

## Immigrant Scholars and Their Children: Experiences and Challenges in a Time of Public Skepticism

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### Abstract

*this study will highlight the challenges faced by immigrant scholars from non-dominant cultures and their children when they relocate to the United States. The purpose of this study is to describe the challenges/difficulties that immigrant scholars from non-dominant cultures face in the US in the time of public skepticism. This study is based on a qualitative tradition and used the case study approach. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Two Immigrants scholars at a city in the southeast participated in the study. We had the literature justify the problem and play a minor role, and we analyzed the data using text analysis/hermeneutic reflection to obtain detailed descriptions and themes. The findings are reported under three themes: (1) several moving, unstable life and reasons of immigration to the US, (2) challenges facing immigrants in the US, and (3) family dynamic changes.*

**Keywords:** *Skepticism, Immigrant Scholars*

### Background and Theoretical Framework

With recent political changes, some perceive the new immigrants as harmful to national interest and perceive immigrants as the source of many of the US societal problems (Rong, 1998). Thus, it is noticeable nowadays that immigrant scholars experience difficulties and delays as they plan to move to the USA. Recent statistics reported by the U.S. Census Bureau (2010) that population and demographic projections will be different by the year 2050. Perez and Hirschman (2009) mentioned that approximately 70% of the population would be white Americans in 2050 and non-Hispanic whites will not be the majority of the population in 2042. Moreover, about one-fourth of Asian Americans and African Americans will have mixed descendants. Also, Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde (2012) revealed that Spanish speakers represent 80% of English Language Learners, ELLs. Asian speakers such as Korean, Vietnamese, and Latino represent only 8% of the population. In addition, approximately 76% of English language learners were born in the USA, but 80% of their parents were born outside the USA and came from different language backgrounds, which is possible that immigrant parents may not have been proficient in the English language.

The first theoretical framework used in this study is the *Social Constructivism* framework. We believe that this paradigm is the best to be used in this study because it depends primarily on participants' views of situations and the researchers should recognize their backgrounds as shaping interpretation. *Social Constructivism* helps us use more open-ended questions to get better information. Multiple realities are constructed through our interactions with participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Another theoretical framework is the *Model of Cultural Adaption*. According to Coleman (2012), this model divides families' adoption to a new culture into three categories; enculturation, selective acculturation and assimilation. To illustrate, immigrant families that strongly hold on to cultural values and behaviors of their mother country while also taking special care to make sure that these values and behaviors are followed by their children are described as embracing *enculturation*. In contrast, families who hold on to the cultural values and behaviors of their mother country and selectively incorporate some elements of dominant American culture in their daily lives are described as *selective acculturation*. Last, immigrant families who fully adopted American culture, behaviors and customs are described as having *assimilated* to the dominant culture. Working through these three cultural adoption processes is dependent on several factors such as languages differences, values surrounding the parent-child relationship, economic advancement and life priorities

The existent literature showed that many immigrants relocate to the United States of America to seek work opportunities, study or are refugees escaping persecution at their home countries (Coleman, 2012; Paat, 2013). Despite these opportunities, immigrant scholars from non-dominant cultures and their children have

difficulty adjusting to American culture and demands as well as language differences in the time of public skepticism.

The purpose of this study is to describe the challenges/difficulties that immigrant scholars from non-dominant cultures face in the US in the time of public skepticism. At this stage in the research, the *immigrant scholar* will be generally defined as a student or an employee who comes to the United States to take up temporary residence to work or to study. *Non-dominant culture* is associated with traditional African, Asian, Hispanic or Latino cultures, and it is not associated with European-American culture. *Public skepticism* is an attitude of doubt or disposition in general or toward a particular object, truth or a person.

