

**SOCIO-POLITICAL ECHOES ACROSS BORDERS: IRANIAN INTERNATIONAL
STUDENTS' CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION**

by

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Introduction

The world is witnessing substantial international migration driven by economic, socio-political, and ecological factors. Consequently, this migration has engendered profound psychological, cultural, and political consequences for both the migrants and the host societies (Berry, 2019). International migration has risen in the past 50 years, with around 281 million people residing outside their country of origin in 2020 (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020).

Cross-cultural literature classifies migrants as immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and sojourners (Berry, 2006). Sojourners are voluntary and temporary migrants (Berry & Sam, 2016) who go abroad to achieve a specific goal within a set timeframe and return home (Safdar & Berno, 2016). International students are considered a sojourner group and one of the most significant and largest groups of sojourners (Safdar & Berno, 2016). Consequently, they are also voluntary migrants who temporarily stay in the host country to achieve a specific objective, such as obtaining an education.

In cross-cultural literature, many researchers have shown keen interest in examining acculturation and its outcome, cross-cultural adaptation (e.g., Brisset et al., 2010). Acculturation occurs when two distinct cultures come into contact, resulting in cultural changes at the group level and psychological changes at the individual level. These changes eventually result in various forms of adaptation, namely socio-cultural, psychological, and intercultural adaptation (Berry & Sam, 2016).

Psychological adaptation pertains to an individual's psychological well-being and life satisfaction, whereas socio-cultural adaptation relates to fitting into a new society and acquiring cultural competencies (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Intercultural adaptation, on the other hand, is concerned with effective interaction within multicultural contexts, emphasizing harmonious intercultural connections (Berry & Ward, 2016; Berry & Sam, 2016). Additionally, in the research on students abroad, academic adaptation is also explored, which encompasses students' adjustment to their educational environment, including interpersonal relationships, academic pursuits (Shamionov et al., 2020), language proficiency in the host country, and familiarity with the host educational system (Sumer, 2009).

Berry (1997) proposed a framework consisting of four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. While this model has been influential, it has also faced criticism from scholars who argue that it oversimplifies the acculturation process by not adequately accounting for contextual factors and relying on a rigid categorization (Gamsakhurdia, 2018). An alternative framework relevant to this study is

Ward and Geeraert's (2016) ecological model of acculturation. They argue that adaptation and acculturation of migrants are dynamic and change as a function of factors such as the ecological context of the home and host country at the *familial* (e.g., family dynamics), *institutional* (e.g., school and workplace), and *societal* levels (e.g., cultural distance, the socio-political context).

International students' experiences can be unique because they must adjust to both unfamiliar socio-cultural and academic settings. Students' experiences can impact their adaptation, either positively or negatively. For instance, language barriers, perceived discrimination, cultural distance, and economic and academic obstacles all impact international students' adaptation adversely; however, positive experiences, such as lower levels of perceived discrimination, higher levels of social support, out-group (local) contact, and motivation to learn about the host culture, have been reported to have a positive impact on students' adaptation (Safdar & Berno, 2016).

The adaptation journey can be more salient for Iranian students as they come from a non-secular country governed by Islamic (Sharia) laws, characterized by adherence to traditional gender roles and substantial gender inequality. Within Iranian society, traditional gender norms and laws have historically assigned men positions of dominance, exerting control over various aspects of women's lives, ranging from basic fundamental rights, such as the requirement to wear the hijab, to more intricate societal roles. Understanding this socio-political context is crucial for exploring Iranian international students' cross-cultural adaptation, experiences, and perceptions.

As Iranian students embark on international journeys, it is crucial to consider the context of Iran's history, characterized by significant transformations and upheavals as well as disruptions across various economic, social, political, and environmental domains. One of the most important consequences of these socio-political shifts and disruptions is the prevalence of the brain drain phenomenon, which has reached some of the highest rates globally. In recent years, this phenomenon has evolved beyond mere brain drain, culminating in the rare global phenomenon called mass migration. These adverse outcomes are attributed to socio-political and economic factors. The ongoing and pervasive disruption across various sectors of Iranian society has engendered an intricate situation for the Iranian people. Consequently, many Iranian individuals, including university students, have migrated from Iran to pursue a better socio-political, educational, and economic situation abroad.

