

Exploring Constructive Resilience: A Qualitative Investigation of the Bahá'í Response to Oppression

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Abstract

This paper delves into the experiences of Bahá'is, the largest religious minority in Iran, with a specific focus on their responses to persecution, and sense-making process concerning their identity and approach to adversity. Adopting a phenomenological approach, the study conducted 10 in-depth interviews with Bahá'is residing in the United States as exiles. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze their narratives. Consistent with the Bahá'í philosophy of conflict resolution, known as constructive resilience, the Bahá'is have exhibited a non-confrontational and resilient stance in the face of persecution, demonstrating constructive behavior. Notably, the findings reveal a compelling contrast between the extensive range of persecutions endured by the Bahá'is at the hands of the government and the positive attitudes held by the general public towards them. Bahá'í participants attribute this positive sentiment to the community's manner of responding to persecution. These collective actions have not only alleviated the suffering of the Bahá'is but have also provided them with a framework for comprehending constructive resilience as an approach to oppression.

Introduction

The population of Iran is predominantly Muslim, with 98% adhering to the faith. Among the Muslim population, approximately 89% are Shia and 9% are Sunni. The remaining population, which constitutes less than 2%, comprises various religious communities including Bahá'is, Christians, Jews, Sabeen-Mandaeans, Zoroastrians, and Yarsanis. According to data from Human Rights Watch, the Bahá'is represent the largest non-Muslim minority group in Iran, numbering at least 300,000 (U.S. State Department, 2016).

In general, the Iranian government implemented stringent legal and policy restrictions on religious freedom, creating an atmosphere of intimidation for almost all non-Shia religious groups (U.S. State department, 2010). However, Bahá'is face even greater restrictions compared to other officially recognized religious minority groups in Iran, partly because they are regarded by the theocratic government as a heretical deviation from Islam (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The persecution of Bahá'is occurs on both social and political levels, through the government-controlled mass media as well as the nation's constitution (Karlberg, 2010).

In addition to limitations on religious observances such as meetings, marriages and burials, the Iranian government imposes restrictions on various fundamental rights of Bahá'is, particularly in areas such as education and employment (Clarcken, 2009). Many members of the Bahá'í Faith

are subject to harassment, confiscation of property, closure of businesses, imprisonment, torture, and even execution.

The situation faced by Bahá'is in Iran has gained significant international attention. However, although government persecution of Bahá'is has been extensively documented by scholars, activists, and journalists (e.g., Clarken, 2009; Kazamzadeh, 2000; Martin, 1984; Momen, 2005; 2012), there remains a lack of empirical research on how the Bahá'i community has responded to this oppression.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of how the Bahá'is in Iran might have responded to the oppression in a manner that is consistent with the constructive resilience approach. In the following sections, we delve into the historical context of the persecution and introduce the concept of construct resilience within the framework of nonviolent resistance.

Causes of Persecution of the Bahá'is

While many Iranian citizens are targets of repression by the current Iranian government, the treatment of Bahá'is stands out as a particularly severe case (Charbonneau, 2012). Unlike Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, who have certain limited rights under the Islamic Constitution, Bahá'is were immediately declared unprotected infidels following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Kazemzadeh, 2011). This can be partly attributed to the fact that “Iranian society is accustomed to the presence of Iran’s pre-Islamic, non-Muslim communities” (U.S. State Department, 2017). However, the Bahá'i Faith, introduced as an independent religion 1,200 years after the time of Muḥammad, challenges fundamental interpretations of the Quran. While Islam asserts it is the final religion and Muḥammad is the last true Prophet of God, Bahá'u'lláh (the prophet-founder of the Bahá'i Faith) claimed to have brought a new message from God and introduced the concept of the progressive and continuous revelation, which challenges the finality of Islam and Muḥammad. Consequently, the Bahá'i Faith is considered as heresy, and its followers, Bahá'is, are considered infidels. Since all laws and regulations in Iran must be based on “Islamic criteria” and the official interpretation of sharia, the Islamic Republic does not recognize any rights or legal protection for Bahá'is. As a result, they are deprived of the same quality of life as others in the region.

Furthermore, the Bahá'i religion promotes independent investigation of truth, emphasizing individual responsibility to learn and interpret holy scripture, thus challenging the authority of influential Islamic clerics known as mullahs (Clarken, 2009). Karlberg (2010) argued that Shia clerics engage in persecution of Bahá'is for both theological and material reasons. Theologically, many clerics are unwilling to accept the possibility of a post-Islamic religion as it conflicts with their interpretation and understanding of Islam (Karlberg, 2010). Materially, the claims made by the Bab and Baha'u'llah—that the “promise and aspirations of the major religious systems of the past will gradually be fulfilled in coming centuries as humanity enters into an era of justice and enlightenment” (Karlberg, 2010, p. 228)—pose a threat to the economic position of these clerics, including their religious endowments, fees, and benefits, because these material privileges can only be preserved with their status “within the Iranian psyche” (Karlberg, 2010, p. 229).

Constructive Resilience

The Bahá'í response approach to oppression has been termed *constructive resilience* by the Universal House of Justice (UHJ), the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith. The UHJ explained this approach in the following statements:

The proper response to oppression is neither to succumb in resignation nor to take on the characteristics of the oppressor. The victim of oppression can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred, and which sustains consistent, principled action. (Universal House of Justice, Letter to the Bahá'is of Iran, dated June 23, 2009).

