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Studia Psychologica nr 8, 129-148

2008

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

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EXPLORING ACCULTURATION EXPERIENCES AND CULTURAL DIALOGUES AMONG IRANIAN REFUGEES IN THE NETHERLANDS BY MEANS OF THE SELF-CONFRONTATION METHOD

ABSTRACT

In this study we explored the most important topics of acculturation experiences among Iranian refugees in the Netherlands, using the Self-Confrontation Method (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). We discussed the Dialogical Self Theory referring to the multiple selves of people who have to deal with different cultures. Ewing (1990) and Hermans and Kempen (1993) argued that a person could have contrasting or even conflicting identities and still experience her or his life as a whole. Personal life-stories of Iranian refugees were described from multiple cultural points of view: cultural I-positions “I as Iranian”, “I as Dutch” and “I as Iranian/Dutch”. Cultural position themes in self-narratives of thirty Iranian refugees in the Netherlands were considered, and relationships were examined between priorities and values (positive and negative) in the self-narratives. We highlighted positive and negative aspects of the acculturation process, such as homesickness and perceived discrimination. Three important acculturation topics were revealed: relationships (family, spouse, colleagues, and friends), traumatic experiences (flight and prison) and norms and values (Iranian and Dutch). It turned out that many Iranian refugees felt homesick and experienced unfulfilled longings for lost loved ones in Iran. Participating refugees experienced discrimination by mainstreamers, such as colleagues who take advantage of their weak position as immigrants. The present research emphasizes the power of storytelling in relation to acculturation research – the power generated by the experience of wholeness in life of an acculturating person. It was found that it is healthier to acknowledge all “cultural I-positions” and give a place to all experiences of the multiple selves, even conflicting or traumatic ones. By acknowledging the past, one understands the present reactions and ambiguous feelings towards the future. Positive feelings such as enjoyment (e.g., music and sports) can then become a normal way of life once more.

Key words: Acculturation experiences, Iranian refugees, Self-Confrontation Method, multiple selves

1. INTRODUCTION

Technological advances and easier traveling have created opportunities for people to move across borders. Therefore, immigrants are able to travel between their country of origin and their country of settlement (Gowricharn, 2004). These new socio-historical conditions are summarized by the term globalization – epitomized by the effect of trans-national companies on international markets (Castles & Davidson, 2000). These socio-historical conditions are connected to changing relationships among individuals and groups. They demand that people review the way they see the world and, as a consequence, the way they define their (cultural) identity. It is important to explore how changes in environment affect the way people understand and construct their new environment, and the way they react to it. Researchers in psychology highlight the importance of cultural context (e.g., Moghaddam, Taylor & Wright, 1993; Smith & Bond, 1998). Sharing a culture means that people share a certain view of the world. They experience the sense of belonging to a collective group with a common way of thinking about the world (Chryssochoou, 2004). People's views are shaped by their social relationships and their position in a given society and culture.

How do newcomers or those in a minority position react to the challenge of a new culture? A number of studies have pointed out the experience of dealing with two different cultures after migration – i.e. the acculturation process (e.g., Berry, 1997; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Phalet & Verkuyten, 2001). Central to making sense of the self as it changes after migration is the construction of self-narratives. Narratives, or stories have the capacity to integrate the individual's reconstructed past (in the native culture), perceived present (in the new culture), and anticipated future (McAdams, 1993). A person's identity is not to be found in behavior, or in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going (Giddens, 1991). Very little is known about the personal narrative of the acculturation process, as perceived by the first generation immigrants. The narratives or personal life-stories, as a method for measuring and analyzing perceived acculturation in terms of alternating between the two cultures involved, has been rarely used. An exception is Ghorashi (1997) who explored the personal stories of twenty Iranian political women refugees in the Netherlands.

In the present study we explore adaptation to a new culture. We examine the perceived acculturation of Iranian refugees by means of narrative analysis. Narrative analysis can be done by studying the temporal organization of life-stories (i.e., past, present, and future). Another way to study narratives is by examining spatial aspects. In our study three cultural identities from different places are distinguished: Iranian, Dutch, and Iranian/Dutch. Time and space are equally important for the narrative structure of the life-story (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). This articulates the need for more information about the narrative structure of Iranian refugees' stories. Thus important topics, discovered through participants' scoring on personal value, can be ranked in terms of time (e.g., past) and space (e.g., Iran).

The goal of the current investigation is to study acculturation through self-narratives, using the Self-Confrontation Method (SCM). There are three key elements of this method. Firstly, the construction of personal life-stories by means of valuations or life-experiences. The psychologist, using open-ended questions invites refugees to tell their personal experiences. Secondly, a list of affects, completed in this study with cultural I-Positions and Personal Value is filled in by participants. Thirdly, analyses of the raw scores are done by the SCM computer program (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). Afterwards these results of the self-investigation are discussed with each participant individually.

Overall examination of participating refugees' valuations will be done in respect of time and space. The researcher will order these valuations according to participants' score on personal value. In this way, the most important acculturation topics of all participating Iranian refugees in the Netherlands can be identified.

