Social and Experiential Influences on the Mental Health of First Generation Afghans in Northern California

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The California Endowment
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Afghan and International Refugees Support Services

Afghan Care

Afghan Coalition

Afghan Cultural Society

Afghan Elderly Association

Afghan Health Partnership Program

Ibrahim Khalilullah Islamic Center

Masjid Muhajireen
The survey includes questions on:

- family ties and family support networks
- educational and educational needs
- language facility
- past and present occupations
- economic conditions
- job training needs
- childcare needs
- exposure to war traumas
- migration history
- past and present governmental support
- mental health needs
- perspectives on mental health
- health insurance
- medical history
- medical translation needs
- preventive health practices
- exercise and diet
- intergenerational relationships
- religious beliefs and practices
- community involvement
- community support networks
- interest in community programs (child care, parenting, libraries, youth, health, etc.)
Outline

- Summary of study participants

- Exposure to violent and life threatening circumstances, and displacement

- Experiences Influencing Posttraumatic Stress Disorder:
  - Exposure to Wars in Afghanistan
  - Escaping from Afghanistan
  - Displacement into refugee camps or surrounding countries.

- Factors influencing emotional distress in the U.S.
  - Prejudice and discrimination
  - Threat of losing Afghan culture and identify
  - Social exclusion/isolation
Summary of study participants

- 261 first generation Afghan Americans living in the East Bay.
- **Gender**: 52% female; 48% male
- **Age**: ranges from 19 to 84.
  - Median age is 48
  - 10% are under age 30
  - Just under 15% are over age 65
- **City of Residence**
  - 50% Fremont; 22% Hayward;
  - 13% Union City; 5% Alameda
- **Age left Afghanistan**
  - Ranges from 1 to 75.
  - Median age of leaving Afghanistan is 30.
  - About 10% left before age 13.
  - About 10% left when 50 years or older.
- **Year arriving in the U.S.**
  - 36% arrived in the 1980s
  - 28 arrived in the 1990s
  - 36 arrived in 2000 to the present
- **Marital Status**
  - 71.1% Married
  - 15.3% Widowed - most of these are women
  - 7.4% Have divorced or separated
  - 9.0% Never married

- **Language Ability**
  - Dari: Speaking – 92.6% Fluent; Reading – 71.2% Fluent
  - Pashto: Speaking – 34.2% Fluent; Reading – 26.1% Fluent
  - English: Speaking – 24.1% Fluent; Reading - 22.6% Fluent

- **Religion**
  - 98.8% are Muslim
  - 65.3% attend Mosque once a month or more
  - 90.4% consider Islam “very important” in their daily lives
  - 90.2% “Strongly agree” that it is important for people of all faiths to respect and get along with people whose religion differs from yours.
Percentage of Afghan refugees’ and U.S. adults’ rating their overall health as either “poor” or “fair.”

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<tr>
<td>18-44</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>45-64</td>
<td>52.5%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
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Afghans in the East Bay are part of a transnational community

- 51% are in families that send remittances to family members living abroad.
  - 49% of those who sent remittances said doing so caused economic hardship for their families
- 85% communicate with relatives or friends living abroad monthly or more often.
- 41% have returned to Afghanistan to visit or work since 2001.
Percentage of interviewees with family members in ______ that they stay in contact with.
Employment and economic conditions

Among those under age 65:
- 21.6% are employed 35+ hours a week
- 16.1% are employed less than 35 hours per week
- 9.0% unemployed looking for work
- 7.1% unemployed not looking for work
- 14.1% are keeping house
- 11.4% retired
- 16.5% disabled
- 3.1% student, not employed
Exposure to violent and life threatening circumstances, and displacement

- 87% of our sample were in a life-threatening situations while in Afghanistan or when they escaped.

- 22% of the men and 6% of the women were held hostage by the military, police, or one of the warring factions. Of these 71% of the men and 38% of the women were tortured or brutalized while in captivity.
• 78% percent of those surveyed had close family members or close friends who were killed during one of the wars or coups in Afghanistan.

• Of these most have lost more than one close family member or friend and 39% have lost five or more close family members or friends to the violence in Afghanistan.
• 54% witnessed someone being killed or seriously injured.
• 22% of the study participants were internally displaced during one of the wars in Afghanistan,
• 14% spent time in a refugee camp
• 80% were displaced for more than six months in one of the countries surrounding Afghanistan.
• 55% were displaced in a surrounding country for more than two years.
Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

**National Center for PTSD:**

“Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can occur after you have been through a traumatic event. A traumatic event is something horrible and scary that you see or that happens to you. During this type of event, you think that your life or others' lives are in danger. You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening.”

“After a trauma or life threatening event it is common to have upsetting memories of what happened, to have trouble sleeping, to feel jumpy, or to lose interest in things you used to enjoy. For some people these reactions do not go away on their own, or may even get worse over time.”

