TWO EYES SEEING: TRANSFORMING THE NARRATIVE OF A PERSIAN ART THERAPY STUDENT THROUGH ART, LANGUAGE, AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

HANIEH TOHIDI

A Research Paper
in
The Department
of
Creative Arts Therapies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

JUNE 22 2020

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This research paper prepared

By: Hanieh Tohidi

Entitled: **Two Eyes Seeing:** Transforming the Narrative of a Persian Art Therapy Student Through Art, Language, and Traditional Knowledge

and submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Creative Arts Therapies; Art Therapy Option)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality as approved by the research advisor.

Research Advisor:

Janis Timm-Bottos PhD, ATR-BC, ATPQ, PT

Department Chair:

Guylaine Vaillancourt PhD, MTA

June, 2020

ABSTRACT

TWO EYES SEEING: TRANSFORMING THE NARRATIVE OF A PERSIAN ART THERAPY STUDENT THROUGH ART, LANGUAGE, AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

HANIEH TOHIDI

This art-based research paper seeks to report on the researcher's responses to the following questions: How can a culturally sensitive art therapy process provide a space for an Iranian art therapy student to connect with her inherited cultural wisdom and use the knowledge of her ancestors to rewrite her own narrative? And how might this process contribute to a positive configuration of hybrid and diasporic identity in relation to different categories of ethnic, social, and professional identities? This research addresses the necessity of incorporating culturally sensitive materials in the healing process of ethnic minorities; in this case, literature and poetry for Iranian diaspora who carry a collective trauma and facing ethnic and identity crises after displacement in Canada. The writer's personal creative exploration of ethnic identity when her social identity was weakened led to the creation of a diasporic and hybrid identity. The findings of this research could be of interest to therapists and mental health professionals working with Iranian diaspora who would like to increase their awareness of the acculturation process and the importance of building cultural understanding regarding the social context and associated identity crisis among Iranian diaspora from collective trauma and learn how traditional knowledge of healing could help recreate a new narrative.

Keywords: Iranian diaspora, Collective trauma, Narrative therapy, Acculturation, Arts-based research, Art therapy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by acknowledging the land on which I settled and had the privilege to study in is the traditional and unceded territory of the Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk); a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst nations. May I serve my duties to the mother-earth and those she held in her arms in peace for centuries. Shall I work hard to bring peace back to our mother-earth as long as I have force in my body and soul.

Hereby, I would like to thank those who have contributed to remembering my *team of life* (Denborough, 2014):

To this universe and the greater power that connect all beings together for reminding me of the knowledge of my ancestors to my knowing heart, in a time that I needed it the most. And for surrounding me with people that offer their wisdom and share their enlightenment with me.

To my mother for being so selfless, protecting me with each cell of her body and supporting me with all the strength in her soul. I could not be standing on this land and pursuing my dream without her. No words can describe the depth of my gratitude for this opportunity and no words can express the depth of my pain and guilt for leaving her behind. All I wish is to make her proud by becoming the best version of myself;

To my grandmother who taught me that wisdom is not between papers and articles. She is the living example that not knowing how to read or write is not a burden; that when the soul is able to be patient, observe and reflect can achieve the greatest. She taught me that I can fly higher than an eagle even without feathers;

To my fiancé, Stephane, who did not give up on me in my darkest times, who stood by me when I was most vulnerable and who accepted me with all my shades and colors, offering me continued and unfailing love every day and teaching me acceptance of what I cannot change and letting go of what is not worthy;

To Jessica, Maria, Bonnie, Yehudit, Linda, Marco, Dale and Harry who were more than teachers of the book, went beyond defined contracts and modeled being caring rare humans before being a teacher;

To Janis, for encouraging me to find my voice and providing the opportunity through this research. I would never dare to write these words on paper and make them eternal without her believing in me;

To my clients who taught me strength, courage, and resilience in their most vulnerable states;

And finally, to my people…to those who fought for Iran's freedom for decades, for their beliefs in better world, a peaceful world, even though they had the chance to leave, they stayed and worked hard to build a better country. To those who lost their lives, to those who remember and suffer for those losses, to those who witnessed those traumas; we have survived, and we will survive.

A bit of patience, the sunrise is close اندکی صبر، سحر نزدیک است

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Real Human solidarity maybe rare, but it is natural and human to forget our self-interest in love, to cultivate enduring relationship over worldly interest and accomplishments, to build something in spiritual dimension, something real and eternal.

-- Helminski,1999, p.260

Chapter 1: Introduction

The journey of finding my identity as an immigrant and studying as a student in a white, and individualist dominant graduate-level educational setting, always brought me the feeling of being lost, as if I'm from Mars on earth. Iranian scholar Aidani (2012), recognizes that Iranians share a sense that they have lost their centre. He suggests that Iranians come from a distinct social, cultural, and political setting and face very different mechanisms and structures in their host countries. In addition, the way people experience emotions is closely related to their language and culture (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2014).

According to Berry (1997), evidence suggests that ethnocultural group members generally prefer the acculturation strategy of integration, especially when displaced in societies with assimilation policies at its core. Diaspora from collectivist cultures who find more fulfillment and happiness in adapting to social norms and fulfilling relational obligations can have a negative experience if they fail to adapt to new environmental demands properly (Uchida & Oishi, 2016). Achieving integration increases positive adaptations among diaspora and allows them to make a more effective and positive contribution to their new society (Berry, 1997, 2018).

By reaching out to Iranians using domestic health services, Dastjerdi's (2012) identifies three main obstacles for Iranian immigrants in Greater Toronto Area: The "language barrier and the lack of knowledge of Canadian health care services/systems; lack of trust in Canadian health care services due to financial limitations and fear of disclosure; and somatization and needs for psychological supports" (p. 8). Counselors tend to see the problems as the client's internal character flaw and fail to pay attention to situational factors and the multicultural perspectives that the impact of language has on communication (Morris, 2011).

Iranian Diaspora is referring to those who have left their homeland and yet are impacted by its context no matter where they live across the globe, legally or not (Mobasher, 2018). The experience of the Iranian diaspora results from the aftermath of global political forces and diplomatic tensions forming ethnic identity as a globally dispersed population and their response to the prejudice and discrimination by (re)constructing diasporic groups (Mobasher, 2018). Experts in migrant mental health agree that paying attention to various contextual and practical

issues that influence illness behaviour, patient–physician communication and intercultural understanding can improve the efficacy of treatment (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Berry (1997) asks researchers, policy makers, counselors and others involved in acculturation individuals, to consider how findings about immigrant integration, while not generalizable to all diaspora, could use this knowledge for the society's benefit. Based on my own lived experiences as an Iranian diaspora and a Canadian citizen, I can validate Berry's suggestion to be very true. My urge to integrate, but not assimilate, into the Canadian society as an art therapist receiving a white-dominant, Western education has brought me to the question: How can a culturally sensitive art therapy process provide a space for an Iranian art therapy student to connect to her inherited cultural wisdom and use the knowledge of her ancestors to rewrite her own narrative? And how might this process contribute to a positive configuration of hybrid and diasporic identity in relation with different categories of ethnic, social, and professional identities?

The answer to these questions is considerably impacted by the narrative of cultural trauma among Iranian diaspora in Canada and the impact this gradual process has on their mental health state (Saul, 2013). This collective trauma can be seen as a hidden or silent trauma, increasing structural and individual violence and division among the community (Saul, 2013). The fact that collective events and their consequences are more significant among collective cultures can increase the impact of collective trauma among diaspora displaced in an individualistic context (Somasundaram, 2014). Collective trauma also provides meaning to the group which passes through generations in the form of traditions, teachings, and narratives to increase the chance of survival (Hirschberger, 2018).

These narratives can still be changed and reconfigured into new meanings in life for victims of the trauma. In general, many migrants have reported use of multiple sources of help from traditional forms of healing to biomedical practitioners (Kirmayer et al., 2011). For instance, community coping strategies such as traditional and religious beliefs have shown to lower the impact and consequences of trauma (Somasundaram, 2014). Regardless of the severity of trauma, retelling cultural traditions, cultural symbols, and family histories can help us to narrate the story of our lives (Denborough, 2014; Somasundaram, 2014). Stories, proverbs, sayings, songs, poems, myths and fairy tales, and all other forms of art in general can be

reforming our narratives in their unique way (Shea et al., 2019; Denborough, 2014; Mobasher, 2006; Silverman, 2004). Hence, art therapy is an ideal helping tool because it creates a space for these narratives to unfold through symbolic forms.

While this research is intended to illustrate the cultural narrative of the Iranian diaspora as a marginalized group in Canada, I will go through the concerns regarding the diaspora's mental health in general, and its relation to the diaspora's acculturation strategy. I will then discuss the phenomena of collective trauma and how changing the narrative of trauma can contribute to healing, overcoming the crisis of identity and constructing new meanings. Finally, I will focus on the collective trauma of the Iranian diaspora. My personal art-based exploration described at the end of this research is an attempt to address possible ways to navigate and explore my diasporic ethnic identity while social identity is in crisis. I will conclude by discussing how my personal art making process and reflection as a member of the Iranian diasporic community can shed light on the main question of this research. I hope my narrative's exploration process and its outcome can help other members of Iranian Canadian community and health professionals serving this vulnerable community in the future.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Diaspora's Mental Health

Diaspora signifies a collectively self-identified ethnic group, distributed across the globe, who are impacted by the conditions of their place of settlement and their homeland's context (Mobasher, 2018). Regardless of their residential status, integration in the new culture while experiencing positive mental health status plays an important role in success for the diaspora. Studies show that, in general, diaspora experience a boost of hope in the stage of entering a new place but gradually the number of mental health struggles rise to the normative curve of the general population born in the country (Dastjerdi et al., 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Shishegar, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo & Davidson, 2015). These statistics consider that despite experiencing comparable levels of distress, diaspora usually do not seek out or receive referrals to mental health services mainly because of language difficulties, financial limitations, mistrust in the health care system, fear of disclosure and stigmatization (Dastjerdi, 2012; Dastjerdi et al., 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2011).

A study on Iranian immigrants in Canada has led to conceptualizing the basic social process (BSP) of becoming self-sufficient in accessing health services (Table 1). This transitional process has five stages of becoming a stranger; feeling helpless; navigating/seeking information; employing strategies; and becoming integrated and self-sufficient (Dastjerdi et al., 2012). This information may support health care professionals in assisting their Iranian diaspora to become more self-sufficient in the Canadian system.

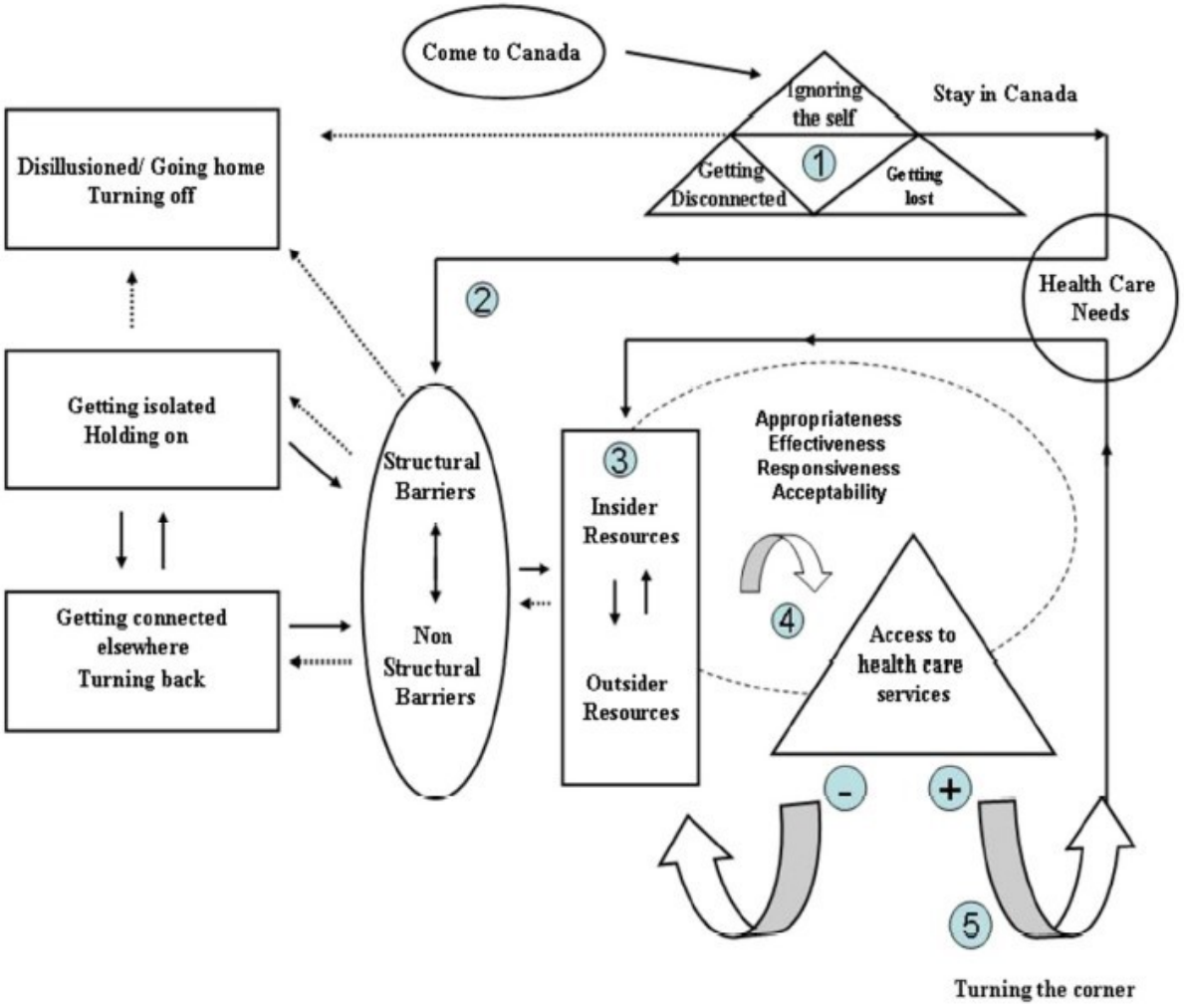

Table 1. The Iranian immigrants' access model to the Canadian health-care services (Dastjerdi et al. 2012, p. 4).