2. ACCULTURATION

Acculturation research studies the question of what happens to people who are raised in one culture and come into continuous contact with another culture. In general, acculturating persons react to cultural expectations and social influences (Berry, Poortinga, Dasen & Segal, 2002; LaFromboise, Coleman & Gerton, 1993). Acculturation has been defined as follows: it "includes those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149). At the individual level, psychological acculturation refers to changes that an individual experiences as a result of coming into contact with other cultures, and participating in the process of acculturation that one's cultural or ethnic group is undergoing (Graves, 1967). While acculturation is a two-way process for immigrants and mainstreamers, most changes occur among immigrants (Berry, 1997). Whereas changes at the group level are articulated, individual differences in participation in the ethnic cultural group remain invisible (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Preference should be given to seeing an individual rather than a member of a cultural group (individualistic orientations) and identification problems with both cultures (cultural alienation) should be distinguished (Bourhis, Mod'se, Perreault & Senécal, 1997).

Berry (1997) suggested that by looking at the two dimensions of contact and participation of the host culture and cultural maintenance, four long-term outcomes could be distinguished. This leads to a typology of acculturation orientations: integration (co-nationals), assimilation (host-nationals), marginalization (no identification with either country), and separation (identification with the country of origin). Berry's model is bi-dimensional as it regards cultural maintenance and cultural participation as two different dimensions. The "Alternation Theory" (LaFromboise et al., 1993) assumes that adapting to a new culture means that it is possible for an individual to know and understand two different cultures. An

individual can have a sense of belonging to two cultures without compromising her or his sense of cultural identity. Ad't Ouarasse and Van de Vijver (2004) explored the structure of perceived acculturation of 166 Moroccan adolescents in the Netherlands and found that accepting both cultures resulted in better adaptation.

Acculturation orientations concern both the ethnic and mainstream groups. The norms and values of both communities interact and shape the acculturation process. Some mainstreamers argue that immigrant groups striving for acceptance need to abandon their traditions and follow the majority's cultural rules. Others argue that people should conform to the cultural norms of the host country in public life, but that they can follow their own cultural norms in private (Chrysochoou, 2004). Immigrants have to deal with the variety of opinions and beliefs of people belonging to the majority culture. Problems like feeling as an outsider (e.g., discrimination by mainstreamers), and feeling homesick (e.g., lack of warmth in the host culture) may occur.

Some types of immigrants (e.g., labor immigrants) are generally "pulled" toward their new country, whereas other types (e.g., political refugees) leave their home countries unwillingly and are "pushed" into a new environment (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands exemplify "the pull motive". They were often poorly educated in their home country and emigrated for economic reasons (employment and education). Refugees, however, exemplify "the push motive". Political refugees, such as the Iranian group, are often well educated, and were actively involved in the political life of their homeland. As a consequence they were forced to flee as soon as they openly rejected rules and regimes, or had been physically threatened.

Refugee immigrants differ from other immigrant groups in several aspects. The experience of being a refugee, the so-called "refugeeness" (Dobson, 2003), might be understood as an experience of otherness and could not be compared with the experience of the tourist or the economic migrant, who might also be called "other". For example, the refugee cannot go back into her or his everyday life, as a tourist can. Instead, refugees are forced to learn to live in a new and unknown culture. Refugees may still regard themselves as political refugees, and they might consider it unsafe to return home, a restriction not applicable to the economic migrant.

Which topics are important for understanding the acculturation process of refugees? Acculturation outcomes of immigrants are often split up into psychological and socio-cultural adaptation to the host society. Psychological adaptation involves one's psychological and physical well-being, whereas socio-cultural adaptation refers to how well a migrant is able to manage daily life (e.g., work, and school) in the new cultural environment. Phalet and Verkuyten (2001) researched several topics of the acculturation process, such as school, work, and health, by means of surveys and standardized tests. The latter method has its limitations, because participating immigrants answer questions that researchers think are important for participants. In the current

research we examine the acculturation process (e.g., acculturation experiences, appraisal of experience and outcomes) in a qualitative way, from the viewpoint of participants. In the present study we use the Self-Confrontation Method and order spatially and temporally the valuations of personal acculturation experiences of all Iranian participants.

The construction of a personal life-story referring to person's past in the culture of his/her origin, present in the new culture, and future expectations gives meaningful coherence to different experiences in an individual's personal and cultural history. In this way the process of adapting to the new culture can be seen as a part of personal meaning construction. Gregg (1995) mentioned personal life-stories as a way to arrange multiple identities in organized contradiction, "me versus me". The surface identity constructs emotions and social relationships, "me versus not me". Accepting the selves of both cultures involved in the acculturation process can be seen as creating multiple identities. In the light of this argumentation, the narrative approach to acculturation can lead to a multi-voiced conception of the cultures involved as represented in the self. According to Hermans and Kempen (1993), opposing characters can be positioned in an imagined space (the country of origin and the new country), and temporal order (e.g., the past in Iran and present in the Netherlands). Even though the different positions of the self can be accompanied by unpleasant feelings, it still belongs to me.

The personal narrative can be seen as a cultural forum where several life-events are brought together – the whole acculturation process equals the sum of these life-events. Perceived acculturation, recounted by the refugees themselves, reveals an "insider's viewpoint" of one group of immigrants (e.g., Iranian refugees).

