

ETHICAL AND EFFECTIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODS: A CASE STUDY WITH AFGHAN REFUGEES IN CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT: SCHOLARLY STUDIES OF REFUGEES and other vulnerable populations carry special ethical concerns. In this invited case study of Afghan refugees in Fremont, California, I provide illustrations and recommendations of ethical research methods with refugees. I also compare and contrast some ethical issues in the U.S. with issues in Thailand. The qualitative, ethnographic methods I report here demonstrate how to conduct culturally sensitive investigations by ethically approaching gatekeepers and other community members to preserve autonomy, ensure confidentiality, build trust, and improve the accuracy of interpretations and results. Six groups at risk for being marginalized in multiple ways within refugee populations are described. Ten best practices are recommended for ethically acquiring an in-depth understanding of the refugees, their community, and appropriate research methods.

KEY WORDS: Afghan; Afghanistan; refugee; women; female; qualitative; ethnography; ethics; methods; San Francisco, California

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THIS INVITED PAPER IS INTENDED AS A companion to the articles in this issue on refugee research at the Thailand-Burma border by Ditton and Lehane (2009). My article first compares and contrasts ethical issues pertaining to refugee¹ research in the developing country of Thailand with ethical issues central to refugee studies in a developed Western country. Then, through a case study, it offers additional ethical and effective ethnographic research methods appropriate for use in both modern and developing countries.

Most studies on refugee populations raise similar ethical issues, whether they are conducted in the contexts of developing or modern non-Western countries or in modern Western countries. For example, Ditton and Lehane cite Leaning's (2001, p. 1432) ethical guidelines for refugee research, and most of their guidelines are pertinent across contexts as follows:

- Restrict studies to those that would provide important direct benefit to the individuals recruited to the study or to the population from which the individuals come.
- Ensure the study design imposes the absolute minimum of additional risk.
- Select study participants on the basis of scientific principles without bias introduced by issues of accessibility, cost, or malleability.
- Establish highest standards for obtaining informed consent from all individual study participants, and where necessary and culturally appropriate from heads of households and community leaders (but this consent cannot substitute for individual consent).
- Institute procedures to assess, minimize, and monitor the risks to safety and confidentiality for individual subjects, their community, and for their future security.
- Promote the well-being, dignity, and autonomy of all study participants in all phases of the research study.

In other ways, context creates important differences. As examples, Leaning's (2001) recommendations to conduct only studies "urgent and vital to the health and welfare" of the refugee population or to restrict research questions to those that "cannot be addressed in any other context" do not apply to studies in developed countries (p. 1432). Investigators, methodology instructors, research ethics committees (RECs, or "ethics committees" herein), government bodies, and scholars should consider the different ethical requirements of refugee research in developed settings, where proximity to civil strife or war is absent and the provision of basic necessities is more stable.

Some of these differences are exemplified by the research reported here, which is based on my nearly four years of qualitative ethnographic research and development work with Afghan refugees. These refugees have been migrating to the San Francisco Bay Area of California since the late 1970s. In this article, I use my research project with Afghan refugees as an illustrative case study to provide examples of ethical decision making and a selection of effective scientific methods for cross-cultural research. My illustrations of the research process provide a way to help guide those who become involved with refugee research in developed countries and across contexts. I explain my initial goals, relevant background

information, how I built the groundwork for the project, and the ethnographic methods used during the formal research process. I also give a brief summary of results and how they have been applied to support improvements in the Afghan refugee community. Then I describe six groups found in my research at risk for being marginalized in multiple ways within refugee populations. I integrate best practices throughout and summarize them at the end. I am not of Afghan or Central Asian descent, and so I had to complete additional preparatory steps as an outsider in order to become a culturally sensitive and competent researcher. Because refugee groups constitute vulnerable populations, one of the fundamental requirements of refugee research is that the investigators seek to understand the culture and sensitivities of those they study, especially when they are not part of that culture themselves.

Initial Goals

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), discussed in Ditton and Lehane (2009a), apply to developing countries and can inform research questions that address the vital and urgent needs of a refugee population. For a developed country, such as the United States, directives do not exist for selecting research topics as long as the topic does not do harm to others and falls within the bounds of law. Before solidifying a topic in a Western country, an ethical researcher who is a community outsider should learn about the refugee group through an extensive secondary literature review and by spending extended time in the community developing cultural competency and building relationships. This preparation, before the formal study itself begins, allows for the gradual formation and refinement of the research topic and related questions or hypotheses that would be appropriate for the particular context.

In the case of Afghan refugees in the San Francisco Bay Area, my initial goals were to do a project that would improve the lives of female Afghan refugees and advance knowledge in my academic discipline of communication studies. Over time, the purpose of my study was refined to focus on gaining insight into the ways that female refugees made sense of their pre-migration, flight, resettlement, and adjustment experiences. How they made sense of and sought help in their difficult and confusing situations was examined by exploring their questions or information needs about these situations and their related communicative behaviors. The details of the qualitative research project are available for download (see Smith, 2008) and are being prepared for publication elsewhere. My purpose here is to examine ethical issues

and effective scientific methods for conducting refugee research in a developed country by using my research among Afghan refugees as a case study.

Background

As part of my secondary literature review and initial preparation, understanding why refugees migrate in general, and why Afghan refugees in particular fled their country, provided me with important orientations to the unique and extenuating circumstances my research participants faced. Resettlement and acculturation in a modern country pose unique challenges for refugees from developing countries such as Afghanistan. Awareness of these factors is essential to conducting refugee research ethically.

