The Narratives of First Generation Female Afghan Refugees

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First Contact…

- Phone Call in 2000:
  - “My wife’s family is being killed in Afghanistan. Please help us.”
  - Wahid and Shirin had a specific need for information in the context of being refugees
Afghan Community in the San Francisco Bay Area

- Community Statistics
  - 2,500 other Afghan families also attempting to bring family members from Afghanistan
  - Up to 30,000 first-generation Afghan refugees in the Bay Area
  - Variety of backgrounds, but two main immigration waves of refugees:
    - Post-Soviet Invasion Group (after 1979)
    - Post-Taliban Group (after 1996)
My Research

- The information needs and associated communicative behaviors of Afghan female refugees in the S. F. Bay Area
- Qualitative ethnography
  - 40 in-depth interviews
  - Participant observation
  - Key cultural informants
- Today’s focus: First Generation Narratives
  - No pictures shown to protect confidentiality
Research Question: How do female Afghan refugees interpret and make sense of the material conditions in which they are blocked from action?

- Analyzed 262 of the women’s narratives
- Step 1: Inductively identified 7 general sets of material conditions (external circumstances)
- Step 2: Examined how they “made sense” of the conditions to create composite summaries
Material Condition #1: Legal & Crime Issues

**Definition:** Sense-making situations arising from legal or criminal matters

**Examples of Issues:**

- Fear of imprisonment

  Zahira, who arrived in the U.S. in the early 1980s with her husband and two daughters, vividly remembers: “When the Communists came they were going to try to catch us to put in the jail... because my husband worked in the [previous] government.”
Examples of Issues, continued:

- Fear of military drafts

  Khatera recalls: “They went to my husband’s, we had a huge house, big orchard, and the government people said, ‘Where is husband?’ A farmer we had living there to take care of the house lied and said, ‘We don’t know. The father dead a long time ago.’ That’s why we fled.”

- Fear of being raped
- Fear of being murdered
- Fear of being hit by rockets

Composite Summary
Material Condition #2: Separation, Loss, & Grief Issues

- **Definition**: Sense-making situations arising from separation from people, places, or possessions

- **Examples of Issues**:
  - Death of family members
    
    As examples, Fadheela’s and Alia’s husbands were murdered; Zarrin’s father, uncle, and two male cousins were taken away by the Taliban and never seen again; and Homa’s brother was killed by a rocket. Madeeha grieves the loss of eighty-four members of her family.
Material Condition #2: Separation, Loss, & Grief Issues

- **Examples of Issues, continued:**
  - Separation from family members
  - Loss of home, possessions, and status

- **Composite Summary**
Material Condition #3: Immigration Issues

- **Definition**: Sense-making situations arising from immigration, immediate language interpretation needs, being new in the area, or needing emergency resources.

- **Examples of Issues**:
  - Disoriented by English language: *Homa felt disoriented when she was mistakenly held in a detention facility and didn’t understand what was happening.*
  - Confused by U.S. culture
Material Condition #3: Immigration Issues

- **Examples of Issues, continued:**
  - Becoming geographically lost
  
  Normally Zarrin’s mother, Safiya, waits for her children to come home from school so they can take her on the bus. One day Safiya decided to go out by herself. Zarrin put their phone number and address on a piece of paper for her. She became disoriented and confused, losing her sense of direction. Safiya had to show a police officer the paper to bring her home.

- **Composite Summary**
Material Condition #4: Long-term Adjustment Issues

- **Definition**: Sense-making situations arising from adjusting to a new country after immediate resettlement issues are handled.

- **Examples of Issues**:
  - Ongoing impoverished circumstances
    
    Fadheela (a widow) and her five children rented an apartment on a meager income. The government assistance falls short $300 to cover the rent alone. Two of her daughters contribute money from their part-time high school and college jobs to make the monthly payment, and try to cover food costs and other living expenses.
Material Condition #4: Long-term Adjustment Issues

- **Examples of Issues, continued:**
  - Ongoing language and cultural barriers
  - Lack of transportation
  - Learning new job skills

- **Composite Summary**
The first four material conditions combine to affect the remaining three conditions.
Material Condition #5: Physical & Mental Health Issues

- **Definition**: Sense-making situations arising from concerns over physical and mental health problems and over access to health care.

- **Examples of Issues**:
  - Chronic physical health problems
  - Affording medical care
  - Isolation
Material Condition #5: Physical & Mental Health Issues

- Examples of Issues, continued:
  - Depression and PTSD
    
    While fleeing, one of her daughters took the burqa off her face for a minute because she has asthma and could not breathe. The Taliban tried to hit her because of it; however, her eleven-year-old son threw a rock at the Taliban at which point they whisked him away. She and her four daughters had to press on to Pakistan without her son, which she unwillingly did and it broke her heart.

- Composite Summary
Material Condition #6: Family Relationship Issues

- **Definition**: Sense-making situations arising from relationships with family members, including extended family and in-laws.