3. IRANIAN REFUGEES

Many highly educated Iranians were forced to leave Iran after the revolution (1979-1981). For the past twenty-five years Iran has endured a high rate of societal and economical change. Until 1935 Iran was referred to as Persia: after the Pahlavi dynasty had assumed power it has been called Iran. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was the last monarch who ruled from 1941 to 1979. During this period there was strong Western influence in Iran. Khomeini came to power after the revolution. Since then an Islamic theocracy has been in power, combined with democratic mechanisms for the election of the president. After the revolution several highly educated Iranians who were revolutionary political activists were captured and tortured or even executed in prison and many had to flee their homeland (Hamidi, 1998).

Almost no research has been done among refugees in the Netherlands; more specifically Iranian political refugees have been neglected. This paucity of research has various causes. Firstly, refugees are suspicious about personal questions because of their traumatic past (Verkuyten, 1999). As mentioned before, many Iranians had to flee for political reasons in the years 1980-1990, and now 28,700 Iranians live in the Netherlands (CBS, 2006). Secondly, Iranian refugees are not

organized as a group. Thirdly, due to the Dutch policy towards refugees, Iranian refugees are spread out all over the country (Van Huis & Nicolaas, 2000). Sometimes Iranian meetings take place in cities like Amsterdam or The Hague, but many Iranians are afraid of betrayal, even outside Iran. As a consequence, they are hesitant and distrustful of interviewers who ask them personal questions (Daniel & Knudsen, 1995).

Refugees tend to experience their acculturation process in three stages (De Beer, Faber, Kielstra, Otten & De Vries, 1993). Firstly, after a short euphoric phase, they experience a crisis. In this stage refugees are disoriented and have ambivalent feelings toward freedom and the Western life-style. Ghorashi (2005) found in her research among female political refugees in the Netherlands that work seems to keep the participants going in the first years of their stay in exile. In the second stage of the acculturation process, refugees try to cope with their traumatic past and some of them feel depressed or unable of any activity (De Beer et al., 1993). In their study of Iranian refugees in the Netherlands De Beer et al. found that adaptation to the host society might take place in the third stage of the acculturation process. Two groups of refugees were found in this stage: one group integrates well in the host society, whereas refugees from the second group considered themselves as being in exile. This second group expects to go back to Iran when the situation becomes politically safe and these refugees maintain their Iranian lifestyle during their residence in the Netherlands (De Beer et al., 1993).

In her research with twenty female political activists from Iran, Ghorashi (2003) observed a similar effect, namely that these Iranian women see their flight to the Netherlands as a waiting for the return to their home country. Thus the immigrant in the Dutch society is focused on the past, as well as on an expected future in Iran. Emotional bonds with their family and with their homeland cause homesickness. These emotional bonds change after several years when their stay in the Netherlands seems to become more permanent. The Iranian women activists realized at that point that they did not feel at home in the Netherlands and that, no matter how strong their nostalgia was, they could not return to their past in Iran. If the focus is on the present and the expected future in the Netherlands, the person is better conditioned for the acculturation process.

Groenenberg (2002) has considered the dimension of the past during her therapy of an Iranian refugee. In her research, she acknowledged that painful experiences in the past in Iran could cause serious problems in the present in the Netherlands. For example, a 35 year-old Iranian man went for “cultural sensitive therapy” (Groenenberg, 2002). He was captured in Iran, and, once free, had to flee. In the Netherlands he had to have a therapy because of his problems at work. It turned out that his depression was caused by his traumatic experiences with the Iranian regime – by being cut off from his past (Iran and family), by his ambivalence towards the past and his identity problems caused by the division between Iran (there, past) and the Netherlands (here, present).

Other researchers were reluctant to consider the past experiences in Iran and focused only on the present situation of Iranians in the Netherlands. For

example, Verkuyten and Nekuee (1998) interviewed sixty-seven Iranians about their current well-being. The researchers distinguished three dimensions: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. Examples of negative affect are fear or worries; examples of positive affect are enthusiasm and activity. Self-approval is related to personal control, and ethnic identification to experiences of discrimination. By neglecting the past, ethnic identification is linked to the negative feeling of being the object of discrimination. In the present research the immigrants' past plays an important role. Firstly, we ask open-ended questions about the past during the first phase of the individual self-investigation. Secondly, we analyze important topics from all participants' past in a temporal way (i.e., past, present, future).

4. VALUATION THEORY AND MULTIPLE SELVES

Valuation theory (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995) is based on a conceptual framework for the study of the self as an organized process of valuation. Hermans and Kempen (1993) argue that a person can have multiple selves, contrasting or even conflicting. Valuation or meaning creation is a personal process to order life-events in a positive or negative way. Everyone can tell a story about himself/herself and his/her personal experiences. Voices might represent the past, the present, or hopes for the future. Ewing (1990) called this the "illusionary wholeness" of a personal story. Revealing the structure of the personal story can be done by arranging the different parts of the story in time (i.e., past, present, and future expectations) and place (e.g., Iran and the Netherlands). The meaning of the personal story can be revealed by arranging the positive (e.g., feelings of freedom) and negative (e.g., fear of being captured) parts of the story. This information is gathered through the practical application of the valuation theory: the Self-Confrontation Method (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

This Self-Confrontation Method offers a good opportunity to study the important aspects of the lives of Iranian refugees who are undergoing the acculturation process. For example, positive experiences in Iran (e.g., its beautiful nature) as well as negative experiences in the Netherlands (e.g., discrimination) can have their own place in one's personal story. Comparing the stories of several Iranian refugees may allow us to discover meaningful connections. We will explain the standard procedure of the Self-Confrontation Method in the next section.

