Race, Parenting, and Identity in the Iranian Diaspora: Tracing Intergenerational Dialogues and Codesign

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Abstract

This paper traces intergenerational learning through a series of dialogues on race, parenting, and identity held with Iranian parents, grandparents and youth at a Persian language school located in the US. Drawing on ethnographic, interactional, and participatory design research methodologies, the analysis focuses on the forms of intergenerational sensemaking and social analysis that emerged over time and what they can teach us about (a) the intersections of parenting and racial identity within Iranian diasporic communities in the United States and (b) the complex forms of personhood (Gordon, 1997; Tuck, 2009), learning and becoming among Iranians raising children and grandchildren outside Iran. Bringing close attention to specific instances of talk as embedded in broader relational temporalities and dialogic arcs, findings illustrate the shifting ways participants articulated the educational needs of Iranian children living outside Iran, the emergence of complex and sometimes contradictory discourses on race and identity, and the ways participants worked together to disentangle self-defense and self-determination from the politics of respectability. The discussion considers the implications of complex personhood for the design, mediation, and interpretation of intergenerational sensemaking regarding race and identity within the Iranian diaspora, with attention to broader processes of community codesign.

Keywords: Iranian diaspora, race, identity, parenting, education

Between October 2016 and February 2017, I worked with Iranian parents, grandparents, and youth to hold a series of intergenerational dialogues regarding race, identity, education, and parenting. These dialogues, or design circles, were part of a national project organized by the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC), which develops critical approaches to family engagement that are rooted in racial and educational justice, community well-being, and self-determination. As Ishimaru and Bang (2016) describe, this work moves beyond "research and practice *on* families (based on a tradition of pathologizing them as part of the problem) to research and practice *with* families that builds from their knowledge, experiences and priorities for change" (p. 3). The setting for the dialogues was a weekend Persian language and community school with whom I have a longstanding partnership focused on youth and parent programming.

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As an educational ethnographer and learning scientist, my broader research involves closely studying microgenetic and relational processes within settings that support expansive learning, social critique, and imagination (Vossoughi, 2014). I take a collaborative approach to research by partnering with educators, families, and youth to study the conditions that foster educational dignity and possibility. Using these lenses to examine the dialogues held at the school, I sought to understand the intergenerational sensemaking and social analysis that emerged over time and what they can teach us about (a) the intersections of parenting and racial identity within Iranian diasporic communities in the United States and (b) the complex forms of personhood (Gordon, 1997; Tuck, 2009), learning and becoming among Iranians who are raising children and grandchildren outside Iran. I define *parenting* broadly, as caregiving practices conducted by multiple family and community members to support the healthy growth of young people.

My analysis of the design circles traces these lines of inquiry through three phenomena: the shifting ways participants articulated the educational needs of Iranian children living outside Iran, the emergence of complex and sometimes contradictory discourses on race and identity, and the ways participants worked together to disentangle self-defense and determination from the politics of respectability. I move between analyzing these substantive themes and highlighting implications for participatory design research (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) by focusing on the forms of mediation I and other enacted, and the collective thinking that took shape over time. Throughout, I consider the relational and dialogic openings that can emerge when complex personhood is treated as an ethical and pedagogical stance in processes of codesign.

Diasporic Education, Race, and Identity

There is a growing body of literature on education, culture, race, language, and identity in the Iranian diaspora. Much of this work emphasizes the development of diasporic educational settings, such as community heritage language programs (Gholami, 2017; Shirazi, 2014), summer programs for youth (Maghbouleh, 2017; Vossoughi, 2011), and language learning in families (Kaveh, 2018). For Gholami, diasporic education is a form of collective praxis that emerges from "a critique of nationalistic systems of education," (2017, p. 577) and produces "counter-narratives, opportunities for self/other-exploration and modalities of citizenship which at once contest any essentialism arising from national and ethnic/denominational positions and prevent their full 'closure'" (Ibid.). Similarly, Malek (2015) prefers the term *diasporic* to *diaspora* for its emphasis on practice and "the embodied experiences of being in diaspora" (p. 38).

Shirazi (2019) argues that diasporic educational settings can both "engender creative possibilities for reworking exclusionary discourses" (p. 480) and underscore the need for decolonial education within schools. Such interventions in school curricula in the US include the need for more expansive and historicized ways of teaching about Southwest Asia and North Africa (Vossoughi, Shirazi, & Vakil, 2020) that are interwoven with critical discussions of anti-Blackness, settler-colonialism, and migration and support the development of complex sociohistorical analysis both within and across racialized communities (Lee et al., 2021).

I therefore situate diasporic education within broader efforts to theorize the racism and othering encountered by Iranians living in diaspora, the complexities therein, and the community spaces that aim to support healthy development and thriving for our young people. As an example of such theorizing, Khabeer et al. (2017) offer the term *anti-Muslim racism* as a critical alternative to *Islamophobia* to draw attention to "the structural and systemic production" (p. 1) of anti-Muslim racism beyond a focus on individual fear, and beyond the framing of discrimination as solely tied to religion. As Shirazi (2019) notes, "'Muslim' has become a stigmatized racial status that operates distinctly across the bodies

of Muslims, non-Muslims from Muslim-majority countries, and those perceived to be Muslim (Bayoumi, 2006)." Indeed, both the racialization of diasporic communities and the racial consciousness and identities of those within these communities must be understood as transnational phenomena that are tied to colonial histories, geopolitical events, structures of power, and resistance (Naber, 2012; Rana, 2007; Yalzadeh, 2020). Anti-Muslim racism is therefore situated in ongoing efforts to control the resources and political destinies of Muslim-majority countries, including Iran.

