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A Cross-cultural Comparative Study of Identity Status in Three Distinct Groups of Women: Iranian, Lebanese, and Lebanese Residents in Iran

By Fatima M. Paz¹, Kazem Rasoolzade Tabatabaee² Maryam Esmailinasab³

Abstract

The present study compares identity statuses among three groups of women: Iranian, Lebanese and Lebanese immigrants in Iran. The age of the samples varies from 22 to 33 years old. Persian and Arabic versions of The Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS-2) were distributed to 39 Iranian women, 40 Lebanese women residing in their home country and 39 Lebanese immigrant women in Iran chosen by convenience sampling. The data was analyzed using inferential statistical models related to independent groups, ANOVA and Post-Hoc tests. The findings showed no significant differences in identity statuses between the groups, although one sub-scale (ideological moratorium identity status) was significantly more prominent among Iranian women in comparison to local Lebanese. Furthermore, there was a significant negative correlation between one EOM-EIS subscale, interpersonal moratorium identity status, and the length of the immigrants' residency. The findings of this study indicate the role cultural factors play in psychological structures, especially in identity formation.

Keywords: Identity Status, Migration, Iranian women, Lebanese women, cross-cultural differences, Lebanese migration

Introduction

Erikson (1968) conceptualized identity development as an essential task of adolescence that optimally results in a coherent and self-constructed dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and personal history and functionally directs the unfolding of the adult life course (Kroger et al, 2010).

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According to Erikson (1968), a sense of identity arises as the adolescent copes with social demands and developmental challenges and attempts to give meaning to her choices and commitments. He also postulates that beginning in adolescence and possibly continuing through early adulthood individuals experience a “crisis” which is a process of exploration of their sense of who they are, including their values, beliefs and behaviors (Vaziri et al, 2014). This psychological process of self-exploration is usually accompanied by some emotional discomfort and involves an evaluation of possible alternatives to their current sense of self. Erikson’s theory suggests that as a result of this self-exploration and the evaluation of alternatives, new values, beliefs, and goals are integrated into a person’s sense of self and individuals become committed to this new sense of self. This commitment allows the individual to achieve a sense of ego identity. This ego identity provides the individual with a sense of purpose and direction and an ongoing sense of which he or she is that is necessary for his or her optimal functioning as an adult (Matsumoto, 2006).

Erikson delineated major factors that contribute to identity formation during adolescence. He argued that each society provides a scheduled time period for the completion of an identity, while recognizing that there are tremendous variations in the duration, intensity, and ritualization of adolescence, he proposed that all societies offer a psychosocial moratorium wherein the adolescent is expected to make “commitments for life,” and to establish a relatively fixed self-definition (Nasri & Damavandi, 2014 & Schwartz et al. 2011).

The most commonly used conceptualization of Erikson’s identity theory is Marcia’s identity status model (Marcia 1966). In this paradigm, the focus is on two dimensions essential to Erikson’s work on identity: exploration of developmental alternatives in various relevant identity-defining domains (referred to as “crisis” in Erikson’s work); and selection of alternatives as well as engaging in related activities towards the implementation of these choices (commitment). Marcia proposed that, based on the amounts of exploration and commitment, an adolescent’s identity can be classified into either one of four different identity statuses: diffusion (low on exploration and low on commitment), foreclosure (little exploration, but strong commitments), moratorium (high on exploration, but no stable commitments as yet), and achievement (high on commitment after a period of extensive exploration). There is consensus that diffusion should be considered as the least adaptive status, foreclosure and moratorium are two intermediate statuses, and achievement is the most adaptive status (Maghanlu, Vafaii, Shahrara 2008). These four different statuses are measured in two different domains, the ideological domain (includes occupational, religious, political and philosophical life-style values) and the interpersonal domain (incorporates aspects of friendship, dating, sex roles, and recreational choices). As was recognized by Erikson, identity is an evolving configuration and at any given time an individual is prone to fit into one of four identity statuses; however, over time the individual may change and be categorized in a different status.