Constructive resilience compasses three dimensions: nonviolence, constructiveness, and resilience. First, the Baha'i response to oppression is non-violent and non-adversarial. Nonviolence is different from pacifism and passivity. As Sharp (1973) noted, nonviolence involves an active struggle rather than passive submission when addressing conflicts. There are two types of non-violent resistance: strategic nonviolence and principled nonviolence. Strategic non-violent resistance employs tactics such as boycotts, strikes, symbolic protests, and civil disobedience to preserve or disrupt the status quo (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Schock 2005; Sharp, 2003). Strategic nonviolent resistance movements may include elements of violence (e.g., the existence of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle). On the other hand, principled nonviolence rejects all forms of violence based on "ideological, religious, or ethical beliefs" (Chenoweth et al., 2017, p. 1954). The constructive resilience approach aligns more closely with principled nonviolent resistance rather than strategic nonviolent resistance. It does not endorse radical revolution or opposition as means of effecting social change. Karlberg (2010) argued that the Bahá'í community's theory and collective practice suggest that strategies of nonviolent opposition may be met with "increasingly sophisticated strategies of nonviolent oppression" (p. 243), because they fail to address the root causes of social injustice and oppression.

This brings us to the second key aspect of the constructive resilience approach: constructiveness. Unlike destructive approaches such as radical revolution, constructive resilience does not aim to dismantle the existing social order. Instead, it focuses on building alternatives to the existing social order, because "inherited structures appear to be disintegrating through the force of their own obsolescence" and "deconstructive processes merely draws energy and resources away from more constructive strategies" (Karlberg, 2000, pp. 208-209). To this end, the Baha'is have been actively engaged in constructive efforts to transform Iranian society since the inception of their Faith. For example, in a society where women are denied many of the freedom and rights available to men, the Baha'is were pioneers in declaring the full equality of men and women. They have consistently worked towards implementing this principle in all aspects of life, including rejecting the practice of veiling women and establishing the first schools for girls in Iran (Karlberg, 2010).

More recently, in response to the Iranian government's systematic denial of Baha'is' access to higher education, the Baha'i community created the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in 1987. In the past decades, BIHE has grown from a small group of faculty to an extensive institute consisting of approximately 955 faculty and administrative staff (<http://www.bihe.com>). Each year, around 1,000 students apply to BIHE, reflecting the resilience and determination of the

Iranian Baha'i community. Through their relentless efforts, both within and outside Iran, Baha'is have refused to surrender their agency in the face of oppression. Instead, they actively construct their own institutions and empower their youth through education (Small Media, 2013). In summary, the constructive resilience approach represents an active and constructive approach to conflict.

Lastly, the constructive resilience approach emphasizes personal and collective resilience in responding to oppression. According to Baha'u'llah, founders of the Bahá'í Faith, the term "resilience" signifies that the Bahá'is' stance does not involve defiance, opposition, or subversion of the government. Rather, it denotes their unwavering resistance to any pressure aimed at denouncing their religion or compromising its teachings (Momen, 2012).

The Bahá'í Faith

To further explore this constructive resilience approach that the Bahá'is take in response to persecution, it may help to elaborate on some core beliefs and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith is a monotheistic religion that emphasizes the concept of progressive revelation and continuity of the divine intervention in human affairs through the successive appearance of divine messengers, referred to as Manifestations of God. According to Bahá'í belief, the most recent of these messengers is Baha'u'llah, who lived in 19th-century Persia and passed away in exile in Palestine in 1892, after enduring 40 years of imprisonment (Hatcher & Martin, 1984; Petrou, 2009).

One of the central aims of the Bahá'í Faith is unity of humanity (Cooper, 1985; Ferraby, 1957; The Bahá'í Faith, 2007). It is through the pursuit of this goal that social progress and evolution are envisioned. Baha'u'llah expressed that "The primary disease that afflicts society and generates the ills that cripple it is the disunity of a human race—distinguished by its capacity for collaboration and whose progress to date depends on the extent to which unified action has, at various times and in various societies, been achieved" (Bahá'í International Community, 1999; Welton, 2017). In line with this objective, Bahá'is are committed to nurturing spiritual qualities, exemplifying personal integrity, demonstrating non-confrontational and non-adversarial behavior in the face of violent oppression, and meeting hatred and persecution with love and kindness (Karlberg, 2010). What is more, Bahá'is pledge loyalty and obedience to the laws of the countries in which they reside (Karlberg, 2010).

In summary, the Bahá'í response to oppression—constructive resilience—is distinct from both violent resistance and the avoidance. An important goal of this study is to examine whether the response strategies employed by Bahá'is align with the teachings of the Bahá'í faith. In other words, the research aims to investigate whether there is a convergence of response strategies among different Bahá'is who have experienced oppression, and whether this convergence can be characterized as constructive resilience. Another objective of the study is to examine how Bahá'is make sense of the conflict and oppression they face, as well as their own response strategies.

The Current Study

Although the persecution of Bahá'is has attracted international attention and raised scholarly interest, empirical studies on the experiences of Bahá'is remain scarce. Existing research has primarily focused on acculturation, examining how Bahá'is adapt to new cultures. Naseri (2011),

for example, interviewed 11 Iranian Bahá'is in exile in the U.S., exploring their identity formation and reformation during the acculturation process. The study revealed that feelings of rootlessness and homelessness significantly impacted their sense of self. Similarly, Williams (2009) conducted interviews with seven Iranian Bahá'i refugees residing in and around Melbourne, Australia, and found that religious identity was more salient than their Iranian or Australian identities. The author explained that the Bahá'i teachings discourage extreme nationalism due to its exclusionary nature. Talebi and Desjardins (2010) examined adaptive strategies employed by Iranian Bahá'is in reconstructing their existence, faith and religious experience as refugees in Saskatchewan, Canada. Interview findings from the four participants indicated that the degree of integration into the host society influenced their ability to redefine their attachment to religion and allow coexistence of parallel cultural traditions (Iranian and Canadian).

