

Hidden Trauma: The Grief Journey After the Transnational Loss

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Abstract

Introduction: Losing a family member in their homeland can pose a unique set of difficulties. The main purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research was to explore the challenges of grief experiences and coping with transnational loss among Afghan Immigrants.

Methods: This qualitative study was carried out using a descriptive phenomenological approach and conducted semi-structured interviews in person with 17 individuals (71.43% Female; Mage=30.42; SDage=5.68) who had experienced loss in their destination country until data saturation was reached. The interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's method.

Results: Two main themes, "What a troublesome situation!" with two sub-themes and "What is the solution?" with four sub-themes were extracted from the data.

Conclusion: The findings highlighted that service providers and mental health professionals can support individuals dealing with transnational loss by understanding its challenges and coping mechanisms. Cultural sensitivity in providing support can assist immigrants in their healing and adjustment to their new environment.

Keywords: Transnational loss, Grief, Afghan immigrants, Qualitative, Phenomenology

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Introduction

Statistics from the United Nations International Organization for Migration (1) indicated that 3.5% of the global population, totaling 275 million migrants, live in countries other than their own. When migrants leave their homelands, they may face various losses, such as social networks, culture, job opportunities, and housing (2).

Losing a loved one in their country of origin can be particularly challenging for immigrants who are unable to return due to various factors (3). The inability to bid farewell, attend the funeral, or be with extended family during this difficult time can exacerbate feelings of grief and isolation (4; 5). Without the usual sources of physical and emotional support that aid in the mourning process, grieving can become more complex for immigrants living far away from their homeland (6). This situation, commonly referred to as "transnational loss or death" or "migratory grief," can have a profound impact on the mental well-being of immigrants (7; 8; 9).

Due to distance, financial constraints, or legal obstacles, many immigrants may be unable to participate in traditional mourning rituals for their loved ones. The deceased may be physically absent but emotionally present, intensifying the grieving process for immigrant survivors

(10). The challenges of processing emotions, providing comfort, and engaging in meaningful conversations with loved ones can prolong the grief process, potentially leading to prolonged mourning (11; 12). Experiencing the loss of a family member while residing in a foreign country can result in a perpetual sense of ambiguous loss for immigrants (3), making it difficult for them to move forward in their new environment.

Bereaved immigrants may struggle with intense feelings of guilt, loneliness, and emptiness, affecting their psychosocial well-being (13; 14). Coping with transnational grief becomes crucial for immigrants as they navigate loss and seek ways to manage their emotional pain (15). The coping mechanisms adopted by immigrants can influence their ability to handle future losses (16). Studies have shown that engaging in mourning ceremonies, transnational family activities, providing support from afar, and exploring virtual communication methods can help immigrants navigate the complexities of transnational grief (17; 3). However, there remains a gap in research on transnational grieving processes and their effects on migrants.

According to the latest figures communicated by the Government of Iran, 762,000 refugees live in Iran, of which



750,000 are Afghans. Additionally, it is estimated that some 586,000 Afghan passport holders with Iranian visas also live in Iran; it is understood that some are previous refugee Amayesh cardholders (18). Given the significant number of Afghan migrants in Iran, it is important to explore the challenges they face after experiencing transnational losses, the impact of migratory grief on their lives, and how they cope with these losses. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the hurdles encountered by Afghan immigrants following transnational deaths, the repercussions of these experiences, and their coping strategies while residing in their new country.

Methods

A descriptive phenomenological approach was employed to understand the experience of transnational death among Afghan immigrants who lost their loved ones in Afghanistan when they lived in Iran as an adaptive country. This methodology seeks to provide a detailed and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of individuals when there is limited existing knowledge on the subject (19; 20).

Participants and Procedures

All participants completed the consent form and were informed about the subject of the research. The time and place of the interview were agreed with them, and they were informed that they could refuse to continue the interview at any time. All participants were offered vouchers for free counseling sessions or psychiatric services if needed.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling from a social work institute in Isfahan City, Iran, from February to April 2024. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 persons (71.43% Female; Mage = 30.42; SDage = 5.68) until data saturation.

