Intercultural Relations and Stereotypes among Afghan Immigrants in Iran: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract[2]: For over four decades, Iran has become increasingly culturally diverse due to the influx of Afghan immigrants. This study explores the dynamics of stereotypes and intercultural relations experienced by Afghan immigrants in Iran. Adopting a constructivist perspective, it seeks to understand the forms of stereotyping and intercultural encounters and the meanings participants attribute to them. Data were collected and analyzed using Constructivist Grounded Theory, which involved initial, focused, and theoretical coding. The analysis revealed eleven core categories: self-superiority attitude, Afghan label, negative perceptions of being Afghan, judging by appearances, feelings of humiliation, striving for acceptance, resilience, identity assimilation, language and accent adaptation, and sedentary orientation. The findings indicate that immigrants encounter three interrelated phenomena in their intercultural relations with natives: negative stereotypes (cognition), negative attitudes (evaluation), and a sense of discrimination (behavior). In response to these challenges, Afghan immigrants engage in strategies such as striving for acceptance, resilience, identity negotiation, language and accent adaptation, and settling into sedentary practices. The study concludes that the intercultural adaptation of Afghan immigrants in Iran remains limited, constrained by structural and social barriers.
Keywords: Afghan immigrants, intercultural relations, stereotypes, immigrant adaptation, grounded theory.

Most contemporary societies are culturally diverse due to the longstanding incorporation of many peoples and worldwide immigration. While Iran has been culturally diverse for millennia, it has become more culturally diverse due to hosting Afghan immigrants for four decades. Diversity is a fact of life, and it is the fundamental psychological, social, cultural, and political issue of our times (Berry, 2000). When societies have become more culturally diverse, policymakers have been

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challenged with understanding and managing the resultant societal complexity (Sam & Berry, 2016). These intercultural relations between immigrants and native people in such societies are vital. Berry (1990) stated that intercultural relations are about understanding how each individual perceives, evaluates, and behaves towards one another across cultural group lines. Berry (2006) portrayed two domains for intercultural relations, including acculturation and ethnic relations. There are core components in understanding the process of intercultural relations (ethnic relations), such as ethnic stereotypes, ethnic attitudes, ethnic prejudice, multicultural ideology, security, and discrimination. The outcome of intercultural relations can include: harmony, effectiveness, conflict, and stress (Berry & Hou, 2021). Stereotyping is a cognitive mechanism that underlies all aspects of intercultural processes: the way individuals perceive members of other groups shapes their attitudes and behavior toward them, influencing their various types of intercultural interaction and perspectives (Grigoryev et al., 2021). Stereotypes are at the heart of intercultural relations and serve as social keys to guide judgments in complex situations like those involved in intercultural relations (Montreuil & Bourhis, 2001). Positive intercultural relations promote a multicultural and harmonious society.

Over the past four decades, Iran has been a host to foreign immigrants and refugees, primarily from Afghanistan. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023), Iran stands as the second-largest destination for Afghan immigrants after Pakistan and hosts the world's largest refugee population. Five significant waves of Afghan migration to Iran occurred due to the persistent insecurity and ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan. The first and largest wave resulted from the communist coup and subsequent Soviet invasion from 1973 to 1989. The second wave occurred during the conflict between the Najibullah government and the Mujahideen in 1990-1988. The third wave coincided with factional disputes and the rise of the Taliban movement from 1992 to 1997. The fourth wave unfolded during the coalition intervention and the subsequent overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. The fifth wave of the migration of Afghans to Iran started after the Taliban's takeover in 2021. It is estimated that between 500,000 and 1 million Afghan refugees have entered Iran since then (UNHCR-Iran, 2023; European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2022). In 2019, Iran was home to 780,000 Afghan refugees and nearly 586,000 Afghan passport holders, with an estimated 2.6 million undocumented Afghans residing in the country (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2021). According to the 2016 census results, there are approximately 1.6 million Afghan immigrants in Iran, with more than half of them born in Iran and thus recognized as second-generation immigrants (Abbasi-Shavazi & Sadeghi, 2015). Although Iran has been hosting Afghan immigrants for four decades, research results have shown that there is a social distance between Afghan immigrants and native people (Zandi et al, 2022).

Berry (2023) proposed four hypotheses in intercultural relations: multiculturalism, contact, language, and integration. In the multiculturalism hypothesis, when individuals feel secure in their place in society, they will be able to accept better those who are different from themselves; conversely, when they feel threatened, they will reject those who are different. Related to this hypothesis is the Integrated Threat Theory. Intergroup threat theory proposes that when the cultural place of a person or group in society is challenged or threatened, then negative attitudes are likely to result (Stephan & Stephan, 2018). Four types of threats play a significant role in negative intercultural relations: realistic threats, symbolic threats, inter-group anxiety, and negative stereotyping (Berry et al., 1978; Levine & Campbell, 1972).

The contact hypothesis (Christ & Kauff, 2019; Dovidio et al., 2017; Pauluck et al., 2019; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011) proposes that when individuals have contact with and engage with those who are culturally different from themselves, under certain conditions (social and economic equal

status), they will achieve greater acceptance. More intercultural contact will be associated with more mutual acceptance. Specifically, more contact will predict higher multicultural ideology and a preference for integration.