Numerous studies have pursued questions of race and identity through interviews and focus groups with Iranian immigrant youth and adults (e.g., Maghbouleh, 2017; Sadeghi, 2016; Shirazi, 2014, 2019), many of whom wrestle with their own complex racial positionings as well as what Sadeghi and Baker (2019) refer to as the everyday pressure to disavow Muslimness. Within Iranian diasporic communities, this pressure is often intertwined with internal critiques of the Iranian state's Islamic political rule and the repression that many minoritized, secular, and/or leftist Iranians have experienced at the hands of the Islamic Republic. Critiques of state religion among some Iranians in the West can therefore dovetail in complex ways with the tropes of anti-Muslim racism (Davari, 2018) and with narratives of "contemporary Iran as solely oppressive" (Khanmalek, 2021, p. 2). As I explore throughout this paper, understanding how Iranians interpret their racialized experiences is important to holding the historicized complexities of their stories and to nurturing spaces for collective sensemaking and learning. Building such collective space requires vigilance toward Iranian or Persian exceptionalisms that can reproduce regional hierarchies and supremacies. Cultivating solidarity within and across racialized communities in the US also requires holding important distinctions between Iranian experiences of racialization, structural economic exploitation, and systemic educational inequity in ways that recognize but do not presume classed, raced, or educational privileges among Iranians. I highlight these layers where relevant within the analysis.

Iranian youth face the multilayered developmental task (Nasir et al., 2006) of making sense of their racialized and intersectional experiences within this complex terrain. In addition to navigating multiple and sometimes conflicting ideas about Iranians' racial positionings, growing up Iranian in the US involves interpreting how young people's critical responses to racism may cast them as dissenting in ways that are often seen as illegitimate, if not dangerous (Dualatzai, 2012). The pressure to prove one's allegiance to the "American way of life" (Maira, 2016) is one that many Muslim, Arab, and Iranian youth encounter, particularly in school (Bayoumi, 2006; El-Haj, 2015). El-Haj (2015) therefore analyzes the racialization of Palestinian American youth through the logics of everyday nationalism: "the discourses and practices through which the nation is imagined and constructed in everyday life—as a key mechanism through which some young people become 'impossible subjects' (Ngai, 2004) of the nation" (p. 6). Discourses that position youth and their families as already suspect coupled with extensive surveillance and entrapment create a fraught terrain for collective dialogue and action within diasporic communities (Ali, 2017), where public critiques of imperialism can be risky and trust among community members is diminished through the threat of surveillance.

My own dialogues about racism with Iranian youth in the US have continuously revealed the ways young people wrestle with assimilationist practices (changing the pronunciation of their names, remaining silent, or making jokes in response to anti-Iranian racism), not necessarily because they have bought into Whiteness but often because they recognize that overtly critical responses will create more problems for them with peers and teachers. For youth and families with multiple racialized identities, such sensemaking can involve navigating racialization and ontological denial from both outside and inside their communities as well as drawing from multiple sources of cultural resilience and resistance. The Collective for Black Iranians, for example, has done powerful work to amplify Black and Afro-Iranian voices, forging important transnational conversations around Blackness and positive racial identity development in Iran and its diaspora. For youth whose experiences of racialization have been

shaped primarily through their Iranian identity, sensemaking around race and racism often occurs in a context of being positioned as legally White (Maghbouleh, 2017).

Expanding Units of Analysis and Inquiry

Both the research on diasporic education and studies of racialization among Muslim, Arab, and Iranian communities carry a strong focus on young people. Additionally, educational research on racial identity and human development typically emphasizes the experiences of children and youth, often to counter persistent deficit discourses and support positive identity development in and out of school (Langer-Osuna & Nasir, 2016; Rogers & Way, 2016). Young people who must routinely contend with the racism and everyday nationalism discussed above undoubtedly experience intensified forms of identity development, which are understood here as dynamic, shifting, and variable processes of becoming (Langer-Osuna & Nasir, 2016). However, a focus on family well-being suggests that it is equally important to attend to ongoing identity work among adults, such as immigrant parents and grandparents who are making sense of and negotiating their own cultural, racial, and sociopolitical subjectivities, often in relation to and in support of their children.

Emphasizing family learning and intergenerational dialogue can contribute additional insights to the literature on race and identity in the Iranian diaspora. While acknowledging important distinctions across generations, utilizing a relational approach aligns with the cultural emphasis on family within Iranian communities and recognizes how diasporic identities are shaped in and through everyday intergenerational and familial encounters. Rather than treating Iranian adults' diasporic identities as settled, an intergenerational view enables understanding of how the racial identities and sensemaking of adult immigrants intersects with their experiences as parents and grandparents, particularly as they work to support their children in navigating racism and the ever-present drumbeat for war with Iran. Given that racial socialization conversations with youth typically occur in family and community settings (Nasir, 2018), an intergenerational focus also contributes to an understanding of where and how Iranian diasporic parents learn to support their children's positive racial identity development.