Many of the studies that have examined identity cross-nationally used older measures that focused on Marcia’s original dimensions of exploration and commitment. Furthermore, nearly all of these comparisons were between the United States and another nation. For example, comparisons between American and Norwegian late adolescents (Jensen, Kristiansen, Sandbekk, & Kroger, 1998; Stegarud, Solheim, Karlsen, & Kroger, 1999) indicated that Norwegian individuals scored lower on scales for all four identity statuses. Jensen et al.(1998) explained their results in terms of the Norwegian mixed-liberal welfare state, which stresses equality among individuals, and which may discourage youth from exploring various issues and from assuming strong commitments. Similar findings emerged when American and Swedish individuals were

compared on measures of identity statuses (Schwartz, Adamson, Ferrer-Wreder, Dillon, & Berman, 2006). Other cross-national comparisons between the United States and other countries have produced somewhat different results. Comparisons between American and South African adolescents (Low, Akande, & Hill, 2005) revealed that American individuals were less often represented in the achieved status, and more likely to be in the other identity statuses. Another study (Graf, Mullis, & Mullis, 2008) found that American adolescents scored lower than their Asian Indian peers on diffusion, foreclosure, and moratorium. These studies suggest differences in identity statuses or identity processes between and among national contexts, but the exact nature of these differences is not clear and appears to vary across studies. American emerging adults appeared to exhibit a more actively constructed identity compared to their Northern European peers from Norway and Sweden, but no other consistent patterns have emerged. Thus, further studies are needed to gain a better understanding of cross-national differences on identity formation. Comparisons conducted between American and European samples have been especially useful in defining the extent to which a highly individualistic and capitalist national context (the United States) may encourage identity activity more strongly compared to socialist-type national contexts where equality of economic outcomes across individuals is explicitly desired (Crocetti, 2011).

Taking the above under consideration we can conclude that exploring cultural differences in identity status and other psychological constructions can contribute to the nature vs. nurture argue since it can help determine to which extent cultural factors can influence their formation and development. No research has intended to compare identity statuses in Iranian and Lebanese females before. These two countries are geographically and perhaps culturally proximate, although they have very different history backgrounds, political systems and population diversity (Iran's great majority is Shiite and the presence and activity of numerous parties is not very common, while in Lebanon eighteen different sects and religions with strong and different political orientations and affiliations cohabite in one territory), that is why we consider exploring the differences and similarities of these two societies worth the effort.

In recent decades, labor mobility and population migration have become prominent (and presumably permanent) in many parts of the world (OECD/European Union 2015). This means that many people in the world, whether by choice, necessity, or coercion, are born in one country and move to another during their lifetimes. Even when voluntary, immigration is often a difficult process for individuals and families. The decision to leave one's country of origin and move to another often brings disconnection from familiar social institutions and cultural practices, separation from family members, and isolation from sources of support in one's new homeland (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). In most cases, the immigration experience is accompanied by acculturation. In the most general terms, acculturation can be defined as 'the process of cultural change and adaptation that occurs when individuals from different cultures come into contact' (Gibson, 2001). When specifically applied to the context of international migration, acculturation refers to the process of adaptation along two dimensions: (a) adoption of ideals, values, and behaviors of the receiving culture, and (b) retention of ideals, values, and beliefs from the immigrant person's culture of origin (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001).

Identity reconstruction

Migration of individuals from one place to the other carries with it the chances of identity reconstruction. The degree of identity reconstruction that may be involved may well depend on the

kind of migration, the nature of migration (for instance, voluntary or involuntary) and degree of tolerance between the co-existing groups emanating from migration etc. (Oppong, 2013).

Robinson (2007) stresses that the process of identity reconstruction essentially involves a subtle balancing act of deep-rooted ethnic values, cultures, modes of operating etc. with often new and in most cases different norms, cultures and interests of the host country where the migrant's resettlement takes place. The critical issues involved in identity reconstruction are the role of group leadership, representation and the size of the ethnic groups in question (Oppong, 2013).