The inclusion criteria for participation required individuals to be Afghan immigrants between the ages of 18 and 40 years who had experienced the loss of a loved one within the past three years. Exclusion criteria included those under or over age, those who had not experienced a loss within the past three years, and those who were not willing to openly discuss their emotions during interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were performed face-to-face in a quiet, neutral location of the counseling center to ensure comfort and confidentiality for the participants. Before conducting the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided their consent to participate. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder, ensuring that all responses were captured accurately for later analysis. During the interviews, prompts and follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of their

feelings and perspectives.

The interviews were designed to elicit comprehensive narratives about the participants' grieving processes and support systems, both in their current location and in their home country. This approach ensured a rich collection of qualitative data relevant to the study's objectives. Some of the questions were "What was your experience after informing about the death of your loved one in your home country? How did you feel after the loss? What challenges and consequences were created for you after the loss? What has been your experience with mourning from afar? What methods did you use to deal with the transnational loss of your loved one? Can you explain your grieving experience? How did this process differ in your country of origin? Can you talk about the support system you have in your current location? How would this be different in your home country? Do you have any other thoughts or emotions to share on this topic?"

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed simultaneously with data collection using Colaizzi's method, following the six steps outlined by Praveena and Sasikumar (21). Initially, the interviewer, who read and re-read them line by line to identify initial codes, transcribed the interviews. These codes were then organized into common themes, with irrelevant data being discarded. The author continued to refine the categories by referring back to the text until sub-themes emerged and were eventually grouped into main themes, providing a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. All analyses were conducted using MAXQDA 2023 software.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis, the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba were implemented (22). To ensure conformity, a thematic map was used to conduct an external validation of the extracted codes. To enhance credibility, a summary of the findings was shared with participants through email, phone calls, or online platforms to solicit their feedback.

Results

The demographic characteristics of participants are provided in Table 1.

The study findings highlighted two main themes that emerged from the experiences of Afghan immigrants living in Iran: "What a troublesome situation!" with two sub-themes and "What is the solution?" with four sub-themes (Figure 1).

These themes encapsulated the challenges and dilemmas faced by individuals grappling with transnational loss. The participants expressed feelings of displacement, grief, and longing for their homeland, while also seeking ways to cope with their loss and find a sense of belonging in their new environment. In essence, the study shed light on the complex emotional and psychological impact of transnational loss on Afghan immigrants, underscoring the need for support and resources to navigate these challenges effectively.

Theme 1: What a Troublesome Situation!

Participants shared the overwhelming emotions they felt upon receiving news of a loved one's loss back in their home country. The weight of the news was described as distressing and heart-wrenching, highlighting the challenges of being far away from loved ones during times of mourning. Participants expressed feelings of helplessness and sadness, illustrating the deep impact that such news can have on individuals living away from their home country. This theme sheds light on the emotional turmoil and difficulties faced by individuals who are separated from their families and communities during times of loss and tragedy.

Sub-Theme 1: Helplessness Emotions

Participants expressed feeling shocked and devastated upon hearing the news of their loved ones' loss in Afghanistan. They described feeling as though their world had been turned upside down, and all they could do was

cry and wait for further information in Iran.

P1 stated, "Getting the news of my father's death over the phone shattered my world suddenly. I was in disbelief that I wouldn't have the chance to see him before he passed away."

P5 also claimed, "I was feeling extremely overwhelmed and helpless knowing that I would not be able to have that closure of seeing her one last time at her funeral."

P10 expressed surprise and distress, "I was completely taken aback. I never anticipated my mother's passing to come so quickly, making it difficult for me as I relied heavily on her. Now, I find myself immersed in her sorrow in this unfamiliar land."