4.1. SELF-CONFRONTATION METHOD

In the present study we investigate adaptation to a new culture. By doing this we are able to reveal the perceived acculturation of thirty Iranian refugees. Furthermore, we deal with the adaptation of Iranian refugees to the Dutch society, by means of personal life-stories instead of a standardized questionnaire. For this we use the Self-Confrontation Method. This is both qualitative and quantitative research. The method differs from the traditional "impersonal" standardized tests and questionnaires (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). In an oral instruction

preceding the personal self-investigation, the psychologist explains the importance of commitment, cooperation, and shared responsibility.

The stories of Iranian refugees participating in our research will be analyzed in accordance with two organizational procedures: temporal and spatial. The temporal organization in a life story recorded by the Self-Confrontation Method can be distinguished in valuations referring to participants' past, present and future. The spatial organization of the stories of the present research has been distinguished as Iranian, Dutch, and Iranian/Dutch. Time and space are equally important for the narrative structure of the life-story (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). This articulates the need for greater information about the narrative structure. In this way important topics mentioned by Iranian refugees can be arranged in temporal and spatial organization.

The Self-Confrontation Method, based on valuation theory is described throughout in terms of clients' self-investigation (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). To provide for an optimal favorable attitude of participants toward their self-investigation, the counselor emphasizes that in principle anything might be brought up that the participant finds important. The personal life-events or valuations are formulated in response to open questions. These questions refer to the past, present or future (Hermans, Fiddelaers-Jaspers, De Groot & Nauta, 1987). According to Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995, p. 33): "The aim of the first self-investigation is to construct a valuation system in such a way that it leads to a well directed process of change. The investigation includes several phases: formulation of the valuations, exploration of associated affect, and discussion of the results with the client."

In the first phase of the self-investigation, the valuations are formulated in response to a set of open-ended questions referring to the past, present and future. The questions have a broad scope, permitting the clients to select topics out of their personal history and formulate them in their own way. An example of a question referring to the present is: "Is there anything in your present life that is of major importance to you or exerts a significant influence on you?" An example of a question referring to the future is: "Do you foresee anything that will be of great importance for, or exert a major influence on, your future life?" Finally, an example of an open question referring to the past could be: "Has there been anything of major significance in your past life that still continues to exert a strong influence on you?" Participating Iranian refugees are permitted to diverge from these questions as far as necessary; the questions are not to be used as a questionnaire items but as stimuli for self-reflection. The method attempts to explore the perceived acculturation from the "insider's viewpoint". The counselor records the participant's responses. When the flow of experiences stops, the counselor recapitulates the experiences. The participant (and not the counselor) must formulate a final response that can be written down on a file card. The counselor helps by asking if the formulation corresponds to the experience in a single meaning unit. Vague formulations, such as "my identity" are clarified by asking: "What do you mean by 'my identity'?" or, "In what particular situation is your identity important to you?" (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). When participants make use of strange words, these

should be clarified, because not only the participant but also the counselor should be able to understand what has been said. Thus participant and counselor work together to articulate sentences. These sentences, when taken together constitute a personal life-story. The open-ended questions in the present study are to be used as stimuli for phrasing Iranian refugees' self-stories in order to explore the perceived acculturation from the "insider's viewpoint".

In the second phase of the self-investigation refugees score their personal life-experiences or valuations by affects (e.g. positive or negative). An overview of the affects can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Terms used in the Self-Confrontation Method

| | | | |
|-----|---------------------|-----|---------------------|
| 1. | Joy (P) | 13. | Guilt (N) |
| 2. | Powerlessness (N) | 14. | Self-Confidence (S) |
| 3. | Self-Esteem (S) | 15. | Loneliness (N) |
| 4. | Anxiety (N) | 16. | Trust (P) |
| 5. | Happiness* (P) | 17. | Inferiority (N) |
| 6. | Strength (S) | 18. | Warmth* (O) |
| 7. | Shame (N) | 19. | Safety (P) |
| 8. | Enjoyment (P) | 20. | Anger (N) |
| 9. | Solidarity* (O) | 21. | Pride (S) |
| 10. | Love (O) | 22. | Energy (P) |
| 11. | Self-Alienation (N) | 23. | Inner Calm (P) |
| 12. | Tenderness (O) | 24. | Freedom (P) |

S – affect referring to self-enhancement, O – affect referring to contact and union, P – positive affect, N – negative affect.

*Three items of the original list of 24 feelings formulated by Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995, p. 277), have been replaced by new terms.