In this study we also intend to discover the effects of migration on identity statuses by comparing this variable in both local Lebanese women and immigrant Lebanese women in Iran. It is important to know that the most common reason for migration in this group is for academic purposes (whether to pursue religious knowledge in one of the main religious seminars of the Islamic world or to undertake a major in different universities of the country), therefore their migration is temporary (for a minimum of five years) and the immigrants' bond to their home country is rarely lost.

Material and Methods

The research method of this study is causal-comparative and of the *ex post facto* type.

Participants

The present study comprises three distinct statistical populations. The first one included Iranian female students of the TMU (Tarbiat Modares University) and Az-Zahra University (Islamic Seminary in Qom). The second one included immigrant Lebanese women residing in Iran, attending either Al-Mustafa International University (Islamic Seminary in Qom) or various universities in Tehran. The third population is composed of Lebanese women residing in Lebanon attending Al-Mustafa International University (a branch of the Islamic Seminary in Beirut) or several universities in Beirut, as well as in the North and South of the country.

The Iranian and immigrant samples were comprised of 39 women each group and the local Lebanese sample included 40 women (a total of 118 women), all of which were chosen using the convenience sampling method. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 33 years old. All Lebanese immigrants with less than three years of residency in Iran were excluded from the study.

Procedure

First, the EOM-EIS-2 was translated from English to Arabic, using the Persian version validated in Iran as a reference as well. Since the questionnaire in question isn't culture free, Rahiminejad and Mansour (2001) made changes to items related to dating (since dating, as known in the west, is not very common in Islamic societies, this word was replaced with: behavior with the opposite sex) and attendance to a particular church (replaced with the choice of the erudite of reference common among Shiite Muslims). To ensure the accuracy of the translation, three different people fluent in both languages, were in charge of supervision and edition. Then, the EOM-EIS-2 was distributed among Lebanese immigrant women in Iran and the samples of the other two groups were chosen to be comparable to the first group in terms of age and academic path (meaning to attendance to university or to Islamic seminary).

Measures

In this study Persian and Arabic versions of the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (EOM-EIS-2) have been used in order to determine the identity status of the participants. This measure has been validated for use in Iran (Rahiminejad & Mansour, 2001). The EOM-EIS-2 consists of 64 items with a response scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree) that assess the degree of identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure and diffusion an individual demonstrates within eight identity defining domains (occupational, political, religious and philosophy of life values constitute the general ideological domain, while friendship, dating (replaced in the validated version for Iran with 'conduct- behavior with the opposite sex' due to cultural differences), sex role and recreational values comprise a general interpersonal domain. Using Cronbach alphas, in the present study the reliability of the EOM-EIS-2 was found to be adequate (acceptable), with a value of .80. As well as its subscales, obtaining .61 for moratorium, .78 for achievement, .87 for diffusion and .79 for foreclosure. The reliability of the mentioned questionnaire and its subscales have been measured separately for the Lebanese participants (since the EOM-EIS-2 has not been validated for use in Lebanon yet), here the reliability of the test in general was of a value of .84 and the values found for the subscales were .75 for moratorium, .79 for achievement, .85 for diffusion and .83 for foreclosure.

Results

Descriptive results related to identity status in all three groups can be observed in table 1 and 2 (ideological and interpersonal).

Research Hypothesis

1. Identity status differs between three groups (Iranian women, immigrant Lebanese women in Iran and Lebanese women residing in Lebanon). To test this hypothesis, analyses proceeded in three steps. First, the sample was divided in three groups (Iranian, immigrant Lebanese and local Lebanese) and participants were classified into identity statuses (in both ideological and interpersonal domain) using cluster analysis. Second, similarities and differences in the identity status distributions of the three groups were examined using chi-square tests. Third, since no significant difference was found in the general identity status between groups, the mains of all subscales of identity status in both domains were investigated using Analyses of Variance (ANOVA).

