by multiple Iranian American advocacy groups attempted to get Iranian Americans to “Stand Up and Be Counted” on the US Census by not marking White/Caucasian or proposing a Middle Eastern category, but rather writing in Iranian or Iranian American as their race. On one of their pamphlets they listed this explanation the question of “What “race” should I put on the census?”

It is very important that on Question 9 of the Census that you that you check the box for “Some other race” and write in “Iranian” or “Iranian-American.” Otherwise, Iranian-Americans will not be counted as a distinct cultural group in the U.S. and will not wield the power that comes with numbers. In other words, unless you specifically designate that you are “Iranian” or “Iranian-American” when answering Question 9, you will not be counted as an Iranian-American. For this reason, almost every Iranian-American organization is encouraging Iranian-Americans to designate their race as “Iranian or “Iranian-American.” Without being counted as “Iranians,” we risk being disenfranchised both politically and economically for another 10 years.

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark one or more boxes

White
 Black, African AM, or Negro
 American Indian or Alaska Native -- Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.

Asian Indian Japanese Native Hawaiian
 Chinese Korean Guamanian or Chamorro
 Filipino Vietnamese Samoan
 Other Asian -- Print race for example, Himong, Laotian, Thai Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on. Other Pacific Islander -- Print race for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.

Some other race -- Print race.

I R A N I A N

OR

I R A N I A N - A M E R I C A N

Figure 2.1: Campaign Material from Iranian Advocacy Groups

This attempt by the Iranian community to draw a distinct boundary around Iranianness as a category is where I situate this research—there is inconsistency and misinformation both in the official designation and in common knowledge shared by family members that is being passed between generations. While racial categorization is socially constructed and tenuous, the meanings individuals attach to these categories are important to consider. This attempt by the Iranian community to create their own category is of particular interest to this study—I argue that the racial narratives that exist within the Iranian community and within individual families are a key aspect of how these individuals come to understand their own position within the racial hierarchy and how they relate to other groups. There is a body of literature that looks at factors influencing racial identity including class position, linguistic ability, phenotype, generation in the United States, and size of one's national origin group (Rodriguez 2000, Vasquez 2011) but few look at the intergenerational family narrative as a key location of identity formation. In the case of Iranian Americans there is little information taught in schools or even in popular culture about this relatively new (and small) immigrant group, so the family is a vital location for the dissemination of knowledge, which happens in the form of storytelling. Polletta et. al (2011)

discuss the usefulness of storytelling, which can sometimes be ambiguous, unclear, and one-sided-- Stories are often told in ways that depart from normal convention, often relying on the interlocutor to complete the narrative, and that the ambiguity of the story can be quite powerful in that it forces the listener to work to grasp the meaning. Looking at the stories told by the first generation parents and the versions of the same stories told by their sons and daughters allows for the unique analysis of how these individuals are “completing” narratives for themselves in different ways. In what follows I provide family cases that highlight the complex nature of understanding racial identity and the multiple types of negotiation that take place at the family, community, and societal level.

DATA AND METHODS

This chapter draws from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 45 first and second generation Iranian Americans in Orange County and Los Angeles County. This sample was accrued via snowball sampling, with a focus on families. Once I conducted the interview with my contact (usually a second generation Iranian American), that person facilitated introductions to their parent(s) and sibling(s) and often organized a mutually beneficial time for their family members to all be present for a group discussion. The adult children were interviewed individually, then they participated in a group discussion with one or both of their parents. Individual interviews took place in personal homes or coffee shops, and only in one instance a parent of a respondent skyped into the discussion as it was the only time all family members were available.

The basis of my interview focused on my respondents sharing stories from their life history—I also asked questions focused on racial and ethnic identity and cultural practices but

left much of the discussion open-ended to allow conversations to unfold particularly in the group interviews. Chase (2003) argues that inviting stories, rather than traditional interview questions, is one step closer to a more authentic, thoughtful, and real explanation of individuals' experiences. In this case I am looking at two versions of these stories—the one told as a first-hand account of events, and the one told as a recollection of someone else's shared account. We discussed identity development as well as how they think about their identity now; we also discussed key life events (e.g. the Iranian Revolution) that served as pivotal shifts in thinking in some cases. I asked my second generation respondents about their race, what box they would check on the census, whether they consider themselves to be Middle Eastern, whether they had ever experienced racism or discrimination of any kind, and finally what they think their parents would answer given the same set of questions. I interviewed their parent at a separate time but the respondent was usually present and wanted to listen to the discussion. On multiple occasions I had entire families at the dinner table at the same time listening to the interviews. This led to some interesting conversations between them, and sometimes the son or daughter would take over and ask follow up questions of the parent(s) which I allowed to happen naturally and transcribed in full.

I conducted the majority of the interviews in English, and two in Persian (the respondents native language). The interviews lasted between 1-2.5 hours-- I tape recorded and later transcribed all of the interviews, attempting to meticulously capture the nuance of conversation between the family members. I took fieldnotes immediately following each interview and used open coding to find prevalent themes. The data in this chapter draws primarily from my interviews with families to provide a rich, in-depth look at the nuances that exist within just a single family unit. I also provide additional examples from individual interviews that are

exemplar of the larger themes. The family case studies really allowed me to delve deeper into how members of the same family negotiate the same narrative in different ways—as well as how the information gets filtered through their own life experience. Seeing parents and children negotiate these narratives in real time at the dinner table was eye-opening—in what follows I explore two of the main themes that emerged through my analysis of the data.

RESULTS

Narratives of Whiteness

I am Darius, the great king, the king of kings
The king of many countries and many people
The king of this expansive land,
The son of Wishtaspa of Achaemenid,
Persian, the son of a Persian,
'Aryan', from the Aryan race

From the Darius the Great's Inscription in Naqshe-e-Rostam

The above excerpt comes from an inscription on the tomb of Darius the Great (550-486 BCE), the third king of the Persian Achaemenid Empire. This notion of Iranians being from Aryan ancestry or tracing back to the time of Darius and the Persian Empire has long been a part of Iranian nationalist and popular literature (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, Shams 2012). Many of my respondents who categorized themselves as white used similar language to trace their ancestry back to the original Persians (Aryans) or “Caucasians” (originating in the Caucus mountains of Central Asia) from the time of Darius. In the conversation at the beginning of this chapter, Mariam Omid is adamant that Iranians are the original Aryan people and therefore white, while her daughter Azadeh is not convinced. Azadeh describes an experience being blatantly profiled at an airport when she was in college and realizing she was not white but rather “Middle Eastern... a person of color” contrary to what she had been told growing up. When Manjeh cited

“lack of education” as the reason why people do not know she is white, her daughter visibly rolled her eyes and looked to me for some type of intervening explanation. Azadeh is phenotypically darker than her mother (who has lighter skin and hazel eyes), and the two went back and forth about what the “accurate” way to categorize them would be. Of all the family groups I interviewed, there was very little agreement across generations on race and racial categorization of Iranians. Often, the second generation son or daughter would interrupt or respond with resistance to their parents’ opinion on race, and try to convince the parent to agree with their own perspective.

Some of the most interesting insights came out of these intergenerational family conversations, for example the following excerpts from the Jamshidi family interviews show the complicated nature of this Caucasian narrative and how they engage with it. I interviewed the two daughters, Neda and Niloofar separately beforehand and then they were both present for the interviews with their mother (Shideh) and their father (Payam). All four of the Jamishidi family members have phenotypically European-American features—Shideh has dyed her hair a light brown, while both daughters have lighter skin but dark hair and eyebrows. The Jamishidi daughters grew up in an affluent part of Los Angeles—they both have college degrees and both daughters are married to non-Iranian men. In my conversation with Neda, the younger daughter, she said she would have said she was white if I asked her when she was in high school, but now (after taking a sociology class in college) she would say Persian or Iranian “depending on how political [she] is feeling that day,” indicating that Persian is a more “palatable” identity for others to handle. Neda said her parents opinion is that, “Persians are white, Iran means land of the Aryans. I think there is a lot of pride in that. Not being Arab, not being not white. I think it is part of the white myth of Persia...” although she often argues with her parents about this point:

Neda Jamshidi:

We always get in this argument because I'm like you are not white. Even if you are white perceptions are different they don't perceive you as white they perceive you as the same as Arabs and other Muslims and not white people. And they say, 'No, they are just ignorant' and I say, it doesn't matter if they are ignorant. When they beat you up at the bar they are not going to stop and have a discussion with you about how Persians are different than Arabs and how Persians are really white people.

For Neda, she is clear on the difference between a claim on whiteness and *recognition of* whiteness. Interestingly, later in our conversation she talked about how when she is questioned about being white, she will sometimes resist and revert to the Caucasian narrative even though she argues with her parents about it:

Neda Jamshidi:

When people say you're not white I want to say fuck you I am white. Iran is the land of the Aryans, Persian came down from the Caucasus mountains and I'm very defiant about it...I mean I don't know. History is history. If they say Persians came down from the Caucasus Mountains...you can go online and read about Persia...I can't help it, some of it absorbed.

She is aware that it is strategic to claim this self-title that connotes racial privilege, even though she knows there is contention around it. Her older sister Niloofar also said she believed she was white but that recently Neda has been telling her and their parents that this is inaccurate.

Niloofar Jamshidi

My whole life I have marked myself as white, until recently I learned [from my sister] that we should mark "other" and write in Persian. It was very important to my parents that we are white. We are the original Aryans. We are whiter than the white people. A few years ago [my parents] would definitely say they are white, but maybe now after all these years that my sister talked about it they might say Persian instead of white. When I was a kid I didn't really associate being Iranian as my race. Race to me meant black or white, so in school I thought I was just a weird white person. I am not black so I am definitely white.

For Niloofar she relies heavily on this narrative from her parents around racial categorization, although she is trying to better understand the inaccuracy. She also mentions this notion of race as a white/black issue, and that by default if she is not black she must be white. Neda appears to have influenced all the members of her family with regard to this topic—with varying levels of success. Jessica Vasquez (2011) talks about this “two-way dynamism” in family interaction—we typically think about the passage of knowledge down the generational ladder from parent to child, yet it is important to consider the information being passed upward from child to parent. When I asked their mother (Shideh) about race, she first shot a glance at her daughter Neda before responding.

Shideh Jamshidi:

Is that a Maz Jobrani episode? I put white. Because I am. As Persians we are pumped that we are pure Aryans and I put white because I believe I am white.

Her tone was slightly sarcastic and she was smiling at her daughter when she mentioned being “pumped up” about being pure Aryans, knowing how Neda feels about this narrative. While she believes she is white, she also knows there is another narrative about race but does not fully accept it. In her comment, Shideh mentions Maz Jobrani, a well-known Iranian comedian who was part of the 2010 census initiative in the Iranian community to mark “other” and write in Iranian or Iranian American. Jobrani is famous for his stand up comedy routine which pokes fun at Iranians who refer to themselves as “Persian like the cat...meow!” instead of saying they are Iranian because of the Axis of Evil and other negative connections to Iran. When I asked her husband, Payam Jamshidi, how he learned that his race is white, he said he learned it in school in Iran. During his story about the original Aryans in Iran, his wife Shideh interrupted, wanting to

validate what he was sharing by referencing the Caucasus Mountains, but ended up calling them the “Caucasian” Mountains which was an interesting conflation of the two terms:

Payam Jamshidi:

Ok. I read it in my history book while I was going to elementary school in Iran, which stated that Iranian are Aryan and that’s why Darius said “my Aryan people.” That is written on his tomb, it says “my Aryan people. So therefore...

Shideh Jamshidi: (*interrupting Payam*)

The Caucasian mountain is in Iran! Come on, Caucasian mountain!

Payam Jamshidi:

Yea, the Caucasian mountain is right up there! Aryans, come on. I read in the history that Aryan people came down to Iran and took over all the country and settled down 6,000 years ago. And Persians are basically a tribe of the Aryans. And if you read the census in Iran, only 55% of Iranians are Persian...

It is interesting that this geographical region is so closely tied to their beliefs about race and ancestry that they both mistakenly called it the “Caucasian” mountains. At this point in the conversation Neda, interjects, “You shouldn’t say Aryan too much right now with Donald Trump!” (The presidential primaries that were going on at the time of our interview.) This interruption shifts the conversation to hair and eye color, and Shideh telling her daughter Neda to lighten the color of her eyebrows, insisting she will look better with lighter brown hair and eyebrows, and Neda shaking her head and looking to her sister for solidarity. We went on to other topics but came back to this Caucasian narrative a few more times with more disagreement between the two generations. The Jamshidi family was a great example of a generational divide on racial narratives, caused mainly by just one family member: Neda. Had it not been for Neda taking the sociology class in college and investigating this identity further, the rest of the family was in agreement about the geographical/scientific explanation for their racial categorization as white.

In my interviews with the Tehrani family from Orange County, there was no real argument between the parents and children with regard to race, but their ties to whiteness were varied and vague in explanation. The Tehrani parents (Amin and Golnaz) are upper middle class, and the two adult children (son Shahin and daughter Sheyda) both have college degrees and are currently living with their parents in a conservative white suburb of Orange County. When asked about their racial category, the father, Amin answered, “I am white due to my skin color” and mother Golnaz simply said “I’m white.” When I asked her how she knew what box to mark on the census she answered, “There is nothing in there...because I look at myself. I’m not black or Hispanic so I guess I’m white. That is the honest answer I don’t know.” The both also mention Iran and people being from the Aryan race similar to the Jamshidi family—but in this case the response from their son and daughter is not critical or argumentative in any way. I the following exchanges with Shahin and Sheyda Tehrani in our individual interviews. Neither denied being white, but gave different insights about some possible limitations of the category.

Interviewer: If I asked you to fill out the census what box do you mark for race?

Sheyda Tehrani: White.

Interviewer: Why?

Sheyda Tehrani: I mean white, just because that is all we have ever seen. Like there is no box for Iranian although I think there should be.

Interviewer: Why?

Sheyda Tehrani: Because I don’t know maybe we could get into better schools? (laughs). No but really...we are not perceived as white. Other people see us as Middle Eastern or Iranian so they don’t really understand. I don’t think they know we check the white box.

In a separate interview I had the following exchange with her brother Shahin:

Interviewer: What box do you mark for race on the census?

Shahin Tehrani: Well I am forced to mark Caucasian, it's funny because I was just having this discussion with a friend, when I am applying for any type of job or school application they make me mark white/Caucasian. But when I am going through airport security they want to know that I am Iranian American, so it works to their advantage when they want it to work toward their advantage.

Both Sheyda and Shahin remarked on the limitations of marking white on applications or forms because it puts them at a disadvantage in terms of diversity initiatives targeted at students of color, but they are not actually granted the full racial privileges associated with whiteness in their every day lives, particularly in the airport as Shahin mentions. Even though Sheyda and Shahin are not as critical of the racial categorization as, say, Neda Jamshidi, they both see some aspects of it that they deem inaccurate. I had some other second generation respondents who talked about race in similar ways and often mentioned feeling uneasy or confused about what they are “supposed” to do in terms of self-categorization:

Ali Sasani:

Depends on my mood. Some phases of my life I would check “Other” because I didn't like [checking white]. But then again you know, I could say I'm from the Caucasus so I mark white Caucasian if that's how you want to characterize that. I can get away with white privilege, I'm light skinned I don't have an accent so I can go in those circles. It depends on my mood.

Interestingly, Ali mentions both the ancestral claim to the Caucasus Mountains, as well as his ability to “pass” as white, meaning European American. However even with both of these claims to whiteness, he still feels conflicted because he differentiates himself from “white people and white culture” so he is not sure what the best choice is for him personally. There were a range of answers that spoke to the issue of feeling comfortable or even just clear about one's identity

label, which I thought initially was linked to one's ability to "pass" for white. For example Tala Shirazi had no qualms about selecting white:

Tala Shirazi:

I always put white. I don't mind it at all. But I think that from what the history is from the Iranian culture and the nomads that have come from the European decent they are part of the Aryan race so we are part of the white racialism even though I don't look like it.

