

Exploring the Iranian-American women's sexual experiences: Preliminary findings of a qualitative study

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Abstract

Although there is considerable research on the status of women as it relates to culture, religion, politics and the dominant male presence in Iranian societies, there is paucity of research that examines these issues of sexuality from the perspective of Iranian-American women. This study explores the experience of Iranian-American women regarding their sexuality using a narrative methodology. Twenty in-depth interviews have been conducted so far and the interview data is being analysed to understand the socio-cultural issues that frame the experiences of migrant Iranian-American woman in both cultures – ie Iranian and Western traditional orientation to sexual values and behaviour. The paper discusses some of the preliminary findings from the on-going study.

Introduction

The increase in the number of Iranian women migrants to the United States in the last three decades has led to additional literature in the west that focuses on the role of Iranian women in society and how it is shaped by history, culture, religion and identity, and the realities of religious doctrine versus practice (Rashidian 2002; Ghaffarian 1989; Tohidi 1993). However, there is very limited information that is based on the voices of the women themselves especially in relation to perceptions of their own sexuality and sexual selves.

To understand any migrant group it is essential to have some background understanding of the socio-cultural traditions of the home country that play an important part in influencing individual behaviour. In the case of Iran, profound social changes have taken place in the past 50 years. The first generation migrant Iranian American women were brought up in a society steeped within a traditional Persian patriarchal culture with its multi-layered ethnic and social identities but segregated on gender lines. Many of these migrant women spent part of their formative years in Iran prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution.

There were three major groups of female Iranians who migrated to the United States - the upper class, upper middle class and the students. The first two groups came to the US for a variety of reasons such as political, religious, economic and personal reasons. The majority of these women came to the United States during 1978-1980 either as students or as part of whole families seeking to escape the political and social uncertainty of post-Shah Iran. After the Iran revolution in 1979, due to limitation of obtaining visa to the United States, the Iranian migration was limited. There is no existing data about the exact population of first generation Iranian-American females however; the average age is approximately between 40-60 years. Moghadam (2004) highlights many of the issues that have deeply affected Iranian women in relation to women's rights, womanhood and women's self-representation. They went through the process of acculturation and developed new ways of life while initially maintained sufficient financial support. Being identified as Iranian is important particularly in the acculturation process because it grants a traditional definition and status to

womanhood that Persian/Iranian women have carried for the last 2500 years (Stowasser 1994).

In their analysis of migrant acculturation, Yuval-Davis (1992) see *women* as the symbol of cultural values and the transmitters and preservers of tradition, whose role is the key to the stability of the collective or total group identity and cohesion. It is the proper behaviour and the proper control of women as relates to marriage, divorce and sexuality that ensures that the boundaries of the collective remain intact. Although the acculturation process transforms the behaviour, values, culture and traditions of the migrant group, it is women's behaviour and often their sexual behaviour that becomes the centre of focus.

The acculturation process for migrant women from traditional societies transitioning to reputedly socially open societies provides a whole new range of possibilities in terms of gender roles and sexual behaviour (Espin et al. 1990, Goodenow & Espin 1993). The migrant women have new options, some of them real and others stemming from fictionalised renditions in various media and the film industry. A study conducted in Los Angeles by Hannassab & Tidwell (1989), found that some young Iranian women feel as if they are being torn by two different directional forces – mainstream and home cultures – and this continuing dilemma creates confusion and a sense of loss for them (Tohidi 1993). The response of young Iranian men and women migrants to the United States is evidence of gender and individual acculturation variance of persons from the same home culture. The men, having been accustomed to freedom, self-determination and the modern world, did not find novel new vistas of personal expression and freedom as did Iranian women, who, in their home culture had experienced restrictions regarding gender roles, sexual norms and intimate relationships. Conversely, Iranian migrant women have been found to be more likely to develop views on premarital sex, marriage, and family that are similar to that of mainstream American society (Ghaffarian 1987; Tohidi 1993). Ghaffarian (1989) and Tohidi (1993) found that Iranian men in the US were more likely than Iranian women to follow home culture traditions regarding sexual relationships.

The present study explores the experience of these Iranian-American women regarding their sexuality. Twentyfive in-depth interviews have been conducted so far and the interview data is being analysed to understand the socio-cultural issues that frame the experiences of migrant Iranian-American woman in both cultures. Their cultural experiences include the traditional orientation to sexual values and behaviour which highlights how women view themselves within the boundaries of their own culture as well as the Western orientation to sexual values and behaviour through the affects of acculturation and the women's adjustment to life in the new culture.