Table 1. Chi-Square test for Interpersonal Identity Statuses of all groups

| | Value | Degree of freedom (df) | Sig (P) |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Pearson X²</i> | 6.227 | 6 | 0.398 |

Table 2. Chi-Square test for ideological Identity Statuses of all groups

| | Value | Degree of freedom (df) | Sig (P) |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Pearson X²</i> | 5.655 | 6 | 0.462 |

Table 3. ANOVA test on interpersonal identity statuses of all groups

| Identity status | | Sum of squares | df | Mean square | F | P |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| Interpersonal diffusion | between groups | 57.447 | 2 | 57.447 | 0.961 | 0.385 |
| | within groups | 3435.951 | 115 | 3435.951 | | |
| | total | 3493.398 | 117 | 3493.398 | | |
| Interpersonal foreclosure | between groups | 43.175 | 2 | 43.175 | 0.643 | 0.582 |
| | within groups | 3862.318 | 115 | 3862.378 | | |
| | total | 3905.493 | 117 | 3905.493 | | |
| Interpersonal moratorium | between groups | 95.404 | 2 | 95.404 | 1.910 | 0.153 |
| | within groups | 2871.63 | 115 | 2871.613 | | |
| | total | 2967.017 | 117 | 2967.017 | | |
| Interpersonal achievement | between groups | 57.755 | 2 | 57.755 | 1.259 | 0.288 |
| | within groups | 2637.203 | 115 | 2637.203 | | |
| | total | 2694.958 | 117 | 2694.957 | | |
| Interpersonal identity status | between groups | 0.653 | 2 | 0.653 | 0.593 | 0.554 |
| | within groups | 63.288 | 115 | 63.288 | | |
| | total | 63.941 | 117 | 64.941 | | |

Table 4. ANOVA test for ideological identity statuses in all groups

| Identity status | | Sum of squares | df | Mean square | F | P |
|------------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------|----------|
| Ideological diffusion | between groups | 54.014 | 2 | 54.014 | 0.862 | 0.425 |
| | within groups | 3601.079 | 115 | 3601.079 | | |
| | total | 3655.093 | 117 | 3655.093 | | |
| Ideological foreclosure | between groups | 83.850 | 2 | 83.850 | 1.263 | 0.287 |
| | within groups | 3818.590 | 115 | 3818.590 | | |
| | total | 3902.44 | 117 | 3902.44 | | |
| Ideological moratorium | between groups | 646.614 | 2 | 646.614 | 4.763 | 0.01** |
| | within groups | 7806.437 | 115 | 7806.437 | | |
| | total | 8453.051 | 117 | 8453.051 | | |
| Ideological achievement | between groups | 29.999 | 2 | 29.999 | 0.732 | 0.483 |
| | within groups | 2357.493 | 115 | 2357.493 | | |
| | total | 2387.492 | 117 | 2387.492 | | |
| Ideological identity status | between groups | 0.052 | 2 | 0.052 | 0.062 | 0.940 |
| | within groups | 47.821 | 115 | 47.821 | | |
| | Total | 47.873 | 117 | 47.873 | | |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

As shown in tables 3 and 4 no significant difference in the general identity status (nor ideological nor interpersonal) among groups was found and such a difference was only witnessed in the ideological moratorium subscale ($p=0.010$). To determine the source of this difference we conducted a post-hoc test. Results can be observed in table 5.

Table 5. Multiple Comparisons (Scheffe test)

| Dependent variable | Groups (I) | Groups (J) | Mean Difference (I-J) | Standard Error | Significance (P) |
|------------------------|------------|------------|-----------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Ideological moratorium | 1 | 2 | 4.385 | 1.866 | 0.067 |
| identity status | 1 | 2 | 5.398* | 1.854 | 0.017 |
| | 2 | 3 | 1.013 | 1.854 | 0.861 |

- Group 1: Iranian women. Group 2: Lebanese immigrants in Iran. Group 3: Local Lebanese.
- * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

As shown in table 5, Iranians differ from local Lebanese significantly ($p=0.017$) in the ideological moratorium subscale. Iranians means in the mentioned subscale are significantly greater. These findings provide partial support for Hypothesis 1.

