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

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AFGHAN REFUGEES IN THE U.S.

STUDY OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

Refugees are confronted with multiple adverse political, socio-economic, and cultural stressors that challenge their health and wellness. For more than two decades, Afghanistan 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 pre-migration, 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) bewildlement 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.