The integration hypothesis proposes that when individuals identify with and are socially connected to their heritage culture and the larger society in which they live, they will achieve higher levels of adaptation to intercultural living than if they relate to only one or the other culture, or neither culture. This hypothesis is based on the Integration strategy, which derives from the intersection between the two planks of Canadian Multiculturalism policy (cultural maintenance and participation in the larger society). The integration strategy is usually associated with better psychological well-being (e.g., Berry et al., 2006; Berry & Hou, 2016).

The language hypothesis suggests that knowing a country's official languages enables social interactions and understanding. Bilingualism increases opportunities for intercultural contact and higher levels of mutual knowledge and intercultural acceptance (Bialystok, 2011).

Following the intercultural engagement, there are three forms of adaptation: psychological ('feeling well'), sociocultural ('doing well'), and intercultural ('relating well'). Intercultural adaptation refers to the extent to which individuals can establish harmonious intercultural relations, with low levels of prejudice and discrimination (Berry, 2016).

Studies in the field of intercultural relations can be structured as a sequential process in three spheres: cognition, evaluation, and behavior. The spheres of cognition deal with the cognitive function of stereotypes: perception, categorization, attribution, and generalization. In the area of evaluation, studies deal with the processes of evaluating members of the groups (general prejudice toward others, and attitudes toward specific groups). Behavioral studies examine acts of discrimination and exclusion. Many papers on intercultural relations have not investigated cognition, evaluation, and behavior separately. Many studies of intercultural relations combine all three psychological processes. For example, Grigoryev and Komyaginskaya (2023) show that the beneficial effect of positive contact was stronger for those ethnic groups with more negative cultural stereotypes. Urbiola et al (2021) claim that the outgroup's perceived immorality was important for understanding the preferences for adopting the host culture of both groups, but in opposite directions. Lutterbach and Beelmann (2021) state that contextual and everyday discrimination experiences prevent integration. Sam Nariman et al. (2020) claimed that high attitude strength toward the Roma resulted in stronger connectivity in all pairs of high-versus low-attitude-strength networks. Tomomune (2024) suggests that language education programs can serve as catalysts for reducing stereotypes and fostering meaningful dialogue for mutual understanding.

These psychological processes are embedded in sociocultural phenomena that reside collectively in the group. They serve as the background contexts within which individuals socialize and develop their various orientations to intercultural engagements. Figure 1 illustrates these group-level and individual-level phenomena.

Figure
Psychology of Intercultural Relations: Group and Individual Processes
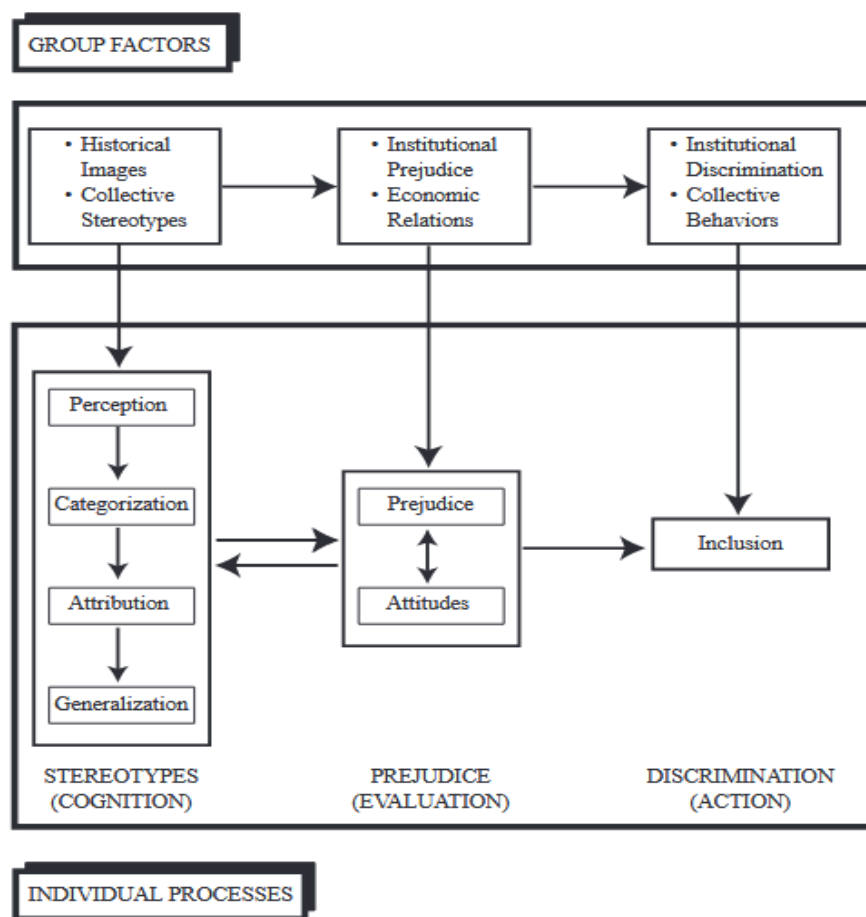
Note. Source: Berry et al., 2021