The following research questions are formulated:

1. What are the most important acculturation topics for Iranian refugees who try to adapt to the Dutch cultural environment?
2. How do Iranian refugees perceive these topics?
3. How do Iranian refugees deal with problems of acculturation such as cultural role-taking and feeling homesick?

5. METHOD

5.1. PARTICIPANTS

Thirty Iranian refugees (sixteen women and fourteen men) living in the Netherlands for at least five years were invited to tell their personal experiences in the past, the present and their future expectations. All participants were naturalized Dutch citizens at the time they were interviewed. One participant was unemployed, twelve were studying and seventeen were employed. The age of the Iranian refugees ranged from 21 to 57, with a mean age of 36 ($SD = 10$). There was no statistically significant difference in mean age between the sexes ($M_{female} = 34$, $SD_{female} = 11$; $M_{male} = 37$, $SD_{male} = 10$, $t(28) = 0.88$, $p = .39$).

It was hard to find Iranian refugees in the Netherlands because they are not organized as a group. Due to Dutch policies Iranians live scattered throughout the country. Therefore, participants were contacted through snowball sampling. Using contacts with the asylum seekers' centre in Nijmegen, we asked some Iranian-Dutch to cooperate for acculturation research purposes. In the Rotterdam area we applied for participants via local papers.

5.2. PROCEDURE

In the present study the Self-Confrontation Method was used (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). During open interviews Iranian refugees told their personal life-stories following the standard procedure described above.

A counselor and a student counselor interviewed participants individually in two or three sessions of four hours. Most interviews took place at participants' homes. Eleven Iranian participants were interviewed at the University of Nijmegen. Interviews were held in Dutch. Iranian refugees often are somewhat reluctant to disclose personal information (Daniel & Knudsen, 1995), therefore the first half an hour was used to set their minds at rest by filling in a questionnaire for background information, such as their age and length of stay in the Netherlands. Surprisingly, participants were very open and appreciated the interest in their personal life-story. In the first session valuations were formulated. After the background questionnaire had been filled in, the first open-ended question was asked. Then the valuation system was recorded. As mentioned before, participants themselves scored the given feelings and cultural positions after telling their personal story. An overview of Iranian refugees' most important feelings and cultural positions can be found in Te Lindert and Korzilius (2006). The counselor analyzed the individual participants' results using a computer program (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995) and discussed the results, such as affect profiles of valuations (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Hermans & Oles, 1996; Van Geel, 2000) with each participant.

In the last session participants ordered the sentences with their personal life-experiences thematically. With the help of the counselor, participants searched for similarities and contrasts in the experiences. Some of the participants formulated the nucleus of their story about positive and negative experiences

in their lives. The individual life-stories of Iranian refugees were examined in this way. Finally, the counselor compared all the thirty stories thematically, and in time and space dimensions.

6. RESULTS

In contrast to the findings of Daniel and Knudsen (1995), all Iranian participants were happy to recount their acculturation experiences, especially, when they realized that the interviewer was really interested in their past in Iran and their present life in the Netherlands. When interviewed at home participants showed great hospitality, for example by cooking Iranian food for the counselor after the self-investigation. All participants were very friendly and willing to tell their story. Although some of them were not able to talk about their traumatic past, they appreciated the personal interest in their story.

As far as the first research question is concerned, we were particularly interested in the most important topics of the acculturation process of Iranian refugees. As mentioned before, the topics of participants' valuations were ordered temporally in past and present experiences as well as in future expectations. We also studied the spatial part of participants' self-narratives by means of the given cultural positions: Iranian, Dutch and Iranian/Dutch. After telling their personal story these cultural positions were indicated by participating refugees.

The researcher ordered thematically the valuations of all participants. Valuations referring to the past in Iran had mainly the topics concerning missing people and missing natural environment. Refugees referred mostly to family members when speaking of homesickness. For example: "I really miss my parents", "I love Madar [Mother]", "Traveling in Iran was joyful" and "I feel homesick for Iran."

Another topic referring to the past was flight and prison experiences: almost all participants mentioned this. The example of valuation is: "My capture is the worst thing that happened to my family". Another participant declared: "I can't think of prison, too much pain". Of course, participants were free to say as much as possible, but they were never forced to tell the counselor more than they wanted to. In this way topics such as flight and prison, or partner and family could be revealed. See Table 2 for illustrative life-events of participating Iranian refugees.

It turned out that all participating Iranian refugees mentioned the following three main topics: relations (e.g., spouse, family, and friends), norms and values (i.e., Iranian and Dutch) as well as traumatic experiences (e.g., flight and prison). Illustrations of life-experiences mentioned by participating Iranian refugees can be found in Table 2.

Relations. As we can see in Table 2., positive relations were often associated with family members in Iran, either still alive or dead. Respondents cannot visit their family members in Iran, this often leads to an unfulfilled longing or to the opposite, namely: self-blame in relation to their relatives in Iran. Relationships in the Netherlands were often spoilt due to, for example, doubts (e.g., Iranian or Dutch spouse); perceived discrimination (e.g., racist colleague), or Iranians who changed into dishonest persons in the Netherlands.

