

**TRAUMA, EXILE, AND IDENTITY: A STUDY OF IRANIAN BAHÁ'Í  
REFUGEE EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES**

by

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**Thesis directed by Professor Janet Jacobs**

**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation research is the primary sociological study of Iranian Baha'í refugees in the United States and lies at the intersection of trauma, immigration, religion, and gender. Using data from fifty in-depth qualitative interviews with first generation Iranian Baha'ís in the United States, I investigate how members of this religious minority community experience, respond to, and cope with the trauma of persecution, the experience of exile and the challenge of religious preservation in the aftermath of mass trauma. More specifically, using feminist methodologies, I analyze the Iranian Baha'ís' experiences of persecution in Iran and their responses to it. Members of this group use passing, open displays of religiosity, or a combination of passing and open displays to negotiate their difficult social position in Iran. I examine how the Baha'ís escaped Iran and the sense of exile they experience when trying to find a place in the United States. Further, I demonstrate that the Iranian Baha'ís experience challenges in the immigration process, as a consequence of cultural differences between them and members of the host culture, racial and religious tensions, loss of status, and generational tensions. Lastly, I explore the role of national and religious identity, as well as religious observance, in the process of individual and collective identity development.

*To Justus, my loving partner and husband, with whom I joyfully share a beautiful life full of love,  
laughter, growth, adventure, service, and peace.*

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

### A. Introduction: Who are the Baha'is?

The Baha'í faith is Iran's largest minority religion and has members all over the world. The religion was founded by Bahá'u'lláh, who is considered the prophet of the faith. His followers are referred to as Baha'ís, which means "followers of Bahá'u'lláh." The Baha'í faith has approximately five million members in over 180 countries all over the world. About 300,000-350,000 (ca. 0.5% of the population) Baha'ís reside in Iran (Kaussler 2013, Baha'ís of the United States 2009, Cameron and Danesh 2008, IHRDC 2006) which has a current estimated population of 66-69 million (CBC 2009, Hassan 2007). In the United States, the number of officially members of the Baha'í faith is ca. 150,000 (Pluralism Project 2015).<sup>2</sup>

One of the main teachings of the Baha'í faith is the oneness of mankind through unity in diversity. It also teaches the equality of women and men, the underlying unity of religions, and the need to eliminate prejudices of all types. This religion strongly promotes the need for universal peace and the importance of human rights (Cameron and Danesh 2008, U.S. Baha'í homepage 2004). The Baha'í world community has been very involved with the United Nations as well as several NGOs around the world in order to promote human rights and peace globally (Baha'í World News Service 2004, IHRDC 2006).

The Baha'í community does not have priests or mullahs, but rather elects nine adult members in each local community to act as the administrative body, called "local spiritual assembly" for each year. The national community also elects representatives for the "national

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<sup>2</sup> This number only includes those Baha'ís and their children who have officially declared as believers through the national Baha'í community. Individuals who regularly attend Baha'í events without this "declaration" are excluded from this count.

spiritual assembly,” also consisting of nine individuals. These administrative bodies typically consult with their communities before making decisions regarding the use of resources, teaching plans, and other activities within their respective Baha’í communities.

There has been a history of persecution of Baha’ís in Iran since the religion was founded in 1844. This persecution only intensified after the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. The possible reasons why Baha’ís have been singled out by the Iranian government and clergy throughout history are discussed below.

## **B. Islam and the Baha’ís**

### ***1. Baha’ís and the Denial of Human Rights Prior to the Islamic Revolution***

Despite the Baha’ís peaceful teachings, the Islamic leaders of Iran<sup>3</sup> see them as a threat to Islam and have systematically discriminated against them (Hassan 2007, Baha’í World News Service 2004). Within Islam, the persecution of other religions is in opposition to the teachings of Mohammad (Handal 2007, Buck 2003). The issue lies in the fact that the Baha’í faith was founded after Islam, thus clashing with the Shi’a interpretation of Islam that a 12<sup>th</sup> Imám named the “seal” will return. The Baha’ís believe that this 12<sup>th</sup> Imám has already returned and was not “a seal” but rather “a gate” to a new era (the Arabic word contains both definitions) (Handal 2007, IHRDC 2006, Buck 2003). This 12<sup>th</sup> Imám, from the perspective of Baha’ís, returned in the form of the Báb, who is considered one of two prophets within the Baha’í faith. He is said to have revealed himself first as a prophet to announce the coming of Bahá’u’lláh, the founder of the Baha’í faith. For this reason, the faith is rejected by the Muslim clergy and leadership in Iran and Baha’ís are considered heretics. Baha’ís are considered to have converted out of Islam, which is punishable by the death penalty in Iran (Schirmacher 2009). In addition to their

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed timeline of Iranian Leadership see Appendix A.

construction as heretics, the Baha'í faith was labeled as an invention by the colonial powers, along with a Zionist movement (Cameron and Danesh 2008, IHRDC 2006, Martin 1984).

In 1955, the persecution became more widespread when Mohammad Reza Shah gave up control over a number of religious affairs and delegated authority to the clergy (Momen 2010, IHRDC 2006, Akhavi 1980). The result of this shift in power was a systematic anti-Baha'í campaign. With permission from the Shah, during the month of Ramadan, one very powerful religious leader in Teheran started a violent propaganda scheme (Momen 2010, IHRDC 2006). Every day during the fast he included anti-Baha'í teachings in his sermons, encouraging other religious leaders around the country to do the same in order to deal with the "Baha'í issue." This campaign encouraged and led to mob violence, murders, destruction of homes and Baha'í centers, desecration of cemeteries, expulsion from schools and employment, and the abduction of women who were forced to marry Muslims. During the third week of Ramadan, the national Baha'í center was taken over and Khomeini established his office space there. Eventually, as the violence escalated, the government tried to stop the sermons, but the Sheikh refused, as did many other religious leaders around the country (Momen 2010, IHRDC 2006). During this time, accusations emerged that the former Shah's advisors were also Baha'í, further connecting Baha'ís to the Shah's anti-Islamic and anti-Iranian image (Hassan 2007). Throughout the years following the revolution these widespread ideas served to continue both systematic and spontaneous acts of persecution.

## ***2. Persecution of Baha'ís after the 1979 Islamic Revolution***

Following the Islamic revolution in 1979, the first step was to make all non-Muslims in Iran second-class citizens, without civil rights (Kaussler 2012, Cameron and Danesh 2008, Hassan 2007, IHRDC 2006, Baha'í World News Service 2004). The Iranian government made

exceptions for a few protected minorities: Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. Although the Baha'is make up the largest religious minority in Iran, they did not receive even those limited rights (Hassan 2007, FIDH 2003).

Special “guidelines” were put in place to deal with the “Baha’i issue.” This “represented a state-led plan to repress the Baha’i community. Among other things, it mandated routine surveillance of the Baha’is and imposed severe restrictions on the practice and public expression of the Baha’i faith” (Kaussler 2012, p.75). As a consequence, many members of this religion have suffered physical violence; have had their homes burned down; and have been fired from their jobs, and have had their businesses taken away (Baha’i World News Service 2004, 2008). In addition, Baha’is have not been allowed to attend universities in Iran or hold religious meetings, all in an attempt to force them to convert to Islam, a demand that is a betrayal of their faith (Baha’i World News Service 2008 and 2004, IHRDC 2006, Bollag 1998).

Besides attacking members of this community, the Islamic leaders also destroyed many of the buildings and ancient sites that survived the previous attacks preceding the revolution. Many more houses were torn down and grave yards were dug up. These actions were a continued effort of destroying the physical history of the Baha’i faith without attracting too much international attention and criticism. But in trying to destroy the Baha’i faith and erase any trace of its existence, the Iranian government was erasing parts of the Persian culture. Many of these sites and monuments that have been destroyed carry the history of the country (Baha’i World News Service 2004).

Another reason for the increased violence and the denial of religious minority status was that the religion had a large number of followers and supporters and this posed a greater threat to the Islamic government than the other religions that were accepted and tolerated as minorities.

Further, given that these other faiths are older than Islam, their followers were not considered to have been Muslim first and then converted to a different religion.

Between 1978 and 1998 over 200 Baha'ís have been killed in Iran (Baha'ís of the United States 2009). Most of these deaths were through execution. However, in the same time frame, thousands have been imprisoned or otherwise persecuted exclusively due to their membership in the Baha'í faith (Baha'ís of the United States 2009). Accurate data for deaths since 1998 is not available. A special U.N. report from 2012 found that close to 500 Baha'ís have been arrested between 2004 and 2011 (Kaussler 2012).

In 1993 a secret memorandum by the supreme leader Khamenei became public which outlined ways that the progress and development of the religion and people could be contained in Iran (Baha'í International Community 2010, IHRDC 2006, FIDH 2003). This document clearly described the intention of eliminating the Baha'í community in Iran and the historical roots of those outside of Iran. This document is also evidence that Khamenei believes that Baha'ís are a religious community and not a political organization and that he has genocidal intentions against them (Baha'í International Community 2010, IHRDC 2006). As a result of the 1993 memorandum, the Iranian government increased their terror of Baha'ís in an attempt to get them to recant their faith. They increased the number of executions of Baha'ís based on false accusations (Baha'í World News Service 2004).

### ***3. Baha'ís' Treatment During the Presidency of Ahmadinejad***

In 2005 there was another resurgence of anti-Baha'í activity, especially on the grounds that Baha'ís were spies for Israel and wanted to destroy Islam (Hassan 2007, IHRDC 2006). The supreme leader issued demands that military agencies identify and monitor Baha'ís in their regions. Since Ahmadinejad's election, "government-controlled media, including broadcasting

and print, intensified negative campaigns against religious minorities—particularly the Baha'is" (Hassan 2007, p.6). As a consequence, several Baha'is have been arrested and jailed in the Evin prison, which is well known for its human rights violations (CNN 2008). The government has also tolerated a number of vigilante acts against Baha'is across the country (IHRDC 2006).

Since 2005, the international Baha'i community has reported media attacks that distort history, sometimes creating false documentation to make the general public suspicious and hateful of Baha'is (IHRDC 2006). The media has depicted Baha'is as a tool of imperialist powers and of Israel and thus a threat to Islam and the Muslim people. The government and religious leaders of Iran, through the use of media, argue that the fact that the Baha'i world center is located in Haifa is proof of connection to the Zionist movement, despite the fact that Haifa became a holy site to Baha'is before the founding of the state of Israel. Several scholars, as well as organizations like Amnesty International, have expressed concern about this propaganda, given the current politicization of Muslim populations around the world (Amnesty International 2010, CNN 2008). They fear that large-scale violence against Baha'is in and outside of Iran is possible (IHRDC 2006).

### **C. International Responses to the Treatment of Baha'is in Iran**

For nearly 20 years, from 1982 to 2001, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights passed a resolution opposing the overall human rights situation in Iran as well as the persecution of Baha'is, specifically (Buck 2003). However, little has been done to prevent injustices from happening. There have been many recent rights violations, including the arrests of the seven Baha'i leaders (and their sentencing), as well as the arrests of 50 youth who were volunteering with a non-profit organization to teach non-religious subjects such as math and

English to underprivileged children in Shiraz (BBC 2008, USDS 2008, HRW 2006, Affolter 2005, Buck 2003).

There is some discussion as to whether the treatment of Baha'is is a case of attempted genocide and, if so, why the international community has not acted more forcefully to end the persecution of Baha'is in Iran. For example, Harff and Gurr (1988) differentiate between genocides and politicides and classify the persecution of Baha'is as a politicide—defined as “mass murders targeted at political parties” (p.363). However, when evaluating their criteria, and recognizing Baha'is as a religious rather than political group, the more accurate label would be xenophobic genocide—defined as “mass murders of ethnically, religiously, or nationally distinct groups” (Harff and Gurr 1988, p.363).

However, to date, Iran has not been charged with crimes against humanity. Several scholars have identified the situation of Baha'is as fitting the U.N. definition for genocide and suggest that even if the numbers of those dead does not yet compare to those of other genocides, Iran still clearly intends to eliminate this group and is currently conducting an ideological genocide (Affolter 2005). Finally, it is suggested that the Baha'i-phobia in Iran continues to feed Islamaphobia in the West because it portrays Iranian Muslims (and Muslims in general) as extremists and religious fanatics who violate the human rights of non-Muslims. This in turn creates more anti-Western sentiment in Iran leading to a vicious cycle of hatred and suffering.

#### **D. Existing Studies and the Need for Research on Iranian Baha'is**

In an article in the Middle Eastern Studies Association Bulletin, Velasco makes an argument for the need of research on Iranian Baha'is (2001). He posits that the lack of research on Baha'is within Middle Eastern and especially Iranian studies is a reflection of the biases that exist among scholars. Despite the fact that “minority studies is in vogue” (p.194), Baha'is who make up the largest minority in Iran have mostly been neglected by the academic community. He

contrasts this lack of research to other groups, including Iranian Jews. He also argues that the study of Iranian Baha'ís could vastly expand scholars' understanding of the processes of identity development and the negotiation of cultural and religious identities. Further, he states that,

“This exclusion is significant. The nineteenth-century Persians who converted to the Baha'í faith evidently felt that the boundary between the Islamicate world to which they truly belonged—they could belong to no other—and the Baha'í faith was bridgeable. Members of this faith were nineteenth-century Persians representing a microcosm of Persian society, steeped in its culture, its traditions, its values. They were both Baha'ís—they belonged to a distinctive community, with traits that differentiated them from all other Persian communities—and they were Persians—they shared with their compatriots a common education, common material circumstances and pressures, and a great deal more. Yet, in current Islamicist scholarship they are not integrated into the spiritual, social, religious, or political landscape of... the Middle East in the way that the Zoroastrians, Jews, merchants, or 'ulama might be. Nor are they even explicitly excluded. Instead they are negated.” (Velasco 2001, p. 192)

The reason Velasco argues so vehemently for the inclusion of research on Baha'ís is that the study of this population can provide an understanding in the ways in which identities and cultures intersect in a modernized and globalized world. He posits that the integration of the Baha'í faith into our mentality, “might well change many of our understandings of the multilayered processes of identity formation, affirmation, and development” in Iran (p.192). He further argues that it might also allow for a better understanding of present day Iran.

Despite this impassioned call for research on Iranian Baha'ís, research continues to be limited. The research that exists on Baha'í communities, which I present throughout this

dissertation, typically consists of political or historical research for purposes of policy making in relation to Iran or Baha'í communities outside of the United States, including Australia, Canada, Iran, United Kingdom, the African continent, and Scandinavian countries (Kaussler 2012, Lee 2011, Karlberg 2010, Schirmacher 2009, Cameron and Danesh 2008, McAuliffe 2008 and 2007, Handal 2007, Hassan 2007, Affolter 2005, Dossa 2004, Buck 2003, Velasco 2001, Bollag 1998, Graham and Khosravi 1997, Gilad 1990 and 1989, Martin 1984, Akhavi 1980). Further, several of these studies include Baha'ís only as one of several groups under investigation.

A few studies exist on Iranians in the United States which include Baha'ís as a small subgroup among many, or text analysis—rather than empirical studies—on Baha'ís specifically (Mostofi 2003, Humes and Clark 2000, Bozorgmehr 1997, Mozorgmehr and Sabagh 1989). The majority of articles, both within the United States and elsewhere, are case studies of just one or two individuals (with the exception of Bozorgmehr who conducted a large scale survey of Iranian-Americans and included a Baha'í sample of 87). Most of the existing research focuses exclusively on the persecution of Baha'ís in Iran from an outsider perspective. The few empirical studies that exist, present limited research on persecution, immigration, or identity. However, because their sample sizes are so limited it is difficult to draw conclusions about larger patterns within this community.

As the first in-depth study of Iranian Baha'í refugees in the United States, this dissertation provides a thorough look into the experiences of Baha'ís both in Iran and the United States. Further, this research adds to the existing, though limited, global research on this community.

## **E. Theoretical Frameworks**

McAuliffe (2007) argues that members of the Iranian diaspora live in a state of exile, defined by distance (both temporal and physical) from their homeland. As a consequence, he

found that the children of Iranian exiles develop a shared sense of home with their parents, including the desire to “return home,” despite the fact that the children in his study were foreign born. In comparing Muslim Iranians with Baha’is, McAuliffe found that while the second generation Muslims felt excluded from the host country and wished to return to Iran, and thus “home,” second generation Baha’is did not share this longing, nor did they share a sense of Iranian identity. Thus, the Baha’i case represents a different dynamic of identity formation in McAuliffe’s study.

In her work on Iranian-American identity, Mostofi (2003) concluded that identity formation in the Iranian immigrant community is not only based on their self-identification, but also on the responses from the members of the host culture. She states that,

“Identity formation for immigrants not only involves internal influences guided by memories of the homeland, experiences of immigration, and from members of the ethnic group itself but also by outside influences—from the members, laws, and circumstances of the host culture” (p.696).

Therefore, a person negotiates their own identity and positionality within the larger cultural context through identification of differences between themselves and the host culture. Further, she argues that without the “other” (members of the host culture), “recognition of collective identity, differences, or individuality are meaningless” (Mostofi 2003, p. 696).

Research on other immigrant and refugee groups, such as Southeast Asians, found that multi-generational families of refugees are often in a long-term state of crisis, due to their traumatic pasts and present day challenges in exile (Detzner 1996). Detzner focused specifically on family dynamics and the ways in which the older generation struggles with their status loss in the host country, while the younger generation appears to become “too Americanized” at their

relatives' dismay. This study concluded that the younger generations often assimilate quickly and more easily into the host culture, while the older generation remains in a state of long-term crisis.

In addition, other research has found that the development of religious and ethnic identities differ by religious groups, home country, and host country (Kurien 2014, Amarasingam 2008, Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007, Peek 2005,). However, these various studies agree that these identities are negotiated in the context of majority and minority groups, membership and the shifts that take place in group status as a result of the migration process. Further, these studies show how immigrant identity is shaped by the host culture's construction of an ethnic or religious group.

Lastly, Massey and Higgins (2011) investigates whether or not the act of immigration had a theologizing or alienating effect on immigrants' religious beliefs and practice. In their research on Christian immigrants in the United States, they found that immigration led to reduced religious identification. However, their data was based on a large scale survey, leaving unanswered why their religious practice was disrupted. These findings are different from research on Muslim identity development and practice that suggests that immigration serves as a factor that increases religiosity and religious identification (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007, Peek 2005).

In an effort to provide an in-depth understanding of trauma, exile, and identity among Iranian Baha'í refugees in the United States, this research draws on the existing theoretical frameworks on exile, religious and ethnic identity formation, and immigration. Throughout this dissertation, I compare and contrast Baha'í refugees experience of these processes to those of other immigrant groups. I will demonstrate that aspects of the Baha'ís' refugee experience is

similar to those of other immigrant groups, which supports some existing theories on larger immigration patterns. At the same time, there are ways in which Baha'is' experiences separate them from other immigrant and refugee groups, further expanding our understanding of the complexity of trauma, exile and identity as well as that of Baha'is' experiences.

## **F. Chapter Overview**

In the next chapter, I provide a detailed description of the methods and methodologies used during this research. Following the methods chapter, the four data chapters contain the findings of my research. In chapter 3, I discuss the range of persecution that Baha'i women, men, and children endured. I also describe the ways in which members of this community responded to the persecution in Iran. Chapter 4 shifts the focus to the journeys out of Iran. In this chapter, I describe the processes of escaping persecution and trying to find a place as exiles in a new host society. I provide two accounts of flight stories and discuss the ways in which Iranian Baha'is experience their exile.

In chapter 5, I highlight the four main challenges that Iranian Baha'i Immigrant families encounter as they settle into the United States. These include cultural difference, racial and religious tensions, loss of status, and familial tensions. Chapter 6 describes Iranian Baha'is' experiences with regard to national and religious identity formation and the development of a collective Baha'i identity in Iran. I then explore Baha'is' experience in the United States and the difficulties that Baha'i refugees encounter in integrating and connecting to the American Baha'is community. In the concluding chapter, I provide a summary of my findings and discuss their larger implications. In this chapter, I discuss my contributions to our understanding of refugee and immigrant populations, as well as recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODS

### A. Introduction

This research is based on 50 qualitative in-depth interviews with men and women who are first generation Iranian-Baha'í immigrants in the United States. In this chapter, I provide detailed descriptions of the sampling method, site selection, and sample demographic characteristics. I also present descriptions of the data collection, data analysis, and data handling methods. Finally, I discuss my approach as a feminist researcher, thoughts on language and narratives, my insider status, limitations, as well as my positionality as a researcher in this project.

### B. Project Development

#### 1. *Sampling and Site Selection*

The sample population for this research consists of first generation Iranian immigrants in the United States who are members of Baha'í families. This includes men and women over the age of 18 who were living in Colorado, Washington, California, and New Mexico at the time of data collection. Using snowball sampling, a convenience sample of 50 individuals was interviewed. Their time of arrival in the United States varied greatly. Some interviewees came to the United States as recently as six months prior to the interviews and some have been in the United States since before the 1979 revolution in Iran. Their persecution histories also varied greatly, but all have experienced at least some level of consistent oppression while living in Iran due to their religion.

Data collection primarily focused on Colorado, Washington, and northern California for a number of reasons. There are large concentrations of Iranian Baha'ís in these areas. The other areas with large concentrations are: Los Angeles, New York, New Jersey, Washington D.C., and

Houston. During the research design stage I had to make decisions about which of these regions to include, given the resources available. I knew I would not be able to conduct field work in all of these areas and felt that it was important to have clusters of interviews in each region that I included, in order to be able to assess whether location has impacted the refugees experiences. I was confident that I would be able to gain entrée to the Bay Area, Washington and Colorado Iranian Baha'í communities through my extended social networks in a number of Baha'í communities in these regions.

After gaining Internal Review Board approval in the spring of 2010, I began recruitment for this research in June of the same year. I simultaneously began contacting Baha'í communities in Colorado and Washington state. Initially, recruitment in Colorado was slow and I was only able to interview two individuals in Colorado early that summer. Having lived in Seattle for a number of years, I felt I would be more successful there in reaching potential interviewees during the start of my fieldwork. I spent one month in Seattle during that summer and was able to interview about ten individuals. More importantly, I had laid the groundwork for reaching more members of the community in the future through snowball sampling efforts. The interviews conducted during this initial research phase served as an important part of the research process. They allowed me to revise my interview protocol based on my experiences in the field.

At the onset of this research, I planned to interview both first and second generation Iranian Baha'ís in the United States. However, after conducting nine first generation and three second generation interviews, it became clear that the first generation interviews provided so much rich data that a separate study would be necessary on the second generation to do each of these populations justice. Therefore, I revised my research design and began focusing solely on

recruiting first generation Iranian Baha'ís starting in the fall of 2010 through the spring of 2014. Next, I provide the details for my various recruitment strategies in the different regions.

**Washington.** To conduct interviews in Washington, I lived there for several months during summers and semester breaks. In Washington, I had contacts to members of the Baha'í community because I formerly lived there. I began by contacting a number of members of the Baha'í community there and had them circulate digital flyers about my research. First, I contacted Iranian Baha'ís who I knew in those communities directly. I began by interviewing individuals who contacted me directly and those whom I had contacted. After each interview, I asked participants if they knew others who might be interested and willing to be interviewed. Typically, I had potential interviewees contact me, because I did not want to pressure those community members who might feel a responsibility to participate, because the research was being conducted by a Persian Baha'í. Through these referrals, I was able to diversify the geographic regions and interview individuals in various Baha'í communities in Washington. This was useful in reaching across class and immigration histories as residence directly relates to their socio-economic status and many of the more recent immigrants tend to live in the same local community. I also attended some Baha'í events and gatherings in communities that were known for having a high percentage of Iranian members in the region.

Baha'ís communities meet every 19 days (the length of a Baha'í month) for their monthly “Feast” where they have devotionals and discuss any community activities, plans or concerns. One particular “Feast” I attended proved to be incredibly significant in my attempts to contact Iranian Baha'ís and gain entrée to these populations. At this gathering, I met eight individuals who all expressed interest or willingness in being interviewed for my research. I believe that my attendance at this event demonstrated to them my insider status through membership in the faith

and therefore implied safety in participating. I made sure to schedule the interviews that night to be conducted within only a few days. I knew that it was important to conduct the interviews while our meeting was still fresh in their minds. Only one individual rescheduled a few times before finally being interviewed on a later fieldwork trip to the region. This respondent was very involved in assisting the newest refugee members in the community with translation services, which often meant she was needed without much notice.

A few interviews led to referrals to other Iranian Baha'ís who lived in neighboring communities. I also made sure to contact other communities where I knew more settled and established Iranian Baha'ís lived. I had this knowledge from previously living in the region and felt it was important to diversify my sample to members of the community who not only immigrated recently, but also those who had immigrated long ago—some as far back as before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In Washington it proved vital to be present locally in order to set up interviews as pre-scheduled interviews were often rescheduled. I believe that in large part this is due to the fact that a larger percentage of the sample from this region consisted of more recent immigrants whose lives tend to be less routine than those who have settled long-term.

**Colorado.** In Colorado, I sent email communications to the secretaries of all of the Baha'í communities in the state. Their contact information is publicly available on the Internet. In those emails, I identified myself only by name and my role as a graduate student with the university. I got very little response from these efforts. I did not want to emphasize my identity as an Iranian Baha'í because I did not want to deter individuals who may not be very active members of the community from participating in my research. I realized quickly, though, that it was important for me to identify myself as a Baha'í because I was confident that this would make potential interviewees feel more at ease about my intentions. Many refugees are very

careful about revealing their identities out of fear that Iranian Muslims connected to the Iranian government might be trying to identify remaining Baha'ís in Iran.

After reaching out for a second time, with a revised letter identifying myself as an Iranian Baha'í, I was able to reach a large number of Iranian Baha'ís who contacted me directly for interviews. Again, after each interview, I asked for referrals to other community members. I also attended several regional and local Baha'í events where I would briefly introduce my research. After one interview, the interviewee invited me to join a dinner she was attending that evening. She said that twice a year a number of Iranian Baha'ís in her region get together to socialize and after conducting the interview, she felt very strongly that I should meet the rest of her group. I joined her immediately following the interview and met a restaurant full of Iranian Baha'ís who had not heard about my research through my other efforts. This connection led to a number of interviews which, through snowballing, led to a great number of interviews after my very slow recruitment beginnings in Colorado.