Most of the research studies have used a quantitative approach and from a macro perspective (Appel et al., 2015; Berry et. al., 2021; Galyapina et. al., 2021; Grigoryev & Komyaginskaya, 2023; Goedert et. al., 2019; Guan et. al., 2010; Hui et. al., 2015;, 2013; Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2021; Lahti & Valo, 2013; Lepshokova, 2016; Makarova & Herzog, 2014; Neto, 2021; Peng, 2010; Park et. al., 2022; Sam Nariman et. al., 2020; Urbiola et. al., 2021), and most of them have been carried out in the context of developed countries. Very few researchers have addressed the micro perspective and the understanding and experiences of immigrants as they adapt to their new society (Nisa et. al., 2017). In contrast, we employ a qualitative constructivist approach in this research to investigate how Afghan immigrants perceive and experience intercultural encounters. In this approach, the behaviour of immigrants in daily intercultural encounters with Iranians is considered to be "socially constructed." Therefore, this study aimed to explore and understand the intercultural relations and stereotypes experienced by Afghan immigrants in Iran. Specifically, the study seeks to examine how Afghan immigrants perceive and interpret stereotypes in their everyday encounters, and how they respond to these challenges through strategies of adaptation and identity negotiation. By adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach, the research aims to generate a conceptual framework that explains the dynamics of intercultural

encounters and adaptation processes among Afghan immigrants. How do Afghan immigrants in Iran perceive and experience stereotypes in their everyday interactions with natives? How do cognition, evaluation, and behavior processes shape the intercultural relations of Afghan immigrants in Iran? How do Afghan immigrants respond to negative stereotypes in the host society?

Method

This qualitative study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to explore the meanings migrants attach to their intercultural relations within the host society. This method provides insights into migrants' experiences, challenges, and interpretations of intercultural encounters. The constructivist perspective acknowledges the influence of researchers' interpretive frameworks and prior experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation (Charmaz, 2006; Mills et al., 2006a). In this approach, the researcher is positioned as a co-constructor of knowledge—reconstructing, interpreting, and representing experiences and meanings—while preserving participants' voices and narratives in written accounts (Charmaz, 2006; Mills et al., 2006). Berry (2009) contends that both positivist and constructivist perspectives are essential for a comprehensive understanding of intercultural relations, including processes of acculturation and ethnic relations.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 first- and second-generation migrants residing in Tehran and Yazd, Iran. Qualitative semi-structured interviews are well-suited for eliciting detailed data without constraining responses within a predetermined theoretical framework (Wengraf, 2001). Based on the 2016 census data, Tehran is home to the largest proportion (32%) of Afghan migrants in Iran. Meanwhile, Yazd province has experienced an increasing trend in accepting Afghan immigrants over the past two decades (Iran Statistics Center, 2016). The interview sessions spanned from July 2021 to April 2022. Participants were selected via purposive snowball sampling, with a deliberate effort to encompass a diverse spectrum of individuals. This diversity includes individuals aged 20 to 65, with varied residency statuses such as refugee cards, passports, Iranian IDs (due to marriage), and undocumented migrants. Additionally, it considers gender, ethnicity, and generational status. The participant sample encompassed 45 Afghan immigrants (see Table 1). Of this group, twenty-five were male (56%), and twenty were female (44%). Interviewees' ages spanned from 20 to 65 years (M = 34 years; SD = 7.4), with a majority (n = 30; 67%) being married. Within the sample, 24 individuals self-identified as first-generation (53%), and 21 as second-generation (47%). During the interview phase, 12 participants (26%) had resided in Iran for three to eleven years, two participants (4.4%) had recently arrived (less than two years ago), and thirty-one individuals (68%) had been in Iran for more than eleven years. The participants' educational backgrounds exhibited diversity, ranging from no formal or just elementary-level education (n = 20; 44%) to university-level education (n = 10; 22%). Among the interviewees, 14 possessed refugee cards (31%) and 11 held passports (24%). Regarding occupational status, most immigrants engaged in manual labor (n = 37; 83%) or held non-manual positions (n = 8; 17%).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic variable		N	Percentage
Sex			
Female		20	%44
Male		25	%55
Age			
20–24 years		5	%11
25–29	years	3	%6
30–34	years	10	%22
35–39 years		20	%44
40+ years		7	%15
Religion			
Shia **Muslim**		29	%65
Sunni **Muslim**		16	%35
Generation			
First generation		24	%53
Second generation		21	%47
Marital Status			
Never married		10	%22
Married		30	%67
Widow**ed**/divorced		5	%11
Ethnic Group			
Hazaras		20	%44
Pashtun		2	%04
Tajik		10	%22
Uzbek		3	%06
Others		10	%44
Education			
None/elementary level		20	%44
Secondary level		12	%26
College/University	(unfinished)	3	%06
College/University (finished)		10	%22
Residential Status			
Having a refugee card		14	%31
Passport		11	%24
Having an Iranian ID		4	%04
Undocumented immigrants		16	%35
Occupation			
Manual Worker		37	%83
Non-manual worker		8	%17
Type of Migration			

Demographic variable	N	Percentage
Individually	10	%22
With family	35	%77
Duration of Stay in Iran		
2 years	2	%4
3-10 years	12	%26
11+ years	31	%68

Note. N=45

The duration of interviews ranged from 1 to 4 hours. The interviews were conducted in various settings, including cafes and public places such as schools and parks. In cases where additional information and follow-up interviews were necessary, these were conducted either in person or through virtual means.