In summary, prior empirical research has provided valuable insight into the diaspora experience of Iranian Bahá'is, especially in relation to acculturation and identity reconstruction in their host cultures. However, there is a notable absence of empirical research within the conflict management scholarship regarding how Bahá'is respond to oppression in Iran. This paper aims to address this gap by investigating how Bahá'is in Iran experience and respond to persecution, as well as how they attribute meaning to their response approaches. The following research questions are formed to guide this project:

RQ1: How do members of the Iranian Bahá'i community experience, make meaning of, and respond to, the persecution faced by their community?

Method

The study employed a phenomenological approach to collect and analyze data. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand how people make sense of their lived experience. It focuses on exploring conscious thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and the meanings attached to phenomena. Central to phenomenological investigation is the practice of interviewing individuals who have direct experience of the phenomenon under study (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). By abstaining from taking the world for granted, researchers strive to comprehend what prompts the interviewee to perceive a certain reality as it is (Bordeleau, 2005). This approach emphasizes the collection of experiential data, while researchers avoid allowing their own knowledge, prejudices, biases, theoretical frameworks, and ideological references to interfere with data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 1985). Therefore, the phenomenological approach is well-suited to capturing the subjective, lived reality of Iranian Bahá'is who have undergone oppression and persecution.

Participants

After obtaining IRB approval, Iranian Bahá'i refugees residing in the U.S. were recruited for this study. The initial recruitment process involved reaching out to the national Bahá'i administrative body in the U.S., which provided a list of potential candidates who met the search criteria (i.e., Bahá'i refugees who had been persecuted in Iran). An email with the recruitment script was sent to each prospective candidate, containing the purpose and the procedure of the study, along with the research team's contact information.

Following a series of initial interviews, the study employed snowball sampling to identify additional participants interested in joining the study. Specifically, after completing their own interviews, the initial interviewees were asked to share the opportunity with others in their network who might be interested. Interested individuals contacted the researchers to express their willingness to participate. In total, this process led to the identification of 10 participants.

To ensure consistency and reliability, all interviews were conducted by the first author, with each interview lasting a minimum of an hour. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, letters were used to represent them in Table 1, which provides background information about each individual.

Table 1: Interviewee Information

| Interviewee | Gender | Age | Resided in... | Left Iran |
|--------------------|---------------|------------|----------------------|------------------|
| A | Male | 67 | Tehran | 1980 |
| B | Male | 30 | Tehran | 2011 |
| C | Male | 66 | Isfahan, Yazd | 1976 |
| D | Male | 71 | Tehran | 2014 |
| E | Male | 57 | Karaj | 1981 |
| F | Male | 32 | Isfahan, Yazd | 2011 |
| G | Male | 60 | Tehran & Shiraz | 1978 |
| H | Female | 58 | Tehran & Shiraz | 1986 |
| I | Female | 35 | Tehran | 2010 |
| J | Female | 56 | Yazd & Shiraz | 1984 |

Procedure

In the first part of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on a specific experience related to their Bahá'í identity, which they found challenging. The goal was to determine whether the challenges stemmed from persecution, marginalization, or discrimination on a social or a governmental level. In the second part of the interview, questions centered on how the participants responded to these challenges and how these responses influenced their lives. The third part of the interview focused on exploring the changes in the lives of Bahá'ís in Iran since the onset of the Islamic revolution in 1979. Lastly, the interview delved into the participants' perception of their identity as Bahá'ís and Iranians, their reasons for embracing the Bahá'í faith despite being aware of the forthcoming challenges, and their expectations regarding the future of the Bahá'í-Islamic relationship.

Prior to the interview, the interview protocol, along with an invitation letter, was sent to all participants via email. Oral consent was obtained from each participant before commencing the interview. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim by the first author. Follow-up questions were subsequently conducted via email to allow participants to further express themselves, expand on their responses, seek clarification, and delve deeper into the nuances of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the research. Thematic analysis involves “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes)” in the data (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguished between two levels of themes: semantic and latent themes. Semantic themes capture explicit and surface meanings using an inductive or bottom-up approach, while latent themes identify underlying ideas, patterns and assumptions using a theoretical or top-down approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, a theoretical thematic analysis approach was adopted. Specifically, research questions were formulated to guide the interviews, and the interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed by the research team multiple times to identify themes that addressed the research questions. The research team discussed their discrepancies when they had different interpretations of the data to increase the affirmability of the results.

The analysis focused on identifying themes that are related to how the participants experienced oppression and their responses aligning with the concept of constructive resilience, although the concept itself was not used explicitly by any of the interviewees. Additionally, the analysis examined patterns of narratives describing the perceived evolution of treatment toward Bahá’is in Iran as reported by the participants themselves. Finally, careful scrutiny of the transcripts was conducted to identify narratives highlighting challenges and difficulties arising from religious identity.

Results

This section highlights the most prominent themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Four recurring themes emerged: forms of discrimination and persecution, perceptions of Bahá’is from the government and the public, the response approach to government persecution and public discrimination, and Bahá’is’ religious and national identity.

Forms of Discrimination and Persecution

All participants shared experiences of various forms of discrimination and persecution, ranging from informal social discrimination to institutional and structural persecution. Participants drew from their personal experiences as well as those of their friends and family. For example, Interviewee A discussed the challenges face by his family and the Bahá’i community, including accusations of connections with Israel, espionage, difficulties enrolling children in schools, and marginalization of Bahá’i students within the school system. This general discrimination was prevalent among all Bahá’is in Iran.

A significant aspect of social exclusion was the perception that Bahá’is are “unclean.” Participant J highlighted the ease with which Bahá’is were identified as non-Muslims due to their non-adherence to hijab. Muslim children in her school considered Bahá’is as “untouchable” and “unclean,” leading to reluctance to share food or sit with Bahá’is. Participant J further explained that even in the classroom, she would often sit with other marginalized groups, such as Zoroastrians, as nobody wanted to associate with them either.