Therefore, when Iranian students move abroad, they not only grapple with the typical challenges faced by international students but also carry the weight of their home country's

socio-political and cultural context. However, it should also be acknowledged that since the 1979 revolution, Iran has been sanctioned many times, particularly by the United States, the United Nations, and the European Union. Consequently, Iranian students find themselves navigating the intricate socio-political context of both their home and host countries, which adds complexity to their cross-cultural adaptation process and can have various impacts on their psychological well-being. These intertwined challenges underscore the importance of gaining insights into the distinctive experiences and obstacles faced by Iranian international students as they adapt to new socio-cultural and academic environments.

The Current Dissertation

This dissertation comprises a comprehensive literature review encompassing 130 studies spanning seven decades in Iranian history, specifically from 1955 to 2022, and three empirical qualitative studies (two cross-sectional and one longitudinal). For empirical studies, twenty Iranian students in Hungary were interviewed once, with different interview segments analyzed for each study. One additional interview was conducted for the longitudinal study.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to investigate the cross-cultural adaptation process among Iranian international students, encompassing socio-cultural, psychological, and academic adaptation. Essentially, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of Iranian students' experiences and adaptation, considering their distinct historical and cultural background within a political climate marked by centuries of upheaval and transformations. This dissertation investigates these facets of adaptation, offering insights into the societal challenges Iranian international students face and potentially contributing to developing policies and strategies to enhance their adaptation.

STUDY 1: Cross-Cultural Adaptation Amidst Socio-Political Turmoil: A Comprehensive Review of Iranian International Students Pre- and Post-Revolution

Research Aim

This study aimed to conduct a comprehensive literature review on the experiences and adaptation of Iranian international students abroad. Understanding the adaptation process of Iranian students requires more than a few references to existing literature; thus, a more comprehensive literature review was deemed essential.

Methods

This literature review was conducted using the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). Between September 2021 and January 2023, a systematic search was conducted on

electronic scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, PsycINFO, ERIC, and EBSCOhost, to identify all articles pertaining to Iranian students. Boolean operators were used to restrict search results to Iranian international students. Inclusion criteria included studies investigating Iranian students' adaptation and experiences, while exclusion criteria eliminated non-empirical studies and studies that did not include reports on Iranian students in their results.

Results

The systematic review included 130 articles. Forty-six studies were conducted in the U.S., with ten predating the 1979 revolution and the rest conducted after it. Gender was disproportionately represented in the studies.

This review employed a variety of models, which have been empirically validated in cross-cultural research involving international students. These models included Ward's (1996) theory of socio-cultural and psychological adaptation, Scharner and Young's (2016) integrated conceptual model of adjustment and adaptation, Berry's bidimensional model of acculturation (1997), the Multi-Dimensional Individual Difference Acculturation (MIDA) model (Safdar et al., 2003), and the ecological model of acculturation (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). These models were utilized to categorize the research findings, enhancing the understanding of Iranian international students' experiences and adaptation processes.

Major Themes and Sub-Themes

The current study primarily used an inductive approach to extract themes (Gale et al., 2013) and analyze the results of the studies.

Theme 1: Push-and-Pull Factors of Migration

Iranian students were attracted to host countries primarily for academic reasons before the 1979 revolution, while after the revolution, they were attracted by stability in socio-political factors. While pre-revolution studies primarily cited academic push factors, post-revolution studies mainly focused on the poor socio-political conditions in Iran that drove students away.

Theme 2: Academic Adaptation

Language in Academic Contexts. Iranian international students' academic adaptation was influenced by their language proficiency, with some facing difficulties with English while others did not. Generally, the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979 and the Iran-U.S. crisis adversely impacted the academic adaptation of Iranian students in the U.S. (Moshfegh, 1989; Shafieyan, 1983). However, the revolution or crisis adversely impacted

adaptation factors like discrimination and academic work rather than language and communication.