In this paper, I examine an educational context that supported the shared identity work of Iranian youth, parents, and grandparents and consider the possibilities emergent within intergenerational dialogues grounded in the ethical and pedagogical stance of complex personhood. Tuck (2009) conceptualizes complex personhood as attending to the ways people make meaning of their lives through "what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward" (Gordon, 1997, p. 4) in ways that account for—rather than flatten—deep complexities of thought and feeling. This disposition toward people's manifold internal and collective lives also means "conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" [Gordon, Ibid, p. 5] (Tuck, 2009, p. 420). Building with Indigenous epistemologies and critical sociology, Tuck's attention to "the intricacies of people's lives" (2009, p. 422) necessitates a shift in educational research away from damage-centered narratives and toward careful attention to everyday forms of resistance, renewal, and survivance (Vizenor, 1994). My analysis therefore considers the implications of complex personhood for the design, mediation, and interpretation of intergenerational sensemaking regarding race and identity within the Iranian diaspora, with attention to broader processes of community codesign.

Setting and Methodology

The Persian school was established in the Midwest in 2007 by parents and grandparents committed to sustaining their language practices with and for the next generation as well as building

community among Iranian immigrants. The school is nonreligious and inclusive, and has served hundreds of students and families. Many alumni continue to participate either as teaching assistants or through the school's alumni association. Based on my work in a summer program serving youth in the Iranian diaspora, the school director asked me in 2014 to support the development of programming for high school students around culture and identity. When the FLDC began its work in 2015, the director and I discussed holding design circles with parents, grandparents, and youth. Parental programming had been a goal within my partnership with the school, and the director suggested participants from a range of backgrounds and timelines of engagement.

The intergenerational dialogues began in October 2016. I held four design circles with a small group of eight to ten participants, which culminated in the design and shared facilitation of a workshop for parents whose children attended the school (30 participants); the workshop topics covered the cultural, linguistic, and racial experiences of Iranian children growing up in the US. The youngest member of the original group was in the eighth grade, and the eldest was a grandmother whose grandchildren attended the school. The dialogues occurred at the school on weekends while children were in class. This time was traditionally reserved for parents and grandparents to connect informally (socializing, playing backgammon, and discussing childrearing, politics, and school needs). The design circles connected with this routine practice while creating a more formal context for discussing parenting, race, and identity in order to learn about participants' experiences and codesign a workshop for the larger community. Ishimaru et al. (2018, p. 45) define community design circles as "in-depth, reciprocal working groups that aim to engage stories, experiences, and expertise within our communities in order to catalyze action within a particular context." As my analysis addresses, the work of codesign also creates distinct conditions for dialogue, listening and collaboration.

My liminal existence between the first- and second-generation immigrants who participated in the design circles as well as the recent birth of my first child positioned me to mediate dialogue in ways that were distinct from my approaches to such facilitation prior to becoming a mother. I sensed, for example, that my frequent use of the term *we* to discuss parenting was important to the relationships and possibilities created within the design circles. I also have a history of participating in such educational spaces as a child of parents who organized similar settings, and thus, a deep appreciation for the love and collective effort required to sustain diasporic organizations.

Our timeline coincided with Donald Trump's election as president and the subsequent women's march and Muslim ban, which figured prominently in the dialogues:
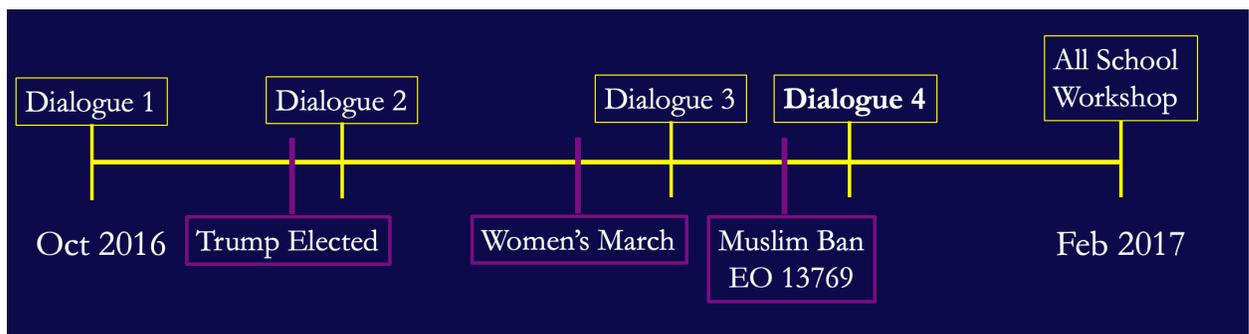
Figure 1: Timeline of Intergenerational Dialogues

This charged political context and the trust generated over time (Vakil et al., 2016) allowed participants to engage in forthright discussions about current events, their histories, and possible meanings for participants' sense of precarity within the US. With participants' consent, I audio-

recorded, transcribed, and translated the conversations in the design circles and the school-wide workshop. The dialogues largely occurred in Persian, although participants moved fluidly between English and Persian. Excerpts discussed below are translated from Persian.