Surprisingly, educational settings, which are expected to be inclusive and unbiased, were frequently reported as sites of discrimination and persecution. As described by Kazemzadeh

(1982), it was not uncommon for instructors and fellow students to collectively target and attack Bahá'í children, aiming to undermine their beliefs. Many participants encountered this discrimination during their time in grade school. Interviewee G was verbally abused in high school:

In the classroom, when the high school teachers, and there were a number of them, especially through high school, would find any excuse to bring up the Faith so they can make accusations and things like that. It was intimidating, but once or twice I raised my hand, and I would say, "Sir, I am a Bahá'í and what you are saying is not really true." And, that would cause them to be loud and use abusive language towards me, and send me out of the classroom to see the principal...

Several interviewees, including F, G, and H, shared their experiences of religious studies mandatory in school and the social exclusion faced by Bahá'í children during these sessions. Interviewee H revealed that teachers instructed the parents of Bahá'í children to "keep quiet" during religious classes and not defend the Bahá'í Faith. Interviewee F recounted being compelled to pair other students' shoes in front of the school during prayer sessions. Moreover, the school principal encouraged teachers and students to engage in "mean and rude" behaviors, resulting in bullying directed towards Interviewee F.

In the realm of higher education, the situation became even worse, as Bahá'ís have been banned from institutions of higher education since the 1980s. Four of the 10 interviewees (B, F, I, and J) mentioned being denied college admission or expelled from school upon disclosing their Bahá'ís identity.

The deprivation of higher education also poses challenges in obtaining employment for Bahá'ís. Interviewee D mentioned that the government restricts Bahá'ís from holding jobs, particularly in government positions. Interviewee F, despite being an engineer, could not obtain a license to sign documents, resulting in lower pay for Bahá'í engineers.

In addition to the discrimination discussed above, participants shared accounts of various forms of persecution, including property confiscation, loss of freedom through arrest, and even loss of life. When Interviewee F was studying at BIHE, many professors, including his own advisor, were imprisoned. Four of the 10 participants (Interviewees E, G, H, J) told stories of friends or family members being executed. Interviewee E's father was among those executed. A typical story is similar to what Interviewee G said:

...in 1981, I received the news of the execution of a number of Bahá'ís in Shiraz, and one of them was my Sunday school teacher, and one was her son, another was a person I served with on the youth committee, and others I knew, and these kinds of things were really heavy on my heart.

In summary, discrimination and persecution against Bahá'ís in Iran manifest in various forms. Participants faced arrests, property loss, executions of family or community members, and deprivation of employment and educational opportunities. Within institutions such as public schools, participants encountered discriminatory treatment and social exclusion, often instigated by figures of authority such as the teachers or principals.

Perceptions of Attitudes towards Bahá'is between the Government and the Public

The interviewees' accounts reveal a contrast in the treatment of Bahá'is between government agencies and the general public, with a positive shift in attitudes observed among the public since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, in contrast to the various forms of persecution from the government, as perceived by the interviewees. For example, Interviewee B noted:

...whatever discrimination that I faced in Iran or any misbehavior or insult even, it was all from the Iranian officials or the Iranian intelligence, or whatever they were. Not even one single instance [was] from my friends, my school, or in the neighborhood or anywhere for that matter.

Interviewee D also affirmed this sentiment, noting that "The people behaved nicely toward Bahá'is, but the people of the government did not treat us well." During times of hardship, non-Bahá'i friends often supported Bahá'is in overcoming challenges. Interviewee D shared an example of his daughter's experience, where her Muslim friends used their own tour guide license number to secure tour guide jobs for her, despite her being denied employment due to her Bahá'i identity. These friends would then turn over the earnings to his daughter, even risking their own jobs to assist her financially.

According to the participants, over the past 40 years since the revolution in Iran, the government's stance on Bahá'is has remained unchanged, while the public's perception of Bahá'is has undergone significant changes. Interviewee A noted that initially, the public's attitudes toward Bahá'is were aligned with the government's position. However, he explained that more recently, the Bahá'i community has gained recognition, and the public has come to realize that the accusations against Bahá'is are unfounded. As a result, "the Bahá'i community is getting a very serious respect, because of its very clear and clean, 170 years of very clear history that we have." (Interviewee A)

According to the participants, two major factors have contributed to the shift in public perceptions of Bahá'is, transitioning from negative (aligned with the government) to respectful and supportive. The first reason is that the general public themselves have suffered under the current Iranian regime, leading to increasing dissatisfaction with the government. For example, Interviewee D said:

... as many as 90% of the public had been in one way or another damaged and has suffered under this regime... about 90% of these people have lost their kids in the wars, have lost income, prices for goods [have] gone up, a family member imprisoned, one way or another had been harassed and persecuted by this government. So they were beginning to understand the pain of Bahá'is, and as a result their attitude has changed from then until now.

The second reason for the attitudinal change stems from interpersonal contact with Bahá'is. Interviewee H emphasized that as the general public engaged in interactions with Bahá'is in their shops and businesses, they had positive experiences that contradicted with the government's misinformation. Interviewee H said, the general public witnessed firsthand that "Bahá'is are more honest, truthful, welcoming, no prejudice."