Academic System. In addition to language barriers, Iranian students, especially those who left Iran after the revolution, faced academic system challenges; however, many students were also satisfied with the academic system of the host country. Many students were dissatisfied with the host country's independent learning style, while others preferred the student-centered approach of the host country (Hosseini, 2022). Iran's hierarchical system may have influenced students' criticism of the teacher-centered approach. Some Iranian students criticized the teacher-centered approach and criticized teachers superiority in Iran (Doray, 2017)

Academic Achievement. Many Iranian students were motivated to pursue higher education, but some obstacles hindered their academic achievement. Language proficiency and familiarity with the academic system impacted Iranian students' academic achievement. External factors, including socio-economic and political issues, also influenced students' academic achievement.

Academic-Related Fees. Iranian students faced academic-related financial obstacles due to high tuition fees, while others found university fees affordable. Socio-political factors, such as the Iran-U.S. crisis, impacted several Iranian students' academic-related fees. After the hostage crisis, American universities lost trust in Iranian students and demanded full upfront payments, causing many students to drop out and seek part-time employment (Shafieyan, 1983).

Theme 3: Socio-Cultural Adaptation

Out-Group and In-Group Contact. Many Iranian students were able to interact with locals easily. However, most studies reported difficulties interacting with locals more frequently than with other international students and fellow nationals. Iranian students' interactions with locals were influenced by their impressions of the locals, how the locals treated them, and their perceived cultural distance. Sometimes, politico-ideological similarities influenced Iranian students' contact. Due to the hostage crisis, some Iranian students avoided American interactions, preferring in-group connections with people with whom they shared similar political ideologies.

Cultural Distance and Cultural Sensitivity. The adaptation of Iranian students, especially in Western nations, was significantly affected by their perception of cultural differences. These disparities, like variations in collectivism and individualism, frequently

resulted in challenges when integrating into the host culture. Cultural distance and cultural similarities were also reported in non-Western countries.

Social Support. Iranian students' primary sources of support were typically their families, with parents playing a central role, primarily offering financial and emotional support. While many Iranian students seemed to gain significant advantages from this social support, often more so than students from different cultural backgrounds, many of them expressed a desire for the experience of living independently while abroad.

Discrimination/Racism. Iranian students in many studies reported experiencing discrimination in the host country. However, pre-revolution studies reported discrimination less frequently than post-revolution studies. This difference is likely due to the absence of socio-political tension between Iran and the U.S. before 1979. Most of the discrimination faced by Iranians after the revolution was primarily attributed to the ongoing socio-political tension between Iran and the U.S.

Immigration Regulations, Visa, and Banking Issues. Iranian students reported issues with immigration regulations, primarily in post-revolution studies. The main issues with immigration regulations were visa-related (e.g., obtaining and extending visas, a lengthy visa application process, etc.). In addition to visa issues, Iranian students faced banking problems in their host country (e.g., being unable to open a bank account or having their bank account abruptly closed). All of these issues were due to the economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. against Iran.

Language in Social Contexts. For numerous Iranian students, their ability to effectively use the host country's language, mainly English, influenced their adaptation. In addition to language difficulties, many of them faced social language challenges, particularly in the realm of non-verbal communication. Some students expressed uncertainty and anxiety regarding navigating non-verbal communication in different cultural contexts.

Economic Obstacles. Many Iranian students reported financial difficulties. However, in most studies, especially post-revolution ones, Iranian students' financial difficulties were primarily attributed to the escalating political tensions between Iran and the U.S. over the past four decades, such as the U.S. imposing sanctions on Iran. In light of these economic difficulties, many Iranian students had to secure employment opportunities in the host nation to mitigate their financial difficulties and ensure stability in their future prospects.

Freedom and Gender Issues. Iranian students, regardless of the host country's location, reported a greater sense of freedom in their host country than in Iran. Pre-revolution studies focused less on freedom than post-revolution ones. However, some pre-revolution

studies addressed freedom. Generally, gender equality and women's rights in the host country were highly admired by many Iranian students.

Food. The primary dietary adjustment observed among Iranian students studying abroad encompassed a range of experiences. These experiences included challenges in adapting to local cuisine but also encompassed satisfaction with the local foods. Additionally, some students exhibited poor eating habits in the host country.