Thus no direct social support was to be expected because the beloved persons still lived in Iran. Support given by Iranians in the Netherlands is also difficult because many of them are not trustworthy. Support given by Dutch people often lacks something, such as love and warmth, or the Dutch are seen as too individualistic and materialistic. Lack of warmth in the love relationship, for example, leads to uncertainty about what to do in the future – start a family here or go back to Iran when it is safe enough.

Table 2. Topics and illustrative life-events during the acculturation process

| Location in context | Topic | Life-event |
|---------------------|-------------------|---|
| Time | | |
| Past | Family | - I really miss my parents. |
| | Flight | - Before I left Iran I felt a double crisis: fear for my life and fear of the insecurity of a new country. - It hurt so much when I passed the border Iran/Turkey. |
| | Prison | - My husband lost his eye in prison due to torture. One year later he died in prison. - I can't think of prison: too much pain. |
| Present | Colleague | - I don't like my racist colleague, he thinks that I am worthless and takes advantage of the situation. |
| | Norms and values | - If I become like Dutch people, I shall loose my strength. - I don't hold with the Western norms (e.g., individualism, carelessness, and materialism) - Iranians in the Netherlands become greedy and therefore dishonest. |
| Future | Family | - I cannot decide my future because of my children. I don't want to be buried in the Netherlands. - When I lose my values, like humanist ideals, or when I am not involved in learning I will lose my honor. |
| Culture | | |
| Iran | Prison/ Family | - My capture is the worst thing that happened to my family. |
| | Nature | - The mountains: think and feel. |
| The Netherlands | Norms and values | - I feel troubled by some Dutch phenomena, e.g., euthanasia. |
| Mixture | Partner | - I still miss something in my relations with Dutch girls. I am not sure if I will raise a family here. |

Norms and values. Iranian refugees sometimes rejected norms and values of the Dutch society (e.g., materialism and individualism; Dutch practices with regard to euthanasia). Individualistic and materialistic values of Dutch people were experienced by these refugees as indifference towards other people in

general and participants in particular. For them, it felt as if Dutchmen did not really care for others (e.g., friend or relative). In contrast, participating Iranians regard values such as warmth and care for other persons as most important, and for this reason they do not like to depend on social welfare in the Netherlands. In their opinion community based organizations that provide services diminish personal help and care of friends or relatives.

Other participants were afraid to lose their most important Iranian values (e.g., humanist ideals). Sometimes they were very worried of becoming greedy like the Dutch. Some Iranian participants really disliked Iranians who accepted too many Dutch standards and values.

Traumatic experiences. Sometimes during refugees' flight to the Netherlands or while in prison in Iran, very traumatic events happened. Therefore, traumatic experiences were also a major topic for the interviewed Iranians. Some Iranian refugees were able to talk about these experiences at the time of the interview. However, most participating refugees could not talk about their traumatic experiences because it "hurt" them too much, or because they felt too ashamed in regard to their relatives in Iran.

As far as the second research question is concerned, in order to understand how Iranian refugees perceive their acculturation topics, the values of personal life-events were structured by the researcher in positive and negative formulation (of the same participant). Illustrative life-events of the positive and negative aspects of the acculturation process of three Iranian women refugees and that of three men will be mentioned below. Participants' names have been changed.

Hafez, a 32-year-old Iranian man, has positive reminiscences of Iran: "Traveling in Iran was joyful." As a negative aspect of the same experience he mentioned that he really missed Iran and that thinking about the home country causes pain deep inside. He said: "I feel homesick for Iran." In this case he did not mean his beloved, the people he had to leave behind, but Hafez really missed the beautiful nature in Iran, the mountains etc.

Mohammed, a 39-year-old Iranian man, mentioned as the most positive aspect of his acculturation process the freedom to read the Bible and to go to church in the Netherlands. He said: "Bible is love and blessing; I feel it in my heart." The negative aspect of this life-experience was felt in Iran. Because he was born Muslim he had to be Muslim always, and had to observe the rules established by the Islamic regime. He always felt fear of being betrayed, even by family and friends, because of his Christian faith. This fear of being captured and even sentenced to death in Iran always shadowed his belief in God and the Bible. He said: "In Iran a converted Muslim is sentenced to death." He mentioned in the interview that he thanked God for saving him during his flight to Pakistan and now for the freedom to believe openly in God in the Netherlands.

Sirin, a 34-year-old woman, gives insight into the positive aspect of her acculturation process by mentioning that it creates opportunities, such as studying law in the Netherlands. She said: "Immigration created new opportunities, such as studying." However, she also mentioned a negative

valuation referring to her acculturation process. Although she was highly educated and spoke Dutch very well, she was treated as an average immigrant. For example, people at the grocery store spoke very loudly and clearly to her because they apparently thought that Sirin would not understand their answers. Sirin felt insulted. During the interview she said: "In Dutch society I am an average immigrant with a low status."

Homeira, a 28-year-old woman, studying psychology, mentioned that she would like to thank the Dutch people for giving her the opportunity to live in the Netherlands. Despite missing loved ones in Iran, she mentioned many positive aspects of her acculturation process such as the possibilities to work and study as well as the freedom of speech. She said, "I would like to thank the Dutch people for giving me the opportunity to live, I am really grateful." Nevertheless, however grateful she was, she could not feel deeply attached to Dutch people. She missed the real warmth of her beloved friends from Iran. Homeira said: "I am very disappointed that friendship outside Iran feels like a snowball in the sun."

