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THEORY & METHOD

Carriers and The Puzzle of Change:

*Opportunities for
Cross-Culturalists to
Spearhead Research
in an Important but
Neglected Domain*



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The early 1980s were particularly challenging years for me as I struggled to perform research in post-revolution Iran. The revolution of 1978 had toppled the Shah and brought into power a new elite, one that espoused a fundamentalist Islamic ideology. Most sectors of the economy had changed hands. The education sector was targeted for change through a major cultural revolution, seemingly modeled on the Chinese cultural revolution of the late 1960s. Universities were closed for several years, many professors were expelled for political reasons, and attempts were made to "re-educate" many others. These changes in formal governmental, economic, educational, and other sectors were paralleled by programs to change central aspects of social life, most notoriously gender relations. Women found themselves restricted by archaic rules and values, making it even more difficult for them to play a significant role in public life. Severe new restrictions came into effect in just about every area of social life, including clothing, names for places and people, travel, music, the arts, and just about every form of human expression.

The momentum of change was maintained not only through revolutionary fervor and Islamic fundamentalism, but also through a series of extended crises, such as the eight-year war with Iraq and the hostage-taking incident, during which the United States embassy in Iran was invaded and embassy personnel were seized. Whereas pre-revolution Iran had for the most part avoided war, remained open to the world, was trying to Westernize as fast as possible,

and was closely allied to the United States, the new Iran was in a state of actual or potential war with its neighbors, remained inward looking, rejected Western and adopted Islamic values, and denounced the United States as "The Great Satan."

From one perspective, then, it seemed that the Iran of the early 1980s had become very different from the Iran of the early 1970s. But as I interviewed people about their experiences, a puzzling pattern emerged: in some fundamental ways it seemed that some important things had not changed. I began to ask "why do some things stay the same, while other things change?"

In the spirit of Gauvain's (1998) earlier article in the Theory & Method series, I want to point out how cross-cultural research should be expanded, in this case through more attention to the topic of change. I shall begin by highlighting some things that did not change in Iran. The key to this stability, I believe, is deeply cultural and related to the role of carriers, which embody specific rules about correct behavior (Moghaddam, 1997). A first type is symbolic carriers, such as a flag, which act as

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symbols of values and life-styles (e.g., honoring our national heroes). A second type is gate carriers, such as regulations restricting immigration, which directly control the path for other changes. The various carriers act to perpetuate certain behavior patterns, such as those identified below.

WHEN THINGS STAY THE SAME

LEADERSHIP STYLE

The Turban for the Crown, the title of an insightful book on the Iranian revolution (Arjomand, 1988), captures one important way in which things did not change. Although the leader changed, the style of leadership did not. In both pre- and post-revolution Iran, one man wielded absolute power and dictated decisions to the rest of the nation. Just as it would have been dangerous for an Iranian to challenge or even question the Shah's decisions before the revolution, in post-revolution Iran Khomeini's decisions could not be questioned publicly. In both cases, the only "acceptable" behavior for Iranians was unquestioning obedience to an all-powerful male leader.

"ONE CHANGE, ALL CHANGE INSTITUTIONS"

Related to a dictatorial style of leadership was a strong tendency for institutional programs and managerial posts to be completely dependent on the personality of

leaders. In both pre- and post-revolution Iran, when a change in leadership occurred in an organization, the new leader would start by replacing most or all managers, and discarding all or most former programs. This took place even when managers and programs introduced by a previous leader were actually working well. A stable feature of this situation was that loyalty to particular personalities was given higher priority than loyalty to institutions and programs.

