

Issues around relocation for Afghan Interpreters

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MSc in Psychological Research Methods

by

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The work reported received ethical approval from the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences, University of Plymouth and complies with the guidelines set by the British Psychological Society. The data collected has been de-identified whereby all identifiable information has been removed or replaced with relevant pseudonyms or unique study numbers.

Introduction

The UK's 13-year campaign in Helmand Province pursued a more secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan which required the support of local national people. Afghan men were often employed as interpreters and deployed to the frontline alongside British troops. They played a major role in winning hearts and minds by communicating with the local population to counter the insurgency. During their employment, many faced regular danger from threats including insurgent forces and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks. As a result, UK Government policy provides support, including sanctuary in the UK. Under the Afghan Locally Engaged Staff Ex-Gratia Scheme (GOV.UK, 2015), eligible interpreters and certain members of their family are granted 5 years Leave to Remain with settlement status, distinct from refugee status. At the end of the 5 year period, they are given opportunity to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain. Settlement into a new country naturally brings with it many challenges, adjustment and adaption to a new cultural environment. The purpose of this research was to document some of those experiences in order to learn what issues former interpreters may face and what support they need and receive.

The conditions under which migrants and refugees leave their homeland and journey to their host country in search of safety impacts on their identity and what they understand to be home (Mallett, 2004). In turn, the experience of home influences the meaning and significance of their journeys and adjustment to their new destination. A home is a multidimensional concept. Ahmed (1999) argues that home in the context of migration can be experienced as strange and/or familiar. Home is not necessarily a singular place or state of being rather it maybe one's country, city or town, where one's family lives or comes from and/or where one usually lives (Ahmed, 1999). The relationship between self and object in the intentional production of home consists of dynamic processes and transactions that transform a dwelling unit into a home in the context of

everyday life (Mallett, 2004). These processes are made up of routine activities such as performing and/or attending religious practices, social gatherings and educational classes. In addition, the formation of the family home is also shaped through ideas about family, ethnicity, class, gender and age.

Navigating the bureaucracy of employment, accommodation, education, benefits and entitlement are key dilemmas facing the refugee community, in their bid to integrate and become positive contributors to society. Many of the problems refugees encounter should be viewed within a wider debate about reception, perception and impact. Integration into any host area will depend in part upon receptivity of the local population. The media holds a very powerful position in conveying, explaining and articulating specific discourses that can help represent and misrepresent minority groups (Cottle, 2006). The negative perception portrayed by the British media inhibits the development of a positive environment and reception for refugees (Cunliffe & Bahiraey 2006). For example, the social consequence of allowing refugees to secure employment deprives indigenous nationals of job opportunities. However, their failure to secure employment is emphasised as an economic drain in terms of housing, the use of social services and benefits (Cunliffe & Bahiraey 2006).

The concept of integration has become a matter of public discussion and central to UK government policy in the field of refugee resettlement and community cohesion. Robinson (1998 as cited in Ager & Stang, 2008) suggested that integration is a word used by many but seen differently by most. It is best understood as multifaceted, individualised, contested and contextual, where no single meaning exists. At government level key markers such as, employment, housing, education and health determine integration. However, on a more individual level integration can describe the struggle people have in mixing their work life with their home life, behaviour with friends, with behaviour at home or with family.

The present study will be centred on how social and psychological factors interplay to affect community adjustment, more specifically what variables hinder and/or facilitate this process. In addition, the study will explore how former interpreters viewed their role working with the British Military and what impact that has on them now. This study adds novel findings to the field by focusing on individual narratives, enabling interpreters to tell their stories which are seldom heard. The main research question was Issues around relocation for Afghan Interpreters.

Method

Participants

A gatekeeper model for recruitment was used whereby a charity in the Southwest supporting former interpreters to settle identified suitable participants. The research was independent from the charity. Four male Afghan nationals aged between 27 and 36 years agreed to participate. Each had worked as an interpreter on the front line with the British Military at some stage between 2007 and 2014. The fifth participant worked for the charity supporting former interpreters in their relocation.