Theme 4: Psychological Adaptation

Homesickness and Loneliness. In several studies, homesickness accompanied or was associated with loneliness among students. Many Iranian students felt homesick and lonely, although this appears to have been a greater problem for Iranian students after the revolution. In most cases, the homesickness and loneliness experienced by Iranian students were caused by missing the families back home from whom they were separated. Students' feelings were sometimes exacerbated by socio-political events, such as the Iran-Iraq war, as many students feared for their families' safety in Iran and worried that they might not be able to see their families again.

Depression and Anxiety. In most studies, Iranian students experienced depression and anxiety to some degree, especially among those who left Iran after the revolution. Depression and anxiety were mainly due to economic obstacles, family separation, academic difficulties, and visa issues. The economic challenges of students had socio-political roots, which exacerbated student depression and anxiety. For example, the Iran-Iraq war, the Iran-US crisis, and the currency crisis caused by US sanctions on Iran contributed to students' depression and anxiety.

Happiness. In most studies, Iranian students reported being happier in the host country than in Iran, and they often cited freedom, independence, and self-growth as reasons for being happy in the host country (e.g., Hosseini-Nezhad et al., 2019). Iranian students often experienced happiness alongside negative emotions such as depression and anxiety, likely due to external factors such as economic crises, banking issues, and visa challenges.

Theme 5: Acculturation

Many Iranian students' integration and acculturation in host countries were challenging, gradual, and influenced by language. Historical and socio-political factors, such as the influence of the West on Iran and the negative global image of Iran, affected students' integration. Additionally, the history of political conflicts between Iran and the U.S. added to students' anxiety, particularly during the initial arrival phase at the airport, where positive treatment facilitated integration while negative treatment hindered it.

Theme 6: Identity

Many Iranian students showed cultural or ethnic pride. Despite their ethnic and cultural pride, some Iranian students felt ethnic shame because of stereotypes linked to Islamic or religious identities they preferred not to be associated with. Despite identity crises involving pride and shame, many Iranian students were willing to re-evaluate their identities to better adapt to their new environments.

Theme 7: Future Plans

Compared to pre-revolution students, post-revolution students were more likely to stay in their host countries or seek opportunities in other countries rather than return to Iran. The main reason why Iranian students, particularly those who left after the revolution, did not want to return to Iran was due to socio-political factors.

STUDY 2: Longing for Independence, yet Depending on Family Support: A Qualitative Analysis of Psychosocial Adaptation of Iranian International Students in Hungary¹

Research Aim

This qualitative research aimed to explore the intercultural experiences of Iranian international students in Hungary and investigate the factors that impacted students' adaptation.

Methods

This study is part of a larger research project encompassing three qualitative empirical studies, each with distinct aims while collectively focusing on the adaptation of Iranian students in Hungary. It should be highlighted that the subsequent qualitative empirical studies discussed in studies 3 and 4 also draw upon the same set of interview data and involve the same 20 Iranian students studying in Hungary. By investigating the adaptation and experiences of Iranian students across these studies, a more comprehensive understanding of the adaptation processes among Iranian students in this specific context can be achieved.

This study employed an inductive qualitative approach through semi-structured, in-depth interviews to explore the intercultural experiences of Iranian students in Hungary. Thematic analysis was deemed the most appropriate method as the study focused on

¹ Hosseini-Nezhad et al. (2019)

identifying themes within the participants' perspectives on their intercultural experiences in Hungary.

Permission to conduct this research, along with the subsequent empirical studies 3 and 4, was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest, Hungary.

Twenty Iranian international students (13 males and seven females) participated in the study.

Participants were mainly recruited via social media platforms, particularly by posting an advertisement form on Facebook groups. They were recruited over five months, between October 2017 and February 2018. A few participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Interviews were carried out face-to-face using a semi-structured format.

The demographic data questions included age, gender, marital status, students' sources of financial support, financial status, employment status, and English and Hungarian language proficiency level.