Various techniques were implemented to ensure the study's credibility, encompassing constant comparison, member checks, and peer debriefing. The authors continuously revisited the data throughout the analysis to validate and refine categories through constant comparison (Ulin et al., 2012). Furthermore, a concise overview of the core findings was shared with select participants to corroborate alignment with their personal experiences (member check). Simultaneously, the evolving codes and categories were subjected to ongoing discourse and evaluation within the research team (Dahlgren et al. 2007). Also, to enhance the study's transparency and credibility, we used reflexivity to limit researcher subjectivity and gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences. We tried to use self-awareness and self-exposure during the research. Self-reflexive researchers examine their impact on the scene and note others' reactions to them (Tracy, 2010). As two Iranian authors who had been in contact with Afghan immigrants for years, we questioned how these immigrants would adapt to their new country. We held several assumptions about their experiences, so we consciously tried to ensure our background did not influence us. We constantly re-examined these assumptions to ensure our host position did not bias our interpretations. So we were consciously careful not to let these biases influence us. The other researcher has had substantial international experience studying immigration phenomena and brings a broad understanding to the specific issues being examined here.

The research systematically incorporates various strategies to address ethical considerations and obtained approval from the University's Ethics Committee (IR.YAZD.REC.1401.025). Before conducting each interview, participants were provided with a clear outline of the study's objectives, and comprehensive information regarding the research was conveyed. Participants were assured of the utmost confidentiality and anonymity throughout the process.

After transcribing the interviews, we analyzed the data using grounded theory coding, which consists of three phases: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. In the initial phase, we read the interviews line by line. We named each word, line, or data segment at this phase. In the focused coding phase, also known as the selective phase, we utilized the most significant or frequently occurring initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large volumes of data. In the theoretical coding phase, we conceptualize the codes selected during focused coding and illustrate their relationships.

This research is meticulously conducted, employing the constructivist grounded theory analysis strategy (Charmaz, 2006). Consequently, the research method concentrated on data interpretation, applying a circular approach characterized by a continuous iterative process between

data collection and analysis. The study's objective was to identify recurring patterns or potential contradictions. Central to this research is an emphasis on comprehending the contextual backdrop and the influence of time. The approach faithfully adhered to respondents' perspectives and maintained an inductive orientation.

Findings

The data were analyzed using grounded theory coding (initial, focused, and theoretical). From this process, eleven main categories emerged: self-superiority attitude, Afghan label, negative perceptions of being Afghan, judging by appearances, discrimination, feelings of humiliation, striving for acceptance, resilience, striving for identity assimilation, language and accent adaptation, and sedentary orientation.

These categories were then organized into a sequential analytical framework:

1. Cognition: self-superiority attitude, Afghan label, negative perceptions of being Afghan, judging by appearances.
2. Evaluation: feelings of discrimination and humiliation.
3. Behavior: exclusionary or discriminatory practices.
4. Immigrants' responses: striving for acceptance, resilience, identity assimilation, language and accent adaptation, and sedentary orientation.

This structure highlights the process through which Afghan immigrants perceive and experience intercultural encounters—from the formation of stereotypes (cognition) to their evaluation in social attitudes (evaluation) and manifestation in social practices (behavior)—as well as the adaptive strategies immigrants employ in response.

Cognition

Afghan Label: Immigrants said that even though we have been living in Iran for a long time, they still see us as Afghan. They told us that you are Afghan, and they gave us the Afghan label. One of the immigrants said that even the newspapers and media did not announce that the Afghan is the currency of Afghanistan. Also, the immigrants said that despite the achievements and progress we have, we are still Afghans from the perspective of the host society. Immigrants resent being called Afghans by natives and say it's important to see us as human beings.

> When people refer to us as "Afghan" with contempt and exhibit racist attitudes, it can be disheartening. We've resided in Iran for 36 years, and while we've grown and adapted, some still regard us with disdain. Even newspapers and media outlets have yet to acknowledge that "Afghan" refers to the currency of Afghanistan. It is important to view us not merely as Afghans but as fellow human beings who unintentionally found themselves in this country (male, 40 years old, second generation).
> If I were from another country, I wouldn't face such humiliation. Regardless of our achievements, we often find ourselves labeled as Afghans. After two decades of living here, the perception hasn't changed. If I stay for another 100 years, they will still view me as an Afghan, hindering my progress (male, 32 years old, 1.5 generation).

Therefore, one of the negative stereotypes that is current towards immigrants in the host society is the label of Afghan identity. Stereotypes affect all aspects of intercultural relations between immigrants and natives. Research results have shown that stereotypes play an important

role in the preference to adapt to the host society (Urbiola et al, 2021). Intergroup threat theory suggests that when the cultural place of indigenous people is threatened or challenged within the host society, it results in negative attitudes. One significant threat contributing to this is the prevalence of negative stereotypes.

Negative Perceptions of Being Afghan: This category states that immigrants have a negative perception of being Afghan in their interactions with the host community. Some immigrants said that when local people find out that they are studying at famous Iranian universities, they are surprised and think that Afghan immigrants are illiterate and uneducated. Also, one of the immigrants said that one of my son's friends told him that he would grow up to be a thief. Or they said that the natives think we are not clean and we do not have cleanliness.

> *One day, I took a taxi to deliver some books to a friend in Ilam. As I got into the car and exchanged greetings, the driver asked, "Where are you from?" I replied, "I'm Afghan." He then commented that I must be serious about securing a scholarship at Tehran University. I mentioned that Afghans possess talent but often lack leadership opportunities. I remained silent after that, but I couldn't help feeling hurt by the unnecessary insult (male, 44 years old, first generation).*
>
> *I recall an incident from 1986 when my 5-year-old son Arian returned home and told me that a boy named Ali had insulted him, saying that being Afghan meant he would grow up to be a thief because he had a bad nature. This deeply affected me, and I pondered the historical decision of our ancestors to immigrate to Iran (male, 45 years old, first generation).*

Other negative stereotypes about Afghan immigrants include being thieves, being less educated, and a lack of hygiene and cleanliness. Negative stereotypes are obstacles to intercultural relations between immigrants and Indigenous people. The results of Nisa et al's research (2017) have also shown that stereotypes and prejudice are two major obstacles to intercultural communication among people. Negative stereotypes led to negative attitudes affecting intercultural relations.