(http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_what_is_ptsd.html retrieved 10/1/08)
PTSD SCREENER ITEMS (Cutoff = six of ten occurring at least twice in the past week)

1. Upsetting thoughts or memories about the event that have come into your mind against your will
2. Upsetting dreams about the event
3. Acting or feeling as though the event were happening again
4. Feeling upset by reminders of the event
5. Bodily reactions (such as fast heartbeat, stomach churning, sweatiness, dizziness) when reminded of the event
6. Difficulty falling or staying asleep
7. Irritability or outbursts of anger
8. Difficulty concentrating
9. Heightened awareness of potential dangers to yourself and others
10. Being jumpy or being startled at something unexpected
PTSD: Key findings

- Based on the PTSD screener, fully 45% of our participants were suffering from PTSD.
- However, only 7% reported ever being diagnosed with PTSD by a doctor or other medical or mental health professional.
- Of those who had ever been diagnosed with PTSD, 94% (18 of 19) scored as having PTSD on the screener.
Posttraumatic stress is associated with experiencing the terrors of war, dislocation, and family loss. Here are some examples comparing the rates of PTSD for Afghans who experienced an event compared to those who did not:

- Safety or life was threatened during a coup or war in Afghanistan (51% to 8%).
- [Of those whose safety was threatened], were imprisoned, captured or held hostage (61% to 43%).
- Close family member or friend was severely injured (57% to 24%).
- Close family member or friend was killed (53% to 24%).
- Stayed in a refugee camp after leaving Afghanistan (67% to 41%).
○ Posttraumatic stress is common among both Afghan men and women, but women (58%) are more likely than men (31%) to suffer from PTSD.

○ Posttraumatic stress is a little more common among recent arrivals to the U.S. Just over half (51%) of those who arrived in the U.S. since 2000 have PTSD. However, it is likely that many Afghans in the East Bay have long term posttraumatic stress as 39% of those who came before 1990 have PTSD.
Talbieh Brief Distress Inventory (TBDI)

• 24 item measure of psychological and emotional distress with an overall scale and six subscales (obsessiveness, hostility, sensitiveness, depression, anxiety, and paranoid ideation).

• Each item has a five responses measuring frequency or intensity.

• e.g. “During the past month, how often have you been bothered by feelings of sadness or depression - feeling blue?” Very often=4; fairly often=3; sometimes=2; almost never=1; never=0.

• Presented here as a scale from 0 to 96.

• Comparing mean TBDI scores to discover social factors of resettlement that influence emotional distress.

• Correlation is not causation

• Different subscales are moderately to strongly intercorrelated.

• TBDI is strongly correlated with PTSD and fairly strongly correlated with self-rated health status.
Three sources of distress in the resettlement and adaptation processes in the U.S.:

1. Exposure to/perception of prejudice and discrimination seems to increase distress among both men and women.

2. Concern about preserving traditional aspects of Afghan culture and identity (especially intergenerationally) seems to increase distress among men more than women.

3. Social and cultural exclusion or isolation seems to increase distress among women more than men.
Mean TBDI explained by gender

Male

Female
Discrimination and post-911 threats of harm are associated with emotional distress for both Afghan men and Afghan women.
Mean TBDI explained by gender and 'Were you ever discriminated against because you are Afghan?'
Mean TBDI explained by gender and 'After 911 were you more concerned that non-Afghans might harm you or your family'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, somewhat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes, somewhat</td>
<td>Yes, much more</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes, much more</td>
<td>Yes, somewhat</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, much more</td>
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Concern about losing traditional aspects of Afghan culture and identity is associated with emotional distress for Afghan men more than for Afghan women.
Mean TBDI explained by gender and 'Do you worry that your children will not maintain Afghan culture?'
Mean TBDI explained by gender and 'How important for ____ to marry another Afghan?'

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<th>Female</th>
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<tr>
<td>Not or somewhat</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
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TBDI: Tolerance and Belief Development Inventory.
Mean TBDI for men explained by 'Who should choose ____ spouses when they are old enough to marry?'

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<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Parents</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
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Social/cultural exclusion and isolation (lack of social integration) is associated with emotional distress more for Afghan women than for Afghan men.
Mean TBDI explained by gender and English speaking ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>None to fair</th>
<th>Near to Fluent</th>
<th>None to fair</th>
<th>Near to Fluent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
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Mean TBDI explained by gender and 'Does not read Dari or Pashto at all'
Mean TBDI explained by gender and 'Volunteer for community organization in past 12 months?'
Mean TBDI explained by gender and 'How many children or grandchildren living in the household?'
Conclusions:
One more reason to vigorously challenge stereotypic media representations of Afghans and Muslims and to support intercultural exchanges that facilitate mutual recognition and allay fears.

I would like to hear more from Afghan men who feel that their culture and way of life is threatened.

Increase support for programs that address the social and cultural exclusion of Afghan women in the East Bay.