Forced Migration

Refugees in acute crises are different from other immigrants. Voluntary immigrants feel pulled to a land of new opportunities and have time to consider and prepare for that new life, whereas refugees are pushed from a land of danger (Stein, 1981). Refugees typically are suddenly forced to leave their home countries, with little prior planning, and seek emergency refuge elsewhere. When a nation experiences warfare, whether from internal civil conflict or invasion, mass atrocities are frequently committed against the country's citizens, including murder, torture, starvation, assault, rape, and/or robbery. Kaufmann (1996) notes, "Many of these conflicts are so violent," and much of the violence is "directed against unarmed civilians," including women with children (p. 136). Because of these terrors, the wars create large populations of politically oppressed civilians who are fleeing their homelands daily. Faced with the threat of persecution or the actuality of physical harm, citizens are forced to flee. For more than twenty years, Afghans comprised the largest refugee group in the world, and they still constitute one of the largest refugee groups.

Forced Migration of Afghan Refugees

Several historical conditions have caused the forced migration of Afghans. Afghan refugees fled Afghanistan from the late 1970s into the new millennium following a series of upheavals and dangerous developments. The refugee exodus began when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Roughly one-third of the estimated prewar Afghan population of 15 to 16 million had fled to different parts of the world less than a decade later (Sliwinski, 1988). In 1989, the Soviets began withdrawal from Afghanistan but the pro-communist leader,

Najibullah, remained in charge until 1992. During those years, a power struggle ensued among the various Mujahideen insurgents to take control over the government, with the U.S. and Soviets funding their preferred victors (MacEachin, Nolan, & Tockman, 2005). The number of Afghan refugees peaked in 1990 at more than 6.3 million refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000). In 1991, the U.S. and Soviet Union ended all military support to the country. Kabul fell to Mujahideen rebels in 1992, with many civilians being killed in the fighting between the various factions as the country “descended into chaos and warfare” (Stabile & Kumar, 2005, p. 768). By 1998, one of the Mujahideen contingents, the Taliban, had seized power of over 90% of the country (Refugee Research Project, 2007).

As the largest single group of refugees in the world, by the new millennium, Afghan refugees faced a growing lack of hospitality and sometimes outright hostility not just from the neighboring developing countries of Pakistan, Iran, and India, but across the globe (Colville, 2001). In July of 2001, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released briefing notes expressing its concern over the dramatic increase in Afghan asylum-seekers during the previous four years as conditions in Afghanistan deteriorated. The notes state starkly, “Overall, the picture concerning Afghans—the single biggest group of refugees in the world at four million or more—is about as grim as it can get” (Colville, 2001).

Two months after the UNHCR released this briefing report, the events of September 11 placed Afghanistan and Afghan refugees at the center of international media coverage. The subsequent bombing of Afghanistan, fall of the Taliban, elections, and continuing civil unrest have affected millions of Afghan refugees living in Pakistan, Iran, and Western host countries such as the United States. Since 2002, “more than 5.6 million Afghans have returned to Afghanistan” (UNHCR, 2008, p. 3). Yet many refugees repatriated to harsh and dangerous living conditions in Afghanistan, with Amnesty International advising a policy of no returns until the country was safer and the refugees could return with dignity (Amnesty International, 2003). Since 2005, the voluntary return rate of Afghans, while “remaining substantial by global standards,” has slowed significantly (UNHCR, 2008, p. 3). As of 2008, one out of every four refugees worldwide is from Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2009).

The migrants from Burma (Myanmar) who resettled in Thailand in Ditton and Lehane’s studies (2009a, 2009b) and the refugees from Afghanistan who resettled in the United States constitute politically oppressed

groups. The investigators for both projects understood the specific historical details leading to the forced migration of the populations being researched. A researcher who is concerned with ethical research design and practices should seek such understanding because the events leading up to and including migration are vividly etched in the refugees’ memories and affect their abilities to integrate into the new society. As investigators, methodology instructors, and ethics committees seek to “do no harm,” this background information informs them of specific ways in which research participants may have been traumatized.

Resettlement in a Developed Country

Traditional refugee groups arrived in the United States primarily from Europe and other similarly developed areas of the world (Wright, 1981, pp. 163–164). While this remains true of some refugees, the new post-1965 immigrants to the United States—largely from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and including refugees from the Central Asian country of Afghanistan—are distinct from earlier European refugees and immigrants. Stein (1981) describes the key differences by stating that the new refugees are “culturally and ethnically different” from their host countries and coming from “countries, at a different stage of development from that of the host” (p. 330). These differences present difficult challenges to researchers, ethics committees, and other stakeholders interested in the well-being of refugees, and to refugees themselves. The larger the gap in social, cultural, political, religious, economic, and linguistic factors, the more difficult the refugees’ resettlement and adjustment process. However, better, more humane living conditions are often available in the developed country where the gap is larger, since the country of origin has been devastated by war or famine, or both, and neighboring countries with similar backgrounds are often also deeply affected by the region’s difficulties.

Afghans resettled in the United States are often living in a developed country for the first time. In this study, Afghan refugees sought to make sense of their lives in a developed country quite different from Afghanistan, but one in which the investigator was a native. The refugees needed to adjust to the country, but the researcher did not. A main challenge for me during my initial preparation was to understand the ways female Afghan refugees viewed American culture. Their being female was significant because they had come from a patriarchal society in which some women had few opportunities outside the home. They also came from an Islamic society to a secular society with diverse and liberal viewpoints.

