



# Family Experiences of Iraqi refugees resettled in Syracuse, NY

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# Introduction



- ▶ A refugee is a person who – “having a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (UNHCR definition)



# Introduction



- ▶ In 2014, the UNHCR estimates nearly 60 million people were forcibly displaced.
- ▶ The United States hosted the 10<sup>th</sup> largest population of refugees.
- ▶ In Syracuse, NY, approximately 397 Iraqi individuals have been resettled since 2001- 2012 (Onondaga Citizens League, 2012-2013).



# Existing research

- Risk of psychopathology in the refugee population – specifically, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substance abuse (Jamil et al., 2002; Lie, 2002).
- Significant shifts in the areas of family roles, communication, and overall relationships with each other and community (Weine et al., 2004).
- Family becomes a key unit through which individuals learn to adapt and navigate the external environment (Nickerson et al., 2011).



# Current study: Research question

- ▶ This study sought to explore Iraqi refugees' experiences of family relationships as they resettled in Syracuse, NY.
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# Current study: Theoretical framework

Contextual therapy theory (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986):

- Integrative, strengths-based approach
- Family relationships as resources
- Intergenerational
- Influence of fairness and justice in family relationships



# Current study: Methodology

- Phenomenological methodology was used.  
Goal is to understand lived experiences of participants.
- Snowball sampling using the key informant strategy was used to recruit participants.  
Participants had to meet the following criteria:
  - a) identify as a refugee from Iraq;
  - b) been resettled in Syracuse after 2003;
  - c) be over 18 years of age; and
  - d) speak either English or Arabic.



# Current study: Methodology

- ▶ Nine individual interviews and one couple interview using a semi-structured schedule.
  - ▶ Interviews ranged from 30 – 90 minutes.
  - ▶ Three participants interviewed a second time for member check and follow up questions.
  - ▶ Two interviews were in Arabic with the assistance of an interpreter.
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# Current study: Data analysis

- ▶ Interviews were transcribed verbatim.
- ▶ Data analysis being conducted using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012)

IPA is a step-by-step analytic approach of formulating descriptive, linguistic, conceptual interpretations of narratives.



# Preliminary findings and discussion.

Participants: Six male and five female; ages ranged from 21 – 39 years

- Moved to Syracuse between 2008 – 2013.
- All except one participant were currently students in different colleges in the city.



# Context of displacement

*"No choice (but) to leave."*

- Rise in ethnic tensions
- Civilians gathering weapons
- Increase in cost of living
- Increase in illnesses



# Context of displacement

*" We fled to Syria and like in the middle of night so that no one can notice, **we didn't tell anybody because there was a lack of trust**...we left everything, we only took – even we didn't take clothes. I mean I remember my mom packed some blankets, like we were probably going to need them on the road, but beside that we left everything, our house, our belongings, everything there." (Male, 21 years, kidnapped and held for ransom for 15 days)*



# Context of displacement

- ▶ Most of them first went to either Jordan or Syria.
- ▶ Border crossings were typically difficult.
- ▶ All except two participants were resettled in the US with their families.

One participant has parents and siblings in different countries.



# Loss and trauma

*I: So you became closer to your family.*

*P: Yes, to my mom, to my dad, yes. They ah, she like, no, she's still living in the ... she like my (pause) uhh, my uhh, childrens more than, because she, she raise them.*

*I: Right, Right, yeah.*

*(Pause)*

*P: (begins to cry) Sorry*

*(Pause)*

*P: **If Iraq safe, we never come here.** We like our country (breathes deeply and cries) the culture is different. It is very different.*

*(Long pause)*

*(Female, 39 years, moved with husband and three children)*



# Loss and trauma

All of them still have family in Iraq and constantly worry about their safety.

*"I think about my mother, brother, sister. I think about....  
Going to get hurt from. So now ISIS, you know. (Pause).  
**There is no way to forget. There is no way to put everything  
behind.**"* (Male, 35 years old, moved with wife and three children).



# Family relationships

*"We are like one unit."*

- Family members relied on each other, drew strength from their relationship.

Note: Families are not always granted asylum together.

- Community level trust was low.



# Family relationships

Shifting gender roles

➤ *"I do the laundry...If (I were) in Iraq, people would laugh at me."* (Male, 39 years old).

Female participants in particular experienced men in their family as being more involved in caretaking and household responsibilities.



# Family relationships

*"But for us, no nothing changes it's still the same. If we need anything we go ask my father if he says ok go do it we do it, if no we don't."* (Male, 21 years old).

- Hierarchy in family was still the same.
- Desire to maintain their legacy of being Muslim and Iraqi.



# Loyalty

Is that a problem for us...to live in a country, who led the war against my country? Uh, honestly, sometimes I feel that I'm **guilty** to do that. Sometimes. Sometimes.....The only thing good with Saddam Hussein, he brought something to Iraq, provide safe. That's it. That's it. Only. But everything was terrible; no education, no communication with the other, with the external world. Nothing, poor, poor situation, but (*pause*) uh, I can say, **no, I'm feeling good here in the United States**. I know maybe it was a mistake by the leaders but with this government, they're doing good, I like them

I: This as in the US government?

Yes. And I feel, yeah, I feel honored to be a part, possibly they accept me to be a part of this great society. And (*pause*) uh, at least, uh, they help me so much. They make me live **safe** here.



# Challenges in research

- Recruitment.
  - Language barrier.
  - Researcher as outsider.
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# Future directions

- In-depth examination of issues around loyalty and loyalty conflicts.
  - Mixed methods study to examine family relationship processes and mental health outcomes in refugees from war-torn Middle eastern countries.
  - Longitudinal study to examine legacy of resettlement processes on family relationships.
  - Best practices for providing family therapy services.
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# Study outcomes

- ▶ Gangamma, R, & Krishnakumar, A. *Development of a survey to assess loyalty conflicts in refugees from war-torn Middle East countries*. Proposal submitted to NCFR Innovation grant, 2015-2016.
- ▶ Gangamma, R. *An exploratory study of family experiences of Iraqi refugees in the US*. Presentation at NCFR conference, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015.
- ▶ Manuscript in preparation.



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