Tala uses an interesting mixture of historical information (albeit inaccurate) to connect herself to the white racial category, while in the same interview telling me stories about being racially profiled and yelled at when people found out she was from a Muslim background. After our interview I thought a lot about subjectivity of whiteness—if someone looks phenotypically Euro-American or "passes" it might be easy to imagine them identifying with this category, but Tala has black hair and brown skin and does not pass. On the other hand, Jaleh Afshar has green eyes and light brown hair and light skin, but is conflicted and mixed up about what she is supposed to categorize herself as:

Jaleh Afshar:

I'd say I'm Iranian...you know I also consider myself white just because I am white, is that weird? Maybe because I can look white, I have light skin, light brown hair, green eyes...I think I talk differently than other Persians. I think I talk like a white person. I could be amongst Persian people and never say a Persian word because I feel more comfortable speaking all English, the language I know best. So that's why I feel very white, and American, or both.

In one breath, Jaleh called herself Iranian, white, Persian, and American, distinguishing each of these from one another and yet using them to mean the same thing. I asked her if she thought being Iranian was the same as being white, since she separated white from Iranian and also from American.

Jaleh Afshar

If it's ever asked or brought up I say "oh I'm Iranian" and I let the person decide what that means. For some people, ok yea whatever you look white, it's ok if you are Middle Eastern, as long as you are not Black or Asian maybe for example, then you are white you know? So but some people say, "Oh you are Middle Eastern that means not white." So yea I let the other person decide.

With this answer, Jaleh expresses that she is essentially giving up her own means of self-identification and allowing others to label her as they see fit. I found it interesting that Jaleh visibly passes for white but does not feel the need to assert this in the way Tala does—it is possible that there is privilege in this choice. Tala may realize she does not look phenotypically white so she asserts this ancestry as a way to claim whiteness whereas Jaleh is granted whiteness for the most part regardless of what she says or does not say—regardless it is clear that these narratives are independent of phenotype and function differently in different circumstances.

Overall the respondents were consistently inconsistent in their racial self-classification. I heard the Caucasian/Aryan discourse in every single interview, and also heard examples of being treated as non-white and understanding that Iranians are not viewed as white in the same way as Euro-Americans. In the next section, I look at the limits of the Middle Eastern identification for Iranian Americans and the ways in which they associate with, or distinguish themselves from the category of "Middle Eastern" which is used to refer to people with origins in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates or Yemen, as well as those who identify as Amazigh or Berber, Arab, Assyrian, Bedouin, Chaldean, Copt, Druze, Kurdish or Syriac.¹¹ This category is highly stigmatized in the current sociopolitical climate, and the first

¹¹ Washington Post October 22, 2016

and second generation Iranian Americans I interviewed had strong opinions about their placement within this panethnic categorization.

Not White, But NOT Middle Eastern

In all the interviews I asked my respondents about being Middle Eastern. I wanted to know whether they considered themselves Middle Eastern, whether they associated themselves racially/ethnically with other Middle Eastern Americans, and so on. Marvasti and McKinney (2004) argue that while Middle Eastern Americans come from multiple racial, linguistic, religious, and geographical backgrounds, they constitute a distinct category in the United States, and I relied on my respondents general knowledge of what they thought this category encapsulates and where they fall in terms of group membership. While some agreed they were Middle Eastern, I was surprised at the level of disdain certain individuals (both first and second generation) felt for this categorization. While some respondents admitted they may not be considered white in the same way as descendants of European ancestry, they made sure to clarify they are NOT Middle Eastern, Arab, Muslim, and so forth when someone mistakes them for these identifiers. Although some agreed they were “Middle Eastern” it was important to distinguish and distance themselves from other ethnicities within that category they believed to be lower or less desirable in some way. This was more common among the first generation Iranians--for example, when I asked Mariam Omid if she considers herself Middle Eastern she adamantly said no:

Mariam Omid:

No. I hate that Middle Eastern. I don't like it. It just means Arab people and we are Persian. Like Iran should not be included in Middle East. It should be somewhere by itself...on top of the world (laughs). It's just an ugly name it is just Arab... We are not Middle Eastern, we are Persian.

Her daughter Azadeh was visibly uncomfortable while she was sharing this opinion, a common reaction by the second generation respondents when their parents were sharing on this topic. For example Neda Jamshidi talked about how her mom will start staying racist and derogatory statements against Arabs and Muslims to distinguish herself from them and this always leads to an argument between the two of them.

Neda Jamshidi:

My mom will say Persians are different than Arabs or, ‘Oh we have seen how Muslims treat people, we hate those people.’ That is my mom’s favorite thing to say, and I’m like no one is listening you don’t have to be so determined to make people know this. She wants them to overhear that she hates Muslim people so they don’t come after her.

The second generation respondents, for example Roya Bamshad, talks about how she does not identify as Middle Eastern and does not feel the label accurately defines her racial background:

Roya Bamshad:

No, I don’t really consider myself Middle Eastern...I don’t know what people mean when they say Middle Eastern. Like a lot of times I think that means Arab or Muslim like that’s kind of what they mean when they say Middle Eastern and I don’t identify with either of those two things in any way. There is nothing about me that is Arab except maybe a few drops in my mom’s blood (laughs) from ancestors back. But like there is nothing that I identify as Arab and there is nothing that I identify as Muslim in myself. So in that sense when people are talking about Middle Easterners that’s what they are talking about so that’s why I don’t self-identify as Middle Eastern. It seems weird to me. I’d much rather be Iranian than Middle Eastern. Because I think there is a huge difference between Iranian and Algerian. There is a huge difference. Yea we are both Middle Eastern but Algerians are North Africans. But between us and who? Saudis? There is a huge difference. Like who is Middle Eastern? Even when I’m saying it right now I’m like Saudis are way different than Lebanese people. We’re just a region of the world...”

For Roya, it is more the perceived inaccuracy of the term Middle Eastern that makes her uneasy about using it. While the term is meant to capture an entire region, there is a strong tie between that term and an Arab/Muslim identity so the two are often conflated. Interestingly, before I specifically asked Roya if she considers herself Middle Eastern, she referred to herself as such at

least five times during the interview, and even after this specific conversation she continued to use “Middle Eastern” to refer to herself and other Iranians. For Kamran Ahmadi, he first mentioned wishing there was a Census category for Middle Eastern “Because I feel like I’m throwing off somebody’s statistics when I put white because I don’t consider myself to be white” but went on to mentioned the inaccuracy of the Middle Eastern category and how he is careful about using the term:

Interviewer:

Do you consider yourself to be Middle Eastern?

Kamran Ahmadi:

Um, yeaaa...but...sometimes I feel like I do just for the convenience of other people. I definitely feel like Iran is separate from the Middle East. I feel like it is and it isn’t. It is geographically, but when I hear the word “Middle East” I keep thinking of everything I hear in the news and I know that’s what other people think about when they hear Middle East so I try to use that sparingly when I describe myself and where I’m ethnically from. Just because it’s a loaded term.

Other second generation respondents hesitated when asked the same question and felt they always had to clarify or educate the person about the differences between people in the “Middle Eastern” category:

Hamid Kazemi:

I mean, I am. I probably wouldn’t present it like that if I was meeting someone for the first time I would say I am Persian from Iran. If they say where is that, then I’ll say the Middle East.

Ehsan Varzi:

Um...No. That’s interesting though. No I consider myself Persian. I feel like Middle Eastern is more Arabs. I’m more...Eurasian? I mean I guess Americans consider me Middle Eastern. They need to take another look at the Middle East and they are mostly ethnically Arab. They need to know and get educated about the different types of ethnicities that are in and not just label them all as Middle Eastern. If someone said “You are Middle Eastern,” I’d say...yea I guess. I just don’t really like that word. It just combines everybody into one word. There are so many cultures that are grouped into one word and I don’t think that’s fair.

Reza Mahdavi:

Yes...geographically speaking yes. But not associated with Arabs.

Marzieh Kooshan:

Um... that's a very tricky question. I do but, I do have this thing in my head and I don't mean it in a racist way... You know how they say that Persians get insulted when you call them Arabs or whatever, I think that is the reason I would distinguish myself... I'm not anti-Arab, but Iraq and Iran have a history of being arch enemies so I don't know why I'd become grouped with them. I don't identify with Saudi Arabia or Syria. Lebanon, they are white, but they are Arab, so it's this different line but I think I just view their conflict as different than mine. I'm both not Muslim and I'm not Arab... But I'll say I'm Middle Eastern, yea I won't reject that but I think this immediately popped in my head. Just like people understanding the difference. I am from the mentality that I come from there but not that I come from that problem that is ingrained in their history, so it's sort of weird.

There is definitely a theme of Iranian/Persian exceptionalism and a hierarchy of where this group falls among the other ethnic groups in the "Middle Eastern" category, namely Arabs. I conducted a few follow up interviews after coding the data and finding this recurring theme of differentiation from Arab, to try and better understand why Iranians do not view Arabs as white in the same way their own group is white, and why this stigma of Arabs exists within the Iranian community. I found that first generation Iranians were taught about the different groups in Iran and in the Middle East in a particular way, which clearly puts Iranians at the top of the hierarchy. For example, Mina Kashan shared the following explanation:

Mina Kashan:

We are from the Aryan race, and we have spread across Europe and Persian territory. The people of Iranian are made up of Kurds, Turks, Lores, and Persian and other tribes that makes them Aryan therefore white. Arabs are originated from Africa that's why we say Arabs are not white, since they originated from Africa, and have black skin color or dark brownish color. When I was going to school we were told about Arab invasion and that Arabs did not like our open culture and freedom since it made them look bad, due to there harsh religion practice and the treatment of females. One main thing we were told in school was that Arabs are against females. Main thing that was emphasized in the class was the fact Arabs and Iranian people were completely different and came from different races.

This distinction between Iranians being Aryan and Arabs being African came up many times. Another respondent, Aria Shahi, said something similar, and went on to talk about how Arabs were represented as uncivilized in comparison to Iranians.

Aria Shahi

We are considered to be Aryan people. Since our skin color are white. I was told that Hitler considered us as white a pure race. Arabs have darker skin and are more related to African race. I was told that Arabs tried to destroy our country, and culture. Since they lacked a civilized culture. Also, in school they use to tell us that they killed their girls at birth since they don't like females. Mostly they told us a lot of negative things about Arabs mainly that they wanted to destroy our culture.

These distinctions between Iranians and Arabs really highlight the complications of this racial identity negotiation process. To elevate their group status Iranians are drawing on a set of available (albeit historically inaccurate) narratives that make this possible. Overall my respondents were aware of the “ascribed” Middle Eastern category, and while some accepted it, the majority did so with hesitation, drawing boundaries between Iranians and all other groups included in this label. This bias against being associated with Arab (namely Arab Muslim) groups likely goes back to the resistance of Arab influence throughout Iran during the spread of Islam (discussed in the introduction chapter). While it is possible that the respondents were not consciously aware of the source of this bias, the similarity in the types of information they provided to differentiate Iranians from Arabs was so consistent that it likely comes from a set of narratives and racial discourse brought over by their Iranian parents. The conflict can clearly be seen in the way the second generation Iranian Americans understand their positionality within the US racial framework but still wish to distinguish themselves from the stigmatized “Middle Eastern” label by providing some kind of information that demonstrates they are unique in some way. Whereas in the first section I argued there was hesitation to accept the Caucasian/ Aryan/ white narrative with some underlying desire to be part of this elevated racial position, here I

highlight the hesitation to accept the Middle Eastern identity using similar types of information to distance from a low racial positioning. Looking at these examples of how my respondents talk about race we can see the multiple levels of negotiation taking place—it is a combination of family, community, and societal influence that these individuals are grappling with to find their racial position.

CONCLUSION

We define racial formation as the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed...racial difference and racial identity are unstable. They are continuously being disputed, transformed, and eroded.

Racial Formation in the United States
Michael Omi & Howard Winant, 2014

Being White is not a monolithic or homogenous experience, either in terms of race, other social identities, space or time. Instead Whiteness is contingent, changeable, partial, inconstant, and ultimately social...White takes on highly variegated nuances across the range of social axes and individual lives.

White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race
Ian Haney-Lopez, 2006

Iranian Americans occupy a racially liminal space between white and non-white. Given the current choices for racial categorization: White/Caucasian or Middle Eastern, there is a strong reaction in associating with either term. While some accepted the white/Caucasian category, others were reluctant or outright rejected this for themselves and their family members. While some outwardly reject the notion that they are Caucasian and clearly differentiate their lived experiences with those of “white” people, others show a hint of desire to be part of this exclusive and elusive racial category. All my respondents were aware of this Caucasian narrative regardless of whether they believed it was accurate or not—the second generation respondents

all indicated they learned this from their parents, who all said they learned about it in school in Iran. In some of these conversations the respondent would concede that possibly they were not white the same way that descendants of Europeans ancestry are white, as long as the alternative was not something they viewed as negative (being viewed as Arab/Muslim came up many times.) The identifier, “Middle Eastern” was contentious as well, but in different ways. The first generation Iranian immigrants wanted to clarify how different Iranians are from other groups encompassed by that category, while many of the second generation Iranian Americans saw the category as potentially more accurate based on certain lived experiences, but still inaccurate.

Across the board, both first and second generation Iranian Americans expressed confusion about their racial categorization and what was the “correct” answer. Using a combination of ethnic-specific narratives and broader social narratives, these individuals are elevating their group status and creating distance from groups they perceive to be stigmatized, namely Arabs. While scholars have shown that it is possible for groups to gain access to whiteness (Irish, Italians, etc.), in this case I do not foresee that happening, nor does it necessarily matter for Iranians. I would argue that the narratives within the community are strong enough that regardless of legal boundaries or common knowledge boundaries, Iranians will continue drawing upon the Caucasian/Aryan narrative in their racial self-identification. Only time will tell if future generations will still use this information, or if the racial categories shift in some unexpected way and a different set of narratives will be used to draw new boundaries.

CHAPTER THREE

Once Upon a Time in Iran...Intergenerational Immigrant Narrative & Ethnic Boundaries

Identity development is full of complexities and challenges. For any member of a second generation immigrant group, the process of ethnic self-identification can be more complex than the first generation group and often entails the juggling of competing allegiances and attachments (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Maira 2002). There is the knowledge they gain at home from their immigrant parents and larger immigrant community (if they have access to such a community), along with the knowledge they gain from their peers in the context of American schools and the larger American society. Scholars have shown that what they take from any of these sources in the formation of their own identity can depend on many factors, including where they grew up, whether they have access to community spaces, how much their parents and family members shared with them, visiting/having access to the ancestral homeland, and even just knowing other individuals their own age with the same background. (see Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Espiritu 2002, Louis 2004, Kibria 2002). Along with the process of self-identification, the formation of ethnic identity involves a process of boundary work as an individual tries to situate themselves within the broader context of their ethnic group (Balkalian 1992, Wimmer 2008). In this chapter, I explore the various ways that my interview respondents are negotiating their ethnic identities and how they understand what it means to be Iranian American in a second generation context, as well as how they distinguish themselves from other Iranian Americans of their own generational cohort. More specifically this chapter looks at two main questions: 1) What is the role of intergenerational immigrant narrative on the significance of ethnic identity among second generation Iranian Americans, 2) What narratives exist and how

are they used to draw boundaries both within (and outside) the Iranian community? I also look at the way the second generation Iranian Americans engage with Iran as a symbolic place and/or tangible place they have visited to understand how they negotiate information about the “motherland,” and how visiting is tied to identity and boundary work.

I argue that the severity of the circumstances around the family departure from Iran as well as the regularity of recollection of this story are both important factors in the way second generation Iranian Americans situate themselves within the broader context and connect to their ethnic identity. There is subjectivity in terms of “severity;” what matters is that the individual believes it was a difficult set of circumstances regardless of whether it was more or less difficult than the circumstances of others. Further, the way the family talks about Iran and whether they have traveled there since the initial departure are both central to how second generation respondents navigate this information for themselves. Taken together, I argue that it is the combination of ones’ personally acquired memories as well as the inherited or appropriated memories of their parents that factor into the way these individuals draw boundaries around “Iranianness” within their generation. In what follows I review existing literature on ethnic identity, narrative, and boundary work and how this study fits into the larger body of scholarship. There is no specific literature on Iranian Americans, so I utilize examples of other ethnic groups to demonstrate similar processes of identity work and the importance of narrative and the family as the site of identity development. One study on three generations of Mexican American families utilizes intergenerational narrative (Vasquez 2011) is of particular usefulness to this study, and I expand on this framework by Vasquez by focusing on both individual interviews and family group interviews to highlight the conversations between generations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The power of narrative as a source of representation of identity comes from its sense-making properties...what matters is not the validity of representations but their effects: the degree to which the narratives and its component parts are understood—by group members or outsiders—as illustrative or exemplary, as capturing something essential about the group in question.