Unlike the Afghans presented in this case study, the Burmese in Ditton and Lehane's studies (2009a, 2000b) resettled in the developing country of Thailand, which was similar in culture and religion to their home country. However, the refugees needed to adjust to living conditions in the migrant-community clusters. Similarly, the foreign investigator also had to adapt to the crisis situation, and had the additional challenges of managing cultural, religious, and language differences. In other words, a main challenge for Ditton and Lehane was to understand the culture of the country to which the Burmese had fled.

Investigators should comprehend the social, cultural, political, religious, economic, and linguistic factors that comprise the unique backgrounds of the refugee population. The researcher should then notice how these elements compare with the same factors in the place of resettlement, whether in a modern or developing country.

Afghan Resettlement in the U.S.

Northern California is home to the largest Afghan diaspora in the United States. Less clear is how many Afghans live in the area. The 2000 census sharply undercounts Afghans. Some were not counted because they identified themselves by ethnicity, such as Pashtun, Tajik Uzbek, Hazara, or Turkmen (Yollin, 2002). Being from a developing country at war, some Afghans were also unfamiliar with scientific census-taking or did not trust anything related to the government, so they declined to participate (Lipson, Omidian, & Paul, 1995). Although estimates vary, up to 30,000 Afghan refugees may live in the area, not including native-born children (Lindgren & Lipson, 2004; Robson & Lipson, 2002; Yollin, 2002). These groups comprise one-half to nearly two-thirds of the Afghan population in the United States (Robson & Lipson, 2002).

Many refugees resettle in already established ethnic communities, as is true of most Afghan refugees living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Yet these communities are not homogeneous. The Northern California Afghan population is, for example, "heterogeneous with regard to politics, social class, ethnicity," and "urban or rural origin" (Lipson & Omidian, 1993, p. 72). Although they share the Afghan nationality and most are staunch Muslims, Bay Area Afghans range from conservative to moderate and from traditional to more cosmopolitan (Lipson et al., 1995). As with many refugee groups who reach developed countries, the first to arrive in the U.S. starting in 1980 were the formerly wealthy, urban upper- and middle-class professionals, many of whom were highly educated or had some college education

and some exposure to the West. The profile then changed rapidly as families sponsored relatives with little formal education, often nine years of education or less (Lipson et al., 1995; Omidian & Lipson, 1992, 1996). This population includes traditional, rural Afghans, many of whom are not literate in their spoken languages of Pashto and Dari, the two main languages of Afghanistan, and almost all of whom had "little contact with Westerners" before coming to California (Lipson et al., 1995, p. 280; Lipson & Omidian, 1993, p. 72). The Northern Californian Afghan diaspora is also divided by politics, ethnicity, and gender. As an example, differences exist in levels of ambition generally acceptable for "educated urban women" compared with "uneducated traditional women," although variations do occur (Lipson et al., 1995, p. 280).

As part of a much larger literature review, my background preparation included knowledge of the historical conditions under which Afghan refugees fled their country and the demographics and other descriptive information of Afghans who resettled in Northern California.² I also had some prior experience in the Afghan refugee community as described below before entering the research site more formally for research purposes.

Serendipity

Unlike Ditton and Lehane's research (2009b), government approval to access the research site was not necessary and in general is not needed by investigators in developed countries. In fact, my access to the research site was quite unintentional. My initial interest was initiated in 2000 by a married Afghan couple, Wali and Hamida,³ when they contacted me, a complete stranger, to ask for my help to secure refugee status for their family in Afghanistan. A business associate of mine said that I could write well in English, and they thought this skill might be useful for obtaining asylum for their family members. They simply did not know who else to turn to. Their vivid retelling of their family's story immediately alerted me to the urgency of refugee issues at a personal level. Over a few years, I met with them to work on this issue about fourteen times, interacting with them, their children, and a couple of Afghan community leaders. During this time, I learned that Dr. Carl Stempel, my colleague and friend at California State University, where I teach, was conducting research among Afghan youth and their parents. I contacted him for advice about gaining refugee status for this family, and through him, I met a community leader who served as president of a nonprofit organization called Hope for

Afghans.⁴ Some formidable barriers existed to gaining refugee status for their family members, and we were not successful in helping them. After a few years with little contact, I last saw Wali and Hamida at a wedding to which they had invited me.

Building the Groundwork

When I was searching for a dissertation research topic, I remembered my Afghan friends and thought that even though we were not successful in gaining asylum for their family members, perhaps I could do something to assist female Afghan refugees who had already resettled in the San Francisco Bay Area. In this way, a general idea for a research topic was formed and a few informal contacts had already been established. However, I still needed to lay the groundwork for my study at the research site by contacting gatekeepers and developing cultural competence. Once this vital foundation was built, I could approach my university's ethics review committee to gain formal ethics approval.