2. Identity status in immigrant group is significantly correlated with length of immigration period.

The correlation between identity general status in the ideological and interpersonal domain, as well as all its subscales, and length of immigration period was computed using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Table 6. Correlations of ideological identity statuses and length of immigration

| Variables | | Ideological diffusion | Ideological foreclosure | Ideological moratorium | Ideological achievement | Ideological identity status |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Length of immigration | Pierson's correlation | -0.157 | -0.177 | -0.298 | -0.149 | -0.177 |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Table 7. Correlations between interpersonal identity statuses and length of immigration

| Variables | | Interpersonal diffusion | Interpersonal foreclosure | Interpersonal moratorium | Interpersonal achievement | Interpersonal identity status |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Length of immigration | Pierson's correlation | 0.087 | -0.066 | 0.557* | 0.029 | 0.161 |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

As it can be observed in tables 6 and 7 no significant correlation was found between the general identity status and the period of residency in Iran. Although a significant negative correlation appears to exist between the interpersonal moratorium subscale and number of years of immigration.

Discussion, limitations and further suggestions

The aim of the present study was to explore the role of culture and nationality as well as a powerful phenomenon such as immigration on identity formation. Hence, Iranian, Lebanese and Lebanese immigrants in Iran participated in the investigation. Results showed that despite these two cultures' similar means in identity status, Iranian women have significantly higher means in ideological moratorium identity than Lebanese women living in their home country. This means that a greater percentage of Iranian adult women are currently exploring in terms of ideology (i.e. religious and political views) if compared to women in Lebanon. According to Abbasi et al (2014), some of the factors that influence the formation of religious identity are religious emotions, religious beliefs, religious ceremonies, religious deeds and religious knowledge. Thus, it is possible that some of the above have stronger presence in the local Lebanese statistical population. If we take a look at the historical and political developments of the two countries, Iran and Lebanon, we will see that they are living a different moment in their history. Iran's Islamic Revolution and the eight years of imposed war (Iran-Iraq) took place in the 80's, those were time of great changes, emotions and apprehension. Due to the recent victory of an ideological revolution under the leadership of Shiite clerics, Islamic values, thinking and way of life were very much palpable (manifest) in the Iranian society. In such social scenario, the speed of identity formation processes increases significantly, and young people achieve identity in a relatively short period of time, either through adherence or after searching exploration. Forty years have passed, and today Iran enjoys relative political and economic stability, which leads to a reasonable explanation for a different approach toward identity formation in new generations of Iranians. Results concerning the second hypothesis of this research report a significant negative correlation between the interpersonal moratorium status and length of immigration period in the Lebanese immigrant group. This means that as years pass after immigrating, this particular identity status, characteristic for its exploration, decreases among immigrants. There seems to be a natural explanation for this finding, people with moratorium identity status tend to engage in experiences that allows them to explore new identity possibilities. Immigration is a perfect example of that kind of experience, and it is clear that with the passage of time a person will most probably satisfy his/her thirst for exploration and search. These findings are also consistent with those of previous research, such as

the one conducted to examine the effects of the length of immigration on general identity status of immigrant women in Australia (Foroutan, 2013). It is also important to discuss the reason of the similarities among the three groups. Perhaps, the reason behind the absence of a significant difference in general identity status is that both countries, Iran and Lebanon are geographically and culturally close. Both have been affected by incidents and events in the region and the interaction of nations in the Middle East throughout history. Thus, it is only natural that they share numerous similarities in their value and cultural system. This common ground is even more prominent in the statistical population of this study since they are all followers of the same religion and school of thought.

A number of limitations can be observed in the present research. The statistical populations only included women, which makes generalization to the rest of the population difficult, therefore future research could include male samples in order to make generalization more accurate. The data was self-reported, and it was obtained using only one questionnaire that assesses identity status. Future researchers should consider making use of additional tools to collect data in order for it to be more reliable. The sample groups were limited in quantity; it would be prudent to increment the samples for more reliable and accountable results in further research.

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