

Introduction

- To date, little research has explored the experiences of Iranian sexual minority asylum seekers and refugees. Yet, Iranian sexual minority individuals face persecution and discrimination due to their sexual orientation (Hamedani, 2014).
- Currently, Iran is one of 76 countries that have outlawed same-sex relationships, and one of five countries in which same-sex sexual acts are punishable by death (Hamedani, 2014). Thus, many sexual minority Iranians seek asylum (Hamedani, 2014; Keung, 2014).
- The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study is to elucidate the experiences of Iranian sexual minority refugees in order to critique and alter the dominant discourse about this population from a post-structural lens, so as to improve the treatment and lives of Iranian sexual minority refugees.

Method

- Participants were recruited from the International Railroad for Queer Refugees. Participants completed semi-structured qualitative interviews.
- Their ages ranged from 19-41 (M=28.7, SD=6.76). Eight identified as gay, and two identified as lesbian. Seven identified as men, two identified as women, and one identified as non-binary. Eight identified ethnically as Iranian, and two identified as Azeri/Iranian Turk. All but one participant was currently resettled in Canada; the rest were awaiting resettlement in Turkey.
- Moustakas' (1994) guidelines for qualitative phenomenological methodology were used to analyze data. A coding team of counseling psychology graduate students was used to establish reliability.

Results

Themes/Textural Findings	
What Needs to Change in Iran	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secularize Iran's laws and government • Education through organizations and media representation
Interpersonal Influences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family shame and rejection • Abuse and violence perpetrated by family, strangers, authority
Life in Turkey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial problems • Housing and employment discrimination • Turkey similar to Iran in terms of views about sexual minorities
Problems with UNHCR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues with asylum interview process • Hopelessness and feeling out of place • Confusion and uncertainty
Issues Imposed by Trump Administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iran ban • drastically reduced number of refugees accepted to the U.S.
Beliefs About Mental Health Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative experiences in counseling • Belief that counseling is helpful/important • Emphasized the need for counseling is not because they are "sick"
Beliefs about self and others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified many personal strengths and goals • Desire for others to understand they are born this way and are humans

Imaginative Variation:

Power was found to be the primary structure that both underlies the reasons for seeking asylum and the experiences of seeking asylum for Iranian sexual minority asylum seekers and refugees.

"Our rights shouldn't be compromised over some political deals they make. Someone comes into power, someone leaves the position, we are the people who are being compromised. All of our rights are being compromised. I remember there was some time they used to talk more about the human rights violations in Iran, but you know, whenever there is a political actual deal, they're going to compromise our rights."

Synthesis:

Iranian sexual minority refugees experience numerous stressors and forms of harassment, discrimination, and abuse both while in Iran and throughout the resettlement process. These experiences appear to be rooted in oppressive government and social systems in the Middle East and Western nations that must be examined through sociohistorical and sociopolitical lenses. Mental health practitioners are not immune to the effects of government power and control and social discourse. Despite negative counseling experiences, participants generally believe counseling is useful when implemented appropriately. Participants also identified numerous strengths and factors that contribute to their resiliency.

Discussion

- Iranian sexual minority refugees experience discrimination/abuse at all stages of resettlement through political and social means.
- The U.S. holds immense power over refugees, greatly influencing refugees' lives, as well as citizens' beliefs about minority individuals

Implications

- Therapy should be a collaborative relationship that allows client autonomy and choice
- Iranian sexual minority refugees will not be able to relocate to the U.S. unless the Trump administration lifts the travel ban, and reforms the "last-in, first-out" system of asylum claims. These current policies leave Iranian sexual minorities stranded in Turkey in often dangerous and inhumane conditions.

Limitations & Future Directions

- Interviews were conducted in English rather than Farsi.
- Some participants may have withheld information during the interviews due to feelings of discomfort or anxiety due to the inevitable power imbalance between myself and the participants.
- Future research should explore the attitudes and beliefs about sexual minorities of mental health and medical providers in Iran.
- Future research could examine asylum interviewers' and adjudicators' beliefs about, and training backgrounds, of sexual minority asylum seekers.