Evaluation

Self-Superiority Attitude: The meaning of the category is that native people look down on immigrants. The immigrants said they have a superior look to the immigrants and even to the world's people. Some other immigrants noted that Iranians are racist. Also, immigrants say that when we go to amusement parks, they tease us and look down on us.

> *I've observed a sense of superiority among Iranians towards immigrants in general; they sometimes display a superiority complex towards people from all over the world. On Instagram, I came across a post where someone mentioned visiting a region near the South Pole in Canada, and when speaking in Persian, everyone around them turned out to be Iranians who looked down on them. It's worth noting that many Iranians have immigrated to various countries themselves, yet they exhibit this sense of superiority towards immigrants (male, 38 years old, second generation).*
>
> *While Iranians may exhibit a degree of racism, it is far more pervasive in Afghanistan than in Iran. For instance, I witnessed a disturbing incident in Iran where a woman (Iranian) condescendingly mentioned her husband's*

profession in a national office. Later, I learned that her husband was Afghan, educated at the Art College of Afghanistan, and I had seen her at work. Her disparaging attitude towards her husband profoundly impacted me, as it was unexpected to see such condescension from an ordinary woman towards her well-educated spouse. This incident left a negative impression (male, 45 years old, first generation).

Therefore, in their daily interactions with the locals, immigrants notice that the natives often regard them with a sense of superiority. This perception alters the behavior and attitudes of the immigrants toward the locals. A study by Razmara and Khosravi (2025) examined the dissatisfaction of Iranian Twitter users regarding Afghan immigrants in Iran. The findings revealed that these Twitter users feel dissatisfaction with the presence of Afghan immigrants, citing their behaviors and lifestyle as the primary reasons for their dissatisfaction. A study by Shaterian (2020) revealed that 62 percent of respondents viewed Afghan migrants as a source of social insecurity, 24 percent cited them as a cause of economic insecurity, and 43 percent considered them a factor in political insecurity. Overall, there was a predominantly negative attitude towards Afghan migrants. According to the hypothesis of multiculturalism, when members of the host society feel insecure about culturally different individuals, they tend to reject and not accept them, leading to negative attitudes. As a result, immigrants may perceive the natives as holding an insular and racist perspective. The absence of a coherent and effective immigration policy in Iran may exacerbate this situation.

Feeling Humiliation: Immigrants often encounter humiliation and prejudice from the local population during their interactions with natives. For instance, immigrants have reported that when they visit offices, the employees do not treat them well. They face disrespect and are often told that they will be kicked out if they speak up. They also said that they respect immigrants if they are from other countries, like Europe and America.

Navigating administrative procedures can be incredibly challenging due to the high level of bureaucratic complexity. We often encounter a lack of respect, and it's frustrating. I can assure you that if another immigrant from America were in my place, they would receive a different level of treatment. But when they realize I am Afghan, they look at me with disdain, and it's infuriating. Unfortunately, I cannot respond because I'm occupied with my tasks and must endure their disrespectful tone. Some even go as far as to tell us that we are without an advocate, without support. In short, we appreciate the Iranian people, with only a small percentage displaying negative behavior. However, when we interact with certain offices, we often feel harassed. They respond to our inquiries insultingly. We wish to be regarded as fellow human beings (man, 32 years old, first-generation).

Stereotypes in intercultural relations are important for the host society to treat them sympathetically and with friendliness. The outcome of intercultural relations is in the form of intercultural adaptation that minimizes prejudices and discrimination. However, the intercultural adaptation of Afghan immigrants is low, and they do not have a strong relationship with the host society. Goedert et al (2019) stated that orientations toward immigrants, entailing openness for intercultural relations, relate to feelings of cultural and economic security. According to the contact hypothesis, when native populations feel secure about the arrival of immigrants, they are more likely to accept and interact with them. More contact will predict multicultural ideology and preference integration. Shaterian's (2020) study also indicated that natives in Iran feel little security regarding immigrants. The studies conducted by Arabpour et al. (2025) and Zandi et al. (2025)

indicate that Afghan immigrants in Iran prefer interacting within their networks. Therefore, it is predicted that Afghan immigrants have less contact with natives in Iran because the indigenous populations do not accept them.

Behavior

Sense of Discrimination: This category states that immigrants feel discrimination in their intercultural encounters. The immigrants said that because of the challenges we faced with our neighbors in the neighborhood, I went out less and developed negative feelings towards the natives. However, over time, I realized that there are good people and not everyone is the same. They also said that there is more discrimination in some areas because the number of Afghans seemed to be higher.