Contacting Gatekeepers

During my review of secondary sources in 2005, I discovered Teri Lindgren's recent dissertation (2004) in nursing on Afghan women's community participation. Her advisor, Dr. Julian Lipson, and a colleague, Dr. Patricia Omidian, had conducted extensive ethnographic research among the local Afghan community, providing Lindgren with entrance into the field, including volunteering with the Afghan Center. In the summer of 2005, after I contacted Dr. Lindgren and discussed my research ideas with her, both she and Dr. Stempel talked with the president of the Afghan Center to refer me to her, thus giving me access to a key community leader. Re-entry into the field occurred in January of 2006 through my contact with the Afghan Center. In February of 2006, I met the president of the Afghan Counseling Services to End Domestic Violence program. He is a respected community leader, an instructor in anthropology at California State University in Hayward, and a teacher of Dari language and culture. Besides these two key community leaders, through the Afghan Center, I also met three key professional helpers in the community who put me in contact with others. One is a family resource specialist for the school district, and the other two are Afghan nurses working at local health clinics. Further, in the Communication Department at California State University where I teach classes, I had an Afghan student, Homaira, who served as my initial research assistant as well as my English and

Dari interpreter. She provided me with another avenue of entrance into the community. Subsequently, after my formal research began, I had three more female Afghan research assistants who also served as key cultural informants. Two other instructors introduced me to their contacts in the Afghan community, including a church group that does volunteer work with Afghan refugees. Overall, I had ten different entries into the community through Afghans from four distinct entry sites. These gatekeepers consist of three Afghans at the university, three Afghans who are community leaders, three Afghans who hold professional service positions, and my initial Afghan contacts, my friends Wali and Hamida. Having four distinct entry sites helped strengthen the quality of the research by providing access to different groups in the community. Such access to different groups can be difficult in refugee populations, as I learned while building relationships and developing cultural competence.

Developing Cultural Competence

My relationships with the ten gatekeepers built gradually over four to five months, which allowed time for me to begin understanding some aspects of this Afghan diaspora community. It also allowed me to develop cultural competency and trusting relationships before solidifying my research questions. The first lesson was that a refugee community may appear unified to an outsider, but have strong divisions within it. To work and live ethically among a refugee group as a participant observer, understanding these divisions is important for a number of reasons, including avoidance of unintentional alignments with one side or another and for the researcher's own safety. For Afghans, divisions exist along familial, ethnic, language, and political lines, but I was not aware of this when I entered the field. These divisions are serious and can carry major consequences. In Afghanistan, one side might have put the other side to death, yet in the United States, they are living as neighbors whose children may want to play with each other. When I was asked to take a leadership role in one organization, one of my non-Afghan advisors with international experience strongly suggested I stay out of leadership roles or I would be joining one team and aligning myself against other organizations. I followed his advice and later discovered he was right. Fierce competitiveness often occurs among the various groups. Conducting participant observation volunteer work in non-leadership roles also aligns the researcher with a group, but not as visibly. The access to insider viewpoints was well worth the tradeoff to me, and I later

engaged in several low-visibility roles, such as teaching a small English class, tutoring a student in English, and writing letters and grant proposals. My advisor counseled that I should also avoid being the “go-between” to communicate messages from one group to another, for being a liaison would insert me into their ethnic struggles and thus hamper my abilities to complete my research and help the community with my research results. Because I was not a member of the community and was still in my own familiar country, some of this new information was at first startling. Rather than impose any outside judgments, I wanted to approach my relationships with the open attitude of a sincere learner to understand their struggles more completely from a variety of perspectives.

By building relationships in the community, I began to understand other deeply held cultural beliefs, values, and practices of Afghans. For example, when I visited the Afghan Center at 11 a.m. to meet the president for the first time, I was professionally prepared for a Western-style business meeting. When I entered the building a few minutes before the scheduled meeting, the receptionist told me the president was on the telephone. Instead of having me sit in the waiting room, the receptionist and her coworker brought me to the lunchroom, where we sat and chatted about their families and children, while drinking tea and munching on Afghan sweets for twenty minutes until the president was ready. Afghans are famous for their hospitality and are strongly family-oriented in their conversations. Understanding the underlying structures of a refugee group’s cultural system will give the investigator a starting point for interpreting their conversations and the meanings they make of their lives.

At this time, I became aware that the Afghan community has diverse opinions about their country of resettlement. Some people think U.S. ways should be integrated into Afghan life, whereas others believe the community should strive to stay separated from outside influences. For example, some traditionalists and even some modernists believe that having women drive automobiles or be employed constitute unnecessary behaviors, since they might not have had to do these things back home. Other traditionalists or modernists disagree. Other areas of contention with U.S. lifestyles vary. The central question they grapple with is the extent to which each person should adapt to U.S. norms and customs. A researcher can discover salient issues of contention among Afghan refugees, for example, by understanding divergent views separating the original refugees and their second-generation children who were born in their new land. The refugees also hold various and

sometimes conflicting viewpoints on the politics of their host country. Whereas many Afghans applauded the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan after the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, many others condemned the invasion and were suspicious of the U.S. government’s motives. Over time, many more Afghans became disheartened, especially with the rising number of civilian casualties. Yet, they remained polite toward me as a U.S. investigator, and most avoided discussing the invasion.

By taking the time to gradually enter the field, contact gatekeepers, and develop cultural competence, I was able to gain insider knowledge particular to this refugee community. This knowledge has been valuable, even indispensably vital, to creating my research design and interacting with community members. Further, this knowledge helped me to avoid “awkwardness, errors in judgment, and even the application of stereotypic assumptions” (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007, p. 195). Concurrently, I built relationships and developed trust with key cultural informants who were also essential in my research as these relationships allowed me access to interview participants and insider cultural knowledge. Being responsive to suggestions from outside advisors provided me with the perspective to adequately monitor my own self-care and boundaries. My credibility was enhanced because my initial motive for entrance into the community was to try to help one of its members and because I was connected with a university. The next step was to gain formal ethics committee approval.