**California.** In the Bay Area of California, I conducted all of my recruitment before traveling there. I knew one American Baha'í there who assisted in contacting several communities in the region for me. Once I had a handful of interviews scheduled, I traveled there to conduct the interviews face to face. I was able to get referrals from interviewees prior to actually conducting the interviews, which allowed me to maximize on my field work travel there.

**New Mexico.** Finally, I was contacted by several Iranian Baha'ís living in New Mexico because they had heard about my research through their contacts in Colorado and wanted to participate in the research. I did not want to turn away these interviewees, despite the fact that I did not initially plan to conduct field work in New Mexico. Conducting skype and other video interviews with this group allowed me to include their experiences in this study. One of the

motivations for my work is to give voice to a population that is frequently silenced. For this reason, I felt it was important to include this group, despite their living in a region that I had not designed to be part of the sample. New Mexico also has a large population of Iranian Baha'í refugees, even if this community is smaller than the other three. I learned that many settle there because the climate is very similar to certain parts of Iran. Finally, the choice of including Washington, California, and Colorado in my field work was not only due to the presence of Iranian Baha'ís in these communities, but also my connection to them and confidence that I could successfully gain entrée. In the case of New Mexico, the interviewees reached out to me and I did not have to work to gain entrée into their community.

Once I had conducted between 38 and 40 interviews, I was starting to reach saturation. I stopped actively recruiting new interviewees during the winter of 2013/2014 and only continued to pursue those contacts that had already been established. I also wanted to complete several more interviews to make sure I had reached saturation before leaving the field. I officially ended my fieldwork in May 2014 after the completion of my 50<sup>th</sup> interview.

The final sample consists of 29 women and 21 men. Their ages range from 18-83. Thirty-eight percent of the sample lived in Washington, 38% in Colorado, 14% in the Bay Area and 10% in New Mexico at the time of the interview. All of these sites were located within larger metropolitan areas in these states. Further, 78% percent of the interviews were conducted face to face and 20% were completed with the assistance of a video chat. Only one interview was conducted over the phone because the interviewee did not have the computer skills to use a video chat. Finally, most of the interviews were conducted with a mix of English and Farsi, but 70% were conducted primarily in English and 30% primarily in Farsi.

**Table 1.1** Demographic characteristics of the sample by age and gender.

Age Group	(n)	%	# Women, # Men
18	2	4%	2 Women
20-29	4	8%	3 Women, 1 Man
30-39	7	14%	6 Women, 1 Man
40-49	17	34%	9 Women, 8 Men
50-59	9	18%	3 Women, 6 Men
60-69	6	12%	2 Women, 4 Men
70+	5	10%	4 Women, 1 Man
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>29 Women (58%), 21 Men (42%)</b>

**Table 1.2** Demographic characteristics of the sample by location of residence.

Location of Residence	(n)	%
Washington State	19	38%
Colorado	19	38%
California – Bay Area	7	14%
New Mexico	5	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 1.3** Demographic characteristics of the sample by primary language during the interview.

Primary Interview Language	(n)	%
English	35	70%
Farsi	15	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 1.4** Demographic characteristics of the sample by mode of interview.

Mode of Interview	(n)	%
Face to Face	39	78%
Video Chat (Skype or ooVoo)	10	20%
Phone	1	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

## **C. Data Collection and Analysis**

### ***1. Life History Interviews***

The data were collected from 2010-2014, using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The majority of the interviews were conducted between the summer of 2010 and the winter of 2013. A handful of interviews were conducted in the spring of 2014, with data collection ending in May of that year. The use of semi-structured interview protocols allowed for flexibility in adapting the questions to follow a more natural conversation flow rather than a strict and set path which is vital to building rapport with participants (Baca Zinn 2001, Marshall and Rossman 2006). This approach also allowed for additional unanticipated information to be shared by the interviewees making the collected data more comprehensive and reflective of their experience.

The interview questions were designed with a number of goals in mind: 1) to document the experiences of religious persecution among Baha'is in Iran; 2) to determine how the first generation of refugees copes with the traumas they have experienced both individually and as a community; 3) to identify how they experience their lives in exile and through which practices (if any) they work to preserve their religious identity or culture; and 4) to identify the role of gender in all of these processes.

The interview schedule consisted of questions concerning their life histories, including experiences of persecution in Iran, the process and challenges of emigration, the importance and meaning of religion in their lives, the importance of religious observance, how they cope with trauma, as well as their views on the significance of retaining the memory of trauma within the family.<sup>4</sup> The questions also addressed their feelings regarding

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for the full interview protocol.

Iran, their host communities, and their feelings about the Baha'í communities in Iran and the United States.

All of the interviews were digitally audio recorded with the permission of the interviewees. This not only allowed me to listen more actively and be more present with the respondents, but it also allowed for a more natural conversation flow during the course of the interview. In addition—because I did not have to record the responses in writing—I could take notes on follow up and clarification questions, as well as non-verbal expressions, emotions, and themes that stood out. The interviews were typically conducted in the interviewees' homes. A handful of interviews were conducted in private work offices and one in a private room at a public library. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to eight hours, with an average length of two hours. The interviewees were focused and engaged during the interviews. Many of them shared family photos and other documents that brought their stories to life. Because the majority of the interviews took place in homes, I usually spent some time there after each interview was completed.

Persian customs are very important in these families, and it is customary that hosts will at least serve tea, fruit, and sweets. Knowing the importance of these traditions, I spent as much time with the respondents as felt appropriate. Many families insisted that I join them for meals before or after interviews and even those who had very little (due to clear financial difficulties) insisted that I share in their family meals.

In addition to traditional Iranian hospitality, in many cases the interviewees and their families felt the need to thank me for doing this work and expressed how grateful they were that I was giving them a voice. The truth is that they are the ones who are giving so much of themselves and my work—while timely and relevant—would have been impossible without their

willingness to share of themselves, their histories, and their present day lives. They often wanted to know my story after they shared so much of their own lives. Thus, I often had to negotiate how much of my personal story to reveal in the research setting. Given that these questions typically arose after the formal interviews were completed, I felt comfortable in sharing some information about my life history in order to reciprocate the trust they had shown me. I did not provide monetary compensation for the interviews, but always offered to provide the interviewees with a copy of their own recorded life stories. Many of them voiced a desire to have their life histories on record so that they could share them with their children and future generations.

As soon as I left the interviews, I jotted down additional notes in the car or more typically voice recorded my thoughts and comments about informal conversations over tea and meals on my way home. Recording voice memos was immensely helpful in processing the interviews as well as in identifying connections that stood out during the course of the interviews. Each night after an interview or the next morning (many of these interviews happened in the evenings and often ran late into the night), I jotted down additional notes in formal memos. In these memos, I recorded interpretations, questions, thoughts, analyses, and my own reactions to the stories I had witnessed. I also transcribed my voice memos into these written memos at this time. The memos served as part of the data for my analysis.

## ***2. Safety/Confidentiality Measures***

At the time of the interview, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form and were provided with a copy to keep. I stressed the voluntary nature of the interview and ensured that the participants understood that they could decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any point during the process. All of the interviews were conducted in

interviewee's homes, private work offices or in a private room at a public library to ensure privacy. With permission of the participants, all of the interviews were audio-recorded.

Confidentiality is incredibly important given the sample population for this study. Many of the interviewees fled Iran under very dangerous circumstances. Several of them had arrest or execution orders issued with their names and are still listed as "wanted" in Iran. Furthermore, many of the interviewees still have family members or other friends in Iran. It is very important that none of the interviewees are personally identifiable in order to protect their loved ones in Iran.

Being sensitive to the issue of confidentiality and security, all of the data for this research (written and audio recorded) was saved on my private computer on a password protected drive with individual documents also password protected by an additional password. In addition, a list containing the participants' contact information for the purposes of follow-up interviews or clarification questions was stored digitally in a separate file that was also password protected. Furthermore, a key linking actual interviewee names to pseudonyms was stored in a locked file cabinet in my private home office to which no one else had access. Upon official completion of my degree requirements, all of the primary data from this research will be destroyed and only interview transcripts containing pseudonyms will be kept for future research purposes.

### ***3. Data Analysis***

Data analysis took place in several phases. First, the interviews were translated, if necessary, and transcribed verbatim. I did not edit the transcripts for grammatical errors in the interviewees' speech. During the transcription process all names from interviews were replaced with pseudonyms. During the early field work stages, I transcribed interviews as they were conducted, which allowed me to revise my semi-structured interview protocol as the research

developed. During later stages of the research process I was able to hire a university contracted professional transcriber, with the aid of grant money, to assist with the transcription of the English language interviews. I reviewed all of the transcripts for accuracy and completeness by reading them while listening to the recorded interviews. This also allowed me to “re-live” the interviews through a process that brought to life the transcripts in more meaningful ways. To this day, I can hear the interviewees’ voices when I read through the transcripts or quotes. I personally translated and transcribed all of the Farsi language interviews. During this time, I also added memos regarding themes that were becoming visible in the data.

Upon transcription, the data were coded in multiple stages. First, several interviews were coded line-by-line in order to create a general coding scheme. Using this structured coding scheme, the remaining interviews were coded, adding new concepts and themes when needed. Then, using “focused coding,” these concepts were grouped together into broader categories that described an underlying construct. The concepts were eventually analyzed into a theoretical framework to describe the relationship among the discovered categories (Charmaz 2001, Lofland and Lofland 1995).

Overall, this research was based on a modified grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990, Charmaz 2001). I did some literature review during the design phase of this study, but limited it to a general understanding of the gaps in the existing literature. Further, because of the dearth of research on Iranian Baha’ís, most of this research focused on the experiences of persecution and exile of other populations. After the design phase of the project, I refrained from further engagement with the existing literature until after the data analysis phase was concluded. My insider status informed my approach to doing modified grounded theory research. Initially, I drew on my own experiences in the design stages of this

study. My analysis, however, revealed findings that both confirmed my perceptions and also others that were completely different from my initial expectations.

#### **D. The Feminist Enterprise**

This study was designed, conducted, and analyzed using a feminist perspective and feminist methodology. To me—as a feminist researcher—this meant investigating a topic that has social justice implications and that would allow me to use my privilege as a scholar and my relative freedom in the United States to give voice to a population that has been silenced for decades. Throughout the research process, my feminist perspective was reflected in my commitment to protecting the research participants, both by emphasizing the voluntary nature of their participation and discussion of all topics, as well as through anonymizing their participation in this study. In the analysis and writing stages, I tried to balance presenting the stories of participants in their own voices and providing analyses that echo their lived experiences as accurately as possible. Because of my insider status in this community, I made strong efforts to practice reflexivity throughout the entire research process. Lastly, upon completion of my degree requirements, I plan to make the findings of this research widely available to draw attention to the persecution of Baha'is in Iran and to provide knowledge that can assist local communities in the United States in better serving this refugee population.

##### ***1. Insider Status***

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to be cautious about the possible impact of the researchers' personal biographies on the research (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Interviewing survivors of religious persecution and mass trauma requires a great deal of sensitivity, and I worked to minimize the impact of my presence on the interview process as best as possible. Differences between the characteristics of the researcher and research participants

can create difficulties in gathering rich data (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Being an insider as a first generation immigrant and Iranian Baha'í was very beneficial for me as a researcher (Baca Zinn 2001).

Initially, I was concerned that interviewees may be reluctant to open their minds and hearts to re-living the traumatic experiences they had in Iran and as a consequence of their exile. Most of the interviewees began to share slowly, but as we got deeper into their life stories and histories, the more they remembered and shared. Most of the interviewees stated, after we completed the interviews, that they were surprised how much came up in our conversation, how much they remembered, and how much they shared. Brostoff (1998) describes this phenomenon in her work with Holocaust survivors. She found that after an initial hesitation to open up old wounds and memories, that “once the dam has been opened” the memories and stories flow freely and openly. I similarly found that once they started sharing, a freedom overcame my respondents, a freedom that they have never before had to share their joys, pains, traumas, and sacrifices. Their lives mattered and could serve to teach others about the plight of Baha'ís in Iran.

In addition, I also thought that the respondents may have felt uncomfortable disclosing negative feelings about members of the Iranian or American Baha'í communities, due to my identity as a Baha'í. But after a brief initial hesitation, arguably a phase where the interviewees were testing my potential reactions or responses to statements that reflected negatively on their communities, they opened up and shared freely. I believe that most of the interviewees realized quickly that my only interest was to hear their story and that I did not hold expectations for what their experience “should” have been like.

My insider status as an Iranian Baha'í also greatly facilitated the recruitment of interviewees in these communities. My fluency in both English and Farsi allowed me to conduct

the interviews in the language most comfortable to the participants, many of whom preferred to conduct the interviews in Farsi or a mix of Farsi and English. This option proved especially vital in interviewing the more recent immigrants, given the large variability in their English fluency.

I believe that, most importantly, my insider status facilitated trust building with the respondents. Living in Iran was associated with constant risk of exposure and persecution. Metaphors describing living in Iran as “living as sheep among wolves in sheep’s clothing” was a common sentiment among the interviewees. Many Baha’is in Iran were socially isolated and only socialized with other Baha’is. As a consequence, a social bond emerged within and between Baha’i communities across Iran. If a member of one Baha’i community needed to travel to other parts of the country, they were often invited and hosted by other Baha’i families. Individuals and families became connected through informal social networks within the communities. These social networks were considered to be safe and trustworthy.

As soon as potential interviewees learned that I was also a Baha’i, they trusted that it was safe to speak with me. As with interviews in general, I often found that this trust grew throughout the interview process as the respondents became more and more comfortable sharing their stories and they realized that I fully believed them. Many of the interviewees mentioned that they were surprised at how much they shared after the interviews were completed. My membership in their community, even if through distant networks, meant I was “safe” and did not have a hidden agenda. My intentions as a researcher and my commitment to keeping their involvement in the research confidential was assumed based purely on my being a Baha’i and therefore being someone who understands the risks involved.

## **2. *Limitations***

A limitation of this research is that the sample only focuses on participants in metropolitan areas and excludes those Iranian-Baha'í immigrants who reside in more rural areas. Therefore, differences between these populations were not researched. However, the vast majority of this specific immigrant population lives in larger metropolitan areas, including the research sites and thus their experiences better reflect the general experience of Iranian Baha'í immigrants to the United States.

Another limitation is that this research does not include the stories of those Iranian Baha'í refugees who chose not to be interviewed or who I was unable to reach through my snowball sampling efforts. In trauma research, a person's choice to remain silent or not share their story can be potentially significant. Differences between these individuals' experiences and those of the sample cannot be determined.

Lastly, it is also possible that the fact that many of the respondents were older than me may have influenced how much they were willing to share about their own struggles. My perception is, however, that the Iranian Baha'í community's regular practice of sharing and teaching even young children about the persecution history of the members of the religion, minimized the effect of our age difference in the interview process. Further, my identity as a graduate student elevated my status in the eyes of the respondents.

## **3. *Language and Narratives***

As a feminist researcher I have been actively thinking about and struggling with choices around the use of language from the onset of this project. I am deeply aware of the power of language in shaping the reading of the stories and findings that are presented in this dissertation. As part of this process, I have made a number of decisions. First, I mostly refer to all of the

members in my sample as refugees. I do not use refugee as an immigration status in the sense that they all hold refugee visas or even did so in the past. Rather, I use the term refugee because it indicates their status as individuals who are in the United States because they either faced persecution in Iran or would face persecution if they returned to Iran. Therefore, living in the United States serves to protect them from danger in their home countries.

Second, I remain conflicted about the use of “survivor” and “victim” in my descriptions and analysis. As a culture, we often associate something powerful with the term “survivor” and imply an end to the suffering and potentially a “happy ending.” My interviewees are survivors in the sense that they have escaped direct threats to their safety and lives, and are living in a “safe place.” In the context of their persecution histories, however, being a survivor by definition also means having been a victim. These refugees are both, survivors and victims and while they may live in physical safety that does not mean that their suffering has come to an end. In addition, while they demonstrate strong agency and power in coming to the United States, they often describe feeling as or more powerless in their host countries when compared to their former lives in their home countries.

Due to my personal history of having been raised in a Baha’i community in exile, I recognize my own tendency to minimize or neutralize the Iranian Baha’i experience. This is because it is normal or more accurately normative within this community to have experienced this type of persecution. At the same time, having been raised outside of Iran, I was also exposed to the western tendency to idealize and idolize those who gave their lives as “heroic martyrs.” Langer (1991) describes this same challenge when presenting Holocaust testimonies that present Holocaust stories as heroic stories of the human spirit that neutralize the atrociousness of the actual lived experiences of the survivors. Langer is concerned that this approach leaves readers

on a hopeful note because it erases the pain, humiliation, and hopelessness of the acts that were witnessed and experienced. Langer thus warns that we should not shy away from bearing witness to the somber parts of human history and its effects for the sake of ourselves and our readers, concluding that “As heroic memory honors the connection between agency and fate, unheroic memory records its absence. The structure of many testimonies involves a shift from the one to the other” (1991, p. 193). Langer’s work exposes an inherent tension in trauma research that each scholar has to negotiate.

In this dissertation, I consciously fight the urge to frame my findings from only a survival or outcome perspective. I do this in order to provide a more accurate representation of Iranian Baha’i refugees and their past and current lived experiences. This responsibility includes presenting a diversity of experiences in order to avoid essentializing this group. It also means that as a researcher I am wary of overlooking the disruptions and suffering in the lives of the participants and a tendency to present a picture of the refugee population that appears more functional, optimistic, and positive (Eastmond 2007, Malkki 1995).

As a qualitative researcher, I have a responsibility to present the interviewees’ experiences as accurately as possible. In order to do this, I often include excerpts from interviews in the interviewees’ own words. Bruner (1986) distinguished between reality, experience, and expression in his discussion of the use of narratives. In this context, reality consists of the “truth” of a situation, whereas experience is how that reality is perceived or experienced. Expression is how experiences are verbalized and framed (Bruner 1986). My focus is on Iranian Baha’is’ experiences and expressions. Experience can only be understood through expression. According to Eastmond, “Experience gives rise and form to narratives, but it is also organized and given meaning in the telling” (2007, p.249). Eastmond argues that “analytically, we need to distinguish

between *life as lived*, the flow of events that touch on a person's life; *life as experienced*, how the person perceives and ascribes meaning to what happens, drawing on previous experience and cultural repertoires; and *life as told*, how experience is framed and articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience" (Eastmond 2007, p.249). Therefore, to accurately present the respondents' lives my task lies in not only telling their lives as lived and experienced, but to analytically interpret their narratives in order to fully understand them.

#### **4. *Researcher Positionality***

One of the major challenges of doing this work, as an Iranian Baha'i refugee, was gaining "enough" distance from the interviews in order to be able to analyze them. In her research on Crypto-Jews in the United States, Jacobs (2002) discusses the need to negotiate boundaries between herself and her sample population due to a shared history and cultural as well as religious identity. She explained that the narratives of her interviewees were often very emotional in nature, both because of the traumatic cultural past and because of the effects of this past on their lives. Jacobs explains that while her positionality in her research made the process more emotionally taxing, she also found that expressing empathy openly throughout the interview process "created an openness and intimacy with the descendants that deepened my [her] understanding of the personal transformations that accompany the recovery of Jewish origins" (2002, p.15).

I also had to negotiate boundaries between my interviewees and myself. Given my positionality both as a researcher and an Iranian Baha'i refugee, many of the experiences that the respondents shared during the interview process relate closely to my own family history. I allowed myself to feel and express empathy throughout the research, though I worked hard not to allow myself to get "too" emotional during the interviews, as I was worried that this may make

the respondents careful about sharing their most traumatic experiences. During the interviews, I often found myself in a mental “zone” where I was completely present and served as a witness to the interviewees’ lives. However, as soon as I would leave the interview location, I often found myself overcome with emotion. I used voice memos as one way to process my own feelings on the drive home, but at times I had to pull over and call someone in my support network to simply process my emotions.

A researcher who does not share the experience of exile and flight might not have struggled with the same depth of connection to their interviewees. However, I firmly believe that any qualitative researcher has to connect with their respondents to some degree in order to be able to build rapport and trust with them. I am also confident that my personal identity and biography allowed me to listen for the effects of the interviewees’ experiences more closely, rather than being taken aback or surprised by the traumas they survived.

Similar to Jacobs’ experiences in her later work on holocaust memorials, I too had to negotiate multiple identities. In *Memorializing the Holocaust*, Jacobs states that “While I felt a moral responsibility to encode the victim’s suffering into my own ethnic memory, my stance as observer demanded a certain distancing from the horrors of the past” (2010, p.7). I, too, struggled with my responsibility to bear witness to the experiences of my sample, while using these experiences as data. This is a tension that we as feminist researchers must deal with.

This role conflict became very difficult at various times throughout the research process. This was true during data collection when I often found myself having nightmares, re-living both my own families’ experiences of persecution as well as those from the interview narratives. Conducting interviews mainly over semester breaks allowed me to immerse myself in my teaching role during the semesters to gain some distance from this research project. Further, I

used memoing and reflective writing throughout the data collection phase to aid in separating out those roles of witness and researcher. I also took breaks in the analysis stage, which lead to multiple layers and rounds of analysis, leading to a more complex and thoughtful process.

At the onset of my research I worried about the burden of asking my interviewees to relive the traumas they had experienced. Having experienced trauma in my own personal life and from my past work with women in domestic violence shelters, I knew the therapeutic value that sharing one's life story can have. At the same time, asking someone to open up old wounds for research purposes still seems potentially exploitative. As I began my work, however, I soon realized that no matter how old, the wounds of persecution had never really healed. Langer (1991) argues that silence about atrocities only spares the readers and writers pain, but that memories function even without speech. As a consequence, I think that it is important not to censor the experiences of this refugee population for our comfort.

Lastly, there are many times when refugees' stories are not believed to be true because they are so difficult to imagine. Baha'is are constantly questioned about their beliefs, their religion and the reality of their persecution. Historical events such as the Holocaust, along with other genocides, are proof that unimaginably horrific events and experiences are possible. The fact that they are difficult to imagine is not evidence against them being true. Langer (1991) explains that there is a risk involved for people who have witnessed unimaginable events to share them, out of fear that the audience may not understand or believe their stories. He urges us to trust that not everyone has to have experienced something in order to be able to accept or understand it. Langer warns us not to underestimate the "sympathetic power of the imagination" and argues that it might be "time to grant that power the whole it deserves" (Langer 1991, p.xiii).

In the analysis that follows, I invite you to engage your imagination and scholarly perspective in the study of the Baha'is' experiences.

## CHAPTER 3: RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION, GENDER, AND RESPONSE STRATEGIES

*“I was always scared. Even to this day, I’m still scared ‘cause I mean our religion is peace for all. We’re not saying we’re the best—we want peace and happiness. And we want to do service for one another. We are brothers and sisters. So it just didn’t make sense to me. Why... why is this specific religion harming us? Why are they killing my brothers and sisters? Why are they killing my family? Why are they torturing us? Why are they not letting us go to school?” - Azar, female*

### A. Introduction

In the last chapter I provided a detailed description of the methods used throughout this research. This includes the design, data collection, and analysis stages of the study. The following chapters will provide a discussion of various themes that emerged from the data analysis. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the types of oppression and persecution Baha’is experience in Iran. Because of the highly patriarchal nature of the Iranian society, the type of persecution sometimes varied by gender. Regardless of their religion, women occupy a lower status within the Islamic regime (Cameron and Danesh 2008). Therefore, women often expressed feeling a double oppression due to being a woman and a Baha’i in Iran, which will be further discussed below. Within this context, I then discuss three major ways that members of the Iranian Baha’i community have responded to the persecution they have suffered. The first group consists of individuals who choose to pass as Muslim either while maintaining their belief internally or sometimes permanently recanting their beliefs. The second group responded to their persecution through overt resistance, openly displaying their Baha’i Identity. The last group, which was the largest, often utilized both strategies of passing and claiming their Baha’i identity dependent on the context.

## **B. Experiences of Persecution**

### ***1. Childhood***

All of the interviewees report having experienced some persecution during their childhood years. Those who lived in Tehran, the Iranian capital, described the years before the revolution as fairly comfortable. They were allowed to attend schools from elementary school all the way through university. Baha'is were also allowed to practice their religion openly based on the law, though the Shiite clergy often preached against the Baha'i faith. Most significantly, communities were allowed to have Baha'i centers, which served as central meeting places for all members of the community to gather and hold activities. During this time, most children attended "Friday classes", which are like religious Sunday classes in the United States (the Iranian weekend is on Fridays). However, the children who lived in remote villages or small towns that were controlled by very conservative or fundamentalist mullahs, described much more oppression and persecution even during the pre-revolution years. When I asked those individuals who grew up in Tehran about their experiences in school they often stated that everyone had some problems, but that this did not compare to the experiences after the revolution. They often did not realize the severity of the struggles their fellow Baha'i children endured in smaller towns.

One case of this pattern comes from Hamid who lived in a small town far away from Tehran, during the time of the Shah (king of Iran). In the following excerpt, Hamid described his first memory of being a Baha'i:

"I think the first memory that pops in my head is the torture that I went through. When I was a little kid, there was a bunch of streets that I had to go through to get to our house after school and I used to get hit by rocks by other kids that would call you Baha'i. And

they would call you dirty names basically. And I just had to go through that, it was dreadful... It was a small town with dirt streets, there was no asphalt, very narrow streets. And I just had to run or look very carefully so that there were no kids because I would sometimes wait for hours to make sure there was nobody there to get to my home.”

Naghme: “That must have been scary.”

Hamid: “It was and now, maybe not so much, but when you are four or five years old, you do not know if you are going to get home with a bloody head and bloody nose. It always was scary. And that's the first thing that pops in my mind. Although, I will always have fond memories of the faith, it's not just all bad. But this is always vivid.”

The experiences described here by Hamid are very common among those interviewees who grew up in small towns during this time. Another respondent, Hassan, now in his sixties, also remembers the violent treatment from other students as some of his worst memories:

“...many similar experiences—such as kids following me and outside the high school and beating me. I always had scratches all over my place... my body, with blood, and stain, and bruises you know. A bruised body. And my mom got used to it after a while, you know, because I would... I would defend myself. I wasn't, you know, letting them beating me. But in the process I would be... and there was like six, seven of them. And they would say things like your pee is blue because you are a Baha'i. I want you to pee so we can prove to you. I mean things like that. And I didn't understand.”

