Biculturalism Among the Iranian-American College Students

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A closer look at the "insider-outsider" patterns around us can reveal how we and other people construct our identities, as well as how we negotiate the boundaries of identity to create community. Examining our lives in the context of biculturalism invites us to see ourselves as cultural beings, and helps us understand how our world views and belief systems are shaped and shared through out our 'Global Village'. Being an educator I believe in keeping an open mind on how our own cultural experiences could dominate in terms of what we emphasize, de-emphasize or ignore in our classrooms, in our writings, and research findings and would like to recognize these limitations for my preliminary findings on biculturalism among the Iranian-American college students.

First I like to start with a functional definition of biculturalism. Biculturalism could be defined as the ability of a person to function effectively in more than one culture and the ability to switch roles back and forth as the situation changes. By this definition two central issues are emphasized: the extent to which individuals are motivated or allowed to retain identification with one's ethnic culture, and the extent to which individuals are motivated or allowed to identify with the mainstream, dominant culture. Developing an Iranian-American identity has been expressed by many as living 'A World Between', or having a hyphenated cultural identity reflecting 'Az Onja Randeh-Az Inja Mondeh'! "Iranian nationalists are proud to be affiliated with the Persian culture and heritage but are ashamed and embarrassed to be identified with the Iranian national government" (Mobasher, 2006).

In studying biculturalism, I have utilized a new model proposed by Veronica Benet-Martinez (2002), and her biculturalism research at UC Riverside for investigating individual differences in bicultural identity organization with a focus on the subjective perceptions of how much the dual cultural identities *intersect* or *overlap*. For example, the 23 year-old female Iranian-American college student who is living at home with overprotective parents who constantly restrict her social activities and choice of sexual partners, could at some point experience conflicts and the dual cultural identity *intersect*. The literature on biculturalism suggests either that people of dual cultural heritage experience identity confusion resulting in *negative psychosocial adjustment*, or that bicultural experiences result in *enhancing psychological functioning*. Studying the Iranian-American college students, I have assessed and identified conflict in the areas of Racial/Ethnic Identity, Social Marginality, Sexuality, Educational and Occupational Aspirations, and Autonomy. In addition to areas of conflict, parental and family attitudes toward bicultural identity, school and community resources and social networks, and peer relationships are assessed to create a more comprehensive understanding of biculturalism and social adjustment. So far, the results have indicated that the area of conflict shared by many Iranian-American youth appears to be in the area of 'Autonomy' and 'Social Marginality'.

For many psychologists the prevailing psychological maps assumed in the West to be universal, simply does not apply to people in the Eastern World. Differences in child-rearing, family dynamics and social structure have psychological ramifications that may explain why some emotional problems occur in parts of the world at a much higher prevalence (e.g., anorexia, agoraphobia, perfectionism, and emotional inhibition). During the first four to five years of life in many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, children sleep with their mothers, are always in the

company of a nurturing family member and are scolded and shamed to make sure they fit into the strict hierarchy of their culture (i.e., Pedar Salari or Mard Salari). By contrast, American children are typically put in their own bedrooms and encouraged to establish autonomy from early years at home and school. In Eastern cultures including our Iranian culture, we experience ourselves as far more embedded in a net of extremely close emotional relationships. This is known as 'Collectivism' and a sense of self which is developed based on 'interdependence' as oppose to 'Individualism' which is developed based on 'independence'. Iranians have what might be called a 'familial self', where one includes their close relationships in their own sense of who they are. This kind of self simply does not exist in the West to nearly the same degree. Iranian-American youth may experience an exaggerated version of the normative adolescent separation/individuation conflict over the balance between autonomy and dependency in parent/teen relationships and have to face the question of '*Who's in charge of my life?'* These adolescents are often overprotected by their parents who are trying to shelter them from the social realities of danger, prejudice, and discrimination specially post 9/11. These teens may respond either by becoming overly dependent on their parents and using home as a safe place against the mixed signals of society, or by rebelling and establishing their independence prematurely.

It is not uncommon for an Iranian-American college student to prolong their dependency on their parents by living at home, which in turn leads to social immaturity, as expressed in their tendencies to be more *obedient,* more *conforming*, and more *passive* in their relationships with adults and peers. This group could also experience a higher rate of depression, emotional restriction, and do not handle the task of separation effectively. Also, this lifestyle could foster rebellious adolescents who engage in *more confrontational*, and *high risk behavior* such as drug

abuse, teen pregnancy, school problems, and delinquent behaviors. Young men are especially at

risk for developing delinquent behaviors, and school problems. In general this population is at a

higher risk for developing more serious interpersonal conflicts with parents, siblings, and peers

and challenges the society to gain acceptance and recognition, as well as fighting against parental

discipline and protection. The following is a case related to more serious interpersonal conflicts:

"Leila a 16-year-old junior in high school, becomes friendly with a group of older teens who

like to party, and use drugs, and are sexually active, and becomes pregnant after a casual date.

She told her mother that boys expected her to have sex, and she wanted to be accepted by her

peers. She experiences a great deal of shame and guilt for letting her family down, and bringing

her family a great deal of shame."

The conflict experienced in the area of 'Social Marginality' deals with the basic question of

'Where do I fit in my community?' resulting in high levels of anxiety related to social

acceptance and fear of social rejection. Typically, young women seem to experience more

anxiety than young men about social acceptance, and often feel torn between two competing sets

of cultural norms and values. Many times they feel as if they have a foot in two worlds but can't

stand on both feet in the American World or the Iranian World. As two students tell their story,

"Being Iranian-American makes me feel special and confused at the same time. Special because

I have the best of both cultures, and I love being Iranian…but I get confused sometimes when

I'm in a situation where I feel being both cultures isn't an option. My two cultures have very

different views on dating, and privacy." "I came to America when I was 13 and my parents

didn't let me go to my prom, and I have to say I felt very out of place and different for not

having had these experiences in high school".

Bicultural and multicultural people are a growing population in our 'Global Village'. Today we are experiencing greater contact and social interactions between diverse cultures and have a need to develop the appropriate tools in improving our understanding of tolerance, conflict resolution skills, and peace psychology so that we can promise our children a secure and socially responsible community committed to bringing social justice, hope, and peace.

This article is only a brief summary on preliminary findings and any further questions are welcomed by contacting me directly at nellyfarnoody@aol.com.

References:

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