As a result of these realizations, non-Bahá’i friends of the participants experienced feelings of guilt or shame because they felt that they have been mistreating the Bahá’is based on the misleading information they received from the government before. For instance, Interviewee F, shared an experience with a Muslim friend in high school who initially believed the government propaganda about Bahá’is being “unclean.” However, on the last day of high school, the friend confessed to Interviewee F that after every time they hung out, he had to take a specific shower to “take the ‘unclean’ away.” The friend felt conflicted because as a good Muslim he had to believe that the Bahá’is were unclean, but as a human being who had a Bahá’i friend, he felt “guilty” or “a sense of shame.” Similarly, Interviewee G spoke of a conversation with a devout Muslim grade school friend who acknowledged that they had been fed lies by the mullahs. Participant G recalled this friend saying, “We thought these Bahá’is were people who had done bad things, so they are getting what they deserve, but now after all these years, I have come to believe that the Bahá’is are really wonderful people.” His friend’s disillusionment with the Iranian government was triggered by the loss of their brother in the Iraq war.

Bahá’I Response to Government Persecution and Public Discrimination

The response of Bahá’is to persecution can be characterized by three important features: non-confrontation, constructive action, and resilience.

Non-Confrontation

In discussing responses to persecution, none of the participants mentioned engaging in direct confrontations with the government or individuals displaying prejudice. Many participants were aware of the Bahá’I governing body’s urge that Bahá’is in Iran should comply with the government’s rules. Participant J said, “They [the Universal House of Justice] were encouraging the friends [Bahá’I community] to be steadfast, reminding us of the examples of sufferings of Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l Baha, stay united, obey rules of government, encouragement, praise.”

When faced with discrimination, many Bahá’I participants chose not to respond with aggression. Interviewee G, for instance, shared his strategy of ignoring instigators who would hurl abusive language at him on the street. He would continue on his way without paying attention to their provocations. He also recalled incidents where he and his Bahá’I friends were harassed by an organized group near the local Bahá’I center, but they chose to simply continue going to the center without reacting. Their non-confrontational approach aimed to maintain peace and avoid escalating conflicts.

Interviewee E explained that the non-confrontational response was driven by the desire to prevent further conflict. He said:

When we were challenged, we had to pretty much subdue [forced to show] respect, and not necessarily publicly oppose and show our reaction, and try to very diligently and gently, try to respond in a manner that would not provoke additional conflict.

Even in the face of threats of death, Bahá’is do not resort to fighting back. Interviewee J discussed when many Bahá’is were arrested and executed, how they as a community responded:

... it was a norm...it was like “okay” (with resignation). It was a blessing, it kept us together, and kept us I don’t want to say happy, but we were content with whatever happened. We knew that it was meant to be. That’s how the Faith is going to grow. And we saw it, saw the result of it [Bahá’is being executed]: How in other countries people came to know about the [Bahá’i] Faith and the Teachings, and everything.

Constructive Action

While the Bahá’I response to oppression emphasizes non-confrontation, it should be noted that the Bahá’is take active and creative actions to address the hardships they face. Participants shared numerous examples of how they demonstrated resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of economic challenges imposed by the new regime after the 1979 Revolution.

Participants recounted stories of individuals within the Bahá’I community in Iran finding alternative means of income when their businesses and shops were closed, and when thousands of Bahá’is were dismissed from public sector jobs and even forced to repay their salaries to the government. For instance, when discussing loss of employment, Participant J said:

...If someone had a car, he started driving like a taxi. If you had a truck you started moving things, and get money. My brother started driving a bus, and started taking people from here to there outside of the city, and that’s how he made money, and helped other people. My aunt knew how to sew, so she started sewing for other people. So people started digging into their resources. If they could bake cakes and sell it, make bread and sell it. Made homemade jams and pickles. Anything they could to make money.

In another example, Interviewee A talked about how his family prepared for potential difficulties, such as arrest. He mentioned the practice of a checking account with trusted friends to ensure access to funds in case of imprisonment or other circumstances that could lead to financial restrictions.

In response to the deprivation of educational opportunities, participants or their family and friends turned to the Bahá’I Institute for Higher Education (BIHE), an institution established to work around government persecution. Several participants (e.g., Interviewees B, F, and I) emphasized the vital role of BIHE in enabling them to pursue higher education. Despite being banned from attending mainstream universities, they found educational opportunities and support within the BIHE community. This alternative educational institution allowed them to complete degrees and continue their intellectual development. It served as a beacon of resilience, teaching them the values of sacrifice, dedication, and constructive agency.

Resilience

Despite facing intense persecution and discrimination in every aspect of their lives, Bahá’is consistently exhibit remarkable resilience and perseverance. This quality of resilience was a recurring theme among the participants, as they shared stories of their own experiences or those of their friends and relatives.

Even in the face of life-threatening situations, Bahá’is remain steadfast in their face. Interviewee G, upon returning to Iran after living in the U.S., expected the Bahá’i community

there to be disheartened and demoralized. However, he was astounded by their indomitable spirit and unwavering enthusiasm. He said, “I just couldn’t believe it, that a community that for so long, 25 years, has been under the government’s thumb, all the atrocities that they suffered, how resilient they were and how positive their outlook was.” Witnessing their resilience became a powerful learning experience for him.

For many Bahá’i participants, the persecution they endured actually strengthened their religious commitment. Participant H shared a poignant example involving her father, who was suffering from serious eye problems in Iran but was denied medical treatment. When they petitioned to leave the country for medical care, the authorities offered them assistance on the condition that they renounce their Bahá’i beliefs and claim to be Muslims. Despite the desperate situation, H’s father adamantly refused, sacrificing his opportunity for timely treatment. He expressed his unwavering dedication by saying, “There are Bahá’is who gave their lives for the Faith, and I just gave my vision.”