Methodology

This study utilized a narrative life history approach whereby the informants were asked to talk about their life experiences with a focus on their perceptions and understanding of their sexual selves prior to and post migration. Narrative is a human, social and communication vehicle that gives structure and meaning to experience. It is the telling or narrating of narrative research, as both process and product that peculiarly characterizes it as a method of inquiry. It is both the means by which the researcher gathers data and the discourse or form of the data gathered. Narrative is both the process (narrating) and the product (narrative) (Baxter-Magolda 1992; Reissman 1993; Bruner 1996). 'Story' is the personal and familiar accounting given in a conversational way, while 'narrative' denotes a different class of telling having formal characteristics. Narrative can have variable structures to which a story cannot be applied. Story is a

narrative structure that organizes or employs human events; a construction made by the teller or narrator, and is transmitted through cultural expression. While this definition does not eliminate the ambiguity of terms, it does assist in the employment of narrative inquiry as a research method (Baxter-Magolda 1992; Bruner 1996; Connelly & Clandinin 1994; Goodson 1995; Polkinghorne 1995). In this paper the terms 'story' is used interchangeably with 'narrative'.

The main sampling criteria included Iranian women who are first generation migrants to the US and residing in the state of California. The initial groups of informants were referred from physicians, psychologists and psychotherapists. Snowball sampling technique was used to identify other appropriate informants. There was no direct approach to the informants in the first instance. Those recruited through professional contacts were asked to approach the researcher in the first instance. After they made the initial approach, the researcher confirmed their eligibility. Those potential informants who met the criteria were asked for a time/date for an interview. At the time of the interview, the researcher asked the potential informants to sign a consent form. Those informants who were identified by snowballing i.e., informants referred by the initial sample were approached by the researcher via phone in the same manner as the initial sample to discuss their participation in the study. For those who indicated an interest, the Informants' Information Sheet was sent. The remaining procedures for recruitment into the study remained the same.

Unstructured one-on-one in-depth interviews were used. A series of open-ended questions was asked during the interview. A recursive method allowed for a conversational and flexible interview guided by the interviewer. Informants were asked permission for audio taping the interviews. The length of each interview session lasted between 60-90 minutes. The interviews were mainly conducted in Farsi (the native language of Iran), however, a few informants preferred to speak in English whereas others spoke using a mixture of Farsi and English. The interviews took place at a pre-determined location identified by the informant as their preferred venue. Although the participants initially felt fearful and reluctant to speak, they gradually felt safe and opened up. They expressed concern regarding the confidentiality and safety of their interviews. As a Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, legal and ethical laws of the California Board of Behavioural Sciences obligate this researcher to be a mandated reporter in addition to the other professional organizations of which she is a member. Additionally, all other requirements for ethics approval in California and Australia were followed.

Informants were also advised that their information remained confidential, and the researcher would maintain informants' identity by using pseudonyms. Due to the sensitive nature of this research, emotional risk factors were discussed with the informants. They were offered the option not to participate should they show or express concerns in this area. These options were extended throughout the interview process. The data collection process did not involve access to confidential information without the informants' prior consent. In addition, informants understood that they could end the interview at any time, and if necessary, would have been provided with local counselling referrals.

It was initially unknown specifically what kind of sexual stories were going to be examined in this research. Would they simply be the narratives of intimate life, with a focus on the erotic, the gendered and the relational? Would they be part of a wider discourse and ideology in society? For this research personal experience narratives around the intimate became the prime concern (Plummer 1995; Riessman 1993; Covington 1991). The interviews began with a broad opening question: "*Looking back*

in your life, living in both cultures equally, tell me how you make sense of your sexual experiences.” While maintaining a focus on the narrative, the interviews probed around three key categories of life stages and experiences. The first was the ‘home country girl’ whereby the informants were asked to share their experiences as a female child in relation to gender roles, sexual messages received, family culture, power positions within the family, family socio-economic level, and educational levels of family members. The impact of these factors on the informant’s experiences during puberty and adolescence was also explored. The second main category was around ‘transition’ and the interview explored informants experiences of coming to a new culture, the meaning and understanding of messages on sexual norms perceived and received in the new culture as a newly relocated migrant woman. The third and final set of issues related to informant as the ‘woman now’, her perception as an adult woman of western culture, the messages received as a sexual being, sexual experiences and sexual beliefs and attitudes.

Preliminary analysis

The transcriptions and analysis of the interviews are in progress. In order to portray a full flavour of the interviews faithfully, the researcher has been interested in details, pauses, overlaps, stretched sounds, intonations, partial words and expressions of agreement, and acknowledgment. Such details of talk assume great significance because they reveal how things are said and not only what is said. An analysis of how the conversation is structured and how it has been influenced by the cultural norms of the informants was conducted. After each interview, the researcher wrote a journal reflecting on the interview process. The journaling made a significant contribution to the identification of themes as the interviews were conducted.