In response to this problem, this study proposes to answer this main question: *What are the challenges that immigrant scholars from non-dominant cultures face in a time of public skepticism?* Other sub-questions are (1) What challenges do immigrant scholars from non-dominant cultures face in obtaining student, work, tourist VISA to travel to the US? (2) How does language differences affect scholars and their children when they relocate to the US? What barriers do they face? (3) How does the family dynamics change as families from non-dominant cultures assimilate to the dominant culture? (4) How do perceptions of others influence the scholarship of individuals from non-dominant cultures? This study is based on a qualitative tradition and uses the *case study* approach. Data will be collected using *semi-structured interviews*. About two Immigrants scholars, originally from Iraq and Lebanon and currently residing at a city in the southeast participated in the study. We aimed to look at the difficulties they experienced when they relocated and which cultural model they adopted.

## **Method:**

### ***1- Qualitative Research Approach***

This study was based on a qualitative tradition and used the *case study* approach. Merriam (1998) defined a qualitative case study as an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit” (p. 27). Case studies provide researchers with a comprehension of complex social phenomena while maintaining the holistic and meaningful characteristics of everyday events (Hebert and Beardsley, 2001). Case studies are a valuable tool for understanding human thinking and behavior, and they provide an in-depth investigation of one particular individual, group, time-period or event (Hebert and Beardsley, 2001). In this study, multiple case studies were used to illustrate the challenges/difficulties that immigrant scholars from non-dominant cultures face in the US in the time of public skepticism. We had the literature justify the problem and play a minor role, and we analyzed the data using text analysis/hermeneutic reflection to obtain detailed descriptions and themes.

The *rationale* for why multiple case studies apply to this research is that they help the researcher to have a deeper understanding of exploring the participants and topic being studied. Moreover, it could be argued that the more case studies a scientific article has, the more likely it is confident in its representativeness. Further, by using multiple case studies, the researcher will be able to analyze the data within each situation and across different situations and get more than one perspective of the issue. Also, multiple cases help researchers understand the similarities and differences between the cases, and thus the researcher can add to the literature important influences from its differences and similarities (Gustafsson, 2017).

### ***2- Sampling (Site/context and Participants)***

In this study, two immigrants’ scholars at a city in the southeast participated in the study. The participants immigrated from Lebanon and Iraq. Participants were recruited using convenient sampling techniques, starting with an individual known to the researcher who has recently immigrated to the US. The researcher then asked the participant to recruit other participants for this study (snowball sampling). In order to provide the researcher with more information about the case under study, we chose research participants from whom we can receive

first-hand descriptions of the problem studied. We believe that this sample will be a good fit for the research question since we were looking for immigrant scholars to ask them about their experiences and challenges when they relocated to the United States.

### 3- Data Collection

In this study, data were collected using *semi-structured interviews*. A semi-structured interview is “a meeting in which the interviewer does not strictly follow a formalized list of questions” (Doyle, 2019). By using this instrument, we asked more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewee rather than a straightforward question and answer format. To combine research questions to the instrument, we prepared a list of questions in advance, but that does not mean we asked them all or use them in any particular order to guide the conversations. We also used probing questions to get more responses from the participants. The list of interview questions was primarily taken from the main research question as well as other sub-questions that we mentioned earlier.

**Interviews protocol:** both interviews were sent via email due to scheduling difficulties to meet the participants in person. The interviews were completed in about an hour. Each participant was asked to read and sign a consent form before completing the interview. Participants were asked to clarify and elaborate phrases the researcher did not understand or in case of ambiguity or lack of clarity. Also, participants were asked that they would be given a follow-up interview if we need more clarifications of their responses.

### 4- Data analysis:

**Transcription Analysis:** to analyze the transcribed interview, some procedures that Wolff (1999) was used in his study. In general, “the initial procedure consists in the description (interviews), followed by reduction (thematizations) and interpretation (hermeneutic reflection” (Wolff, 1999; in Merriam and Associates 2002, p. 97). Here the description was the transcribed interviews with respondents. In each respondent’s description, the researcher looked for clusters of statements that come together and form one mass or whole around a central theme and list these themes together with the research participant’s comments.