The process of transitioning to a new culture needs to be investigated in the context of the phases of (a) premigration, (b) migration and (c) post-migration since several factors in each phase can have a great impact on the mental health of the diaspora (Kirmayer et al., 2011; Shishegar et al., 2015). Kirmayer et al. (2011) also add that migration process includes three

main transitions, namely: "changes in personal ties and the reconstruction of social networks, the move from one socio-economic system to another, and the shift from one cultural system to another" (p. E961). Each of these changes alter ethnic and social identity since identity can be negotiated and modified based on its context.

Premigration	Migration	Postmigration
Adult		
Economic, educational and occupational status in country of origin	Trajectory (route, duration)	Uncertainty about immigration or refugee status
Disruption of social support, roles and network	Exposure to harsh living conditions (e.g., refugee camps)	Unemployment or underemployment
Trauma (type, severity, perceived level of threat, number of episodes)	Exposure to violence	Loss of social status
Political involvement (commitment to a cause)	Disruption of family and community networks	Loss of family and community social supports
	Uncertainty about outcome of migration	Concern about family members left behind and possibility for reunification
		Difficulties in language learning, acculturation and adaptation (e.g., change in sex roles)

Table 2. Factors related to migration that affect mental health (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. E961).

As shown in Table 2, important premigration influential factors on mental health of the diaspora involve the experience of trauma, violence and PTSD, roles in the family, educational and work status. However, as Erikson (1972) suggests, we need to consider that collective trauma does not manifest through typical known psychological symptoms of individual trauma but still have a great impact on the person experiencing it (Saul, 2013). Kirmayer et al. (2011) also add the length of time spent to be admitted to the country and policies and practices that govern the individual's admission to Canada can act as a premigration stress. Studies in Canada have shown the negative impact of exposure to racism and discrimination on mental health of immigrants and refuges (Berry, 2018; Dastjerdi et al., 2012; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Moghissi, 1999).

In addition, loss of social status, uncertainty about family members left behind, acculturation, and adapting to the new system and culture are some of the many factors altering the mental health of the diaspora (Kirmayer et al., 2011). The next section will discuss acculturation and collective trauma as an important influence on mental health of the diaspora.

This is followed by, how changing the narrative can be a useful tool to heal from the hidden trauma.

Acculturation

Currently, it is a norm for people from all around the world to settle in a place that they do not originate from. Consequently, many societies gradually move towards a plural culture which is characterized by shaping cultural groups that are usually unequal in numerical, political or economic power that can be named as dominant and non-dominant cultural groups (Berry, 1997).

The classical definition of acculturation by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936) is shaped around the phenomena happening during the time that diverse cultural groups of individuals directly get in touch with each other and subsequently either one or both groups experience changes in the original culture patterns (Berry, 1997). The meaning of acculturation has grown broader since this initial definition, covering multifaceted layers of not only two but several cultures being exposed to each other either through personal first-hand experience or secondary experience through exposure to mass media (Berry, 2018).

Berry (1997) introduces four categories of integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization to explain different strategies to acculturation (Table 3). These categories and the behaviours of each are formed around attitudes and preferences towards the dimensions of (a) preserving inherited culture and (b) contact with other cultural groups (Berry, 2018). He believes that in all plural societies, cultural groups and their individual members, regardless of belonging to the dominant and non-dominant situations, must deal with the issue of *how* to acculturate. In other words, acculturation strategies are reciprocal and mutual (Berry, 2001; 2018).

Berry (1997) notices that the dominant groups refuse to find their way to acculturate and in return they tend to use accountability pressure by enforcing certain expectations or constraining the non-dominant groups or individuals' choice of acculturation strategies (Berry, 1997;2001; Iwamasa, Regan, Subica & Yamada, 2013). He symbolizes this pressure from the dominant culture as a “Pressure Cooker,” forcing the less powerful group to be solely responsible for meeting the cultural demands of the dominant group and distancing from the proper acculturation; or the “Melting Pot” (Berry, 2001;1997) which denotes a mixing and blending together. For example, if separation is forced upon a group and is required from

dominant society, segregation replaces the selective acculturation option. Similarly, imposed marginalization on minorities by the dominant group is considered as the exclusion (Berry, 2001;1997).

	SUBORDINATE GROUP		DOMINANT GROUP		
	Extent to which cultural identity is maintained and valued				
Extent to which relations with other groups are valued and maintained	Integration	Assimilation	Multiculturalism	Melting pot	+
	Separation	Marginalisation	Segregation	Exclusion	−
	+	−	+	−	

Table 3. Berry's acculturation model. (Berry, 2001, p. 618).

The aftermath of this theory is the Acculturation Complexity Model (ACM; Tadmor & Tetlock, 2006) adding the component of cognitive dissonance as a predictor factor of acculturation. This model suggesting that if an individual is accountable to only one cultural audience, they can simply choose an acculturation strategy (Iwamasa et al., 2013). In contrast, the individual who is accountable to two cultural audiences and is forced to negotiate between two opposing sets of cultural norms, practices, identities, and values, becomes confused and consequently experiences difficulty in choosing an acculturation strategy (Iwamasa et al., 2013).

Adaptation is defined as the individual or group's response to the environmental demands, both in a negative and positive way: "integration is usually the most successful; marginalization is the least; and assimilation and separation strategies are intermediate" (Berry, 1997, p. 27). Integration, the most preferred strategy by ethnocultural group members, can only be a feasible option for non-dominant group if chosen voluntarily and freely when surrounded by an inclusive dominant group that are open to diversity (Berry, 1997). Contrary, marginalization is almost never a voluntary choice. Integration and separation strategies are perceived as "collective'' phenomena, whereas assimilation is considered to have an "individualistic" nature

(Moghaddam, 1988 as cited in Berry, 1997; Lalonde & Cameron, 1993). Evidence suggests a positive correlation between the acculturation strategies and adaptation (Berry, 1997).

Berry (1997) recommends that the acculturation process has three levels of difficulty, low, medium, and high range, that are directly linked to acculturative stress. The life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation are originally intercultural problems which are the source of acculturative stress or culture shock. Lower levels of acculturative stress provide a space for both cultural shedding where groups tend to let go of some parts of their inherited culture, and cultural learning, where observing parts of the new culture may lead to assimilation (Berry, 1997). When an individual fail to successfully work with an acculturation problem, stress levels and negative effects elevate, which can lead to the experience of marginalization or separation.

In particular, people from collectivist cultures holding the value of adapting to social norms and fulfilling relational obligations may try to avoid circumstances that would cause exclusion and ostracizing of the self (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2014; Uchida & Oishi, 2016). But if the acculturative stress reaches an overwhelming level, it may lead to personal crises and mental health issues like anxiety and depression which can become chronic and pathologic if not addressed (Berry, 1997). Oberg's (1979) U-curve culture shock model for migrants' adaptation process which is divided into (a) honeymoon stage, (b) hostility stage, (c) recovery stage, and (d) final stage, is a useful tool to evaluate the individual's emotional responses to acculturation and navigate their level in their adaptation process. The hostility stage and recovery stage are the bottom of the U curve and have the greatest negative impact on the individual's emotions (Jamarani, 2012).

The psychological acculturation phenomena depend on several factors, pre-existing or recurring (Table 4). The context and time period in which the acculturation is happening can offer different variables and hence result different circumstances (Jamarani, 2012; Berry, 1997).

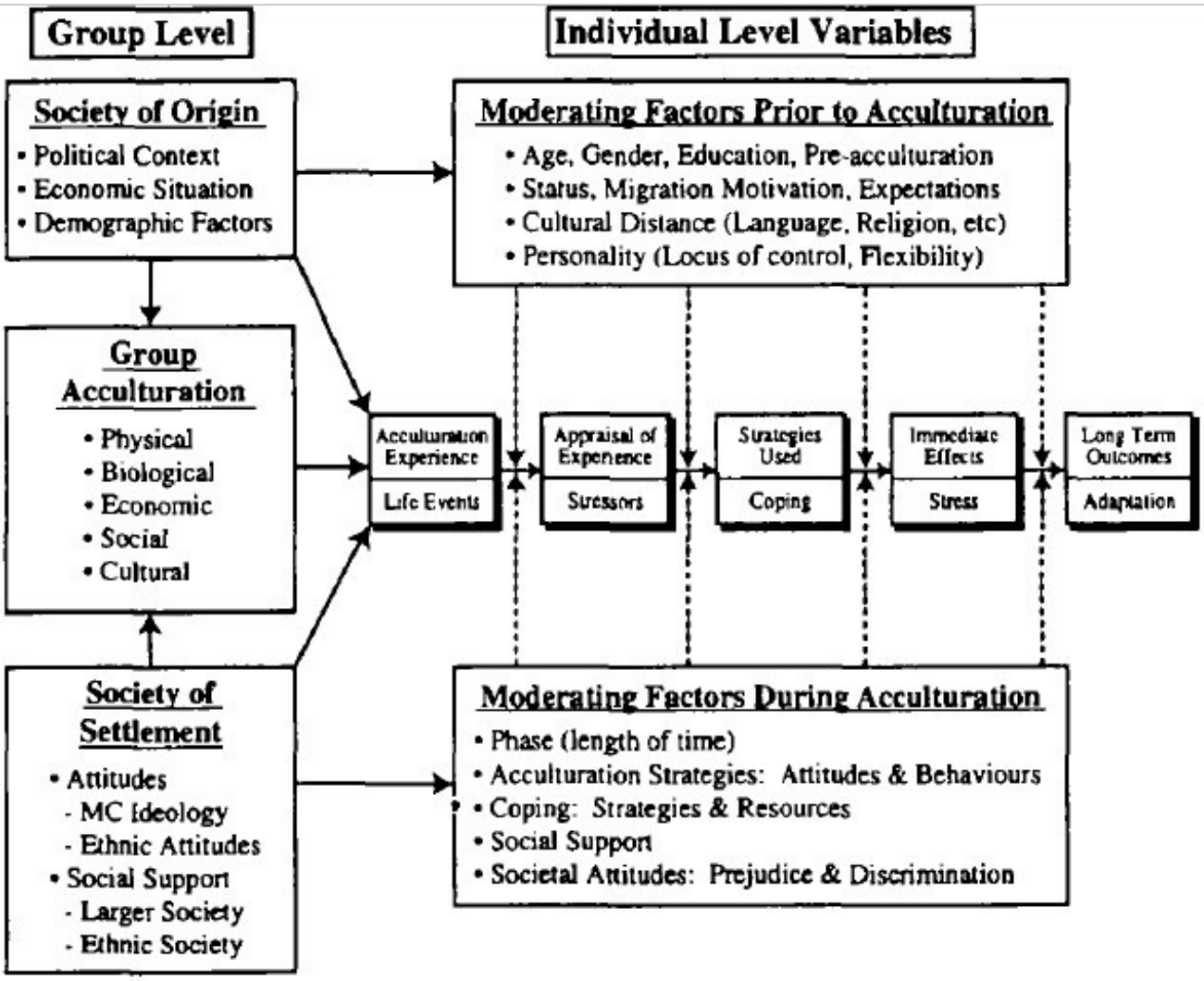

Table 4. A framework for acculturation research (Berry, 1997, p. 15)

Hence, it is important to look at the acculturation phenomena experienced by each ethnic group within specific geographical and historical situations separately to have a clear and precise vision of the process. Jamarani (2012) has enhanced Berry's (1997) model of acculturation in regard of the diaspora's linguistic ability (Table 5). For example, age, gender (specifically being female), and education are some of prior existing factors that can impact the acculturation process (Berry, 1997). The psychological acculturation, and consequently, adaptation processes are also influenced by numerous group-level factors in the society of origin and in the new society.