Data collection

Interviews with the Afghan national interpreters took place in a central location where the participants lived, as this was an accessible and familiar place for them. The interview with the Support Worker took place over the phone. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. All five interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analytic procedure

The transcripts produced from each interview were analysed separately. The transcripts were read through thoroughly by the researcher

enabling familiarisation with the participants' personal narrative. Any potential items of interest were noted in the left-hand margin of the transcript. This was repeated several times until an in-depth understanding of each participant's journey as a former interpreter was established. The subsequent stage of analysis involved assigning final codes to each answer segment relevant to issues around relocation. This was marked in the right-hand margin of the transcript. Participants were non-native English speakers and therefore great care was taken to ensure codes and potential themes were in accordance with participants' use of language. Once coding was complete, similar and overlapping codes and patterns within and across the participants' datasets were identified and organised into key concepts. To avoid misrepresentations an independent reading of the transcripts was carried out by the supervisor at various stages of the analysis.

Thematic Analysis (TA) is an accessible and theoretically flexible approach which allows themes to be identified, analysed and reported from the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The researcher had previous experience of interviewing military personnel who had been deployed to the frontline in Afghanistan and thus was well positioned to understand the specific issues facing this participant group.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the issues around relocation for Afghan interpreters and their families. Overall, participants told narratives that described a journey, mediated by opportunities and circumstances. Family, whether nuclear or multigenerational, remained the single most important aspect of their life. An inductive thematic analysis revealed five main themes: *dangerous nature of interpreter role, career choice, culture*

and religion, cense of home, and support network. Themes and subthemes have been discussed.

Dangerous nature of interpreter role

Although the participants were not directly asked to speak about the dangers they faced as an interpreter, they were asked to discuss the point when they realised the dangers of the job. One participant described realising the dangers early on, when he considered becoming an interpreter:

Participant D04: 'I just hear that there's interpreter job in Helmand, so I realise yah, the first thing is [...] you may not come home in one piece, that was the first sign in my mind'.

The dangers of the role were also discussed in the context of being on the ground, specifically whilst on the frontline, patrolling with the British soldiers:

Participant A01: 'I knew it was risky when we were going outside we could be blown up by IEDs, we could be shot by bullets, anything'.

Reasons for relocating. Wide knowledge of interpreter's involvement with coalition forces put them and their families at great risk of reprisal from the Taliban, especially when internal security forces withdrew. One participant described how he feared for the safety of his family:

Participant B02: 'we had worry about (.) when we did work, for family, for our father and mother. Always I keep secret I'm not working, I working with agency, like there's plenty people [...] they (.) knows we did work'.

Another described the risk interpreters faced should they be identified by the Taliban:

Participant A01: 'we do remember some interpreters, while they working with the armed forces, ah they been stopped by the insurgents at the, when the insurgents found that they working with the Army, they been killed, even some interpreters have been, ah behead by them'.

Former interpreters who were considered by the UK government to have put themselves in the most danger during their service in Afghanistan were given three offers, including relocation. Whilst they are permitted to choose one of the three offers, external compelling factors mitigated this choice. It therefore becomes a decision not of freewill, but one influenced by persecution and economic difficulties. All four participants chose 'the relocation offer' in a hope that the UK would provide safety, financial stability, education and a future:

Participant D04: 'safety of my family (.) that was the most important point for me, to come here because (.) after withdrawal of national Americans and British forces, I knew that there will be problems with err, economy in Afghanistan. And we won't be able to find good jobs, to make good money, to run family better, to also educate my kids'.

Career choice

Helmand Province was one of Afghanistan's most volatile regions, a stronghold for Taliban activity. When coalition forces were deployed to the region, it brought with it social and economic opportunities for the Afghan people. Motivations for becoming an interpreter included financial stability for the family, even at the risk of being killed or injured:

Participant D04: 'quite risky but (.) when I was looking back to my financial problems or my

family's financial problems, so I prefer it, it's better than doing nothing'.

Another participant who was previously in education aspired to work in service of the people. He describes the interpreter role as an opportunity to help the people of Afghanistan:

Participant A01: 'I like to work with people for people and that was um, a good opportunity for me to go and join the army...that was my big wish to work with err, with my people for my people, yeah so that made me go and join the British Army'.