We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity
Stephen Cornell, 2000.

Scholars of ethnic identity have found narrative to be an important tool for understanding the way individuals and groups negotiate identity. By being told and retold, stories remind group members of their own peoplehood and help them draw boundaries around social groups to which they do and do not belong (Polletta 1998, Cornell and Hartmann 1998, Boesen et al. 2012, Cornell 2000). Cornell (2000) argues that when people take on an ethnic identity, part of what they do is to “take on, create, or assign a story, a narrative of some sort that captures central understandings about what it means to be a member of the group.” He goes on to say that constructing an ethnic identity involves a “layering on and connecting of events and meanings” thus creating a sense of collectivity. Cornell asserts that narrative lies at the heart of many ethnic identities and that these narratives constitute “a version of ourselves that we may celebrate or reject, struggle against or struggle to change.” These narratives are seen as a crucial element of individuals understanding their membership in groups, with personal and community implications.

Both the distant past and more recent events can be important, since all these experiences can be part of a group's collective memory. For example, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II became a symbol for generating ethnic solidarity among Japanese

Americans and continues to promote a salient ethnic identity among later generations (Tuan 1998). Similarly, the collective memory of the Holocaust has become a major factor in sustaining Jewish identity since World War II (Meyer 1990). However, Andrea Louie (2004) argues that rootedness is most effective if stories refer back to places and spaces that are familiar, for example the telling of family experiences and narratives about emigration as opposed to historical events from older generations. Vasquez (2011) argues that knowledge of family history, or family memory, plays a key role in perpetuating a sense of history, “roots,” family and ethnic pride. In the case of Iranian Americans, all of my respondents families came to the United States between 1970-1990, the majority leaving just before, or in the middle of the Iranian Revolution (1978-1981) or during the Iran/Iraq war--more Iranians entered the United States during these years than any other time in history (Keddie 2006). The stories shared by their families specifically about these events are crucial to the maintenance of ethnic identity—because these stories are not shared elsewhere in American history classes or in popular media, the family is where this “identity work” is happening.

Many scholars discuss ethnic boundaries and the culture they enclose, and the instances when ethnic boundaries are expanded or become more inclusive and/or symbolic. For example, Bakalian (1992) provides the example that for American born Armenians, “Armenian identity is a preference and Armenianness is a state of mind...one can say he or she is an Armenian without speaking Armenian, marrying an Armenian, doing business with Armenians, belonging to an Armenian church, joining Armenian volunteer organizations...” (1992: 13). However, Joanne Nagel argues that “even when ancestry can be proven, questions can arise about the cultural depth of the individual’s ethnicity (Was he or she raised on a reservation or in the city? Does he or she speak Spanish?...Solutions to questions of authenticity are often controversial and difficult

to enforce” (Nagel 1994: 160). Nagel further argues that ethnic boundaries determine who is a member and who is not, and that culture, “provides the content and meaning of ethnicity; it animates and authenticates ethnic boundaries by providing a history, ideology, symbolic universe and system of meaning. Culture answers the question: What are we?” (162). In some cases, for example with later generation Japanese Americans in Japanese beauty pageants, there are ethnic strategies used to move up the hierarchy of authenticity. Many mixed-race contestants prove group membership through use of Japanese names and most importantly through speaking Japanese. Since later generation Japanese Americans are predominately English speaking, this knowledge of Japanese (even among someone who is mixed race) signals a heightened understanding of the Japanese culture and provides cultural legitimacy. In the case of Iranian Americans, I am interested in looking specifically at how the ability to situate ones experience in a broader historical context and connect it to the “master ethnic narrative” is notably important, in this case the Iranian Revolution¹², Iranian Hostage Crisis¹³, and the Iran/Iraq war¹⁴. Attention to how people tell stories (Labov 1972 and Riessman 1988) and when they invoke larger, culturally accepted narratives into their own stories (Wood 2001) is just as important as the content of their stories when understanding how people make sense of their experiences. For the purposes of this chapter I am interested in a family life history narrative approach, with specific focus on the discrete stories of parental experience in Iran, immigration and context of departure/reception, along with experiences of both the parent and child while living in the United States. These narratives strongly highlight the processes of figuring out what is specific to

¹² The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is also known as the Islamic revolution and refers to the events involving the overthrow of the Shah of Iran and eventual replacement with an Islamic republic led by Ayatollah Khomeini

¹³ The Iranian Hostage Crisis lasted for 444 days between 1979-1981 with 52 American diplomats held hostage by Iranian Students in the American embassy in Iran. This was a pivotal event in Iran-US relations and created significant hostility towards Iran among the American public.

¹⁴ The Iran/Iraq War lasted eight years (1980-1988) and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths on both sides as well as a further exodus of Iranians to the United States and other countries

one's own experience (or one's family) and what is part of the larger community (in this case Iranian Americans) and developing these connections between individual and collective experiences.

DATA AND METHODS

This chapter draws from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 45 first and second generation Iranian Americans in Orange County, CA and Los Angeles County, CA. This sample was accrued via snowball sampling, with a focus on families. Once I conducted the interview with my contact (usually a second generation Iranian American), that person facilitated introductions to their parent(s) and sibling(s) and often organized a mutually beneficial time for their family members to all be present for a group discussion. The adult children were interviewed individually, then they participated in a group discussion with one or both of their parents. Individual interviews took place in personal homes or coffee shops, and only in one instance a parent of a respondent skyped into the group discussion as it was the only time all family members were available.

The basis of my interview focused on my respondent sharing his or her life history—I also asked questions focused on racial and ethnic identity and cultural practices but left much of the discussion open-ended to allow conversations to unfold particularly in the group interviews. Chase (2003) argues that inviting stories, rather than traditional interview questions, is one step closer to a more authentic, thoughtful, and real explanation of individuals' experiences. I asked my second generation respondents to share with me their own life history as well as the story of how their parents came to the United States and any other stories they felt were important. For those individuals who agreed to connect me with their parents, the respondent was usually

present and wanted to listen to the discussion. I asked the parents to share their experiences in Iran and in America, and in some cases I would prompt them to share their own version of a story I had been told by their son or daughter. Often they shared the same stories without any prompting, an interesting observation that I discuss in the following section. On multiple occasions I had entire families at the dinner table at the same time listening to the interviews. This led to some noteworthy conversations between them, and sometimes the son or daughter would take over and ask follow up questions of the parent(s) which I allowed to happen naturally and transcribed in full.

I conducted the majority of the interviews in English, and two in Persian (the respondents native language). I tape recorded and later transcribed all of the interviews, attempting to meticulously capture the nuance of conversation between the family members. I took fieldnotes immediately following each interview and used open coding to find prevalent themes. The data in this chapter draws primarily from my interviews with the family units, but also includes additional examples from supplemental individual interviews that are exemplar of the larger themes.

FINDINGS

We Didn't Leave on a Camel: Hierarchy of Severity

One theme that emerged quickly was a hierarchy of severity around the family immigration story and how it compared to the stories of others. Those with more difficult stories had a very strong sense of pride in their ethnic identity and what their families went through to come to the United States. Further, they utilize these stories as a way to differentiate themselves and their families from others who had an “easier” time coming to the United States. However,

regardless of the exact circumstances of their family's story, the majority of the respondents shared the specific details they perceived to be difficult and reflected on these experiences their parents went through, even if it may not have been "as difficult" as other Iranian immigrants. All the respondents used events from the master ethnic narrative¹⁵ as key plot points in the way they shared the story, and used stories from other individuals as points of reference or comparison to their own story.

For example, Laila Azadpour¹⁶ and her mother Simin Azadpour are Baha'i refugees that escaped Iran into Pakistan (and eventually to the United States through Canada) on an extremely difficult journey that included riding many hours on a camel through the desert. Laila was only two years old at the time, but remembers parts of the story which has since been told to her many times.

Laila Azadpour:

I was born in Iran in 1984 after the revolution...After a year and a half...my dad died and because my dad was Muslim and my mom was a Baha'i, there was a chance the government could take me from my mom. She had it arrange with my grandpa's help and they got smugglers to get us out of Iran. In 1986 my mom and I escaped Iran, like a movie, in the middle of the night, on a bus, to the border of Iran to Pakistan. It was like *Not Without my Daughter*¹⁷. They made us hide in the bushels of hay to wait for the guards to be gone and to cross the Pakistani border. We got like robbed and it was really scary. We lived in Pakistan for a year and half then we sponsorship by the United Nations as refugees there. Once we got UN's sponsorship we got sent to Canada where my uncle lived.

Simin Azadpour:

[Laila's father] had a very sudden heart attack and died when Laila was a year and a half old. He was a Muslim and I was a Baha'i and I thought for sure the government would take my daughter away from me...and I couldn't handle it...I sold all my stuff and gave money to a smuggler...in September 1987 we came to a city on the border of Iran and Pakistan and we had to walk for nine hours. My daughter was sleeping on my shoulders...we passed the border at 3 o'clock in the morning and they hid us under the bushes for many hours until a car came and picked us up...it took us three nights and four

¹⁵ To reiterate, in the case of Iranian Americans I include the Iranian Revolution, Iranian Hostage Crisis and the Iran/Iraq War as key elements of the master ethnic narrative

¹⁶ Pseudonyms

¹⁷ 1991 American film starring Sally Field

days...on the last night six guys with masks and guns attacked us and took whatever I had, thank God they didn't take my daughter that was the most important thing for me...After three months in Pakistan the United Nations verified my identification as a Baha'i and finally after 14 months...in November 1988 me and Laila, the government of Canada bought a ticket for us because four of my brothers were in Canada so we went there.

I interviewed Laila and her mother individually at separate times, but Laila's account of the story is very similar to her mothers, sharing many of the exact same details in the same order. She told me that growing up her mom would always tell the story about her dad and the story about leaving Iran and as she got older she asked more questions and actually realized she had a memory of the event:

Laila Azadpour:

I remember being on a camel and my mom was sitting behind me and somebody else in front of me and I remember being really scared and we were chanting this Baha'i prayer in Arabic over and over...I remember looking and I could see rolling hills of sand and it was like a full moon and I remember being really scared. The only reason I know that is a memory is because my mom never actually told me that story, I asked her about that. The first time she told me that story was when I asked her about it like, did this happen why do I have this vision in my head? She said that exact thing happened.

Her mother Simin did not actually mention the camel part of the story, which I noticed later after transcribing and reviewing both interviews. In a follow up conversation with Laila she seemed surprised--said she cannot be positive if she remembers or if her mom told her the part about the camel at a younger age and it embedded into her memory, but either way this is a key part of the story for her. Interestingly at this part of our interview, her husband, Cyrus, came into the room and began listening and eventually participating in the interview. Cyrus is also an Iranian Baha'i, he grew up primarily in Canada until moving to the United States for work ten years ago. He began sharing about how his family had to move from Iran after they fired both of his parents

from their jobs for being Baha'i after the Islamic revolution began harassing all religious minorities.

Cyrus Pedrad:

We escaped [Iran] too, but we escaped on a plane, not on a camel like her.

Laila Azadpour:

There is a hierarchy of refugees.

Cyrus Pedrad:

Only with her. You only “escaped” if you went on a camel and on a jeep.

It was an interesting exchange between the two of them about this idea of “escaping” and what actually constitutes a legitimate escape story, and who can claim this type of narrative. The idea of the camel came up multiple times in other interviews, sometimes as a way to downplay the difficulty of one’s family story in comparison with a camel story. For example, in my interview with Neda Jamshidi she talked about how her parents had a difficult time leaving Iran and had to go to Germany for many months while they awaited a visa, but that it was not as hard as others:

Neda Jamshidi:

It wasn’t hard they didn’t come on camel or anything. They came on Lufthansa. I’m just saying I know of a family who had to take a fucking donkey through the hills because they were Baha’i. [My parents] weren’t so persecuted but it was emotionally difficult.

Although the circumstances of Neda’s family leaving Iran were less severe, it was still a tumultuous time for her parents and her older sister Niloofar, who was four years old at the time they left. I interviewed Niloofar separately, and her parents Shideh and Payam with both daughters present. While Shideh was sharing the story of leaving Iran, they had the following exchange:

Shideh Jamshidi:

It was midst of revolution, we had gotten married already... We went to Germany we went to France we stayed for 3 months and couldn't get a visa and we came back. We had gotten rid of a lot of stuff then we went back. The good thing was we were living with my mother in law so we had a house to go back to. After we came back we figured out there is nothing we can do so lets have a child (*laughs*).

Niloofer Jamshidi:

I didn't know all these details.

Shideh Jamshidi:

I was pregnant with [Niloofer] and they were bombing every night when I was four months pregnant... (*begins crying*)

Neda Jamshidi:

Don't cry.

Shideh Jamshidi:

Give me some water, I can't help it. It doesn't get easy. I got over it but still. The scary part was that all my family members were here. They were bombing every night the sirens were played and they would say go to the basement red alert but there was no basement in Tehran it was just stupid. Then I would sit downstairs I would put a pillow on my stomach like a bomb isn't going to hurt the pillow. We had already decided to leave. We stayed and [Niloofer] was born and my mom came back because I was very upset and my dad came to visit and they helped my mother in law help me with the baby. They would babysit and I went back to school and finished it and the Islamic republic gave me a scholarship and I was very happy so we sold everything and we thought that we are going to really come here and then the scholarship fell through but we had sold everything so we went to Germany to get a visa anyways.

During this part of the interview both Neda and Niloofer moved closer to their mother to console her. Neda also cried while sharing some of her parents stories during our one-on-one interview, and even though she downplayed them with the notion of them not leaving on a camel, it was clear that her parents had shared the stories many times and Neda had absorbed some of the difficulty her parents faced as part of her own story and identity. There was another interesting story that Neda and Niloofer individually told me, and then and their mother Shideh told in front of both of them about Niloofer crying at a furniture store in Germany-- each had a slightly different take on what happened:

Neda Jamshidi:

It was emotionally difficult and when they were in Germany they lived in an apartment with no furniture and my sister was so disturbed because she was 3 or 4 and she watched them sell off all her furniture in Tehran and all her toys except one stuffed animal and a doll and came to Germany and they had no furniture just a mattress and a crib for Niloofar and two chairs and a coffee table and that was their whole apartment for 6 or 7 months and they weren't working and what the fuck were they doing poor guys.

Niloofar Jamshidi:

Apparently, I would have cry when we were in Germany that I needed new furniture and anytime we passed by a furniture store I would break in tears because we had to sell all our furniture, I guess. When we first moved we didn't have furniture we just had a couch and we lived in a small apartment.

Both sisters separately told the story with a key plot point that the family had sold all the furniture in Iran and had no furniture in Germany and that this was the reason for Niloofar's meltdowns. However when their mother also told the story (unprompted), there was a shift:

Shideh Jamshidi:

The funniest thing was she would go by any furniture store and [Niloofar] would scream and cry...we were young parents and we sold everything in front of her [in Iran] so people would come and take the bed take the couch so she would go by the furniture store start crying like off her lungs and wanted to buy furniture. Poor baby.

Niloofar Jamshidi:

That's a piece of trauma I held on to (*laughing*). I remember we had no furniture [in Germany].

Shideh Jamshidi:

No, that's not true. In Germany we got furniture, they brought us everything. Your uncle had a party and all his German friends brought nice furniture, beds, dishes, everything.