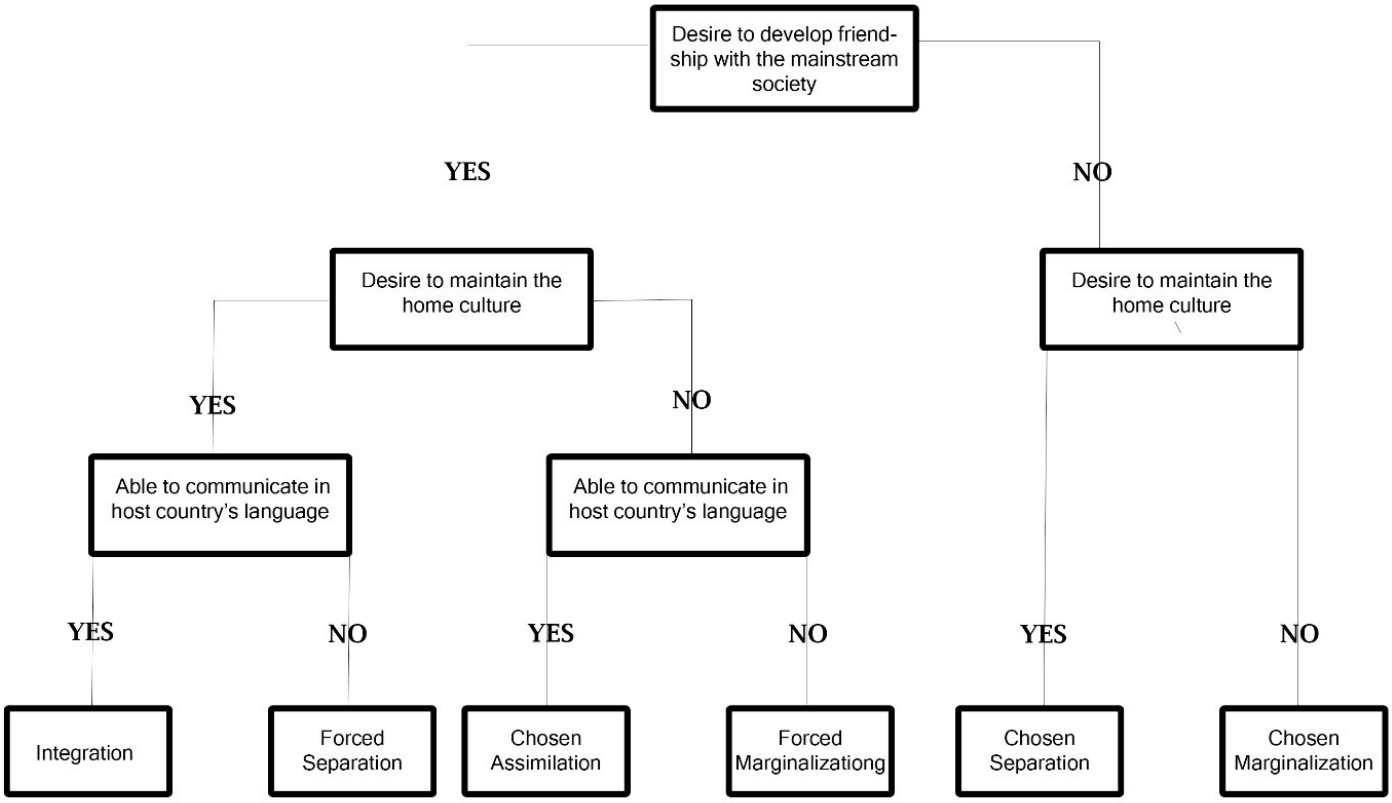

Table 5. Socio-linguistically Enhanced Acculturation Model (SLEAM) (Jamarani, 2012, p. 179).

Cultural distance, the difference between two cultures, is one of the important predictors of positive adaptation (Berry, 1997). The more cultural distance requires greater cultural shedding and cultural learning, which can induce deeper cultural conflicts inside a group or within two groups. "People live in multilayered cultures nested within each other, from 'national culture' as a larger macro-level culture, to 'state/prefecture' as mid-level culture, to 'neighborhood/ community' or 'organization' and 'family' as a micro-level culture" (Uchida & Oishi, 2016, p. 134).

The way people experience emotions is another important component of cultural distance (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2014). Language, learning, beliefs, values, and historical memory influence different parts of the brain and consequently, emotional understanding and expression may vary between cultures. For example, how people remember and reason accidental eye-witnessed events or how they spatialize time differs across languages and their linguistic patterns (Fausey & Boroditsky, 2011; Fuhrman et al., 2011;). Even among multilingual individuals, the chosen

language to communicate shapes their way of understanding and expressing (Athanasopoulos et al., 2015).

Many studies have shown a significant difference in the values of people from individualist and collectivist cultures, creating further distance between cultures in Western and Eastern societies (Jamarani, 2012; Kim, 2007; Morris, 2011). However, as Triandis and Gelfand (1998) suggest, both cultures have a horizontal and vertical structure that enables individuals to stand on a spectrum of individual-collective values (Jamarani, 2012). For instance, independence, directness, competition and change are found to be shared values among Americans (Kim, 2007). Singapore, meanwhile, has shown to be more rooted in values such as interdependence, indirect expression, respecting elders, harmony, and tradition (Kim, 2007). Consequently, the nature of seeking happiness is different between cultures. Hence, emotions such as happiness needs to be described in all layers.

Generally, in Western cultures, self-esteem and self-efficacy has shown to have a strong correlation with happiness (Uchida & Oishi, 2016). The happiness is also seen as personally achievable and working towards it contributes to mental health on a personal level (Uchida & Oishi, 2016). On a macro level, pro-social behaviours such as donations have shown both positive and negative impact since receiving social support increases the feeling of dependence and reduces self-esteem (Uchida & Oishi, 2016). In comparison, studies show that collectivists mostly define their level of happiness as a lifetime measure considering all ups and downs in life (Uchida & Oishi, 2016). Studies with eastern Asian individuals show that collectivists are yielding towards *interdependent happiness* that can be found within shared relationships rather an individual journey (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2014; Uchida & Oishi, 2016). Interestingly, the philosophy of life in the Eastern cultures such as belief in unpredictability of fate can turn happiness to a temporary state (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2014; Uchida & Oishi, 2016).

Both globalization or acculturation can influence personal values and cultural values (Kim, 2007; Uchida & Oishi, 2016). They can therefore challenge individuals in finding new measurements of happiness that are functional on both an individual and collective level (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2014; Uchida & Oishi, 2016). The following section explains how culture and its values can be greatly impacted by historical memory after experiencing a collective trauma.

Collective Trauma

Erikson (1972) draws a clear line between individual and collective trauma and specifies that the latter damages what tie people together and impairs the dominant sense of communality (as cited in Saul, 2013). As he suggests, collective trauma has a more gradual impact and does not always resemble the typical scientific definition of trauma and its sudden impact. Individual trauma, on the other hand, has more internal and immediate impact on the person experiencing it (Saul, 2013). In addition, the individual symptoms of trauma such as shock, denial, confusion, withdrawing from others, and others, in this type of trauma may be missing but the relations still are impacted by the trauma (Saul, 2013; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). In other words, as Erikson (1972) suggests, those suffering from collective trauma still hold a meaning for "I" and "you" but "we" as linked cells in a larger community body diminishes (Saul, 2013). Consequently, the community as an important support system and a crucial part of self gradually fades away (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Hence, it may be fair to refer to the collective trauma as a 'hidden' or 'silent' trauma, leaving an impact on several members of the community.

It is important to remember that the individuals within a community may not be directly impacted by a collective trauma in the same level. For example, in case of COVID-19, not all members of the community are exposed to the loss of a neighbour, friend or family member. Also, an individual's resilience and other protective factors changes how members of the community experience collective trauma. Sometimes, a collective trauma such as political oppression put pressure only on certain groups within a community. There are other aspects of the collective trauma that can differ from the individual trauma. For example, studies on communities after a collective trauma has shown an increase in structural and individual violence, the inability to respond to repeated threats and opportunities, and emerging cycles of social fragmentation among the community members (Fullilove, 2004, as cited in Saul, 2013).

Somasundaram (2014) suggests that the definition of self within collective societies is implanted within the family and community so deeply that the individuals can experience the traumatic event as a group rather than relating to it based on subjective criteria. Hence, the collective events and their consequences are considered more significant among collective cultures compared to the Western individualistic societies (Somasundaram, 2014). This may be read as a positive correlation between collectivism and complex impact of trauma (Saul, 2013).

Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelsner, and Sztompka (2004), however, believe that events cannot be perceived as collective trauma by themselves but in relation to their social impacts. As Mobasher (2006) explains, a traumatic social crisis can only turn to a collective experience when it is apprehended as a cultural crisis or cultural trauma. Cultural trauma "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 1). Sometimes it takes decades for a traumatic event to turn to a cultural trauma (Håkon, 2015).

Hirschberger (2018) explains that a collective traumatic event threatens the feeling of one's existence, their identity, and meanings in life and therefore enforce a psychosocial alteration of individuals, families, communities, and the larger society. Collective trauma on a large scale, especially, can fundamentally change the survivor's perception and understanding of their surrounding world, create feelings of apprehension about their physical and social environment, and establish particular coping styles, emotional sensitivity, and ego functioning for generations (Alexander et al., 2004; Saul, 2013; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). This generational transmission of trauma can occur through epigenetic processes, family dynamics, narratives, songs, drama, language, political ideologies and institutional structures (Somasundaram, 2014).

Somasundaram (2014) mentions that community coping strategies such as traditional and religious beliefs and social support determines the impact and consequences of trauma. Members of the community who have limited access to resources experience an increase in their stress levels that may trap them in a traumatic loss cycle, and increasing their exposure to anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Saul, 2013). These cycles can be interrupted by providing more resources for people such as community support, referrals to health professionals, and psychoeducation.

Since the collective trauma directedly impacts all levels of human relationships, an effective resource includes collective processes of readjustment, adaptation, and increasing resilience of the community (Somasundaram, 2014; Saul, 2013). Those communities developing healthy collective narratives based on solidarity and compassion for each other can work against the social integration after the collective trauma (Somasundaram, 2014). Such narratives help the

society to experience less post-traumatic symptoms compared to other communities experiencing "narratives of abandonment, isolation, disregard of community rituals and social support, and the dislocation of local morals and ethics" (Somasundaram, 2014, p. 49).

Rewriting the Narrative of Trauma

On the one hand, collective trauma may put the collective identity in danger. It can, however, simultaneously have an identity building effect. When the trauma is integrated with one's identity and narrative, it can induce the feeling of shared faith and destiny and consequently, construct a collective narrative that can influence the collective memory (Hirschberger, 2018; Somasundaram, 2014). It can be described as a "process of identity construction that comprises the sense of self-esteem, continuity, distinctiveness, belonging, efficacy, and ultimately a sense of meaning" (Vignoles et al., 2006, as cited in Hirschberger, 2018, p. 2).

Many mental health professionals following Western psychology believe that in order to heal from trauma, the lost narrative of trauma, hidden in the unconscious, needs to be remembered by the individual in one-on-one counselling (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). In reality, this trend does not necessarily meet the needs of people who already have historical knowledge of healing based on their cultural context. Watkins and Shulman (2008) add that "psychological scars and post-traumatic stress from war, violence, terror, genocide, sudden toxic pollution, natural disaster, and resultant displacement and forced migration has led to a need for psychological practices that can repair the bonds among people as well as narrative threads of an individual life history" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 14).

Morris (2011) explains how preference of indirect communication in certain cultures can cause an aversion towards direct counselling. Holding in mind that the end goal for the diaspora is to have a positive acculturation experience, the question then becomes: How does a diaspora whose experience weakened relationship with a bigger community that they identify with could, be assisted by mental health professionals? How these professionals could guide the diaspora to develop their personal identity while remaining connected to a larger collective identity?

Through the trauma process, which occurs between the traumatic event and its cultural construction and representation, the collective trauma becomes engraved on the collective memory of the affected group (Alexander et al., 2004; Mobasher, 2006). The crisis of finding

meaning within the individual self and the self as a group member is a prerequisite of the trauma process, and can continue through future generations who do not hold first-hand experience of the traumatic event, until a new meaning and narratives emerge (Alexander et al., 2004; Håkon, 2015; Hirschberger, 2018; Mobasher, 2006; Saul, 2013; Shea et al. 2019; Somasundaram, 2014).

Aidani (2013) states that "human life needs narrative" (p. 63). We (humans) make sense of ourselves and our world through telling stories which enable us to focus on the meanings they produce for us (Aidani, 2013). The purpose of storytelling is to pass our concepts and defined meanings of things to the world; through telling stories of our beings we connect to the wholeness of human beings in the world and unite with them (Aidani, 2013). This idea is exemplified within communities like the Blackfoot Nation and the First Nations perspective of needs which views storytelling as a self-actualizing action that unites us through the witnessed narrative with the larger community (Blackstock, 2011; Michel, 2014).

Trauma and its process provoke different narrative frameworks such as narratives of disassociation, narratives of messianic transformation, narratives of fatalism, and narratives of participation (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). A person who finds insight to their own narrative framework and engages in a cognitive examination of their framework is able to transform their narrative and consequently their meanings. In other words, the narrative of participation opens the door to new experiences and new meanings, allowing exploration of new narratives with flexibility, curiosity, and creativity to reframe one's story (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The conscious awareness of collective shared elements, in the story of a group, can moderate the larger story (Allen, 2013).

Jungian psychology suggests the term *individuation* for this process. Through this process, one can separate from self-identification with the existing collective social narrative, and yet retain a deep relation with others while focusing on their individual *self* (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). In postmodern psychology, these phenomena are referred to *as nomadic identity*, a state where one is in a deep, heart-driven self-dialogue (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). In this state, the individual is willing to accept the suffering of self and others and find a peaceful and non-judgmental space that allows them to connect to collective consciousness (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). As the result, the person feels more as a whole and yet feel joyful presence of other souls (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Following Jung, Watkins and Shulman (2008) suggest that cultural symbols have a crucial role in constructing identity. Use of narrative language and cultural traditions have great roles to play in the frame of narrative of participation (Mobasher, 2018; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The peoplehood matrix by Robert K. Thomas (1980;1990) may provide a good explanation about this matter. This matrix suggests the four dimensions of (1) language, (2) territory or land, (3) sacred history, and (4) ceremonial cycle to understand the indigenous group identity. These dimensions are woven together and cannot be interpreted individually but they are flexible enough to survive if each one of them is weakened (Stratton & Washburn, 2008). Hence, we can hypothesize that similar to indigenous people, other autochthonous collectives are deeply formed around their language, land, history and traditional cycles. When one dimension is weakened, in the case of the diaspora who suffers from collective trauma, the land, history, and the other two dimensions carry on the presence of the collective identity.

Denborough (2014) suggests that retelling the stories of our lives can happen through different skills tied to cultural traditions or family histories. Forms of art including stories, proverbs, sayings, songs, and poems can reform our narratives in unique ways (Denborough, 2014; Shea et al., 2019). Silverman (2004) has demonstrated how to supersede hardships of people through the myths and fairy tales manifesting in different creative arts modalities under supervision of a therapist as a witness. It is not always possible to elaborate on an experience within linear text made from objective direct words and that is when metaphors, directions, and colours in an image can act as meditation tools (Lawton, 2018). Visual arts created in a specific cultural base can be a grid of socially constructed narratives that reinterpret the normalized identity and together form a new acceptable identity (Leavy, 2015).