In addition, interpreters played a vital role in intercepting and translating enemy radio 'chatter' for British soldiers, in order to pre-empt Taliban attacks:

Participant B02: 'we have one icomm, that was radio to how we receive the (.) enemy voice [...] always I listen to that and I pass to commander of patrol, the enemy is maybe behind that wall, maybe in that village. The enemy told us, they see us, "oh the British soldier is coming, there is one, two, three, an interpreter is the third one, maybe fourth one sometime", "oh, I am confused, now they been shooting by sniper!" (laughter) and they did before because (.) that time, for there was no idea, the interpreters for patrol, the eyes of soldier (.) because interpreter will tell err, them and (laughter) will interpret for them, to how the people talking like this'.

Unemployment. One of the biggest challenges former interpreters face in the Southwest of England is finding work within a competitive and seasonal job market. The limited industries and infrastructure in the

Southwest, in comparison to more densely populated cities put them at a disadvantage. Furthermore, ethnic minorities in business in the Southwest are not as prevalent as the more culturally diverse cities where connections are built through relatedness leading to opportunities in work. As a result, some families have had to relocate to more metropolitan cities with greater employment prospects:

Participant F06: 'some families have left [place] because of the, their inability to get a job and so while their English skills spoken are brilliant or really good, um, their written and reading skills aren't so, necessarily, so good and that, and that puts them at a disadvantage in the competitive job market'.

Jobs offered in the UK usually require a level of experience and a form of reference. Former interpreters who have been relocated are essentially 'unknown' until they are able to start building connections within the local community. This lack of experience has led to difficulties in finding work:

Participant C03: 'yah this is very hard to find the job in, specially in [place] you know...if anyone, err want to get a job (...) they have experience, without experience, no chance to get a job but how you can get the experience before the job you know.

Former interpreters who have relocated to the UK with their family become the sole provider as their wives speak no or little English. Thus, the time needed to support their family and maintain the connection with their children's school impacts on their availability for work:

Participant D04: 'my job at the moment is, ah, taking kids to school [...] and bringing them back,

ah, that's one of the main jobs and, ah sometimes when I think if, ah, I need to find a regular job, ah but that is always in my mind, that my wife, sh—she's not able to go and collect the kids. So there will be a lot of hard work for me, walking and then a lot of paper work from school but I wouldn't be able to do a regular job at least six days a week'.

In Afghanistan, men are viewed as responsible for the economic welfare of the family and often single-handedly support an entire household. This belief, should it be transferred and applied to living in the Southwest could have a considerable impact on the former interpreters. Feelings of immense pressure and frustration by their inability to find work and the type of work they are offered, could lead to a loss of dignity and social prestige, which is important in Afghan culture.

Low skilled jobs. For a variety of reasons, former interpreters have been shuttled into low skilled jobs, unable to work to their full potential. These reasons include linguistic skills, reading and writing competency, lack of experience and reference, and recognised qualifications. Therefore, many interpreters are offered jobs as cleaners or delivery drivers:

Participant F06: 'they've been incredibly disheartened and frustrated by the, the, their, (...) um, their, th-th—the length of time it's taking them to find work and then the types of work that they're able to get. Like a lot of them are being, are delivery drivers and things for fast food, for fast food outlets'.

These low skilled jobs are not perceived as providing financial stability and a future for the family:

Participant D04: 'I'm, I really (clears throat) looking forward to find out (.) a job which is, which makes, ah, good enough money and makes a good future; whatever it would be but not cleaning, cleaning doesn't make any future'.

Interpreters had an important role, working many years on the frontline for the UK government. Transitioning from this role to unemployment or low skilled work could be incredibly difficult. Furthermore, cultural and religious beliefs about gender roles and responsibilities could have an impact on the interpreter's ability to adjust to the types of work they are offered. In Afghanistan, much social behaviour is influenced by awareness of personal honour that encompasses an individual's reputation, prestige and worth. A women's role is primarily in the domestic sphere and by doing what is seemingly a women's role could be dishonourable for a man. These views and beliefs could in turn result in unemployment.