My approach to documentation and analysis is guided by interpretive ethnographic research (Erickson, 1986), critical and decolonial methodologies (Bang et al., 2016; Paris & Winn, 2013; Smith, 2012), and participatory design research (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). In recent work with Miguel Zavala (Vossoughi & Zavala, 2020), we argue that these methodological frameworks resituate the pedagogical dialogues that can emerge within interviews away from logics of extraction and instrumentalism and toward relational encounters that both mediate larger political and ethical goals and become ends in themselves. Similarly, participatory design methodologies guide my efforts to conceptualize collaborative research with grandparents, parents, and youth as a joint activity through which role re-mediations, mutual learning, and historical action can become possible (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). My training in interaction analysis and cultural-historical theories of learning further direct my attention to the details of talk and interaction as the processual and relational grounds of such learning.

I began my analysis by reading and rereading the transcripts, noting the topics discussed and their evolution over time. I also listened to the audio while reading the transcripts to refamiliarize myself with the social and emotional tone of the dialogues. Although several themes emerged in this first pass, I decided to focus on discussions of race and identity as they related to the educational needs of the younger generation. I sensed that the intergenerational dialogues could offer unique windows into these themes, both in terms of the revelations that emerged when grandparents, parents, and youth spoke with one another and in the reflections of elders as they recounted their experiences as tied to supporting their children's cultural and ontological thriving.

I then reexamined the data and identified all the instances in which race, racial identity, and the educational needs of the next generation were discussed, whether separately or cumulatively, explicitly or implicitly. My initial coding process involved examining the topics themselves, the ways participants engaged in these conversations, and how the dialogues were mediated. This process led me to the three themes that structure my analysis: (a) participants' discussions of educational needs, concerns, and dreams for their children; (b) complex and sometimes contradictory discourses on race and racial identity; and (c) collective efforts to disentangle self-defense from the politics of respectability.

In addition to analyzing the instances that were germane to these themes, I expanded my analysis to study specific arcs of dialogue over time. This approach emerged from my sense that more could be gained interpretively by investigating how these moments were mediated and how they built on one another rather than focusing only on discrete instances when particular topics were discussed. I defined these arcs according to how ideas were revisited and reworked both within and across design sessions as well as the ways in which particular contributions created grounds for dialogic shifts. The analysis combines my discussion of the three themes with my efforts to trace such dialogic arcs over time. This temporal dimension is important to working with the idea of complex personhood as both an analytic lens and sensibility towards pedagogical mediation. Design circles and the broader work of community codesign can thus attune us to the conditions that support thinking and dreaming together over time rather than seeking to identify and characterize "what people think" as a settled phenomenon. This analytic shift is rooted in my understanding of human learning and becoming as always unfolding, and of research as working in the service of locally constructed forms of social change and community well-being.

Analysis

Educational Needs, Concerns, and Dreams

We began our dialogues by describing what led us to bring our children to the school (Figure 2a) and what we believed to be the educational and social needs of children growing up in the Iranian diaspora (Figure 2b). As participants generated ideas (in Persian and English), I wrote them on pieces of poster paper (in English) as part of a river-of-life activity that was shared by the FLDC. This activity supports design circles to engage with community histories, presents and futures around particular themes, in this case the educational needs of our children.
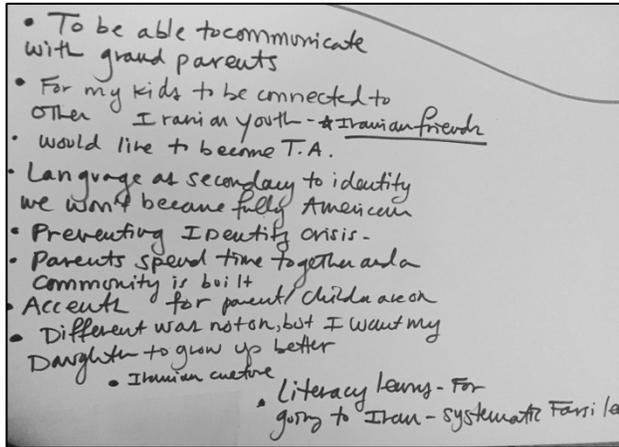

Figure 2a: What brought families to the school
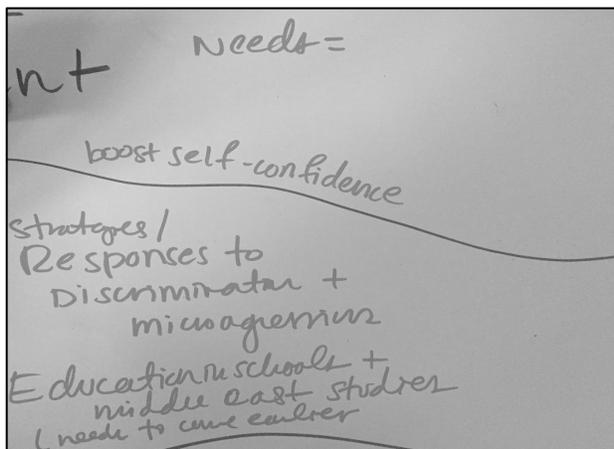
Figure 2b: Educational and social needs of Iranian children