The process of resistance and healing from collective trauma of people in Chile and South Africa provide examples of the importance of witnessing (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). When a story is witnessed and acknowledged, it can make a difference in the way storytellers experience themselves (Denborough, 2014). There are two identified types of witnesses: A critical witness which is based on “the person is the problem”; and an acknowledging witness, who provides a respectful flourishing environment for reshaping the narrative of trauma (Denborough, 2014, p. 67).

The narrative of trauma covers two storylines of the person's narrative of the injustice and how they have reacted to the problem (Denborough, 2014). Both of these storylines require an open and non-judgmental reception for the narrative of trauma to evolve. The act of acknowledging these two storylines of a person in the narrative of trauma is what Denborough (2014) refers as 'double listening' which can be compared to the concept *of two eyes seeing* of indigenous people were accepting differences lead to positive changes in society.

Denborough (2014) also argues that the act of witnessing can be achieved in various ways and suggests that the person can choose their audience: an invisible friend, the ancient wisdom, or the ancestors. The storyline can manifest in different forms of creation such as written words, personally made certificates for achievements, stories, poems, myths and fairy tales (Denborough, 2014; Saul, 2013; Silverman, 2004). In this way, the person themselves can become a witness of their stories through two eyes seeing and move towards reshaping their narrative. Consequently, the collective trauma and emotional state will evolve to a cultural trauma which demands both an emotional and a cognitive meaning making process (Håkon, 2015). In addition, reclaiming a cultural context can come through exploring language and the cultural practices that contribute to wellness and are aligned with personal values and lifestyle (Shea et al., 2019). Consequently, forming an ethnic identity has proven to increase resilience in the face of difficult experiences (Shea et al., 2019).

Iranian Diaspora in Canada

In the last forty years the number of Iranian immigrants in Canada has shown a growth rate of 147% from 1996 to 2006, due mostly to traumatic experiences such as revolution, changes in governing values, war, financial instability and lack of resources resulted by sanctions from the United States of America (Dastjerdi, 2012; Safdar, Lay & Struthers, 2003; Shishegar et al., 2015). In 2016, over 225,155 people in Canada reported Farsi as their mother tongue, ranking it as eleventh among immigrant-spoken languages in Canada (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2020).

The results of a study in Germany indicates 28% of Iranian immigrants were suffering from mental disorders associated with acculturation stress. Other studies indicate the seniors, women, and students are the most vulnerable among Iranian diaspora population (Shishegar et al., 2015). More studies are required in Canada to estimate the domestic percentage accurately,

but it is very likely that the results are similar or higher. Since acculturation is reciprocal and mutual, the dominant group has a critical role in providing a positive atmosphere for acculturation of non-dominant group. A non-dominant group feeling that they are being targeted by the dominant society will be discouraged from integrating or assimilate and instead will move towards separation and marginalization (Berry, 2018; 2001; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Moghissi, 1999); and are more at risk for increased acculturation stress, loss of interest in inherited culture, serious conflict, and radicalization.

To avoid such conflict, societies required to have overtly democratic and multicultural host nation (Berry, 1997; 2001; 2018; Safdar, 2003). In such nations, the dominant group holds a certain psychological precondition such as the widespread acceptance of the value to a society of cultural diversity (i.e. the presence of a positive "multicultural ideology"); relatively low levels of prejudice (i.e. minimal ethnocentrism, racism, and discrimination); positive mutual attitudes among cultural groups (i.e. no specific intergroup hatreds); and a sense of attachment to, or identification with, the larger society by all groups (Berry & Kalin, 1995, as cited in Berry, 1997).

The recent changes in the Iranian diaspora's exosystem in the West (including Canada) such as governmental policies, society, and the media has led to the construction of the collective identity of marginalization and social outsiders among this population (Sekechi, 2020; Mobasher, 2018; Aidini, 2013; Dastjerdi et al., 2012; Moghissi, 1999).

Iranian diaspora in the West has been the target of discrimination, demonization, and politization after American embassy hostage crisis in Tehran in 1979 (Mobasher, 2006; 2018). After the World Trade Centre tragedy in December 2001, Iranian diaspora (specifically men) faced unjust discrimination dictated by the USA's immigration policies that fed global Iranophobia and Islamophobia (Mobasher, 2018). Consequently, the Canadian government became more concerned with federal safety and established their security intelligence agency (CSIS). These concerns were followed up by Canadian Conservative government influenced by the USA branding of Iran as a social enemy to terminate all political ties with Iran in September 2012 (Mobasher, 2018; The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2020).

The pressure on the Iranian diaspora has continued to grow following the inauguration of the President of the United States in 2016, which saw regulations that restricted Iranians from

entering the country and restoring sanctions on Iran (Mobasher, 2018). The closure of the Iranian embassy in Canada has had a great impact on Iranians, including experiencing difficulty during immigration and visa procedures. For instance, it is mandatory for Iranians visiting Canada, Iranian students studying in Canada, and Iranian residents to submit their fingerprints to Canadian government. This process brings a feeling of criminality to the population. Since the closure of the Iranian Embassy, the Iranian Canadian Congress (ICC), a volunteer-based non-profit organization, has been the only voice for Iranian Canadians who wish to have a constructive conversation with the Canadian government. For instance, ICC reported a great delay in the permanent visa application process time of 200 Iranian international students inside Canada in 2018.

These governmental policies have a direct impact on Iranian individuals in Canada because they shape the assumptions of the white majority, non-Iranian-Canadian population (Dastjerdi et al., 2012; Moghissi, 1999). Even though Iranians are reported to be more educated among Canadian diaspora population and used to have higher job status in their homeland, they do not find more opportunities for employment (Shishegar et al., 2015). The financial insecurity caused by unemployment or holding entry-level, low-wage positions not compatible with an individual's skills and training leads to anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders (Shishegar et al., 2015; Safdar et al., 2003). Studies on Iranian diaspora across the globe and Canada shows that general mistrust, suspicion, and mistreatment prevents Iranian diaspora from proper social integration in the host country (Mobasher, 2018; Moghissi, 1999).

A group's path of settlement can predict the frequency of specific types of problems of the members and their rates of mental health care usage (Sekechi, 2020; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Table 6 on the following page illustrates the common themes through the socio-cultural lens of Iranians migration transition phases: premigration, migration and post-migration (Shishegar et al., 2015; Kirmayer et al., 2011). Shishegar et al. (2015) suggests two categories of issues with mental and physiological impact on the Iranian diaspora's health. 1. Social issues, including experience of discrimination, language barriers, lack of information about health care services, lack of social support, and unemployment; and 2. Cultural issues including intimate partner violence and culture shock. However, Dastjerdi (2012) proposes that misunderstandings between healthcare provider and consumer does not necessarily relate to the language of communication

but cultural misunderstanding and the differences in the health care systems of Canada and Iran. It is the Iranian diaspora's world view, social structures, language, and cultural values that influence their health beliefs such as how health and illness are defined, and their attitude such as acceptance of diagnosis and treatment procedures suggested by health practitioners (Dastjerdi, 2012; Safdar et al., 2003).

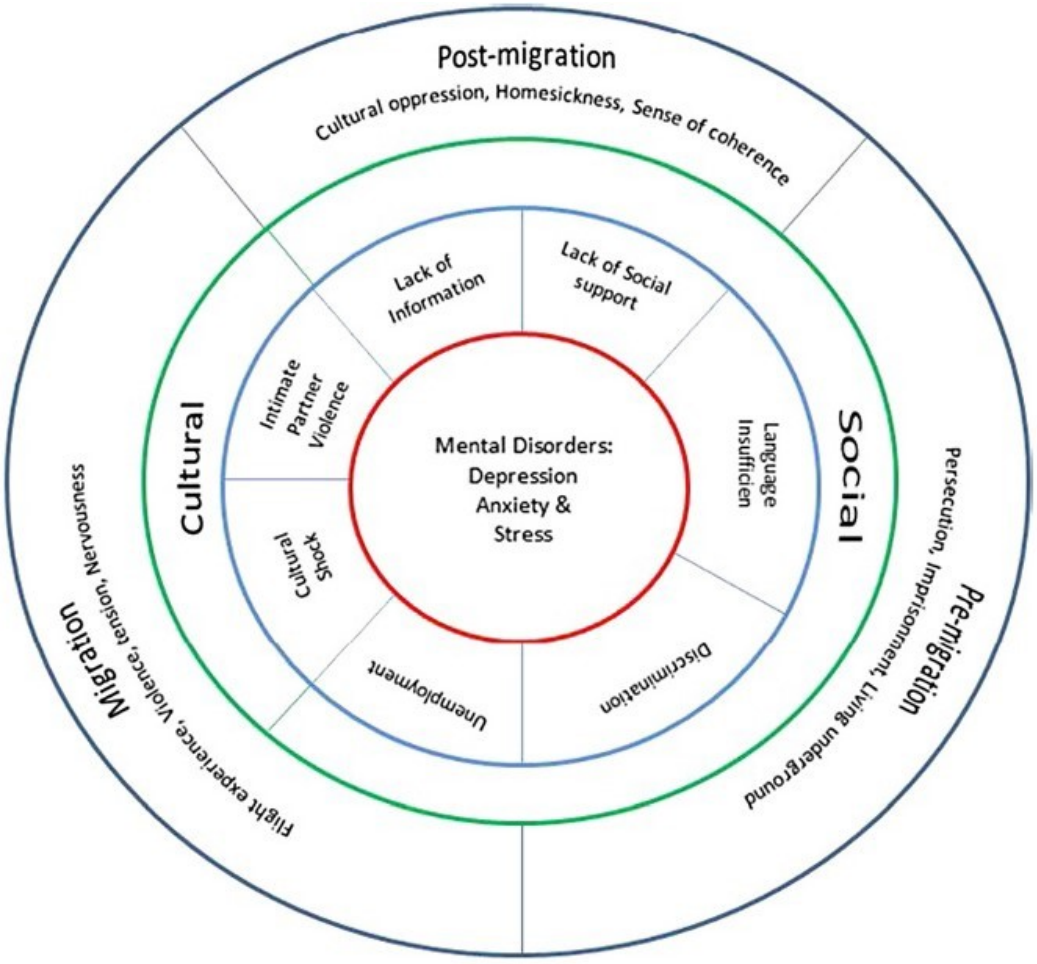

Table 6. Framework of concepts pertinent to Iranian immigrant experiences (Shishegar et al., 2015. p. 7).

Based on social representation theory, history and people's understanding and explanation of historical events has a significant role in shaping their social identity, their perception of the present, and their expectations of the future (Hirschberger, 2018). Iranian diaspora has shown to be sceptical about Canadian health services and do not trust the system (Dastjerdi et al., 2012; Dastjerdi, 2012); in some cases, many experiences with doctors and authorities are reminders of past traumas. For example, some Iranian diaspora who has past

experiences of interrogation can become scared that their recorded comments will be used for political benefits and deny consent for their voice to be recorded by the practitioner for research purposes (Shishegar et al., 2015). Such events of past trauma and loss can contribute to the re-emergence of anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

Hirschberger (2018) points to the behavioural pattern of intentionally remembering and reviewing memories of past traumas even when a survivor is safe and protected. He acknowledges that the memory of trauma puts survivors in a position of cautiousness which can increase the chance of group survival and consequently bring back the lost feeling of efficacy. On the other hand, the 'open wounds' from the historical collective trauma can decrease the personal autonomy and self-confidence of an individual (Lira, 2001, as cited in Watkins & Shulman, 2008). In response, many members of the community show the innate attempt to gain back their sense of agency by forgetting the past and continuing with the future. This contradictory response to the ongoing collective trauma affects people on a daily basis, and communities face rigid social frameworks, sociopolitical polarization, and interpersonal rupture as a result (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Those outside the home country geographical borders also deal with a similar conflict because of the inevitable effect of technology and mass media on the diaspora's experience of trauma (Mobasher, 2018). Somasundaram (2014) explains that the feeling of responsibility and guilt after leaving the family encourages most of the diaspora to stay in close touch with their home network. The family members' experience of terror, trauma, and the aftermath such as feeling uncertainty and insecurity become more powerful than their surroundings.

Consequently, the diaspora distances from factual dimensions of living in the host country and instead experience current occurrent traumas involving their family as if they are exposed to them directly in person (Somasundaram, 2014). Studies show that the community conflict of remembering or forgetting trauma is very alive among the Iranian diaspora, resulting loss of identity, cultural pride, cultural alienation and identity crisis among them (Mobasher, 2006).

Iran has a rich history dated from 4000 BC. Islam has been a part of Iranian culture for the last 1400 years and has dramatically shifted the cultural values (Mobasher, 2006). For the last two centuries, Iran has been the target of invasion and abuse by Russia, British Imperialism,

armies from both sides of World War II, and American Imperialism (Aidani, 2013). In the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, British and American forces overthrew the first democratically elected government that worked hard to nationalize Iranian oil and helped with the establishment of Shah's oppressive regime. This event has contributed to a sense of distrust towards the Western world that is held by many Iranians (Aidani, 2013). Those countries supporting Shah then denied their support for him during the 1979 Islamic Revolution which was a form of changing collective narrative for Iranians suffering collective trauma at the time.

Sanctions on Iran started at this time and the door for other countries to use Iranian oil was officially closed. Only a year after Islamic revolution, Iraq started a war to access the oil field of Iran. During the eight years of Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the USA sold ammunition to Iraq, even chemical bombs that were announced by UN to be illegal to use (citation). In response to two hundred years of collective trauma, the Iranian government was convinced that any relation with USA and other countries trying to abuse Iranian natural sources are their true enemies. Consequently, radicalism was popularized among government and their followers. As a result, the government started to introduce expected behaviours for Iranians, regardless of the differences in their belief system based on their personal narrative of the collective trauma. The pressure on Iranians who do not identify with the Iranian government's set of values started another collective trauma. In conclusion, the traumatized Iranian culture has devaluated the ethnic identity and invaded people's lives with suffering, embarrassment, and shame (Sekechi, 2020; Aidani, 2013; Mobasher, 2018).