Sub-Theme 2: Double Suffering

Double suffering refers to the added emotional burden that Afghans face when they are unable to return to their home country to attend a loved one's funeral. Beyond the normal grief and sadness that come with losing someone, they also grapple with feelings of loneliness and helplessness as they mourn from a distance. This form of suffering is made worse by their inability to take part in traditional funeral customs, offer comfort to their family, or find support within their community back home. The lack of physical presence and the differences in mourning practices in their current surroundings can worsen feelings of isolation and alienation, making the grieving process even more difficult.

For example, P7 shared, "I experienced a deep sense of loneliness as I longed to be with my family but was unable to be with them. The feeling was incredibly painful."

P12 explained, "It was difficult to be distant and unaware of the details surrounding her funeral."

Many have expressed the challenges of grieving from a distance, feeling isolated from their cultural practices, and unable to engage in traditional funeral ceremonies.

P17 reflected, "One of the most difficult aspects was not being able to attend the funeral. Not being able to bid a proper farewell weighed heavily on me and lingered in my thoughts for quite a while." P6 stated, "I was not able to see my brother before he passed away, so I missed out

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Participants No	Gender	Age	Years of migration	Years after the loss experience
P1	Female	27	10	2
P2	Female	31	8	3
P3	Female	23	6	3
P4	Female	27	5	1
P5	Female	38	9	2
P6	Female	22	4	1
P7	Female	36	8	2
P8	Female	29	7	2
P9	Female	24	6	3
P10	Female	38	6	2
P11	Female	38	9	3
P12	Female	29	5	2
P13	Male	30	2	2
P14	Male	26	3	2
P15	Male	28	2	3
P16	Male	33	7	1
P17	Male	35	5	3

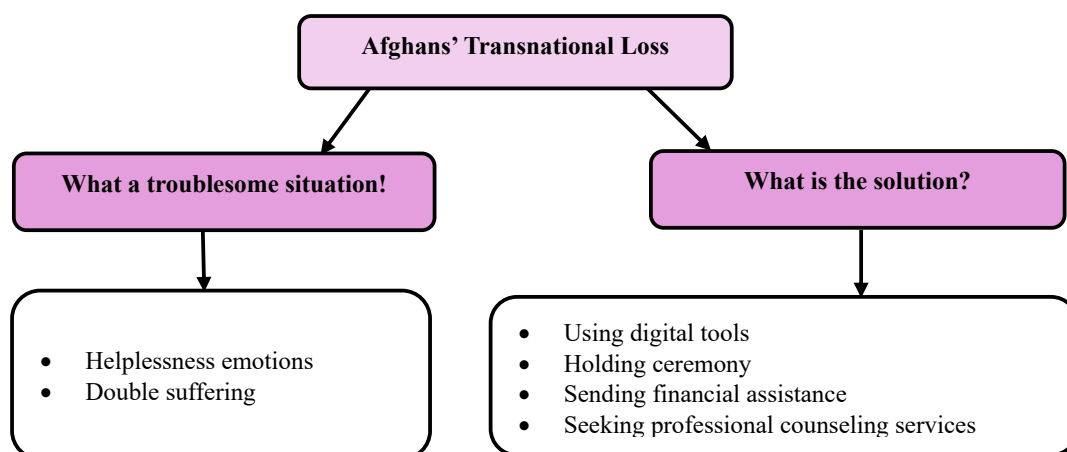


Figure 1. Thematic Map of the Main Themes

on the opportunity to say goodbye at his burial.”

P4 claimed, “In a different country, it can be challenging to grieve as you are required to carry on with your daily responsibilities and work commitments because your grief is not apparent to others.”

Theme 2: What is the Solution?

In addition to discussing the challenges of transnational grief, participants also shed light on the strategies they employed to address these difficulties. These coping mechanisms provide a glimpse into the diverse ways individuals navigate the complexities of transnational grief and find solace amidst the challenges it presents. Participants highlighted several important coping mechanisms, including using digital tools, holding ceremonies, sending financial assistance, and seeking professional counseling services.