- **Examples of Issues**:
  - Increased arguments with spouse
  - Increased pressures from some in-laws
Material Condition #6: Family Relationship Issues

Examples of Issues, continued:

- Growing cultural gap with children

  An Afghan refugee helper, Shabnam, explains, “Very difficult things are going on in the moms’ minds beneath the surface. The kids are bilingual and the moms don’t know English. One kid lied to his parent about a report at a parent/teacher conference. He translated what the teacher said as that he did good instead of he did poorly.”

Composite Summary
Material Condition #7: Reputation & Trust Issues

- **Definition:** Sense-making situations arising from protecting one’s face or reputation in the community and trust of others in the community.

- **Examples of Issues:**
  - Protecting family honor
    
    *With the loss of status the refugee experience brings, their concerns elevate about protecting one’s honor in front of other community members.*
  - Maintaining family independence

- **Composite Summary**
Summary

- #1: Legal & Crime Issues
- #2: Separation, Loss, & Grief Issues
- #3: Immigration Issues
- #4: Long-term Adjustment Issues
- #5: Physical & Mental Health Issues
- #6: Family Relationship Issues
- #7: Reputation & Trust Issues
For More Information

- See Handout for Composite Summaries
- Contact Dr. Valerie Smith at valerie.smith@csueastbay.edu
- Or see http://csueastbay-dspace.calstate.edu/handle/1211.5/9
The Narratives of First Generation Female Afghan Refugees: An Analysis of Their Sense-Making when Blocked from Action

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Brief Description of Analytical Method

Through scientific analysis of qualitative research data, seven broad categories of material conditions described by female Afghan refugees were found (see the bold-faced list below). The more than 250 narratives (examples or stories told by the women interviewed) were then each categorized under a specific material condition in which it occurred. From examination of these narratives, interpretive composite summaries were systematically created to represent the essence of how Afghan women made sense of their experiences in these material or physical circumstances. The analysis of their sense-making particularly focused on how they understood their situations at moments when they were prevented from moving forward or blocked from action. While the composite summaries or profiles are not representative of all Afghan refugee women, taken together they provide an in-depth picture of the refugee experience from a woman’s point of view.

Related Findings

1. Sense-Making of Legal and Crime Issues

Composite Summary: An Afghan woman facing legal and crime issues related to escaping from Afghanistan 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, but in any case she wants to feel safe. If she encounters legal situations in the United States in which she is discriminated against or disadvantaged, she may feel a sense of powerlessness and be gripped by a sense of fear or even terror of what lies ahead. On the other hand, if she discovers that the laws in this country protect her, she may feel lighter or liberated inside.

2. Sense-Making of Separation, Loss, and Grief Issues

Composite Summary: A female refugee dealing with separation, loss, and grief concerning fleeing from Afghanistan feels pulled or torn away as she leaves family members behind, whether dead or alive, and/or is separated from other relatives during transit and resettlement. 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. With the death of one or more family members, whether in Afghanistan or the United States, she will likely feel overwhelmed, possibly with a sense of suffocation. When she loses her home or possessions but her family members are unharmed, she will feel overwhelmed but not as intensely as when a family member has died.

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1 Fleeing from Afghanistan for any reason, such as fear of death, being drafted, or raped, is included under legal and crime issues, with the exceptions of “fleeing after the death of or separation from loved ones” and “fleeing because of the need for physical health care.”
3. **Sense-Making of Immigration, Migration, and Mobility Issues**
   Composite Summary: A refugee woman confronting immigration, migration, and mobility issues feels lost, bewildered, and confused. 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. On the other hand, if and when other people lead and assist her in her new country, she gradually feels more and more settled.

4. **Sense-Making of Long-term Adjustment Issues**
   Composite Summary: An Afghan refugee handling long-term adjustment issues feels blocked or stuck in her situations, especially if poverty is a factor. She may internally struggle or may 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. 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.

(The first four material conditions just combine to affect the remaining three factors.)

5. **Sense-Making of Physical and Mental Health Issues**
   Composite Summary: A refugee woman may have exacerbated physical and mental health issues because of her experiences. While still 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. In the United States, she may become frustrated with difficult transportation and health interpretation issues at the doctor’s office and she may sometimes feel blocked from receiving health care at all.

6. **Sense-Making of Family Relationship Issues**
   Composite Summary: An Afghan female may undergo heightened family-relationship tensions because of the family’s 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. As a mother, 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 U. S. schools and the cultural chasm grows between them. However, when her family relationships are strong, she experiences senses of delight, freedom, abundance, and/or peace.

7. **Sense-Making of Community Reputation and Trust Issues**
   Composite Summary: To the extent that she engages with the refugee community, an Afghan woman may encounter magnified concerns about upholding her reputation and she may 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 traditions that feel constraining to her, all the while still valuing her vibrant cultural heritage.

For more information:
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