Identity formation process, as Erikson (1968) suggests, is influenced by interaction of two factors: 1. external social interaction such as cultural practices, stereotypes, and prejudice; and 2. internal psychological interaction including personal attitude and values (Jamarani, 2012). Identity has the capacity to be mortified and adapt to changes in these external and internal factors (Jamarani, 2012). Ethnic identity shapes self-image and a sense of belonging, whereas social identity shapes self-concept and self-esteem, evaluation of roles and responsibilities attached to that identity, how they define norms, goals and meanings, their social, cultural, and individual values (Jamarani, 2012; Mobasher, 2006).

For example, in the shadow of imposing religious rules by the current government such as obligatory hijab, many Iranians who were born Muslim have lost their commitment to

religious practices and experience more confusion about their identity compared to Armenians, Jewish, Zoroastrians, Bahais and other religious minorities (Mobasher, 2006; 2018). Those experiencing displacement after the Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979 has experienced economic, social, cultural, familial and symbolic losses and as the result live with an ever-present encapsulated sadness that surface through feelings of insecurity and anxiety (Sekechi, 2020; Aidani, 2013). Regardless of religion, the identity conflict in relation to gender roles are widespread among diaspora especially after women lost many of their legal rights; such as the right to divorce and have custody of their children regardless of their age and gender, due to systematic changes in laws after Islamic revolution (Sekechi, 2020; Moghissi, 1999).

Selective or imposing displacement of the diaspora in other places than their home country confronts them with new contexts and meanings attributed to them. Hence, diaspora starts to question their identity, values, and priorities (Jamarani, 2012). As Aidani (2013) explains, many Iranian diaspora are on political exile for the same reasons that also shaped their excisional values through their past lived experiences. Many of these values such as living in a democratic society that divides assets and resources equally among the population can be described in historical and cultural context. These values are not always achievable in the diaspora's host countries that are promoted to be democratic and consequently the diaspora experience a sense of confusion and loss. In addition, imposed stereotypes and prejudice brings a threat to self-integrity and self-esteem to diaspora (Jamarani, 2012). Hence, diaspora tends to increase the quality of other social categories that they identify with to restore a positive sense of self (Jamarani, 2012).

Research shows that "acting white" has become very popular among Iranians, the diaspora and their children to cope with the stigma attached to their ethnic identity (Mobasher, 2006). For example, many Iranians might wear blue contact lenses, lighten their hair, or even have plastic surgery to have physical attributes of white people and meet standards of Western beauty. The assumption is that different features will increase assimilation in the society and consequently open more doors to success (Mobasher, 2006). The urge of conforming to white standards even goes beyond physical transformation as people also adopt the norms of white culture such as celebrating Christmas while not Christian (Jamarani, 2012).

In Iranian culture connecting to family, friends, homeland, and soil, called Khâk in Persian, has frequently been reported (Coehlo & Ahmed, 1980; Good et al., 1985, as cited in Safdar et al., 2003; Jamarani, 2012). Mobasher (2018) mentions the dual relation of culture and ethnic identity; culture gives meaning to ethnicity and also provides content of ethnicity through art, music, religion, language, poetry, beliefs, and traditions. For example, Iranian culture has historically been heavily characterized by its pro-collectivist content to the point that many characters in myths, stories, and poems are illustrated as devoted and committed idols (heroes) who gave priority to the common cause such as rescuing their people and their land (Safdar et al., 2003). Many research on diaspora around the world has shown that this pro-collective characteristic, fostered by carrier groups, has empowered the diaspora and encouraged them to form cultural festivals, concerts, ethnic cultural associations, political organizations, language classes, and poetry nights (Mobasher, 2018).

All sorts of carrier groups refer to religious leaders, intellectuals, film directors, singers, artists, and professors who may use arts such as music, poetry, and cinema to create or represent a new master narrative around the nature of trauma, its cause, its victims and acknowledgement of responsibilities (Alexander et al., 2004, as cited in Mobasher, 2006). These activities help the diaspora to cope with challenges of integration in exile and also to keep their relationship with Iranian ethnic heritage and culture. In Iranian culture, poetry has always been a tool for communication, a symbolic tool of cultural resistance and carrier of pride embedded in Iranian ethnic identity (Mobasher, 2018). Sekechi (2020) notices that Iranians may use Persian proverbs to talk indirectly about the core of their inner conflict around some experiences with great effect. She also found that visual art and creativity can be a sublimation tool for the diaspora to express their suffering. Studies show that culturally informed art therapy, where diaspora can explore their ethnic identity through familiar art forms and materials, reduce cultural and language barriers, and encourages self-expression (Hanania, 2018; Rowe et al. 2017). As an Iranian diaspora who was exposed to art and poetry, I similarly found these tools facilitating my ethnic identity exploration in a time of exclusion during my studies.

Chapter 3: Art-Based Research Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Art Based Research (ABR) enables us to communicate holistically, through the simultaneous study of the whole and the parts within phenomena by presenting complex information embedded in the visual form (Kapitan, 2018). A single art-based study in the ABR format presents a detailed specification of a situation in the present moment but it also urges the reader to think beyond the scope of time and place of given situations. In this way, it has the capacity to be generalized to the lives of many (Kapitan, 2018). ABR research is seen as a feminist and postcolonial approach (Leavy, 2015) which deeply resonates with my personality and values. Accordingly, I hope that my process of art-based exploration can raise awareness in the art therapy field and show how culturally sensitive art therapy can initiate the creation of a new narrative and meanings for Iranians; which in turn may serve to empower an ethnic identity and provide a healing opportunity from collective trauma.

Research by art therapists have illustrated the vital role of using arts-based approaches within the field of art therapy (Allen, 1995; Kapitan, 2018; McNiff, 2013). Through the artistic inquiries, art therapists are able to make a deeper connection with their art expression and as a result, transform their relationship to the self and their world by illuminating the mutual relation of thinking and feeling aspects of self (Allen, 2013; Kapitan, 2018). As Leavy (2017) states, the experience of the world through the body shapes our understanding of it and gives birth to our social meanings.

Many researchers use the narrative of the lived experience of the diaspora to study the transformation of identity (Aidadni, 2013; Mobasher, 2018; Moghisi, 2012; Sekechi, 2020). Unfortunately, such exploration required more financial investment and time allocation than this graduate research paper could offer. Aidani (2013) acknowledges that an individual narrative is a personal narrative, but since a whole world has come together to inform that private story, that story is valid evidence of society's total situation. Hence, as the writer (and using personal reference 'I' through the remaining text), I decided to use my own process of identity exploration as my research data.

Art has been my only self-expression tool for many years. I have used my art materials and creations for self-reflection and understanding of my internal and external world. Art is a

philosophical examination of different ways of knowing, distance from the scientific approach (McNiff, 2013). Visual media exposes culturally influenced metaphors and symbols that carry effective and economical theoretical statements such as describing the dominant views around gender and race within the society (Kapitan, 2018; Leavy, 2015). Hence the art I created as an art therapy student and as an individual who is a part of Iranian diaspora in Montreal is representative of a bigger whole. I wish that my process of recovering my ethnic identity while stuck in a pressure cooker can advise the art therapy practitioners about the current essential need of Iranian diaspora under hidden social and political pressure or as Frosh (2017) calls "the hidden history of suffering" (as cited in Sekechi, 2018, p. 125).

The hidden trauma can be described by the fact that Canadian media and the Canadian government only shows sensitivity to Iranian community residing in Canada during catastrophic events related to Canada, such as the Ukrainian plane crash tragedy costing lives of Canadian citizens and many more permanently residing in Canada. However, the general well-being of Iranian is still undermined by the current political strategies of the Canadian government. For example, Canadian government has terminated the diplomatic relationships with Iran in 2012. Consequently, Iranians residing in Canada face many difficulties and tolerate so much pressure after closure of the Iranian embassy in Ottawa. Despite shared concerns by Iranians in Canada and promises made by the liberal party of Canada to restart the diplomatic relationship with Iran, Iranians still do not have access to simple diplomatic services such as birth registration or passport renewal in Canada.

Ethical Considerations and Biases

All people unconsciously have biased attitudes and stereotypes and researchers are not excluded from this innate human characteristic (Leavy, 2015). I acknowledge that my suffering as a minority student in a white-dominant educational institution has had a great impact on my perception of the narrative of the Iranian diaspora to the point that I am biased about this matter. However, as Bell Hooks (1995, as cited in Leavy, 2015) explains "representation is a crucial location of the struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind" (p. 3). Art as data does not necessarily explain everything about our questions but gives us an artist's perspective of the world (Leavy, 2015). As a researcher, I am

aware that my story and my path of healing through culturally inspired art-making may not have the validity and reliability to be advised to the general Iranian diaspora population.

Luttrell and Chalfen (2010, as cited in Leavy, 2015) suggest that the position of visual research in the research process can predict its impact. I agree with Leavy (2015) that art can be a tool for research rather than a topic or an outcome, since interpreting art does not necessarily provide insight and objective understanding of the context. This research may augment my thesis for the readers, allowing their perceptions, thoughts, and feelings to expand and result in being able to understand and distinguish branches of the complex matter discussed (Kapitan, 2018).

Artistic forms are the foundation of creating comprehension and knowledge in ABR because some experiences, such as exploring social identity, cannot be articulated through conventional means (Kapitan, 2018; McNiff, 2013). "In addition, there are gross distortions and stereotypical characterizations in artistic representation, with some groups systematically privileged over others" (Leavy, 2015, p. 228). This is a valid point in the context of art represented in Montreal, Quebec and most of Canada. I wish to invite readers to hold the concept of two-eye seeing of indigenous people in mind and look at this research in hopes of finding new insights. As the Persian poet, Rumi (Molana, Mowlānā or Moulana in Persian) in his Divan Shams (Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi or Divan-e Kabir), Robāyi 157, says:

Beyond kufr and Islam, there is a desert plain, in that middle space, our passion reign.

When the gnostic arrives there, he'll prostrate himself,

Not Kufr not Islam nor is there, any space in that domain (Persian Poetics, 2020).

As a note, I wish to acknowledge the other well-known English translation of this poem by Coleman Barks:

Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

This translation is considered problematic by many Persian scholars since it misses a lot of important words of the original poem (Vaziri, 2015). Mowlānā met his mentor, Shams of Tabriz, in 1244. Influenced by Shams, Mowlānā created teachings, essays, letters and two major poetic works, containing 24400 distichs in Masnavi and 35000 in Divân, during the last thirty

years of his life. He created 2,000 odes after meeting his mentor (Sedaghat, 2020; Robinson, 2016). The first complete Divân was gathered by Badiozzaman Foruzânfar in 12 volumes which were published between 1957 to 1966 (Foruzânfar, 1966). Translators have been selective in their interpretations of poems and have not referred to the number of poems as a reference (Sedaghat, 2020). Scholars argue that *pantheism* and *monism* imposed on Mowlānā are more of a European application (Vaziri, 2015). A. A. Sedaghat (personal communication, June 9, 2020) names two tendencies among Westerners or so-called experts of Mowlānā which he considers equally wrongful: Islamizing and romanticizing/secularizing propensities. He points out that in our era, Islamizers have more power of far-left liberal domination of academia and media in the West. He adds that this group is focused on Rumi's mystic philosophy to deliver "a supra-religious message, imbibed with Neo-Platonism, Vedic philosophies and Mithraism, in order to whitewash the deteriorated image of (mainstream) Islam". On the other hand, the influences of Islamic mystic metaphysics, Iranian Mazdean and Mithraic philosophies, and Vedic monism are removed in translation of Mowlānā's poems by those romanticize his message in order to make him the bearer of the universal message of love and peace (Sedaghat, 2020).

I personally suggest readers to practice the two eyes seeing in this context as well; therapist may explore how individuals relate to poems and base their practice on respect each person's unique way of interpretation of their traditional knowledge. A part of collective trauma and ethnic identity crisis in the Iranian community is related to the religion, going back to *Two Centuries of Silence* after Arab Muslims invading Persia (Zarrinkub, 2017). Hence, it is common for many Persian speakers, not all, to relate to poems on the spiritual rather than religious level.

Data Collection Procedure

The poem above is an example of how I am inspired by heart-thinking. Hillman (1992) refers to "the thought of the heart," which is embedded in my culture and philosophy. Sufis, Persian mystics, know that the objective knowledge that humans seek, such as purpose of life, is not achievable by human intellect only (Helminski, 1999). Throughout history, traditional psychologies have gone to the care of the soul through the heart-thinking (Hillman, 1992). "The heart is an objective, cognitive power beyond intellect" (Helminski,1999, p. 255). Avicenna, a Persian polymath, amplifies the heart's force occupying the whole body by circulating the consciousness throughout all senses in our body (Hillman, 1992). This conciseness pours into the

wall down in the middle of the heart. The heart is the place that holds the knowledge of the mind and the body. The mind knows what we are willing to do, and body knows the limits of what we are capable of doing. Hence, the heart becomes the place of containment of our core duplex, the very human nature (Hillman, 1992).

Imagination begins within a heart that is aware of both true and false imagining; neither ignoring nor devaluing the other, but coexisting with each other (Hillman, 1992). To understand the enormous ability of the 'intelligence of the heart,' it is crucial to believe in its force. The heart does not think like the brain does but the heart-mental reflection has been perceived and described as an animal reflex (Helminski,1999; Hillman, 1992). The conscious unified reality around us provide signs and receiving these signs through the heart will lead to discovery of the meaning and the purpose of this reality (Helminski,1999). Similarly, Silverman (2004) describes the necessity of being open to the unknown in order to enter a therapeutic process, create and heal.