Identity as a Bahá’i and an Iranian

The participants’ narratives shed light on their sense of identity and how it relates to their experience of persecution and their response to it. Despite being born into Bahá’i families, all interviewees emphasized that their religious commitment was not a given, but rather a result of independent investigation and personal choice. They described the Bahá’i teachings as promoting unity, peace, equality, and universal education, which resonated deeply with their values and aspirations. Interviewee B, for instance, passionately explained why he chose to become a Bahá’i, highlighting its alignment with his desire to promote peace and equality.

While the majority of the participants made their decision to become Bahá’is at the age of 15, two individuals took detours on their spiritual journey. Interviewee A initially became a communist during his university years but eventually rediscovered his belief in the Bahá’i Faith. Similarly, Interviewee C, identified as a socialist during college but embraced the Bahá’i Faith later in life.

Given the severe persecution awaiting them as Bahá’is in Iran, it was important to explore why these individuals chose to embrace the faith despite the expected hardships, including limitations on higher education. When asked about this, Interviewee F, representing the sentiments of many participants, said:

It is definitely a test for every Bahá’i, but I was very determined. The question never crossed my mind. I took pride in my decision and was proud of facing the deprivation of higher education for my Faith. I took pride in whatever consequences would befall me because of my Faith. I knew there would be consequences, but I made that decision being fully aware.

The term “Iranian Bahá’i” evoked diverse responses among the participants. For some, it symbolized not only persecution in Iran but also prejudice against Middle Easterners upon seeking refuge in the United States. Interviewee B recounted the discrimination he faced as an Iranian in the U.S., exemplified by his parent’s inability to attend his graduation due to travel restrictions imposed by the U.S. government. Therefore, the combination of being a Bahá’i and an Iranian felt like a precarious mix, characterized by ongoing challenges and discrimination.

Conversely, other participants expressed pride in their dual identity as Iranian Bahá'is. Interviewee D saw no conflict between the two identities by saying, "Not only it does not create a conflict, but we experience pride because Baha'u'llah came from Iran." Similarly, Interviewee I highlighted the love for Iran within the Bahá'i community, acknowledging the faith's Iranian roots while emphasizing its global and inclusive nature.

For the majority of participants, their Bahá'i identity held greater prominence than their Iranian identity. Participant E considered himself a global, transcending the specificities of his birthplace. Another participant, Interviewee H, concurred with this perspective. She said:

Bahá'i culture is not Iranian culture; it is a culture that embraces every culture. It doesn't want to interfere with the way you grow up in your culture. It just brings everyone together. The beauty of this Bahá'i culture is that regardless of your language, [and] culture, you are human. And the beauty of this is that it teaches from your childhood, that humanity is one that there is only one race, the human race. It doesn't think Iranian culture is the same as Bahá'i culture.

In conclusion, the analysis of interview transcripts aligns with existing literature regarding the extent of persecution and discrimination faced by the Bahá'i community. The participant's responses highlight their non-confrontational approach, resilience, and resourcefulness in the face of adversity. Additionally, their narratives indicate that their Bahá'i identity remains strong despite the discrimination and exile they have endured. This study offers insights into the complex dynamics of constructive resilience within the Bahá'i community and underscores the participants' creative responses to persecution. Although the study does not focus on acculturation, the majority of participants displayed a resilient sense of Iranian identity even in exile.

Discussion

The findings of this study shed light on the contrasting attitudes towards Bahá'is in Iran between the government and the general public. More importantly, the responses of Bahá'i participants to persecution align with the principles of constructive resilience. This section discusses the implications of the study's results.

Constructive Resilience in Action

Constructive Resilience

The behavioral responses of the Bahá'i participants exemplify the concept of constructive resilience, showcasing a non-adversarial approach to oppression. In the face of denial of access to higher education, Interviewees B, F, and I did not succumb to despair or resort to adversarial resistance tactics like protests or demonstrations. Instead, they demonstrated constructive agency by pursuing education through alternative means, such as the BIHE.

Despite encountering various forms of persecution, none of Bahá'i participants, their families, or friends have engaged in any anti-government activities. They generally refrain from getting entangled in the divisive political processes surrounding them (Karlberg, 2010, p. 234). For

example, Interviewee E's father was executed, his mother was unjustly terminated without pay, and their property was confiscated by the government. Yet, Interviewee E's response reflects the typical Bahá'í approach—gentle, respectful, and non-confrontational. These individual responses highlight that unity, as both the means and the end of social change, remains a fundamental belief within the Bahá'í community, even in the face of violent oppression (Karlberg, 2010, p. 231).

This distinguishes the constructive resilience adopted by the Bahá'í community from many other forms of nonviolent resistance, which can be effective but often disrupts social order. A notable example is the Yellow Vest Movement in France that began in November 2018. In contrast, the constructive resilience approach prioritizes constructive transformation and personal as well as collective resilience, rather than strategies that aim to dismantle the existing social system and social order. Participant H's father exemplifies resilience and perseverance. Faced with the threat to lose his eyesight due to his inability to leave Iran, he defiantly expressed his unwavering commitment to his faith, even at the cost of personal sacrifice. This steadfastness underscores the resilience inherent in the Bahá'í community.

Participant E's family has also taken a constructive approach in dealing with oppression. They have reached out to foreign governments and media, presenting a case to highlight the innocence of the Bahá'ís. In addition, Participant E's mother has authored a book detailing their experiences, effectively becoming agents for raising awareness in the outside world (Participant E).

The experiences shared by the participants in this study, coupled with the growing recognition and respect the Baha'í community is receiving internally and externally (Landinfo, 2017), suggest that the constructive resilience approach can serve as a viable conflict management framework for minorities facing persecution under authoritarian and oppressing regimes.