Sub-Theme 1: Using Digital Tools

One common solution mentioned was staying connected with loved ones by using digital tools. Regular phone calls and chat messages were mentioned as a way to maintain emotional support despite physical distance. Participants also discussed relying on various communication technologies such as Telegram, Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and more to stay connected with family members and participate in memorial events virtually.

For example, P8 noted, “I made a video call to my family every day to maintain closeness with them during grief times. This routine of connecting with them regularly helped me feel close to them despite the physical distance between us.”

P13 explained, “Through these video calls, we were able to support each other, express our feelings, and show compassion towards one another. It was a healing experience to be able to see and hear my loved ones during such a difficult time, and it reinforced the importance of staying connected and not isolating ourselves when we are going through tough situations.”

P9 stated, “I would have used Telegram or WhatsApp to express my sadness, grief, and condolences, as it was the only way to connect and show empathy to my family during their mourning... The strength and healing that came from human connection and the bond of family were evident during our time of loss and sorrow.”

Sub-Theme 2: Holding Ceremony

Participating in ceremonies allowed Afghans to feel a sense of belonging and comfort while mourning in a foreign land. This was evident when Afghans gathered with fellow compatriots or Iranian friends to uphold cultural traditions that provided a sense of belonging and understanding for them.

For example, P11 shared, “Attending small traditional mourning ceremonies helped me connect with my deceased”.

P2 also mentioned, “Holding this ceremony helped me feel closer to their community and provided a sense of

unity during difficult times.”

Sub-Theme 3: Sending Financial Assistance

Another strategy mentioned was sending financial support to their grieving family members back home. This not only helped alleviate some of the practical burdens faced by the bereaved family but also served as a way to show love and care from afar.

In this regard, P14 stated, “I made sure to send money regularly to my sister-in-law after my brother passed away. It was the least I could do to help support her and my niece during such a difficult time.”

P15 claimed, “I knew my family was struggling financially after my father’s death. Therefore, I work a lot to send a significant amount of money to help cover their immediate expenses. It felt good to be able to provide some relief during their time of need.”

Sub-Theme 4: Seeking Professional Counseling Services

Participants emphasized the importance of building a support system in their current location to help them navigate their grief. Seeking formal support from professionals in counseling services and joining therapeutic support groups were strategies mentioned by participants. Participants noted that talking to a therapist or counselor helped them process their emotions, gain perspective on their loss, and learn healthy ways to cope with their grief.

P16 shared, “Talking to a therapist really helped me process my grief and find ways to cope. It was a lifeline during such a difficult time.”

Discussion

The results of this study revealed two main themes: “What a troublesome situation!” “What is the solution?” These themes offer valuable insights into the key components of the experiences of Afghan immigrants residing in Iran, who have experienced transnational loss and face challenges in navigating their grief.

In line with some studies (6; 13; 14; 7; 8), the theme of “What a troublesome situation!” showed the profound emotional impact of transnational loss on Afghan immigrants, illustrating the feelings of helplessness, shock, and double suffering that individuals experience when they are unable to be with their families in their home country during times of mourning. Consistent with Bravo’s (3) study on undocumented Latino immigrants coping with death in their home country, participants in this study also shed light on the profound feelings of loss, isolation, and yearning for connection that come with transnational loss.

The physical separation from their loved ones prevented participant from being able to bid farewell, pay their respects at the funeral, and take part in customary mourning practices, posing challenges in both grieving and coming to terms with their loss (8). This underscores the importance of providing support and resources to help individuals cope with these difficulties effectively

(12). The emotional turmoil, sense of helplessness, and longing for their homeland that immigrants experience when they learn of a loved one's death while living abroad are magnified by their inability to partake in traditional mourning customs and their physical absence during moments of loss. In line with (15), this intensifies feelings of loneliness and detachment, making the grieving journey even more challenging for those who are far from home.

On the other hand, the theme of "*What is the solution?*" explored the coping strategies employed by participants to address the difficulties of transnational grief. These emerged as important ways for individuals to find comfort and support while mourning from a distance.