It was interesting to hear how this story had been slightly shifted in Niloofar's memory, and of course Neda who was not alive at the time but still knew a version of the story. This detail of not having any furniture in Germany makes the circumstances more severe and was important enough for both sisters to share with me as part of their family narrative. In the process of telling stories, Cornell and Hartmann note, "symbolic resources are transformed into...solidarity,

emotional attachment, pride, commitment, and mobilization. They teach the importance of particular identities and maintain an awareness of what those identities mean or should mean” (1998: 224). In this case for the two sisters, although there is no camel in their story, they have taken key pieces of their family’s story and re-remembered them slightly but for an important purpose—this difficult experience was a pivotal shift for their whole family and is what connects them to the broader ethnic narrative of Iranians who came at that time, and differentiates them from others who had a smoother immigration process.

There were common themes in the type of information shared by my respondents, and all of them used the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian Hostage Crisis, or the Iran/Iraq War as a time marker of when their parents left (either before or after the specific event). For example, Tala Shirazi shares the following story:

Tala Shirazi:

My dad came before the revolution. My mom...she was on the last flight that left Iran to come to America¹⁸. That was the last flight. It gives me goose bumps (*laughs*). When they came here it was hard for them because of the whole hostage crisis. People outside of the grocery stores would say no Persians allowed, they would beat up the Persians who ever was going to universities. Everything was cut. My parents couldn’t get money from their parents anymore either. So it was hard for them.

Another respondent Naseem Zahedi shared a similar story about her parents:

Naseem Zahedi:

My mom was studying abroad during her senior year high school, in the U.S in 1978. She went back to Iran just as the revolution was starting and her dad was the minister of agriculture for the Shah. He told my mom “you need to get out of here, your future is a lot better off if you don’t stay in Iran” because he knew what was going on. He went to ship her back to the US so she can get her degree, but then as they went the American embassy had just shut down. The closest place was Canada, so they went to the Canadian

¹⁸ On January 24, 1979 there was a military occupation of the Mehrabad airport issued by Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar in order to prevent Imam Khomeini from flying to Tehran and out of Iran. This airport shut down lasted until February 1, 1979 when Khomeini returned. Twelve days later the government was fully overthrown. (Iran Hostage Crisis Chronology of Daily Developments: Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, March 1981).

embassy. While she was getting her visa, she was the last one to ever get a visa before the embassy shut down. The hostages were being held in the basement¹⁹ of the Canadian embassy while she was there. They wouldn't even give out visas anymore so she got this done before because of her uncle, my great uncle was the minister of education, so both my grandfather and great uncle had power to get someone and issue her this visa. So then they got her on the first plane out, and then she lived in Canada while she wasn't able to see her family for a good, I think 15 years.

Both Tala and Naseem share stories that have key details linking their family narrative the overarching narrative of contemporary Iranian immigration, and both took extreme pride in sharing these stories with me. Interestingly, they made certain assumptions that as an Iranian American I had previous knowledge of the historical events mentioned in their stories, which was not always the case. I argue that these second generation Iranian Americans are utilizing these stories as a way to insert themselves into the broader ethnic narrative—the first step is to establish positionality within the narrative (which events they are connected to), and the second is often to draw boundaries between themselves and other Iranian Americans whose families did not have the same circumstances of departure. Even though many of the respondents were not even born at the time of these events, they are claiming this story (through their parents) as a part of their own personal ethnic narrative. I had a few respondents explicitly share with me that they feel differently than other Iranians as a result of having these types of stories.

Neda Jamshidi:

I feel my parents are way more worried, anxious, and fearful about their situation here in the US than my friends whose parents came before the revolution as students²⁰. Their parents didn't see the violence. They didn't feel the fear of going to school while soldiers or whoever beat students around you...which happened to my mom when she was studying in Isfahan...I feel like that shit has to fuck with your head...right? Like that

¹⁹ Six American diplomats were harbored in the Canadian Embassy and later escaped with the help of the CIA, the basis of the film *Argo*. After they were smuggled out of Iran on Canadian passports, all the remaining Canadian diplomats also left and the embassy was shut down in 1980. (<http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/iran/canada-iran/canada-iran.aspx?lang=eng>)

²⁰ Before the Iranian Revolution the majority of Iranians who came to the United States were primarily university students studying abroad, many of which planned to return to Iran after the completion of their degree programs (Keddie 2007)

fear. And so they project a lot of those old worries onto us, in a way that I don't see my friends' parents who came before the revolution. Those that came even a little later like my folks experienced the Iran/Iraq war as well, which in some ways I think was worse than experiencing the revolution... they were only there for 4 years, but having to run downstairs into a bomb shelter or like cover the windows, etc. probably had a huge effect as well.

The stories of leaving Iran were different for the Iranians who came to the United States as students in the years before the revolution. First, many of these individuals planned to return to Iran after completing their degrees, and when the revolution happened they ended up just deciding to stay. In the case of these families, I found that the stories shared by the second generation respondents function in a different way—the focus of the story is not the severity of circumstance in leaving Iran, but rather the resilience of their parents in the face of adversity living in the United States and navigating those difficulties. For example, I spoke with Shahin Tehrani as well as his sister Sheyda and their parents who came to the United States before the revolution.

Shahin Tehrani:

...I can't imagine being in that situation...they were in Colorado and this whole embassy hostage situation happened and they kind of brought all the Iranian American students in and questioned everybody. Basically said that you need to maintain a certain GPA or leave the country. You know being in that situation is already difficult as it is, as you know not being able to speak that language and having to work full time. I know many of them worked overnight shifts so that they can go to school during the day and pay for their school. So just hearing how they were able to persevere and use whatever resources they had to survive and basically not get kicked out of the country. I know for me that something that is very inspiring because I was raised completely differently. Everything was given to me at young age, I was very blessed with all these, with a roof over my head, and not having to worry about that you need a certain GPA or you need to leave the country or you need to learn the language to survive. So...whenever I felt like I was overwhelmed by academics, I had to ground myself back in this reality that at least it's not what they went through and there is no way that my situation could ever be that hard...

Although Shahin's parents did not live in Iran at the time of the revolution, the stories shared about the hostage crisis and trying to navigate the difficult situation while living in the United States really impacted him personally. Andrea Louie (2004) talks about "rootedness" in terms of ethnic identity and how:

"Tracing one's family back twenty-five generations may foster a sense of family pride, but more important is the telling of family experiences and narratives about...how the family came to the United States...and the lives of grandparents and parents on United States soil...the flesh-and-bones context of immigrant ancestors and their experiences" (Louie 2004: 194).

While Shahin and his sister do not have family stories from their parents about experiencing the revolution from inside of Iran, the experiences from the same time period while living in the United States serve as their connection to the master ethnic narrative and sense of "rootedness" in their ethnic identity and history.

Overall I found that for the second generation Iranian American respondents it was not just the content of the story that made it meaningful—the broader context of the story and its connectedness with other stories from the master ethnic narrative were also important. Some of the respondents had a sort of "ranking system" they used to compare their family story to the stories of others, but regardless of whether someone left on a camel or an airplane, the theme of struggle and perseverance permeated all the stories. In the next section I discuss the respondents views of Iran—some families have been able to return to visit the country post-revolution, while others have not (or cannot due to possible persecution). In the interviews we talked at length about Iran and what the respondents (particularly the second generation) heard about the country from their families, and whether or not their personal experiences going there (if this was a possibility for them) matched their expectations.

Colored Views of Iran

For my second generation respondents, the circumstances around their parents departure from Iran have had a significant impact on their personal views about Iran. For example, Kamran shares this nostalgia for Iran, his “mother” that he desperately wants to get to know; all he has received thus far is a collection of stories and photographs but has yet to meet her.

Kamran Ahmadi

I sort of feel like a kid whose parents got divorced and they aren't talking. Iran is my mother, and I'm living with my dad [America] right now, and he's pretty cool, got me a nice job and a fancy education, but I really miss my mom and want to get to know her better. I hear about her all the time and that she is really beautiful, but besides photos, I have never seen her in person.

Discussing Iran was often bittersweet for the respondents, especially those who have never been there; there was a mixture of curiosity, mystery, nostalgia and anger that came up during the conversations of Iran. For those who had not been to Iran, I paid specific attention to the stories they shared compared to the stories their parents shared, as I was interested in the possible connections between these stories and how the parents may be influencing their personal viewpoints. For example, Simin and her daughter Laila Azadpour who escaped Iran and have not been back since, share very conflicted views about the country:

Simin Azadpour:

[My daughter] would love to go back to visit Iran, but in this situation I really don't want to. Hopefully maybe one day...I don't know. I really don't want to go back until the government is not the Islamic government. My brother is in Iran now visiting relatives...some Baha'is come and go but I don't want to you know what I mean? I have a lot of bad memories. I cant stand it if somebody is going to tell me about why I'm wearing my hijab the wrong way or say anything bad about the Baha'i faith. I really can't stand it. And personally, I believe if I got out of Iran and I couldn't live there, why would I go back? Although my kids really want to see Iran...we talk about it often.

Interviewer:

What stories do you usually tell them when you talk about Iran?

Simin Azadpour:

Usually I tell them about before the revolution. How good it was. How people were living back then, how we were free.

During my conversation with her daughter, Laila, we talked about her mother and the stories she shared about Iran and how for her there are two Irans:

Laila Azadpour:

I feel like there are two Irans. I feel like Iran and its history and its culture is pre-revolution Iran is the heart of Iran, I feel like a romantic sense. My mom's side of the family is really poetic and creative and the way they talk about Iran that is how I picture it. I feel like it is magical like driving to the [Caspian Sea] and eating the kabab on the street has been romanticized in my head but then on the other side of it there is a very scary Iran. Like the fanatical Islamic the people who burned down my grandparent's house, who fired my mom from her job, killed Baha'is and put them in prison. That to me, that part of Iran is very scary. So on the firm other side of it I feel a lot of negativity to that aspect of it...I really want to go. There is no way that I would not go...a time will come where I won't feel nervous about going. I hope the time will come and it is okay for me to go to Iran.

Laila talked about how growing up her family really missed Iran and would talk about it all the time, sharing the stories from the time they all lived there together. But they also shared all the stories of difficulty escaping and persecution they faced before leaving, and these two sets of stories are difficult for her to negotiate. Another family I interviewed, the Bamshads, escaped as political refugees. Their daughter Roya describes this experience, and subsequently we discussed her views of Iran:

Roya Bamshad:

My father was an activist as part of the revolution. My father, when he was 17, was sent to prison and tortured. When he finally got out of prison, he met my mother and they got together, and I think the situation in Iran was bad and a lot of their friends had been killed, so they decided that their best option was to escape. My parents escaped through Pakistan. Somehow they ended up in Europe...I do know that my mother was pregnant with me, and when they were being smuggled out of Iran through Pakistan, she had to pawn off a watch that she had. They smuggled themselves out of Iran with opium dealers...my mom rode in the back of a truck with some opium dealers, and my father was somewhere separate I'm not sure. Finally they were in Germany, then in Spain where they went to every embassy they could find to get a visa for the U.S. Finally after getting

rejected multiple times, my parents were granted student visas to a university in Minnesota, and that is how they got to the United States. My mom had to hide the fact that she was 8 months pregnant with me so that they could get in.

Interviewer:

How do you personally feel about Iran? Would you like to visit?

Roya Bamshad:

I've always wanted to go to Iran. I'd really really like to go to Iran. Unfortunately, because my parents are political refugees, and because they are so active right now in human rights work in Iran and really against the Islamic Republic, it is impossible for me to go to Iran. I can't go, and for me that is really really difficult to comprehend because I see myself as so Iranian. But I have no idea what Iran even is.

Roya does not have first-hand information of what Iran is, only what she has heard from her parents or seen on television; she has patched together these pieces to construct her understanding of the country. Even for families who left voluntarily and not as refugees, visiting Iran is no easy task given the political turmoil that has existed between the United States and Iran since the time of the revolution and subsequent events. For instance, there is no Iranian Embassy in the United States (nor an American Embassy in Iran after the hostage crisis). All that exists is an "Interest Section for the Islamic Republic of Iran" located in the Embassy of Pakistan in Washington D.C. Additionally, every Iranian, even U.S. born, is required to obtain an Iranian certificate of birth, an Iranian passport, and an Iranian National I.D. card prior to visiting Iran. Although overturned as unconstitutional, the recent executive orders from President Donald Trump banning all travel to the United States by citizens from Iran, Syria, Iraq²¹, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen, sent further ripples through the Iranian community about possible consequences and risks of travelling to Iran, even for U.S. citizens (who are technically also

²¹ removed from second executive order

Iranian nationals)²². With all of this said, it is clear that on the most basic level, going to Iran is not just about buying a plane ticket.

Some families have avoided making the trip back to Iran due to all the complications around the process, thus causing an interesting disconnect in their stories of old Iran versus the current climate. Shirin, for example, has a very nostalgic and idealized view of Iran. She was born in the United States and her parents and all of her extended family have not returned to Iran in 29 years.

Shirin Toorani:

I think it's a beautiful country. We have so much artifacts, history, culture, so much behind it. But the media, it really bothers me the way it's portrayed. The way people think about the country. It's really not that bad. You hear on the news that in one little village somewhere in Iran, there is a shooting and one person died. That's all you hear. But they don't tell you about all the rich culture, all the good things about the country. I think it's a great country but I'm a little biased.

Roya, on the other hand, shares her nostalgia for Iran, but also acknowledges that the Iran in her imagination is not the same as what actually exists.

Roya Bamshad:

I have this love in my heart for Iran, this ambiguous mythical identity thing, Iran the country, the motherland whatever it is. In terms of the Islamic Republic of Iran and what it is right now, I have no connection to that and no sympathy. The Iran that I see in my eyes is the Iran of Persepolis²³ and Hafez²⁴ and all those things. That's what Iran to me is. It's not what it is now. I see the idealized version of Iran with people drinking tea and reading poems. I like Iran because that is where my family is and my roots are, but more than that I don't have any connection because I don't know.

Roya is saddened because she knows that the Iran in her mind does not exist, but she continues to think of the country in this idealized way. Her mother, Farnoosh, shared the following views:

²² Washington Post March 6, 2017

²³ Ancient capital of the Persian empire, burned down by Alexander the Great

²⁴ Persian poet Hafez e-Shirazi from the 14th century

Farnoosh Bamshad

In my heart I really want to go back to Iran, but because of the way that my husband and I [illegally] left Iran there is a lot of paper work and processes to go through. We went through so much stress so when I think about it I do not feel it worth taking the trouble to go back to Iran. I have a lot of good memories but the conditions are not right.

There is an underlying uncertainty around visiting Iran in the stories of many of the respondents, even if they did not leave as refugees. This duality, the idea of “two Irans” as Laila describes, was prevalent through many of the stories. Jaleh Afshar captures this duality in her feelings about Iran using examples about the way her parents and other people in the Iranian community talk about the country:

Jaleh Afshar

Iranians love Iran. Even Iranians who had to leave their country, if they could go back and it was the Iran before the revolution they would. I think it's a great country with great people in the hands of not so great people and I think the culture and the history got mixed and jumbled with the politics and its really unfortunate. I feel that...some of them are not willing to go back because they are jaded by...the new Iran...There are fears that if they go they won't be able to come back [to America]. Those who [make the trip] say even though its not the same Iran the people are still the same and the culture is the same.

This combination of love and uncertainty came up multiple times, with some families deciding to take the risk and others feeling hesitant about the possible consequences. There is an overarching uncertainty and fear around going to Iran, but the majority of my second generation respondents still had a desire to go visit. For those who had had the opportunity to go, the experience in itself was important but often spurred additional questions or confusion about what they had been told by their families growing up. We talked about their expectations, and what it meant to them to make the trip, as well as how their views of Iran shifted based on what they saw first-hand versus what they had heard in stories.

Arash Khoddam

I visited once...I was 23. It was nice, I felt like I had a void in myself in my identity in my attitudes and everything and I felt that going to Iran kind off helped me re-establish my self and find myself. As any expatriate community, when you are raised abroad you are raised in a constructed identity. So its like you are in an island, connected somehow through stories back to the motherland. But when you actually go you realize how much you have in common and [also] how much things have changed since [your family has] been there. I feel like the way I was raised, kept a much holier version of Iran. Like, “everyone is kind, the food is delicious...the government of course is a fascist government but everything else is good,” and when you go there you realize that a lot of that is true, but Iran is so complex that it is very difficult to gauge yourself in that whole environment.

