

Female Afghan Refugees Making Sense of Traumatic Events: An Emic Explanatory Model

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STUDY OVERVIEW



BACKGROUND

Refugees are confronted with multiple adverse political, socio-cultural, and economic stressors that challenge their health and wellness. For more than two decades, Afghans comprised the largest refugee population in the world. With more than 60,000 Afghan refugees in the U.S., the largest concentration resides in Northern California.

PURPOSE

As part of a dissertation, this research examined how female Afghan refugees conceptualized and made sense of stressful situations throughout their premigration, migration, and resettlement processes.

METHODS

The researcher conducted 40 in-depth qualitative interviews, averaging two hours each and including limited-English proficient women; a focus group; participant observation in the refugee community for more than two years; and consultation with key cultural informants. Interview respondents were asked to explain their experiences and perceptions of each important and difficult situation, from events that led up to their leaving Afghanistan to the present. Maximum variation purposive sampling was used.

RESULTS

Qualitative inductive analysis yielded 262 stressful situations and five thematic conceptualizations of stressful events: (1) imminent and overwhelming dangers in the homeland; (2) suffocating losses of family members and friends; (3) resolving to flee; (4) bewilderment and confusion in the new country; and (5) struggling to adjust. With sense making, the study shows how these traumatic experiences can exacerbate family tensions, community reputation concerns, and physical and mental health problems.

CONCLUSIONS

People working with refugees should be aware of the emic accounts of female Afghan refugees' traumatic experiences and mental health stressors to inform culturally competent care.

Afghan Female Refugees' Perceptions of Stressful Events

Dangers in the Homeland



An Afghan woman facing imminent and overwhelming dangers in her homeland senses that dangerous outside forces are pushing her, sometimes overwhelming her, or both. She may experience a sense that her way of life has ceased or of a steadfast resolve to flee because of fear of prison, military drafts, being raped, being murdered, or being hit by rockets, but in any case she wants to feel safe.

"The Communists tried to put us in jail" – Zahira

"The rockets grew worse and worse and we just had to leave because it wasn't a safe country" – Aisha

If she later encounters situations in the US in which she is discriminated, she may feel a sense of powerlessness and be gripped fear or even terror of what lies ahead. On the other hand, if she discovers that the laws and people in this country protect her, she may feel liberated inside.

Suffocating Losses



A female refugee grieves from the multiple losses of family members and friends through death or separation because of war-related violence. She feels pulled or torn away as she leaves family members behind in Afghanistan, whether dead or alive, captured or in hiding, tortured or unharmed. She is often separated from other relatives during transit and resettlement.

Madeeha grieves the loss of eighty-four members of her family who were murdered, exemplifying the massive suffering common to many refugees.

With the death of family members, an Afghan woman will likely feel overwhelmed, possibly with a sense of unbearable suffocation. When she loses her home or possessions but her family members are safe and unharmed, she will feel at a loss for her beloved country, but not so intensely as death.

Resolving to Flee



Because of imminent dangers in the homeland and suffocating losses, she may experience resolve to flee, especially for the sake of her children's well-being. However, she may mentally collapse, losing all resolve, if one of her children is captured or killed, as happened to Farima when she was escaping with her kids.

"My daughter had to wear the burqa but she had asthma, so she took the burqa off for a minute to breathe and the Taliban hit her. My young son threw a rock at the Talib guy and they took him away" – Farima

If she makes it alive to a neighboring country, she most often feels desperate or resigned in the unsanitary, overcrowded, and dangerous refugee camps, in which she may still see death daily from famine, disease, and crime.

Bewilderment in the New Country



Comparatively few Afghan refugees leave neighboring countries for developed regions of the world. When an Afghan woman arrives in the US she feels lost, bewildered, and confused from the shock of the new language, culture, religion, and US systems – such as the health care, government, social services, legal, and educational systems.

Homa, Khalida, and Basma, each felt disoriented from not knowing the language or culture, whether being mistakenly held in a detention facility, not having an income for rent, or not knowing the bus system.

Sometimes she struggles forward, but in any case she wants ongoing direction because just when she thinks she understands a matter, it becomes topsy-turvy again. If people assist her in the new country, she gradually feels more settled.

Struggling to Adjust



An Afghan female refugee handling long-term adjustment issues in the US may feel blocked or stuck in her situations, especially if poverty is a factor. She may internally struggle or resign herself to her circumstances and even sense peace as she does so. The adjustment period may also be a time of accomplishments for her, but not without an uphill struggle.