A set of semi-structured interview questions comprising 13 topics was employed to facilitate open discussions on students' living experiences in Hungary. These interview questions were based on existing literature that primarily explored international students' socio-cultural, psychological, and academic adaptation. The topics covered a broad range of factors, including but not limited to the factors influencing students' decision to study abroad (push and pull factors), socio-cultural adaptation (e.g., interactions with in-group and out-group members, perceptions of host attitudes, cultural differences, social support systems, prior intercultural experiences, gender-role related experiences, daily challenges, and available resources), psychological adaptation (e.g., mental well-being in Hungary, intercultural stress, acculturative stressors, feelings of loneliness and homesickness, life satisfaction, and happiness), and academic adaptation (e.g., academic challenges, perceived academic competency, the need for and recommendations regarding university support systems, and the student's experiences with the academic system in Hungary).

Notably, in each of the three empirical qualitative studies (studies 2, 3, and 4), only a few selected topics were chosen for analysis, and not all were investigated.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using the six thematic analysis phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

Three key themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the interview data: (1) sojourn's experience as self-growth, (2) uncertainty in intercultural interactions, and (3) striving for autonomous-related self.

Theme 1: Sojourn's Experience as Self-Growth

Most students were happy to be in Hungary and with their daily lives and not saddened by their separation from Iran and their families; only a few felt sad. Homesickness was not experienced by the majority, with only a minority experiencing it. About half of the participants felt lonely, while the other half did not. Their improved psychological well-being in Hungary compared to Iran was mainly attributed to the opportunities and resources available, including the ability to live independently, experience personal growth, greater freedom, language learning, English-language education, exposure to diverse cultures, and pursuing a European degree.

Theme 2: Uncertainty in Intercultural Interactions

Half of the participants were nervous or uncertain about how to behave in some situations in Hungary, while the other half were not. Concerns about nonverbal communication and unfamiliar cultural behaviors in Hungary sometimes caused this anxiety and uncertainty. Concerns about making cultural mistakes, such as inappropriate physical contact that could be misinterpreted in Western culture or being unsure when to hug, kiss, or shake hands, were examples of nonverbal communication uncertainty or worry. These examples demonstrate the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptation in cross-cultural interactions.

Theme 3: Striving for Autonomous-Related Self

This theme describes the independence aspirations of Iranian students studying in Hungary. Compared to their experiences in Iran, where living alone was uncommon, many students exhibited a strong sense of independence. They viewed their time abroad as an opportunity for self-growth and greater independence and autonomy. Despite this desire for autonomy, most students relied on their families, particularly their parents, for financial and emotional support. While parental support positively impacted their adaptation and mental health, it occasionally resulted in excessive parental concern and interference. When faced with obstacles, some students attempted to balance their need for independence with their reliance on family support.

STUDY 3: “We Begin 300 Meters Behind the Starting Line:” Adaptation of Iranian Students in Hungary in the Post-Sanctions Era²

Research Aim

The current study explored the trajectory of psychosocial adaptation among Iranian students in Hungary and the obstacles they faced. This study focused specifically on visa, banking, and currency crisis issues.

The following are the primary research questions:

Q1: What are the main challenges Iranian students face in Hungary negatively impacting their mental health?

Q2: How do Iranian students’ mental health and adaptations change over time?

Methods

As mentioned in Study 2, the three qualitative empirical studies discussed in Studies 2, 3, and 4 all utilized the same interview data collected during the initial interview round. Because the methodology of the first round of interviews has already been discussed in depth in Study 2, duplication of information is avoided in this study. As a result, only the methodology utilized for the follow-up interviews is described further down. This study adopted a longitudinal design using an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

In the follow-up interviews, out of the 20 Iranian students who participated in the first interview round, 12 agreed to participate. The rest did not respond or had left Hungary due to the currency crisis. Follow-up interviews were conducted via audio call between September and October 2018. The follow-up interviews were concurrently translated to English and transcribed verbatim on *oTranscribe* software. In Study 2, the demographic questions and the topics comprising the semi-structured interview questions were outlined. Follow-up interviews explored changes in student adaptation over six months, particularly emphasizing the effects of a currency crisis on students’ mental health.