Gaining Formal Ethics Approval

I gained research ethics committee approval through the university where I teach, California State University, East Bay. After completing a training course titled “Conducting Research on Human Subjects,” I submitted my protocol, which included a request for waiver of signed consent if my interview respondent was uncomfortable with providing her signature. Previous research had shown that when working with refugee populations, such as Afghans, a signed consent form reminds some interviewees of imprisonment and torture experiences (Omidian, 2000). So, in this particular community, an information sheet has been used in place of an informed consent form (Lindgren, 2004; Lipson & Meleis, 1999). The common practice for ethics review committees is to accept the information sheets in place of informed consent forms when such issues exist for vulnerable groups, and I received such permission from my research ethics committee. For this study, I used the informed consent form, with the

option to switch to the information sheet if interviewees had difficulty agreeing to give their signature. The information sheet was identical to the informed consent form, except it did not have a signature line or require a signature. Only three respondents out of forty refused to sign the informed consent form.

Method

My multi-faceted research was conducted through forty in-depth qualitative interviews, averaging two hours each; a focus group; ethnographic participant observation in the local refugee community for more than two years; and consultation with key cultural informants.

Qualitative work has become the most frequently used approach for cross-cultural studies, because it is especially fitting when “exploring the viewpoints of persons and groups,” such as refugees “whose assumptions differ from those of the mainstream culture” and “who, therefore, have a particular need to speak and to be heard in their own voices” (Berkowitz, 1996, p. 54). This type of research is also useful to explicate “differences in world view” that may “underlie assessments of what is needed” to solve a specific problem or meet a particular need (p. 54). Qualitative research should be considered a valuable method for conducting refugee research.

Female, Caucasian, and Christian

Qualitative work in general shows the importance of the presence of the researcher “in the lives of the participants” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 79). From the start of the study, I was conscious of myself as a female, who is Caucasian, educated, and a Christian, and I was aware that these identities influence how I interact with, view, and interpret the Afghan community. My identities also influenced how Afghans viewed me. Because Afghans originate from a patriarchal, tribal society, I had access, as a female, to some participating women in ways that may have not have been allowed if I were a male (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). I had a gender-based connection with women refugees because we shared a common gender and thus shared experiences common to most women.

At the same time, as a Caucasian from a more liberal and individualistic society, I had access to leaders and men whom some Afghan women would not normally talk with (Papanek, 1964, 1973). The outsider woman “may almost become an ‘honorary man’” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 86). Yet my individualism was ever present in my verbal and nonverbal codes as I interacted with Afghans of either gender.

As a white, educated, English-speaking U.S. citizen, I also had privilege. I tried to be aware of this disparity in power and how it affected my interactions with Afghans (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004, p. 726). As cultural insiders and respected members of the community, my research assistants and key cultural informants also served as cultural brokers to help reduce the power differential that may have existed between me, as an outsider from a university, and the refugee women. They facilitated “opportunities for women to describe their personal experiences in a context in which cultural nuances” could be recognized (Neufeld et al., 2001, p. 584). They were also able to “hear” what Afghan participants were “saying and provide insight into the questions and responses beyond the actual wording” in ways that a non-Afghan investigator may miss (Cai, 1998, p. 36). Sometimes the interview respondents viewed me as having more power to help them than I possessed as a university instructor. In Afghan culture, teachers are among the elite. University professors are often seen as people who can open doors as information brokers for others, and I was asked sometimes to handle legal or government matters that were outside my professional expertise.

Having been a Christian for all of my adult life and active in church circles, I have strong moral values; understand the sacredness of Scripture; and experience the communal, familial nature of having “brothers and sisters in Christ.” I noticed that my Christian experience helped me to identify with some Muslim religious concepts of refugees. For example, Muslims also view unrelated Muslims as part of a larger social family. Even though they are not blood relatives, they share a sisterhood or brotherhood relationship with each other in the Islamic tradition.

Throughout the study, I kept reflexive memos to clarify my own involvement, potential biases, and cultural representation issues (Lindgren, 2004). Further, to uphold the credibility of the data, my research, analysis, and writing consisted of a stance of empathetic neutrality, meaning that I did “not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths” (Patton, 2002, p. 51). Rather, my attempts were to truly represent the experiences of female Afghan refugees in their own voices (Abu-Lughod, 1993). Such an approach is important for ethical investigators as it seeks to preserve the autonomy of the research participants (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001).

Participant Observation

I had participant observation experiences from one to three times a week for sixteen months and have since

gradually lessened my involvement to one or two times a month. Whenever feasible during participant observations, local Afghans participating in the activity were informed that I was a researcher as well as a participant. Many of them came to know me well through repeated interactions. When I attended large events which attracted hundreds of people, however, such an introduction would have been out of place (Enteen, 2005).

My participant observations initially included attending community events and meetings, “hanging out” at the Afghan Center office, having lunches and dinners with Afghans, and attending my Dari language and culture class with the community leader who taught those classes. Then, as people got to know me, I also took on official roles, mainly as a teacher for the English class at the Afghan Center, an English tutor for a refugee and helper for her family over a summer, and later as the facilitator for the Afghan Partnership for Health Program, which meets quarterly. I still serve in this latter role, planning meetings, inviting people to attend, hosting the meeting, and following up, including writing the minutes and other materials. Additional participant observation work consisted of writing grant proposals, letters, programs, and presentations; advising Afghans with various problems; and serving in several roles in two other academic research projects. Throughout my participant observations, I strove to maintain neutrality by not taking sides and not making assumptions but striving to learn the various perspectives represented. Overall, my activities allowed me not only to learn about the culture, but to observe directly and to take field notes on the important situations, information needs, and communicative behaviors that female refugees presented in these contexts.