> *Differences between Afghans and Iranians are prevalent, creating a noticeable class gap. Even now, when I visit Qom, I sense that the high Afghan population is met with disapproval from the local community. This discrimination has persisted (female, 23 years old, second generation).*
> *During my school days, I held negative feelings towards people here, including Iranians, due to the challenges we faced in our neighborhood. I avoided going out and mainly focused on school, limiting my social interactions. Over time, I encountered some incredibly kind individuals who were not prejudiced. They supported others in achieving their goals, which changed my perspective. I now appreciate people for their goodness and refrain from engaging in conflicts. If given the option, I would return here if the conditions were right, as I remember the hardships and the acts of kindness I will never forget (female, 20 years old, second-generation).*

The quality of interaction between immigrants and members of the host society hinders the integration of immigrants. Lutterbach and Beelmann (2021) state that contextual and everyday experiences prevent integration. The negative stereotypes that exist in the host society towards immigrants indicate the absence of a multicultural tendency in the host society. It will affect the strategies of integration and adaptation to the host society. When native people feel threatened, they tend to develop prejudice and discrimination (Stephan et al., 2005). The multiculturalism hypothesis is thus: when people are secure in their own identity, will they be able to accept those who differ from them (i.e., when there is no threat to their culture and identity). Berry et al. (1978) developed the multiculturalism hypothesis in politics based on the claim that freedom from discrimination should be based on confidence in one's identity. Studies show that Iran faces a vacuum (Zandi-Navgran et al., 2024) and inconsistent policies (Maghsoudi, 2022; Mohammadi et al., 2020; Mokhtarzade & Ansari, 2022).

Judging by Appearances: The immigrants said that Pashtuns and Tajiks look like Iranian people and behave well until the natives don't understand that they are Afghans. The immigrants stated that if they find out that we are Afghans, the indigenous people will react. Also, the immigrants said that the Hazara ethnic group (the largest number of other ethnic groups are Afghans in Iran), whose faces do not look like Iranians, have fewer connections with the natives.

> Tajiks and Pashtuns enjoy a more favorable perception in Iran; their appearances rarely reveal their Afghan heritage. They easily find marriage partners in Iran within their communities and among Iranians (male, 37 years old, second generation).

In some situations, people inquire about your nationality upon meeting you. However, while I was taking a taxi today, the driver asked about my background. I mentioned that I am Afghan, and he seemed genuinely surprised. He asked about my occupation, and when I told him I was cleaning a school, he refused to accept any payment (female, 26 years old, first-generation).

Therefore, Afghan immigrants face different stereotypes and stigmas in their intercultural interactions with Iranians. One reason can be the feeling of threat that native people have towards immigrants. Negative stereotypes are one type of threat. These negative stereotypes precipitate prejudice and intercultural relations. The sense of security will cause the most tolerance in the host society, affecting both the acculturation expectations of native people and the preference for acculturation of immigrants (Park et al., 2022).

Beyond this evidence of the experience in cognition, evaluation, and behavior, we also obtained evidence regarding how immigrants deal with these experiences.

Coping Strategy:Responses

Afghan immigrants experience three main challenges in their interactions with members of the host society: negative stereotypes, negative attitudes. When confronted with these issues, immigrants respond in various ways. In other words, they employ different strategies to cope with these challenges.

Striving for Acceptance: Immigrants use different strategies to adapt to the host society due to the challenges they face in their daily interactions with the people of the host society. One of the categories obtained for coping strategies with the host society is the striving for acceptance. Immigrants used to say that we try to see what an Iranian friend or person likes. For example, respect is important for Iranians. Some of the immigrants said that if Iranians ask us for something, we will do more for them. They also said that we would go ahead and say hello.

I tried to gain acceptance by contacting people independently, fostering effective communication. Growing up here, my familiarity with the community enabled me to connect with them effectively. I understand their personalities well. Spending time with them, even just a few days, helps me understand their preferences. I cherish more positive memories than negative ones, with most negative ones attributed to limitations. Generally, I have no issues with Iranian people, although there are a few exceptions. (male, 36 years old, first-generation).

For instance, when native people request or express their needs, we tend to go above and beyond to assist them. We believe in maintaining good relations with our neighbors, striving to keep them satisfied and happy. If neighbors do something for us, we try to reciprocate two or threefold. Currently, our neighbors in the house we're renting are Iranians. Their son was being noisy, hindering my cleaning efforts. Another neighbor, a young woman of 24 years and a first-generation immigrant, advised me to give it some time and, if necessary, respond if their behavior persists.

Therefore, one strategy immigrants use in their daily interactions with natives is to try to satisfy them through communication. This category states that the acceptance of multiculturalism ideology in the host society is low, meaning many positive contacts between natives and immigrants are not being formed.

Resilience: Immigrants strive to be resilient in the face of negative intercultural encounters. The immigrants said that we practice at home so that if they insult us outside, we have nothing to do and ignore it. They say we try not to see everyone as the same; here, it is like a forest with good and bad people. If they insult us in the subway, don't conflict.

> *We made a conscious effort not to dwell on those who disrespected us. Moreover, we aimed to treat those around us with kindness and respect. We now view everyone differently; if someone behaves poorly, it doesn't taint our perception of everyone else. At home, we practiced a principle that when an Iranian, whether male or female, insults us on the street, calling us backward Afghans, we shouldn't respond in kind. We acknowledge that there are many good people, and not everyone shares such negative views. Another way we coped with this situation was by staying in one place and avoiding frequent moves. Finally, when we think about Afghanistan, we put aside negative experiences and focus on better opportunities here. Despite insults, we feel it's a safer environment, especially considering the uncertainty in Afghanistan, where even returning home from work can be risky, and family safety is a constant concern (male, 36 years old, 1.5 generation).*

Thus, the immigrant agency plays a crucial role in fostering positive intercultural communication, although the immigration policies of the host society are also significant.