Results

The following themes emerged from qualitative content analysis of interview data: (1) visa and banking challenges, (2) impact of the currency crisis in Iran on mental health, and (3) positive and negative changes in psychological well-being.

² Hosseini-Nezhad et al. (2021).

Theme 1: Visa and Banking Challenges

Challenges in obtaining and extending visas for Iranian students in Hungary led to anxiety and feelings of discrimination. Iranian students faced obstacles in extending their visas after graduation, which created uncertainty and a sense of inferiority compared to their EU peers. This visa-related anxiety stemmed from the fear that if they could not obtain a visa extension, they would have to leave Hungary, and if they left, they were uncertain if they could get a visa again in the future to return. Many students were driven to seek employment before their student visas expired to secure a longer-lasting working visa. However, obtaining visas is not guaranteed and involves a time-consuming process. The working visa allows students to stay in Hungary for an extended period and apply for visas in other countries, motivating Iranian students to put in extra effort to avoid deportation.

Iranian students also encountered banking difficulties in Hungary because of sanctions imposed on Iran. Many banks either denied Iranians the ability to open bank accounts or abruptly terminated their existing accounts.

Theme 2: Impact of the Currency Crisis in Iran on Mental Health

In follow-up interviews, students revealed that the sudden devaluation of the Iranian currency had a detrimental impact on their mental well-being. Initially, most of these upper-middle-class students did not mention financial challenges in the first interview; however, in the second interview, nearly all of them reported financial hardships. A few students' families resorted to selling assets or seeking second jobs to afford their children's tuition fees. Almost all participants relied on their parents for financial support; however, the economic crisis motivated them to seek employment and work harder to recover their financial losses, causing anxiety about their future. Furthermore, some students' families could not send money because currency exchange services halted transfers until rates stabilized. These challenges compelled some students to seek employment since money could not be transferred from Iran. The currency crisis emerged as a significant contributor to students' psychological distress, impacting financial security, employment necessity, and visa acquisition.

Theme 3: Positive and Negative Changes in Psychological Well-Being

In the second round of interviews, most students' mental health notably improved compared to the first interview round. Nevertheless, a small number mentioned experiencing heightened anxiety and depression. Several students were happy with being in Hungary and noted decreased anxiety levels. Initially, some participants encountered difficulties living independently; however, as they spent more time in Hungary, they began to see their ability

to handle tasks, including decision-making, like cooking, cleaning, and managing finances, as a valuable asset. Furthermore, improved mental health among participants in Hungary was related to socio-political freedom, economic opportunities, and educational achievements. Some students believed that due to the unstable economic situation in Iran and the uncertainty about their future, they felt safer and more hopeful about their prospects in Hungary. Some students in the second interview round reported declining mental health due to the economic crisis. Participants stayed hopeful about overcoming their challenges. Students knew they had to stay positive to stay focused on their goals. Since the U.S. imposed strong sanctions on Iran and the Iranian government cut subsidies and raised prices, students' anxieties will persist as the Iranian currency falls.

STUDY 4: Perceptions of Gender Roles and Freedom among Iranian International Students in Hungary³

Aim of the study

This study investigated gender differences regarding gender-role attitudes and perceptions of freedom among Iranian students in Hungary. It also explored how the students subjectively experienced freedom and what aspects of freedom in Hungary were perceived as advantageous for each gender.

The primary research questions are as follows:

Q1: How do Iranian men and women in Hungary perceive gender role differences?

Q2: How do Iranian men and women in Hungary perceive freedom?

Methods

This cross-sectional qualitative study integrated inductive and deductive content analysis approaches (Nyquist et al., 2019).

The semi-structured interview included closed and open-ended questions about various topics, including perceptions of gender role differences, psychological and socio-cultural adaptation, and perceptions of freedom.

The inductive content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) part guided the data analysis (e.g., the procedure entails open coding, category, sub-category, and theme

³ Hosseini-Nezhad et al. (2022).

development). Inductive content analysis was followed by deductive content analysis using theoretical frameworks, guiding the study from general observation to a specific conclusion.

Results

Four themes emerged from data analysis of the interview data: (1) gender essentialism, (2) gender-role egalitarianism, (3) traditional gender stereotypes, and (4) gendered freedom.