Sense-Making

An important aspect examined in this study is how Bahá'í participants make sense of their experiences of oppression and their chosen approach to respond to it. Analysis of the interview transcripts reveals that Bahá'í participants find meaning and purpose in their persecution through the perceived positive attitudes from the public, particularly in stark contrast to the negative treatment by the government. Participants from the study have all observed a shift in public attitudes since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. According to Participant C, during the pro-Western Shah period, the government was relatively more accepting of Bahá'ís, whereas the general public held negative views. However, after the revolution, there has been a notable change in public attitudes. Some participants have even received support from non-Bahá'í communities, which had eased the burden of oppression. For instance, Interviewee D shared how his daughter was able to retain her job due to the assistance of her non-Bahá'í colleagues, despite the potential risk to their own employment.

This perceived support from the public stands in sharp contrast to the oppressive actions of the government towards the Bahá'ís. When discussing their experiences of persecution, participants mentioned various negative portrayals constructed by the government. Bahá'ís have been accused of "being in connection, for example, with Israel, being involved with espionage" (Interviewee A), "unclean" (Interviewee F), and "have done bad things" (Interviewee G). Scholars suggest that these negative portrayals are part of the government's efforts to shape public perception and garner support or at least indifference towards actions taken against the Bahá'ís. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that "most Iranians harbor no animosity toward the Bahá'ís, and the teachings of

Islam explicitly promote religious tolerance" (Karlberg, 2010, p. 223). However, these negative portrayals initially influenced public opinion, as participant G quoted his Muslim friend saying, "... we thought these Bahá'is were people who had done bad things, so they are getting what they deserve."

This perception of the authorities as the perpetrators of oppression, while the general public displays friendliness and support towards the Bahá'is, has been corroborated by other sources. For example, in 2009, an open letter of apology entitled "We Are Ashamed" was drafted and signed by a group of Iranian academics, writers, artists, journalists and activists worldwide, addressed to the Bahá'i community. This gesture illustrates the increasing support that Bahá'is receive from individuals outside their faith. Landinfo's (2017) interviews with Bahá'is and non-Bahá'is in Iran further revealed that many Iranians hold the Bahá'i community with high regards and have found ways to bypass official instructions of non-engagement with Bahá'is. For example, one interviewee in Landinfo's study, a business owner from Tehran, received an order to dismiss all Bahá'i employees; however, he continued to utilize the services of a Bahá'i employee on a freelance basis.

Participants in the study in the study believed that the positive attitudinal change towards the Bahá'i community is attributed to their conduct in the face of persecution. They emphasized that their response approach has facilitated changes in the general public's perception of Bahá'is. Interviewee G, for example, highlighted the significance of the non-violent approach, stating:

The Iranian people as a whole, their view of the Bahá'is changed after having seen the response of the Bahá'is to everything that have been used against them over the years and how they responded to this. [They are] The only group in Iran that did not take arms and fight the government or anything like that. They just, in a peaceful way, even though these injustices were being done. They tried as much as possible to address these with whoever would listen, within the government or not, and as a result, the Iranian people have come to recognize the Bahá'is were not what the mullahs had depicted; but, they are honest people who do what they say and practice what they preach, and they are the lovers of Iran, and they do whatever they can for the survival of their own community but also for Iran.

Karlberg (2010) believed that the exemplary conduct of Iranian Bahá'is has mitigated the negative effects of the government's campaign against them. Positive interactions between non-Bahá'is and Bahá'is have led to a realization that the government's accusations of Bahá'is being bad people, "traitors," "dirty," and "dishonest" were false. Interviewee C and Interviewee F commented on the integrity of Bahá'is as a facilitator of the attitude change. Interviewee E mentioned that in business relationships, honesty is highly valued, and people prefer working with Bahá'is because they are trusted not to deceive them. Interviewee F also said, "Through the years, the public has come in contact, and seen Bahá'is are honest, trustworthy, kind and compassionate in action, not just words." Interviewee H even believed that the general public would do exactly the opposite when the Supreme Leader ordered them avoid any association or dealings with Bahá'is because people have realized through their interactions that Bahá'is are "innocent people, that their only crime is being honest, being truthful, having the virtues that other people in the society don't have..."

These findings suggest that when a discrepancy exists between government media portrayal and interpersonal contact, people tend to rely on their personal experiences. This finding aligns

with the Contact Hypothesis, which argues that the attributes of a disliked group member must disconfirm prevailing stereotyped beliefs for positive changes to occur (Cook, 1978; Rothbart & John, 1985). The new information about Bahá'is derived from interpersonal interactions challenges pre-existing stereotypes, leading to a growing divergence of attitudes between the Iranian government and the public.

However, it is important to note that the majority of the participants did not have first-hand experience interacting with the general public or observing changes in the public's attitudes toward Bahá'is. Only three participants had returned to Iran since escaping. Nonetheless, all participants expressed enthusiasm about the change in public attitudes in Iran. This finding suggests that Bahá'is find purpose in their suffering and the way they respond to oppression. When they experience positive attitudes from the public or hear others discuss the changes in public attitudes, they are more likely to attribute these changes to their individual and collective response to oppression.

These findings hold implications for studying the constructive resilience approach to oppression. When Bahá'i community members perceive a shift in attitudes from the non-Bahá'i Islamic majority in their favor, it empowers them. This sense-making process becomes significant for Bahá'is going through or have gone through persecution, as they may come to believe that their suffering serves a higher purpose.

The Role of Social Identity

The Dominant Identity and Discrimination

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1974; 1978; Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979) offers insights into the existence and perpetuation of conflict within Iran, particularly between groups divided by religious and, to some extent, cultural boundaries. According to SIT, individuals strive to align themselves with their in-group, deriving a sense of belonging, pride, and self-esteem from it. This alignment involves emphasizing qualities, traits, behaviors, or beliefs that differentiate their in-group from the outgroup. An in-group refers to a social category or group to which individuals strongly identify, while an outgroup represents a social category or group to which they do not identify.