Culture and religion

The Islamic religion in Afghanistan underpins and shapes cultural values, which are seen by the participants as compatible with the multi-faith society found in the UK today. One participant in particular draws on similarities between the Islamic faith, and what might be perceived as British beliefs, demonstrating relatedness:

Participant D04: 'we were told by God and by Allah or same, you call it God, we call it Allah and by the prophet (.) that Jesus Christ was messenger of God, there's no doubt in it. Not—if you don't believe ah, Jesus, we not proper Muslim because he was a messenger of God, he was mention in our holy

book, that yes he was a messenger and before that, before Jesus, after Jesus, till the last prophet'.

Without exception, all four participants spoke about the importance of respect and tolerance towards the values upheld by people living in Britain:

Participant D04: 'respect, what we have been told since we were kids, ah, it's, it's a part of Islam as well (sniff) (clears throat) if you respect other religions, other religions will respect yours'.

It was apparent they sought a harmonious relationship with neighbouring households to maintain a peaceful coexistence. Participant D highlighted a potential cause of friction with his neighbour and demonstrated a willingness to make adaptations to preserve cohesion:

Participant D04: 'we can (.) compare it with our fr—neighbours, they good, especially English they—they're good. Except, a Polish, I don't know why (.) but sometimes, especially when my kids are playing, err outside, so they come—coming with small kinds of complaints, "oh it's a car park, your kids are playing". I say, "ok, ah, I won't let them to play outside or they won't play with balls when your cars are parked". I just bring them in, I don't want troubles, I want to live calm, peaceful'.

In UK society, there is a large emphasis on equality for women. In Afghanistan, there is a distinct separation of genders, which constitutes social expectations. There has been some progress towards women's rights that modernised the attitudes of many Afghan people. Yet, when the Taliban came into power, they placed extreme restrictions on women, resulting in

their seclusion. Since coalition forces liberated Afghanistan from Taliban rule, many of these restrictions have eased. Although, they are founded on a religious and cultural basis, and morals concerning a woman's role and place in society, are therefore widely upheld. One participant describes the role of women in the UK as the biggest difference they face:

Participant F06: 'I think the biggest, the biggest difference culturally is the, the role of women in UK society and them adapting to that and the women adapting to that [...] my take is that you know, they're just, their role is really in the home'.

The wives of the former interpreters attend English classes advocating their adjustment in order to take a more prevalent role outside the home. However, such learning is not within mainstream education with other male and female learners:

Participant D04: 'my wife, sh—she can't speak English, she's doing, she's going to—there's a (...) I don't know it's a institute or a (.) place to learn English, it's called [name]. Ah, there's a separate ah, place called [name] (sniff) just for Afghan ladies, especially all interpreter ladies err, wife's. They're going there studying English separately, not with other male and female's, ah, so she is learning'.

Culturally the husband is the first point of contact and his responsibility is to lead the family. This type of lifestyle is continuing in the UK and while this is acceptable to them, the expectation of a western culture exhibits different values and promotes equal opportunities across gender.

Conflicting values has the potential to present an obstacle to integration into western society leading to vulnerability in an unplanned situation:

Participant F06: 'their husbands don't see the need for them to learn English. And we've said, "well what about if you're not at home and there's an emergency, what are they going to do?", "well they're going to call me" [...] we did have an incident where a child was injured and there was a delay in the child receiving medical care because the husband was away from home'.

Sense of home

All four participants described a dual sense of home. For them Afghanistan will always be their true, ancestral home where their wider family continue to live. Their home in the UK was viewed as a place that provided safety, happiness and a future:

Participant D04: 'it doesn't feel like home for anybody because everyone is got a regional country or home but kind of yes, because wherever you live and you are safe, you happy, that's your home. And for me, if I live in Africa, ah even the, err, how to say the, the lowest economy (.) countries of Africa and you safe there and you happy there, that's a home. Home is made by the people who live there'.