Theme 1: Gender Essentialism

Several Iranian men attributed differences in gender roles to biological attributes, and they considered these differences natural. The gender-essentialist attitudes of a few older men were even entwined with anti-feminist or feminist stereotypical sentiments. In contrast, none of the women in the study held gender essentialist beliefs; they did not link gender role differences to biological traits but solely ascribed them to societal influences.

Theme 2: Gender-Role Egalitarianism

As previously mentioned, even though many Iranian male students attributed gender role differences to biological factors, many attributed these differences to social factors, which manifested as gender-egalitarian attitudes. Generally, Iranian men were more likely than Iranian women to hold transitional gender-role attitudes. On the other hand, Iranian women were more outraged by gender role inequality and gender role disparities, and they all held egalitarian attitudes regarding gender roles.

Theme 3: Traditional Gender Stereotypes

Iranian male students supported gender equality and egalitarian gender roles; however, many held traditional attitudes and stereotypes regarding gender. Generally, Iranian men held more rigid gender stereotypes than women, who adopted fewer gender stereotypes than males. Male students held stereotypes around occupational roles, relationships, behaviors, and personality traits. Overall, traditional gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes were mainly evident among male students; only one female student displayed benevolent sexist attitudes.

Theme 4: Gendered Freedom

This study used the term “*gendered freedom*” to conceptualize the processes by which freedom was experienced, perceived, and evaluated according to gender. Iranian students generally reported feeling more freedom in Hungary than in Iran. Freedom, or its relative lack, was mentioned in various domains. The discussions on freedom primarily revolved around freedom of speech, clothing, hairstyles, relationship choices, and sexual behavior. In Hungary, certain freedoms appeared to be more advantageous for one gender than the other,

such as the absence of a veiling requirement for women and more relaxed cross-gender relationships for men.

Integrated Discussion

Based on the results of the four studies, it can be concluded that Iranian international students, particularly those who left following the 1979 revolution, experienced an involuntary and permanent transition. In addition, their process of cross-cultural adaptation was marked by a complex interplay of both positive and negative socio-political factors, including but not limited to the 1979 revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the hostage crisis, visa and banking issues, currency crises due to sanctions, freedom and independence in the host country, and high-quality education abroad. This process is significantly and more frequently influenced by broader socio-political and historical factors pertaining to the student's home country, the host country, and diplomatic relations between the home and the host. The result of the present study is consistent with the ecological model proposed by Ward and Geeraert (2016), according to which the ecological contexts of the home country and the host country play a critical role in the adaptation of migrants.

This dissertation proposes revising the classical taxonomy of international students as “voluntary” and “temporary” migrants. The proposed revision seeks to incorporate potential characteristics of “involuntary” and “permanent” migration of international students. Additionally, existing categories of cross-cultural adaptation, such as psychological, socio-cultural, and academic adaptations, may not adequately capture the impact of socio-political factors on the experiences of Iranian international students. Hence, a new category, namely socio-political adaptation, is proposed to better comprehend and address the challenges faced by international students, especially those from countries with complex socio-political histories. The new category would also encompass three aspects of students' adaptation to socio-political factors: their host country, their home country, and the diplomatic relations between the home and host countries. It would also account for variations in adaptation experiences across the chronology of the socio-political history of both the origin and host countries.

The current studies exhibit several limitations that require acknowledgment. These limitations encompass a focus on students from middle to upper socioeconomic classes who predominantly rely on parental financial support, an underrepresentation of female participants, and the potential for cultural bias. In future research endeavors, it is advisable to direct attention toward financially independent students with lower socioeconomic

backgrounds, strive to include a more balanced representation of Iranian women, and involve non-Iranian researchers to study Iranian international students to mitigate potential biases.

Furthermore, this research underscores the necessity of fostering a more supportive environment for international students, especially those from countries like Iran facing socio-political challenges, by raising awareness, offering financial aid, immigration assistance, job opportunities, academic guidance, and psychological support while also advocating for solutions to address Iran's socio-political issues; therefore, it calls upon policymakers, educators, and advocates to take action in this regard.

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