In-depth Interviews

Omidian (2000), who has conducted extensive research in this Afghan diaspora, cautions that with the community’s “distrust of outsiders, it is more important to gain the trust and openness of a few reliable informants” instead of interviewing many people, and often receiving unreliable answers (p. 45). She also identifies the importance of the participant observer in understanding themes that emerge and in checking both interview information and observations with the key informants. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) also conclude that, “The study of a large, randomly selected sample of cases is not necessarily the most useful approach” (p. 48). Whether such a large sample is useful or not may be an impractical question, for as Omidian (2000) points out, “[r]andom sampling in refugee communities is nearly

impossible,” particularly in countries of final resettlement where census data does not closely match the actual refugee population (p. 43).

Most of the ten gatekeepers who provided my entrance into the community were interviewed by me, and many of them referred from one to four people who also were interviewed to create a purposive sample of forty Afghans interviewed (Patton, 2002). Maximum variation was a goal of the sample, which included early, middle, and recent arrivals; self-described modern, middle, and traditional mindsets; thirty-five women and five men, ranging in age from their early twenties to late seventies; leaders, professional helpers, and laypersons; married, single, divorced, and widowed females; Pashtuns, Tajiks, Farsiwans, and Hazaras; college-educated, high school-educated, grammar school-educated, and non-schooled people; and English-speaking and non-English-speaking respondents. (All interviewees spoke fluent Dari and seventeen participants were also familiar or fluent in Pashto.)

Special considerations were kept in mind to include and account for the additional vulnerabilities of refugee women who were recent arrivals and from rural areas, had little or no formal education, did not speak English, and were sometimes widowed. Some widows who formerly lived in refugee camps were allowed by recent U.S. policy to gain refugee status here. Some of them may have been “somewhat invisible, not only in their new resettlement communities, but also within their particular refugee communities” (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004, p. 729). To extend my research sample to cover even those “marginalized refugee women” far from the center of visibility in their respective communities, I included eight widows and eight domestic violence victims in the research sample as part of the layperson respondents (p. 728).⁵ These marginalized women and to a degree some Afghan refugee women in general are frequently considered a “hard-to-reach” population because of language barriers, a lack of education, and cultural differences that preclude some of them from speaking for themselves or understanding the purpose of research (p. 729). Thus investigators often find it easier to “consult with leaders of refugee communities, who are typically men” rather than talk with women (p. 729). I agree with Burnett & Peel (2001) who assert, “It is important to speak to them [women] directly, using an independent interpreter rather than a family member” to discover what the women’s needs really are (p. 546). I strove to clearly explain the benefits of the research to the community and to make interview questions direct and in simple language. Another researcher, Thompson (1991),

found that after the interviews the women made “frequent requests for help” related to medical care, housing problems, and other basic needs (pp. 35–36). As an ethically beneficent practice, she and her co-researchers did their best to help the women or refer them to appropriate resources, as I have, with whatever various needs they might immediately present during the interview. At the same time, the investigator must recognize that she or he does not have the resources or background to solve all of the refugees’ problems.

Besides interviewing laypersons, including females who have been marginalized in multiple ways, I also interviewed eight Afghan leaders and six Afghans in professional helping occupations. Afghan community leaders and professional helpers, whether from ethnically-based organizations, health service providers, or refugee assistance groups, have regular contact with female Afghan refugees and their information needs. Their professional and personal assessments of the issues that women face provided valuable insight for this study about the information needs that are visible to community service providers and whether those needs are being met (Neufeld et al., 2001; Sherkin, 2004).

The Role of Interpreters

Interpreters were needed to interview seventeen of the respondents who spoke little or no English. A female, Afghan master’s degree student who served as my research assistant in exchange for college credit received detailed training about the purpose of the research project, the interview guide, and the need to interpret responses as “verbatim as possible” (Patton, 2002, p. 392). Then she interpreted for three of my interviews. After receiving orientation about the research and similar instructions about giving verbatim interpretations, adult children of the respondents interpreted for three additional interviews. Each of these three interviews contained less depth than the other interviews. For the remaining eleven interviews in which interpreters were used, trusted community leaders or professional helpers provided the Dari and English interpretations. These individuals received an orientation about the project from me and they already had extensive experience as interpreters.

Confidentiality

An important part of doing research is promising interviewees that their responses will be kept confidential and that the participants will not be “identified as having responded in any particular way” (Cai, 1998, p. 34).

If refugee respondents are afraid that their answers can be traced back to them, they may refrain from answering honestly or withdraw from the interview altogether. The informed consent form was designed to ensure confidentiality. It was available in both English and Dari, one of the two official languages of Afghanistan and a language that virtually all Afghan refugees in the local diaspora spoke. The Dari version was translated by an expert, then double-checked and typed by another expert.

When the informed consent form was explained to each respondent, permission for digitally recording the interview was also sought. If permission was received, which it was from all except three respondents who were elderly or more traditional, the digital file was later used to make verbatim transcripts of the conversation. The transcripts were coded by number and kept separate from the respondents’ actual names and contact information. Then the transcripts were used for data analysis. In the writing of my dissertation, pseudonyms were used and inconsequential identifying details were changed to help further ensure confidentiality.