In this study, the findings are reported under three themes: (1) several moving, unstable life and reasons of immigration to the US, (2) challenges facing immigrants in the US, and (3) family dynamic changes. Each theme has sub-categories, and figure 1 shows *Themes Mapping* with other sub-themes.

### 5- Establishing Credibility

This study addressed four components of trustworthiness that are relevant to qualitative research: (a) credibility; (b) transferability; (c) dependability and (d) confirmability (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011).

To establish *credibility*, the researcher reviewed the individual transcripts, looked for similarities within and across study participants. As stated in an article by Krefting (1991, p. 218), “A qualitative study is considered credible when it presents an accurate description or interpretation of human experience that people who also share the same experience would immediately recognize.” To check the credibility of this study, member checking, and peer review processes were used. The researcher asked the participants to review the transcripts and interpretation of data to check for accuracy and resonance with their experiences (*member checking*). Also, the researcher asked an experienced professor at the University of Alabama Birmingham in the qualitative analysis process to review and discuss the coding process (*peer review*).

To establish *transferability*, which means "The ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another" (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011, p. 153), the researcher intends to use the same data collection methods first with a group of Asian immigrants, then with a group of Hispanic immigrants to provide intensive descriptions of other demographics and geographic boundaries of this study.

Dependability occurs when another researcher can follow the study of the trail used by the researcher (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011). To establish *dependability*, we asked a researcher outside of the study examine the process of data collection, data analysis, and the results of the research study. This was done to confirm the accuracy of our findings.

Confirmability “occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability have been established” (Thomas and Magilvy, 2011, p. 154). To establish *confirmability*, the findings were shaped by participants more than they were shaped by the researcher. In addition, we used reflective techniques to maintain a sense of awareness about the study and unfolding results. For reflexivity, the researcher spent time considering how her own beliefs and values affect the research. The researcher's background as a temporary immigrant helped write up her thoughts and attitudes and attach them to this study.

### 6- Ethical Considerations

There were some ethical issues that the researcher considered prior, during and after conducting this study, and here are the steps of what has been done:

- (1) **Consent form and invitation letter:** we sent invitation letters and disclosed the research problem, the purpose, alternatives, confidentiality, voluntary participation and withdrawal, cost of participation and benefits and risks of the study to participants, and we did not pressure them into signing consent forms.
- (2) **During collecting data:** we asked participants if they wanted us to mention their first names in the study or use pseudonyms.
- (3) **During analyzing data:** we avoided disclose only positive results, and we presented all positive and negative points that immigrants talked about.
- (4) **When reporting and sharing data:** we avoided disclosing harmful information that would harm participants. Although we avoided presenting harmful information and only positive results, we reported honestly and avoided falsifying evidence, data, findings, and conclusion.
- (5) **Confidentiality procedures:** the researcher followed these guidelines to maintain confidentiality and safeguard the data;

1- *Encrypt sensitive files:* this was done by encrypting sensitive files using file passwords so as to protect them from being read or used by those who are not entitled to do either.

2- *Physically secure devices and paper documents:* this included controlling access of all kinds, both digital and papers, protecting devices and paper documents from misuse or theft by storing them in locked areas. Devices or sensitive documents never left unattended in public locations.

3- *Securely dispose of data, devices, and paper records:* at the end of the study when data is no longer necessary for university-related purposes, the researcher will dispose them appropriately to ensure that it cannot be recovered and misused. All Paper documents containing sensitive information will be shredded rather than dumped into trash or recycling bins.

4- *Manage devices:* this was done by protecting computers used. The researcher followed basic cybersecurity hygiene by using anti-virus software, using device passcodes.