Arash makes two important points: first that he felt visiting Iran fulfilled some part of his identity that was missing, and second, the challenges of negotiating the stories his parents told him with what he actually saw firsthand. Scholars have shown the importance of visiting the “Motherland” and how many feel a void in their identity if they have never been to the country their family is from (Louis 2004). Some respondents said they did not feel as Iranian as others because they had never been to Iran, or on the opposite end of that, they finally felt authentic or rooted in their Iranianness after they came back from Iran. Shahin shares his experience with a sort of culture shock seeing Iran after what he had been taught more so in school and through media representations:

Shahin Tehrani

I heard a lot of nice stories [about Iran] from my parents but there is this stigma...in movies and they way your classmates and teachers and the news portray [Iran]. I was kind of shocked when I went and saw that, aside from the pictures of the ayatollahs...in every public place, [Tehran] is a beautiful city with tons of culture we went to all these amazing sites where you can see how ancient the country really was. They have stuff there that is thousands years old getting to see that... Seeing all those different parts of it is really an eye opening experience for me because it’s not what I was expecting...it was interesting it kind of helped shape the way I see it and talk about Iran now to people.

Shahin shared that after his trip, he now makes a point to correct misinformation and share stories of what he saw firsthand in contemporary Iran, not just based in stories he heard from his parents about the 1970s:

Shahin Tehrani

It's funny that you are asking me this question [about Iran] because my friend and I were having the same discussion with one of his white friends in San Diego. That guy has a view of Iran based of what the media portrays everything and how it's all a desert and that people out there are just living in caves and stuff. So, my friend pulled up a picture of Tehran and asked [the white guy] "Where do you think this city is?" He was like, "Seattle obviously." We were like "NO, this is Tehran," and the guy didn't believe us at all. He had to google it for himself and he had to see. It's amazing because it 2016 and all the information is so easy to access to see what these places are really like, like if you want to look it up you can. But people choose not to because the information is just fed to them and that this must be what it really is.

Shahin had to first overcome his own preconceived notions of Iran when he made the trip, but now tries to share his perspective with others who hold those similar ideas. Interestingly for a community with overall limited access to their homeland, the Iranians I spoke with were extremely outspoken and connected to Iran in whatever way was possible without visiting. Many have Iranian satellite television in their homes, Skype or FaceTime their families in Iran regularly, read Iranian news sources, and other ways of indirectly accessing the country and culture.

Overall I found that visiting Iran, or even just talking about Iran is a complicated process for Iranian Americans. Both the parents and children shared these ideas of the nostalgic former Iran as well as their conflicted views of the present-day situation in the country. Since the onset of the Iranian Revolution and mass exodus of Iranians to the United States there has been an ongoing hostility between Iran and the United States, and this apprehensive relationship between the countries is apparent in the stories of my respondents. On one hand their parents saw

firsthand a political upheaval and instability in Iran, followed by years of negative media portrayals and stigmatization of their country; on the other hand there is a love and nostalgia for a culture and a country that, for some, only exists within these stories. It is clear that these intergenerationally transmitted stories are not just a set of facts about a place or an experience; what makes the stories powerful is that it transports these second generation Iranian Americans into a moment in their parents lives. In the story format these individuals really understand what their parents went through and it has a lasting impact on their lives and identities.

CONCLUSION

Through this chapter I specifically address the role of stories of coming to America, as well as stories of the “homeland” as important factors in the ethnic identity of second generation Iranian Americans. For those families who faced severe circumstances in their departure from Iran and/or their arrival in the United States, these stories serve as a badge of honor for the second generation, and provide a sense of rootedness in their Iranian identity. Both the content of the story as well as the way the story is told are important to look at; most respondents compared their stories to those of other families and used various benchmarks to establish where their story fit in terms of the broader ethnic narrative. I also looked at stories of Iran, and how the information passed down about the “two Iran’s” creates conflicting information for the second generation to negotiate: they are torn between the culture and nostalgia their parents share of the time before the revolution and what they hear from the media and through possible first-hand experience of present-day Iran. Overall I argue that the combination of these stories and memories from their parents and their own personal lived experience provide a framework for their ethnic identity and the way they situate themselves given these two sets of (potentially

conflicting) information. Through this story telling there is an opportunity to reinforce and strengthen their ethnic identity and help them situate themselves more clearly in the American racial/ethnic context. The following chapter closes the dissertation by outlining the broader arguments of each chapter and outlines suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Selectively Racialized, Selectively Politicized? Politicized Ethnic Identity Among Second Generation Iranian Americans

While many scholars have examined the relationship between ethnic identity and political participation, few have addressed the initial emergence of ethnic political consciousness. Some studies suggest that a threatened identity (ethnic or otherwise) can motivate an individual to become politically active or participate in a social movement to obviate that threat (Kaplan and Liu 2000). Portes and Rumbaut (2001) find that racialization and discrimination can lead to a heightened salience of ethnic identity, and the assertion of a “reactive ethnicity,” which can in turn be politicizing. Further, scholars find that the collective memory of historical discrimination and of racially charged events can cause heightened group consciousness, promote group solidarity, and create political mobilization (see Min 1995, Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Dawson 1994, Tuan 1998, Espiritu 2001). A few studies focus on the mechanisms (mainly discrimination) that initially activate a politicized ethnic identity (see Wald 2006; Sears et al 2003) however these studies do not address the variance of ethnic political consciousness among group members and why an individual ultimately chooses to assert this identity or not.

According to Sears (2003), to have a politicized ethnic identity entails both “placing oneself in a particular social category *and* adopting a group consciousness and even being impelled toward collective action to achieve the in-group's goals” (p. 421). For example, in a study of Jewish Americans, Wald (2006) argues that the political effectiveness of the Jewish diaspora is likely to depend on the extent to which its members display a politicized ethnic identity. While studies like this suggest politicized ethnic identity is important for political mobilization, there is little focus on the specific mechanisms that tie ethnicity to political

consciousness for certain individuals. The focus of this paper is not measuring political participation, but rather the initial activation of political consciousness that could later motivate an individual towards collective action on behalf of the ethnic group. Through an analysis of the experiences of 1.5 and second generation Iranian Americans, this study examines the mechanisms, both direct and indirect, that activate ethnic political consciousness (herein referred to as *politicized ethnic identity*).

Iranian Americans present a compelling case for the study of politicized ethnic identity. The U.S. Census officially categorizes Iranians as racially “White”²⁵, and some research refers to Middle Eastern groups as “honorary whites” (Bonilla Silva and Glover 2004). While many Iranian Americans and other Middle Eastern Americans can visibly pass as white (Euro-American), others report experiences of racially-based prejudice that are more similar to that of non-whites, especially in a post-9/11 context (Jamal and Naber 2008, Bakalian & Bozorgmehr 2009, Tehranian 2009). John Tehranian (2009) suggests that Middle Eastern Americans are dealing with a selective racialization process: “When they conform to social norms or achieve success in American society, they are perceived as nothing more than white. When they transgress, they are racialized as Middle Eastern” (p. 6). Based on this theory one would expect that only individuals who are racialized as Middle Eastern and experience discrimination are politicized by this experience, but my findings suggest that even without direct experience, perceived discrimination of Iranian Americans as a group can trigger politicized ethnicity.

A politicized outcome can be mediated by many factors such as age, gender, education, religion, and generation; however after coding my interviews with 1.5 and second generation

²⁵ According to 2010 U.S. Census, “White” refers to a “person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicated their race(s) as “White” or reported entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian.

Iranian Americans, two main mechanisms emerged as more prominent in relation to politicized ethnic identity. The first is a direct experience with racial discrimination, which is consistent with the theory of reactive ethnicity. Scholars have shown that in some cases individuals form a reactive ethnicity through witnessing discrimination of members of their family and their groups (Rumbaut 2008, Stepick 2008), but the theory of reactive ethnicity does not clearly distinguish between direct and indirect discrimination in relation to identity formation. Thus, I extend the theory of reactive ethnicity by focusing on how perceived discrimination of other group members can activate a politicized identity, particularly for group members who pass for white and do not experience discrimination as a result. Secondly, I argue that a strong connection to ones' family immigration narrative, especially when the narrative includes struggle in the context of departure from Iran or upon arrival into the United States, can politicize an individual even in the absence of a negative personal experience. More specifically, I argue those individuals whose families came as a result of the Iranian Revolution are able to situate their personal experience into the broader historical narrative of that experience. I draw upon the words of my participants to demonstrate how in some cases, the absence of these mechanisms leads to a non-politicized outcome. In the next section I review relevant literature and provide background information regarding Iranian immigration to the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a large body of scholarship on the relationship between identity salience and participation in social or political movements. For the purposes of this study, I am interested in the literature that examines racialization and collective memory as mechanisms that contribute to politicization. The ethnic identity literature suggests that experiences with discrimination can

lead to the politicization of ones' identity; on the other hand, the collective memory literature suggests that ethnic groups mobilize around a shared experience or linked past, sometimes even panethnically. As such, my study engages both sets of literature to examine the factors that contribute to the formation of politicized ethnic identity among second generation Iranian Americans.

Reactive Ethnicity

Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that the process of forging a “reactive ethnicity” in the face of perceived threats, persecution, and exclusion, is common. They highlight the role of a hostile context of reception and ongoing negative experiences to account for the rise rather than the erosion of ethnicity. In the case of Iranian immigration, the context of departure, reception and ongoing sociopolitical context are interesting to consider, as the primary influx of Iranian immigration to the United States happened during the Iranian Revolution and then the Iran/Iraq War (1979-1988). During this time many political refugees/exiles, religious minorities (Jews, Baha'is, Zoroastrians), student activists and protesters, and secular Muslims left Iran for the United States and other countries. Some Iranians migrated to the United States for purely economic reasons before and after the revolution; however many more came after the revolution for political reasons (Keddie 2006, Ansari 1998, Bozorgmehr 2001). At the same time, many were dealing with a hostile welcome in the United States due to the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Between 1979-1981, the hostage crisis lasted for 444 days, and included the holding of 90 U.S. diplomats and citizens inside the American Embassy in Tehran, all of whom were eventually released. During the hostage crisis, the attitude of Americans towards Iranians living in the U.S. was exceedingly hostile; media portrayals and the political handling of the events surrounding the crisis was inflammatory and instilled a generalized fear and/or hatred of Iranians into the

American public (Kelley, 1993). This research study will examine the experiences of the children of these immigrants who were raised in the United States in the post-revolution period. In the context of the U.S.-Iran relationship, experiences of these second generation Iranian Americans are important to understand as these individuals have formed their racial, national, and cultural identities in a way that is uniquely shaped by current social and political conditions, including the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, there was backlash against many Middle Eastern groups including Iranians. With the representations in the media of the “Axis of Evil”²⁶ and constant mention of the fear of Iran’s nuclear programs, Iranian Americans along with other Middle Eastern groups have had to explain and justify their culture as well as their allegiance as “Americans,” regardless of the fact that they were raised in the United States. In a 2010 report, the U.S. State Department named Iran as the most active state sponsor of terrorism²⁷. As Mehdi Bozorgmehr (2001) claims, “Whenever anti-American sentiments surge in the Middle East...all Middle Easterners in the US, regardless of nationality or religious affiliation, become scapegoats. Most Americans cannot distinguish Middle Eastern groups from each other due to unfamiliarity with the region and the diversity of its immigration” (p. 1). After 9/11, INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) implemented the National Security Entry/Exit Registration System (NSEERS) and began requiring certain non-citizens from designated countries to register, Iran was one of the first five countries whose nationals were subjected to special registration (Mahdavi 2006). Numerous Iranians were among the first few hundred registrants who were arrested and detained for visa violations when they appeared to register in Los Angeles,

²⁶ Axis of Evil is a term coined by President George W. Bush in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002 to describe governments he accused of helping terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. He named Iran, Iraq, and North Korea in his speech as part of the Axis of Evil.

²⁷ <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170260.htm>

California. Although the NSEERS project was intended to be applied to all foreign visitors, according to Mahdavi (2006), the program never expanded beyond males over 16 years old from 25 countries—24 Middle Eastern and/or heavily Muslims countries, and North Korea.²⁸ The stigma of Iranians as outsiders, foreigners and potential terrorists from the time of the Hostage Crisis was ever-present in 2001 and is still very much today, as Iran has recently been named the country with the highest state sponsor of terrorism.

Since 9/11, Iranian Americans have been negatively impacted in a variety of ways and there has been a shift in the community as a consequence. Iranian Americans, along with many other Arabs, Muslims, South Asians, and others, have found themselves increasingly scrutinized and severely impacted by the security and immigration procedures put into place following the 9/11 attacks. Thus according to the literature, this particular context of arrival and departure will lead to high levels of reactive ethnicity among my respondents. This study looks at whether the ongoing sociopolitical climate (specifically post-9/11) could be a possible trigger for reactive ethnicity among the second generation. Additionally, because some Iranian Americans can pass as non-Middle Eastern, this study looks at possible indirect mechanisms that trigger reactive ethnicity. More specifically, I argue that the knowledge of discrimination of other group members as well as the collective memory of the Iranian Revolution can be a catalyst for reactive ethnicity.

Collective Memory/Collective Identity

In her study of Latino political engagement, Lisa Garcia Bedolla (2005) finds that for Latinos, “racism and xenophobia shape both the meaning and social value attributed to their

²⁸Iran, Iraq, Libya, Sudan, Syria (group 1) Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Eritrea, Lebanon, Morocco, North Korea, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen (group 2) Pakistan, Saudi Arabia (group 3) Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait (group 4)

ethnic identities and to the lived experiences of national belonging in contemporary U.S. society” (p. 2). Additionally, Garcia Bedolla argues that collective identities are constructed by individuals’ experiences of stigma, and by the social network in which they are engaged. Further, she argues that racialization, and the stigma that accompanies it, affects how Latinos constitute themselves and their social group, as well as how they choose to act on behalf of their group. Garcia Bedolla also presents an important argument about how a certain label, for example, “Latino” can have differing effects on political attitudes and activity based on the individual’s attachment to the group. I would argue that similarly, Iranian Americans vary in in the labels they give to their identities as well as the meaning they ascribe to those particular labels. Thus, it is not the actual label, but rather the process through which individuals acquire such an identity that interests me, and specifically, how these processes differ for group members.

Yen Le Espiritu (2002) finds that some second generation Filipino Americans are moving towards a politicized ethnic identity and away from a exclusively cultural and “symbolic ethnicity”. She finds that among the second generation there are differences in the degree as well as the nature of their identification with ethnicity. Espiritu does not delve deeper, however, into the reasons why some Filipinos have a cultural or somewhat symbolic ethnic identity, and others have a more politicized identity. In this study I look specifically at the mechanism that causes this potential divergence in identity among Iranian Americans.

Lopez and Stanton-Salazar’s (2001) study of Mexican Americans presents an interesting case for another group that faces a unique combination of racial ambiguity and negative stereotypes. The authors argue that even “white” Mexicans have internalized the continuing resentment and racism towards their ethnic group, regardless of not having directly experienced racism. Lopez and Stanton-Salazar discuss the disconnect between being perceived as Euro-

American until the individual is identified as Mexican, which discounts their whiteness. Using the CILS data set (Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study) they find that 88% of second generation Mexican Americans agree that there is racial discrimination in America even though only 67% report experiencing it directly. I expect a similar response from Iranian Americans, and further posit that some Iranians (or Mexicans) who are racialized as white may be politicized through the knowledge of group discrimination. By using in-depth interviews this study looks at factors like knowledge of discrimination and collective memory as possible politicizing factors.

Milton Takei (1998) argues that collective memory is the key to understanding why people retain a certain group identity. Both the distant past and more recent events can be important, since all these experiences can be part of a group's collective memory. For example, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II became a symbol for generating ethnic solidarity among Japanese Americans and continues to promote a salient ethnic identity among later generations (Tuan 1998). Similarly, the collective memory of the Holocaust has become a major factor in sustaining Jewish identity since World War II (Meyer 1990). Marianne Hirsch (1997) discusses collective memory amongst children of Holocaust survivors as a “post memory” which she defines as “the experiences of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor recreated” (p. 22). Debra Kaufman (2007) extends Hirsch’s definition to discuss the experiences of Jewish American young adults who have a post-memory of the Holocaust even though they are not related to any survivors. Kaufmann demonstrates how strongly tied contemporary Jewish Americans are to the narrative of the Holocaust and how this continues to fuel the solidarity of the Jewish community in the United States. These studies on Japanese and Jewish Americans

are useful in situating the experience of Iranian Americans in relation to the collective memory of the Iranian Revolution and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. The literature suggests that these collective memories may be producing collective politicizing identity among 1.5 and second generation Iranian Americans, which in this case I argue is happening through the transmission of family immigration narratives.