Notions of Trust

Afghans typically distrust non-Afghans, and also distrust unrelated Afghans, but may trust close friends or respected community leaders (Omidian, 2000). Thus trust is an especially important consideration when conducting research in an Afghan community. Three of my gatekeepers into the community were respected community leaders, and my research assistant was also a respected individual in the community. Personal referrals from these people were crucial because Afghan refugees prefer recruitment through personal contacts rather than advertisements.

Some research has shown that respondents sometimes talk more openly and freely with outsiders, especially with an in-depth interviewer whom they meet once and never see again (Gans, 1999; Weiss, 1994). The social distance and anonymity present with an outsider may “facilitate disclosure more than interaction with someone who is a member of the same community because of a greater threat to privacy and confidentiality” (Neufeld et al., 2001, p. 586).

The investigator must be aware of these considerations when interviewing and make efforts to build trust by providing assurances of confidentiality, explaining the reasons for questions, treating the interviewee as a valuable teacher, and occasionally feeling free to disclose reciprocal demographic information that shows

commonality between the interviewer and the interviewee—if asked to do so and when appropriate. For example, the respondent may be curious to know whether the interviewer is married, has brothers and sisters, or grew up in the local area. In my research, being an outsider was an asset in my interviews with many of the women—for they confided that they were much more open with their remarks than they would have been with another Afghan.

Creating Accurate Transcriptions

As the “essential raw data for qualitative analysis,” verbatim transcripts were typed of thirty-seven interviews from the digital tape recordings, resulting in more than 1,000 pages of transcripts of interviews averaging two hours each (Patton, 2002, p. 441). Because of the large quantity of data collected, a transcription service was hired to assist with the interviews conducted in English. An Afghan research assistant typed the interviews conducted in Dari by transcribing into English both the respondent’s answers and the interpreter’s translation of those answers to double-check for accuracy. My questions and comments were transcribed as well. Resources were not available to have a second person back-translate the interviews into Dari and compare them against the original digital tape (Goodkind & Deacon, 2004). However, the research assistant consulted with other Afghans for interpretations that were puzzling or not straightforward. For the three interviews in which notes were taken, the notes were typed soon after the interview so details could be filled in from memory.

By regularly communicating with the key cultural informants during data collection and analysis, the “true meaning of answers” and an insider’s view were better grasped (Omidian, 2000, p. 45). Key cultural informants also read my written drafts of research findings, checked for accuracy, and provided insights until the document was completed. After reading drafts, a few key informants expressed amazement and pleasure with how forthcoming and honest the respondents were during the interviews. The respondents were able to trust me as a culturally sensitive non-Afghan outsider and consequently shared their stories, some of which they had never shared previously.

These methods of qualitative ethnographic research demonstrate not only how to conduct investigations among refugees effectively, but also how to ethically approach community members to preserve autonomy, ensure confidentiality, build trust, and improve the accuracy of interpretations and results.

Results

This study (see Smith, 2008) contributed knowledge to extant literature by offering insights about the difficult situations, information needs, and associated communicative behaviors of Afghan refugees and refugees in general; additionally, this study makes an important contribution because it offers these insights using both women’s own voices and a scholarly point of departure, including the rigorous application of qualitative methods. This research shows that the difficult situations and conditions women refugees experienced during pre-migration, migration, resettlement, and adjustment lead to and include increased physical and mental health concerns, family issues, and community tensions for Afghans. These conditions, as well as linguistic and cultural barriers, then affect their abilities to successfully bridge information gaps that occur during their migration and resettlement processes. Many information gaps or needs of the females were identified, and the women’s use of specific interpersonal relationships to help meet information needs was shown.

Similar to Ditton and Lehane (2009b), since completing my formal research I have presented my findings to “government, non-government and private stakeholders.” As part of my role as Afghan Partnership for Health Facilitator, I presented relevant results at a Refugee Health Summit in October 2008 to more than sixty attendees including elected public officials at the state, county, and city levels; community leaders; health care providers; ethnic group representatives; community members; and other interested individuals. Since then, I have prepared and distributed a report of thirty recommendations for service providers drawn from the results of my research (see Smith, 2009). Currently I am working with a community group in developing programs that follow from certain recommendations.

Discussion

Ditton and Lehane’s research (2009a, 2009b) focus on refugee research in a developing country, whereas this essay highlights ethical issues that arise during the research process in a modern Western country through a case study among Afghan refugees in Northern California. Most of Leaning’s guidelines (2001) are applicable in both contexts. Ditton and Lehane focus on the application process and conditions for research approval that the Thailand government required, which are not necessary to conduct research in developed countries. This article identifies specific research procedures and methods, and discusses why they should be

given special consideration because of the vulnerabilities of refugees in any research context and particularly when the research method takes a qualitative ethnographic approach.

Being a refugee places a person in a vulnerable position from the time of crisis in his or her home country and throughout migration, resettlement, and adjustment. From my research, I have learned that within refugee communities, some groups may be more vulnerable than others. Yet U.S. federal regulations for conducting ethical research only stipulate specific protections for pregnant women, fetuses, neonates, prisoners, and children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). The guidelines do not require specific protections for refugees in general or for particularly vulnerable groups within refugee communities. Investigators, methodology instructors, ethics committees, government bodies, and scholars should be aware of the following six groups who can experience additional multiple vulnerabilities in refugee communities.