Art therapist, Pat B. Allen (2013; 1995) writes about Jung's active imagination and how narratives with energy and life emerge when she follows her intuition while creating art. The unknown can be intermediating, provoking a sense of insecurity, and so, trusting our traditional knowledge can assure us that similar demons have been encountered by our ancestors on their paths and hidden treasures have been found which can also be revealed to us throughout this creative process (Silverman, 2004).

The 'thought of the heart,' or intuition as some western philosophers and psychologists call it, has been my guide in creation and collecting my data in this research. Thus, I have opened my heart to signs from the ancient knowledge of my ancestors in form of poetry, stories, and fairy tales. After this step, I created artworks based on those poems and stories which provided opportunities for connecting to my ethnic identity and empowering myself through a process of exploration. I have collected art responses to these signs during the last three years up to the ending of this research, starting when my social identity and ethnic identity faced challenges during my graduate studies in a white-dominant setting.

Data Analysis Procedures

We can build our own unique personal relationship with a story by selecting a special momentum that resonates with us. I used specific parts of poems and stories in similar manner.

Silverman (2004) encourages the participant in the therapy session to choose stories and relate to their life's experiences in the context of those stories. The essence of her work is to encourage the client to interpret the story's metaphors and symbols in relationship to their own lived experiences, using the characters of the story to dramatize themselves, and consequently, allow the audience to relate to them and their lived experience through witnessing the story they have chosen. I imagined myself in the context of poems and stories and created a sense of my story with different art materials. However, only externalizing the character within its new context, and exploring emotions and thoughts affiliated to it, are limited.

To understand the wisdom offered by the inherited traditional knowledge and decode the message of the art, I used Allen's (1995) suggestion of intention and witness art creation process. Allen (2013) explains that without applying any force to the image, we can write about elements and meanings we see in the image and emotional responses to the artwork. In ABR, she adds, we need to bring the stories that our images tell, to physical life, and allow the audience to receive them not only through their minds but their hearts (Allen, 2013). The goal for us is to connect to the soul of our images, not be afraid of them complicating our narratives, but allow them to enlarge our capacity for understanding the world and each other (Allen, 2013). Hence, I added a description of my conversations with the image and explain briefly the elements that enabled me to explore my ethnic identity.

Chapter 4: Changing the Narrative of My Lived Experience

"Writing about self is a frightening act; it has all sorts of consequences. Writing about self cannot be fully achieved without writing about others" (Aidani, 2013, p. 106). I hereby confess that it has been a two-year struggle for me to come to the point that I can now share my lived experience with readers – and I feel that I should. The main reason it has taken this long is my own bone breaking fear of being judged by the white witnesses of my story. And this is a learned fear. I have been told many times by a white professor during the three years of my graduate studies that I am victimizing myself.

Receiving this comment was confusing and problematic for me for two reasons. The first is that I did not understand what she meant by self-victimizing. Iranians' stories are filled with the injustices they have experienced, and hard events often open up or intensify previously existing wounds of racism and other forms of discrimination, social and economic inequalities,

and past traumas (Aidani, 2013; Saul, 2013). In this case, would Iranians that speak up about the injustice they are receiving be victimizing themselves or is it a natural response to recalling the collective trauma? The second was the fear of speaking my truth which began to alienate me from myself. I am a girl who lived thirty years of her life under oppression and yet I never felt so weak, inferior and voiceless. I used "Statira," the rebellious girl, as my artistic name for years. I was standing in the face of many people, to the point of feeling as if I was being threatened for my life but I never gave up. I did get to the point that I didn't really know myself anymore.

Identity in Crisis

For me an art therapy education was a lifelong dream, not for the title, or money. but in search of polishing my soul and becoming a better person. What I experienced, however, was that I was immediately judged for my writing, by my critics in this competitive setting, rather than respected for how much time and energy I invested in self-reflection and productive criticism. In facing unfamiliar experiences, people tend to categorize experiences into the most relevant mental schema (Jamarai, 2012). I found myself under a breath-tightening oppression, similar to what I have experienced in my home country where those in power dictate their preferred criterion to put their approval or denial stamps on people. Consequently, the existing oppression within the western educational system and even governmental system became more evident and tangible to me. The following image and my journaling may say it all.

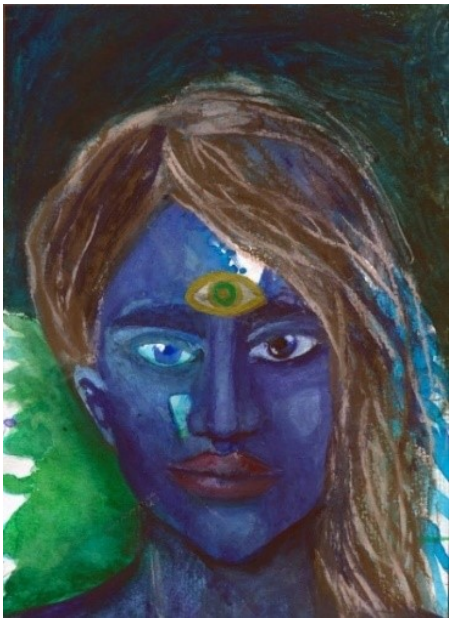

Figure 1. *Dictatorship*

Note. I wrote: "Dictatorship is when the system cannot hear any critic. Instead, it starts to blame the opponents, questioning their feelings and set rules and frames for them to function within its preferences. Dictatorship is when the voices are not heard. We can pretend that we are listening but it's upon those who are sharing to determine if their voice is being heard."

During my studies, I heard from a white professor that "the world is not fair" and I need to accept it! I was questioned during my application portfolio submission about the Iranian dates I used when labelling my artwork as if I had cheated. The reality is that the Iranian calendar does not follow the Christian calendar and I just used the actual year in my country to date my artwork! I was called a migrant and was assumed to be an international student. I was told that I needed to learn the Canadian culture if I was to stay and work in the country. And that my problem with a religious meeting at my internship site was related to my prejudice as an Iranian about a religious minority group. In reality, being assigned to a religious internship site and being asked to meet with religious leader at the site triggered my past trauma with forced religion in my home country! The supervisor who tried to help me understand my emotional reaction in my workplace was accused of acting as my therapist, not that he was actually understanding the depth of my struggle to build my identity as a therapist. Even the most sensitive professors assumed my first language is Arabic.

These may sound like small misunderstandings for people from the dominant culture, but for me, these are all wounds that I am reminded of all the few days that I face another microaggression, prejudice, and stereotyping. Especially, when I was seen as a threat to another student's life during my second year of study. I felt ostracized in my classroom and internalized the ethnic identity of the Iranian diaspora being perceived as terrorists and criminals.

After this experience, I changed from a fighter, *Statira*, to a survivor. *Hanieh* [Honeyeh] in Persian means the good ending or good result. But even my name was not resonating with me anymore. I felt ashamed for not meeting the core meaning of my name. I became disconnected from my social and personal identity through that experience. I felt that I did not deserve to exist, with suicidal and destructive thoughts that I hardly managed to overcome during my adolescence time. However, this time my mother, the only protective factor I had against this demon voice, was with me in my new city. I had to do something because I knew ending my life was going to only hurt my mother more and even put her in danger. This time, I was lucky to have an

understanding compassionate partner from the dominant culture with me who kept reminding me of the consequences of giving up on all past achievements. He became the counter narrative of white supremacy, white fragility, and white privilege I was experiencing.

Revitalizing Statira

He was right. I had the privilege to be born in the capital of Iran, but I am a girl from a lower-class family in a country under internal and external oppression and I still made it to Canada. I was lucky to have the kindness of people around me, and a strong belief in my heart that I can, and I will. To fly higher than an eagle was always my motto and I need to fly again even if I have lost my feathers. That was the problem, I felt so vulnerable, so naked, as if all my feathers have burned. I could recall artworks that help me to express my pain during my earlier dark times. Also, my supervisor who witnessed my struggles put so much effort into containing my narrative and encouraged me to use art and do more self-care.

So, I started creating, hoping that the process would heal my wounds. I accepted the paper she distributed to everyone in the classroom but was blank about the image I needed to create. I focused on my heart and allowed all things, no matter how nonsensical, to emerge. The candle beside me was running out of the flame, so I put the leftover red wax on my paper, like my vessels were bleeding. All I could feel was my suffering. I used watercolour but added so many layers that the colours looked like acrylics, dense and heavy. I knew that my body needs such density, so I stayed nonjudgmental about the process. And a bird sitting on my hand, surrounded by fire, filled with pain and sorrow emerged. It was my soul that was burning. It was sad. But suddenly it reminded me of a Phoenix, *Simurgh* as Persians call her.

Simurgh is a benevolent, mythical bird in Iranian methodology and literature and can be found in all periods of Iranian art. In *Shahnameh*, the epic poetry book by the Persian poet *Ferdowsi*, *Simurgh* saves an albino baby boy abandoned in the mountain after his father, the king who was ashamed of his son, denied him. Simurgh was reborn from her ashes and, of course, getting burned is not a pleasurable feeling. So, I thought more about Simurgh, her patience in knowing that pain will give birth to new opportunities, her loneliness when living in a mountain by herself, and the wisdom that she could gain in her isolation and share with one who needed her help. I found a glimpse of light and hope in my heart through my cultural heritage, my ancestors, my angels.

Figure 2. *The bird in the flames.*

Nomadic identity shows resistance to acculturation strategies of integration, assimilation and any form of negotiation and dialogue with the dominant culture (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). It is true because I had a great resistance towards internalizing any value of the dominant culture at this time. Even in relation to my research, I felt an urge to avoid Western articles as much as possible. I thought with myself that I am the descendent of the famous Iranian philosopher, Hadi Sabzevari who influenced many philosophers and scholars such as Henry Corbin. So, why would I turn to the Western world to rescue myself from the pain that it injects in me? Why not turn to my ancestors and my traditional knowledge to find a refuge and overcome this pain? After all, I am the descendent of fighters. I cannot just survive. Sometimes we don't know what we are fighting for or we lose hope to fight for our mission. Then maybe the problem is not the urge to change but knowing what we want to change. I realized that, just like Simurgh living in isolation, my fight may not lead to changing things in the external world but rather bring wisdom and an inner peace to me.

Through the Fire

The last day of the semester of winter 2017, my supervisor advised me to participate in a group exhibition with other classmates. I was carrying a sense of not belonging to the group but a voice inside me knew my true essence is pure and never purposefully aims to hurt others. Participating in that exhibition was like jumping back into the fire and that feeling of burning and

those dark thoughts were the last thing I wanted to experience again. The idea of jumping in fire reminded me of a famous poem of Ferdowsi. The king's wife, *Soudabeh*, who is in love with the king's son, *Siyâvash*, and tries to seduce him but gets rejected since the son is an honourable and loyal person. Filled with revenge, she shifts the story and convinces the king, *Kavoos Shah*, that his son is betraying him. The king wishes to punish his son and orders him to jump through fire.

Fire in Persian history, starting with Zoroastrianism, is a strong holy symbol. It is believed that innocents would survive the fire. So, the prince accepts the order of the father, knowing that he is innocent and therefore will receive no harm from the fire. The king and his wife watch *Siyâvash* smiling in white dress on his white horse entering the fire and coming out with no harm. So, I thought to myself, there is no point in avoiding the fire when you truly believe you are innocent. Yes, people's cultural differences influence their perception. My cultural values may be opposed to cultural values in Canada, but it does not automatically turn me into a criminal. I created the image below with *Simurgh*, the symbol of ancient wisdom, reminding me of Mowlānā 's quatrain number 158 from Divan Shams, his book devoted to his mystical love for Shams and that I need to accept differences in all contexts:

"Beyond kufr and Islam, there is a desert plain,
in that middle space, our passion reign.
When the gnostic arrives there, he'll prostrate himself,
Not Kufr not Islam nor is there, any space in that domain
Ideas, language, even the phrase "each other"
doesn't make any sense.
The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep" (Ganjoor website, 2020; Persian Poetics, 2020).

Figure 3. Beyond Kufr and Islam (beyond wrong-doing and right-doing)

My suicidal ideation was vanishing at this time and humiliation was taking over. It is interesting that shame is considered the bedrock in the Western culture according to my supervisor who is a psychologist in a well-known psychiatry hospital in Montreal. In my experience, humiliation is more negative than shame in Persian culture and it is usually provoked in a collective context. My social identity was in crisis and I could not resolve the idea of being a criminal for myself. At the same time, I had a good social identity in relation to my clients, which allowed me to open my heart to the healing that may come from them. Interestingly, a client lent me a Persian poetry book translated into English for a small group project.

The Conference of the Birds by Attar (1177), the Sufi poet, is considered a mystical educational reference. In the book, the birds of the world gather to decide who is to be their sovereign. Each bird presents a human characteristic that is preventing mankind from reaching enlightenment. The wisest bird, the hoopoe, suggests that they should look for the legendary *Simurgh.* On the journey, the group looking for *Simurgh* becomes smaller for several reasons. At the end, only thirty birds made it to the abode of Simurgh but could not find any trace of her. Finally, they realize that *Simurgh* (in Persian: Si [thirty]+ Murgh [bird]) is nothing but themselves working together. Hence, the wisdom is inside humankind if we look for it. I decided

to use this book as my source of reference in Yehudit Silverman's (2018) summer course of the myths and fairy tales offered in the creative arts therapies department at Concordia University.

I chose the poem, *Eblis (the devil) and God's curse*, as my main story in this course. It is important to keep it in mind that the personification of the Devil in Persian culture is affiliated with a different character than the Western context. First that Zoroastrians who introduced the idea of heaven and hell to the world of theology believed that this world and this living life is where humankind build their own hell and heaven. Depending on a person's loyalty to three main components of the Zoroastrianism religion "good word, good thought, good deed" (Rose, 2011), humans can face their own hell and heaven in their lives. In addition, the Devil in Islam is an angel who disobeys the God and yet the God had not slain him for his wrongdoing but provided an opportunity for the human to experience the world with both good and bad forces.