The data show that multiple generations of Baha'i children have grown up with mistreatment from their peers, teachers and communities. Hassan's story demonstrates the propaganda that was taught by religious leaders, parents and teachers. While these experiences pre-date the revolution, they became intensified for those respondents who grew up in Iran

during and after the revolution. Hamid, along with several other interviewees, explained that parents played a big role in helping children understand that these responses by the surrounding community were not his fault and that he is not an infidel or ungodly person. They were often called unclean and untouchable by their classmates and neighbors, something that is a very strong insult in the Iranian culture. Parents also coached their children in how to respond to these kinds of physical and verbal attacks. They taught their children that they had to be steadfast and kind and not fight back, to remain passive as much as possible. Further, many parents encouraged their children to take pride in their suffering, because they were enduring it “out of love for [G]od.”

Pari, a woman who also grew up before the revolution, but lived in Tehran at that time describes her childhood experiences as follows:

“When I was growing up, you know, as a child I had experiences you know... subtle persecution and prejudice by Muslims. By my teachers... elementary teachers and all that. They would say “Oh this is a Baha’i” with a bad tone. Even at the elementary school, I remember my friends you know we sat on benches in Iran. And then they would kind of... everywhere three or four on a bench. They would all squeeze together, leave me a lot of room because they didn’t want their garment to touch my garment... my uniform, because my uniform was “najez,” you know, ...unclean.”

Almost all of the respondents reported having been called “najez” at various times while living in Iran. When I asked her how she felt during that time, Pari explained:

“I was kind of bothered by it at first. Then I one time talk to my mother, and I said that these,... that’s what they’re doing. And she said you know, these children... it’s not their fault. It’s their parents’ fault who is... who are teaching them the prejudice. You know

they're learning it from their parents. So it's not really their fault. Don't worry about it. Don't be mad at them because they don't know what they're doing."

Parents often had the difficult task of explaining to their children how their being a Baha'i could lead to many negative responses from the surrounding community. And while the data show that they all tried to teach their children not to take the insults personally, many of the interviewees voiced that this was difficult for them when they were children. These childhood memories are still very vivid in the respondents' memories.

Ramin, a male in his forties, explained how his school experience changed during the revolution. His school friends began to try to convert him to Islam. When he refused, they beat him severely. Further, the members of his hometown burned his family's business and home to the ground. He explains this harrowing time in the following narrative:

"They wanted to fight with government. We are not government people. We are not work for government... that time many people to say hey, Ramin, don't worry about it. You see, your dad work so hard and now everything is on fire. Don't worry about your religion. Came back to Islam. We give to you everything. You need a house? You need a car? You need a this one, you need a that one? I said you know I'm Baha'i. I saw this in my dad how he make everything. And one night you people come in to burn everything. After that, I be Muslim...be like you? If the religion is from the heart, be good. If religion from the talk, that is for you not for me. I stay here. I don't care. Really, really I never forgot that thing. And this one day I was walking home from school. I see these two, three people come. And really hit me. They punched my face, my stomach. I fall down and they kick me. And this one and put...put me in the water. When I back to home, I was shaking. My dad say, what's happen? I say there some people hit me. I was

crying at that time. I say some people hit me. Then after me, my brother came home. And [they had] hit my brother.”

He explained that the students in the school had planned which one of them would beat up which of the Baha’i children that day. It is not clear whether the community or parents encouraged this behavior or if the students were merely mimicking the adult actions against the adult Baha’is in the community; but all of the Baha’i children were targeted that day.

Once the revolution began and especially during the first ten years following it, the lives of all Baha’i children became much more difficult, regardless of where they lived. The interviewees explained that, during this time, both boys and girls regularly faced beatings from other children at school or on their way home. Further, teachers also began identifying and mistreating many Baha’i students in their classes. Mehri described her first memory of being identified in school in the following excerpt:

“I was sitting in class, like every day, when the teacher asked the class who is a Baha’i. Our parents had told us not to say that we are Baha’i unless we were asked. But they said if we were asked, we should say that we are. This became the policy in the schools. Don’t tell unless they ask. But then say without shame. So the teacher asked who was a Baha’i and my heart started to race so fast. I was afraid, because the day before I saw another Baha’i child get beaten severely in another class. I was so afraid [sobbing], what should I do? What should I do? So I stood up and I said ‘I am!’ But I was so afraid. I thought I would get beaten. But I did not want to lie.”

Mehri’s teacher explained that they were starting new religious instruction and that this included teachings about Baha’is and that any student who was a Baha’i was not allowed to speak during this part of class. Although Mehri did not experience physical punishment on that

day, the experience of being singled out and identified to the class has left lasting emotional scars. Even in her fifties, as she recounted this memory from thirty–five years earlier, she sobbed and her body tensed up as if she were re-living the experience once again.

Religious instruction classes became very difficult school experiences for many of my interviewees. Baha’í families often expected their children to learn to read and recite the Quran (the Islamic equivalent of the Bible) by heart in preparation of these classes. The Quran was typically learned in Arabic, which most students did not know at this time. In fact, becoming competent in both Baha’í writings and Islamic writings became an important survival technique for Baha’ís—young and old. It was a way to demonstrate religious knowledge and critical thinking. Pouya explains this experience below:

“Well, it wasn't that easy but my mom used to say, you go there and learn the Quran and know it by heart so that no one can say you are ignorant. And if they say to read it, you read it. Don't even look at the book. And I used to do that. And my teacher used to get very mad at everyone. This guy is not even a Muslim and reads Quran by heart and say it correctly. And you don't know... you don't know how to say it. This is a shame. It was very rough. He used to get very angry. And then he had a chain and used to play with it, it was at the end of this key or something and he used to play like this. Then one day, when I read very well he said, sit. And then he just hit me with his chain on my hand and the chain mark was on me, and I started crying. The religious instructions were not very good. They were very rough.”

As Pouya’s story demonstrates, being able to recite the Quran was both a survival strategy and at the same time an act of passive resistance. He embodied and demonstrated characteristics that were expected only of “good Muslims” and not of “infidels” or “heretics.”

Pouya's teacher, as well as many others, often felt conflicting feelings of shame about the Muslim students and confusion about the high level of academic and spiritual development of their Baha'i students. My interviewees described having felt both pride and fear when demonstrating a higher understanding of Islam than their peers. Unfortunately, being good students, hardworking, and well-behaved did not protect Baha'i students from the risk of being expelled.

Many schools, sometimes because of orders from the clergy and sometimes because of their own prejudices, expelled Baha'i students frequently. Arezoo, a young woman in her twenties describes her fear of being expelled:

“Being expelled was one of the worst things that could happen to you as a child. In Iran, the only thing we Baha'is had was our education. It is the only thing you have to live for. And you definitely don't want to give that up. So you are not allowed to say that you are a Baha'i because that would get you kicked out of school right away. You can't talk about your faith or any of that. If you do, they can expel you.”

Arezoo further explained that even at a very young age she was well aware that education was her last remaining right as a Baha'i in Iran and that this right only existed through high school. Parents and children alike worked hard to try to maintain at least this limited access to education for their children.

Omid, another interviewee, shared how his nine year old daughter got expelled from school:

“Actually... my daughter was nine and they forced her to go to gathering prayer. As Baha'i, we don't have gathering prayer. We don't do that. But she knew... my daughter knew prayers in Islam. So she said the prayers... to show them that we respect and we

believe in prayers and Quran. But that we are not joining gathering prayer. It wasn't easy for them to accept this. That you are a nine year old girl you don't want to go there and you are rejecting the command of the school principle. Anyway, they were putting my daughter in small place, maybe bathroom or something in the school as a jail for three months. Every day from the time prayer was starting to the end, like one hour or so. And she didn't tell us. So finally, we noticed that after three months we noticed she doesn't want to go to school anymore. Which she was very interested in school and her grades were good... and she loved to go to school. Finally, she was slowing down, she didn't like to go... and we saw that her eyes are red, but still she is not telling us what's going on.”

During this time, Omid was living underground after having escaped death row, which I will explain in more detail later. He explained that his wife went to the school to try to convince them to treat their daughter more humanely. They would not excuse her from the prayers, however, and continued to confine her to another room.

Omid then went to the school himself:

“I remember, once I was so upset and I went to school, even though I was in hiding. I went back there and I said I don't care what's going to happen. So I have to go and see what's going on right there. So I went to talk... I talked to the principle of the school and asked why are you doing this to this little girl? They said, well, she is not joining the gathering prayer and she has to. This is the rules of the school. I said, well that is not the rule of the school. That is religious. That is something you need to have it personally in your heart... Next day they fired her from school. They wrote that this she's against Islam. She's destroying the Islamic religion at this school. As a nine year old... they put all these you know words... that is just allegations and making it bigger.”

As the encounter reveals, the school identified a nine year old child as an agent against Islam and despite the family's efforts to contest the decision with the education department, she was not allowed to return to school, nor was she accepted at any other schools.

Children's experiences of oppression and persecution were not limited to schools or interactions with their peers. While the data showed that boys seemed to have experienced physical punishment more frequently in school and from other children, girls were typically more at risk of abuse from adults, rather than from children. Women and girls were at much greater risks for sexual assault by the police and revolutionary guards than the men. These forms of persecution and violence are further discussed below.

## ***2. Adulthood***

As a result of the revolution that shifted the leadership of Iran from the Shah to the fundamentalist clergy, many people used Islam as a way to justify their abusive behaviors towards Baha'is. As I explained in the introduction, the shift in power led to a wide spread sanctioning and encouragement of the persecution of Baha'is across Iran. Revolutionary guards and other Muslims in the various towns began raiding homes, arresting Baha'is, and many times killing or violently beating men, women, and children.

When girls were arrested or taken from their families they were often raped by the men as an act of insuring their damnation to hell after death. Mona, a woman now in her forties, often heard stories as a child from her family members about the brutal assaults on young girls. She explains what she learned here:

“Revolutionary guard... because their belief was these girls are going to be killed or martyred—we call it martyred because that's what they were... they were martyred—if they go to the next world and are virgin, they would be pure and forgiven. So they would

sexually assault them and rape them, so they would be...in their mind—how backward and stupid can you be—that you will go to hell. I mean it’s just beyond...it’s beyond human understanding.”

As Mona explains, the justification for murder and rape was that the perpetrators were fulfilling their duty by ridding society of Baha’is and ensuring that the women and girls would go to hell.

Cameron and Danesh in their comparative analysis of the rights of women, Kurds, and Baha’is in Iran found that women and girls were at risk of sexual violence in Iran due to the lack of “women’s rights” in Iran (2008). As other instances of the use of sexual assault during wars and ethnic conflicts have shown, rape and sexual violence were often used as tools to shame families<sup>5</sup> (Brownmiller 1994, Folnegovic-Smalc 1994, MacKinnon 1994, Seifert 1994, Stiglmeier 1994, Uwonkunda 1999). Further, in some cases, forced impregnation of women was also used as an ethnic cleansing tool that would force Baha’i women to carry and give birth to Muslim children. Acts of forced impregnation as a form of ethnic cleansing have also occurred in other conflicts around the world. For example, during the genocide in Bosnia, Muslim women who suffered mass rapes were often impregnated by force by Serbian soldiers in this way (Copelon 1994, Stiglmeier 1994).

Dina, a woman who fled Iran in her mid-teens describes one family’s experience of violent torture and attempt to shame Baha’i families through rape:

“There was this family, though, that we were very close to that we used to hang out every night with them. Their father was, I think, an auxiliary board member [a highly honored spiritual and administrative position within the Baha’i community] there or equivalent to that, I’m not sure because we were not supposed to have titles after the revolution. So for

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<sup>5</sup> In the Rwandan and Bosnian genocides, for example.

many years he was on the run. He could not live in his own house. And there was the mother and then the two kids that were our age. The daughter was a little bit older than me, she was probably two years older than me and their son was probably my age or something like that. And so this whole family was always living in exile. They couldn't see their father, they would meet in secret places in some Baha'i families – so anyway, for many, many years they were looking for the father. Until they arrested the mother. They tortured her so badly. They pulled her toenails, they beat the hell out of her until that they beat her head so bad that she was okay at that time but now, after many years, she is blind because of that. She lives in the United States now. And then they arrested their gorgeous daughter, she was like a model. They raped her. They raped her, I think she was 18 or 19 at that time. So being in the Iranian culture, yes, it is a big deal for a girl to be a virgin and so a lot of the Baha'i who had sons, they came forward just to say we honor that, we don't care that this happened. It's an honor to have you. And she got married right away to one of those guys and she is living here somewhere in the US also and she has a son.”

When I asked Dina if the torture of the man's wife and rape of the daughter was intended to force him out of hiding, she said that torture was used for these purposes and also to punish Baha'is for going underground. Because it was the man's role to protect his family, he was being punished for exposing his wife and daughter to risk by hiding and leaving them alone. She further explained that the father was never discovered.

The story of this brutal torture of the mother and rape of the daughter not only demonstrates the severity of the suffering of this community in Iran, but also shows the ways in which honor, status, and gender are used as a way to manipulate and oppress the Baha'i community. As the interviewee expressed above, the community was well aware of the stigma

that was associated with the loss of virginity within the Iranian context. To counter this stigma and as an act of resistance to honor the family's service to the faith, their Baha'i community stepped in to prove that the daughter was still "marriage material." The equality of men and women is one of the fundamental beliefs and teachings of the Baha'i faith, but we can see even in this account, that a "pure" woman's role is being a wife and mother and that the community sought to restore the status of this young girl.

As previously mentioned, sometimes forced impregnation and coerced marriages of Baha'i women to Muslim men were used to disrupt the Baha'i lineage of a family. Mona provides a description of this pattern below:

"For girls...for boys, I think pretty much you know they were mean and cruel to Baha'is period, but of course with girls they tried and sometimes forced the girls to marry the Muslim guys, to convert them into Muslim religion, expose them to drugs. Basically, they thought if they take the girls and from these girls they're going to bring more Muslim kids. They tried to, actually I hear more later on that that has happened unfortunately [by later on she means in the last twenty years]. Like in Bosnia, so that they would give birth to Muslims. Which is supposed to bring shame to their own family and religion, but then also it's a way to, eliminate that line. But I think when I hear the Baha'i kids back home they are very strong, because they've gone through difficult—really difficult—time. I don't know how they stood up so firm and strong for this many years. I... I would pray for them. I would applaud them. If I was any of those, I would take off in a heartbeat, because it's really living a life of confinement in a prison. It is being in a prison where you have no choice. You have to do what they expect you to do."

Mona seems to have a very clear understanding of the ways in which girls and women are used and abused as tools in this process. Overall, she had a very sociological mind, which allowed her to interpret many of her experiences from both a personal and broader perspective. She is a nurse now and seems to be less hesitant or shameful about discussing traumatic events as well as the ways in which those experiences impact her today.

Other women in the study also highlighted that Baha'í women had to face a dual oppression, that of being Baha'ís in Iran and that of being women in a highly patriarchal society. I asked Golnaz, a woman in her thirties, about the differences and challenges that women and girls experienced when compared to boys and men. Here is what she shared:

“Yeah, definitely. Because in that country, even the Muslim women are treated harshly, they are discriminated against all the time. They don't have rights. So imagine if you were a Baha'í woman... that would be double.”

Golnaz was referring to the treatment Baha'í women experienced for being women in the larger society, as she is comparing them to Muslim women. About half of the women I interviewed also agreed that there remains some gender inequality within the Baha'í community in Iran itself. They were careful to explain that this was not part of the teachings of their religion, but rather a consequence of the Iranian culture having such a strong influence on the members of the community. Other women vehemently denied that there was any gender discrimination within their families. In most cases, these women held high leadership positions within their own communities or came from families that had been Baha'í for multiple generations. Often these women had left Iran before or immediately following the revolution, possibly indicating a stronger influence of the widespread oppression of women in the country after the Islamic revolution. It is also important to keep in mind that some of these respondents lost many male

family members due to persecution, including husbands. Therefore, they may not be willing to portray these men, who they consider martyrs, in unfavorable ways.

Women's persecution was not limited to gendered or sexual acts. Shideh, a young woman in her twenties, recounts an event in her childhood that permanently changed her nuclear family. She explained that her mother came from a family that was mostly Muslim. She married her father ten years before the revolution and the family did not seem to care about the fact that her father was a Baha'i. Eventually, her mother also declared as a Baha'i. Shideh explained that after the revolution, her mother's family stopped talking to her mother because they feared they would be punished for interacting with Baha'is. She offers this account of the violence of the times:

“Because that was the time the Baha'is were like getting killed or imprisoned. We lived in a village. There are like 80 villages in a small town... not a small town, it's a big town. But there are small, little villages. The Mullah, the guy who's like the priest in the village... in the mosque, he told them that we have to kick out Baha'is. That was right as the revolution was happening. So there were probably three or four Baha'i families. So they kicked out the men first. And my dad had to leave... So it was my mom and three kids, and she was pregnant with her fourth child. She had to take care of everything during that winter. And then they would attack the house. And she was there alone with the kids. One night when she was going to get something, I don't know why she had to leave the house, somebody just hit her with a shovel in her back. So yeah, she got really sick. She didn't move anymore. And they just allowed my dad to come back and take her away. So that was just like the beginning. And then they went through a lot. She... she technically got paralyzed 'cause they... those are the parts it's kind of hard to talk

about—but I can do it. 'Cause my mom's been sick for 32 years now. And um she was pregnant at the time. And she got paralyzed for... for a year.”

Shideh's mother regained her ability to walk, though she still has a lot of pain and health problems as a result of the attack over thirty years ago. The above example demonstrates that women were not always safe from attack, even when men were seemingly the main target. None of the men in my sample highlighted gendered violence or even systematic violence towards women in general, but several of the women did.

Most of the men felt that boys and men suffered more frequent and severe persecution. They said it was better this way because women could not have survived what they had gone through. One of the male interviewee's explanation, while clearly well-intentioned, shows the influence of the Iranian culture on his perspective on women and men. When I asked him if men's experiences were different from that of women, he responded:

“Yes they do treat them different. Sometimes you know... I ... have a lot of patience. I can ... but I'm sure a girl cannot handle like me... I may be able to handle more problems... but they are so innocent and they are created like that. That's the way they are. They are sensitive and... I have seen things that... I was driving. I remember in Tehran...right in the street. This girl was passing the street in the middle of the street they [revolutionary guards] stopped her. The car stopped and they stopped her... and they said... oh you have lipstick. We need to clean it up. And they had [razor] blades in their napkin and they cut her lips. And I said you guys are not supposed to touch her even...what are you doing? So ... I don't know how you can believe that they are human. So it is hard... the way they are treating people, no human can do it.”

This participant's account of the guards' violent assault on the young woman shows the tension between his perception of girls and women and what, in reality, they had to endure. He clearly is shocked and horrified by the woman's treatment in the street, but he also stated that he does not think that "a girl" could handle what he has gone through. In addition to his gendered understanding of strength and patience, another factor influencing his views may be his age, as he did not leave Iran until he was in his late forties and is now in his sixties. Furthermore, his perspective may be shaped by the severity of his own experiences of persecution.

Like many of the Baha'is who were active in their communities and who held administrative positions, this respondent was arrested at the time of the revolution. His case thus illustrates the violent nature of Baha'i persecution. He began his account with this description:

"I remember when one day they came to our office and they arrested me with all the files I had in the cabinets. They took them to the government... they were called "committee," which is a kind of police station. There are running the government... and the police is different, but they were from the new revolution government created by the new government. Anyway they took us right there and they asked questions what we are doing, why we are there, all those details, explain what we are doing right there. We are doing our job. This is the archive. Every religion has their own books and archives and we are having ours right here. You can see it. There is nothing wrong with that. We are not doing anything wrong. They took me to my home. Same day... and they had their gun behind my head and just go... I was kind of driving my own car... drove to my home and when we arrived to the door so my wife was there and they just told her that we are looking for the car title. They tried to, you know, say that they are not catching me or not arresting or nothing is wrong. My wife knew what was going on. They are not coming to

your home to get your title. They took all the books that we had and searched for something... I don't know... weapons. They were knocking the walls all around and they took whatever they could. They took me back to the committee.”

Like many Baha’is who were arrested, the respondent was imprisoned. During his arrest, he was asked questions regarding his faith, while at the same time being insulted for his beliefs, as illustrated in the following account:

“What do you have in the Baha’í faith. There is no book. You have nothing. What is the Baha’í faith and they were just saying all kinds of you know, bad words about the Baha’í faith and trying to insult us. And sometimes they were saying oh these Baha’is in the next room they all became Muslim. Why don't you come... and just go home? And I said, you know what? We are the best Muslims. Because we are abiding the word of the [G]od... because when next manifestation is showing up we have to believe him. And this is what we did. After Mohammad, Bahá’u’lláh [the prophet of the Baha’í faith] came and we believe Bahá’u’lláh. But you are still back there. You don't believe. So what is wrong with you? We are a step ahead not behind. So they... tried to insult at the beginning with those words and hurt the Baha’is. And a lot of times they hit, they just talk very loud and very bad... it wasn't fun at all.”

After an initial round of questioning, the guards put the respondent in a small cell approximately four by three feet that already had five other occupants. By five in the morning, his wife had learned which jail he was in and came to see him. The respondent described his conversation with his wife during this visit:

“It was almost five a.m. I think... my wife came to find me and they came and they told her that he's sleeping. You should wait. Of course... nobody could sleep... we were

standing, there was no room to sleep. Even there was no room in that small area to sit. So anyway, I came out and I just... they let me to visit... be visited by my wife. I said: why did you come here? We are ok. Everything is good. They are doing the best hospitality [laughs]. Just go. So she was there for a few minutes and she left. Then they took us back and we were there for a while and then they sent me to a different jail... every few days they were asking questions and they were trying to force us to become Muslim.”

During the interrogation, he endured physical as well as psychological abuse. As a result, he wears braces on both his arms and knees and continues to have chronic problems. His account describes how the guards would pull him up by his arms and then slam him into the ground until his knees dislocated and his spine was injured. He explained that the abuse was so painful that he was often disoriented and had to recoup before being able to talk. He asked the guards many times why they were abusing him and they stated that they wanted to go to heaven; they had been told by the new government and the religious leaders that this was the way to achieve spiritual salvation.

Eventually, the respondent was taken to the Evin prison, which is notorious for having the worst conditions for prisoners. One part of the prison was known as “death row”, meaning if you were housed there you were undoubtedly going to be executed, whether or not you had been sentenced. He remained in this prison for over two years before being brought before a judge<sup>6</sup>. In the interaction with the judge, it was made clear to him that while the judge was aware that the defendant had not done anything wrong, the new revolutionary government required the judge to sentence him regardless. Further, he was told that should the opportunity arise to flee, he should take it. Unexpectedly, and most likely due to actions of the judge, the defendant was, in fact,

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<sup>6</sup> Within the Iranian judicial system the judge and state attorney consist of the same person (Schirrmacher 2009).

given the opportunity to return home to take care of his affairs before returning to prison.<sup>7</sup> Seeing no other way to escape death, the respondent describes his decision to break the law by not returning to prison:

“I had no choice, I think. I left the prison and I never could stay in my [choked up] home area. Sometimes I was going very late home and leave the home very early in the morning. But mostly I was around different states, different cities. I was around for nine years. And finally... and still I didn't like to leave the country. But they started bothering my children from school... so we decided to leave.”

Like this respondent, many men and women shared experiences regarding having been arrested. While most of them were released after a few days of questioning and strong attempts to convert them to Islam, a few of them had severe experiences like the case described above. Others had spouses or family members who were killed in prisons, either because they died from their injuries or they were officially executed. A few interviewees witnessed one of their parents being beaten to death during home invasions.

Finally, most of the men I interviewed had to go through mandatory military service after high school in Iran, which for many proved to be the most painful experiences of persecution. Military service in Iran was mandatory for all men who were of college age if they were not enrolled in the university. Because Baha'ís were excluded from higher education after the revolution, none of the Baha'í men were exempt from military service, despite the fact that the religion does not allow them to fight.

Most of the male interviewees stated that Baha'ís were regularly forced to do the most difficult and heavy labor during the worst shifts that were available. Furthermore, during the

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<sup>7</sup> Islamic law requires prisoners who are to be executed ten days to return home to take care of their end of life affairs. Typically, prisoners have to provide a type of bail in the form of home deeds of relatives.

Iran-Iraq war, many Baha'í men were forced to the front lines, despite the fact that pacifism was a tenet of their religion. As a consequence, many families tried to prevent their sons from being drafted by hiding them and in some cases smuggling their sons out of Iran and sending them abroad. Because these attempts were not always successful, many men, including my interviewees, had to complete their military service.

### **C. Three Modes of Response**

#### ***1. Passing as Muslim***

As the above examples of persecution demonstrate, Baha'ís in Iran have become constructed as an “untouchable” and “less than human” group. This stigma has served in creating a hostile environment within the larger culture. Goffman describes the attitudes a society holds towards a person with stigma:

“by definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, and often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (1963, p.5).

In response to their stigmatization and the associated dangers within Iranian society, some Baha'ís chose to pass as Muslims. Kanuha (1999) defines passing as a social interaction strategy in which a person represents themselves as different from their true identity, in order to manage social stigma. This strategy is not unique to Baha'ís, but rather has been used by many groups throughout the past when they faced discrimination and oppression, including Christians living in Islamic countries such as Egypt, Christians living in India, and Jews living in Europe (Kurien 2014, Schirmacher 2009, Hodge 2006, Deluca 2006, Jacobs 2002, Sanchez and Schlossberg 2001, Zeidan 1999, Brown 1991).

Among my respondents, passing was the least commonly discussed response strategy among my interviewees. This is not surprising, given that they self-selected to participate in this research and thus fled Iran and gained refugee status as Baha'is. However, a handful of individuals also mentioned that some Baha'is in Iran converted to Islam during the height of the revolution, in order to avoid loss of employment and other types of persecution. There are many second or third hand accounts of people converting, who lost their support from the Baha'i community but who did not attain real membership in the Muslim community because they were suspected to be Baha'i spies. An example of this pattern is found in the following narrative:

“Some of them were concerned about their safety and things like that. But then some of them also had stories about how they were brave. And some of them were scared, so some of the people recanted the religion, but not a lot, just a few. But others got braver and became more closer and steadfast. So a family that became closer to each other they would help each other, but the people who recant the faith got worse because they went in and the Muslim persecuted them worse because they said they may be spies. In that case. But there's only one or two cases out of all thousand cases of persecution.”