ROLE OF WOMEN

In at least one fundamental way the situation of women did not change: Both before and after the revolution the rules for correct behavior for women were dictated by an elite group of men (Moghaddam & Crystal, 1997). Policies to "modernize" Iranian women were put into effect during the Pahlavi era (1926-1978), and this included the forcible removal of Islamic coverings ("chador"). By the 1970s, millions of Iranian women, and most of the better-educated and younger women, did not wear the traditional chador, preferring to dress in a Western style. However, after the 1978 revolution there was increased pressure on all Iranian women, including members of religious minorities, to wear a veil. This pressure quickly translated into law, so that any woman not wearing a veil was arrested and punished. Both before and after the revolution, then, how women dressed, as well as their general role in society, was dictated by an elite group of men.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fathali M. Moghaddam (Ali) was born in Tehran, Iran, and began his cross-cultural education at the age of eight when he started schooling in London, UK. For the next nineteen years he received formal education in British schools, and informal education back home in Iran. He went back to teach in universities in Iran after the revolution of 1979, and then worked on United Nations development programs for several years. These experiences brought him face to face with the puzzle of change, and the question of why some aspects of human life (such as intergroup bias and conflict) are so difficult to change. From working on South Hemisphere national development he moved in 1984 to McGill University in Montreal, Canada, where he researched for six years (in collaboration with Wallace Lambert and Don Taylor) on intergroup relations. In 1990 he moved to Georgetown University, Washington DC. Two recent books are *Social Psychology: Exploring Universals Across Cultures* (Freeman: 1998) and *The Specialized Society: The Plight of the Individual in an Age of Individualism* (Praeger, 1997). His forthcoming book is titled *Change* (Worth Publishers), and his current research includes the psychology of human rights and duties.

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ETHNIC MINORITIES

Iran is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. A wide range of policies are available for managing culturally diverse societies such as Iran, from strong support for multiculturalism to strong support for assimilation. Both before and after the revolution the leadership in Iran has followed a policy of assimilation. In the Shah's Iran, ethnic and linguistic minorities were pushed to conform to an ideal of an Iranian modern state, Westernized and centralized as much as possible, with Farsi as the official language. Although the ideal toward which minorities are pushed to assimilate has changed in post-revolution Iran, from Western to Islamic, the basic policy remains the same in terms of its goal of assimilation. Non-conformity is not tolerated, and tendencies toward regional autonomy are stamped out, as evidenced by the treatment of the Kurds and other minorities.

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OBLIGATIONS AND NETWORKS

At the micro level, among the behavior patterns carried over from pre- to post-revolution Iran is a set rather similar to the practice of *guanxi-xue* in China (Yang, 1994), which involves creating obligations and extending social networks by giving gifts and doing favors for others. For example, Ahmed discovers that the manager of a nail factory needs a certain drug for his sick child, and he spends a week scouring the market to buy several months supply of the drug. Ahmed gives the drug to the manager as a gift, and the manager feels obliged to meet Ahmed's request for additional boxes of nails for his workshop. Arguments have been made that we should not regard such practices as equivalent to bribery, in large part because obligations arise out of the social relations and personal bonds created, as well as concern for maintaining face generally, and not just because gifts and favors have been given. Interestingly, communist policies have not succeeded to eradicate *guanxi-xue* practices, despite such practices being specific targets for reform programs. In Iran the typical targets of such practices (i.e., those in positions of power) have changed, but the practices themselves continue as they were before the revolution.

SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

On the surface it appears that seating arrangements have changed dramatically across periods in Iran. In pre-revolution Iran, the trend was toward Western style furniture, and away from the tradition of sitting on carpets and cushions on floors. After the revolution, there has been increasing media coverage of public events during which

people sit on floors. Also, television programs have tended to show more traditional family life styles, where in the home family members typically sit on carpentered floors rather than on chairs. But underlying these surface level shifts there is consistency in more important aspects of seating arrangements. Irrespective of whether a room is furnished with Western style chairs or people are expected to sit on the floor in the traditional manner, the arrangement of people in the room remains the same: the most important personages sit at the "top" end, furthest away from the door, and the least important sit by the door.

TOWARD A CULTURAL THEORY OF CHANGE

Thus, from leadership styles to more micro-level behaviors, such as seating arrangements, post-revolution Iran was in many ways characterized by stability rather than change. I found that respondents repeatedly led me to ponder why some things did not change, or changed very little as compared to other things. A close reading of major revolutions in other parts of the world leads one to conclude that "the paradox of revolutions" (Middlebrook, 1995) is experienced in many different countries and historical eras. My contention is that a solution to the puzzle of change can be discovered in carriers that regulate relationships between individual level processes and societal processes (Moghaddam & Harré, 1996). In this brief discussion I want to focus on just two aspects of the solution I envisage. First, the proposition that the maximum speed with which change can take place at the societal level is always faster than the maximum speed

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of change that can be achieved at the corresponding psychological level. The term "corresponding psychological level" here refers to the psychological characteristics typically associated with a particular type of social organization, such as democratic government or free market economic systems. A second proposition is that individuals do not just passively accept macro-level changes, but influence them through the choices they make in their everyday lives. These choices have to do both with controlling the local community, as well as trying to influence the larger society through gate carriers, things that if changed would lead to opening a floodgate to other changes.