During this course, I dramatized my character as "*Eblis*" who Attar introduces as someone who has only one differentiating characteristic from other angels: curiosity. I chose what I thought as the peak moment of the story:

> *But round your neck will shine a ring to show.*
> *Your treachery to all the world below –*
> *For fraudulence and guile you will be known*
> *Until the world ends and the last trump's blown* (Darbandi & Davis, 1984, p. 168).

Figure 4. *Eblis*

I had similar feelings, as my curiosity and not foreseeing the consequences led me to receive the label of endangering others. I was so grateful for the universe to bring this book to me through many people at the right time and in the right place. I created the Eblis's Mask (Figure 4) without lips. I was focused on the thinking heart while experiencing my creative flow and I felt that lipless *Eblis* has something to share with me. I took a paper and wrote down a poem from *Eblis,* enlightening me of how a negative symbol like the devil can be my guide to peace:

I don't want to be seen; I don't want to be called
Is this isolation or that I need to guide?!
Hey Adams and Eves,
I would unveil within the right words. So be gentle and wise not to be burned in my curse!
Shall you want my secret to be revealed, seek truly, fearless of what may come?
In return, take my oath; I will seal you with my shield.
My secrets are buried by the creator's will
If you stand on his way, you will be burned and buried just like me!
So, I loan you my eyes and seal your lips, to show you the hidden secret treasure of his!
He cursed me but he didn't know, in seeking, I find my treasure too.
I seek loyal listeners through the history, to show him I was the most loyal after the misery!

In this stage, I allowed myself to put the mask on and explore my relationship with the God in the story. I also created the collar of curse in this stage but had resentment to wear it around my neck (Figure 5). I explored the rest of the poem. Eblis's reaction to the curse in following verses was the key that released me from the prison I have built for myself:

Eblis replied: "And what is that to me?
I saw the treasure and now I go free!
To curse belongs to you and to forgive,
All creatures of the world and how they live;
Curse one! This poison's part of your great scheme
And life is more than just an opium dream.
All creatures seek throughout the universe

What will be mine forever now- Your curse!" (Darbandi & Davis, 1984, p. 168)

Figure 5. *The collar of curse*

Afterwards, I could wear the collar, which made me think of God's thoughts and feelings when he allows himself to label his angel for millenniums. I realized that how much God was intolerant for the differences and disobedience and was blinded by his anger! God was the mighty, but with biggest fear inside his heart! In that moment, not only my recent experience of oppression during my studies but all the 35 years of oppression I had experienced felt so worthless. Those people who took away my choice and tried to control me, those who tried to dictate their rules on me, are from the place of fear. The Pandora box of all dictatorships and prejudice since the beginning of the human's history is weightless because it contains nothing but fear and insecurity around what the unknown can expose them to!

After that, I felt a large inner peace light my soul. My body was still filled with anxiety around my cohort, but my heart was assuring me of my strength to fight once again. *Statira* was gradually coming back but something was missing. As mentioned before, soil (*Khâk* in Persian) is very important for Iranians. I am missing my land to the point that through experiencing my dark thoughts I asked my partner to send my body to my country, so I will be buried in my soil. Re-grounding myself allowed me to become connected to the soil that I now live in once again.

I thought of Rumi, Mowlānā, immigrating to Turkey and imagined how he acculturated to his new environment that after more than seven centuries many Turkish people not only

follow his path but also consider him a Turk, even though he never wrote any poems in Turkish. How can someone only follow his heritage and yet connect to the dominant culture like this? Where in Berry's acculturation model (Table 2) was he located? What is the purpose of assimilating or integrating? Within these questions, I was searching to define the relationship of my ethnic identity with my social identity in the new soil as an art therapist in Canada.

Berry (1997) gives evidence stating that even in societies that promote assimilation policy, immigrants and ethnocultural group members generally prefer integration. He adds that those achieving integration tend to make more positive adaptations. I wish to be as close as possible to the new culture to the point that I can help clients from the dominant culture, but I cannot turn my back on my own culture and inherited wisdom. In other words, assimilation is not a choice for me. I wish to integrate into my new society.

Filled with ideas and internal debates, I happened across a story on a Persian TV channel. A Persian ancient myth called *Mah Pishooni*: the girl with a moon on her forehead. The main character, *Shahr-banoo* (translation: the lady from the city) is very similar to *Cinderella* in terms of family dynamic and jealousy of the stepmother. However, the main character in this myth helps a cow on her path and in return she receives some advice about how to deal with the monster that she may encounter during her journey. The key to survival from the monster is to do exactly the opposite of what he asks her to do. So, when *Shahr-banoo* meets the monster and is asked to destroy his house, she starts to clean it. When the monster asks her to hit him with a stone, she puts the monster's head on her legs and pampers him with kindness. As a result, the monster orders her to wash her face with black and then white water in his garden and a moon and a star appear on *Shahr-banoo*'s forehead and chin, lighting up her path in the dark.

So, I asked what the message of this myth is for me. What is it that society demonizes, turning it to a negative character, but still has the potential to be beneficial for me? The white-dominant educational system generally promotes the findings of the scientific world and minimizes traditional knowledge. Being eclectic and lacking a cognitive rational for every move was discouraged by most of my professors in the second year of art therapy. I was discouraged from working towards becoming a psychotherapist for being a heart-thinker. Perhaps, my heart thinking abilities are my moon on the forehead and my star on the chin (Figure 6); tools to be used only in darkness, yet I can rely on the scientific world during the day light.

Figure 6. *Mah Pishooni*

Daylight for me is a symbol of my therapeutic relationship with clients where I am able to cognitively break down their needs, identify my objective of therapy, and develop my approach and interventions while working with them. The darkness resembles the situations that for different reasons I cannot clearly navigate the needs of my client and fulfill my role as an art therapist. That is when I can trust my intuition knowing that the knowledge of the past, the consciousness going through my heart to my sensations and unifying me as a whole with the universe will guide me to serve my purpose in life. Throughout the process of this image, I learned to trust my ancestors, my values, and my culture and celebrate my self-worth and self-value.

Importance of Public Witness

Different individuals in Denborough's (2014) narrative work showed an interest in sharing their hard-won knowledge after going through a difficult experience with others. By sharing their work, they were able to change their narratives from being a victim to someone whose experiences, make a contribution to the lives of others. The latter therapeutic experience enabled me to step forward and take ownership of my narrative when the opportunity sparked me. I was discussing opening an art hive for Persian speakers in Montreal with the Afghan Women's Centre and the person I was talking to suddenly asked me if I would like to join their book project about narratives of immigrant women in Montreal. I was hesitant at first, but I knew

that I didn't want anyone to have a similar experience like mine and for that I was willing to contribute to the well-being of others by sharing my story.

The interview took place in the physical space where interactions with others formed most of my original narrative of being an outsider and a threat to others. Sitting in the same classroom and retelling the story was a critical point in my narrative because before I felt that my voice had no place between those walls, but in that moment, my story was the only thing that could exist there. I knew that I surpassed my former narrative when the interviewer challenged my story, and I did not have the same emotional reaction that I had earlier in similar situations. I knew my narrative (Figure 7) will be heard by many and hopefully will help some.

Figure 7. *My story*

Denborough (2014) recommends handpicking our witnesses to observe our journey's end and suggests that planning a celebration at the point of arrival is an opportunity to solidify the new narrative. However, he advises people to predict backlashes by thinking about their coping skills and tools in facing the hard times such as moments that the narrative and its liability get questioned. As he recommends, we need to manage the voices of abuse in such moments. Consequently, I just had to keep in mind that the events of the past no longer control me; my narrative stays valid for me between the walls of the classroom and beyond them. Again, I gained trust in my achievement when I invited many people to the book launch. Only one person could make it, but I felt solid inside and did not doubt the validity of my narrative like before.

I was invited to find a poem with the topic of women for the book launch event. Again, opening up my heart to possibilities led me to a poem by Fariba Shesh-Boluki (2004) a Persian female poet that unfortunately her poem has been plagiarized by other famous poets:

"A woman I know, who has the zeal for feathers and wings
but because she is so passionate, she is two hundred folds apprehensive of the trip
A woman I know, who, in the corner of a house
in between washing and cooking, in the kitchen, sings a love song
Her gaze is modest and lonely, her voice is tired and sombre, her hope is at the end of tomorrow
A woman I know, who says she is regretful
Why has she given him her heart, what about him is worthy of her
A woman mumbles, I am weary of this house
But, she asks of herself this, who would comb my baby's hair after I leave
A woman is pregnant with pain, a woman has a newborn sorrow
A woman cries and says, I have low milk in my breast
A woman weaves a netted dress, by the fabric of her loneliness
A woman, in a dark corner, prays for light
A woman accustomed to chains, a woman intimate with prison
all of her shares is this, the cold look of a prison guard
A woman I know, who would die of an insult
but she sings, that this is the game of life
A woman puts up with poverty, a woman sleeps with tears
A woman - with grief and amazement, does not know her sin
A woman hides her varicose veins of the leg, a woman hides her secret pain
from the people, so they won't say
How miserable! How miserable!
A woman I know, whose poems smell of sadness
but she smiles and says, the world has twists and turns
A woman I know, who, every night, puts her children to bed, reading stories and poems
even thought, in her heart, she has overwhelming pain
A woman is scared of leaving, since she is the candle of the house

If she goes out the door, how dark would this house be
A woman is apologetic to her child
Sitting by the side of an empty dinner spread O my child! Go to sleep tonight.
Yes, go to sleep
And I will sing you again, the song of lullabies
A woman I know, whose skirt is yellow coloured
Crying has become her night and day, because she is painfully barren
A woman I know, whose ability to walk has gone, her steps are all tired
Her heart, under her feet, she screams, it's enough
A woman I know, who, a thousand times has fought with her inner demons
and since she is victorious in the end, has laughed ridiculously
At the evildoers' infamy, a woman sings, a woman remains silent
A woman stays in the alley, even at night
A woman works like a man at her job, there are blisters of pain on her hands
She has so much agony and grief, that she has forgotten,
that she carries a fetus in her womb
A woman is in her dying bed, a woman is near death
Who is going to see about her? I do not know
One night in a small bed, a woman slowly dies
and a woman takes revenge, on an unfaithful man" (Sheshblouki, 2020)

Figure 8. *I know a woman*

What was the message of this poem for me, I asked myself? I am in the peak of my new narrative and still face a poem filled with struggles of women, familiar stories that I have seen and heard to this day inside my country. I could not identify the role of the poem in my narrative at the time. The only thing felt right to do was for me to work on a new artwork when I started to write this research paper in December 2019. I was battling with the frustration of writing a paper, so I thought maybe this poem wanted to tell me that hardships are a part of life and we should accept them. I painted myself naked, surrounded by the cedar, an important tree in Persian culture and literature. I felt more grounded and rooted than what I initially drew. There were no feet and hands were fading and fragile, covering my genitals. I still could not understand why I drew myself naked. I left the image half-done before Christmas, thinking that the rest will come at its own time.

Statira Unfolding

On January 8, 2020, a Ukrainian international flight was shot by two missiles launched by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, only seven minutes after its departure from Tehran International Airport. Nine crew members from Ukraine, 167 passengers (which 138 of them were heading to Canada) all died in the crash. I, like many other Iranians living in Canada, felt numb hearing the news. All I could think of was that I could be on that plane and not be alive at this moment. The collective trauma of the last thirty-five years was again activated inside me.

I realized I'm not immune to the events of the past as much I thought. However, I have new wisdom about how to heal from it. I facilitated a Persian Art Hive inside the university for one week, welcoming those who are impacted by tragedy. I took my poetry books to the hive so other members of the community could benefit from the ancient knowledge as much as I did. I had my artwork with me in each session, allowing poems that people chose to be a part of my journey. One poem was a small part of a religious poem used in yearly national grieving ceremony for *Imam Hossein*, the grandchild of the prophet of Islam, who was killed in *Karbala* by his opponent.

Shia Muslims believe that *Hossein*'s opponent, *Yazid*, ordered his soldiers to put *Quran* on top of their spears, swearing that they will do no harm to Hossein and his followers. However, *Yazid* was not loyal to his word. He ordered his soldiers to kill *Hussein* and even Hossein's young baby in a brutal way. He then ordered soldiers to cut Hussein's head and put it on top of a

spear and show it to all followers left in the kingdom to promote fear among the nation. Every year, Shia Muslims around Iran and other countries, even in Canadian cities like Toronto and Montreal, people get together to mourn for this painful epic. Iranians specifically have a lot of symbolic rituals like carrying heavy metals that are designed with colourful feathers around the town, carrying enormous wooden house on their shoulders in the court yard of the mosque and putting it on fire, splash mud on themselves, signing, role playing the epic story, signing and mourning and so on. These rituals vary in different locations based on the traditional knowledge and the historical memory of their citizens.

I ruminated the first line of the poem by Mohtasham Kashani (15th century) with myself:

"Again, what is this revolt that is in the universe's nation.
Again, what is this dirge, what a lamentation, what a mourning" (Wikipedia, 2020)

باز این چه شورش است که در خلق عالم است باز این چه نوحه و چه عزا و چه ماتم است

This ceremony brings a great controversy to Iranians every year when they face trauma and loss, but I still observe many members of the community expressing deep sadness for a loss dating 1400 years ago. I thought to myself, this plane crash tragedy is Karbala for Iranians. So, I painted the background of my image red, as religious figures always describe Karbala. The blood of innocent is everywhere giving birth to red trees that echo the voice of innocents in the space (Figure 8).

What could be done? What can I do with my baggage of suffering in a new environment that cause different forms of suffering for me? Now, I understood why I painted myself naked. We, as humans are so vulnerable. The tree of wisdom provides a shelter for us but cannot protect us from the unforeseen suffering. I felt very small in a big world where only those with power dictates your destiny.