This starting point was important, as it historicized our collective thinking regarding the school's genealogy and the communal work that families and school leaders had been doing for years. Parents and grandparents initially recounted their desires to support their children to maintain their language and culture; however, further discussion led to the expression of additional needs and concerns. Resonant with Shirazi's (2014) study of diasporic education, parents expressed a desire for "forming community in ways that go beyond language learning" (p. 121). This included sustaining relationships

with other Iranians and cultivating a deeper sense of belonging. Lily,[1] a 17-year-old alumna who served as a teacher's assistant at the school, described the space as follows: "You feel so much like [this is] home. Even if you cannot visit Iran, this is like a half-version of that." Parents also spoke about the desire for their children to learn Persian to communicate with grandparents and relatives in Iran (Kaveh, 2018), and about the importance of building friendships with other Iranian children. Beginning the design work with historicity therefore helped make visible prior cycles of local design and experience, which presented new horizons of possibility (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). For example, although language learning was a primary reason for their initial school involvement, participants stated that the weekly experience of connecting with other parents led to the articulation of building community as another central goal.

This dual focus regarding the school's existing role (Figure 2a) and parents' beliefs regarding their children's ongoing needs (Figure 2b) brought attention to issues of self-confidence in the face of anti-Iranian racism as well as the need for access to Middle Eastern studies and history earlier in their children's K-12 schooling. For Taraneh, a mother of two, the goal of language learning was secondary to that of identity:

> My main goal is to keep our identity. Because we are not Americans, no matter how much we kill ourselves to be American.…We aren't American, and we won't become American, not with our appearance or culturally. I want my kids to know that there are other people like them living in America.

Taraneh's statement aligns with what El-Haj (2015) calls "unsettled belonging" and reflects the many instances when Iranian parents and grandparents distanced themselves from Americanness, which often functioned as code for Whiteness.[2] Her usage of *we* suggests that she understood her own and her children's racial positionings in the US as similar; conversely, Rahim, a father whose son currently attended the school, stated:

> One thing that is very important to say is that my son is an American, but I'm not American. So I think we can talk about how to resist discrimination when we know more about ourselves. In order to resist discrimination, our children have to know about their culture and history.

While assimilationist and color-evasive discourses (Annamma et. al., 2017) sometimes emerged within the dialogues, very rarely, if at all, did parents and grandparents themselves claim "honorary Whiteness" as a racial identity (Dualatzai, 2012). As reflected in Rahim's comment, parents also expressed both ambivalence and concern about their children's assimilation.

Although not initially named as a reason to attend the school, explicit discussions of race led many participants to consider how such educational spaces can support children to know how to defend themselves—both interactionally and internally—against racial aggression and bullying. Akbar, another father, stated:

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[1] All names are pseudonyms

[2] There are complex layers to this use of the term "American," including critiques of the U.S. as a nation-state, potential avoidance of naming Whiteness, and the erasure and flattening that can occur when "American" is conflated with "White." At the same time, parents sometimes troubled the use of American as a proxy for Whiteness. When Akbar shared a story of American co-workers responding to the news that he annually travels to Iran with surprise and fear, Rahim said "What are they? White?"

> I am looking to the educational institutions, the Persian schools, or even his school. I'm not saying I'm a complete parent who knows what to do in this situation. I'm asking you to teach me or to teach my son how to respond to these things. Tell [him]: 'You are Iranian, and you are a Muslim. If they say this to you, you can respond in this way…'"

Akbar's statement, "I'm not saying I'm a complete parent," was one of the first explicit requests for support from fellow participants and helped sow the seeds for reciprocal vulnerability and mutual support regarding parenting further downstream (Kohli, 2014). Akbar and his son had recently migrated to the US, and he often posed questions to learn about their new political and educational context. For Akbar, claiming Muslimness as a point of pride against racial bullying (envisioning and perhaps rehearsing how educators might tell his son, "You are Iranian, and you are a Muslim. If they say this to you, you can respond in this way") was an important lesson, and he was beginning to see the Persian school as a potential site for such learning.

Some parents immediately took issue with Akbar's comment based on their own religious affiliations and histories with Islam. This point of tension (which emerged halfway through our first design circle) led to a lively and important discussion about the complexities of claiming or disavowing Muslimness (Sadeghi & Baker, 2019) in the context of both anti-Muslim racism and Iranian state politics and history. Both Taraneh and Nasrin (Taraneh's mother) argued that although they are not practicing Muslims, disavowing Muslim identity denies who Iranians are as a people. Countering this idea, Rahim spoke about his family's long history of resisting Islam, and how absurd it was for him to encourage his son to claim a Muslim identity in the U.S. He also hedged this comment by stating that he did not want the discussion to "get too political." As the facilitator, I intervened here, stating that I was "not afraid of politics" and that we should consider these discussions as a legitimate and important part of our work together.

Following this first session, I wondered whether I should have done more to highlight the racial and colonial politics of disavowing Muslimness in the US, or the flattening of internal heterogeneities that can occur when Iranians as a people are positioned as Muslim. Though my hesitation to do more than legitimize political discourse at this early point in our process resulted from a desire to respect participants' distinct religious histories, I now see that allowing the dialogue to breathe while trust was established over time helped create conditions for participants to hold and pursue these tensions together. There are many productive approaches to facilitation in such moments; however, this unfolding suggests that the ways dissension is navigated within participatory design work (especially early in the process) may create new grounds for authentic discourse that moves with rather than flattens complex histories. Indeed, nurturing the collective capacity to work with such tensions is an important mediational practice, a generator and marker of trust.