The data show that the most commonly reported cause of conversion to Islam was family. Baha'i women who were married to Muslim men before the revolution or whose husbands converted during the revolution were often faced with the possible loss of their children and family if they did not also appear to convert to their husband's religion. Neda provides one such example from her aunt:

“They literally forced some of the Baha'is to change their religion. And one of those people was my aunt. My dad's sister, her husband became Muslim. And he took all of the kids away from my aunt—all three of them, even the newborn—my aunt for one year

didn't see her kids. She was going crazy. She couldn't handle it anymore. Yeah, she left the faith. Not because deep down in her heart she wanted to leave the faith. She left the faith because she wanted her kids in her life. And I'm talking about tests and difficulties, what other test and difficulties could you be tested. How long has this government been around? If she would have never converted, she wouldn't have seen her kids for the past 26 years. These kids would have been raised by another woman, not knowing their own mother. I mean, these are the tough decisions that people have to make. Deep down, my aunt is not a Muslim. She would never be a Muslim in a billion years. But I feel she has been forced into it because her husband left her with no choice."

As Neda describes, her aunt waited a full year before she also converted to Islam. This suggests that her decision to convert was strongly influenced by the loss of her children. It is also possible that some individuals lost their faith in the Baha'i religion because they could not imagine that such terrible persecution could happen if they were on the right path. Stein (2014) reports cases of Holocaust survivors renouncing their faith in [G]od after enduring and witnessing horrific atrocities that made it difficult for them to believe that a [G]od could exist.<sup>8</sup>

There was only one respondent in my sample who stated that he himself left the Baha'i faith, although he later re-declared as a Baha'i after fleeing the country. Shayan describes this difficult time:

"Honestly, I don't know. Hopelessness. That's when I started smoking. Then the war was raging. I had a few Muslim friends and they went to the war, then I decided that religion is not a good thing so I started my political activities and left the faith. I was afraid, afraid to be stabbed, to be raped. I've seen horrible things in Iran. Not happened to me, but it

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<sup>8</sup> Although they did not necessarily renounce Judaism.

made no difference. I hate Iran. The only thing good about Iran is Báb and Bahá'u'lláh [prophets of the Baha'í faith]. Trust me. I've seen what people do. Just go back to, when was the election? When was the last election, did you see what they did? To their own kids? They raped them, they killed them, they tore them to pieces. That's the people of sin. I hate them. Whatever they want to call it, religious blindness, whatever it is. That is not justified.”

It is clear that Shayan continues to struggle with his feelings towards Iran, his memories of the revolution, and the time of the Iran-Iraq war. Although he believes deeply in the teachings of the Baha'í religion, he argues that the fundamentalist Muslims in Iran are not actually spiritual people, but rather are living in sin and violating spiritual law through their actions. There were other interviewees who described the state of Iran under Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) to be very similar to that of the time immediately following the revolution (1979-mid 1980s). Many of the respondents agreed that during the presidency of Khatami (1997-2005), there was a temporary easement in the persecution of Baha'ís, giving them at least some rights to gather and observe their faith.

During the interviews, the respondents reported consistently that the revolution created a strong divide in the country between those who followed the more conservative and fundamentalist government after the revolution and those who (Muslim or not) do not support this government. The interviews contained some examples of Muslims who secretly helped Baha'ís in difficult situations. For example, a few respondents recalled a neighbor who allowed them to hide in their home when the revolutionary guard came to look for them in their residence. However, the interviewees reported that most Muslims did not demonstrate such public support for the Baha'ís because of the risk to their own lives and livelihood. At a time

where many neighbors were encouraged and rewarded for spying on each other, any support or sympathy from non-Baha'is provided a welcome reprieve or refuge for the members of the Baha'i community.

## ***2. Open Displays of Baha'i Identity/Religious Constancy in the Face of Danger***

When describing the experiences of persecution among Baha'i children in Iran, it became clear that many parents coached and taught their children how to respond to acts of persecution through remaining steadfast to the principles of their faith. It is not surprising then that many of the interviewees who were adults when they lived in Iran similarly responded to acts of persecution with pride and steadfast commitment to their religion. Many of the respondents, both men and women, explained that while difficult, it was a privilege to sacrifice their own freedoms in the name of their religion. It is important to note, however, that there was a clear tension between wanting to serve their faith and the pain and anguish they felt as a consequence of their experiences. A person can both hold strongly to their Baha'i identity and at the same time yearn for a life free of oppression and persecution.

There are numerous examples of both men and women refusing to convert to Islam even under severe pressure. One example comes from Khatereh, a young woman who was arrested at the age of seventeen after a neighbor reported a Baha'i. The police arrested everyone at the party and she was jailed for three days. While in prison, she was told multiple times to convert to Islam as Khatereh describes here:

“They said that you should say that you are Muslim. Then we let you go. And there were ... I guess twenty girls that we were in one cell and none of us said yes. They asked us many times. Eventually after three days, they made us sign that we are not attending any

parties or anything... for two years my dad didn't let me go anywhere. For two years, he was really scared.”

Khatereh was also very scared during this time in jail and she felt shameful that her “gray haired father” had to beg the young guards to release his daughter. She felt guilty that he had to beg for her freedom. At the same time, the excerpt above demonstrates that she felt proud that neither she nor her women friends agreed to deny their belief in the Baha’í faith in exchange for their freedom.

It is interesting to note that this interviewee did not declare as a Baha’í until she was nineteen, even though she was raised in a Baha’í family<sup>9</sup>. It was not until she received her admittance to the university by claiming a Muslim identity that she decided to declare as a Baha’í, which automatically prevented her from attending the university. Khatereh still shows shame for having taken the entrance exam under the guise of being a Muslim, while her friends were excluded because they identified as Baha’í on the forms. Recognizing the injustice of the discrimination, Khatereh made a moral choice to sacrifice her educational opportunity and to stand steadfast with her friends and religious community.

Both men and women equally shared stories such as Khatereh’s where they remained steadfast in their faith or became strengthened under pressure from Muslims, despite possible known and unknown consequences. Many of the respondents expressed that it was dangerous for them if non-Baha’is knew of their Baha’í identities. Therefore, any time a Baha’í was faced with the question of their religious membership, they had to make a conscious choice to either claim their Baha’í membership or hide it. The following case is an example of this kind of dilemma:

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<sup>9</sup> At the age of fifteen Baha’í youth are no longer considered Baha’í unless officially declare their faith in the religion.

“My neighbor said: I have heard something... I hope it's not true. I said... well, what did you hear? And he said he has heard I am not a Muslim. I said... well... depends how do you describe Islam. I said... well... is there anything wrong? Did you see anything bad? What's going on? Why did you ask today? He said: You cannot be Baha'í. I said, why? And he said, are you a Baha'í? I said... if [G]od believes I would like to. And he said, is that important? I said, yes, being a Baha'í is not easy. And... the way I am a Baha'í... I hope [G]od accepts me as a Baha'í. And then he said, but you don't look like a Baha'í. And I said, what's the difference? He said you respect everybody. You are coming and going everything... are very organized... and I said, Yeah... maybe that's because I'm a Baha'í. And he said... no, no, no, no... he could not... he was clergy. He could not even... I said: these people right there...they are Muslim. They don't care about you...they don't say hi even.”

Despite the danger of disclosing his identity, Shahab felt it was important to explain to this neighbor, who was a member of the local clergy, that his ideas about Baha'ís were misconceptions. The neighbor was conflicted about his beliefs about Baha'ís and who he knew his neighbor to be. Shahab is one example of the men who felt pride and had confidence in their ability to navigate the Iranian system. Despite the risk and persecution of Baha'ís, he often continued to teach his faith to others. He provides one such account below:

“I remembered that we were asked to talk to the people and let them know about the Baha'í faith. And I remember I was at the stop light in one of the streets of Tehran and the stop light was here and I had a small car... and there was a big truck next to me and I just talked to the driver. Do you know what the Baha'ís are? Baha'í faith? And he didn't hear me... or heard something wrong... He said: What? I said: Have you heard about the

Baha'is? And he said... again WHAT? What are you talking? And then the light was green so we passed. And he drove and came and stopped me right to the curb. And they came and like they want to hit me. I was just smiling and I said... I didn't say anything bad. And he was just about to hit and I said... He said: What did you say? And I said: Have you heard about the Baha'í faith? [laughs] and he said... What is the Baha'í faith? I said, haven't you heard of that? The Baha'í faith is here for love and unity. And he said no I haven't heard about that... but he was so mean. I said just calm down... slow... just come let's talk. And I said just park over there... this is not good the way you parked. And we talked... there were three guys... it took about a few months... but one of them became a Baha'í and he was a very nice person. He became very active.”

As the above account illustrates, some of the Baha'is continued to teach about their faith despite the risks of being identified as Baha'í. In many cases they believed that if more Iranians knew about the Baha'í religion that this would raise the moral status of Iran.

Baha'is see their religion as a gift to be shared with others. The following excerpt is from my interview with Fariba, who is now in her eighties and whose husband was executed in Iran. She states that it is important not to hide one's Baha'í identity:

“I don't tell them [my children] if there's danger don't say I'm Baha'í or whatever, no. No. Because we believe the Baha'í faith is a solution and cure for this sick world. And right now you can see the people that—the leaders—they don't know what to do, because economy is going to be worse. And the only solution Bahá'u'lláh brought and then nobody listen. And my husband gave his life and he said, I give my life... why should I be Muslim? They ask him to become Muslim we let you go. And he says why I be Muslim... why should I become Muslim? I'm Baha'í and I believe to Bahá'u'lláh as

something that helps to rescue this sick world. Why should I be Muslim? And I'm thinking if I follow Baha'i faith, at least is one step helping to rescue this world... and healing this world."

When a person believes so deeply that they hold a remedy to the social injustices and suffering that exist in the country, it becomes understandable that they would continue to teach their faith openly even at a high risk of persecution. While some of the respondents continued to live openly visible Baha'i lives, the vast majority, however, practiced a less visible form of resistance.

### ***3. Alternating passing with open displays***

Most of the respondents described their religious socialization to be tied closely to choices around safety while maintaining religious constancy. According to the data, before and after the revolution, schools often tolerated Baha'i students as long as they did not speak about their religion. Many of the interviewees learned from their parents to remain quiet and pass as a Muslim student unless they were specifically asked about their religious membership. If they were asked, parents expected their children to state that they were Baha'is. As a result of this socialization, most of the respondents described continuing this pattern of remaining silent unless asked throughout adulthood. After the revolution, due to the increased scrutiny, the interviewees explained that Baha'i communities began holding meetings in secret and only in small groups, in order not to draw attention to any one family that was hosting or attending the gathering.

At the same time, children's classes as well as the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education<sup>10</sup> (an underground university founded by Baha'is who were professors and professionals) were

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed description of this underground university, see Karlberg's 2010 article "Constructive Resilience: The Baha'i Response to Oppression."

created in order to provide education and spiritual deepening to the members of the community. These were not allowed under the law, but were vital to the survival of the Baha’i community. Further, these activities of religious and educational preservation served as a form of resistance against the oppression Baha’is faced in the larger society. Karlberg (2010) provides an analysis of the religious writings of the Baha’i faith as well as statements from the governing body (located in Haifa, Israel). From his analysis he concludes that the religion supports acts of peaceful resistance in order to maintain “a vibrant community life even under the most arduous conditions” (p.235).

A few of the interviewees described strategies that they learned from their parents to hide the fact that they were on their way to children’s classes. For example, one respondent explained that she would always carry arts and craft supplies with her under the guise of having a crafting class. An explanation for why the continuation of educational activities was so important, despite the risks associated with getting caught, is found in the following narrative by Hamid:

“I think the biggest worry was losing everything that you have. If someone were to come and take your life, your family, and not having a recourse. The fear of not being able to do anything about it. Here, bad things happen, unjust things happen to you. But you always have recourse, you can always take someone to court. You can always complain to somebody that this is not right, what is happening to me. The biggest fear in Iran is that your voice is not being heard, ever. You don't have a voice, you don't have justice. But our children’s development, their understanding of the religion and even their education past high school are incredibly important. Otherwise, what will they have?”

Many of the respondents articulated similar perceptions of the importance of Baha’i events and classes to children’s development. Most of these parents lived through the revolution

where many families lost all of their Baha'í books and writings and as a consequence began memorizing any Baha'í texts that they could locate. Children's classes served as one source of the transmission of the religious knowledge to the next generation.

As a result of alternating passing in public and living Baha'í lives in their homes, many respondents describe leading dual lives or feeling that they had two personalities that they had to manage while living in Iran. Khatereh described this pattern and her own struggles managing her identity when she was younger:

“Having two different personalities and, you know, the one that you are doing it's wrong, but what can you do? You don't want them to come arrest your dad or put you in jail, because the age doesn't matter. They killed a thirteen year old girl, just because she was a Baha'í. So... and you know when you are that young, you are afraid of dying. Later on you might say... Oh, the other world is better. But when you are that young, you don't even know what would happen if you died. You don't understand anything, you just want to be alive, and so you don't say anything. So. I... I ... I guess most Baha'ís they have different personalities.”

Many of the interviewees' reported this pattern of vacillating between secrecy in public and practicing their religion in the privacy of their own homes. In her work on Crypto-Jews, Jacobs found that, historically, this community found ways to continue to practice their religion in secret, despite being faced with severe persecution, which caused them to have to hide their Jewish identity in their public lives (2002). My data reveal that many of the Iranian Baha'ís did not stop practicing their faith when it became dangerous to do so. Rather, they found ways to preserve their religious practices and continue to lead Baha'í lives, even if they had to do so in secret.

Adding to the above account, Kathereh further explains that she has heard from relatives and friends who remain in Iran that fewer people are willing to lead a different public and private lives:

... but nowadays, I guess, Baha'is they are trying to show their faith publicly... because for how long you can be silent? Now they started saying that, we are Baha'is there is nothing to be ashamed of. That's a religion and I'm proud of having my religion. But now they are putting more and more in jail and... they thought that by arresting the seven friends of Iran [administrative leaders] they are going to just finish with the whole thing. That no one is going to say they are Baha'is... because they thought oh these are the leaders, so they are telling them what to do what not to do. But they have been in prison for two years [at the time of the interview] and still Baha'is they are calling themselves as Baha'i."

The above account illustrates that the Baha'i communities in Iran appear to have grown tired of secrecy after years of oppression and secrecy. It is unclear if this renewed attempt at pushing back against their oppression will lead to any larger societal or governmental changes or if it will lead to increased crack-downs on their communities that will push more individuals back into secrecy.

#### **D. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown that women, men, and children of the Baha'i community in Iran have experienced varying forms of persecution. While there are some differences, this persecution existed before the Islamic revolution, although it became intensified and state sanctioned as a result of the overtaking of the Iranian government by Islamic leaders. I have also shown that men and women responded to the persecution of Baha'is in Iran using one of three

strategies: 1) passing as Muslim, 2) open display of Baha'í identity, and 3) alternating passing with open displays.

Throughout their lives, these women, men, and children have engaged in a number of acts of resistance. Following their religious teachings, they do not engage in overtly political acts. Rather, they demonstrate resistance through continued engagement in their religious communities, teaching of their faith, and education of their children. In some cases, members of the Baha'í faith reported converting to Islam or choosing a life where they fully pass as Muslim by leaving the religion. More typically, individuals vacillate between passing on the street, while living Baha'í lives behind closed doors.

In the next chapter I discuss what happens when individuals and families can no longer bear the oppression and persecution they were subjected to or when there has been an immediate threat to their lives. In this chapter I will shift the focus to the experience of fleeing Iran and the resulting exile in the United States.

## CHAPTER 4: TRAUMA, EXILE, AND THE LOSS OF HOME

*“The most difficult part... This is still not the destination. When I moved here, I figured there’s no destination. There’s no end. Like well I’m in the U.S. and I’m safe now, and it’s good. I...I think that’s the most difficult part. There’s knowing this is not a safe place either and there is no safe place. The world is just one mess... Iran is difficult in a different way.”* – Shideh, female

### A. Introduction

In the last chapter, Baha’is’ experiences with persecution in Iran were investigated. We saw the various ways in which members of this community made sense of, responded to, coped with, and survived different forms of persecution and oppression. In this chapter, I will explore the processes of escaping persecution and trying to find a place as exiles, living in a new host society. Specifically, I will provide two examples of flight stories and explain how individuals leave Iran if they can secure passports. Further, I will discuss four themes that emerged in the data in relation to the experience of exile: 1) initial relief; 2) loneliness and homesickness; 3) refugee guilt; and 4) nostalgia. Negotiating one’s place within a given society is a very complex and, at times, difficult process. However, negotiating this place within the context of multiple societies and cultures has the potential for even more confusion, complexity, and difficulty. This is especially true for individuals being forced to leave their home countries in order to protect themselves and their families. These cultures provide exiles with a place to call home and to belong, a place where their way of being is meaningful. The experiences of Iranian-Baha’i refugee women and men provide a deep look into the complexity and difficulty of negotiating one’s place and maintaining a consistent sense of self in the transition from persecution to relative safety and from “home” to exile.

## **B. Migration and Exile**

People have moved across the world, regionally, and locally throughout history. While many people move for economic reasons, to this day a vast number of people migrate to save their own and their families' lives. This may include groups or individuals escaping ethnic conflicts, international wars, as well as religious and/or political persecution. Forced migrants who become refugees or exiles have to face the challenges of starting a new life, in combination with the implications of the traumas they have experienced. Many exiles are survivors, yet it is important to remember that these can be diverse populations, even when focusing only on one national group. Migrant groups often vary based on educational, political, economic, and/or religious backgrounds (Tettey and Pupilampu 2005, Frykman 2001, Eastmond 1993). All of these various factors influence a person's or family's experience in exile.

While life in exile may vary based on an individual's personal biography and resources, some are better able to create a "normal" life for themselves than others. It is important to remember that, as Edward Said stated:

"to think of exile as beneficial, as a spur to humanism or to creativity, is to belittle its mutilations. Modern exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical. It is produced by human beings for other human beings; it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography" (Said as quoted in Frykman 2001, p.22).

Therefore, while some people may successfully create new lives for themselves in their host country, many people in exile have experienced tremendous suffering through traumas that can and do disrupt their lives in ways that make it difficult and potentially impossible to have a new start (Frykman 2001).

One key element of exile compared to voluntary migration, which is often seen as permanent, is that it is open-ended (Graham and Khosravi 1997). Eastmond describes the open-ended nature of exile as increasing the disruption of involuntary or unplanned migrations that disturb the social order of a person's life (1993). One of the most difficult aspects of the open-ended aspect of exile is that there is no guaranteed return home. This open-endedness has been a crucial component in the immigrant experience of Iranian Baha'is in the United States—especially for those who immigrated more recently or in the years after the revolution.

The concepts of home and having a sense of homelessness lie at the heart of the experience of exile. Rapport and Dawson (in Tettey and Puplampu 2005) describe “home” as the place:

“*where one best knows oneself*- where *best* means *most* even if not always *happiest*. Here, in sum, is an ambiguous and fluid but yet ubiquitous notion, apposite for charting the ambiguities and fluidities, the migrancies and paradoxes, of identity in the world today. [...] Being at *home* and being *homeless* are not matters of movement, of physical space, or of the fluidity of socio-cultural times and places, as such. One is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated—and homeless when such a cognitive environment is eschewed” (p.151).

This definition is especially appropriate when exploring meanings of home among both voluntary and forced migrants. For those who escaped their “home,” this place—though potentially meaningful to them—most likely is *not* a place that was happy or even safe. Despite the dangers, however, this “home” represents a known and understood place with which one's identity is intermingled.

Malkki (1992) describes the idea of having roots or being rooted as representing the close connection between people and “place.” In order to better understand the role of place, roots and territorialization in the shaping of identity, Malkki suggests that it is important to explore the meanings that are generally attached to ideas such as uprootedness and displacement. In turn, this also requires the exploration of the meanings of being rooted. The idea of culture itself includes ideas of being rooted, consistent, or stable and tied to a physical space. As a signifier of uprootedness, territorial displacement becomes labeled as pathological (Graham and Khosravi 1997, Malkki 1992). Therefore, the state of exile—by definition—disrupts a person’s rootedness and as a consequence their cultural identity and sense of belonging.

### **C. Narratives of Flight: Traumatic Journeys Into Exile**

Iranian Baha’i refugees not only have to deal with the aftermath of the traumatic events they experienced in Iran, but often the escape journey out of persecution—whether with or without a passport. These journeys are themselves quite traumatic for many refugees. In the following section, I share two flight stories which capture the experiences of escape journeys among many of my interviewees. The narratives consist of one man’s and one woman’s story of fleeing with smugglers without a passport. I will also discuss the process of leaving for those few who were able to secure a legal passport, but still had to leave under the guise of short-term travel. Regardless of how they escaped, the data reveal that these journeys are significant life experiences for the members of this community. Further, they are representative of the escape narratives of a majority of the respondents. As Langer (1991) describes so poignantly in *Holocaust Testimonies: the ruins of memory*, often times outsiders have a difficult time understanding or believing the experiences shared by survivors because they seem so far from our understanding of humankind or human nature. In fact, Langer sheds light on many survivors’

difficulty of believing their own experiences because they are so disconnected from the “normalcy” of their present-day lives. He argues, and I agree, that in many cases we have to believe that horrific and unjust acts are impossible and unlikely in order to be able to “function” in the aftermath of trauma and mass trauma.

### ***1. Mehran’s Escape***

Mehran fled Iran in the late 1980s at the age of 21. During the preceding years, he secretly took photographs, documenting the torture and execution of many Baha’is in Iran. He explained that during this time many Baha’is and political activists were imprisoned and executed. After prisoners died, their bodies were first transported to a warehouse where families could come identify their loved ones. From those warehouses they were then transported to various morgues for burial preparation. As part of an organized group within the Baha’i community, Mehran had secretly been taking photographs of the tortured bodies of Baha’is in these warehouses. The community would then smuggle these pictures out of Iran and send them to the Baha’i community’s administrative headquarters in Israel for documentation.

On this particular day in February, he went with his cousin and uncle to identify the body of a young man who had been arrested at school at the age of 17 and was imprisoned for four years where he was severely tortured through the use of boiling water. When they arrived at the warehouse, Mehran found out that the body had already been moved to the morgue where photographs could not be taken without a flash, due to the dark lighting there. Because of the severity of the torture the young man experienced, the three men decided that they had to take the risk and photograph his body with using the flash on the camera. Unfortunately, guards saw the flash and started chasing the men. Mehran gave his cousin the camera and they ran in separate directions, while the uncle stayed behind. His uncle was arrested on the spot and the two

other men escaped. Because the guards knew who the visitors were, Mehran had been identified as the person who had taken these photographs over the previous few years and immediately had to go into hiding. After spending forty days underground, planning his journey and gathering the money for smugglers, he began his journey.

Mehran left Iran on March 21<sup>st</sup>, the Iranian and Baha’i new year. Many families travel on this day of the year and he hoped that he could get through auto checkpoints using his brother’s driver’s license while traveling with his mother and sister to reach a city 120 miles away where he would meet his smugglers. Once they arrived at their destination, he had to say goodbye to his mother and sister. When I asked him to describe this farewell, he stated:

“You know... it’s hard to really even describe, because there were two things here. It’s... life couldn’t have continued like that. So I was ...leaving a huge danger, yet saying goodbye to someone you’re so close to that you may never see again. It was a relief [leaving the danger], yet quite sad to say goodbye.”

The smugglers had told them that the journey would only take one day and that they would travel by truck and horse. The journey ended up taking twelve days and nights by which point his family thought that he was dead. There were known cases of smugglers collecting their fees and then killing travelers. Now, being a father, Mehran expressed deep regret for “putting his parents through the ordeal.”

During the twelve travel days, a group of a few men walked at night and slept during the day. They were not prepared for the physically taxing journey at high altitude and failed to reach their destination on one of the nights a few days into the trip. Here he describes the experience:

“One night, we couldn’t make it from destination A to B by six in the morning. When the sun started to rise, we were still in the middle of the road. So we hid behind a big

boulder... big, huge rock. I never forget, from six ...it was bitterly cold [it was deep winter in the mountains]. Bitterly cold. So until eleven-twenty ...we had started feeling really, truly losing our senses. We sat down and said, okay, right across from the big boulder were border patrollers. So we literally sat down—six of us—said ok, we are going to die. If we stay here, we are going to freeze to death. We can either freeze to death or just walk out and get shot in an instant. We chose the second one. But you know, [G]od has his own ways. As soon as we walked out from behind the big boulder, the weather changed miraculously. It became so foggy. It became so foggy that we could not see two feet from each other. The border patrollers saw us, machine guns started shooting, but they couldn't see... and we couldn't see either. So we ran and got lost. We walked until eight that night until we reached a village.”

From this village, the smugglers regrouped and continued the remainder of the journey. Finally, after twelve days the group made it into Turkey. Mehran explained that his group met up with another group for the last leg of the trip. After a particularly difficult stretch across a frozen river, one of the men next to him looked down and noticed that he had lost his boots during the walk and he had not even noticed because of frostbite on his feet. They were still in danger until they reached the United Nations office where he could apply for refugee status. Once he reached the United Nations, Mehran said he felt a huge relief—one that is indescribable. After 16 months of waiting for acceptance as a refugee to the United States, Mehran left Turkey to begin his new life.

## **2. *Mona's Escape***

Mona, a woman now in her forties, fled Iran in the early 1980s with her family when she was 13 years old. The family had to escape because they were informed by community members

that they had been added to an arrest list and that the revolutionary guards were coming for them. With the aid of smugglers, they began their journey out of Iran the following day. They paid them half of their fee in advance and left the other half with a relative in Iran. This way, the smugglers could pick up the remainder of their fee after they safely delivered the family to the destination. Mona describes having to change clothes frequently on the journey to match the local clothing. In each new village they arrived in by truck, the family had to put on a new disguise and often learned a new cover story in case they were stopped by road blocks or eventually the border patrol.