Zora, a 35-year-old woman, director of her own company, mentioned that she really felt at home in business in the Netherlands. Zora worked very hard. She learnt Dutch in six months, and saved money by working double shifts. She felt really accepted mainly because she was respected as a woman in the business world consisting mostly of men. She said: "I feel at home now in business." In contrast, the negative aspect of the acculturation process of this Iranian woman, at first sight well-adapted and fully integrated, was the fact that she could not speak Farsi with her beloved ones in Iran without feeling very insecure. She said: "It's really terrible that I don't speak fluently my mother tongue anymore."

Nader, a 42-year-old Iranian man talked about his pleasant years as a child in Iran. He loved his "Madar" and she loved him very much. She recited to him and his brother poems of the famous Persian poet, Rumi. Nader still loves reading and listening to Rumi's poems. He said: "Almost every evening my brother and I read and studied poems of Rumi." Although he had very positive feelings concerning his past life in Iran, Nader felt very uncertain about the future. He realized that Iran had changed tremendously, nothing was the same anymore. In the Netherlands he did not feel at home. The most negative aspect of his perceived acculturation process was that he felt as if living between two cultures. Nader said: "It is difficult to make choices for my future life, because I live between two cultures."

Six participating refugees showed in their positive and negative aspects of the acculturation process that every joyful memory of the past in Iran has its dark side in the Netherlands and vice versa.

We now address the third research question namely how Iranian refugees deal with acculturation problem. For example, some participating refugees felt ambiguous about their future expectations. They felt very insecure about going back to Iran (dangerous political situation). Some of them would like to leave the individualistic Dutch society, whereas others were trying to build their lives in the Netherlands. In order to answer the third research question, three examples

of how to deal with the acculturation process, based on the similarity of positive and negative affect profiles of refugees' valuations, will be presented. These three examples illustrate dealing with different aspects of acculturation.

Vida, Iranian woman, unmarried, 39 years old, lecturer at a university, 12 years in the Netherlands.

Vida learned the Dutch language in one year. She still felt troubled about her relatives in Iran. But she also realized that she could not go back to Iran. To reinterpret her life in the Netherlands she worked hard and motivated students to finish their studies, so she had less ambiguous feelings about the future. During the interview she told that she was able to enjoy the little things of life again, despite her past experiences and doubts towards her future. For Vida the reinterpretation of her life in the present made the acculturation process bearable.

Dariush, Iranian man, married, two children, 28 years old, law student, 8 years in the Netherlands.

Dariush had been studying for several years and almost finished his law study. Only recently he was able to talk about his past traumatic experiences. He built up a future in the Netherlands with his wife and their two children. He was able to share his recent grief for his father with his Iranian wife and children. In the Netherlands he did not like to be dependent on social security, so he was studying very hard. Although the acculturation process was a real burden for Dariush, finally he was able to settle in the Netherlands and enjoy sports and games despite his traumatic experiences in the past.

Kader, Iranian man, married, 56 years old, highly educated engineer, unemployed, 14 years in the Netherlands.

Kader was very sad, he missed Iran: his roots still were there, as he had lived in his home country for forty-two years. He had problems feeling at home in the Dutch society. Despite his efforts, he was still unemployed. He felt very guilty that his family had to flee from Iran because of him. According to his own standards and values Dutch people as well as Iranian people in the Netherlands are not "good", nor are they to be trusted. He did not feel any identification with the Dutch culture at all. For all his valuations, he was not able to identify cultural I-position "I as Dutch" or even "I as Iranian/Dutch". Regarding his future, he did not like the idea of being buried here or having his (grand) children growing up here. He felt his past only in a positive way, which might prove this to be a purely illusory past. In the present he has only negative experiences. For Kader the acculturation process became an almost unbearable burden.

7. DISCUSSION

In the present research we studied the most important topics of the acculturation process of Iranian refugees in the Netherlands by means of the Self-Confrontation Method (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). We highlighted the positive and negative aspects of acculturation as perceived by the participating refugees. Finally we studied how Iranian refugees deal with acculturation problems such as homesickness. It should be noticed that

all participating Iranian refugees wanted to tell their personal story during the interview. This contrasts with the findings of Daniel & Knudsen (1995), who observed that as a consequence of fear of betrayal, even outside Iran, refugees were hesitant and distrustful of interviewers who asked them personal questions. Apparently, participating refugees trusted the interviewer and felt comfortable during the self-investigation. Recruiting participants via asylum centers, advertising or friends and colleagues might have made them feel less distrust of the interviewer.

The three most important topics found in the present study, were relations (e.g., spouse, family, colleagues, and friends), traumatic experiences (e.g., flight and prison) and norms and values (i.e., Iranian and Dutch). With regard to relations it turned out that Iranian refugees had to deal with different opinions of Dutch mainstreamers about the best way to adapt to the Dutch society. Refugees felt discriminated at several occasions. For example, they felt they were treated like an outsider at work or as persons abusing the Dutch welfare system in regard to such privileges as housing or study loans. On the contrary, participating Iranian refugees disliked welfare systems. In their opinion institutional help provided by the state was a deeper cause of Dutch people's individualism and indifference to other people, whereas support provided by relatives and friends resulted in feelings of warmth and caring for others. Obviously, most participating refugees felt homesick for Iran and their beloved there. They missed personal interest and warmth of relationships with them. Participating Iranian refugees felt powerless because they were neither able to change the situation in Iran, nor go back till it becomes politically safe.