All of the examples discussed thus far emerged during the first design circle. In what follows, I discuss how the group widened their focus from children's educational needs and experiences with racism to parents and grandparents' racial identities.

Complex Discourses on Race and Racial Identity

Two new parents joined the second design circle, and I began the meeting by recounting the key themes from the prior session. My mention of racial discrimination as a theme spurred the group to dive back into the topic for the remainder of our time. This was likely related to the election of Donald Trump, which had occurred less than 2 weeks prior to our second dialogue. However, this shift was also intentional; our initial discussions of race focused on our children, and we had not yet spoken about how we are affected by anti-Iranian racism—particularly among first-generation immigrant parents who had likely encountered specific (if not intensified) racial and linguistic discrimination. The

move to carefully open such space was rooted in my assumption that co-developing strategies to support Iranian children would be limited without deeper discussion of our own racialized experiences. My analysis examines how holding space for the complex and sometimes contradictory discourses that emerged can support collective learning.

When I asked participants about their experiences with racism, Parisa (a new member and mother of two) initially stated that while she believed others had experienced "these things," she had not, even stating that some people use the "race-card" too often. Yet, within the same stretch of talk, Parisa shared that her parents-in-law did not accept her because she is Iranian. Two months later, Parisa recounted that her son's kindergarten teacher does not like him because he is Iranian. When participants encouraged Parisa to confront the teacher, she expressed a fear that it could make matters worse: "He has my child for 8 hours a day, and he can do many things."

Parisa's story helped expand the group's focus from bullying enacted by peers to the micro and macro aggressions enacted by teachers toward Iranian students, and the dynamics of power between teachers and families of color. It also reflects the complex tensions and movements embedded in participants' narratives about their racialized experiences. One interpretation of Parisa's shifting stances is that people may resolve the contradiction of denying racial discrimination and proceeding to recount clear instances of racism by sidestepping race as the logic undergirding the actions of others. The use of language such as *the race card* also demonstrates how conservative discourses regarding race in the US can infuse and mediate everyday sensemaking. Another, though not mutually exclusive, interpretation is that these tensions can signal emergent sensemaking and learning. This second perspective suggests that Parisa may have been publicly probing and perhaps reevaluating her initial denial of racism, a view that offers more in terms of the educational and dialogic potential embedded in such narratives.

Similar to Parisa, other parents opened up about experiences with racism only after establishing rapport and often in response to witnessing others' forthright narrations. During our fourth session, Nasrin, the sole grandparent in the group, shared that she feels that some patients at her clinic will never fully accept her due to her Iranian identity. In response, Rahim described his experiences with White supremacy as an Iranian child growing up in Germany, including standing close to the subway platform wall for fear of being pushed into the tracks by neo-Nazis. Nasrin responded with concern and asked whether he had discussed these experiences with his mother. Rahim replied,

> She didn't have any familiarity. It was me who had the experience. We never talked about it at home. It was vice versa. In order not to put any stress or fear on my mom, I held everything inside me.

It may be significant that Rahim voiced this experience while conversing with Nasrin, who was his elder within the group. Such moments offer glimpses into role re-mediations (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016) within design work, where the stories participants are moved to share create grounds for others to share memories. These occasions further suggest that noticing to whom a speaker is orienting their commentary within the collective (in this case, Rahim sharing with Nasrin) can evince the relational conditions that allow such stories to be spoken.

Nasrin and Rahim's exchange underscores the potential power of intergenerational dialogues. Though Rahim participated in the design circles as a father, Nasrin's presence and support may have allowed him to connect with the issues at hand as a son—both regarding the memory he shared and in terms of how she engaged with him as an elder. Such movements between generational identities are important, as remembering what it was like to be a child can nurture new ways of connecting with the experiences of one's children. In this case, Rahim framed his story with the caveat that Iranian

children growing up in the US do not suffer the racial violence he encountered as a child: "You have never had an experience like this [encountering neo-Nazis] growing up here…So, the experience that Iranian Americans have is very different." He further expressed the hope that his son can "stay in the world of playing football and not be exposed to things he's not old enough for yet." The connection between Rahim's childhood silence and our own children's potential silence about experiences with racism was left implicit within the exchange. Making such connections explicit and naming the generational perspective-taking that Nasrin and Rahim's dialogue supported as an important practice may contribute to fuller views of children's experiences across time and place.

Others wrestled with and sometimes challenged the idea that today's youth encounter less overt racism. Hossein, a father who attended the larger workshop, stated:

> I have a concern. I was a kid and attending school when we moved to the US. I had a struggle with my name, but I only changed my name back then. There was no racism, but things have changed a lot now. A 15-year-old kid has heard a lot of anti-Iranian and anti-Muslim words all his life. There was not such a thing when I was 15. The society is not the same.

Once again, we see how stances that may be in tension with one another can coexist. Though Hossein felt the need to change his name, he described the past in positive terms relative to his children's racialized experiences in the post-9/11 era. Hossein's comments simultaneously disrupted dominant narratives regarding American racial progress (his children, he stated, have heard more anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian racism than he did) and demonstrated the ongoing need for antiracist education and solidarity work within Iranian diasporic communities (considering his statement that there "was no racism").