At one point in the journey, the smugglers separated the men from the women for the journey through the desert, which Mona's mother found very alarming. Her husband was to be sent with one group and the next morning two young men came to pick up the women in a truck. While boarding the truck, Mona's mother overheard the men saying that they were going to rape all the girls and throw them in "the ocean of salt" (Namak Lake). They also stated that nobody would ever know what happened to them. The children were oblivious to what was going on, but Mona's mother was in shock, shaking, and trying to figure out how to get her and the family out of the situation. She could not tell the children what she had heard because the smugglers could hear her. Mona recalls:

"My mom convinced the guys that she left her jewelry at the previous house and that they had to return to pick it up because it was very valuable. You know, because these young guys wanted money if they could get it. When they got closer to the village, my mom she threw herself out of the car, broke her head open, broke her leg. All in blood. And she screamed run to the village and yell for help. So we all ran. We didn't know which direction we were running. All we were doing we were screaming. Help! Just help, they

are killing us! So the guy who brought us on the previous leg of the trip, he came out of the house asking what was going on. He asked who those guys were, apparently he had no idea who they were. My father was still there and he said to the other smuggler let's all look underneath the back of the truck. They had ropes, a gun, and knives, all in the back of the truck. So the older guy took all of us together with my dad. We left right away and drove through the mountains at night. He only allowed us to stop for bathroom breaks, because he was concerned about the other two men following us. Eventually, we did see them following us and drove without break straight to the doorsteps of the United Nations. Like literally.”

Once at the United Nations, Mona and her family claimed religious asylum and reported their escape experience to the United Nations officer. They took their mother to a hospital to treat her broken leg and check on her head wound. Luckily, she had no lasting damage from jumping out of the vehicle. On the drive to Pakistan, Mona's mother told the family that she had heard the men talking about killing all of them. Mona was very afraid, watching her mother bleed from her head wound. They were all in a state of shock. But the family did not feel safe in the Pakistani border town and requested to be moved as far away from the border as possible until their refugee application for Canada (they now live in the United States) was accepted.

Both Mehran and Mona's narratives reflect the risk and danger many of the respondents experienced on their escape journeys out of Iran. Men and women shared the dangers of illegally crossing into another country. Men also endured more physically taxing journeys when they escaped in all male groups. At the same time, the data reveal that women were often at risk for sexual violence in ways that men were not.

### 3. *“Legal” Departures and Feelings of Exile*

A few of the interviewees were able to legally secure passports, which allowed them to leave Iran by train or airplane. However, these passports were acquired under the guise of short-term travel, which limited the travelers’ options. For one, they could only bring a “reasonable” amount of luggage with them—selling or leaving behind many keepsakes of their past lives. Further, they could not act suspiciously at the airport or train stations by being emotional during their goodbyes. Several of the respondents described this as one of the most painful moments in their journey. At home, most of them did not realize that they would be under such public scrutiny. The memory of not being able to have a “proper” goodbye from their parents, friends, and other relatives—without knowing whether they would ever get to see each other again—still brings tears to many of the interviewees’ eyes. Once they arrived at the travel destination, the process of gaining refugee status was similar to that of the individuals who had to leave Iran illegally.

The memory of the escape journey and the circumstances of their having to leave Iran serve to reinforce the refugees’ feeling of exile. The experience of flight highlighted the sense that there is a place that is home, a place that they were forced to leave behind for the sake of their own survival and a place that is out of reach for this population, despite their very strong ties to Iran.

During her interview, Mona described in detail the effects that persecution and her traumatic escape has had on her. She suffers from nightmares, anxiety attacks, and a deep fear that she describes “will never go away.” As a nurse she believes that growing up in a state of fear is something that has changed her for life:

“With the fear of getting caught, of going home and revolutionary guards waiting for you, taking you or killing you, your friends, your parents... they were killed, they were martyred, they were tortured. You grew up with that. And even living outside of Iran was another horrifying experience. I sometimes have to let my husband take over, because my fears and anxiety take over. It all goes back to my childhood. I spent years living with the fear of being killed. It was just horrible.”

Many of the interviewees described that they left a part of themselves behind when they left Iran and lost another part along the journey out of the country. In almost every interview, the respondents stated that their suffering is less than those Baha’is who are still living in Iran. As a consequence, they do not feel that they have a right to express suffering when they are living in “freedom.” However, as Mona explained, trauma is not bound by time and place. Memories of suffering can continue to affect a person long after the event has occurred. Further, even living in relative safety and freedom, still means living in exile for these refugees—which in itself can be a traumatic experience.

#### **D. Finding a Place in the Host Country: The Burden of Exile**

##### ***1. Initial Relief***

Initial experiences of living in the new host society can vary based on the nature of life in the home country prior to leaving. Multiple studies, focusing on a range of refugee groups in exile, have found that for many groups there is an initial feeling of relief of having escaped various forms of oppression or danger along with a positive response towards members of the host country (Tettey and Puplampu 2005, Mostofi 2003, O’Neil and Spybey 2003, Frykman 2001, Ghorashi 1997, Eastmond 1993, Sorenson 1990).

Consistent with this past research on immigration and exile, my respondents stated that they initially experienced some relief and hopefulness due to sense of safety, freedom and opportunities in the new country. As described above, many of them endured difficulties on their way to the United States. For many this included exhausting and dangerous escapes with the aid of smugglers through the mountains into Turkey or Pakistan. But even those who were able to get passports and leave Iran legally, had to deal with uncertainty and stressful economic and living situations in transitional countries. The respondents typically did not know how long they would have to wait for asylum while working to prove to the United Nations that they were in danger in Iran.

Being granted asylum and permission to come to the United States often put an end to an undetermined waiting period for most of these individuals and families. Many of them came to the United States with high hopes for their new lives as free Baha'is. In addition, the American Baha'i community tends to be very supportive of new arrivals by providing a significant amount of assistance while getting settled. Most respondents described having felt incredibly welcome and valued, respected, and honored when they first arrived in their new host community. This is illustrated in the following account by Mona, whose escape story was presented earlier:

“Wonderful Baha'is. They were all American Baha'is. They were... they would go out of their way... all these wonderful people. They took us in because we were the only Persian Baha'is there. And they helped us out to learn the language, to get a job, to feel comfortable. And they had so much respect for us because they knew what we've gone through.”

The experience of Iranian Baha'i refugees in this regard is different from other refugee groups, such as Eritreans in Canada, who did not experience the same initial positive feelings

towards or from members of the host country, although they did feel relieved and comparatively safe (Tettey and Puplampu 2005).

## ***2. Loneliness and Homesickness***

After their initial settling period, many of the respondents felt haunted by the memories of the circumstances of their departure and journey of escape. This difficulty is experienced in addition to the challenge of adjusting to a new culture and language, while attempting to start a new life. Furthermore—especially those individuals who came to the United States by themselves or at a very young age—loneliness and homesickness were at times debilitating. Hamid, who escaped Iran without his parents in 1975 as a sixteen year old boy, struggled deeply with loneliness and homesickness. He had such a difficult time that his parents were convinced after two years that they had to sacrifice a successful business in Iran to come to the United States to join their son. Here he describes this experience:

“When you are 16... Everything gets cut off and changed because then you come to this strange land. I didn't speak any English at all at the time. I would call the operator on the phone and just say, talk to me so that I can learn and just to talk to somebody. You feel so alone. It's so devastating to a kid that age to feel that alone. Because you have to understand, if you grew up here, you may never feel that close relationship that [Baha'í] kids have in Iran. Because we were so isolated from everybody else, you have these groups that you feel so comfortable with and you can always talk to and you get together. There is not an afternoon you don't spend time with each other. And all of a sudden you come to a land that nobody is speaking the language you have, your cultural shock, you are losing material things that you had like your music, your stereo. It may seem simple

but this is what we were happy with. So it felt like my world had crumbled. In fact, I literally say there were times that I said I want to come back. I can't make it.”

This account illustrates that young refugees suffer from loneliness after arrival in the United States. Hamid not only left his entire social network behind, but also was forced to immigrate without his parents, leaving him truly alone during his first few months in the United States. The data reveal, however, that one advantage of being as young as Hamid when immigrating to the United States is that the younger immigrants were able to adapt more easily over time. Within a few months, many of them began to learn the language, found work and started school. Nevertheless, the lack of life experience and emotional capital caused many of the young refugees to feel the kind of despair that Hamid described above.

In comparison, the male respondents who were older at the time of fleeing Iran struggled more and much longer in adjusting to their new lives in the United States. This group typically came to the United States with wives and one or more children. They placed much of their hope for a new life on their children's education and their own ability to be free practicing Baha'is. Many of them were surprised and became disappointed after observing differences between their new American Baha'i communities and those they left behind in Iran.

Omid, a man in his late fifties, who escaped death row in Iran by living underground for thirteen years, describes his disappointment with the host culture in the following excerpt:

“I thought the Baha'i faith is pretty strong in the United States. Which when we got here, I ... noticed no it's not that strong and people are growing, but it's gradually, slowly, and I understand that because the Baha'i faith started from Iran, so of course right there people are more educated and they are more religious than here. But I can say it was very nice being here. There was a lot of opportunities for us. Of course I had a *hard* time starting

life here from zero. Because when you don't know the language of the country, you have a family, you need to go to work full-time. Full-time job, full-time in school. All these are going to put a lot of stress. It was not easy, but I just really thank [G]od that we could survive.”

Baha'is tend to grow up valuing racial and religious diversity—something that is uncommon in a racially homogeneous society like Iran. However, because of Iran's homogenous make-up, Baha'is have never actually tested these values. The data show that, typically, this tolerant perspective seems to ease the Baha'i refugees' transition to living in the United States, as they tend to face less of a culture shock when first transitioning to a diverse society. Culture shock, however, is experienced in other ways. Furnham and Bochner (1986) define culture shock as the “psychological consequences of exposure to unfamiliar environments.” Further they explain that cultural disorientation can have both disabling and enriching effects on a traveler. They argue that culture shock can be alleviated through cultural learning, which consists of learning the social skills and behaviors that match those of the new location (Furnham and Bochner 1986). Using this definition, it supports the idea that having been socialized to hold a more open attitude towards cultural diversity would aid these immigrant-refugees in their interactions with members of the host country. There is a gender difference here, however, with men typically struggling more than women. Continuing his discussion, Omid states:

“I can't match myself here... the most difficult part... I have difficulties, I do! I cannot match myself in the situation right here. It's ok, we are free to live the way we want here which is very ok, very nice. But in total... I do not like this society.”

The reason that Omid does not like this society is that he can't relate to the culture and he feels that materialism here has corrupted the people. Other interviewees also reported that they

feel materialism is something that greatly differentiates American culture and society from that of Iran.

Women, on the other hand, tend to adjust better to life in the United States and experience less culture shock. I believe this is in large part due to the fact that women experience new freedoms after immigration, while men tend to lose some of the few benefits they had in Iran because the country is deeply patriarchal (Graham and Khosravi 1997). Most of the women, regardless of their age at time of immigration, immediately pursued education in the United States. For some this consisted of English courses. For others, who were students in the Baha'í Institute of Higher Education, they began undergraduate or even graduate study as soon as possible.

Khatereh, a woman in her mid-thirties who came to the United States with the help of a Jewish organization that helps persecuted Iranians escape Iran, describes her experience of being able to publicly attend higher education in the United States after spending several years studying in the Baha'í Institute of Higher Education:

“I believe that [G]od is helping me and I don't think that [crying] he left me alone. So... that's ...when I was living in New Mexico, I was alone, but I could never ever imagine that everything goes so smooth for me. I mean just... getting accepted to graduate school and all these things are like a big dream for me... I mean... it might be nothing to an American kid, but to someone who [crying] was not even allowed to go to university, I guess it's a big change. I think ... I think [G]od is helping me. And I guess it's just because he knows that what I've been through.”

Despite feeling lonely in the United States, the respondent believed that [G]od was intervening on her behalf, by making it possible for her to attend graduate school. To Khatereh,

this was an affirmation that [G]od supported her escape from Iran and used it as motivation to commit herself fully to her studies.

### ***3. Leaving Them Behind: Refugee Guilt***

Despite the joy and expressed belief that [G]od created these opportunities, Khatereh—like many of the other women I interviewed—struggled with feelings of guilt for having these new freedoms and opportunities while having left behind friends and family members who are still suffering from the Human Right’s violations in Iran. Khatereh offers this perspective on refugee guilt:

“It took me a while to make the decision [to come here]... it was a huge decision for me. It still... sometimes I feel that I made the wrong decision and I don’t know... but... well... I know that I came here to go to school and education that is something important for the Baha’i faith, but you know the other Baha’is are still in Iran and they... they say that just staying in Iran it’s like doing a service. And I believe that... you know... [crying]... I don’t know. I feel that I broke my promise and that I’m not doing service there. But, on the other hand, I think that if I was making the wrong decision, then why did they accept my degree and why do I have all these opportunities. But still, it’s hard, because... sometimes I feel that I was so selfish. But I’m here and I can’t do anything about it now.

The majority of men did not express this kind of personal guilt, but rather emphasized that they sacrificed their life in Iran and their status in the Baha’i community in order to come here to provide their wives and children with a better life. As one of the respondents explained, “Why else would you leave home?” The men often frame their escape around not having had a “choice,” while many of the women feel guilty for “choosing” to leave, even under highly

oppressive circumstances. As a consequence, women typically did not feel that they could claim exile status, associating exile with a forced rather than voluntary condition.

Mehran, whose escape story was cited earlier and who left Iran as a single man without children, could not use children as an explanation for his leaving. Rather, it was because of extreme danger that he was forced to leave Iran. During the interview, he explained this decision:

Naghme: “If you hadn’t been caught, or they didn’t know that you were the one taking the pictures. Do you think you would have left Iran?”

Mehran: “Probably not. Probably... again to go back, I wasn’t allowed to go to university... my brother was a second year of medical school student. He was expelled from university. I was never given the opportunity to take the entrance test. But... I was one of the top students in the in the whole state [in high school]. So there was no doubt that I would have entered the university in any discipline that I wanted to study. So even with that, probably... even though I wanted to study, I wanted to have good education [and knowing that I wouldn’t have been able to], probably I wouldn’t have left. I would have stayed probably, like my brothers did. So, just probably being around the Baha’is and not to leave them behind. So but there was no option for me.”

If not for fear of his life, Mehran believes he would have sacrificed all of his wishes and dreams for the future in order not to leave behind or abandon his community. Because he had been documenting the torture and deaths of Baha’is, Mehran knew that had he been caught there was little hope for survival in Iran.

Almost all of the interviewees shared that they wished to return to Iran. The only participants who did not express this desire were those who were children and youth at the time

they escaped and those who no longer had any family or friends in Iran. Those who wished to return explained that it was painful for them to think about the suffering of the Baha'is there while knowing that they themselves were in freedom and safety. Variations of "I wish I did not have to leave them behind" appear in many of the interviews.

Guilt is a common theme among the refugees, bringing to light the struggle to maintain a cultural identity while also trying to build a new life in the host country. In contrast, Gilad (1990) conducted a study on refugees in Newfoundland (originating from a variety of regions such as Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East) and found guilt only among refugees who did not flee direct or active persecution. In the case of direct persecution, her sample did not reveal guilt for having left family members or friends behind.

My findings align more closely with that of O'Neil and Spybey (2003) who discuss the pride many refugees feel from having survived very difficult life circumstances and at the same time struggle with their lack of a homeland. A handful of respondents stated that they even missed the persecution because at least in Iran they knew how to deal with people and what to expect. In the United States, they feel helpless and like strangers who do not belong. Combined with these feelings, many refugees experience a moral dilemma when dealing with issues of integration into the host society and building a new life (Eastmond 1993). Working to build a new life means accepting the permanence of the exile, while integration represents a kind of "betrayal" to those people that were left behind and an abandonment of resistance activities in the home country (Graham and Khosravi 1997, Eastmond 1993).

#### ***4. Nostalgia***

Several respondents, especially those who were severely persecuted in Iran because of their engagement and leadership roles in the religious communities, felt that their language

difficulty and outsider status prevented them from being able to fully participate in society, especially in the Baha’i communities in the United States. Many interviewees also stated feeling as though their new life had less purpose than in Iran and that they sometimes felt they betrayed their community and themselves by taking the “easy” route and escaping. In Iran their Baha’i community was their life. Their shared experiences of persecution and oppression and commitment to remain steadfast in their faith bonded members of the community in ways that does not seem to be the case in the United States. When asked what she missed the most in exile, Khatereh described the bond she felt to her community in Iran:

“What I miss the most... is the Baha’i atmosphere over there. I miss that a lot. I attend a lot of Baha’i activities here, but I guess... well Baha’is over there they are different. I don’t know. But we share something... I don’t share those things with Baha’is here... here they don’t understand. They have never been through that... I don’t blame them, but still. It’s different. The life totally is different in Iran. For Baha’is in Iran, service is really important. But here it’s a busy life. Everyone has so much to do... just going... go to school go to work... and then faith *maybe* comes next.”

Farid, a father of three teenage boys who fled Iran with his wife and children six months prior to his interview, longs for Iran so strongly that he says he frequently “visits” Iran in his dreams.

“If it wasn’t for the kids, I would have stayed in Iran. It’s my home land. I grew up there. I was raised with those people. I understand the language, the places, the structure. I still go there in my sleep and come back. I dream about Iran. I love Iran. I worked. I didn’t struggle with the language. I understood the people. I felt competent. Here, I don’t feel useful. There, I was useful. I could make a difference. Here, they don’t use me

well...because I don't speak the language. I can't express my ideas, I can't make a difference. So my knowledge and experience is a waste here.”

From a very young age Farid's family experienced extreme levels of persecution. When he was only a young boy, his father was beaten so brutally inside of his home that he died from the severity of his injuries. His mother also suffered intense persecution and remained sick and frail for much of his youth. This is one of his first memories of being a Baha'i in Iran. Over the course of his life, Farid was regularly denied employment and had his home raided and destroyed. Landlords would cut off the utilities to their apartment, forcing them to live without heat or electricity through the winters with limited food. Still—despite the difficulties that defined his life in Iran—when asked if he hopes to return to Iran one day, he responded:

“Yes. My heart's desire is to return soon. I even told my children here... I am a stranger here, it's difficult for me. I even asked my children if they will let me return. They said yes. But they didn't say it from their hearts... mean it. But of course... I can't let them go. I don't want to. I love my wife and children. I want to see them succeed and lead a good life. We left our life, so they can have one. But I would like to return. Really. But there without children and wife it would be very difficult. I couldn't bare all the difficulties in Iran without my wife and children. Life is so hard. Without my family it wouldn't be bearable. They give my life meaning... But maybe I could.”

Many of the men and women I interviewed voiced this kind of nostalgia for their lives in Iran, especially in regard to a meaningful and important life. Farid also clearly expresses the part of himself that he left behind in Iran. He states that he left his life so that his children could have a better life. His wife described similar feelings about their escape from Iran:

“Only for the children. We came for our sons. Otherwise, I would very much like to be in Iran. My sister is here, but my roots, my home, my heritage is in Iran. I am not complete here, but alas, we came for the children.”

As in the above example, the more recent refugees express a strong calling to return to Iran even if the political situation does not necessarily change. All of those who have children stated that they only left the country for their children and that if it was not for them, they would return or they would have stayed. They recognized the suffering and pain they endured in Iran, but still felt as though they would rather be there and give up the freedoms they have in the United States in order to return to their extended family and communities.

Nostalgia for the home country and resistance to assimilation often become tools for holding on to and recreating a sense of identity. This nostalgia is often based on a false or past memory of the home country and not on current day politics, often leaving those in exile with a sense of homelessness (McAuliffe 2007, Tettey and Pupilampu 2005, Mostofi 2003, Frykman 2001, Ghorashi 1997, Eastmond 1993). Graham and Khosravi argue that some refugees try to recreate a “more authentic” homeland in their host society compared to the way culture is being practiced in their home countries. “Nostalgia is never only about ‘the past as it was’. The past is actively created in an attempt to remember it” (1997, p. 128). These scholars see this nostalgia as vital in recreating a homeland in the new host society. Further, consistent with my findings, two studies comparing the experience of Muslim and Baha’í Iranian exiles found that this nostalgia is present in both groups, despite the Baha’ís experience of marginalization in Iran (Mostofi 2003, McAuliffe 2007). In the case of Baha’ís, this was an unexpected finding, given their experiences of past and present discrimination.

Baha'is experienced internal exile in Iran and a real threat to their lives as a consequence of their religious membership. The place that represents home for them was never a place where they were accepted (McAuliffe 2007, Mostofi 2003). Because of the global outlook of the Baha'i faith, Iranian members focus on building a global identity, deemphasizing the importance of nation. McAuliffe believes that this is a way to deal with being marginalized both in their home country and in the diaspora. In the Baha'i teachings the idea of being a "global/world citizen" is prioritized over national identity. Therefore, the religious identity is presented as global, but their Iranian identity and that of their home is not. The data show that there exists a tension between the religious beliefs and values and the Iranian Baha'is' rootedness to Iran, both as their cultural heritage and the birthplace of their faith. While many say that they are global citizens, this label merely obscures the fact that they express feeling displaced and homeless. They feel in exile in the United States and at the same time know that they do not have a place where they belong in Iran. When I asked the interviewees if they would have stayed in Iran if the circumstances had not become unbearable to them, a large portion of the respondents stated, "if not for the persecution, why else would you leave your home?" This response, demonstrates that, despite this global outlook, most of the Baha'i informants felt a strong connection to their homeland and desired to return or at least visit Iran, based on the condition that the political situation would have to improve (McAuliffe 2007).

In my research, this nostalgia was typically focused on family, the Baha'i communities of Iran, and the linguistic and cultural heritage. Pari, a woman in her late fifties and mother of two Iranian-American adult children, conveyed feelings of nostalgia especially when talking about the pre-revolution Iranian cultural heritage:

“That I miss. You know, the poetry...to be able to read the literature...Baha’i literature. And not just Baha’i literature, just Persian. And being able to not be a foreigner. You know?”

Shideh, who is in her twenties, describes missing “home.” This idea of home includes senses such as sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. Sometimes her longing to “feel” at home—to be in Iran—is so strong that she will call her father’s house in Iran, even though she knows it is unoccupied—just to feel connected. This case demonstrates the strong connection between home and place. For Shideh, home was directly tied to a physical space that provided her with a sense of place and belonging. She describes these feelings here:

“I miss our home a lot. I know my dad is not home, but I call and when the phone is ringing I’m there. Like I’m making a sound there. So I miss the home. What else do I miss? I miss the food a lot. And the pastry shops. There are some pastry shops.

Sometimes I just miss some streets, like streets I used to like walk in all the time. Some people. I don’t know. There’s... actually there’s warmth between people. Like there’s something that’s not here. People are kind of cold here. So I miss that.”

Similar to Shideh’s description, a number of informants felt as though they do not truly belong in the United States, but that they also no longer truly fit in with the Iranian culture. In this way they now experience an outsider status both in the United States as well as in Iran. This is a status that is both assigned to them and one that they construct for themselves. Pari, who has a successful teaching career and has been married to an American for over twenty years, shared that she feels that even in her nuclear family she is a stranger and that her children and husband cannot understand her experiences. She described herself as having a “marginal identity” that is neither Persian nor American. She stated that she expects to feel this way until the day she dies.

Even though she does not believe things in Iran will change during her lifetime, she still yearns to return to Iran and feel as though she belongs to her country of origin, at least to a certain degree:

“You know how it is with the foreigners... is that they establish their own perimeters. You know they're marginal... we live on a margin of the society. We are not American; we are not Persians. We are right in between, which is called I think constructive marginality. That you adapt some of the culture of this country that you live in, and you have some of your own culture. And you have your own marginal culture. So you're... I have some of my Persian culture, some of my American culture, some of my Finnish<sup>11</sup> culture, which has formed into a separate entity.”

It is important to note that in exile, many of these refugees construct a sense of “home” around their memories of Iran. Most of the feeling of belonging comes from their experiences within the Iranian Baha’i communities, overlooking the exclusion they experiences from the larger Iranian society. In many ways, they experienced a type of internal exile in Iran, where Baha’is are often constricted to life only within the Baha’i community. Similarly, immediately following the revolution in Iran, a time known as the years of suppression, Iranian political activists (not Baha’is) experienced this type of homelessness in their home country as well (Ghorashi 1997). The activists described this as a very difficult experience where they felt rejected and oppressed by the newly emerging regime. Having been labeled as a “dangerous group,” ultimately led to an initial migration of many wealthier Iranian activists and members of the middle or upper classes. Because of their fairly western lifestyles in Iran, these groups did not experience a strong culture shock in their host countries and stated feeling positive and hopeful

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<sup>11</sup> She lived in Finland prior to immigrating to the United States.

for a new life. However, over time and through increased interaction with members of their host countries, many members of the Iranian diaspora started becoming frustrated with the general public's lack of knowledge and understanding of Iranian culture and Iranian politics. Over time, this often marked a new awareness that they would never really belong to their host society and thus would lack the ability to truly build a new life for themselves (Ghorashi 1997). As I have shown throughout this chapter, the experiences of Iranian Baha'í refugees in the United States compare closely to those of the Iranian political activists. Both groups felt an initial sense of relief that subsided quickly after settling into their new host societies and became replaced by a sense of exile.

## **E. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have described the processes of escaping persecution and trying to find a place as exiles, living in a new host society. Specifically, I provided two examples of flight stories without a passport. Further I explained the process of leaving Iran under the guise of short-term travel for those who were able to secure passports. Then I discussed four themes that emerged from the data, describing the ways in which Iranian Baha'ís experience their exile: 1) initial relief, 2) loneliness and homesickness, 3) refugee guilt, and 4) nostalgia.

First generation Iranian Baha'ís in the United States face a number of difficulties in maintaining a connection to the home country while negotiating their place and trying to start a new life in exile. Almost all of the interviewees expected to be able to practice their religion more freely and widely, given the lack of restrictions by the United States government after their escape from Iran. For many of them, this served as a strong justification for their decision to leave Iran. At the same time, the findings support that this group of exiles have experienced difficulties integrating into the American-based Baha'í community due to perceived differences

among their Iranian home communities and their new host communities. This feeling of disconnection from a community, which heavily influenced their perception of self, appears to increase the burden of exile and in the long term poses a risk of feelings of isolation, homelessness, and a need to reject the host culture all together in order to maintain a sense of self.

Feelings of rootlessness or homelessness in exile seem to have a powerful impact on a person's transition out of persecution. Of course this influence varies by personal history and experience in the host country. This search for belonging and the fears attached to never having a true home were present in the narratives of these first generation exiles. Consistent with Ghorashi's research on Iranian political activists (1997), respondents felt concerned about their future in regards to belonging in the host culture. The future was the most difficult topic for them to discuss even when compared to the oppression and difficulties they faced in Iran. The lack of feeling connected to their religious communities in the US seems to play a critical part in their concerns about the future.