### 7- Role of the Researcher

Since we used the social constructivism framework, which depends primarily on participants' views of situations, we recognized their backgrounds as shaping interpretation. We also were able to use more open-ended questions to get better and further information (Creswell and Poth, 2018). We also worked as a learner, and we actively engaged in constructing deeper understandings about the topic being studied. We realized how something is true and how we trust what someone said and what was acceptable as evidence. According to (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 38), “although the researcher cannot actually get into the participants' minds, he can search for evidence of their world views”. In addition, we were reflexive, which means that we spent enough time considering how our own beliefs and values would affect the study. Finally, we did not critique

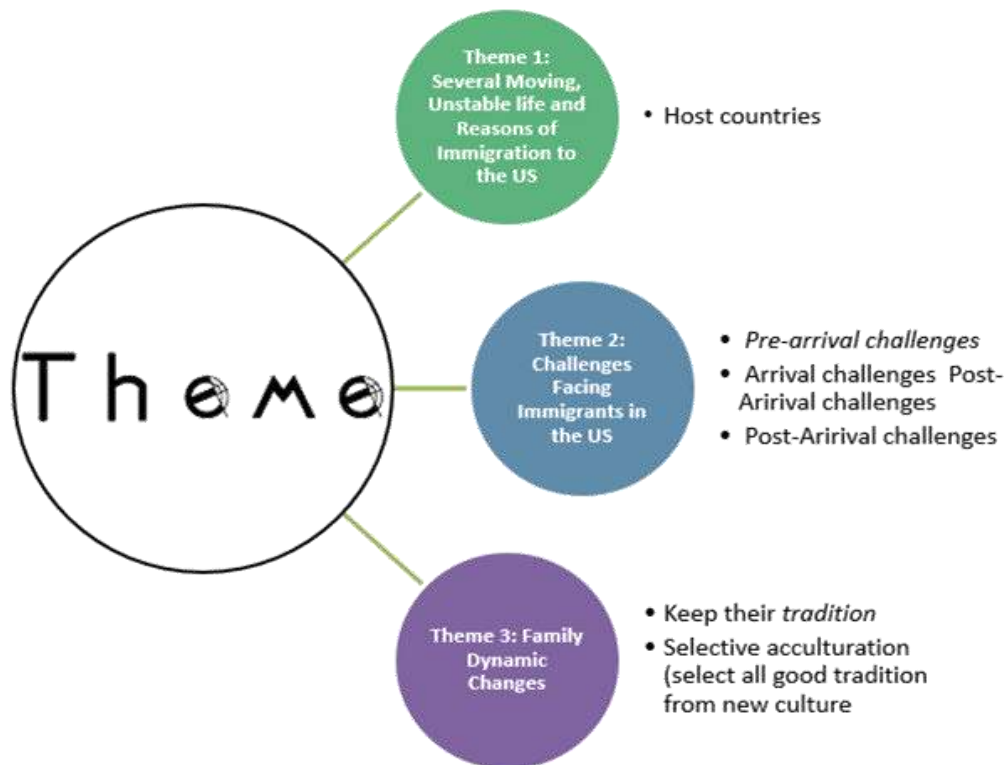
what participants said in the interviews, but we only gathered data, described it as it is shown in the transcript (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

### Finding and Discussion

In this section, we will present both our findings and a thoughtful discussion of what we believe the data “means.” We will include a detailed description of the setting, study participants, themes, and how we addressed research questions and sub-questions. We will then provide limitations, implications for practice and recommendations for future research

Two immigrants’ scholars at a city in the southeast participated in the study. The participants immigrated from Lebanon (Alia) and Iraq (Shayma). The findings were shaped by participants more than they were shaped by the researcher. We wrote our participants’ responses in *Italic* font and our reflection and discussion in Normal font. The findings are reported under three themes: (1) several moving, unstable life and reasons of immigration to the US, (2) challenges facing immigrants in the US, and (3) family dynamic changes. The Figure 1 below shows *Themes Mapping* with other sub-themes.

