POPULATION-BASED EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES
A socio-medical study of Iranian families in Sweden
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ABSTRACT
The significant social problems that confront Iranian families that have immigrated to Western countries have been described in the literature, in particular regarding the difficulties between parents and their adolescent children. However, the investigations that have been performed have not focused on how the situations of these families can be improved. Therefore, I conducted an intervention study involving Iranian families in Sweden, one of the largest immigrant groups in this country. The objectives were as follows: (1) to describe how ideas about family pedagogy held by parents and adolescents are affected by move from a country with prevailing traditional family values to a Western society such as Sweden; and (2) to construct a family pedagogy based on the opinions/narratives of members of immigrant families (especially adolescents), and subsequently put this teaching into practice and then evaluate the results of that endeavor.

The empirical data comprised 25 interviews with parents and adolescents, 10 letters written by adolescents, and some other evidence collected in Sweden and Iran. Symbolic interactionism was the main theoretical perspective that guided the entire research process, including the selection of methods. Therefore, it was natural to use methods from ethnography and grounded theory, as well as narrative analysis. Analysis of the data revealed three important dimensions in parent-adolescent relationships: power, communication, and intimacy. A model of visionary family pedagogy was constructed based on the analysis of the data, the UN:s Child Convention, and the application of symbolic interactionism done to gain an understanding of parent-adolescent relationships.

Following the pragmatist circle of theory-practice-theory and in order to improve the situations of the Iranian families in Sweden, I initiated a two-year intervention program aimed at educating and supporting these people. This program was carried out within the Swedish Organization for the Rights of Children (BRIS) and used communication technology such as live local radio lectures and a telephone help-line to provide support. From 1998 to 2000, as many as 13,000 Iranians listened to a total of 83 live broadcasts, and 525 calls lasting a total of 22,507 minutes were made by Iranians for private family counseling. A pragmatist empowerment model for problem solving was developed and used both in the educative radio programs and especially in the help-line conversations.

The intervention program was evaluated together with a senior researcher. The problem-solving model has been taught to university students and to practicing social workers in Sweden since 2000. Experience from the intervention program has also been transferred to a child organization in Iran (the Society for Protecting the Rights of the Child, SPRC). As a result, the first telephone help-line for families has been started in Iran, and the problem-solving model has been taught to practicing social workers.

Key words. Immigrants, Iranians in Sweden, intervention research, family change, parent-adolescent relationships, power, communication, intimacy, the United Nations Child Convention, family pedagogy, social work, empowerment practice, educative radio lectures, telephone help-line, pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, social constructionism.

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