While in Iran, these Baha'is were outsiders and held firm to the belief that once in the United States where they could practice their religion freely, they would finally gain a sense of belonging to the larger society. When discussing their experiences in Iran, they often describe themselves as outsiders there. However, after coming to the United States and experiencing the burden of exile as outsiders, they appear to reconstruct their memories of Iran as having "belonged" before they left. This construction of "home" as a place they left reinforces the sense of exile in their host country. In hindsight, Iran provided a place where they knew the language, customs, and could navigate the system. McAuliffe (2007) also found that distance and hindsight can create a fondness for the homeland and a "diasporic desire to return." It is the experience of

being an outsider that prevents refugees from fully accepting the permanence of their displacement. This, in turn, only further reinforces and deepens the burden of their exile and outsider status. In the next chapter, the immigrant experience of Iranian Baha'is in a racially charged context will be explored.

## CHAPTER 5: IRANIAN BAHÁ'Í'S IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

*“The feeling of not belonging. Not knowing where you belong...where your home is. Because the place you were born literally threw you out, and had no respect for you. And now you're trapped and there is nothing you can do about it. You feel like the doors are closed and perhaps never can be opened again, that how it feels.” – Mona, female*

### A. Introduction

In the last chapter I discussed Iranian Baha'ís experience of escaping persecution and their search to find a new home in exile. In addition to the challenge of the traumas they have experienced both in Iran and on their escape journeys, as well as the open ended nature of exile, this population has to face the difficulties that are associated with being refugees and immigrants in a new country. As discussed earlier, there has been a history of persecution of Baha'ís in Iran since the religion was founded in 1844 (IHRDC 2006). However, since the 1979 revolution especially, Baha'ís have experienced systematic discrimination including loss of employment and educational opportunities; forced conversion to Islam; and threat of violence and death. The oppression of this religious community has led to a significant Baha'í diaspora, with a large number of refugees and exiles settling in the United States over the last four decades.

In this chapter, I focus on the challenge of this diasporic community in starting a new life in a host culture that has had a contentious relationship with Iran, since the Islamic revolution and hostage crisis. Baha'ís fleeing Iran not only have to adjust to the new host culture, learn the language, and try to build a new life, they also have to transition from a racially homogenous society to the United States that, despite its freedoms, also presents a number of racial tensions. Because of the existing tensions, Baha'ís are perceived as suspect due to being perceived as Muslim. In addition, the refugees experience shifts in the roles of family members, loss of status

culturally and economically, and the tensions that often arise between immigrant parents and their children. Throughout the chapter, I will refer to this group as “immigrant-refugees” because I will be focusing on their immigrant experiences in the United States.

## **B. Persian Baha’is Immigrant Experience**

As discussed in the previous chapter, initial experiences of living in the new host society can vary over time and are influenced by nature of life in the “home” country before leaving. For example, Sorenson (1990) found in his study of Eritreans’ ethnic identity in Canada that many members of this group rejected their host culture due to negative experiences. Eritreans’ who fled ethnic conflicts with Ethiopians were often perceived to be part of the same group, despite their conflicts in Africa. In response to this miscategorization and the associated denial of their own distinct identity, many members of this group began to recreate traditional elements of Eritrean culture as a way to build a unified community in their host country (Sorenson 1990).

Multiple studies have found that for many groups there is an initial feeling of relief of having escaped various forms of oppression or danger along with a positive response towards members of the host country (Tettey and Puplampu 2005, Mostofi 2003, O’Neil and Spybey 2003, Frykman 2001, Ghorashi 1997, Eastmond 1993). This is certainly true for the Iranian Baha’is that come to the United States in the search for freedom. However, over time, cultural differences, pressures to assimilate, racial and religious tensions, loss of status, and familial tensions complicate this community’s attempt to settle into their new lives in the United States. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail below.

### ***1. Cultural Differences***

Both adult Baha’i immigrant-refugees and former Iranian political activists who fled Iran at the onset of the revolution, did not express having felt much of a culture shock when

immigrating to their new host country. Research on former Iranian political activists who settled in Europe showed that forced cultural changes in Iran<sup>12</sup> and having been labeled as a “dangerous group” ultimately led to an initial migration of many wealthier Iranian activists out of Iran (Ghorashi 1997). Because Iranian life was much more similar to that of the West until the revolution, these groups did not describe their host cultures appearing drastically different at first. Further, they initially expressed optimistic for a new life in their new host country.

However, through increased interaction with members of their host countries, many members of the Iranian diaspora started becoming frustrated with the general public’s lack of knowledge and understanding of Iranian culture and Iranian politics. Over time, this often marked a new awareness that they would never really belong to their host society and thus would lack the ability to truly build a new life for themselves (Ghorashi 1997).

The respondents in this study shared a similar experience as these political activists. Those interviewees who were adults at the time of the revolution, and fled in response to the cultural and religious shifts, were used to the more open and western lifestyles during the time of the Shah in Iran. They did not express feeling much of a culture shock, initially. However, as with the political activists in Europe, these immigrant-refugees in the United States eventually began to feel discriminated against and isolated from the larger host culture. As I will discuss in the section on racial tensions, Baha’i immigrant-refugees similarly felt alienated and excluded from the larger American society during the time of the revolution and especially during and after the Iranian hostage crisis.

Those Iranian Baha’is who came to the United States after the revolution, experienced a much stronger culture shock. In large part this is due to the fact that they lived in Iran during a

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<sup>12</sup> Following the 1979 revolution, Iran was transformed from a very modern to a traditional country.

time where the culture had shifted dramatically from a fairly liberal and worldly place to a very conservative, religiously controlled, and traditional society that became isolated from the rest of the world. The daily lives of these refugees were very different in Iran than those of the Iranian Baha'is who never lived in Iran under the new revolutionary government. One example of this comes from Noushin, whose family escaped Iran when she was a young teenager:

“Everything was different! Nights were days and days were nights. It was just so different and the culture, the language, everything was so difficult to get used to. It all was so hard, but it's getting better. I'm getting used to it. In school, I couldn't understand and didn't relate to the students, so most of my friends were the teachers. I couldn't relate to the kids much. It was hard making friends when I would do things that were not considered normal here... I wish they understood that it was because I was new here and not just socially awkward.”

Noushin continues to struggle with relating to many of the students in her school, although she has found some friends with whom she feels close. These friends are mostly from religious (Christian) families and thus share a religious-oriented perspective. In her book on Holocaust survivor families, Stein describes the experiences of children of survivors of the Holocaust as having similar difficulties relating to other students in school (2014). Oftentimes, these children were the only “survivor students” at a school, with teachers and students unsure of how to interact with them.

Another example of the difficulty of adjusting to the new culture is that of Mahvash, who only recently immigrated to the United States as an adult with two children. She stated that the initial transition was especially difficult for her children:

“Unfortunately they had a climate shock. Now the climate or weather, that is very much like Iran. But the society was much more calm and peaceful, and it took a little bit to get used to, especially for my son. He was a child in Iran and wasn’t used to different cultures. He was behaving like an Iranian child and did whatever he wanted. Our caseworker would tell me that I had to teach him not to act Iranian. That it’s not ok to hit your mom when you want something or cry and yell in the street. It was rather hard. It took him a long time to get used to this place. Us too, like when you have to take a number to wait in line calmly and not rush. It was different for all of us and hard to get used to.”

In addition to the challenges of learning to speak, write and read a new language (Farsi uses a different alphabet), the above excerpt shows that cultural differences present themselves in all areas of life. Even something as simple as going to a government office and waiting in line can be quite different depending on the culture. Further, as Mahvash explained, even her refugee caseworker<sup>13</sup> perceived the family’s behaviors as not only different but inappropriate and pressured them to assimilate to the American way of life as quickly as possible.

In Stein’s book that was mentioned above, she describes Jewish families having similar trouble with “resettlement agencies.”

“While acknowledging the challenges facing survivors, resettlement agencies held out the hope of overcoming ‘behavior patterns’ that might work against ‘adjustment,’ offering the hope that even survivors of the concentration camps, if given schooling, work, and a place to live, could integrate and carry on in the grand tradition of other immigrant groups” (Stein 2014, p.51).

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the Baha’i refugees were assigned case workers who assisted them with gaining access to refugee services, such as temporary housing assistance.

While Baha’i families are not survivors of concentration camps, their cultural differences and traumatic pasts are often perceived as maladjusted and problematic for the successful integration into the American culture, as the interviews demonstrate. Immigrant families, then, have to modify their behavior patterns if they want to participate in American life successfully.

For some families, the local Baha’i community provided a mediating buffer between the refugees and the larger American culture as they assisted them with some of the immediate needs such as finding housing, getting enrolled in English courses, and showing them where and how to access other services. In some cases they even assisted children with homework, given that the parents’ lack of English prevented them from being able to assist their children in their educational transitions. One example comes from Neda whose family fled Iran when she was thirteen years old. She recalls the assistance she received from the local Baha’i community:

“Not knowing the language at all. All you know is yes, no. Make sure you say yes and no at the right time. There were wonderful Baha’is there. They were all American Baha’is. They would go out of their way for us... all these wonderful people. They helped us out to learn the language, to get a job, to feel comfortable. And they had so much respect for us because they knew what we’ve gone through. They had a really good influence on us. They helped us through high school, coming over to help with homework when my parents would call them, because they [the parents] didn’t know the language either and couldn’t help us. It was hard, but it really helped that we had them to help us.”

This example shows the powerful impact that having a local community can have in a transition to a new country. Had it not been for this community’s help, Neda is confident that they would have had an even more difficult time getting settled and starting a new life. Similar to my findings, in her 2006 article, Menjivar reports on faith-based assistance to immigrant groups

by Catholic churches and the various forms that this assistance takes. She explains that faith-based assistance can have an important impact on immigrants' transition to the United States, but argues that more comparative research is needed.

Others respondents, however, did not receive much assistance from their local Baha'i communities and often had to rely on distant relatives or local refugee services to assist them with the initial needs. This often created a much more difficult start to the transition to American life. Dina, who fled Iran with her fifteen year-old brother when she was nineteen and without her parents, describes the difficulties she encountered in her first few months in the United States:

“We were going to Canada, but we got rejected. That was another disaster, the reason my brother got more depressed saying he wants to go back, we have no money in the U.S. But they said no, you have to go to the U.S. And I remember that we had a cousin that we never met. Someone had to give you a sponsorship, not financial, but say that they are related to you at least. So we didn't know her. We called Iran and told my mom, call our cousin. She did, she faxed something and we ended up here. We were lost, confused. My English was as good as now, speaking wise, but I couldn't understand anything. My brother picked up really fast and went to high school. But it was very difficult. We felt that people were very cold. Our own relatives didn't come to visit us. We were dying, we had like these heroes, our cousins and they were so important all of our childhoods we wanted to come and be with them. And they just never even cared to see us. Which, now that I think about it, it's normal in the U.S. Like you are not dying to see your cousins. We were dying to see them. It was just a difference of culture.”

Dina and her brother had high expectations around their relationship with their “cousins in America” who they had idolized their entire childhoods. Once in the United States, however,

they found that cultural differences created isolation and confusion during their early experiences with family. In the case of Dina, she and her brother stayed with a cousin who was born in the United States and led a busy life. Dina describes this time as uncomfortable and tense due to the cultural differences between them and their American-born relatives. Iranian cultural norms place much of the care-taking responsibility on older relatives. Further, men are expected to provide for all of the members of the family. Within the American context, however, long-term house guests typically contribute to the cost of the household. Because of these unspoken rules and a lack of communication between the cousins, Dina expresses having violated many American norms during the time they lived with her cousin and feels that this caused negative feelings between the two of them. As a consequence, as soon as Dina and her brother were able to rent a room on their own, they lost most contact with their cousin.

A major cultural difference that both pre- and post-revolution immigrant-refugees discussed was how “busy” Americans and American Baha’is are and that this creates a significant cultural barrier between them. Life in Iran was quite difficult for many of these families. While work, family life, and Baha’i activities took up much of their time in Iran, it did not prevent them from visiting with and hosting friends and family. In Iran, it is customary to just drop by to visit family and friends, something that is very different from the American culture. Several of the interviewees stated that it was difficult to get close to American Baha’is and Americans in general, because they often do not reciprocate invitations. This perception of being “too busy” for them is something that is even visible to the younger immigrant-refugees. Noushin, who just finished high school in the United States raised this issue when I ask her about her future goals:

“I want to... I want to continue my education of course... to go to college. And then America is a place that everyone is busy. Everyone is doing something. It’s hard to find time in America. Life just goes so fast and I feel like many people don’t... before they understand what they’re doing, they’re 60... in their 50s, 60s, you know. They’ve been working all their lives and... and they’ve been so busy that they haven’t been with their families, with their kids as much. They haven’t been able to go out with them, talk to them, spend time with them. And I don’t want that. I love... I like America a lot. And the freedom is really, really good. And opportunities that people have is really good. And you can grow and become, you know, have a comfortable life. But it’s... I don’t want to be busy. I want to have a life that I work a little bit, but for the other half of the day I want to spend time with my family. I want to enjoy life and really maybe read books, understand more about life, travel, and you know, just taste life. Yeah, being busy, everyday life, working and then coming home, paying the bills... it’s just kind of material and before you know it, it’s all gone.”

Many of the respondents shared this sentiment that busyness is simply a reflection of materialism in American culture. Because many of these immigrant-refugees came from an environment where they had very little compared to their American peers, they did not see many of the material goods as necessities and missed the social aspect of relationships.

## ***2. Pressure to Assimilate***

As a consequence of the cultural barriers, the younger generation (those who were children or young adults when coming to the United States) often felt significant pressure to assimilate to the host culture in order to “fit in” (Gouda 2008). On numerous occasions, Shideh

expressed feeling that she needed to fit in if she was to have a “normal” life in the United States. In the following excerpt she describes one of these situations:

“To feel normal. ‘Cause my real stresses are what if something happens to my dad in Iran and we are all far away? Or I don’t know what if something happens to my mom? Or what if I can’t find a house that she is comfortable in? So, even though I don’t really get stressed about things like taking my exams at school, I mean I do get stressed, but not as much. It’s not even comparable to my [college] classmates. But I feel like I have to put up a status on my Facebook saying I’m so nervous about my exams. The same way that they do. It’s a pattern I’ve learned to fit in.”

When asked why she felt the need to express similar types of stresses in order to fit in, she explained:

“It usually occurs during conversations that I have with people here. Sometimes I’m just like ‘are we really talking about this? I don’t really want to.’ But If I want to have those people around, if I don’t want to be alone and have a normal life, I have to do it. I can’t go and talk to people about politics and what’s happening in Africa, what happened to us in Iran...and how much I think about it, I can’t really talk to people about that or about Baha’is in Iran. Sometimes I get tired of it myself, so I just want to go and talk about this dress I saw an Banana Republic, and how much I want it and I’m saving money for it.”

Shideh’s story, like the narratives of other respondents, reveals how Baha’i immigrant-refugees struggle with sharing difficult pasts and being true to themselves. For these respondents, materialism is perceived as a barrier to living a life that is less self-involved and more focused on injustices and human rights violations occurring around the globe. Many of the interviewees thus feel isolated from American culture for these reasons.

In some cases assimilation was not just seen as a desire to “fit in” but rather as a necessity in order to have a successful career. One of the women participants whose family immigrated to the United States at the start of the revolution explained that she was asked to change her first name to sound more American during career training. She complied and although she reported that she was “fine” with changing her name, because people here did not understand the true meaning of her name in any case, it became clear during the interview that she was very much attached to her real name which carried meaning and a connection to her homeland.

In a similar vein, Hassan, who was working for a large national insurance company at the time of the Iranian hostage crisis, explained that he always avoided talking about Iran, politics, or religion at work. He voiced that, “to this date, my clients, coworkers...still there is always this look, suspicious.” Not only did he experience suspicion and discrimination after the hostage crisis, but also in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the world trade center. To ease some of these suspicions, Hassan works hard to be perceived as a neutral and non-threatening person in his work environment, despite the fact that in his private life he describes himself as a highly political person who is “always making trouble” by asking critical questions.

In comparison with the younger aged immigrant-refugees, those individuals who were older at the time of coming to the United States had a much more difficult time overcoming cultural barriers, including learning the English language. As a result they often felt like outsiders that could not integrate well into the host culture. Waters and Jiménez (2005) argue that immigrant assimilation can be measured on four primary benchmarks, one of which is language assimilation.<sup>14</sup> When language assimilation is low, immigrant groups have a more difficult time settling into the host culture.

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<sup>14</sup> The other three are: socioeconomic status, spatial concentration, and intermarriage.

Finally, it is significant to note that while Iran is a highly homogenous society, Baha'is tend to be raised to value racial and religious diversity. This aspect of their culture typically eased Baha'is transition to living in a more racially diverse country. The difficulties they encountered therefore, as described above, were more typically about life styles, rather than interacting with groups of people who are of different racial backgrounds.

### ***3. Racial and Religious Tensions***

Despite the Baha'i immigrant-refugees cultural openness to racial diversity, they are often not welcomed by the larger host society. The more recent Iranian Baha'i refugees are dealing with racial prejudices directed toward them in a post 9/11 United States and many of the earlier immigrant-refugees faced discrimination as a consequence of the Iranian hostage crisis. Furthermore, Baha'is are often falsely perceived as Muslims in a culture that tends to view all of Islam as fundamentalist.

Many of the interviewees stated that they did not feel discrimination based on their race, but then explained that they were often perceived as Muslim and treated differently because they were "Middle Easterners." A few respondents, however, felt that they were discriminated against because of their background and had vivid memories of such situations. Hassan provides one illustration of this experience:

"I was working with a big company to offer them a group health life insurance. It would bring me close to six-grand a month of commission bonus. It would set me up, you know for a while. And I worked with that company for almost a month and a half...two months of meeting with executives, and presenting packages, and comparison...a lot of presentation. It was really hard work. Finally it was approved. Then the proposal was given to the CEO, and the CEO wanted to sign it. The day that he was supposed to sign it,

I went to his office and he was sitting with his big cigar, smiles, and he was from Texas. And he goes, so tell me who...where are you from? I said, I am from Walnut Creek, California. He goes no I mean your origin. I said I'm Persian. He goes Persian? Remember this is the time of the revolution. I mean as soon as I said that, I saw on his face. He kind of pushed the contract away from himself, and then he started chatting about different things, but I knew he was not going to sign it... And he goes well, I don't think that I'm going to sign this, my son. No, I don't think so. We're going to start all over with someone else. Just like that. I was terrified. I was just completely terrified. Went back to the office and ran into my boss's office and he goes we'll figure it out. We'll see what happened."

Because of the prejudice of the CEO, Hassan lost access to a significant professional opportunity. In a culture that continues to struggle with racial and ethnic prejudice, but also has a large immigrant population, these dynamics contribute to obstacles that immigrants face in leading successful lives. Some respondents tried to avoid the consequences of the larger public's negative perception and mistrust of Iranians or people from the Middle East in general. The most common strategy was to preemptively tell people they met that they were Baha'is and fled Iran because of persecution.

In other cases, respondents explained that they would call themselves Persian, because many people did not associate Persia with Iran. If they were asked to clarify and had to identify as Iranian, they would then immediately follow up with a disclosure of their Baha'i identity. Afshin also used this strategy after having had many negative experiences as a result of being an Iranian man in the United States. He explains:

“I have developed a dialogue and I’m like automatically my tape goes on. When they say ‘where are you from?’ I say originally I’m Persian. Sometimes they say what is Persian? You know 95% of people don’t know Persian. I said, you know nowadays it’s called Iran. Iranian? They say. No, Iranian. You know I try to correct them. Typically I say I came to America just before the revolution, because I’m a Baha’í. Have you heard about the Baha’í faith? No? We believe in Bahá’u’lláh. And then I say these ideas are very threatening to the Iranian establishment. But I was very lucky to be able to situate myself in America. This is the land of freedom and I’m very happy here. I don’t talk about Islam. Another example of this patterns comes from Parvaneh, who uses a similar strategy:

“Because I’m a Baha’í, but I’m from Iran... and sometimes I have to educate people that I’ve gone through persecutions back home because of our religion. Just because I’m from Iran, don’t clump us all in just one pot, because we have gone through so much. So I have to educate people. And unfortunately, some people understand and others are ignorant. You just have to educate them. Sometimes I just learn to be quiet and just not say anything, because if they don’t get it, it doesn’t matter what I say, they already have assumed whatever. It’s funny, when people ask where I’m from I always try to tell them that I am a Baha’í first. I’m like: Hi, I’m Parvaneh, I’m a Baha’í, I’m from Iran. Immediately.”

When avoiding the topic does not work in a situation, many of the respondents use the strategy of leading with their Baha’í identity as a way to minimize prejudicial treatment towards them. Several interviewees have articulated, however, that to their surprise many people don’t know what the Baha’í faith is and because of their Iranian background assume that it’s a branch of Islam. If not a branch of Islam, it might not be seen as a legitimate religion.

In these cases, identifying themselves as Baha'í tended to further alienate them from their conversational partners because they were perceived as belonging to a “fake religion.” This was especially difficult for those refugees who fled Iran after having experienced extreme hardship for being Baha'ís. Their expectation was that in a free country they could not only practice their faith, but that the Baha'í faith would also be known and widely accepted as a “real religion,” unlike in Iran where they were denied public and governmental recognition. Arezoo explains that when she corrects people about being Muslim, they often question the legitimacy of the Baha'í faith:

“And they think that it’s a made-up religion. That only Persians are Baha'ís. And then they don’t understand the universality of it. And it... it’s kind of sad because you came her with the expectation that if you come, you would be free and people would accept the Baha'í faith. And people’s close-mindedness in a country with that much freedom and that much media, and freedom of expression, that they still don’t know. That surprised me a lot. That they are still so closed minded, even though they are so free.”

To Arezoo, as well as several other interviewees, coming to a country that was known for freedom meant not having to face discrimination or ignorance. Realizing that their faith was still not perceived as genuine was a shock and hurtful to many of the respondents.

Baha'í immigrant-refugees in the United States struggle with the American emphasis on national heritage and identity. As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, Baha'ís in Iran are denied their national identity and are defined solely on the basis of their religion. Currently in the United States, much more emphasis is placed on geographical heritage, rather than religious community. Sri Lankan Tamil Youth who immigrated to Ontario express a similar experience of living in a country where one’s ethnic/national background takes precedence over one’s religious

identity (Amarasingam 2008). For this group, however, the result is that they adjust their perceptions of their own identities to privilege their ethnic rather than religious identity. Therefore, while the Sri Lankan youth share the external forces that highlight ethnicity and nationality, their response is different from that of the Baha'is in this study, who continue to emphasize their religious identity.

This might not seem as significant to someone who sees religion as only one part of their identity, but for this population, their religious community is the only community to which they had access in Iran. The larger national identity was reserved for those people who partook in their persecution either directly or by passivity. The next chapter will explore the role of religious identity in much more detail.

#### ***4. Loss of Status***

Another difference between those Baha'is who immigrated before the revolution and those who left Iran more recently is due to their educational status and financial resources. Those who left Iran before the revolution either still had access to higher education in Iran or came to the United States specifically for educational purposes. In many cases, these families had higher socioeconomic status and the resources associated with this status. For Baha'is who lived in Iran after the revolution, they not only were denied higher education, but also frequently experienced loss of employment or access to only informal work opportunities. After coming to the United States, their work experience often did not "count" because they could not provide references or demonstrate formal education in their fields. This often translated into a significant loss of status for those families who left Iran after the revolution, despite the oppressed circumstances in which they lived in Iran.

Farrah explains that despite the fact that her father was fairly fluent in English when they immigrated to the United States, he struggled with school and employment, which led to a significant loss of status as compared to his life in Iran:

“My dad was in much better position, because he knew English—he taught English back in Iran—so he... grew up in a country that spoke English [pre-revolution Iran]. So it was easier for him, more so than my brother and my mom. So pretty much all of them ended up going to community college. Going to ESL classes. And after a while starting to take other courses. Still, I think it is difficult for him too [her father], because he has been...it has been some 20 some years—um plus years—that he hasn’t totally communicated in English. And being out of accounting for so long because he lost his accounting job after the revolution and not having his degrees being recognized in the U.S. Or what do you do when all you did was basically by hand and now and now everything is computerized. So he felt that he had to go to school, and after a while he’s like ‘I’m too old for this. I... I can’t keep up with all that is happening.’ So my... my dad ended up continuing going to accounting classes for a while. And he got his certificate, but he had a hard time finding a job. So he tried carpentry and they asked for your school and they asked for your experience, which he could not provide. He didn’t have any references. So he ended up working in a small shop and doing management there. And working in hotels as a janitorial staff. Whatever he could do.”

Despite the fact that her father spoke English, he was not able to continue the type of work he did when he was in Iran. Having run out of options, Farrah’s father worked several janitorial jobs in order to provide for the family, something that she describes having been very difficult for him after having been an accountant and teacher in Iran. There are countless stories

of this type of loss of status, especially among men, because women often were not able to work in Iran. In his article on southeast Asian refugee families in the United States, Detzner found that the older generation of immigrants often experience a significant status loss, that they find overwhelming (1996). Detzner identifies this status loss as a change in status roles, where the older generation no longer serves as “economic provider, sage, family head, and moral leader because their experience is perceived by the young as not relevant in the American context” (1996, p.48).

Many of the men in this study describe feeling useless or without purpose in the United States because they do not have the language or cultural resources to navigate the culture. Many of the male interviewees, though not all, also describe having trouble with learning English and finding employment that compares in status to the work they did in Iran. Several of the respondents also expressed having struggled when trying to seek formal education in the United States in order to have better employment opportunities in the future. Both age (having been out of school for many years) and language barriers often prevented them from being successful educationally, causing them to fall back on physical labor as a source of income for their families.

Omid, who had a successful office printing company in Iran, experienced a similar struggle after immigrating to the United States:

“I put the kids in school, of course, with help of the refugee offices, and I started going back to school again. My English was not as good. I went to school for a while. Because at work they didn’t accept my license, so they asked me to go back to school to study again. Which was hard for me. I had to study all those... I knew those... I had worked in that job for a lifetime... When I was 13 years old, I started. Anyway, I started studying in

the university. I studied four years of pre-med. I was in the university about nine years. For English, and then... I liked to go and become a medical doctor so that I could serve better. But family and the situation didn't let me to continue. So I changed my position, my job actually... and I became a contractor. I went back to school and studied rules and regulations of the buildings. And since thirteen years ago, I've been a contractor and doing building stuff like that. Anyway, after all... we lost our home in Iran. The government took it and we kind of lost our hope of going back to... [crying] ... our country.”