Several inter-linked themes have emerged from the interviews conducted so far. These include exploration of gender roles and sexual awareness, the influence of parents and family elders, the use of metaphors to explain sexual behaviour, rationale for “keeping secrets”, the meaning of silence, how silence is used to convey messages about sense of unease about sexual experiences and what gets left out of the story and why. Some of these themes are discussed in this paper whilst analysis of others is underway. There are many questions that would also need to be looked at in relation to why do people tell these sexual stories or not tell them and what motivates them to turn what was not so long ago a private, secret world into a public one. The issue of language and words used to articulate their concerns is important as are the questions about what sort of situations enable people to find a voice and what happens to people once they give voice to their sexual story.

Results and Discussion

The telling of sexual stories

Culture itself can be defined as an ensemble of stories we tell about ourselves. The world has become chaotic with sexual stories (Plummer 1995). Talking about themselves was the hardest thing to do for most informants. Since talking about sex is taboo for most Iranian women and feeling sexual aroused or sexual pleasure is akin to committing a sin, for as long as they could remember they believed that their soul was flawed. However the informants did share their personal sexual stories and talked about how their sexual beliefs about themselves and their sexual behaviour and life in general.

....I had nothing else to compare and to know any differences... myself... as a girl... I didn't know that I can say to others that they had not right to keep an eye on me the way they did... my parents were enough...but that was part of the culture....as a person I knew I had some rights, as a girl I knew I had some rights, but... I had no way of communicating that I am not sexually active at this time since I am divorced.... currently, I don't have a husband and/or a boyfriend.... (Informant No. 7)

.... the most important thing for a girl was her virginity in our culture....therefore it was crucial for us to remain virgin regardless of our age.... If a girl was 10 or 60 years old, single, divorced or widow...as long as she was not married the girl had to remain a virgin and the divorced or widow to not engage herself in sexual activities... I have to say that most Iranian men unfortunately do possess dirty mind and thoughts about a divorced or widow woman.... As soon as they meet women like me (widow), even the married men, get the idea of how they can approach me and take sexual advantage of someone like me. After all, they don't have to worry about my virginity anymore and someone like me perhaps in their opinion is desperate and lonely, while experienced in sexual activity and looking for sex too! They get this strange look in their eyes. These kinds of behaviour, after I became a widow, forced me to stay away from Iranian community and men in general. (Informant No. 8).

The stories unfolding as part of the present research include a range of issues and experiences across the informants' lives in their home and host country. The issues discussed ranged from talk about sexual awareness and experiences (or lack of them) in relation to power and control, gender and prescribed gender roles for retaining virginity and family honour, keeping secrets, and the burden, shame and price of maintaining silences.

...It is not like you are innocent until proven guilty... you are guilty until proven innocent... I had to accept it as part of my culture...I had to decide to agree with it ... I did not resent the concept of family meeting, since it was good to discuss family issues... however; I disagree with the concept of one way communication and for me to agree with their wrong perceptions of things about me... I did not like their decision making process... I remember I had to shout down my feelings back then... it was easier to not to have feelings rather than to experience them and suffer from them... I still do the same thing... thing and worked it out as a family and maybe something good would have happened for us...maybe that is why I still shut down my feelings... (Silence)... (Informant No. 7).

While in Iran, the informants experienced a patriarchal and closed society. They have had to relocate themselves to the openness of the American culture about telling sexual stories as evidenced by its characteristics of individualism which is connected to self-reliance and self-actualisation (Plummer 1995; Belenky, et al 1988; Sherfey 1972). As is common to the landscape of stories of migration and acculturation, the informants have attempted to co-exist in two cultures simultaneously. Their narratives about their sexual selves need to be understood within the context of this cultural co-existence that includes the lived reality of other life experiences. With them, they have brought their homeland problems, issues, temporary and permanent solutions, perceptions, and the

way of living they have been taught for years prior to their migration. While the stories have some similarities in terms of shared culture, ultimately they are different from each other.

The effects of socialization on their life

"Being together sexually is a way for people to get close, to bond, to connect, to end isolation, to have fun, to play, to enjoy.... It's about many things. But when our sexuality is defined or influenced by guilt and shame, expressions of sexuality are actually quite distanced from our emotional selves and from others" (Covington 1991 pp.5). Many of the informants for the present study spoke about the fear of abandonment. Due to fear of abandonment, self-neglect happens which has a payoff. The payoff usually is a reduction in painful feelings and/or a temporary increase in joyful feelings as result of pleasing others. Since the individual is operating based on the pleasing and the pleasure of others these feelings changes due to different circumstances and meeting different people and was not based on the authentic wants and needs of the individual. There is a need to maintain a balance between the outer and the inner self. However, this balance is not generated automatically since most people do act based on their false self which can be rephrased as nearly everyone is acting as a co-dependent most of the time. Acting as a co-dependent is a learned behaviour starting from infancy to adulthood. The primary models for co-dependency are the immediate family members and into the larger society, media, government, religious organizations and the helping professionals (Whitfield 1991; Covington 1991).