Figure 1: Themes Mapping



### Theme 1: Several Moving, Unstable life and Reasons for Immigration to the US

Historically, the US is known for its hospitality and readiness to welcome all cultures and backgrounds around the world, especially to those who are forced to flee persecution or human rights violations such as killing and torture. Other immigrants are looking for a better quality of life. For example, better healthcare, education, personal security, jobs and improved economy, governance, and basic rights and much more. In some cases, and often, immigrants move through several countries before they enter the United States. These countries are called host countries. Although immigrants often settled in some countries before relocating to the US, many of them did not feel that these host countries would be their final destination. Many immigrants wanted to move to



communities that guarantee them the quality of life. The following quotes from the immigrants *Alia* and *Shayma* reflected on these issues.

- *Alia* from Lebanon said, “*We came here because of my husband's job, and we have been here for 9 years. We lived in Canada for a long time and when my husband relocated due to his job, we had to apply for a working Visa*”.
- *Shayma* from Iraq, where the people there, experienced war, injustices and persecution has provided us with her long story of coming here. She said, “*I have been here for 18 years and my husband 7 years. My parents decided to leave Iraq in 1991 because of war, oppression and dictatorship. I had three uncles executed by Saddam Hussein's regime for having views that opposed the dictatorship. Our lives were in danger. My parents then decided to move our family (my siblings and I) to Syria. I was 6 years old. I was enrolled in school there and lived for 10 years. However, opportunities were limited in Syria and concerns about safety from persecution lead to us moving to the US in 2001 through the help of the United Nations. I was 16 years old. Therefore, I was enrolled in high school in Michigan. I then attended Wayne State University in Detroit and earned my bachelor's degree and worked in my field of study for 10 years. My husband, however, came to the US as a master's student in 2012 sponsored by the Iraqi government. He then got accepted to a PhD program which he completed last year. I am a naturalized citizen of the US and my husband holds permanent residency (green card)*”.

## Theme 2: Challenges Facing Immigrants in the US

### 1- Pre-arrival challenges:

Prior to relocating to the US Immigrants are required to apply and obtain VISA in their home countries. The process of obtaining the VISA is long, tedious and often not all applicants easily obtain VISA. Even though *Alia* said that they did not have problems getting the US VISA we noticed from her reflection that her husband's job provided a lawyer to apply on behalf of them. If getting the US VISA is easy, they would not have to provide a lawyer to apply on behalf of them.

For this challenge *Alia* said, “*We lived in Canada for a long time and when my husband relocated due to his job, we had to apply for a working Visa. Wasn't hard to get the visa because my husband job provided a lawyer to apply on behalf of us*”

*Shayma's* families did not have to apply for a VISA because they arrived in the US as refugees through the United Nations. However, she said that they went through a strict process before arriving here.

For this challenge *Shayma* said, “*I did not apply for VISA. I arrived as a Refugee through the United Nations. My family and I went through a rigorous process that included interviews and medical checkups. The process took more than one year. My husband came through student VISA*”

### 2- Arrival challenges:

#### • At the airport:

Many immigrants' families usually experience delays in arrival to the airport due to long lines and interviews by Transportation Security Administration, TSA officials. But, since *Shayma* and her family arrived in the US as refugees, and they had already applied through the United Nations, they did not face any problem at the airport.

- *Shayma* said, “*Being admitted through the United Nations was not difficult. We had our Green Cards (permanent residency) in Syria before we came to the US. TSA agents reserve the right to admit visitors and travelers based on their own discretion*”.

However, *Alia* moved from Canada to the US. I had to wait for a long time at the airport without any reason.

Alia said, “*Since we live in Canada we drove when we moved to the USA, we faced lots of waiting about five hours without any reason because at that time we had all the papers and documents they needed, what’s the reason behind all this waiting till now I don’t know*”.

- **The feelings of immigrants and their children when they arrived**

Some immigrants have mixed feelings when they arrive in the US. They feel alone and isolated because they miss their cultures, colleagues, relatives, and friends, and they also feel happy because of the safety and quality of life. However, as they settle in the US, immigrants feel more relaxed as they acculturate to the new community. The following quotes were *Alia’s* and *Shayma’s* feelings when they relocated to the US with their families.

*Alia* said, “*I felt lonely at the beginning but after a while I started making friends*”.