Omid was already in his forties when he came to the United States. It is understandable that formal education was very difficult for him. However, because of the lack of available resources and the structural barriers that prevented him from continuing in his familiar line of work after immigration, he had to work in a highly physically demanding profession to support his family. Because of the injuries he sustained in prison in Iran, doing physical labor to provide for his family, while successful, has been a very difficult journey for him.

##### ***5. Familial Tensions: Gender and Generation***

The data reveal that Baha’i immigrant-refugees experience familial tensions as a result of shifting gender and generational norms within the nuclear family. In this section, I discuss the gender tensions that arise as a result of loss of male status and increased responsibilities of female family members. I will also highlight the generational tensions that emerged in the data as a result of the difference between parents’ expectations and perceptions of their children’s behavior and the children’s perceptions of their own behavior.

**Gender Tensions.** In several families, the men experienced a loss of their male status within the family and culture after immigrating to the United States. In Baha’i communities in

Iran it is common to privilege girls in formal education, rather than boys, because women are seen as the primary educators of future generations.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, when families had limited resources, they might choose to only provide access to higher education to their daughters, even if that consisted of the underground Baha'í university, while the boys were expected to find work after high school to contribute to supporting the family. Because of this educational difference, many of the women in the Baha'í families arrive in the United States with at least a basic knowledge of the English language. This typically led them to take on a more prominent leadership role within the family, taking care of immigration processing, having an easier time finding employment, and being able to start university studies more quickly in the United States.

Several of the interviewees reported that they see higher divorce rates among Iranian Baha'í families after coming to the United States. My interview sample does not, however, reflect this observation. In fact, most of the Iranian Baha'ís who came to the United States with spouses seem to have grown closer because of their experiences, rather than further apart. Of course, it is difficult to determine how time might affect their relationships. All of the interviewees who immigrated before the revolution either came as single adults or as children within families. While most are now married, those relationships developed in the United States.

Women often enjoyed new freedoms that they did not have while living in Iran, which is highly patriarchal. Even though the Baha'í faith teaches equality of men and women, the Baha'ís in Iran are still often affected by the larger culture around them. Even if equality exists within a family, women still face gender oppression on a societal and cultural level there. Having access to work and education seems to lead to a personal liberation for many of the female interviewees

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<sup>15</sup> Literacy rates of Baha'í women under the age of 40 had reached 100 percent by 1974, while the national average was only 15 percent at the time (Karlberg, 2010).

who came to the United States as adults. This shift in their own sense of self at times further stressed the relationship with a husband or father as they tried to negotiate their new status as immigrants.

Drawing on the above example of Omid, while he was unable to complete his studies in the United States, his wife and children were able to do so. This change impacted family norms that he feels have undermined his male authority. He complains that his adult daughter does not listen to him when he wants to restrict how long she stays out or where she goes. He ascribes this to a cultural difference, but his daughter's financial independence and emancipated status in the United States has led to her being much more self-sufficient and autonomous than would have been possible in Iran. When speaking about life in the United States, he often expresses regret for having left Iran and emphasizes how much he wished he could have stayed.

**Generational Tensions.** Finally, the last major tension that seems to exist as part of the immigrant experience is that of generational tensions within the family. Parents are often very concerned with their children's future and tendency to assimilate "too much" to the American culture. The majority of families that fled Iran with children voiced this deep concern. Parents worried that their children may drift away from their faith and not develop as strong and devout Baha'is in adulthood. Golnaz, who came to the United States with her daughter, explains that her biggest worry is that of her daughter's spiritual development:

"I just worry about her spiritual upbringing. Although I'm pretty determined and stubborn sometimes in spiritual education. I know I can guide her somehow. But I worry for the future... that she remains in the same path. She becomes a good servant of the faith, you know?"

Many of the interviewees who came to the United States as parents express similar concerns. They often left Iran primarily for their children's formal education and to live with religious freedom. Mahvash, for example, is especially worried about her son, because they live in an area that lacks Baha'i children's classes:

“I hope that my son would practice and be free to practice his religion, but here they ...the freedom that kids have, just to say ‘no,’ I don’t want to go. So you cannot force them. Especially my son that is now more grown, I can’t force him to go to feast or anything. So it’s up to him... to want to practice. And it’s worrying. That’s why I want my daughter to go to children’s classes so much, to participate. To be more safe and be more in the faith. My son... didn’t have that during his youth years. He’s gone without classes. That’s why I think he’s not interested in religion of any kind. He’s just on his own, not practicing. I didn’t think of this possibility when I was in Iran. It’s such a disappointment.”

Mahvash does not blame her son for the lack of closeness to the Baha'i faith, but worries very much about his spiritual life. She stated that they often argue about his lack of interest in participating in or attending Baha'i activities. In addition to the possibility of becoming distant from the Baha'i faith, parents also worried that their children might take their freedoms for granted. Many interviewees expressed that they forsake everything in order for their children to be free, to have access to education, and to be able to practice the Baha'i faith openly. Several respondents lamented that their children did not hold the same academic or professional goals for their lives.

Karim, who came to the United States when his daughter was a teenager, voiced his disappointment that his daughter is not taking full advantage of the educational freedom that is available to her:

“You know, unfortunately, the parents want something and they [the children] choose something else. We encourage her to study hard. To be a good doctor or something like that. First she started, but then she changed her mind about college. First she wanted to be a surgeon, which was very good. And then, right now, she wants to be a psychologist or something like that. Yeah. We came here because of this [her education]. And we encourage her to continue her studies, but then I don’t know. She changed everything.”

In Iran, being a doctor is a highly prestigious profession, which is why Karim is so disappointed that his daughter wants to choose a different path. Furthermore, psychology is not considered a real medical profession in Iran. Many older Iranians still think that only “crazy” people see psychologists and do not see it as a good professional choice. Several of the interviewees felt that their dreams for their children’s lives did not match their own, which caused some challenges within the family.

On the other hand, children sometimes felt immense pressure to live up to their parents’ dreams. Because parents often explain their flight from Iran by stating that they left only for the children, this can place a lot of pressure (whether intentional or not) and guilt on the children. For example, Azar describes the heavy pressure she feels to live for her parents:

“I mean knowing the fact that my parents never finished high school, it’s always pushed me to become what I am now. To be something, to do something with my life. I mean I always have that in the back of my mind. Not only am I doing this for myself, but I’m doing it for my family. It’s always a different experience you know. You would see on

TV that the child brings home a report card, and it says like a B or something. And the parent says oh, good job. And they stick it on the refrigerator. When I bring back my report card, my parents...it's always more emotional. It's like they have tears in their eyes. They're like wow. They look at this and they're like 'I wish it was my report card.' I could have had something. So it hurts. It hurts a lot. And it just...it makes me always...it makes me happy inside to know that I am doing what they've always wanted to do. And so it just...it's very touching and it's very...it's a blessing."

I asked Azar if, while it feels like a blessing, does she also feel a responsibility that is different from her classmates, because her parents did not have the opportunity to go to school in Iran? She explained:

"I feel a lot of that. I do feel pressure, but it's in a good way. It's the way that they're pushing me to become a better person. Yeah. It's like motivation but the most stressful way, you know. It's like, okay, again they never push me where it's like, did you finish your homework? Are you sure about that? Are you sure that's the right answer? They believe in me. And so it...it's really hard to explain. And it's...I guess it's one of those feelings that's indescribable. But it's just...hard."

Azar felt a deep responsibility to her parents, because they did not have access to higher education, but were also expelled from high school. She feels that her parents are proud of her and happy for her, but she also believes that they look at her educational achievement with a feeling of loss, because they were never able to attend school at their daughter's age. Azar came to the United States while she was a teenager, which results in her sharing some of the aspects of the first generation of immigrant-refugees, while also displaying some of those of the second generation.

Research on Holocaust survivor families has shown that female children are more susceptible to “inheriting” their parents’ traumas due to their heightened awareness of their parents’ painful experiences (Rowland-Klein and Dunlop 1998, Vogel 1994). Vogel (1994) argues that girls are more at risk for the transmission of trauma by their family members due to the fact that, unlike boys, they are socialized to develop their sense of self in relation to others. My sample did not include any male children old enough to be interviewed, as a result, I cannot compare how much they take responsibility for living their parents dreams compared to the female children. Furthermore, Stein (2014) found in her work on Holocaust survivor immigrant families in the United States that,

“children of survivors were caught between two worlds: the world of their parents, which demanded loyalty and placed expectations on their children to redeem their losses, and a dominant individualism, accentuated by the generational rebellion of the time, in which baby boomers made a politics of asserting their autonomy and breaking away from their parents. Their survivor parents failed to understand the contradiction of urging their children to remain tied to them, yet also expecting them to be successful and ambitious. In addition to feeling misunderstood by their parents, they also felt misunderstood and unrecognized by their peers” (p.77).

This pattern of being caught between two worlds is evident in the narratives of the immigrant-refugees who were children at the time of arrival in the United States. However, in addition to feeling a deep responsibility to their parents, many of these respondents also felt a similar loyalty to their friends and relatives who they left behind in Iran. This struggle between fulfilling the dreams of their loved ones, while at the same time trying to negotiate one’s place within the new culture, is visible in Noushin’s account:

“I feel really bad when.... I mean whenever I’m having a good time at school, whenever I see all the opportunities that all people have at school here, I just always remember my friends in Iran. And I say: why can’t they have this...this opportunity to...these opportunities to have...have fun? You know, we have assemblies for prom, and homecoming, and every single time I go there to prom...all these fun, I say they don’t even want that. Just the education...just being able to go to school and have this big library, that’s nice.”

Some respondents, like Noushin, seem to struggle with fully enjoying their new freedoms because they know how different this life is from the one their friends and family members are living in Iran. Noushin’s example shows that she believes it might be excessive and therefore wrong to enjoy social functions at school and expresses that it would be more appropriate to just get educated. It appears that she is concerned with taking her education for granted, a concern that some parents also conveyed for their children in the United States.

### **C. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have highlighted the four main challenges that Iranian Baha’i Immigrant families encounter as they settle into the United States: 1) cultural difference; 2) racial and religious tensions; 3) loss of status; and 4) familial tensions in regards to gender and generation. In their transition from oppression and persecution into ‘relative’ freedom, Iranian Baha’is face a number of challenges that are both similar and different from other immigrant groups. As a result, many of the participants feel a hopelessness for the future because they sense that they will remain outsiders within the U.S. culture. I have shown that at times they construct themselves as immigrant outsiders because they do not relate to members of their host culture.

This sense of being an outsider is reinforced by the ways in which members of the host culture also construct these Iranian Baha'ís as outsiders from their perspective.

Therefore, cultural and institutional barriers, as well as the pressure to assimilate, further intensified their sense of alienation. Their hopes of fleeing Iran's oppressive regime and leading free lives in an environment of cultural and religious acceptance dissipate quickly after their arrival in the United States. As shown in the previous chapters, this community experienced a deep internal exile while living in Iran. This sense of exile, while experienced differently, continues in their lives after fleeing Iran. Finding refuge in the United States, which has a long history of mistrust and hostility towards Iran, also means facing racial and religious prejudice and intolerance while living in "freedom."

In the next chapter I investigate how Baha'í also experience this outsider status within their own religious community in the United States, as a consequence of cultural, spiritual, and experiential differences between immigrant refugees and American Baha'ís. The role of religion, religious identity, religious observance, and religious preservation will be explored.

## CHAPTER 6: NATIONALISM, RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, AND OBSERVANCE

*“What does it mean to be a Baha’i? That’s a hard question. I think it’s all about love, understanding, resilience under so much oppression and so much injustice. Actually, for me, the Baha’i faith is really everything. Because when I think, if I didn’t have it, and that would happen to me, I wouldn’t be the person I am today. So I think the Baha’i faith is my life, there’s no doubt about it. It gives me strength and it gives me understanding and gives me all the attributes I have now, that make me who I am. So it’s like my identity. You can’t take that away from me.” – Golnaz, female*

### A. Introduction

In the last chapter, I discussed the immigrant experience of Iranian Baha’i refugees in the United States as people of Middle Eastern descent in a politically charged climate toward that population. In this chapter, I shift the focus to that of the process of religious identity formation and reformation in the context of two different societies and significantly dissimilar Baha’i communities. Further, I investigate the role of religious observance and the importance of religious preservation for first generation Iranian Baha’is as they negotiate to identity maintenance and reformation in the aftermath of mass trauma. Specifically, I will discuss Iranian Baha’is’ experience of: 1) the denial of a national identity and the importance of their religious identity; and; 2) their development of a collective Baha’i identity in Iran. Then, shifting focus to their experiences in the United States, I will describe: 1) the cultural differences they experience between them and their American counterparts; 2) the spiritual differences they perceive between the two communities; and 3) the differences in life experiences and how these hinder Iranian Baha’is from connecting with and integrating into the larger American Baha’i community.

Negotiating one's identity over the life course and within one's home culture and society is a complex process. This process becomes complicated when one is ascribed an outsider status as a result of any one identity such as race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or disability. As I discussed in previous chapters, Iranian Baha'is experience this outsider status both in their home country as well as their new host country. Many immigrants struggle with maintaining their identities in a new culture and often find themselves renegotiating their own cultural identities as they build new lives for themselves in a new country. For Iranian Baha'is, who were denied full citizenship and the right to practice their faith openly, their escape to the United States was deeply interwoven with the hope and promise of a life in which they would be free to not only practice their faith openly, but where their religious lives would no longer be limited and constrained by outside forces.

## **B. Identity Formation and Reformation**

Identities are partially negotiated, partially ascribed, contextual and fluid, rather than fixed (Mostofi 2003, Olick and Robbins 1998, Ghorashi 1997, Sorenson 1990). Olick and Robbins describe identities as processual that are continually constructed and reconstructed through narrative (1998). They emphasize that this could take various forms and is not limited to identifying with a given narrative representing a certain history, but also can include rejecting a community's past in order to situate oneself and one's identity in relation to this community. Therefore, they support the idea that a real community is "a community of memory."

Halbwachs (1992) sees family as playing a key role in shaping our constructions of the past and therefore our identities. Through family narratives we learn to have certain emotional reactions to experiences including shame, pride, pain and fear. Through this community of memory, people learn to feel emotions even about events that may have happened to members

of our groups or communities before they became a part of them (through birth or joining). These communities of memory can also provide counter memories, as defined by Foucault, which may often challenge dominant constructions of memories/events (Foucault 1977, Olick and Robbins 1998).

Ghorashi (1997) and Sorenson (1990) demonstrate that while ethnic or national identity is often a major source for identification, political ideology, and changing experiences within historical moments can outweigh or deemphasize the role of ethnic and national affiliation in identity construction. Mostofi (2003) and Ghorashi (1997) also emphasize that much of identity formation is negotiated through social interactions, including being ascribed an identity. Therefore, “identity is always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories” (Malkki 1992, p.37).

### **C. Identity Formation in Iran**

#### ***1. Denial of a National Identity and the Importance of Religious Identity***

Prior to 1935, the geographical area that is now known as the Islamic Republic of Iran was called Persia in the western world, although in Farsi it was always called Iran. During this time in the regions’ history, there did not exist an inclusive national identity, but rather individuals identified with the regions in which they were born and lived. Remnants of this past importance of regional identity can be found in the last names of Iranians who left Iran prior to or within the first few years following the revolution. Their last names are typically hyphenated with regional descriptors. In 1935, Iran began requesting that other countries discontinue the name Persia in official communication and instead refer to the country as Iran (Yarshater 1989). This shift is attributed to the Iranian Ambassador to Germany who at the time was influenced by

Nazi ideology and felt it was important to reemphasize the Iranian nation as unified and to highlight its Aryan roots.<sup>16</sup>

Over the years, regional identity became deemphasized and a larger Iranian national identity was developed. Then, in 1979, with the Islamic revolution, Iranian national identity became replaced by a national Islamic identity. More specifically, Iranian and Muslim have been conflated and are perceived as interchangeable throughout the world, including in Iran (McAuliffe 2007, Humes and Clark 2000). The name of the country also was changed to the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of the revolutionary government. A few years after the revolution, Iran also began eliminating the hyphenated descriptor from last names.

As the national Islamic identity became solidified, those who did not or were not allowed to share the Islamic membership were labeled as “other” and were denied full citizenship rights and “true Iranian identity” defined by Islam. A few religious minorities became classified as “tolerated” with limited rights, but Baha’is were not included in this group (Schirmacher 2009). Not only is the Baha’i faith not recognized in Iran as a “real” religion, members of this faith have become defined as anti-Islamic and therefore anti-Iran.

When observing Iranians outside of Iran, there exists a pattern that reflects these changes. Baha’is of Iranian descent typically call themselves Persian, as do some non-Baha’is who fled Iran during the time of the revolution because they did not support the new regime. Other Iranian immigrants, typically call themselves Iranian. I believe this difference in language reflects Baha’is exclusion from Iranian national identity.

As a consequence, the Baha’i community had to renegotiate their collective identity to be rooted fully within their own community and religious practice. The Baha’i faith was founded in

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<sup>16</sup> The word Iran itself is rooted in the word Aryan.

Iran and its followers honor its founding place and birthplace of their prophet. Seeing it become redefined by a fundamentalist regime that stands in direct opposition to their own beliefs was a tremendous cultural loss. Furthermore, as discussed in detail in the introduction, the revolutionary government and its successors have systematically destroyed historic Baha'í sites within the country to erase their existence from physical history.

This systematic erasure of Baha'í history, along with the continued persecution of the members of this religion, has created a type of internal exile for Baha'ís in Iran. Farid, one of the respondents who continually spoke about how much he loved Iran because it is his and his religion's birthplace, described the experience of living in Iran as, "... like living as a sheep among wolves in sheep clothing." This suggests that while everyone looks the same ethnically, Baha'ís can never know who is safe and who is dangerous.<sup>17</sup> He also explained that while Baha'ís come from the same ethnic group as Iranian Muslims, they no longer hold the same rights and protections under the law as their Muslim counterparts.

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

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

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<sup>17</sup> Baha'ís are not ethnically different from Iranian Muslims (Nagan 2012).

Hamid's experience of being an outsider in Iran was intensified because his family had Jewish roots. As a consequence, he felt doubly oppressed because of his Jewish background and membership in the Baha'í community. About a third of the respondents described similar struggles in developing and maintaining their identities growing up.

However, the majority of the respondents described having learned very early on to identify deeply with the "heroes and heroines" of the Baha'í faith through the coaching of their parents. Those who learned this strategy early on seemed to hold firm to their Baha'í identity even under severe experiences of persecution, while those who were more conflicted did not develop a strong religious identity until after leaving Iran. The following example, comes from Peyman who credits his parents with preparing him for the challenges of living a Baha'í life in Iran:

"We probably owe it to my parents to equate this persecution as a gift from Bahá'u'lláh. In one of his writings he gives jubilation to tests of his loved ones. I guess my parents prepared us very well with that. So because we are loved by Bahá'u'lláh [the prophet and founder of the Baha'í faith], that's why we are tested. It is a reward. It wasn't looked as a punishment, which is very very different psychologically than if you look at it as a punishment, it's huge. No, we actually looked at it as grace and the grace of Bahá'u'lláh. So because Bahá'u'lláh loved us that's giving us all those tests. And that was very difficult still, but we accept it. You always compare yourself with the heroes and heroines of the faith. That's just huge. It's a very different psychological approach."

Learning from a young age to attribute tests and difficulties as a blessing (and evidence for love of [G]od and his prophet) prepares young children for the harsh realities of living as Baha'ís in Iran. Being united in their suffering has become a main source of strength and support for this

community in Iran. Therefore, identifying not only as a religious Baha'í but also as a persecuted group who suffers in service of their faith was a significant source of identity for Baha'ís before fleeing Iran.

## ***2. A Collective Baha'í Identity: I am a Baha'í First***

In response to the persecution by the Iranian government, religious leaders, and religious followers, Baha'ís in Iran developed a collective identity defined by service and dedication to their faith. A person cannot choose to be both safe and live as a Baha'í in Iran at the same time. Therefore, having a different perspective from which to evaluate one's suffering allows members of this community to make sense of and give meaning to their experiences. Bek-Pederson and Montgomery (2006) argue that immigrants construct their identities through narratives of the past. This research supports this finding through the ways in which Baha'ís construct a collective identity through their stories of practicing their faith in Iran and the persecution they experienced. The vast majority of respondents talked about the Baha'í faith as their life. "In Iran the faith is a real part of you, it's part of your DNA" or "in Iran the friends [Baha'ís] sacrifice everything for the faith and each other" are commonly expressed sentiments. Some of the respondents claim that their primary identity is that of being a Baha'í first, then other roles such as being parents, siblings, etc. follow. In a context where everything in life, including the lives of spouses or children, could be taken from a person at any moment, it seems understandable that they would define themselves as Baha'ís first.

However, even in the most devout individuals, the tension between the various roles is clearly visible. The following account shows the tension between religious identity and that of being a parent:

“I thought to myself, and I prayed all the time. I told Bahá’u’lláh, you’re Bahá’u’lláh. Everything I have, even my husband’s life, my life, and even my daughter... my child’s life, is in your hand. I don’t care if we be killed or everything destroyed. The only thing I ask you I don’t want they come and touch me or my daughter. They hit me, they kick me, they kill me. They put you know whatever they have, shovels and things and hit me, kill me and my daughter in front of me. I don’t want they sell her, kidnap her, or rape her or rape me. Please. The only things I don’t want my daughter be raped or kidnaped. Then whatever you want to do, do it. If they want to kill her. Kill her in front of me. I want to see it. To be sure that she is not in their hands. And thank [G]od it never happened. That was my weakness. Because some people maybe they, you know,... now that I’m thinking about it, accept everything, even the rape, in this situation. But I don’t want it. I didn’t want it and I don’t want it.”

In the above excerpt, Fariba argues that she is willing to sacrifice everything including her life or the life of her child for the Baha’í faith. The only exception is that she does not want her child or herself to be abused sexually. This demonstrates that there are limits to her willingness to sacrifice and that she does, in fact, wish to protect her child (and herself) from what she believes are the worst experiences.

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

“As I said, I’m proud. I thought, you know, I have something they don’t have it. As my father always used to say when I became a Baha’í, I think I have a big diamond in my hand. I want to share this diamond with everyone. That’s why I teach. I have something

in my heart, a treasure that I'm Baha'i. I felt because I am Baha'i, I feel very strong, very proud. At the end of my life, if I look back, what have I done for Baha'i faith? At least I did a little thing. Otherwise, with empty hands I go to the other world."

Fariba believes that having sacrificed so many things throughout her life means that, when she dies, she will be able to show that she lived steadfastly as a Baha'i and that she is a true believer. She does not want to be perceived as someone who was selfish or took the easy route. In fact, she refused to leave Iran despite her husband's request for many years. It was not until after his death, having promised that she would take her daughter out of Iran, that she reluctantly left the country. To this day she strongly believes that being a Baha'i living in Iran is the greatest service a person could do for the faith.

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

"In Iran, being a survivor of persecution it gave you identity. That's something I've been thinking for a while, because it's so different. Your identity is part of your experience. Part of your faith, the beliefs that your parents raised you by. But the experience ...that's when your beliefs are actually tested. And that's the time you make the decision for yourself, and you get to shape who you are. It's not purely based on what your parents taught you, but it's based on what you think and what you do."

Many respondents, including Arezoo, believe that one of the main differences of Baha'is in Iran and outside of Iran is that those living in Iran are actually tested on their beliefs. In many cases, the interviewees seem to feel that having had an opportunity to prove their faith has made them stronger and more devout. They describe situations where they demonstrated great bravery in the face of danger and explain that [G]od either "spoke through" them or gave them the

strength to act in the ways they did. Others often discussed having held leadership roles within the community in Iran in order to demonstrate that they were active and committed to the Baha’í faith. In an environment of extreme oppression, being “active” in the Baha’í community is one of the few ways to gain and demonstrate status. Those who are elected to conduct administrative duties, who take responsibility for teaching children’s classes, and who organize other activities are often highly respected within the Baha’í community.

Furthermore, the Baha’í community in Iran provides access to an important social network that offered employment opportunities; assistance in times of need; communication about Baha’í activities and other communities around the country and safe friendships. “People were so close and everyone was already trying to support each other.” This description was frequently repeated in the interviews. When I asked the respondents about their first memory of being a Baha’í, they often answered either with memories of persecution or memories of attending children’s classes. In the case of the latter, these children’s classes provided religious training for the community, but more significantly, they also provided spaces where the children felt they could belong. In these classes they played, they learned, and they could be themselves. The times spent with their friends allowed them to feel part of a community in the way that Muslim children may have felt in school and in the larger society. As a consequence, religious practice both affirmed and reinforced Iranian Baha’ís identity and served as a critical tool in the preservation of the religion and its history. Because religious identity is so critical to the experiences and survival of Baha’ís in Iran, religious practice and preservation continue to remain priorities for this group when they are in exile.

#### **D. Unfulfilled Expectations: Religious Life in the United States**

Baha’í refugees arrived in the United States, seeking a life free of oppression and persecution. Many of them believed that coming to the United States would mean joining a

vibrant American Baha’í community where they would be able to practice their religion openly and fully. At first, the refugees felt welcome by their new Baha’í community and were valued as “experts” on the faith. After an initial phase of other Baha’ís reaching out and looking after the new arrivals, many respondents began to feel more isolated as their host community became caught up in their daily routines and life responsibilities. After being in the United States for a period of time, many of the respondents were thus surprised at the differences they perceived between their communities in Iran and the American Baha’í communities of which they were now a part. These differences were described as cultural, spiritual, and experiential. I will discuss each of these in detail below.

Mostofi (2003) found in her work on non-Baha’í Iranian-Americans that “identity formation for immigrants not only involves internal influences guided by memories of the homeland, experiences of immigration, and from members of the ethnic group itself but also by outside influences—from the members, laws, and circumstances of the host culture” (p.969). This finding supports that as Baha’í refugees began to see themselves as outsiders even within the American Baha’í community, they began to define themselves not just by their religious membership, but by being an Iranian-Baha’í, specifically.