On the last day of the Persian Art Hive, a participant wrote a part of a poem from Mowlānā (Rumi) and added it to the collection of artworks made by Iranians who visited the hive previously. Once again, a poem showed the path to me; Poem 54 from the Divan:

دلا زین تنگ زندان ها رهی داری به میدان ها مگر خفته ست پای تو تو پنداری نداری پا
چه روزی هاست پنهانی جز این روزی که می جویی چه نان ها پخته اند ای جان برون از صنعت نانبا

تو دو دیده فروبندی و گویی روز روشن کو　　زند خورشید بر چشمت که اینک من تو در بگشا

از این سو می کشانندت و زان سو می کشانندت　　مرو ای ناب با دردی بپر زین درد رو بالا

Unfortunately, I did not find a reliable English translation for this poem, but I can elaborate on my impression of it. Perhaps experts in linguistics and literature may not agree with my point of view but that is the beauty of self-reflection through poetry, myths, and fairy tales.

The poet refers to the prisons we build for ourselves and yet dreams that we keep in mind, reminding us that we assume that we don't have legs to walk towards our goals, but our legs are just sleeping. He adds that there are so many days hidden beyond the days we are looking for, just like breads that were made by non-bakers. "You close your eyes and ask where is the lighten day! The sun is knocking on your eyes that this is me now, you open the door." And the last verse says, "they grab you from this side, they grab you from that side! Hey, you are pure, don't go with the pain, jump from this pain towards up."

I was speechless, filled with gratitude of how knowledge will come to me if I connect to the collective wisdom that our ancestors have provided for us, Iranians. I was reminded of how unpredictable life is and how much of my frustration comes from this sense of staying within a frame that my professional identity, social identity, or ethnic identity dictates. I drew my feet on the image, observing them, their existence, their strength. I added more colours to remind myself that the suffering is not all I have experienced in my past. And in my hands, threads woven by my ancestors, guiding me through threats I am going to face from now on in my life.

Figure 9. *Statira on the date 1398.11.23 (Iranian Calender)*

Chapter 5: Discussion

Acculturation in a new society requires psychological changes, "behavioural shifts" (Berry, 1980), "culture learning" (Brislin, Landis, & Brandt, 1983), and "social skills acquisition" (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). These provoke acculturative stress in the diaspora (as cited in, Berry, 1997). During the acculturation phase, people may use either approach of emotional-focused coping or solution-oriented coping to work with their problems, depending on which is more promoted in their inherited culture (Berry, 1997). I feel this is the cause of a lot of misinterpretation in the dominant culture of white individualistic educational setting where there is a larger emphasis on cognitive functioning and problem-focused coping. Perhaps showing my emotions has led to receiving judgments, such as victimizing myself. However, in my point of view, the border between sharing struggles and victimizing the self, is the sense of hope, where its presence is a motivational force for us to make a change and its absence prevents us from working with the problem.

Nomadic identity shows resistance to acculturation strategies of integration, assimilation and any form of negotiation and dialogue with the dominant cultures in times of conflict (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). For example, Caucasian typically is used to identify the ethnicity of white people in academic and non-academic settings. However, word-wise, Caucasian is referred to the habitats of Caucasus. I feel extreme frustration in my school setting because I can be considered more Caucasian than all of my white cohort and professors because my maternal ancestors, the Tat people of Caucasus are of Iranian Muslim origin who have preserved the old Persian language for centuries. Yet, I get mislabeled as a Middle Eastern which is the label created by the Western politicians and has been used only in the last forty years (Beaumont, Blake & Wagstaff, 1988; Clayton, 1976). This term has evolved and became a label to identify countries of the Islamic world (Mobasher, 2006). As the result, the term has constructed a stereotype that divides Asians between peaceful and dangerous categories. Said (1997) suggests that the western attitude to *Orientalist* relates Islam to war and conflict, representing Muslims as uncivilized and dogmatic people who hate the western world (as cited in Mobasher, 2006). I identify myself as a two-spirit Asian and Shia born Muslim who do not practise a religion but believe in religions because only by believing I can have respect for believers.

Berry (2018) suggests diaspora seek to use the integration strategy while practising remaining rooted in their inherited culture and community. He also encourages them to reach out to be involved in the larger society they currently live in. This "double engagement" has the most positive sociocultural, psychological, and intercultural adaptive value. I believe that my research was an attempt to break my isolation as an art therapy student and to find ways that I can keep functioning as an art therapist in the dominant culture yet find my uniqueness within my professional identity.

Watkins and Shulman (2008) explain the benefit of finding diasporic identity or hybrid identity in this time of identity conflicts as it allows the diaspora to embrace ambiguity, complexity, and diversity, while resisting the repressive and alienating cultural norms. Hybrid or diasporic identity is a unique complex configuration of identity, creating a meeting point of past and present (Jamarani, 2012; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Hybrid identity builds a bridge between differences and negotiates the elements of both home and host culture, and their different forces, values, beliefs, norms and practices. Refiguring the identity is only possible if we avoid confining narrow identities and instead consider the possibility of fluidity, malleability, and multiplicity in the identity of others and ourselves (Watkins, & Shulman, 2008).

Perhaps the urge to conduct this research was an attempt to form my hybrid identity as well. According to Hirschberger (2018), gradually, collective trauma at the centre of group identity becomes the lens which group members understand their social environment through, identify threats, and strive for their survival. Consequently, I learned that the heavy weight of not meeting the socially normative demands in the educational setting was actually provoking my collective cultural trauma.

I am coming from a social, political, and cultural background where not fitting in the frame defined by the system will put your existence in danger. This idea of otherness did not start with the current political system in Iran. It is rooted in centuries of unhealed collective trauma. Generally, Iranian culture is based on black-and-white, all-or-nothing mentality. The events in the past century has created a narrative of trauma for Iranians. It appears that no matter which political group rules the country, the system can define people's fate; finding a job, financial stability, ownership of would they have gained such as knowledge, research, house or money are not guaranteed by being an honest hardworking person. Not confirming to the system

and their belief values may cost people whatever they have: their life, their loved ones, or anything imaginable in the materialistic world. Hence, I have internalized the idea that my survival is in hand of authority. I experience a great amount of fear and uncertainty when I do not receive the approval of authority figures inside the Canadian educational system, workplaces, and the society. Hence, unconsciously or as a force of habit influenced by my historical memory, I start to look for a way to survive by using fight, flight, freeze responses.

Many individuals working from a psychodynamic background may relate my need for approval from authority to my early attachment experiences with caregivers. Although valid, I have to point out that the behaviour of caregivers is also influenced by sociocultural and political situations. For examples, my parents experienced the revolution during their marriage, and I was born during the Iran-Iraq war in the capital. During the war and the first decade post-war, the nation spread of poverty, famine, uncertainty about life caused anxiety and depression for people. In addition, the enforced male-dominant religious culture, and the decrease of health and psychological services, and many other factors contributed to behaviours of my caregivers.

Therefore, I invite the members of the dominant culture in Canada, either in educational systems or health services, to always keep the differences in culture, values, and experiences in mind and trust their students and clients in the way they choose to express their needs (Berry, 1997). Indeed, integration as the most productive acculturation strategy requires a mutual accommodation which is achievable when members of both groups acknowledge and accept the rights of all groups to live as culturally different peoples (Berry,1997). According to Berry (1997), the acculturation is a mutual process dependent on the host's value in accepting diversity. Hence, I believe that the greater the openness of the dominant culture, the greater the positive impact on the speed of cultural shedding and cultural learning processes of the diaspora. This means that diaspora who faces openness from the host culture will be more open to exchange personal and social values and reach a better acculturation outcome.

Recommendations

- Invite the creation of new narratives using culturally derived teachings and traditions offering a sense of meaning and group cohesion (Hirschberger, 2018). The learned schemas of trauma can change and reform through creation of new narratives (Denborough, 2014).

- Witnessing Hardships Denborough (2014) suggests that his clients turn the sharing of their hardships to an opportunity for other people to witness their story. “Being an acknowledging witness to someone’s story is about doing justice to their stories” (Denborough, 2014, p. 70). The narrator can also witness their progress in changing their own narrative of suffering by putting their story in written words as well (Denborough, 2014).
- Consider the power of traditional text: Suggest to an Iranian to look for a poem on their phone, start a conversation about their favourite poet, or ask them to play the songs with traditional poems as lyrics. By knowing that for 5,000 years of history Iran has always faced war and invasion, we can reach for the prolific volumes of traditional poems and literature left by our ancestors as a way that they transformed their narratives of trauma and as a gift to Iranians to use to heal from their suffering.
- Storytelling and other culturally sensitive materials such as non-Western musical instruments, dance, and sharing traditional foods.
- Create a collective inclusive space for the diaspora to start their ethnic identity exploration. I have used these techniques in the Persian Art Hive which started after the plane crash in January 2020. Many participants responded to this intervention in positive ways, explored traditional poetry books or thought of a poem that they liked and made art in relation with the poem. Others who read those poems on the artworks also connected to the collective cultural wisdom. As the result, despite the divisions among the Iranian communities, people could connect to each other through this shared aspect of their inherited culture.
- Explore your own Arts-based Research project (ARB): The use of art-based inquiry in this research not only allowed me to practise appreciating my own narrative and heart-thinking knowledge but it also allowed me to understand the source of my fear

Limitations

Just like any other therapeutic approach, this research is not generalizable to all members of the community. One reason is that not all Iranians have Persian/Farsi as their maternal language. Persian/Farsi is the official language of Iran, meaning that all population learn this language at school. However, Iran is a multi-lingual and multi-dialectic country. Those speaking

Azari (Turkish of Iran), Kurdish, Lurish, Arabic, Balochi, Gilaki, Mazandarani, Tati, Armenian, Circassian, Syriac and Assyrian may prefer the traditional knowledge and literature of their own language resembling their cultural values and characteristics.

The second reason that not all Iranian diaspora has similar exposure to collective trauma through the years. For example, those from the capital have much deeper experience of the revolution but their experience of war is less intense than those living close to Iran-Iraq border. Even to this day, there are children and adults losing their limbs and lives because of landmine explosions left from war. Natural disasters in the past thirty-five years have greatly impacted rural places in North, West, South and Central Iran and may carry a different type of trauma.

The third reason is the diaspora's preferred acculturation strategy. Only when other members of one's ethnocultural group insist on maintaining the group's cultural heritage, certain acculturation strategies such as integration and separation become available. Accordingly, integration and separation strategies are "collective'' movement, whereas assimilation is more "individualistic" (Lalonde & Cameron, 1993; Moghaddam, 1988, as cited in Berry, 1997). Iran has a history of mixing ethnicity and tolerance of religions for millennia, but radicalization has had more power during the last few centuries. Yet, many Iranians trauma from the last fourth decade is so deep that they choose to distance themselves from their inherited culture. In such cases, using the language and poetry is not very helpful since the aversion towards culture can be a self-protecting mechanism. I have faced numbers of Iranian diaspora who do not wish to have a therapist from their same ethnicity and cultural background.

In the end, it is up to individuals to select which psychological approach they connect to and feel comfortable working with. Perhaps, providing the option of exploring cultural inherited knowledge can open up new healing doors to the diaspora who seek help. However, Morris (2011) advises to therapists to consider individual perspectives and avoid generalizations based on their country of origin and cultural background is still valid and important.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

It is the nature of migration to bring people from very different cultural backgrounds together. Therefore, it is important for the helping professions to consider all cultural dimensions of the illness experience (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Culture can profoundly influence how people

communicate with health care professionals, express their emotions, explain their issue and understand or react to its symptoms (Kirmayer et al., 2011). Studies suggest that failing to integrate and become self-sufficient in using the Canadian health services would lead to potential feeling of loneliness, not belonging, and lack of interconnectedness (Dastjerdi, Olson, & Ogilvie, 2012). Consequently, people compromise their health by ignoring their symptoms, seeking help from their own family members, or going to their homeland and look for help which is time consuming and financially unsustainable (Dastjerdi et al., 2012).

Diaspora integration can be assumed a free choice only if the dominant society is open and inclusive in its orientation towards cultural diversity (Berry,1997). And that includes accepting the heavy baggage of collective trauma of the diasporic community and their need to heal from it. Such inclusivity can tap into the collective trauma of oppression among Iranian diaspora and initiate a change in their narrative. Inclusivity is also offered by the psychologies of liberation, the fact that the Western health system needs to acknowledge that all diaspora carries a traditional knowledge of healing that can serve them better than Western psychological approaches. For example, carrier groups meditate the narrative of collective trauma through poetry, drama, art, cinema, photography and other forms of art (Håkon, 2015; Mobasher, 2006). Encouraging people to join these carrier groups or using similar media to not only change their own narrative but having an impact on the biggest collective narrative can be a beneficial therapeutic intervention.

My journey in changing my diasporic narrative, finding my hybrid identity, and reconfiguring my ethnic identity became a possibility through connecting art making with Persian literature and poetry in the process of conducting this research. The Persian literature, poetry, and myths provided a safe and inclusive space for me to reflect on my narrative and understand my issues and learn new ways to work with the problem. The familiar media of Persian literature and poetry activated innate coping skills transferred to me through generations. I feel an enormous trust in recreating my narrative only because my heart knows that my ancestors have used the same knowledge for generations to survive. Even though I have tried many therapists with several Western scientific psychological approaches such as Psychodynamic, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, and Emotional Focused Therapy, none offered such a peaceful and grounding healing process for me. In addition, I could not really bring such

materials to my therapists because I had to use most of my session explaining the context of poems and literature. I cannot imagine any other way that I could have achieved my new narrative without my inherited traditional knowledge.

In the end, all humans desire a peaceful enriching life experience. Therapists and all other health professionals can be a part of making this desire come true for many others who did not have the privilege of being born in a peaceful and safe country like Canada.

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