*Shayma* expressed her feelings extensively by saying “*in 2001 when I arrived in the US with my parents and siblings, I was feeling excited, happy and sad. I was excited about this new adventure and going to the US where people are respected, and the law protects the people. I was happy to finally not worry about our safety. However, it was sad because I left dear friends back in Syria. I relocated when I was 16 years old. It was very stressful to adjust to the way of life in the US. That includes language, culture and even the laws of this land. I had to learn how to embrace the new culture*”.

### 3- **Post-arrival challenges:**

- **The effect of relocation on children**

*Alia* reflected on her children's feelings by saying “*My children always miss their country and they wish to go back, but after a while they adapt and make friends and they moved on with their life and now they consider Alabama their home*”.

*Shayma* had so many concerns about relocation. She said, “*I relocated when I was 16 years old. It was very stressful to adjust to the way of life in the US. That includes language, culture and even the laws of this land. I had to learn how to embrace the new culture. Also, high school was a bit challenging in regards to interaction. students were grouped into their cliques. They said hurtful comments like “boater” which means I came to the US by boat. But in general, I was able to form my own friends who were in the same situation as myself being new to the US. This sharing of the same struggles made it so much easier. I was lucky that the city we settled in had middle eastern immigrants. I also cover my head with a scarf in accordance with my religious teachings. This brought extra attention and made me feel sometimes awkward. But I had friends in similar situations and that helped too*”.

- **Language barriers**

When *Alia* moved from Lebanon to Canada, she said that she had some language barriers. However, they did not have any language difficulties when they moved to the US because they had already learned English in Canada. *Alia* reflected on that by saying:

*“Communication becomes difficult due to the language barrier in our case wasn’t a big deal because we knew the language very well when we came here”.*

On the other hand, *Shayma* came from Syria and she only knew Arabic and French. She said,

*“The biggest challenge was the language. I did not speak any English. My primary language was Arabic, and I was taught French as a second language in school. I enrolled in school the second week we arrived in the US. I was enrolled in ESL classes which were very helpful. Having my immediate family with me helped a lot and alleviated a lot of my concerns. I cared very much about my studies and spent a lot of time in the library. I started reading children's books to learn the language and then transitioned to more advanced reading materials. This was my absolute main focus. It was to learn the language and graduate high school on time without being delayed”.*

- **Post-September 11<sup>th</sup> and perceptions of others**

The tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 greatly changed the immigration policies to the USA. Since then, applicants are required to provide extensive information and the review process is taking longer and fewer are approved to relocate to the USA. In addition, perceptions by some people toward immigrants who had already relocated to the US changed.

With regard to this issue Alia said, *“it is very hard to fit in because they always consider you a foreigner no matter what you do its always harder to get hired for basic jobs and it's even harder to get a visa to travel”*. She also added, *“perceptions of others impacted our children big time because all the scholarship applies only for the green card holder and American citizen. students who have VISA they're not allowed to apply”*.

However, Shayma had faced several challenges regarding this issue.

She stated *“I tried not to let perceptions of others about immigrants from the Middle East affect me. However, after the shocking and sad events of 9/11 everyone in my family was very stressed and apprehensive. We were new to this country and the terrorist attack happened a couple of months after we arrived in the US. My parents prepared us for the backlash that could happen against us. We avoided going to places we were not familiar with. We were extra vigilant when we attended sermons in the Mosque. This feeling still persists to this day.*

*I actually felt like this recently due to strong and hateful rhetoric in the media against the Muslim US representative Ilhan Omar. I was shopping at a popular market when I was faced with racist remarks from an older lady. She told me to “go back to your country and stop trying to change this country”. It honestly shocked me. But I was somehow expecting it to happen.*