### ***1. Cultural Differences between Baha’í refugees and American Baha’ís***

The first differences that they observed were cultural. They described religious practice in Iran as very strict, because the community was under so much scrutiny by the larger society. In the United States, children often were not expected to participate in prayers or other religious programming, instead they were entertained with arts and crafts or other play. For the Iranian Baha’í refugees this was very surprising, as even small children in Iran learned to sit still and participate in all of the activities. This was considered a vital part of their religious upbringing

and deepening. In addition, in Iran there were strict rules for proper behavior such as how to sit during prayer and how to carefully handle religious texts because there were so few remaining in Iran. Hamid provides one example of the cultural difference he experienced in the United States:

“Conducting a feast [monthly Baha’í gathering with prayer and consultation section]. I remember in Iran everyone sits properly and have their hands and feet all in proper positions during the feast, so if you see a kid here that is spreading his legs open or slouching down and not sitting properly you could feel like it’s disrespectful. To me, and you have to remember I came here when I was 16, so I’m Americanized in some ways, to me that is a cultural difference and it has nothing to do with their understanding of the faith or respect for it. But when you come fresh from Iran and the faith is all you had there, it could seem disrespectful to them here.”

Similarly to Hamid’s observation, Shahnaz, who has been in the United States since the late 1970s, feels that some of the differences in the American Baha’í community seem disrespectful. He describes one such example here:

“It’s kind of a disappointment. For example, traditionally you hold observances for martyrdom of the Báb [one of the two prophets of the Baha’í faith] or ascension of Bahá’u’lláh or any of the other holy days, but especially these two. Because they gave up so much for us. And we say the tablet of visitation which is something that they always did in...in Iran and at the shrines they do that. I think a lot of Baha’í groups do that. So when someone [in the American community] says we don’t have to say it; it’s not an obligatory prayer or why do we have to stand up, you know... that that’s a ritual, I understand that it’s not an obligatory prayer because it really wasn’t listed amongst obligatory prayers. But... it is something very little that we give up if we stand up for

three or four minutes in discomfort, I mean you even see old, old people stand up in Iran because that's all they can give right now. So that kind of disappoints me.”

Several of the interviewees described similar disappointment in American Baha'is limited understanding of the religious meaning of being Baha'i that carries a great deal of symbolic weight for Iranian Baha'is. In this respect, Shahnaz explains that:

“...it goes back to the same thing, that if you... if you realize what you have and how it came to be, the same way that if you really work hard to be able to buy this pair of shoes you don't wear it in mud. And you take care of it, except at a much, much, much higher degree of importance. Then... then you're willing to give some of your comfort and your money and resources, whatever it may be, for it. But if you don't realize that, you know.”

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

Other groups, such as Iranian Jewish immigrants in the United States, had similar difficulties relating to and connecting with the American Jewish community (Soomekh 2012, Feher 1998). Within the Jewish community, Iranian members share a different cultural heritage and practice that has caused them to be labeled as outsiders within the larger American Jewish community. While similar in being outsiders, Iranian Baha'is seem to self-isolate or distance themselves from American Baha'is as a result of the cultural differences they perceive. Finally, Ebaugh (2003) argues that immigrant groups often incorporate their ethnic practices into their religious ones, as a way to create a stronger sense of “home” in their host societies.

## *2. Spiritual Differences Across Countries*

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

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

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

The data reveal that the respondents have the perception that spirituality in Iran was connected to the heart and defined their entire lives, as opposed to being just one small part of life. Another interviewee described prayers in Iran as more emotion based. According to respondent, people in Iran would have tears in their eyes and feel the prayers, rather than just read the liturgy. Some of these perceived differences could be cultural differences in expression, but many of them are likely due to the differences in their life experiences that shape the kind of relationship religion plays in their lives. As discussed earlier, for Baha'is in Iran, their religion

and community defined their identities, whereas in the United States American born Baha'is seem to have connections to multiple communities.

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

“I guess for Baha'is in Iran, service is really important. But here, it's a busy life.

Everyone has so much things to do... boom boom boom just going... go to school, go to work, go to school, go to work, and then faith maybe comes next, I guess.”

Others, like Khatereh, describe families going from school to soccer practice, to music lessons, and therefore do not find time to attend Baha'i activities which are not their priorities. Research on various immigrant groups has resulted in contradictory results regarding religion and immigration. For example, data from the “New Immigrant Survey” found that among Christian immigrants (from all over the world), immigration disrupts religious practice and leads to lower levels of religiosity and religious practice among Christians coming to the United States (Massey and Higgins 2011). On the other hand, research on Muslim immigrants as found the opposite, that immigration functions as a protective measure in religiosity, leading to higher levels of religious identification and practice in the United States when compared to life in the home country (Peek, 2005). The findings on Muslim immigrants also remain constant when compared to different Muslim home countries, as well as receiving host countries (Hu et al. 2009, Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007, Ebaugh 2003). The first generation Iranian Baha'is in this study appear to remain as religious as they were in Iran and in some cases become more religious after coming to the United States. While a few of them stated that they had to actively resist assimilating to, what they perceived as, American's lower level of religious practice, they

emphasized the importance of their religion and often adhered to the traditional forms of religious observance they practiced in Iran.

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

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

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

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

To many of the refugees, being devout and active Baha'is is a responsibility towards those whom they left behind in Iran. For these respondents it is important not to get too caught up in or attached to materialism, because everything is temporary except for their faith. At the same time, the respondents recognize that they themselves sometimes get caught up in this pattern and lament the impact that Americanization has had on their spiritual lives. Shayan is

most concerned about Baha'is who lose sight of their faith or whose priorities change after gaining freedom. He feels it is Baha'is responsibility to be "agents of change." He explains this perspective in more detail here:

"So the fact that these are happening it's heartbreaking. The fact that you see, we Baha'is are busy with life, it's heartbreaking. Because we are supposed to be elements of change. If the element of change is me, that world is not going to change, it's not going to do jack. If our Baha'i youth, their aim and ambition is to buy a truck... that's the Baha'i youth. There is no Baha'i family [community] here. What hope is there for his life? Or This Baha'i girl who says, I don't want to be a Baha'i. So what do you do? I think all humanity has a horrible, horrible future. After that there might be a bright day. In thirty years it hasn't changed. My father used to watch the news and listen for better days and better news. He's gone a long time. It's my turn now. So don't lose hope. You are young. But, realistically, I don't see that change in humanity, the way we expect. I think we're going to hit the wall hard. And at the forefront of it will be Baha'i because we did not act like an agents of change."

Similar to Shayan, a large number of the refugees felt that it is their responsibility to work towards positive social change. They explain that they had no voice in Iran, but, now that they are free, they feel it is important to use their voice to draw attention to the suffering of other people. Some of the more recent immigrants listed their lack of language and inability to use their voice as one of the most difficult challenges since coming to the United States. They feel limited in their ability to act as Baha'is because they cannot communicate their thoughts. For these respondents, it is especially difficult to understand why American Baha'is are not more active in working towards social change.

Many of the interviewees felt that the Baha’í communities in Iran were stronger, more devout, and more willing to sacrifice themselves for the prophet and their faith. This disconnect between religious freedom and limited religious practice arose many times throughout my interviews. For a population that fled their home because of a lack of religious freedom, it is very difficult to relate to a community that does not prioritize their religious practice above all else. Shahab, who suffered intense persecution in Iran explains:

“There is a big difference. Really... I don’t wish to offend Baha’is here, but spiritually Baha’is in Iran are much stronger. Their faith is stronger. Prayers are different, they mean more. Here it’s good too, not that it’s bad. It has freedom. But the spirituality, I feel is less here.”

In trying to make sense of why Baha’í spirituality seems weaker in the United States, many of the interviewees conclude that it may be because the Baha’í faith was founded in Iran and goes back many generations there, whereas the religion is fairly new to the United States. This perceived lack of being “a Baha’í first” has led many of the respondents to view the American Baha’í community as “loose” and not as devout as the community in Iran. While they often emphasize the importance and beauty of freedom, they seem conflicted about the worth of freedom if “everyone is too busy to take advantage of it.” As a result, several of the interviewees expressed regrets about leaving Iran in order to come to the United States. Life seems less meaningful than in Iran, because they do not feel that they are able to serve their faith in the same way.

### ***3. Differences in Life Experiences***

Another challenge in connecting to the American Baha’í communities lies in the fact that many people cannot relate to or imagine the severity of the persecution that these refugees

experienced in Iran. Shideh, a young woman who came to the United States after completing high school in Iran, explains her boyfriend's misperceptions of the status of Baha'is in Iran:

“I always wanted people to know. Sometimes I feel like people here, especially Baha'is who were born here, they don't take the persecution seriously. Like my own boyfriend sometimes says Baha'is get too much international attention in Iran. He says they're not in any danger. So I explained to him how the little things affects each person's life. And how a person who was born here as a Baha'i... how their life is so different compared to a person in Iran. So I feel that this is really good that people know. People know it might not have been a holocaust, but persecution stops a person from being who that person could be. It could change them... it could lead them to a different direction. And it can, if we don't stop it, it can go on forever. Like people in a different part of the world. I feel like there is a difference between what happened in Rwanda and what happens in Iran, but it's just the level. It's the same thing. It affects people's lives.”

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

## **E. Conclusion**

Many of the Baha'i refugees came to the United States with hopes for a better future and an underlying hope for freedom and belonging. After living as outsiders within Iran, many of

them yearn for a sense of belonging now that they are in the United States. However, because of a lack of a collective Baha'í identity in the United States, these refugees often find themselves as outsiders even within the religious community, which in Iran provided a reprieve from their outsider status. Mona describes the difficult sacrifice that many of the interviewees made in an attempt to escape persecution and start a freer life:

“You know, I think that’s what makes us who we are....the strength that we have in us is that we left our country. We didn’t come with money or wealth. We came with nothing. Except heartbreak. We just came with a heart filled with love for the faith, and pain of all the suffering. But we came here because we wanted a better future for ourselves.”

This search for belonging and the fears attached to never having a home were common concerns among first generation exiles. Consistent with Ghorashi (1997), interviewees felt concerned about their future with regard to “belonging” in the United States. The future was the most difficult topic for them to discuss even when compared to the oppression and difficulties they faced which led to their fleeing in Iran.

Because of their outsider status, even in the United States, many of the interviewees in the study emphasize the importance of continuing to practice their religion as they did in Iran, as a way of maintaining their identity as an Iranian Baha'í. At the same time, they recognize that the Baha'í community in Iran is also changing and they worry that they will no longer fit in anywhere. Farrah explains that “you’re not Iranian anymore, and you’re not American, and you’re not Iranian-American. ... it’s hard sometimes to give up what was familiar, but the way Iranian Baha'ís lived in Iran, that’s not believable to the culture you’re living in now.” She clearly understands that there is pressure to assimilate to the American Baha'í community in

order to fit in, but also expresses how difficult it is to give up such a deeply rooted part of herself.

While some of the younger refugees try to adopt their practices to fit more closely with their new American community, many of the older refugees seem to live with the disappointment of having been wrong in their expectations of what their new life would provide for them and their children. Often they are left yearning for the deep connections they had with their Baha'í communities in Iran. The importance of religious life to their identity and sense of self ultimately creates a sense of ongoing alienation and exile for many of these refugees who have not found a supportive religious community in the United States.

The themes that I presented in this chapter are evidence of a larger cultural phenomenon. Specifically, I discussed Iranian Baha'ís experience of: 1) the denial of a national identity and the importance of their religious identity; and; 2) their development of a collective Baha'í identity in Iran. Then, I explored their experiences in the United States, which I described as: 1) cultural differences between Baha'í refugees and American Baha'ís; 2) spiritual differences across countries; and 3) differences in life experiences. When immigrant groups arrive in a new country, they are faced with the challenge of negotiating both their ethnic/national and religious identities. Frequently, this negotiation occurs in a culture that prioritizes these various identities differently from their cultures. Some of the existing research I have presented throughout this chapter shows that some immigrant groups develop stronger ethnic or national identities while their religious identities decline. Other groups minimize their ethnic or national origins in favor of a pan-cultural religious identity. In both cases, immigrants are seeking to redefine and renegotiate their sense of self and situate themselves in the larger cultural context. In the case of Iranian Baha'ís, the interviewees tend to emphasize their religious identity, while minimizing the

role of their national or cultural background. However, the discussions about their feelings of Iran, as previously discussed in this dissertation, demonstrate that they also feel a deep connection to their cultural heritage. Therefore, it appears that they only deemphasize their cultural background in their interactions with Americans, while continuing to identify closely with both their religion and culture in the privacy of their families and homes.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

### A. Summary

In the previous chapters I examined Iranian Baha'ís: 1) persecution in and escape from Iran; 2) their experience of exile in the United States; 3) their immigrant experiences; and 4) their national and religious identity. More specifically, in chapter 3 I have shown that women, men, and children of the Baha'í community in Iran have experienced different types of persecution. While there are some differences, this persecution existed before the Islamic revolution, although it became intensified and state sanctioned as a result of the overtaking of the Iranian government by Islamic leaders. I have also shown that men and women responded to the persecution of Baha'ís in Iran using one of three strategies: 1) passing as Muslim; 2) open display of Baha'í identity; and 3) alternating passing with open displays.

In chapter 4, I described the processes of escaping persecution and trying to find a place as exiles, living in a new host society. Specifically, I provided two examples of flight stories without a passport. Further, I explained the process of leaving Iran under the guise of short-term travel for those who were able to secure passports. I discussed four themes that emerged from the data, describing the ways in which Iranian Baha'ís experience their exile as: 1) initial relief; 2) loneliness and homesickness; 3) refugee guilt; and 4) nostalgia.

In chapter 5, I have highlighted the four main challenges that Iranian Baha'í immigrant families encounter as they settle into the United States. These are: 1) cultural difference; 2) racial and religious tensions; 3) loss of status; and 4) familial tensions with regard to gender and generational conflicts. In their transition from oppression and persecution into 'relative' freedom, Iranian Baha'ís face these challenges and, as a result, many of them feel as though they are outsiders within the U.S. culture.

In the last data chapter (chapter 6), I presented Iranian Baha'is experience of: 1) the denial of a national identity and the importance of their religious identity; and 2) their development of a collective Baha'í identity in Iran. Next, I explored their experiences in the United States, which I described as: 1) cultural differences between Baha'í refugees and American Baha'is; 2) spiritual differences across countries; and 3) differences in life experiences. Taken together, these perceptions hinder Iranian Baha'is from integrating into and connecting with the American Baha'í community.

### **B. Outsider Status: Where is my Home?**

The analysis of this research with Iranian Baha'í refugees confirms the previously discussed importance of engaging in scholarly research that focuses on the Baha'í experience as a way to expand existing theoretical frameworks on identity, trauma, religiosity, and immigration (Karlberg 2010, Velasco 2001). This study contributes to the large gap on Iranian-American Baha'í studies within the context of the global need for a deeper understanding of the lives and thought processes of immigrants from Middle Eastern regions. In this section, I will discuss the ways in which this population is both similar and distinct from other groups. I will also highlight the contributions that this dissertation makes to the existing research and theories in these fields.

Iranian Baha'í immigrants experience a sense of outsider status as a result of their experiences of persecution, exile, immigration, and religious identity. For many of them, finding a place to belong and call home is the most difficult part of their experience. Dina, who came to the United States in her late teens describes this struggle:

“There is so much of me that I feel so Persian. I have to do my Persian cooking, Persian baking, and Persian music. But then at the same time I've been told over and over and over and over, mentality wise, I'm a white girl [Americanized]. I've been told. I don't

know. I'm okay with a lot of things that maybe are against the faith or, I don't know, a lot of things that people disagree. But I'm open with that, I'm okay with that. So I myself feel that it's true. I'm in the middle. Like even if there is the Persian New Year, I'm not that excited. I'm not. Or if it's American New Year, I don't care, that's their thing. It's not my thing. I don't feel I can claim any of it. It's their stuff. Rather than cherishing both.

Because I often think about it: I should be blessed that I have two of them to celebrate, or be excited. But somehow I don't. I don't feel part of either one of them. This is home.

Kind of. I don't know, where's my home?"

The above quote is representative of the feelings of a large portion of my sample. Many of the members of this refugee community do not feel a sense of belonging or membership in either culture. For some, there are very strong ties to Iran, but to an imagined Iran. Several of the interviewees even recognize that Iran is no longer the same country that they left, although none of them understood or expressed that their memories of the "old days" may not be accurate.

In his research on second generation Iranian immigrants, McAuliffe (2007) found that those from Muslim backgrounds voiced a strong connection to Iran and longing to return. In his study, the second generation Baha'is did not express this same connection and longing. McAuliffe argued that the reasons Baha'is did not feel connected to Iran is that they had been excluded from the Iranian society as outsiders and that their parents were persecuted in their homeland and therefore did not pass on positive feelings about the country to their children. This study only presented data from a handful of respondents and did not reveal the actual sample size, leaving unclear how many interviewees' views were elicited.

On the basis of McAuliffe's argument, we would expect to find the respondents in this study to express a similar position. However, with the exception of one interviewee, who stated

that there was nothing positive about Iran, the vast majority of respondents communicated a deep love for and connection to Iran as their homeland and the birthplace of their religion. This was not only true for the older refugees, but also those who came to the United States at a very young age. While many Baha'is in Iran experience horrendous persecution, as shown throughout this dissertation, the data show that this does not prevent them from establishing deep ties to the land, culture, and people there. Attachment and affection for one's birthplace does not appear to result from a linear or rational model where individuals choose to detach from a place where they were not welcome or accepted. Further study of groups who also experience conflicting emotions to their country of origin is needed, in order to determine how much of this experience is unique to Baha'is and how much of it is a reflection of a larger pattern among refugees.

When refugee groups escape persecution or danger and transition into a relatively free society, there is a risk of assuming that their biggest worries or difficulties have been solved. Pedraza (1994) argued for the need to differentiate the experiences of economic immigrants and refugees within the field of the sociology of immigration because of the vast range in their experiences. She further suggested, that sociologists would be amiss to overlook or bypass the pain and struggles of these refugee-immigrants as they negotiate their place between their home and host cultures.

My research shows, that freedom and safety are complicated in a culture where one is an outsider and religion does not feel as valued, important, or spiritual. One's rescue or salvation are even more complicated. For displaced persons, finding a safe haven does not necessarily improve the quality of one's life. In this way, my research not only speaks to the need to better understand immigrants' experience of exile, trauma, and religion, but it also demonstrates the

complexity of the intersection of these processes. This study further nuances our understanding that a safe space for immigrants does not necessarily mean the end of their suffering.

This aspect of the Baha'í experience relates closely to that of other refugee groups who experience status loss in their transitions to safety. For example, the research presented on Southeast Asians and their strained generational family relationships demonstrates that safety alone is no guarantee of a happy and fulfilling life for refugee groups (Detzner 1996). My research supports the findings on the older generation's concerns about children and grandchildren becoming "Americanized" and drifting too far away from the home culture. In addition, the data from this dissertation also reveal that some of the younger generations of Iranian Baha'ís are concerned about the ways in which American Baha'ís have "Americanized" the religion and that this dilutes it or takes away from its purity.

Iranian Baha'ís' experiences shed light on some of the processes of religious and immigrant identity formation that have already been established in the literature. Peek's article on Muslim identity development concluded that for second generation Muslim immigrants in the United States, religion emerges, "as the most salient source of personal and social identity" (2005, p.215). She argues that religious identity development passes through three stages. First a person experiences religion as their ascribed identity, then as their chosen one, and eventually as their declared identity. Peek focused on the second generation in her research and seems to take for granted the religious identity constancy of first generation immigrants. She agrees with past research that found that first generation immigrants, "... react to the alienation and confusion that result from their arrival in a new country by turning to religion. In an attempt to resolve adjustment issues, they build religious institutions and re-establish familiar social and cultural activities in the new host society" (p. 218).

As I have shown throughout this research, religious identity also has to be negotiated for members of the first generation Iranian Baha'is. Members of this group are faced with cultural differences that not only alienate them from the American society in general, but also from the American Baha'i community. Unlike other immigrant groups, Iranian Baha'is do not "build religious institutions" to recreate their homes, because the organizational structure of the Baha'i faith prevents this kind of separation by cultural background. That said, the Iranian Baha'is do seem to attempt to hold on to their cultural practices by trying to maintain, as much as possible, the traditions of religious observance from Iran.

Peek further argues that, in part, the impacts of the crisis following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Center increased the centrality of Muslims' religious identity to their understandings of themselves and their communities. In terms of their national identity, this study and Peek's found similar patterns of the prioritization of religious identity over that of nationality or ethnicity. These findings are a distinct from those focusing on Christian immigrant groups, among whom national and ethnic identity tend to overshadow the importance of religious identity (Massey and Higgins 2011). As a result, the Baha'i refugees' narratives and experiences both support and complicate our understandings of how religious, national, and cultural identity is negotiated.

Lastly, this research challenges current approaches to studying immigration exclusively on the basis of assimilation. Waters and Jiménez (2005), in a review of the existing research and theories on immigration, focus on four primary measures of assimilation (socioeconomic status, spatial concentration, language assimilation, and intermarriage). They found that much of the existing literature describes immigrant groups as largely assimilated to American society on the basis of these measures.

The findings from this dissertation bring into question the validity of the use of these measures for assessment of “successful” assimilation in the host culture. Using these four measures, would lead us to conclude that almost all of the interviewees in this study are fully assimilated to American culture, with the exception of the most recent immigrants. However, my data show that having established themselves professionally and economically, living in primarily non-Persian communities, being fluent in English, and in some cases intermarrying with other cultures, does not accurately capture what it means to be fully integrated or assimilated to a society. Many of the Iranian Baha’ís express a profound sense of exclusion or distance from the American culture and a strong attachment to their “home.” My research has shown that they remain deeply affected by the memories of the traumas they experienced, by the lack of connection to the American culture and American Baha’í community, and by the open ended nature of their exile. They may appear to have fully assimilated on the outside, based on superficial demographic measures, but they have not done so internally. I think it is possible that the same is true for other immigrant and refugee groups who experience this type of exile, and further research is needed in the future that looks at more in-depth measures of assimilation.

As I have shown in this section, this dissertation demonstrates that the existing theories of exile, trauma, and identity are insufficient because they only partially explain the experiences of Baha’ís in this study. As a result, my work contributes to the frameworks of understanding these social processes as more complex and varied than the existing literature appears to present. Theories of persecution and exile need to be expanded if we seek a deeper and more accurate understanding of the experienced of the ever-increasing number of displaced people around the world.

### **C. Future Directions for Research**

Over the course of this project, I have frequently come across additional questions that I wished I could have explored as part of this study, but that lie far beyond the scope of this dissertation research. However, I believe that these questions and topics are the ideal starting place for evaluating future directions for research on Iranian Baha'is in the United States.

First, I would like to expand the research by interviewing the second generation of this refugee population, as originally planned for this dissertation. My next project will be that of interviewing the second generation and thus building on this research. As part of this process, I plan to investigate the ways in which this community transmits the memories of the traumas they have experienced to future generations and what impact this transmission has on their own identity development.

Second, my research only included Iranian Baha'í refugees who lived in larger metropolitan areas. It would be important to conduct a study that compares the experiences of those living in more rural places, in order to gain a more complete and nuanced understanding of this community's experiences in the United States.

Finally, my sample did not include younger men who came to the United States as boys. This was simply an outcome of the snowball sampling process and was not intentional. However, having found some patterns between the first generation immigrant daughters and their parents in the United States, I would like to be able to compare daughters' and son's experiences to see how gender and generational tensions compare.

### **D. Conclusion**

In closing, the study of Baha'í immigrant-refugee experiences in the diaspora offers an intriguing look into the processes of religious, national, and cultural identity development within

the context of multiple societies and cultures. Through the experiences of the first generation Iranian Baha'í refugees across the United States, I found that members of exiled communities not only become constructed as outsiders, but also often engage in a process of self-alienation in response to the host culture and in an effort to maintain a connection to their home countries and cultures. Within this framework of self-alienation, Iranian Baha'ís long for an imaginary place—one that no longer exists, or may never have existed. This longing in turn keeps them from being at “home” anywhere else. As a result, this first generation immigrant community not only experiences exile due to the persecution they faced in Iran, but also because they engage in a form of a self-imposed exile that prevents them from integrating meaningfully into the host culture. The repercussions of this dual exile and outsider status are that many members of this group remain in a long-term state of isolation, loneliness, and longing for community. The findings also suggest that this group never truly healed from their experiences. At the same time, in a life full of disruption and constant change, their continued suffering (even if internal) provides these Baha'í refugees with some sense of continuity in their perception of self, as well as a connection to those they left behind.

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## APPENDICES

### A. Timeline of Iranian Leadership Changes

- 1963 Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (the king of Iran) implements the “White Revolution” aiming to westernize and modernize Iran. Nationalist Khomeini is arrested and eventually exiled.
- 1979 Islamic Revolution begins. The Shah and his family go into exile, and Ayatollah Khomeini returns to Iran and declares himself as the supreme leader. U.S. Embassy hostage crisis begins (49 hostages held).
- 1980 Iran-Iraq war begins.
- 1980 Bani-Sadr elected as Iran’s first president.
- 1981 American hostages released after 444 days of captivity.
- 1981 President Bani-Sadr is impeached and Raja’i elected as president. Raja’i was assassinated 15 days after the election. Khamenei (note not Ayatollah Khomeini) elected as president.
- 1985 President Khamenei is reelected.
- 1989 Supreme Leader Khomeini dies and president Khamenei becomes the new supreme leader. Rasfanjani is elected president.
- 1993 President Rasfanjani is reelected.
- 1997 Khatami elected president.
- 2001 President Khatami is reelected.
- 2005 Ahmadinejad is elected president.
- 2009 President Ahmadinejad is reelected in a contested election. “Green Revolution/Movement” arose as a result (ca. 2009-2010).
- 2013 Rouhani is elected president.

## **B. Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**

### Baha'i Cultural Memory Questionnaire

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

#### Religious Identity

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

## Persecution History

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

- For women: what were your feelings about wearing a chador or headscarf (ruh-sarrih) in Iran? How do you feel about it now?

### Leaving Iran

- When did you come to the U.S.
- How did you come here?
  - a. Can you tell me about the immigration process as far as you know?
  - b. What led up to leaving Iran and coming here?
- Which members of your family have left Iran?
- When did they arrive in the U.S.?
- What were your biggest worries about being in Iran?
- What are your biggest worries now?
- What is the most difficult aspect of being in exile?

### Iran

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

## Healing

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

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