These stories illustrate another key tension within our dialogues: while some participants recalled remaining silent about racism as children, and others shared that their young children were asking questions about their skin color and learning to value normative standards of beauty and language, many expressed the belief that young children may not be ready to discuss race. Although the group agreed that older children should have these conversations, they often worried that discussing race with younger children would imply that they are different or that any slight is due to their Iranian heritage. Some even expressed concern regarding older youth. Bita and Babak (her eighth-grade son) began participating in the design circles together. However, Bita expressed worry that Babak's participation may exacerbate feelings of difference, and Babak did not attend our final two sessions. Yet, in one of our final sessions, Bita eagerly shared that Babak had recently remarked on her frequent viewing of the Hallmark Channel, specifically asking why all the characters are White. Bita expressed a growing attunement to her children's existing awareness of race, which she felt was important to share with the group. Since 2016, Bita has spoken with me several times about her children's racial and cultural identities, seeking advice when Babak (then a high school junior) asked whether he should hide his Iranian identity following the U.S. assassination of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. My conversations with Bita suggest that the complex discourses of race and parenting highlighted throughout this section may take shape differently over time as parents read ongoing experiences with their children through new lenses. As a high school senior, Babak cofacilitated storytelling workshops we organized for Iranian youth in the school, helping to create a space for younger students to process their experiences with race and identity.

Though the group consistently expressed the desire for their children not to feel "different," they reflected and wrestled with this idea in the larger, whole-school dialogue. As the workshop co-facilitator, I problematized the idea of difference as a deficit, sharing research that stresses the importance of talking with children about race as well as strategies parents can employ in such

conversations, such as the use of children's books to facilitate dialogue. I discussed the young age at which children begin to understand race (Kaveh, 2018; Kharij Collective, 2017; Shirazi, 2019), both regarding their own racial identities and the assumptions they begin to form about others in a society built on racial hierarchy. In response, Soroush described that his son "has seen himself as different and never thought of it as a bad thing; in fact, he thought of it as a good thing." Soroush signaled possibilities for supporting Iranian children to claim difference as an act of positive racial identity and as a critical stance toward White supremacy. His comment further affirms that intentional and explicit facilitation within design work can encourage alternative viewpoints to emerge.

The parental impulse to protect children from painful encounters with racial othering is real. At the same time, many parents know that "their attempts to comfort their children have more to do with shielding them from the truth than convincing them that their fears are unfounded" (Kharij Collective, 2017). As Maghbouleh (2017) argues, the language of difference "is the language of race and always has been" (p. 13). As the next section discusses, a key facet of critical pedagogies of race within Iranian diasporic communities involves codeveloping careful ways to support children in developing sociopolitical clarity about their racial identities (Sadeghi & Baker, 2019), generating the potential to deepen collective confidence, historical action, and solidarity. This approach resonates with one of the FLDC's core principles: "We aim for whole, healthy children (within healthy families and communities) who know/practice their culture, understand power, and can determine their own future" (Ishimaru & Bang, 2016, p. 7). It also stresses the need to move from focusing on whether to discuss race with young children, to the more important question of how.

Disentangling Self-Defense from Respectability

Analyzing the design circle transcripts with these issues in mind revealed key moments when elders and young people were working together to disentangle struggles against racism from the politics of respectability. Akbar offered the following example in our third session, which occurred just after the 2017 women's march and before the Muslim Ban:

> What can I say to my son to help him defend against this type of discrimination? For example, and this is a silly example but I'm just giving an idea here, what if someone says to him, 'You ride camels in Iran.' Or 'women can't drive in Iran.' Or worse, make fun of his name…or call him with a different name. This is very important to me— for my son to learn how to respond and defend himself against these types of comments.

A few participants responded by reaffirming the need for children to know their histories and the "good aspects of Iran," while Rahim offered a different perspective, suggesting that Iranian children should learn to engage in counterarguments:

> So, when someone says, 'You ride camels in your country,' the kid should say, 'Yes, our country is so big that in some parts they ride camels, in other parts they ride horses, and is some parts they drive cars. You don't have this type of diversity in your country.'

Rahim's amendment turned a defensive stance into one of cultural pride and a critique of presumed American superiority. Here, intergenerational engagement in shared problem-solving regarding racism and bullying not only generated strategies but also enabled the group to analyze the layers embedded in one another's proposed responses and the implications for children's evolving sense of personhood. This practice may have been enhanced by the sense of responsibility participants

felt to generate strategies to share with the larger school community in the culminating workshop, offering a view into what can emerge when participants are positioned as codesigners. In this case, Rahim generatively challenged the politics of respectability, although the flattening of heterogenous lifeways in the US context remained unexamined. In future design circles, visibly recording such suggestions and further examining their political layers may enable critiques of Whiteness and the US as a nation-state[3] to form the grounds for solidarity with multiple racialized communities.

A related trend emerged in the distinct ways older and younger participants conceptualized the educational needs of children in the diaspora. Parents and grandparents often discussed the need for Iranian children to learn their culture and history; however, Lily and Babak, the two youth participants, emphasized the need for schools to teach dominant populations a valid and complex view of Iran and the broader region, and to engage White students in antiracist education. This argument became more pronounced for Lily after the presidential election. She had previously characterized her primarily White, suburban high school as "very progressive" and open-minded. Following Trump's election, Lily described the deep dissonance she felt as she witnessed White peers waving American flags and expressing excitement about the election results. In the context of supportive dialogue within community, such moments of dissonance can create possibilities for reimagining self-defense and determination on young people's terms.