Striving for Identity Assimilation: The category signifies that immigrants seek to assimilate their identity with that of the host society, presenting themselves as members of Iranian society. Immigrants said that sometimes we introduce ourselves as Iranians to find a job because we have to leave a lot of promissory notes and checks, and if they find out, they won't give us a job. Or we take the national card of our Iranian friend. Also, immigrants said that many immigrants are looking for Iranian birth certificates.

> Many of my friends and relatives have sought Iranian birth certificates, but I haven't pursued this myself. My family and relatives have made monetary contributions without tangible results, but I haven't personally taken that route" (male, first generation, 57 years old).

Therefore, immigrants seek an Iranian identity to obtain a positive intercultural connection. In search of an Iranian identity, it appears that positive contact, the ideology of multiculturalism, and integration are not prevalent.

Trying Language and Accent: Although Afghan immigrants share the Persian language with Iranians, they seek to learn the language of Iranian ethnic groups and the accent of the Persian language. One of the immigrants said that we should tell our students to learn Kurdish, Turkish, and Farsi. One of the immigrants said that when I go to the store, my child tells me not to speak because I don't know how to speak Farsi.

> *We converse in Afghan at home, but we use Persian outside. I encourage my students to learn other common languages in Iran, such as Kurdish, Turkish, and Lori" (male, 45 years old, first generation).*

Learning the official language of the host society leads to better social interactions, increases the opportunity for positive intercultural relations, and creates intercultural acceptance. Lahti and Valo (2013) consider language as a tool to improve intercultural relations. According to the language hypothesis, learning the host country's official language by immigrants and being bilingual is an opportunity for immigrants to engage in positive intercultural relations. Although

Iran and Afghanistan share a common Persian language, the varying accents pose significant challenges for immigrants. For example, a study by Alipour et al. (2024) showed that the problems teachers face with immigrant students are related to the issue of bilingual immigrants. Immigrants' vocabulary is derived from their language and dialect, and teachers do not understand them. They also do not understand some of the teachers' vocabulary, creating a communication challenge. The multiculturalism policy's language and communication component suggests that multilingualism will enhance participation in the larger society and foster greater mutual acceptance.

Sedentary: This category states that immigrants prefer to live in one neighborhood and move less due to the negative intercultural encounters they have had. One of the immigrants said that he has been living in this neighborhood for 20 years and has not moved to another neighborhood because the neighborhood people know him here, and if he goes to another neighborhood, it will be a problem. The natives do not have good relations with them. Moreover, he said, I feel good that they approve of me here.

> *The third thing we must deal with is that we lived in one place and did not go to different locations. We lived in one place and did not go to different places. We got used to one place from the first day and became family members. When I came to the Ministry of Interior, I also needed the seal of the local council, Behiar, and the seal of the mosque. I went to stamp three of them because I knew them and stamped them immediately. Because they don't need to research, they don't put these stamps because they have to do research, then stamp, but because they know how to stamp. Because I was there for 20 years, writing and sealing this gentleman is our approval. This has made us feel a little better (male, 30 years old, first generation).*

Therefore, due to the negative stereotypes, immigrants have chosen to settle down and stay in one neighborhood for a long time as a strategy to cope with it. This strategy causes immigrants to have less contact with the host society, the intercultural acceptance of immigrants decreases, and the understanding of immigrants and natives towards each other decreases. The two categories of sedentary and try to assimilate identity indicate that immigrants do not have strong intercultural adaptation during intercultural interactions. Immigrants cannot establish harmonious intercultural relations with low levels of prejudice. It will also affect their attitude towards others.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to understand the phenomenon being examined from the perspective of immigrants and their experiences, and consider their behaviors. Data were analyzed through theoretical coding at three levels: open, axial, and selective. Eleven main categories were discovered from the data analysis, including self-superiority attitude, Afghan label, negative perceptions of being Afghan, judging by appearances, feeling humiliation, striving for acceptance, resilience, striving for identity assimilation, trying language and accent, and sedentary. They give different responses to the stereotypes and the experiences in intercultural encounters, including striving for acceptance, resilience, striving for Identity assimilation, trying a language and accent, and being sedentary. Based on Berry's (2023) framework, cognition, evaluation, and behavior are sequential processes, as shown in Figure 1. Stereotypes lead to prejudice and attitudes, and then to discrimination and exclusion.

Therefore, when the categories obtained from the data analysis are placed in the framework of the above model, the label of Afghan and negative perceptions of being Afghan lead to a superiority complex and a feeling of humiliation. There is a reciprocal relationship between the