In a similar vein, Michael Dawson (1994) discusses the connection between collective memory and racial salience and solidarity among African Americans. Dawson demonstrates how the collective memory or “linked past” of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement have “reinforced the racial identity of African Americans because it has strengthened the perceived link between ones’ own fate and the fate of the race” (p. 61). According to Dawson, African American collective consciousness is a response to the historical aspects of racism, where they understand that their life chances are determined by their race. Dawson and others, for example Miller et al (1981) make a distinction between simple group identification (just characterizing oneself as part of a group) and racial group consciousness, which is about realizing how ones life chances are interrelated with those of their group. Further, Junn and Masuoka (2008) argue this consciousness becomes politicized when a racial minority “begins to attach the social and political problems of the group to systemic causes that require political action in order to be resolved” (p. 95).

In the case of Korean Americans, Min (1995) finds that the L.A. riots and burning of Korean-owned stores in Los Angeles caused many 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans to become self-conscious about their common fate as Koreans, with many organizing politically around this collective identity. Bakalian (1992) similarly finds that the Armenian genocide is at the forefront of Armenian collective consciousness. As an extension of the literature on linked

fate, Espiritu (2001) suggests that the combined collective memories of multiple marginalized groups can lead to panethnic solidarity. She argues that a shared history of discrimination helps develop racial/ethnic consciousness across Asian groups, allowing the formation of panethnic mobilization. I am interested in whether Iranian Americans have a sense of linked past and linked fate, particularly in connection with other Middle Eastern Americans post 9/11. A recent study of Middle Eastern mobilization indicates that an unanticipated outcome of the post-9/11 backlash was the empowerment of second generation Middle Eastern Americans (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009). I am interested in the link between this post-9/11 backlash and the formation of political consciousness for Iranian Americans.

Politicized Ethnic Identity/Ethnic Political Consciousness

After reviewing many studies on ethnic group consciousness and political engagement, I found a variety of definitions of “politicized ethnic identity” or what constitutes “politicized” more generally. Sears (2003) suggests that strength of ethnic identity should be associated significantly with social and political attitudes in ethnically relevant domains, with a tendency to promote ones own ethnic group interests. He further asserts that politicized ethnic identity implies “ones willingness to act politically on behalf of ones own ethnic group, having spent time trying to learn more about ones ethnic group, and trying to improve the status of [ones] ethnic group” (2003 pg 431). Wald (2006) measures politicized ethnic identity by focusing on the tendency of Jewish Americans to factor Israel into their personal political priorities or not. In a study of immigrant youth engagement in South Florida, Alex Stepick and Carol Stepick (2008) use multiple general measures for political engagement including discussing politics with family and friends, reading the newspaper, voting, and attending demonstrations. For the purpose of this study I find it most useful to use a similarly broad definition of the term “politicized” which

includes political knowledge and active political engagement under the broader umbrella of political consciousness.

This study differs from the relatively small body of research on politicized ethnic identity; most of these studies focus on the mobilizing outcomes based on the existence of a politicized identity. Here, however, I look at the mechanisms that initially activate political consciousness. Further, this study demonstrates that the conventional wisdom of politicized ethnic identity formation may not accurately reflect the experiences of all members of an ethnic group if the variance among group members is not considered. The treatment of Iranian Americans as potentially both white and non-white presents an interesting context for understanding politicized ethnic identity, which could potentially vary based on individual experiences with racialization.

DATA AND METHODS

The data presented in this study come from twenty in-depth interviews conducted between 2012-2013 with 1.5 and 2nd generation Iranian Americans. This study was limited to Iranian Americans between the ages of twenty and thirty-five who had been born and/or raised in the United States since the age of twelve or earlier. I initially recruited participants through personal contacts in Iranian organizations both on and off university campuses throughout Southern California, and at a conference on the Iranian diaspora at UCLA (October 2012). The biannual conference attracts a diverse crowd including graduate and undergraduate students, journalists, artists, filmmakers, and community members and proved to be useful in recruiting a variety of respondents. Between November 2012-March 2013 the sample was expanded through “snowballing,” or the referrals of interviewees to other potential participants. Once the

participant agreed to the interview, I asked him/her to meet me at a mutually convenient location, usually a café or their home.

While snowball sampling does not offer the same generalizability as random sampling, I did try to create a gender and age balance. I also wanted to make sure to include individuals who are active members of Iranian organizations (political or cultural) and those who are not involved in any organizations, thus referrals were helpful in that respect. The backgrounds of the individuals in the sample were varied, but not across all aspects due to the nature of snowball sampling. All the participants were college educated, some were finishing their bachelors but many had already completed their degree and some held advanced degrees (Master's, Ph.D., Ed.D., M.D.). The majority of participants came from secular Muslim families, however three were practicing Muslims and two were Zoroastrian, and one participant came from a mixed Jewish/Muslim family. Although a study of this small scale does not lend itself to generalizability, Iranian Americans are highly educated overall, predominately middle class, and the majority are secular Muslim.

For this study I used a set of interview questions to guide the semi-structured individual interviews. This format allowed me more freedom to ask questions as they arose based on what the participant shared. I asked interviewees about their family's immigration experience, personal experiences growing up in the United States, racial and ethnic identity, and civic and political engagement. I was also interested to find out how the respondents came to be politically active (or not), and what types of issues they are engaged with. To begin the conversation around activism, I asked them about their families and how politically active they were in Iran and the circumstances surrounding their immigration. This allowed me to ask follow up questions regarding their own activism and beliefs about what it meant to be Iranian American, and what it

meant to be political. The interviews, which lasted between thirty minutes and three hours, were tape recorded and later transcribed.

After I transcribed the interviews, I used an open coding technique to record notes in the margins. I coded each interview then wrote an initial memo focusing on specific aspects of that individual's experience. After writing the initial memos for each interview I went back through the transcripts and coded them for themes and categories that emerged across multiple interviews. I initially focused on any indication of political knowledge as a base line for political consciousness and politicized ethnic identity. I then separated the respondents out further when I realized there was a distinct difference between individuals who had experienced discrimination and those who had not, as well as those who had knowledge of their family immigration story and those who did not. Based on this purposeful coding and categorizing I developed a typology which I discuss in the next section.

RESULTS

Racialization, Collective Memory, and Politicized Ethnic Identity

After conducting the interviews I found that the respondents covered a wide spectrum of levels of ethnic political consciousness, with some individuals expressing this identity much more strongly than others, and some not expressing it at all. To reiterate, I define politicized broadly, using ethnic political knowledge (and interest) as the base line of politicized ethnic identity. In line with the literature on reactive ethnicity, I found the strongest correlation between politicized ethnic identity and direct experiences with racialization and discrimination, particularly in the post 9/11 context. Individuals who had felt discriminated against shared the impact of that experience on their identity, and how it caused them to become more informed and outspoken. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, there was also a cohort effect; the interviewees

who were in elementary or middle school during 9/11 so the events did not resonate for them in the same way. However, some of these younger individuals had knowledge of their family's immigration narrative, and I found that to be another potentially politicizing factor.

In addition to experiences with discrimination, I found a strong correlation between a connection to the collective memory of the Iranian Revolution and an active politicized ethnic identity. The difficult conditions under which the families of some respondents immigrated to the United States and their knowledge of this experience proved to be formative. Two-thirds of the respondents were able to tell this story in some amount of detail; many also discussed how they felt it was important for them to be engaged because of what their families had to go through. Only three of respondents knew very little about how or why their parents came to the United States, which initially indicated to me that it must have been an uneventful and smooth process. However, in one case in particular a follow up conversation with a respondent uncovered a story of religious persecution that her parents never told her. This demonstrates that we cannot assume a connection to a collective memory, and points to the role of the families in potentially transmitting a politicized narrative.

Although I found that not all the respondents display a politicized ethnic identity, I want to clarify that they do have a salient cultural identity. In fact, all twenty of my respondents felt strongly connected to the Persian language, culture and customs in various ways. Many were fluent in the language (including reading and writing in some cases), attended cultural events, joined cultural clubs, took Persian music and dance classes, and had Iranian friends. However, I did not find a direct relationship between salient cultural identity and politicized ethnic identity.

Based on my findings I have developed a typology (Figure 1) to illustrate the relationship between these mechanisms and potentially politicized outcomes.

	Family Narrative	No Family Narrative
Personal Discrimination	Highly Politicized (Heightened Ethnic Political Consciousness)	Politicized (Some sense of Ethnic Political Consciousness)
No Discrimination	Selectively Politicized (Selective Ethnic Political Consciousness)	Not Politicized (Absence of ethnic political consciousness)

Figure 1. Typology of Politicized Ethnic Identity

The respondents with knowledge of their family’s immigration experience *and* who had personally experienced discrimination were highly politicized, demonstrating a heightened sense of ethnic political consciousness in comparison with other respondents; those who had little knowledge of their family story *and* no experiences with discrimination were not politicized (absence of ethnic political consciousness). In this study I did not have any participants who had experienced discrimination but did not know their family narrative; I later realized this was because many of them interrogated this family history after the initial experience with discrimination. Thus the cell I label “politicized” is more of a temporary position, with a likely transition to “highly politicized” once the individual processes the events and seeks to understand their experience in a broader context. Most interesting among my findings was the category of individuals who had a strong family narrative but had not personally experienced discrimination. These individuals all passed for white and as a result had a sort of “reactive ethnic option²⁹” which some chose to assert, but others did not. I label this group “selectively

²⁹ Mary Waters (1990) argues white-Americans have ethnic options and can choose to assert and maintain an ethnic identity or not, but that it is largely symbolic.

politicized” and argue that those individuals who have knowledge of the family narrative as well as a strong sense of perceived discrimination against the group are more likely to assert this identity, but that they have to actively choose to do so.

Highly Politicized Ethnic Identity (Reactive Ethnicity)

Some of the respondents, for example Kamran Ahmadi, talked specifically about the importance of staying up-to-date on current events concerning Iran and the Middle East, understanding the potential for such events to have a potential backlash in his own life.

Kamran Ahmadi:

Every time I hear something in the media that is connected to Iran I have an immediate interest and I’ll try to think about how that might affect me personally.

Kamran had multiple negative experiences going through airport security post 9/11 that impacted him deeply. After coding all the interviews I found that many of the respondents had some level of ethnic political consciousness; however Kamran and the five other respondents who had experienced personal discrimination expressed a heightened awareness of their ethnic identity as well as a heightened political consciousness. It became clear from the interviews that this experience with discrimination distinguished these individuals from the others.

While I label this group “highly politicized,” I am not implying that these individuals are activists and social movement organizers (although some are), but that a personal experience with discrimination leads to a heightened (and constant) awareness of one’s ethnic identity that is distinct from those with no personal experience. Additionally, four of the six respondents who had experienced personal discrimination came from families that left Iran specifically for political reasons and experienced extreme difficulty leaving Iran and arriving in the United

States so the negative experiences they faced in both context of departure and reception were also unique among the respondents. In what follows, I give examples from the interviews to demonstrate the relationship between politicized ethnic identity and both discrimination and family immigration narratives. I also found age to be an important factor, particularly the age at which they experienced certain historical events such as the Iran/Iraq War, the first Gulf War, and the September 11, 2001 attacks. For the older respondents (25+) who had memories of multiple events, their ethnic political consciousness was stronger than the younger respondents who had little or no memory of these events and their impact on Middle Eastern Americans more generally. When I began the interview process I hypothesized gender would emerge as an important variable, but interestingly I found very little variance between the men and women in my study; the differences were more across phenotype, which in this case is the ability to pass for white. The men and women who had experienced racialized discrimination were distinct from both the men and women who could pass for white.

Experiences with Racialized Discrimination

Roya Bamshad was living in San Francisco at the time of the 9/11 incident and was completely shocked by the experience of being verbally attacked in the days after:

Roya Bamshad:

A few days after the attacks on September 11, 2001 happened, I was driving in my car, and I used to have a bumper sticker that said ‘George W. Bush Serial Killer’...and I was stopped at a light, and this white man got out of his car and came up to my window and started yelling at me saying, ‘You fucking Arab bitch, why don’t you take that bumper sticker off your car!’ He was in my window, yelling at me. At that point do I really want to say, ‘oh I’m Iranian, not Arab?’ There was no difference.

Although she was aware of racial profiling against Middle Easterners and had strong political beliefs (seen in this example through her bumper sticker), she said that that after that incident she had a heightened awareness of her ethnic identity. In response to this, she began identifying

herself as Iranian in an effort to try to educate others about ongoing issues in Iran and throughout the Middle East. She says:

Roya Bamshad:

Iran is always in the news...it's always something people are talking about. Going to war with Iran or when Iranians took those hostages, these things are burned into the American consciousness. Sometimes it makes it hard to identify as being Iranian, but it also makes me want to identify as being Iranian at the same time.

Roya's sense of responsibility to identify as Iranian and speak on behalf of her community has led to her involvement in an organization that speaks out against human rights violations in Iran, and other panethnic social movement organizations including one for Palestinian rights. Another respondent, Mona, said she has a heightened awareness of her panethnic identity (Middle Eastern) more than Iranian after 9/11, with people asking her questions about Islam and women's rights in the Arab world, even though she does not identify as Muslim and is not Arab. Mona shared this blatant encounter with racial profiling after 9/11:

Mona Hassani:

My family went to spend the 4th of July in Boston...It was the July after 9/11. We had a picnic...and these two women were...giving us the stink eye...one of the women gets up and she called the cop over...then sure enough the...cop does a lap around the area and comes to my dad asking all these questions like 'So what are you folks doing here today?... Where are you from originally? How long have you been here?' All of these really invasive questions that are essentially saying, the people sitting around you are threatened by you... Of course how do you sit through fireworks celebrating the independence of America after something like that? It was such a...raw moment...we are getting these messages all the time that we don't belong here.

This negative experience affected Mona and her family very deeply. She talked at length about the dissonance between celebrating the 4th of July and experiencing discrimination and feeling unwanted in America, as well as other subtle experiences she had with racism in more

recent years. Mona was highly involved in Green Movement³⁰ protests after the 2009 presidential election in Iran, and shared her beliefs about the importance of political engagement at the most basic level:

Mona Hassani

...It's about the curiosity and drive to learn more and educate yourself. It is also important to go to that next level..whether that is protesting making yourself visible on the street, or sharing information through social networking...what we always hope for is that more people will get invested in the level of change to go so far as direct action.

Mona said her interest in political activism all goes back to issues of inequality, which she experienced directly but also through stories shared by her parents. In the next section I look more closely at how these family narratives serve as a politicizing mechanism.

Another example comes from Arash Khoddam, who shared multiple stories of racism and verbal abuse growing up in a predominately white neighborhood during the first Gulf War as well as after 9/11:

Arash Khoddam:

Everyone was white, so I'd get into fights all the time, and... I would be called 'sand nigger.' That surprised me more than it offended me in the beginning because I was like, "wow" that is creative, you know, because it puts us all in our place in their white eyes.

Arash said growing up in the face of this ignorance further reinforced his Iranian identity and that he has embraced the Middle Eastern identity in a political context. With these experiences, the respondents shared their worries about how other political events concerning Iran or the Middle East might impact them. Additionally, the respondents said they were more cautious of their actions and their words after 9/11 because they were worried about saying things around

³⁰ After the controversial re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad there were protests in Iran as well as demonstrations throughout the diaspora calling the election a fraud. The supporters of the opposing candidate Mir-Hosseini Mousavi would dress in green, so this was seen throughout the protests and demonstrations thus coining it the "Green Movement"

people who had misconceptions of Middle Eastern groups based on the negative news media portrayals.