How people are nice. The participants reported to have had good experiences of people in the Southwest and other parts of the UK. These experiences make the UK feel like home:

Participant A01: 'the friendly environment, people, ah, that all makes it feel like home, uh

hu, ah specially good neighbours. So, I don't feel like I am living, like (...) not in a strange place, it feels, I feel like um, my home'.

Happy living in the Southwest. When asked if they were happy living in the Southwest, all the participants said yes, they were:

Participant A01: 'I found it very good I mean, very easily. Ah, everything is been, it looks err (...) like, everything looks perfect err, been the, everything yeah. I'm more than happy with the (.) everything, with the people, with the culture, with the everything'.

Support network

The former interpreters have built strong relationships within the Islamic community, locally and throughout other cities. Maintaining these connections is important in developing a sense of home and understanding the society they encompass:

Participant C03: 'it's not different yeah, no. It's not difficult (.) for us you know...here we have a family, Afghan family, we have a (.) good relationship, we have a community, small community, going each other, err sitting for something you know, that's right, yeah. Yah the same like we (.) been in Afghanistan, yah we've, hmm (clears throat) feeling very happy'.

In addition, the support worker role is key in the adjustment and management of the bureaucratic systems in the UK:

Participant F06: 'that support worker position is crucial because the, the bureaucracy and everything...they couldn't of negotiated that

without, you know, support from an agency [...] they wouldn't of been able to get a National Insurance number, you know, that would of taken months and their, um, when their Home Office money would of run out, they just would have been in destitution without, without the support that, you know, the government did provide or, you know, the council has provided'.

General Discussion

To date no research was found to explore the specific needs of former Afghan interpreters and their families relocated to the UK, provided through a qualitative approach. The main aims of the present study were to assess how social and psychological factors interplay to affect community adjustment, more specifically what variables hinder and/or facilitate this process. In addition, how former interpreters viewed their role working with the British Military and what impact that has on them now.

Former interpreters and their families have relocated to the UK as an outcome of the dangerous nature of the role. It was a way of keeping safe. The interpreter role was not only a way of providing financial stability for the family, it was an opportunity to play a major role in winning hearts and minds by communicating with the local population to counter the insurgency. The worthiness placed on this role leads to social prestige and respect within society. This potentially has an impact on interpreter's ability to find work and perhaps lead to unrealistic expectations around employment prospects in the UK, in particular the Southwest. This in turn has a further impact on what is deemed as successful integration (Cunliffe & Bahiraey 2006). Former interpreters described the challenges they faced in finding work which resonates with research into the refugee population where they are

shuttled into labour market niches, comprising of low-status and low-paid jobs that local populations avoid (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006).

Research Implications

This initial study has highlighted several areas for further research. Firstly, this study has heavily touched upon initial transition experiences and the participants' limited period of residency has yet to highlight greater difficulties for these families once support is fully removed. This is something that still requires further investigation. Secondly, the expectation of lifestyle, social integration and economical productiveness in the UK with its equal opportunities for all values may, at some point, conflict with the Afghan chosen way of life.

It would appear from this study that Afghan culture takes the view that it is protection for a wife to remain in the home. Within Afghanistan, this approach has advantages of protection and is supportive due to the large family networks that are present around Afghan women. Afghan women living in the UK have the potential to remain isolated from the opportunities available to them due to undeveloped language skills and lack of knowledge of support systems, as well as being isolated from their wider family network support. Further research is required to understand the potential impact such isolation may have on psychological wellbeing on not only Afghan wives living in the UK, but on the whole family network. Further research should also consider the potential consequences of this isolation in terms of significant life events, such as illness and/or the death of the husband.

Finally, further research is needed to look at the support needs of children living within these families, particularly in a location such as the Southwest, with limited access and support from the Muslim community more generally. This research could look to formulate the development of

robust family structures that would enable functioning in crisis in an adopted country so different for their own.

Conclusion

The study found that Afghan men became interpreters for financial reasons, but the nature of the job led them, and their families being placed in danger. Relocating to the UK was seen as the only option post-war. The male participants reported that they liked living in the UK and feel suitably integrated, however are having trouble finding suitable employment. There is a need for wider integration, one which allows whole family integration rather than just that of the former interpreters themselves.

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