MAXIMUM SPEED OF CHANGE

Governments can be toppled overnight. New laws can be passed in a matter of hours. Ownership of entire corporations and even sections of the economy can change quickly, from public to private or vice versa. The maximum speed of macro-level

changes, involving political, economic, and institutional structures, can sometimes be extremely fast. The collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the communist states of Eastern Europe took place relatively rapidly. The Berlin Wall, a classic example of a gate carrier, was knocked down and carted away by souvenir hunters in a matter of weeks and months. In comparison with this, however, transitions in everyday behavior necessary for successful movement from communism to democracy has not come about quickly. The development of "psychological characteristics" necessary to make a political democracy work, and a free market system work, have yet to come about in these formerly communist states. Changes in how people think and act have been relatively slow. This is partly because symbolic carriers and the behaviors they sustain have ensured some level of continuity.

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The same contrast in the maximum speed of change in macro- and micro-level processes is sometimes evident in Western societies. Decades after legislation came into effect making it illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, for example, subtle forms of racism and segregation continue. Studies of the United States criminal justice system clearly demonstrate that race is a major factor in determining how an accused is treated by police, judges, and other officers of the law. Passing equal rights legislation was speedy in comparison to the pace of reform in actual treatment of African Americans and other ethnic minorities.

American
racism

INDIVIDUALS AND "BIG PICTURE" CHANGE

During the early post-revolution era, fundamentalists attempted to eradicate all aspects of pre-Islamic life in Iran. This included symbolic carriers, such as monuments, ceremonies, and festivities that pre-dated Islam. An example is the traditional Iranian New Year and various ceremonies associated with it, such as jumping over bonfires

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human?

on the 13th day of the year, a tradition that was attacked as part of hedonic "fire worshipping." But the fundamentalists faced opposition from at least some sections of the population, not demonstrated through violence or explicit political activity, but by choices people made at the local level. The traditional New Year ceremonies, including jumping over bonfires, were continued in homes and local communities, even throughout the most repressive years of the new regime. The sustaining of carriers that ensured continuity gradually brought the pendulum back the other way, so that fundamentalists have lost ground at least on this issue.

But the fundamentalists are also intent on preventing change in some domains, such

as gender roles. In order to prevent change, they have adopted the traditional veil as a symbolic carrier. During interviews I conducted, some Iranian women described the veil as "just a piece of cloth, nothing important in itself." Of course, it is what the cloth stands for that is important. The veil is a public and symbolic declaration of the direction that gender roles and Iranian society generally has taken.

Similar struggles over symbolic carriers can be found in Western societies. For example, in the United States during the last few decades there has been heated debate about the Georgia flag. During interviews with people in Georgia, a number of respondents referred to the flag as "just a piece of cloth," implying that in itself it is unimportant. However, as a symbol, either of a legacy of slavery and racism in the Old South, or of the proud heritage of chivalry, hospitality, and uniqueness of the Old South, the Georgia flag is emotionally charged. The continuing fight over the flag reveals its potency as a symbolic carrier: it stands for important things, which it can help to maintain or to wipe out.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL RESEARCHERS

In his article as part of this series, Kashima (1998) noted the Heraclitian tradition of viewing the world as flux, and to this I add that Heraclitus also highlighted tension. Two millennia earlier than Hegel, Heraclitus pointed to the role of conflict in change. In this process, individuals play an active role, helping to shape their local environments, as well as their larger societies. The behavior of individuals is not causally determined by large scale change, nor do individual behaviors causally determine large-scale change. Attempts to explain change through deterministic cause-effect models, whether top-down or bottom-up, are misleading. Human agency and the choices individuals enjoy ensure that cause-effect models prove to be unsuccessful. *

Cultural researchers have an opportunity to spearhead research on change. Cultures provide individuals with different ranges of options for behavior. Through making choices and selecting to do one thing rather than another, individuals exert some influence on change. But the ranges of options available are also influenced by macro-processes, such as economic and technological ones. A particularly important set of issues concerns discrepancies between the speed of change at the macro-level, involving political, economic, and other institutions, and the speed of change in psychological characteristics necessary for making workable desired new macro-systems. ? flush out

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