Solheim and Ballard (18) found that transnational families experience ambiguous loss due to separation, leading to emotional distress and challenges in maintaining family connections. Therefore, utilizing some strategies provides a glimpse into the resourcefulness and resilience of immigrants in navigating their grief and finding solace amidst the challenges of transnational loss. Similarly, Bravo (3) found that new communication technologies like email, Facebook, and video calling apps are more important in coping with transnational loss, making it easier for families separated across borders to stay connected emotionally and offer support during mourning. However, these tools are beneficial; they cannot fully replace the sense of closeness and comfort that comes from in-person interactions, leading to transnational relationships that lack the intimacy of shared daily life (3; 23).

One of the most crucial coping strategies identified by our participants was seeking professional help in the form of a grief counselor or therapist when grieving a transnational loss. This approach involves consulting with a trained mental health professional who can provide support, guidance, and therapeutic techniques to help migrants navigate their emotions and process their grief in a healthy manner. In line with the study by Enworo (24), visiting a grief counselor or therapist can be particularly beneficial when facing a traumatic loss, as these professionals have the expertise and experience to help individuals work through complex emotions and navigate the unique challenges associated with transnational grieving. By providing a safe and non-judgmental space for individuals to explore their feelings, a grief counselor or therapist can help facilitate healing and promote emotional well-being during the grieving process.

Experts should take into account the cultural differences of immigrants when it comes to mourning. By acknowledging and assisting them in adapting to new mourning practices, experts can aid in their healing process and prevent their grief from becoming more complex (25; 26). According to the study by Aggarwal et al. (27), recognizing culturally specific symptoms can improve communication, enhance mental health interventions, and create stronger relationships with healthcare providers for immigrant populations. Although distress may provoke similar psychological

reactions across cultures, understanding these cultural distinctions is essential in providing effective support.

Overall, the study findings underscore the importance of understanding and addressing the complex emotional and psychological impact of transnational loss on immigrants. By exploring the challenges faced by Afghan immigrants following transnational deaths, the repercussions of these experiences, and the coping strategies employed, this study highlights the need for culturally sensitive support and resources to help individuals navigate their grief effectively. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of transnational grief on immigrants' mental well-being and the effectiveness of different coping mechanisms in facilitating the mourning process. By deepening our understanding of transnational grief and its impact on migrants, we can better support individuals in their journey of healing and adjustment in their new environment.

The study contributes to the existing literature on transnational loss by providing insights into the specific experiences of Afghan immigrants living in Iran. By understanding the challenges they face and the coping mechanisms they employ, service providers and mental health professionals can better support immigrants dealing with migratory grief. Additionally, the study sheds light on the importance of building a support system in the host country and utilizing cultural practices and digital tools to navigate transnational loss effectively.

Conclusion

This study highlights the profound emotional and psychological impact of transnational loss on Afghan immigrants residing in Iran. The themes of "*What a troublesome situation!*" and "*What is the solution?*" illustrate the complex challenges immigrants face in coping with grief while living apart from their families and homeland, as well as the strategies they adopt to navigate these experiences. Understanding these experiences can help mental health professionals and service providers develop culturally sensitive interventions that better address the unique needs of immigrants experiencing transnational grief. Such support has the potential to facilitate healthier mourning processes, promote psychological well-being, and enhance immigrants' adjustment to their host society.

The findings should, however, be interpreted in light of several limitations. This study focused exclusively on Afghan immigrants, and the experiences of other immigrant populations may differ according to their cultural, social, and migration contexts. In addition, the perspectives of mental health professionals and service providers were not explored, limiting a broader understanding of the support needs and challenges associated with transnational grief. Future research should therefore include more diverse immigrant groups, incorporate the views of mental health professionals and service providers, and examine the

long-term consequences of transnational grief as well as the effectiveness of different coping strategies and culturally appropriate interventions.

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Competing Interests

The author reports no conflict of interest in the present research.

Data Availability Statement

Interview transcripts are available upon reasonable request.

Ethical Approval

The permission to conduct the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Isfahan (Ethical code: IR.UI.REC.1400.114).

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