...I was a tomboy, or maybe this how my parents raised me. ...it is true that my mother always wanted to have a boy,...since every mother must give birth to a boy..., and I wanted to be close to my dad... this made me to be a tomboy, or was it because that my mother wanted to have a boy as her first child, or maybe both of these condition applied to me at that time.... (Informant No. 2)

From some of the informants' narratives it emerged that the Iranian-American women's co-dependency and the need to feel safe led to ongoing suppression of their true self as a way of survival even through acculturation process. For example one of the informants commented:

...My good feelings about me stems from being liked by my parents and receiving approval from them... I am not aware of how I feel, but I know what to do to make them feel good...my dreams are my parents' dreams... my dreams are my husband's dreams.... I only live for my children... My fear of rejection and anger determined what I said and how I said it about my sexual feelings....I have been a giving person all my life....how I like to think about sex was dictated to me by my parents.... By my husband.... (Informant No 6)

The sexual self image

The subject of sexual self can produce a paradoxical reaction (Covington 1991). On the one hand, there is a need to know all about sex as it is related to self. On the other hand, sometimes the findings are frightening. Many of the Iranian-American women received mixed messages at an early age about their sexuality, that is, it was important to act feminine and to be concerned about how their bodies looked. However as discussions about sex or sexuality was strictly off-limits they were told that there was one part of their body that must remain unnamed and untouched but no explanation. The informants therefore subconsciously solved their issues by disconnecting from

themselves and their sexuality by believing sex, sexuality, sexual feelings were sinful and shameful and any such feelings would have a devastating negative impact on them and their family. Most of them did not know what their bodies really looked like and reflected on their limited knowledge of their genitals. Many of the informants who were interviewed had difficulty in exploring their beliefs and assumptions about their bodies, their sexual activities, their erotic urges, and their capacity for pleasure.

...what do you mean by my sexual self....it is shameful for a woman to have and to talk about her sexual desires.... Orgasm is for men and a woman should not lose control of herself during sex...
(Informant No. 3)

...I lost my virginity, my biggest nightmare, the sinful piece of me, my chastity...the one thing that put me through all that suffering and pain... (Informant No. 4)

The acculturation process has helped the Iranian-American women to look deeper into their inner life and recognize their feelings and to learn to use them constructively. At first talking about sex was not only a 'bad thing' but also beyond their comprehension. They revealed how they learned about their own sexuality and what was their understanding of their sexual selves. They were able to talk about their true sexual desires, about being injured through their sexual experiences. They were able to talk about sexual fantasies without shame and how they learned to choose a partner for themselves.

Self-reflection on the researcher's role

Much of narrative analysis serves to give voice to feelings and experiences. An important factor in narrative research is the provision of a suitable channel for the participant's story to be heard. An equally important factor is the narrative analyses the researcher gives to the story. The expertise of the researcher is heightened by the necessary knowledge of the storyteller's cultural background in order to be able to structure and convey the informants' narrative (Mishler 1986; Reissman 1993; Coles 1989).

The researcher, and first author of this paper, is a first generation Iranian-American woman who migrated to the US in early 1980s. She herself went through a prolonged process of acculturation. During the interview process she found herself sharing some aspects of the study informants' 'intimate' life stories and experiences which had been a taboo for her as well. At times she found it extremely difficult not to get emotionally involved in the stories told by some of the informants who had complex and deeply disturbing experiences. It is unclear whether such responses made the informants alter their stories or led to holding back of information. On reflection and review of journal notes, it seems that whilst some censoring of information was inevitable, on the whole the informants shared many intimate details. For many of the informants this was their first experience of narrating their sexual story to anyone. Many of the stories were not easily told and required considerable effort. The informants expressed a range of emotions including despair, tears, confusion and relief. The depth of information shows that most informants were able to trust the researcher and share their deeply personal experiences.

Summary

Most of the Iranian-American informants grew up with messages about sex and sexual feelings being sinful and that sexual pleasure was the prerogative of men. They

realised that the rules of the society and culture required men to be the decision makers of their lives. They learned that it was men that created the culture, recorded the history as they saw it, and continued to run the society as they pleased, and controlled their lives including their sexuality. Because of this entrenched gender inequality they developed a sense of guilt around their own sexuality. They felt powerless to initiate change, in both their personal lives and in society. Their narratives show that although they accepted what came to them in the past as a way of living and surviving, however that was no longer acceptable for them. The acculturation process has offered a new level of awareness of self. The informants have changed their view of themselves including their sexuality and sexual relationships.

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