Discussion

More can be said about the topics that emerged within the dialogues, including the threat of war with Iran and how Iranians can work in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other communities of color to resist policies such as the Muslim ban, family separation at the border, and police brutality. Another central trend involved how both older and younger participants drew on shared histories with state power in Iran as resources for analyzing state power and politics in the US. These discussions, and the examples above, reveal a historical intersubjectivity (Matusov, 1996) that may have played a key role in allowing parents, grandparents, and youth who were informally acquainted through the school to embark on honest and probing dialogues that were anchored in resonant histories. My analysis of the dialogues emphasized what it can look like when complex personhood is treated both as an analytic lens and a mediational sensibility. I conclude by discussing some of these learnings.

First, the concept and practice of complex personhood can reorient our relationships with political tensions, disagreements, and dissent as they emerge within such dialogues. Here, holding space to wrestle with complexity, and explicitly naming politics as something we need not shy away from early in the design process, may have helped generate and assume the strength of emergent forms of trust within the collective. Such trust is essential for engaging with difficult topics in ways that deepen rather than threaten collectivity. In light of recent Iranian history, the concerns that participants expressed about "getting too political" likely reflect a shared knowledge of the many community organizations and spaces that have disbanded because of political rifts. Developing ways to engage in honest dialogue that nurtures rather than severs relationships can engender alternatives to apolitical and areligious collectivity as the only means of sustaining diasporic community, thereby supporting historicized forms of relational healing. The careful work of mediation is important to continue analyzing and naming as we consider how diasporic organizations can serve as environments for such intergenerational learning.

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[3] In light of Rahim's other critical comments throughout the design process, parents' own political identities and histories of critique with regard to U.S. imperialism (Nasrabadi & Matin-Asghari, 2018) may play an important role in their stances towards racial identity and parenting, a key area for future research.

Second, a mediational sensibility rooted in complex personhood can generatively slow down our movements with one another, helping attune to layered discourses regarding race and identity as spaces of learning. The sometimes-rapid shifts from expressing color-evasive ideologies to critiquing those ideologies or, as Parisa's stories reflected, from denying experiences of racism to sharing overt encounters with anti-Iranian discrimination, suggest that intentionally and patiently opening such spaces can allow different narratives to become available for collective sensemaking. The sometimes assimilationist discourses present within the dialogues could be read as evidence that Iranians (particularly first-generation immigrants) are invested in claiming the privileges of Whiteness. In line with the broader project of FLDC, challenging deficit views of parents can mean suspending such interpretations to create sustained opportunities for collective social analysis, which, in this context, allowed elders and youth to practice shifting from assimilationist responses to forms of self-determination.

This orientation toward temporality and relationality is also a methodological imperative: interviews and focus groups may capture the kinds of comments that emerged in the first or second design circle, allowing us as researchers to overlook the distinct stances that can be expressed over time. How can we learn to treat the stories, experiences and concerns exemplified here not as settled discourses, but as portals of meaning that can birth new possibilities and solidarities? One way to do this, as exemplified through the stories shared, is to focus on establishing and practicing routine forms of dialogue—such as carefully analyzing proposed responses to racism or the generational perspective-taking that emerged between Nasrin and Rahim—and trusting what such practices can give life to over time rather than trying to resolve each tension in its current moment. This is not mutually exclusive from the need for antiracist education within Iranian diasporic communities, as seen with the need to support parents and caregivers in talking with young children about race and to expand racial literacies around anti-Blackness and settler-colonialism. However it is an argument for recognizing the relational time required for learning and healing—in this case, among diasporic Iranians reflecting on sometimes painful histories to support the educational and social needs of the next generation.

Finally, the question of timescales and mediational patience matters both for how we move within design processes (the five sessions discussed here), and for what we learn through longer temporalities of partnership. During the school-wide workshop, some parents suggested holding a similar discussion with the school's teachers, many of whom grew up in Iran, to hear how they are navigating their experiences with racism as new immigrants and to allow them to benefit pedagogically from learning more about their students' racialized experiences. Four years after this workshop, the school director asked me to co-lead such a session with teachers following the U.S. assassination of Qasem Soleimani and the subsequent rise in anti-Iranian racism. Additionally, I was asked to hold a workshop for parents to discuss concerns for their children regarding the implications of the assassination and sense of impending war. I also worked with the school to create a guide (in English and Persian) for families to support their children amid ongoing militarism and sanctions against Iran. A few weeks after this parent workshop, a mother who had been present told me that she had shared some of the responses we discussed with the mother of her child's Chinese American peer, who had been experiencing increased anti-Asian racism in the era of COVID-19. She commented that she now felt confident in what she was sharing with other parents about supporting their children. Around this same time, Lily shared that she had facilitated similar conversations among Iranian families during a Parents' Day at her college, which she organized as a leader of the school's Iranian students' association. These ripples reflect the openings that can emerge when dialogic social relations are seeded and sustained over longer arcs of time. Moving with the ethics of complex personhood was central to this relational work.

Acknowledgments

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