It was found that positive and negative aspects appear in a temporal (e.g., past and present) and spatial (the Netherlands and Iran) dimensions in the self-narratives of most of the participating refugees. However, not every participant revealed both positive and negative aspects in case of Iran and the Netherlands; Kader for example, missed the positive aspects of his life in Iran and perceived his present life in the Netherlands as something mainly negative. Especially raising his children in "bad" Dutch culture worried him. Kader perceived the acculturation process as a burden. He feared the Dutch society and therefore he did not want to raise his children in the Netherlands but in Iran according to Iranian norms and values. This is in line with the findings of Kazaleh (1986, in LaFromboise et al., 1993), who studied Ramallah-American adolescents. Kazaleh found that oscillating between the two cultures could lead to identity problems, but most adolescents oriented toward both cultures to reduce their fear of the host society and the impact of their acculturation problems. Adolescents with major acculturation problems turned out to have parents who avoided American society and were afraid of its bad influence on their children. Therefore, it is very important to study acculturation orientations of refugees to avoid problems such as Kader's and avoid problems his children might have in the Netherlands.

We found that the Iranian refugees participating in our research had to deal with a variety of beliefs of the native Dutch concerning the acculturation of non-natives. Problems such as feeling as an outsider (e.g., discrimination or racism) and feeling homesick (unfulfilled longing) for Iran were found in the analysis of the self-narratives. Feeling homesick for Iran sometimes creates (e.g. Kader) so much pain that no Dutch cultural position can appear. In the case of Kader, there is no room for pleasure in the present because of his prolonged grief for his lost past. We agree with Vingerhoets (2005) who argued that more research should be done among refugees about the relation between homesickness and well-being.

In this research we observed that (traumatic) experiences in the past must have a proper place in one's self-narrative (the example of Dariush) because otherwise immigrants live in an illusory past (the example of Kader) and cannot feel at home in the Netherlands. Therefore the cultural dialogue – between cultural I-positions, such as “I as Iranian” and “I as Dutch” – might help to acknowledge not only past experiences but also those happening in the present. This dialogue refers to the past in Iran and the present in the Netherlands – as far as the positive and negative experiences are concerned. This line of argumentation is in accordance with the findings of Ewing (1990), who remarked that a person-centered approach towards the cultures involved in perceived acculturation might help to experience “imaginary wholeness”. The results of our research may be compared with the results obtained by Ghorashi (1997) who explored the relation between present and past in case of Iranian women activists in exile. Moreover, the results of the culture-sensitive psychotherapy of Groenenberg (2002) indicated that her Iranian patient was able to take past traumatic experiences into account together with his (work/relation) problems in the present. Thus, multiple identities can be seen as accepting the selves of both cultures, even though these selves might be contrasting or conflicting.

Wong-Rieger (1984) found that attitudes towards members of the host culture, immigrants' expectations and changes in perception as well as standards and values were important from the point of view of adaptation. This has been confirmed by the analysis of acculturation themes in the present research, probably due to the fact that Iranian refugees in the Netherlands are seen as a homogeneous group, with regard to their socio-economic status and (high level of) education (De Beer et al., 1993). Most participants learnt the Dutch language in one year, and had jobs or were studying at the time the interview took place. Of course, not all participants were able to show such high levels of socio-cultural adaptation. This heterogeneity among participants is also in accordance with the findings of Ad't Ourasse & Van de Vijver (2004).

Although our sample of Iranian refugees may not be entirely representative of the Iranian population in the Netherlands, in our qualitative study they provide us with a broad range of views and opinions concerning the acculturation process. Our study explored the perceived acculturation of participating Iranian refugees. We used the Self-Confrontation Method (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995) to study it, because the method allows for the expression of wholeness (Ewing,

1990) in the life of participating Iranian refugees. In our study it turned out to be healthier to acknowledge both cultures and give a place to all experiences, even conflicting or traumatic. This is due to the fact that by acknowledging the past, one understands the present reactions and ambiguous feelings about the future. In our study Kader, for example, was not able to give a place to all experiences and could not acknowledge the past ones. He still felt homesick for Iran. His present life was full of mistrusting people and feelings of guilt towards his family. He was not able to imagine a bearable future life in the Netherlands, nor in Iran. Often he felt very sad. In contrast, Vida and Dariush were able to build a new life with some bright prospects for the future in the Netherlands, despite their sometimes very traumatic experiences in the past in Iran. Thus, positive feelings such as enjoying a beautiful flower (Vida) or being proud of winning a game (Dariush) can become a normal way of life once more.

Future research could investigate gender differences as well as differences in affect (such as feelings of warmth and hopelessness) related to personal experiences of acculturating persons. Finally, the topics explored in the present study should be addressed using a larger sample of Iranian refugees.

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