Religion serves as a basis for social categorization, resulting in the formation of religious in-groups and outgroups (Rocca & Brewer, 2002). Flunger & Ziebertz (2010) argue that religious affiliation interacts with status differentials in influencing outgroup prejudice. Members of high-status religious majority group members often harbor negative attitudes towards low-status religious minority outgroups. In the case of Iran, the majority Muslim group perceives the Bahá'is as a low-status religious minority. The Iranian government has actively exploited religion as a divisive factor, subjecting the Baha'is to persecution not only through the denial of basic human rights but also by constructing negative portrayals of this outgroup (e.g., associating them with espionage or labeling them as unclean).

Moreover, religion can exacerbate power imbalance between majority and minority groups. Agbibo (2015) asserts that religions possess an absolutist nature, promoting the idea of "us" as possessors of "precise and complete understanding of truth" (p. 417), and "them" as non-believers depicted as "infidels," "sinners" and "heretics" (Agbibo, 2015, p. 417). These categorizations provide justifications for the persecution of outgroup members. Conflicts between groups arise

not only due to resource competition but also from a struggle for the legitimacy of identities (Winstok, 2010). In the case of the persecution of Bahá'is in Iran, it reflects the dominant Islamic group's attempt to delegitimize the Bahá'is' religious identity, made possible by the absolute power and control wielded by the Iranian government.

The Bahá'i Identity and Unity

As the most persecuted religious minority in Iran, Bahá'is may experience a clash between their Bahá'i and Iranian identities. However, most participants in this study did not perceive a conflict between these identities. Two interviewees (D and I) expressed pride in their dual identity, citing the fact that Baha'u'llah originated from Iran or that the Bahá'i religion has its roots in Iran.

Nonetheless, nearly all participants explicitly stated that their Bahá'i identity holds greater salience for them compared to their Iranian identity. They consider themselves Baha'is first and Iranians second. Participant E' statement encapsulates this sentiment:

Whether my roots from Iran or not, is not really relevant. What has happened, the situation in Iran has probably strengthened my belief even more, how strong the Bahá'is in Iran are and how faithful they are, and how they have managed to withstand all this injustice, and able to help the growth of the faith elsewhere, because at the end, the world is going to look at the situation and say that despite all the pressures, this community has remained faithful and they have stayed unified there.

Furthermore, Baha'i participants do not view their Baha'i identity as a divisive factor. According to Interviewee H, Bahá'i culture brings people together rather than dividing them. She explains that the goal of Bahá'i teachings is to "unify the whole of humanity," whereas this is not the primary objective of Iranian culture. The Bahá'is prioritize unity among humanity rather than the social categories that create division. Baha'u'llah, as quoted by Cole (2005), emphasized that "blessedness does not lie in loving one's own nation, but rather in loving the whole world" (p. 132). Abdu'l-Baha, the appointed interpreter of Baha'u'llah teachings, urged Bahá'is to "cleanse ye your eyes, so that ye behold no man as different from yourselves. See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness." By focusing on unity and minimizing "otherness," Bahá'i participants transcend their national and ethnic identities, moving beyond the dichotomy of "good us" versus "bad them." This approach facilitates the development of *constructive resilience* in the face of oppression. Participant I expressed, "As a Baha'i, you love Iran so much." This love for Iran prevents Iranian Baha'is from engaging in destructive behaviors towards their country and encourages them to adopt alternative and constructive approaches, such as youth education and empowerment of Iranian women.

Although the Bahá'i identity distinguishes Bahá'is from non-Bahá'is, thus potentially being divisive, the emphasis on unity within the Bahá'i faith diminishes this divide. This notion permeates every aspect of Bahá'i life. As Bahá'u'lláh suggests, "if religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division it would be better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act" (Esslemont, 1980, p. 286).

This finding aligns with previous research indicating that for Bahá'i refugees/immigrants, their Bahá'i identity takes precedence over their Iranian identity (e.g., Williams, 2009). Despite

experience discrimination, persecution, and forced exile to the U.S., participants in this study did not perceive a conflict between their Bahá'í and Iranian identities.

Conclusion

The persecution of Bahá'is in Iran holds significance in the realms of human rights, foreign policy, and peace and conflict studies. This study examined the experiences of Iranian Bahá'is in exile, a unique group that has directly encountered various forms of persecutions. Their perspectives offer valuable insights into understanding the nature of this persecution and its aftermath. In addition to exploring their firsthand experiences, the study focuses on the strategies employed by Bahá'is in response to oppression.

The findings reveal that Bahá'is have adopted a non-violent and non-resistant approach known as constructive resilience in dealing with oppression, both within and outside Iran. This approach discourages divisive and adversarial forms of social or political action (Karlberg, 2010). Constructive resilience serves as a framework through which participants navigate their experiences, providing them with a sense of purpose and unity in their response to oppression. It enables them to make sense of their own suffering and understand the collective behavior of their fellow Bahá'is.

Additionally, the study highlights the participants' perception of a shift in public attitudes towards Bahá'is in Iran since the 1979 Iranian revolution. They believe that the general public has transitioned from hostility to support and understanding. This perceived change in attitudes contrasts with the negative treatment inflicted upon them by the government. The participants' interpretation of this shift in public perception contributes to their sense-making process, diminishing the impact of their suffering and providing a meaningful context for their chosen approach to oppression.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the experiences and responses of Iranian Bahá'is in exile. It highlights the significance of constructive resilience as a non-violent strategy and emphasizes the participants' perception of changing attitudes within Iranian society. Understanding the complexities of the persecution faced by Bahá'is and their chosen methods of response can contribute to broader discussions on human rights, peacebuilding, and the pursuit of religious freedom.

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