1. Refugee women can be disadvantaged when they leave a society in which many women had communicated exclusively with members of their extended families and had spent much of their time in the home, and then enter a society in which men and women talk freely and women travel unhindered outside of the home. However, the change in the structure of society can also represent new opportunities for these women if they can accept new ways of thinking and acting.
2. Refugees who are not literate in their native language and have had little formal schooling face tremendous hurdles in learning a new language, especially if they are older.
3. Refugees who are unable to learn their new country's language for other reasons are also at a remarkable disadvantage. Obstacles to literacy in the new language might include a husband not allowing his wife to attend school, or having a debilitating illness or a disability that interferes with being able to mentally concentrate.
4. Elderly refugees tend to have more difficulties than younger refugees in adapting to a new culture, in part because they do not have the same exposure to the new country through work or school, and they may find themselves isolated and lonely in the home.
5. Refugees who have been disabled by the war (e.g., by torture, bomb explosions, or gunfire), as well as refugees who were born disabled or became disabled through illnesses or other injuries have special needs that require special consideration.

6. Refugees who were working professionals in their homeland, such as government leaders, university professors, doctors, lawyers, and business owners, have extraordinary personal challenges with the loss of status in their new country when their credentials are not recognized and they cannot find employment comparable to what they had. This deep sense of loss of recognition tends to particularly affect the men.

These factors and more combine to create new pressures in the home and community, often leading to two additional areas of marginalization.

7. An increase in domestic violence may exist within refugee families.
8. Widespread mental health difficulties may occur within the refugee community.

Ethics review committees and others who seek to understand and ameliorate these difficulties should consider developing guidelines for ethical research in the vulnerable population of refugees in general and for specific groups who are marginalized in particular and often multiple ways.

Best Practices

Ten recommended practices for conducting ethical research in a refugee community have been integrated throughout this report. Each of the ten rests upon acquiring an in-depth understanding of the refugees, their community, and research methods appropriate for those people and that community. Here are the ten areas that my experience suggests researchers should become knowledgeable about or understand.

1. The historical conditions under which the refugees were forced to flee.
2. The social, cultural, political, religious, economic, and linguistic factors that comprise the unique backgrounds of the refugee group.
3. The group-defined markers of difference or division within the refugee community.
4. The group's deeply held cultural beliefs, values, and practices.
5. The ethnic community's stances toward the country of resettlement.
6. How to develop relationships with one or more outside advisors who have international experience and will help with the investigator's monitoring of self-care and boundaries.

7. How to ensure confidentiality to interview participants, including using an unsigned information sheet in the place of an informed consent form when necessary.
8. The importance of gaining the trust and openness of a few reliable key cultural informants who can serve as cultural brokers, act as interpreters during interviews, and provide an insider's viewpoint during data analysis and the writing of the research findings.
9. The importance of making a conscious effort to include in the research, and account for, the needs of those refugees who experience additional multiple vulnerabilities.
10. The importance of using the results of the research to improve the lives of refugees in the community studied.

The knowledge gained from seeking understanding of the first five areas will provide the investigator and other stakeholders with a rich, complex base or starting point for developing research questions or hypotheses and conducting research in a way that makes ethical sense for the refugee community. During this time of laying the groundwork, the researcher will also build trusted friendships within the group and become better accepted by members of the group. The refugees will recognize the investigator's genuine interest in learning about and helping them. The remaining five best practices will help guide investigators, methodology instructors, ethics committees, government bodies, scholars, and other stakeholders as they create, evaluate, and carry out ethical and effective research designs to improve the lives of refugees in and beyond the communities researched.

Research Agenda

Future research among refugees conducted by cultural outsiders should identify and document additional appropriate and ethically responsible research procedures in order to demonstrate what special considerations are needed. This documentation, focusing on the investigator's development of cultural competency and adaptation of research design to fit the context, could be especially useful for studies in developing countries. Future areas for investigation include:

1. An assessment of how a detailed informed consent process might be affected by the unstable conditions of the developing country and how it should be modified to be appropriate to that context.
2. An exploration of the meaning of confidentiality when interviews are conducted in meeting places

that may include tents (Benjamin, 1981), a "comfortable log along the seashore, an abandoned warehouse," or "other creative spaces" (Sommers-Flanagan, 2007, p. 192).

3. An inquiry into the nature of accurate record keeping in a crisis environment compared with the stable setting of a developed country as presented in this article.

Core understanding should be sought of how investigators must adapt their methods to be ethically responsible and effective when working with refugees in both modern and developing countries.

Educational Implications

Stakeholders interested in refugee research can engage in cultural sensitivity training in the classroom or in professional development settings. Such training should include case studies and role-play opportunities so that the learner can develop hands-on intercultural skills before entering the research site. Methodology instructors should include in their curriculum how research methods should be adapted to account for specific vulnerabilities of the population being studied. Similarly, members of an ethics review committee evaluating refugee research protocols should become educated about specific concerns and vulnerabilities of research among refugee groups. This article and Ditton and Lehané's (2009a, 2000b) can be used towards that end.

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End Notes

¹The term “refugee” is defined by international law as “a person who is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or unwilling to return to that

country because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 1967, p. 16).

²Investigators who are new to interactions with cross-cultural groups should also seek necessary training in intercultural communication or a related field that provides cultural sensitivity training to enhance their understanding of concepts such as ethnocentrism, flexibility, adaptability, and active listening.

³Pseudonyms are used for people’s names in the Afghan community to protect confidentiality.

⁴Pseudonyms are used for the organizations’ names.

⁵Ten general laypersons who were not widowed or victims of domestic violence were also interviewed.

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