*I did go to university and earned my bachelor's in science in Clinical Laboratory Sciences and worked for almost 10 years. At work, most of my coworkers are very respectful and polite but I had one person asking me strange and I felt discriminating questions. She actually questioned my feelings in regards to 9/11. I felt very uncomfortable and hurt. I told her our religion (Islam) prohibits us from taking a person's life and it's mentioned in the Quran that taking a life of a human being is considered similar to taking the life of the whole humanity. Human life is considered sacred and nobody has the right to take an innocent life. What happened on 9/11 was unimaginable and caused so much pain and sadness and changed the history of this country and actually the whole world.*

*This negative perception of our culture/ religion at the same time lead me to work very hard. I wanted to present the best picture of someone that is Muslim. I always considered how others see me and it's important to me that they see me as a human being without external perceptions. I understand perceptions are in human nature, but I try to project the best example that I can. After 18 years of residing in this country I feel more at ease and stronger in handling situations related to misinformation and hateful language”*.

- **Other challenges immigrants from non-dominant cultures faced**

With regard to this point, Alia said, *“we don't feel welcome in some places but on the other hand we feel very welcome depends on the people. This is the hardest challenge for us there are others challenges here and there but their okay”*.

Shayma also had another sad story regarding her husband's family visiting the US. She said, *“my husband who came through a student visa was not able to see his parents for 6 years. US embassy in Iraq refused to give his parents VISA to come to visit him even though they are settled in Iraq and the rest of their children and grandchildren are in Iraq. They could not visit even to attend his master's*



*graduation nor his PhD graduation. In the meantime, his friends in school from India were able to bring their parents to the US to visit”.*

### **Theme 3: Family Dynamic Changes**

Many families who immigrate to the US experience changes in their family structure, family responsibilities, parenting styles and roles of children and adults in the family. With regard to dynamic family changes, we can describe both *Alia* and *Shayma* adoption to the US culture as *selective acculturation*, which means that they both hold on to the cultural values and behaviors of their mother countries and selectively incorporate some elements of dominant American culture in their daily lives.

According to *Alia* “*we tried to keep our tradition and protect them and pass them to our children especially the religion one like marriage, fasting, and praying but we adapt all the good tradition from the new culture such as men helping in cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children”.*

*Shayma* always has a detailed answer, she said “*In terms of family dynamics, it did not change a lot. My father was working outside the home and my mother took care of us at home. My mother I feel took on more responsibilities in regards to the household. She had to learn how to drive and took on the responsibility of dropping us and picking us from school and taking us to the library. My siblings and I were mostly responsible for our school and homework.*

*After I graduated with my bachelor's, I started working right away in the hospital full time. It was an afternoon shift (2:30 pm to 11:00 pm). It was a tough schedule and my parents did not like that I was working so late at night. However, I was happy to earn an income and contribute to the family. In our culture, children stay living with their parents until they find a spouse and move on with their spouse. This applies to male and female children. Exceptions can happen for studying away from home like staying in dorms for graduate school. We respect our parents and elders and listen to their opinion and advice. My parents also listened to us and asked for our thoughts and opinions on decisions that could impact the whole family.*

*In regards to the language barrier, I noticed that barrier between my younger siblings and my parents. It was easier for my youngest two brothers to communicate in English. This led to us older siblings taking on the translator duty. We also helped in filling out forms and doctors' appointments and even translating the news on TV. Living in a community that speaks our mother language was good and bad. It provided comfort and a sense of belonging but at the same time made it hard for our parents to learn English”*

### **Limitations**

In this study, we had only two participants. In future studies, the voices of more participants will enrich the findings.

### **Implications for Practice and Recommendations for Future Research**

This critical multiple case study highlights a need to continue examining the challenges experienced by immigrants who have recently relocated to the United States. The study needs to be replicated with other immigrants who come from different geographical regions such as Korea, Vietnam and China, ...etc. In addition, this study could also be applied again on the immigrants from dominant cultures such as European countries, Australia and New Zealand to see whether they face the same challenges or not. The question that needs to be examined in the future is, *what are the challenges that immigrant scholars from other cultures besides those in this study face in a time of public skepticism?* These studies of other cultures and countries will also add to our understanding of the challenges that immigrant families face.

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