superiority complex and facing humiliation. Also, these categories lead to discrimination and judging by appearances. These categories indicate no strong intercultural relationship between immigrants and the host society. Categories have been shown to lead to different responses among immigrants to their intercultural encounters. Some responses try to tolerate the host society, such as resilience and striving for acceptance, and others, such as settling and living in a neighborhood for a long time, because they are trusted in that neighborhood. Figure 2 draws a conceptual model of the categories obtained from the data analysis.
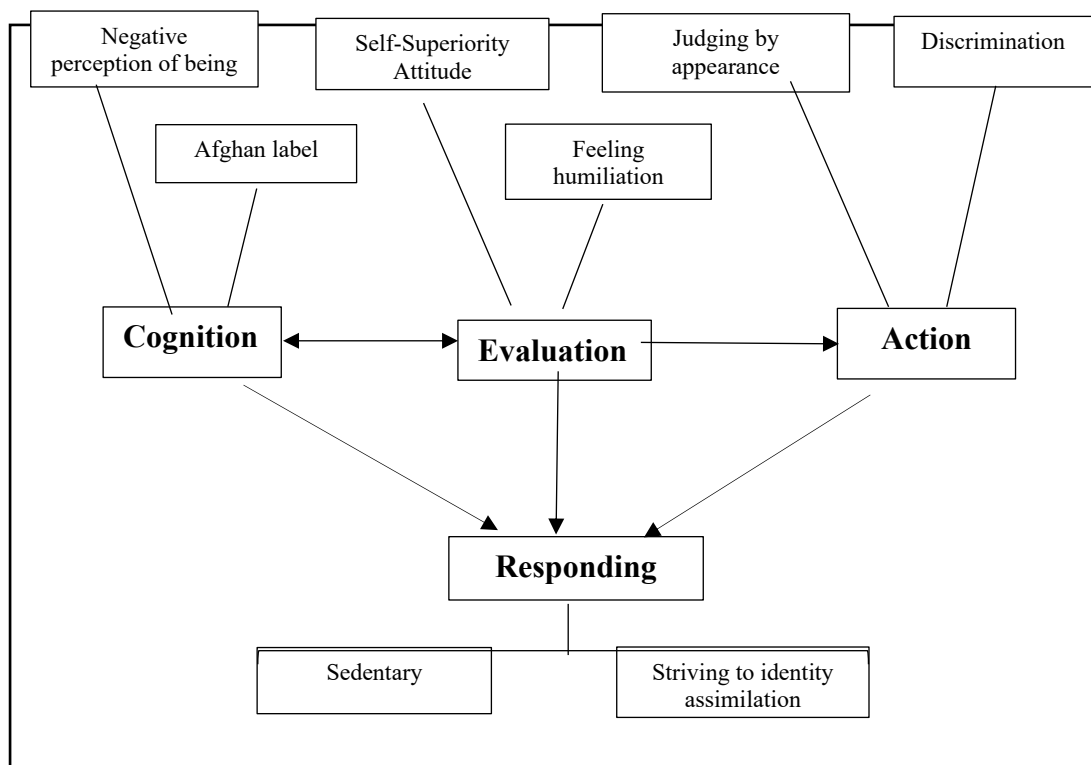

Figure 2. Conceptual Model of Intercultural Relations and Stereotypes among Afghan Immigrants in Iran

Based on the multiculturalism hypothesis, the security (economic and cultural) felt by indigenous people effectively accepts people from other cultures (immigrants). When people feel threatened, they reject immigrants. Integrated Threat Theory suggests negative stereotyping plays a significant role in negative intercultural relations (precipitating prejudice). According to the results of the research, the negative stereotypes that exist in Iran towards Afghan immigrants are the label of Afghan identity and negative perceptions of being Afghan (less educated, a thief, and dirty). These negative stereotypes encourage prejudice and affect the intercultural relations of immigrants with indigenous people. The discrimination category indicates a negative contact between immigrants and natives, and that negative contact leads to a decrease in the sense of security. Findings of Galyapina et al. (2021) and Park et al. (2022) support the finding that perceived security affects the tolerance of acculturation expectations the most. Therefore, the multiculturalism hypothesis proposes that a sense of security will promote better adaptation, and positive contact should predict higher levels of both intercultural adaptations. Negative contact will be associated with lower intercultural adaptation. A study by Shaterian (2020) revealed that 62

percent of respondents viewed Afghan migrants as a source of social insecurity, 24 percent cited them as a cause of economic insecurity, and 43 percent considered them a factor in political insecurity. This study indicates that the perception of security among Iranians regarding Afghan immigrants in Iran is low.

The measure of intercultural adaptation is negative attitudes and multiculturalism ideology (Berry 2023). Based on the research results, the two categories of superiority complex and facing humiliation show a negative attitude. The categories of sedentary and attempts at assimilation are responses to these categories, which indicate the consequences of intercultural relations between immigrants and natives, where strong intercultural relations are not adapted. The sedentary category suggests that immigrants will likely have limited interactions with native populations. Research conducted by Zandi-Navgran et al. (2025) and Arabpour et al. (2025) indicates that Afghan immigrants in Iran primarily engage in social interactions within their networks.

The findings indicate that stereotypes and prevailing attitudes within the host society significantly influence immigrants' adaptation strategies. This highlights the need for initiatives to reshape public perceptions of Afghan immigrants through public education and a critical review of the host society's immigration policies. Compared to previous research, a distinctive contribution of this study lies in identifying new concepts—such as *sedentary*, *striving for acceptance*, and *striving for identity assimilation*—as specific responses of immigrants to intercultural encounters in the host context.

Finally, the findings of this study carry important implications for policy and practice, highlighting the urgent need to reassess immigration policies in Iran. Immigration frameworks should be grounded in a multicultural approach. To this end, inclusive educational programs are essential—particularly those aimed at teaching the official language of the host society—as they foster communication and create meaningful opportunities for intercultural engagement between Afghan refugees and the native population. Also, social programs need to promote daily engagement between migrants and members of the settlement society. Developed policies and programs need to be flexible and guided by continuous monitoring of the needs and challenges faced by migrants in daily intercultural relations. Moreover, policymakers must adopt a long-term perspective on Afghan refugees, recognizing that they have been an integral part of Iranian society for several decades and are likely to remain so in the future.

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