In the example below, Tala Shirazi describes being shocked by the hostile environment she faced while attending pharmacy school in Massachusetts with students and even professors treating her negatively after they found out she was Muslim:

Tala Shirazi:

I thought alright, everyone is cool in this country. There is no more racism in the 21st century. Just to skip a lot of details, basically I had my peers wanting to beat me up. Literally in the middle of class a girl came up to me and she was threatening me. Just because of the fact that I was Muslim...I didn't know there was so much hate there was in this world...It was just too intense for me. So I stood up for myself in the middle of school...I literally was in tears.

I asked Tala for more details about what happened but she said she did not want to re-live the trauma and asked if we could change the subject. I respected her wishes but it was clear even from the little bit that she shared how much she that experience with discrimination impacted her identity.

Overall, it is clear that there is a relationship between experiences with discrimination and politicized ethnic identity, which is consistent with the literature on reactive ethnicity. In the next section I look at the family narrative of these respondents. I argue that in addition to these personal experiences with discrimination, another key factor to forming a politicized ethnic identity is having knowledge of the personal family immigration narrative, and in this case the collective memory of the Iranian Revolution.

Collective Memory

All twenty respondents' families came to the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s. Some of their parents were students who came to study and when the revolution happened they never returned, others escaped at the height of the revolution, and some stayed through the

beginning of the Iran/Iraq war and then decided it would be best to leave for the sake of their children. Four of the respondents who experienced discrimination had families who left Iran as a result the revolution for political reason *or* were living in the United States during the revolution and faced discrimination during the Iranian Hostage Crisis. I found a clear correlation between growing up with stories of the Iranian Revolution or the Hostage Crisis and the formation of a politicized ethnic identity. Many of the respondents were all able to recount their family stories with immense details. For example, Roya shared the following story:

Roya Bamshad:

My father was an activist...when he was 17 he was sent to prison and tortured. When he finally got out of prison, he met my mother and they got together...a lot of their friends had been killed, so they decided that their best option was to escape...through Pakistan... my mother was pregnant with me, and when they were being smuggled out of Iran through Pakistan, she had to pawn off a watch that she had...my mom rode in the back of a truck with some opium dealers, and my father was somewhere separate I'm not sure. Finally they were in Germany, then in Spain where they went to every embassy they could find to get a visa for the U.S...after getting rejected multiple times they were granted student visas to a university in Minnesota, and that is how they got to the United States. My mom had to hide the fact that she was 8 months pregnant with me so that they could get in.

Roya's parents gained political refugee status upon arrival and are unable to return to Iran, meaning Roya can never visit Iran under the current government. Roya's parents were active in the Iranian student groups at their university and so Roya became connected to many other Iranian children like herself, spending time with them while all the parents were having meetings. She said that political involvement is all she has ever known and could not imagine being apolitical and not knowing about the latest news in Iran.

Similarly, Arash's parents, who are both politically active, came to the Baltimore area to attend university in the mid-70s and then went back to Iran. Arash was born there and when he

was just 2 years old, his parents felt it was not safe for them any more so they decided to return to the United States for his sake.

Arash Khoddam:

It was just after the revolution, and during the Iran/Iraq war that my parents decided to leave for good. They just didn't see it as a safe situation. A lot of family and friends were being arrested and executed so they just...it was happening everywhere around them, so they didn't feel safe and they left. They weren't exactly forced out or expelled. I mean, they left on their own decision but because of the situation they left.

Arash's parents left Iran and struggled financially in America for many years, a theme that was common among many of the respondents. Many said their parents were better off financially in Iran and held good jobs but were unable to transfer their credentials when they came to the United States.

Marzieh Kooshan said her parents came to the United States to get Masters degrees and return home, but when the revolution happened in Iran they just decided to stay in the United States and not go back. Even though they were outside of Iran, they were receiving bad news from family and friends while also dealing with discrimination during the Hostage Crisis.

Marzieh Kooshan:

I know a lot of my mom's cousins were killed...they were political activists in Iran. My parents aren't politically active but they lost so many friends and family who were. My parents and my sister were living in Ohio and they dealt with a lot of discrimination with the Iranian Hostage Crisis so they had a really hard time initially when they were here. They didn't have any support system in place until they finally moved to California.

Marzieh said she would go on walks with her father when she was growing up and he would teach lessons using the stories of the revolution, and that she had heard most of them multiple times. Marzieh said that her parents were actually very concerned about her becoming politically engaged as an adult; because of the negative experiences they had had in Iran they did not feel it was safe for her to be involved in politics now that they were in America.

Marzieh Kooshan:

I know that my parents are opposed to me taking a political position. Once I was making an anti-war speech at a rally, and my parents were unbelievably upset and told me they didn't want me to get involved and to just be grateful to be living in America. I guess to them, things are way better here than they are in Iran so they don't want me to complain.

For Marzieh, her being politically involved is against her parents' wishes, and although she understands what they have been through and why they are upset with her, she still feels strongly about continuing the work she is doing for human rights in Iran and other developing countries. So for Marzieh, she has found political organizations to be a part of but is conflicted about going against her parents' wishes.

Another interviewee, Tala Shirazi, shared a story her parents had told her about studying at university and experiencing severe discrimination living in Alabama:

Tala Shirazi:

My dad came before the revolution. My mom, she also came, she was on the last flight that left Iran to come to America. That was the last flight. It gives me goose bumps. When they came here it was hard for them because of the whole hostage crisis. People outside the grocery stores would say no Persians allowed, they would beat up Persians who were going to universities. Everything was cut. So my parents couldn't get money from their parents anymore either. So it was hard for them. Then they moved to Washington DC and then drove all the way to Sacramento and then moved to Southern California and that's where I was born.

Tala mentioned the point about mom being on the last flight to America (before the airport temporarily shut down in Tehran) multiple times during the interview. Tala's parents also discouraged her from speaking her opinion because of what they went through, but she said there was no way for her to stay quiet after hearing those stories all her life.

One final example comes from Azadeh Omid, who discusses how she did not initially know her family's immigration story until *after* she had a negative racialized experience. Had I interviewed Azadeh right after this experience I believe she would fit the typology in the

category “Politicized”, but ultimately Azadeh interrogated that personal experience and gained ethnic political consciousness afterward.

Azadeh Omid:

When I was 15, I was racially profiled at an airport. My white friend was allowed to exit, and as I followed her the guard said, ‘no you aren’t going with her, you need to go that way.’ And pointed to the additional screening area. When I finally got outside I was crying and as I finished telling the story to my mother she said, ‘Oh, I should have warned you.’ I never knew I needed warning about such things.

I don’t intend to make a linear argument here; that one must experience discrimination first, then find out their immigration story and ultimately become politicized in their ethnic identity. Rather I’m interested in the possibility that there are many different pathways to ethnic political consciousness, and that there are different mechanisms that trigger similar outcomes. Overall, I argue that in addition to personal experiences with discrimination there is also a relationship between these family stories and the connection to the broader narrative of the Iranian Revolution and the formation of a politicized ethnic identity. Although personal experiences with discrimination may trigger a reactive ethnic identity, the family narrative also serves as a politicizing mechanism. In the next section I look at the respondents who I considered “selectively politicized.” What these individuals had in common was a connection to their family narrative, but no personal experiences with discrimination.

Selectively Politicized: Reactive Ethnic Options

I labeled ten of my respondents “selectively politicized.” These individuals lacked personal experience with discrimination but they were aware of discrimination towards the group and how they had managed to avoid it. These ten individuals had some level of ethnic political consciousness, but it was more salient for some than for others. I argue that this group

demonstrates the possibility that an indirect mechanism can politicize an individuals' ethnic identity, which adds nuance to the theory of reactive ethnicity. My findings suggest that even without direct experience, perceived discrimination toward Iranian Americans as a group can trigger reactive ethnicity. The difference for these individuals is that reactive ethnicity is more of a choice, and because they can pass for white, they can choose when to be politicized or not. For example, Naseem Zahedi shares the following:

Naseem Zahedi:

Because I pass for white, I haven't had a hard time in comparison to a lot of people I know. I have some distant cousins, and they are Muslim too, and they had a shitload of problems after 9/11 with all these hate crimes happening to them. People saying go back home, telling them they aren't American. I mean, they grew up here too, just like me.

All the respondents in this category knew their family immigration story with some level of detail; something else that distinguishes these stories from those in the "highly politicized" category is that the families of these respondents immigrated mainly for economic (as opposed to political) reasons. Some of the families did experience struggle during immigration and I argue that the knowledge of this was enough to activate a politicized ethnic identity among the respondents.

Even though the Census considers Iranians racially white, all the respondents across the board still distinguished between themselves and "white people," meaning white European Americans. Many respondents, like Naseem, discussed passing for "white" and avoiding discrimination by blending in and not being racialized as Middle Eastern. For example, Jaleh Afshar said she feels fortunate to have lighter skin and hazel eyes because people do not see her as Iranian-looking as some of her friends:

Jaleh Afshar:

I would say I guess that I am lucky because I don't have to deal with what I have seen friends deal with. People view you differently if you are a darker color, and I've been

able to get away with it and live a normal life, and not defend myself because of the color of my skin. I can get away with people not questioning my identity because like many Iranians, I am lighter skinned.

Jaleh said she never felt a threat to her safety, but was always cautious when she told someone she was Iranian, and wanted to make sure they understood what that meant and would try to educate them if they did not know. Jaleh shared a story during her interview about choosing to conceal her identity as Iranian when she heard some co-workers talking about reasons to go to war with Iran. She knew that they were incorrect about many of the statements that they were making but did not feel comfortable revealing she was Iranian and correcting them for fear that they would ask her more questions and become suspicious of her for siding with Iran. She said she was not hiding her identity, but “she just wasn’t saying it” and let them continue talking as she stood nearby and listened. She said she later felt badly that she had not spoken up, as it would have been an opportunity to correct at least a few misconceptions. She stated that even if she would not be able to answer all of their questions, she could have at least tried. This is an interesting example of this “reactive ethnic option,” that Jaleh and some of the other respondents have: because she is able to pass for white she can choose to engage an issue or keep her distance.

In another example, Khosrow Fardin discussed how people were often surprised to find out he was Iranian, and that he often hid his identity growing up:

Khosrow Fardin:

People often tell me ‘oh you have a Middle Eastern background I’m surprised to hear that.’ I think I have been very blessed in that regard. When I was younger in elementary school...I didn’t want to be Iranian. For a long time I wished my name was Matthew...I was reluctant to admit I was Persian.

Khosrow was only in elementary school during 9/11, but he understood enough about what was happening to want to disassociate himself from the Middle East. There was a shift when he went

to college and joined an Iranian student organization and began connecting to his ethnic identity during the 2009 Green Movement protests. He eventually became president of the club and no longer tries to hide his identity. An interesting caveat is that his family discourages his interest in Iranian politics, once again citing fear of safety:

My mom...on facebook she tells me don't post photos of you going to Iran, don't say that you are going on a trip...because her parents are still in Iran and she wants to keep on a good foot because it seems like the Iranian government keeps track of all these things.

The respondents who had visited Iran and still had family members living there cited a similar explanation for why they are fearful of political activism, even though they all stated clearly that staying politically informed was important to them. For example, Ehsan was fearful to discuss politics with me at all, and talked at length about how he chooses to engage with some people and not others:

Ehsan Varzi:

...I...don't talk about politics with Persians. This is my first time talking politics with a Persian that I don't know...I... never want to be accused of anything political because I just want to keep it clear. I don't want any history of any politics with me...if my grandfather gets sick I would like to go back to Iran so I don't want anything in my way...I talk to Americans somewhat. I like to tell people about the situation. About the revolution, about how it is today. I try to inform them but not give advice on a view...There are some Iranian sites I look at to get the news about Iran. I'm really informed about Iran, I like to know what's happening.

Similar to Jaleh, I argue that Ehsan's choice to engage or not is situated in his ability to pass for white. Ehsan spent time explaining to me how he was actually "white" and did not mark "other" on the census like some Iranians because his ancestors are from Russia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, so he has "authentic" Caucasian heritage. The respondents who had experienced racialized discrimination were much more conflicted about their racial category, and none of them marked white on the census or any survey because they did not experience the privileges associated with that category. In the next section I look at the immigration stories as politicizing factors. As these

individuals are less susceptible to racial discrimination, I argue that their ethnic political consciousness is potentially triggered through their family immigration narratives.

Collective Memory

The respondents in this group shared many detailed and heartfelt stories about their families experiences immigrating to the United States. Both Ehsan and Khosrows' families came to the United States before the revolution to attend university. As Ehsan shared:

Ehsan Varzi:

My mom left Iran in 1976, she was 18 years old and she came to Oklahoma to university and she was there for at least like a month and then her uncle lived in California close to SF and was like come over here why are you in Oklahoma! ...My dad had come a bit earlier and he had already got his degree...in Iran and he came here to get his master's...And they met somehow, my dad's uncle and my moms uncle knew each other so they told them both to go to this Persian concert and somehow met each other.

Similarly, Khosrow's father already had a Master's and came to the United States to get his Ph.D.:

Khosrow Fardin:

My parents immigrated to the states a little bit before the revolution. They were here getting their master's... My dad started off as an electrical engineer in Iran. He went to one of the top technical universities there. He was working with the army during his army service. Then coming to the states he went to USC for computer architecture then he transferred his master's program to do it at Stanford. He studied computer software there. My mom came to Boston university to get her master's in literature.

Both Khosrow and Ehsans' parents attempted to blend in during the Hostage Crisis by hiding their identity; Khosrow's parents told people they were Afghani to avoid being associated with Iran. This is an interesting aspect of studying the Iranian case, as it was common for Iranians to hide their identity during the Hostage Crisis and is still going on today as seen in previous examples.

In Jaleh's case, her parents lived a very affluent life in Iran. Her father was an engineer and vice president of a major steel company in Iran and had two homes, a Mercedes Benz, and traveled often. They left Iran when she was just two years old, in the midst of the Iran/Iraq war, and things changed drastically when they arrived in the United States.

Jaleh Afshar:

The reason we came was because right after the revolution the universities were closed, and my parents didn't know for sure if they would reopen or be the same so they were worried about the future of education in Iran. So, we came to Florida to live with my uncle, and my dad got some temporary jobs working in restaurants and doing labor. He eventually found an engineering job in Florida, and then in California so that's why we moved here. But his job didn't last long because technology became more advanced, and by the time I was in elementary school, things were pretty unstable. My parents did what they could to survive and got different jobs, but to this day they haven't been able to get back to the way things were in Iran.

Jaleh's parents made the decision to sacrifice the lifestyle they had in Iran for her and her brother to have a better life in the United States. Jaleh talked about how she constantly thinks about the way her parents struggled when she thinks about her opportunities and privileges living in the United States. Although inconsistently so, Jaleh demonstrates an ethnic political consciousness based in both her own experiences and those of her family.

Overall, this group was interesting because they knew so much about their families experiences and struggles, and many made the choice to speak up (on occasion) because they understood the difficulties their families and friends faced, even if they were afforded certain privileges. While these individuals have been politicized through indirect mechanisms, they are not consistently expressing this politicized ethnic identity.

Not Politicized (Absence of Ethnic Political Consciousness)

In this section I look at the respondents who I labeled “not politicized.” As I stated at the outset of this paper, I do not assume that an individual should have a politicized ethnic identity, only that I am interested in the mechanisms that lead to politicized or non-politicized outcomes. As identity is fluid and changes over time, it is possible that these individuals might become politicized at a later time, or that a “highly politicized” identity could disintegrate over time as well. However, at the time of the interview, these three respondents had a non-politicized identity, and I argue that this correlates with the lack of experiences with discrimination and little or knowledge of family immigration story. These three respondents were also younger, ranging in age from 21-26, thus they were in elementary school during the 9/11 attacks and events such as those did not impact them as strongly.

No experiences with Discrimination

Parsa Anvari, Bita Ebadi, and Shirin Malek all shared that they had not experienced any discrimination after 9/11, or felt the situation was trivial had no impact on them at all. For example, I had the following exchange with Bita:

Bit a Ebadi:

I feel like middle easterners in general were looked at differently after 9/11 just generally speaking. I never felt directly impacted by it but I don't know if there is a reason that I should.