When the English class wasn't helpful, Khatera visited the library, checked out a "traffic book" written in English, because she wanted to get her driver's license, and got a Dari/English dictionary. She taught herself to read English at home.

As she learns new things and encounters new ideas, she experiences the sense of an opening door, giving her a feeling of personal growth and empowerment.

How Stressful Events Exacerbate Tensions

Family Relationship Tensions

An Afghan female may undergo heightened family-relationship tensions because of her premigration, flight, resettlement, and adjustment journey. As a wife, she may feel forced, blocked, or trapped, as if sinking in quicksand, when marital conflict occurs since she is often dislocated from other familial support and lacks local cultural knowledge.

"My husband would beat and verbally abuse me, but I felt as if I was blind and mute in this country" – Homa

As a mom, she may feel a desperate longing to reconnect with her children and sense that her important role in their lives has been displaced as her children attend US schools and the chasm grows between them, especially when a language barrier exists.

"One kid lied to his parent at a parent/teacher conference. He translated that the teacher said he did well instead of he did poorly" – Shabnam

However, when her family relationships are strong, she experiences senses of delight, freedom, abundance, and peace.

"My husband had fled Afghanistan in 1980. He decided he wanted to bring a bride from Afghanistan. On the phone he told me [a stranger], 'It's okay. I want to save your life. It doesn't matter to me if you're sick'" – Rasheeda

Community Reputation Tensions

Two principles deeply imbedded within Afghan culture are protecting family honor and existing independently from other Afghan ethnicities. With the loss of status the refugee experience brings and to the extent that an Afghan woman engages with the diasporic refugee community, her concerns may elevate about upholding her reputation in front of other community members. She may also have a decreased propensity to trust others than she would have had in Afghanistan before the wars. She may sense that other families, living in such close proximity, are watching and judging her every behavior. With one misstep, her image and her family's honor will be spoiled; with one triumph, she will be the woman others admire. She may sense inner turmoil when she has to decide whether her loyalty is to uphold Afghan traditions or to break away from some.

"Traditionally, an Afghan woman should wear black for at least one year after the death of her husband. Was this tradition reasonable for me in the US, especially since I work with elementary school children? I decided to wear colorful clothes and keep my sadness inside. My sister said, 'People will say bad things'" – Salma
 An Afghan woman still values her vibrant cultural heritage.

How Stressors and Tensions Contribute to Health Disparities

Physical Health Issues

An Afghan woman may have exacerbated physical health issues because of her traumatic experiences and subsequent somatization. She may also have difficulty receiving health care. While in Afghanistan, in many instances she may feel helpless to acquire adequate professional health care even as suffering intensifies from untreated health issues. When an Afghan female escapes from Afghanistan to seek physical health care, she leaves with a sense of purpose and possibly determination even though the travel is still risky and consequently elements of fear persist.

"No medical center was available with doctors who could help. Because of the state of war, the patients did not have much. We decided to try to leave Afghanistan" – Haleema

In the US, she may feel blocked from receiving health care at all without insurance to cover a doctor's appointment or if her husband prevents her from receiving care. One serious and extreme instance happened in an emergency, but was resolved.

"The husband didn't want her to go out of the house. They could not promise it was going to be a woman at the hospital to take care of her in the emergency room" – Setara

A female Afghan refugee may also become frustrated with transportation challenges or missing or unintelligible health interpretation at the doctor's office.

Mental Health Issues

A female Afghan refugee often may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and feelings of isolation.

"With so many wars in Afghanistan, they are all depressed" – Nadira, an Afghan Nurse

She may have difficulty concentrating on learning English and acculturating because of the memory impairments produced by PTSD and the flashbacks triggered whenever she happens to see the Afghan news. She also feels pressure from the isolation the language barrier causes between her and her children. Being uprooted by war has prevented her from realizing the life she had dreamed for herself. She may then place all of her hope on her children's futures. If the children turn out differently than all she had sacrificed for, she may find it devastatingly disappointing, even blaming herself, as hope for meaningful future family stories is lost.

"Oh I was very dumb. I spent all of my life to take care of these children and some of them are really good, but some of them are in jail or drinking" – Basma

She may fear the community's judgment if she seeks Western mental health care as it implies to some members that she is crazy. Rather, she has experienced many socio-cultural, economic, and political determinants of health beyond her control.