Interviewer:

Why do you think you have not been impacted?

Bit a Ebadi:

I don't know (laughs). I haven't had any specific experience that would make me feel like I was directly impacted. –Bita, 21

Parsa, shared that people had made comments but he brushed them off as unimportant:

Parsa Anvari:

Um. I would say it's so rare that I might not have even realized or just wrote it off as what an idiot and just walked away. It wasn't to the point where I was affected by it...I sort of embraced the negative stereotypes so I would beat them to the punch when it came to jokes like that so I never had a problem with that.

Shirin cited living in a diverse area and looking ethnically ambiguous as the reasons why she has not experienced discrimination:

Shirin Malek:

People think I'm Egyptian sometimes...where I live is so diverse and open to different cultures so I haven't had a problem with it. I don't know if people think we are terrorists. You know after September 11 actually I did feel a little bit, yea I'm Iranian American but you'd kind of say the American part first.

It is important to note that although these individuals have not faced discrimination, the possibility of it occurring still exists, so it is interesting to consider what impact that would have on these individuals.

Vague Immigration Stories

Out of everyone I interviewed, Parsa, Bitra, and Shirin knew the least about how or even why their families left Iran. I found myself asking them multiple follow up questions to see if I could clarify the timeline of the story, but it proved difficult. For example, Parsa and I had the following exchange:

Interviewer: When did your family immigrate to the US?

Parsa Anvari: My dad was 13 and my mom lived in France when she was around middle school age as well so they all left Iran fairly early.

Interviewer: Before the revolution?

Parsa Anvari: Um...actually no. My dad was in Michigan at that time because I remember him talking about the situations where his friends would have to hide him sometimes because some bad stuff was going on. So I think he was out before.

Interviewer: And your mom?

Parsa Anvari: Um...I don't really ask too many details about that honestly just because its rough times for them and I don't really care to know about the tough times they face.

Parsa acknowledge that his parents may have faced a difficult time, but for whatever reason he has not followed up to ask his parents to share more about their experience. Similarly, Shirin told me the following story and could not answer the follow up questions I had about why her family left Iran to come to the United States:

Shirin Malek:

My dad's mom came to the U.S. years ago, long time ago. When my dad and mom got married they went to Turkey for 6 months and then were able to come to the states and that's pretty much it and I was born a year later in 1987.

Shirin never followed up with me, but Bita emailed me two weeks after the interview (unprompted) to share what she had found out about her family. Below is the story she initially shared with me, followed by the email she forwarded me from her mother with the actual story.

Bit a Ebadi:

Um from what I know, my parents came here 30 years ago I think and um...I don't know. I don't know much about their immigration but um they of course traveled to like Paris then them came to different places before they came here so it was a little bit of a struggle.

Interviewer:

Do you know why they left?

Bit a Ebadi: A better life? I don't really know too much about how exactly they got here. Um. I guess I should know. (laughing). Its important...maybe I can get back to you. I mean I just don't have this type of conversation on a daily basis you know. But yea I can get back to you about specifics.

Email from her mother:

Sanaz Ebadi:

I came to India to visit my aunts with my mother. We went to Athens, Greece, and with help of lawyer to Rome, Italy, and after almost 2 moths we came to L.A. through the N.Y. (*sic*). Your father came from Germany. I met him in the L.A. We were a minority religion³¹ and we were not comfortable with limits (not going to public with no cover scarf), and not allowed to have high position in government ruled companies. Our

³¹ Bit a's family is Zoroastrian

schools taken and ruled by Islamic rules. So we made a decision to move to America after revolution.

Bitá's case was particularly interesting because she had no knowledge of what turned out to be a story of escaping religious persecution. I was left wondering why her family had never shared the story with her, which would be an interesting follow up to the present study. Without the passing down of information, Bitá was unable to connect her family story to the broader narrative of the Iranian Revolution, which proved formative for all the politicized respondents. When I asked Bitá about her political engagement, she said she was not engaged even though she knew it was important to stay informed, it was not a priority for her.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

I began this paper seeking to understand the mechanisms that tie ethnic identity to political consciousness, and how these may vary among group members. To answer these questions I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with 1.5 and second generation Iranian Americans; I was particularly interested in learning what this process might look like for individuals who pass for white even though their ethnic group overall does not. Using my interview data, I developed a typology of politicized ethnic identity; my findings indicate that there is a relationship between politicized ethnic identity and experiences with discrimination, both direct and indirect, as well as knowledge of the family's immigration narrative. For those who had personally experienced discrimination, this in itself activated a politicized identity in many cases, which is in line with the literature on reactive ethnicity. Even if the individual did not have knowledge of their family's immigration narrative at the time of the incident, many ultimately learned this information later on. My findings add nuance to the theory of reactive ethnicity by demonstrating the ways direct experiences with discrimination as well as perceived

discrimination of Iranian Americans as a group can trigger reactive ethnicity. Some of my respondents' politicized identity formed as a result of knowledge of discrimination of family, friends, or even just the community in general. Particularly for those individuals whose racial ambiguity allowed them the privilege of passing for white, indirect mechanism ultimately contributed to their ethnic politicization. Finally, I demonstrate that the absence of these mechanisms leads to a non-politicized outcome for some of my respondents. Age also proved to be a factor for the non-politicized individuals; my findings indicate that events such as the 9/11 attacks were not as formative for younger individuals (now in their early twenties).

This study began by asserting the need to understand variations in politicized ethnic identity among group members. I held no assumption that all members of an ethnic group will, or even should, assert a politicized ethnic identity, but rather offered a typology which points to mechanisms that lead to politicized or non-politicized outcomes. While this study focuses on Iranian Americans, this model might also find applications in the case of other racial and ethnic communities, including other Middle Eastern groups or Asian Americans who experience selective racialization or are considered "honorary white," a status that is tenuous at best. In addition, the typology could be expanded to include other factors which were beyond the scope of this study. For example, many of the politicized respondents indicated that they had a sibling who had no had no interest in ethnic politics. In this case, it would be interesting to also examine their individual networks to help explain the different outcomes. Yen Le Espiritu (2002) finds that institutions such as ethnic clubs and ethnic studies programs play a critical role in the development of racial/ethnic consciousness, so possibly one sibling engaged in these types of activities and the other did not. This is something I would be interested in interrogating in a future version of this study. Additionally, this within-family variance brings the topic of family

narrative into further discussion—why would the family narrative be politicizing for one sibling and not the other? This requires further investigating through interviews with the siblings as well as the parents. I would also be interested in a closer examination of gender and religious differences, but my small sample did not yield enough information to see the variation within these variables. Finally, I would suggest additional studies on politicized ethnic identity that bridge the literature on racialization and collective memory. With more studies of this type it will be possible to gain additional perspective on the relationship between ethnic identity, political consciousness, and ultimately, mobilization.

CHAPTER FIVE:

CONCLUSION

Periods of rupture [are] those periods when identities, for one reason or another, are questioned by those who carry them, are called into question by others, or are severely tested by events. At these times identities lose their taken-for-granted quality...such situations call for a re-narration of group identity.

We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity
Stephen Cornell, 2000.

As I began thinking about the conclusion to my dissertation and culmination of my doctoral research, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States. On his 6th day in office he issued an executive order banning all travel to the United States by citizens from Iran, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. Within 48 hours I received multiple phone calls and messages from family and friends in the United States and in Iran about what this meant for people in the Iranian community. As a US citizen I was technically exempt from the ban, however almost every Iranian American is a dual national, as Iran's nationality rules consider anyone born to an Iranian father an Iranian citizen, often irrespective of other salient facts.³² Given this information, my mother and brother both immediately prohibited me from visiting Iran during the entirety of the Trump Presidency, and even from travelling internationally to anywhere in case there was a real risk of being detained for my Iranian citizenship. While a Federal Judge deemed this so-called "Muslim ban" unconstitutional twenty-four hours after being issued, the fear continues to permeate the community in a way that is all too familiar. Just a few weeks later a revised travel ban was issued, removing Iraq from the list of countries and slightly adjusting the requirements (removing green card and current visa holders

³² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/01/28/unhcr-speaks-donald-trump-suspends-us-refugee-program/>

from the ban), but nonetheless re-igniting the conversation about this discriminatory legislation.³³ This made me reflect on this idea presented by Cornell in the epigraph, about periods of rupture and subsequent shifting of narratives. What would it take for Iranians to “re-write” their racial narrative and stop claiming membership to whiteness—is the “Muslim ban” enough to cause a rupture in this narrative? During all of my interviews with second generation Iranian Americans we discussed political consciousness/activism within the Iranian community. One of my respondents, Roya Bamshad, made a poignant observation about her perceptions of the Iranian community which I think best answers this question:

Roya Bamshad:

We [Iranians] do not understand that we are still a very disenfranchised community. Even though there are many successful Iranians there are still many that are suffering and dealing with racism on a daily basis. Political identity is unconditionally bound to empowerment; so many Iranians don’t feel the need to have a political identity because they think all Iranians are doing so well. The depths of what we are going to suffer, us here abroad and back home in Iran is so vast. It’s like a grain of sand against a tidal wave.

I argue that this absence of collective narratives of racialized discrimination is directly tied to the shock of all the Iranians detained in the first days of Trump’s “Muslim ban;” video interviews at the various airports show many Iranians in complete disbelief that the treatment they faced. In one video released by the Washington Post, a young Iranian man is outraged and telling the reporter about his friends who had been detained, “They are Iranians they have green cards they have jobs they are scientists at Johns Hopkins University!³⁴” Multiple articles about how Iranians are so successful and that doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. had been detained, as though it was a mistake to detain these individuals if only their profession or class status had been revealed.

Without a collective community agreement that Iranians (and other Middle Eastern groups) are

³³ Washington Post March 6, 2017. This second executive order was also blocked by a federal judge in Hawaii

³⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/trump-gives-no-sign-of-backing-down-from-travel-ban/2017/01/29/4ffe900a-e620-11e6-b82f-687d6e6a3e7c_story.html?tid=sm_fb&utm_term=.c6fff0e6f2fd

not considered white by common societal knowledge, this disconnect between these narratives and lived experiences of Iranians in the United States will continue to cause discomfort.

As I discussed in the earlier chapters, the 2020 Census may include a new racial category for the first time in four decades: MENA- Middle Eastern North African.³⁵ Since 1909, the U.S. has officially categorized people from the Middle East and North Africa as “White/Caucasian,” but in 2020, Iranians and the other 29 ethnic and national origin groups included in this category will be *extracted* from whiteness literally and figuratively if this proposal is approved. But is this shift in legal designation enough to create a shift in the narrative? A few days after the “Muslim Ban” I was driving to dinner with my mother and shared with her this information about the possible change in racial categories in 2020. I explained how there may be a new category and that underneath the “MENA” racial box would be 30 subcategories to select the specific ethnic/national origins. She listened quietly and then when I was finished she said, “I don’t know about all that. It doesn’t matter, I’m still going to mark white anyways.” In the wake of the discriminatory legislation and all the multiple discussions I have had with her about race and my ongoing research, she is unwavering in her belief in this Caucasian racial narrative, as are many Iranians. It is unclear what it would take to shift the narrative, and what this will look like in the coming years when the third generation of Iranian Americans enters adulthood.

In this dissertation my aim was to come away with an understanding of the role of narrative in how an individual comes to understand their racial and ethnic (and politicized ethnic) identity in the broader context. What are the stories they are hearing, and how are they negotiating and making sense of this information? In looking at the case of Iranian Americans,

³⁵ Washington Post, October 22, 2016

my dissertation has examined the broad question: How do intergenerational immigrant narratives passed from parent to child shape the identity of 1.5 and 2nd generation immigrants in the United States? Further, how are the adult children negotiating the potentially conflicting narratives they receive from their families, from the media, and other sources? In three separate empirical papers I looked at narratives relating to race and ethnicity and how these are shaping the second generation in interesting ways. In chapter two I examined the discourse exists that around race and whiteness in the Iranian American community, and how Iranian Americans experience and construct racial boundaries. I found that there is a process of upward boundary work, with Iranians claiming membership in a racial category they know to be at the top of the racial hierarchy (white/Caucasian) while also distancing from a targeted group (Middle Eastern and more specifically Muslim), particularly in the post-9/11 context. These processes look different for the first and second generation, with the latter having a complicated relationship with the racial categories, often going back and forth about how they identify.

In Chapter Three and Four I focused on narratives and ethnic identity: first I looked at the role of intergenerational immigrant narrative on the significance of ethnic identity among second generation Iranian Americans, as well as what narratives exist and how are they used to draw boundaries both within (and outside) the Iranian community. I argued that the severity of the circumstances around the family departure from Iran as well as the regularity of recollection of this story are both important factors in the they way second generation Iranian Americans situate themselves within the broader context and connect to their ethnic identity. Further, the way the family talks about Iran and whether they have traveled there since the initial departure are both central to how second generation respondents navigate this information for themselves. Taken together, I argued that it is the combination of ones' personally acquired memories as well as the

inherited or appropriated memories of their parents that factor into the way these individuals draw boundaries around “Iranianness” within their generation. In the fourth chapter I took this argument a step further and examine the mechanisms, both direct and indirect, that activate ethnic political consciousness (herein referred to as *politicized ethnic identity*) among second generation Iranian Americans. I found that two main mechanisms emerged as more prominent in relation to politicized ethnic identity. The first is a direct experience with racial discrimination, which is consistent with the theory of reactive ethnicity. The second, I argued, is a strong connection to ones’ family immigration narrative, especially when the narrative includes struggle in the context of departure from Iran or upon arrival into the United States, can politicize an individual even in the absence of a negative personal experience.

Overall, my dissertation examined the role of intergenerational immigrant narrative in the identity development of second generation Iranian Americans. Using a cross-generational qualitative approach to examining understandings of racial and ethnic identity, I highlighted how the different types of narratives, ranging in severity and scope, impact these individuals, and how they are understanding what it means to be Iranian American through a dual lens: their own and that of their parents. While this study used the case of Iranian Americans, the implications of this study are not limited to this population. I argued that looking at intergenerational family narrative as a site of identity work broadens our understanding of how individuals draw on various sources of potentially conflicting discourse to ultimately situate their own experience in the context of race/ethnicity in the United States.

Implications for Future Research

“Identities are narratives, or stories that people tell about who they are (and who they are not).”

Belonging and the Politics of Belonging: *Patterns of Prejudice*
Nira Yuval-Davis, 2006

As I look to the future, I wonder about the next generation of Iranian Americans who are born and raised in the era of the “Muslim Ban” and of a possible racial recategorization as non-white. Will these individuals grow up thinking they are white? Will the existing narratives persist or will they be replaced by others? I am also curious how the experiences of the second generation will be passed down to the third—will the events surrounding the “Muslim Ban” or other unknown coming events be material shared intergenerationally in the way that stories of coming to America and facing difficulty were passed from the first to the second generation? While the context of the second generation stories is in the United States, I definitely think there is a possibility these narratives can function in a similar way in shaping the content/context of ethnic identity for the future generation of Iranian Americans—even more so if they are part of a largely stigmatized group.

After the Iranian Revolution, the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the Iran/Iraq War, 9/11, and now the Trump Administration and the “Muslim Ban,” Iranians have been subject to discrimination. As a community, sharing these stories and keeping the narrative active is a way to prepare and protect the younger generation for what seems to be an ongoing and continually re-emerging experience. This dissertation looked at the experiences of first and second generation Iranian Americans and the stories passed between generations as a way to examine the process of constructing and expressing Iranian identity in the current sociopolitical climate. These next four years will be a test for immigrants of all type in this country, but especially for Iranians and

others groups subject to profiling and prejudicial legislation which is causing families to be separated and access cut off. As Smith (2010) writes:

“Within civil society...we are making sense of events that are unfolding in real time before our very eyes, in present tense, with a heavy twist of the subjunctive and with information of sometimes doubtful validity...some retrospective is called for: we look back to the past, think about old clues in new ways, construct revised narratives, and contemplate changing our genre” (Smith 2010: p. 31).

Only time will tell if Iranian Americans will look at ongoing (and past) events with a different lens and being sharing a different set of narratives, or if we will continue hearing about “Caucasians on camels” for generations to come.

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