The Complexities and Challenges of Researching Forced Marriage in the US

Reflections from a Qualitative Study

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In the past few decades globally, and over the past several years in the United States, forced marriage has surfaced in the public spotlight (Heiman and Smoot 2011).[1] Recent coverage in the United States has focused on child marriage as one form of forced marriage (Tahirih Justice Center 2017),[2] as well as the intersection of forced marriage and intimate partner violence (McFarlane et al. 2016; Sri and Raja 2013; Swegman 2016). In the research space, however, forced marriage remains understudied and poorly understood, particularly in the United States. Forced marriage is often considered to be an issue that does not pertain to the United States; as a result, we know little about its prevalence or appropriate service provision responses. A major challenge to identifying, researching, and intervening in forced marriages is the absence of a uniform definition. The government of the United Kingdom defines forced marriage as a "marriage in which one or both spouses do not consent to the marriage but are coerced into it" (HM Government 2014). Growing awareness has helped broaden this definition to include those who are below the legal age to marry, subject to disability or other incapacity, or subject to emotional pressure that blurs the line between consent and coercion (Anitha and Gill 2009; Heiman and Smoot 2011). Some advocates conflate forced marriage with arranged marriage, which the US Department of State (2005) defines as cases where "families may participate in the matchmaking process, but both partners voluntarily enter the marriage." This complicates the ability of advocates to agree on a definition that is neither too broad nor too narrow (Caroll 1998; Gangoli et al. 2011; Shan 1991).

Without a shared understanding of forced marriage and how it is distinct from arranged marriage, researchers face roadblocks in documenting the nature and scope of forced marriage and in equipping service providers and other stakeholders with sufficient resources to intervene. To help fill this literature gap, the Urban Institute, in collaboration with the Tahirih Justice Center and with funding from the National Institute of Justice, conducted a preliminary examination of forced marriage in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. The exploratory study looked at the victimization experiences of those subjected to and threatened with forced marriage. The goals were to assess the nature of forced

marriage; identify risk factors; examine the social, cultural, and religious norms surrounding forced marriage; document the overlap with experiences of intimate partner and sexual violence; understand how victims engaged with service providers and the civil and criminal justice systems; and examine the response from victim service providers and the civil and criminal justice systems.

This brief provides an overview of the challenges faced and lessons learned from Urban's exploratory study on forced marriage in the United States. We discuss the evolution of the study's methodology and the ways in which some methods may yield more meaningful contributions to the research. We draw on semistructured interviews with 24 people who experienced or knew someone who experienced forced marriage and 15 stakeholders who have worked on forced marriage cases to identify key considerations for future research.

An Evolving Methodology

We understood at the outset that this project would be exploratory, as this was one of the first studies to examine forced marriage in the United States. Throughout the study, we altered our data collection methodology to overcome recruitment challenges. Our core research objectives, however, remained the same.

Planned Sampling Strategy

Because few prior studies have examined forced marriage in the United States, we based our research design on methods shown to work with other hidden, hard-to-reach populations. Our initial design set out to use respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to conduct in-depth interviews with approximately 300 South Asian men and women residing in the Washington, DC, metropolitan region. Respondents were eligible for the study if they were at least 18 years old and had experienced a forced marriage or been threatened with a forced marriage or were close with someone who had been forced into a marriage. We limited our target sample to the South Asian community to accommodate for RDS, which relies on referral chains in small, well-defined, tight-knit communities. However, we did not know whether this sampling strategy would work with this population.

A critical pillar of the original design was our advisory board of service providers and members of organizations that work within the South Asian community. The advisory board, whose members had already built trusting relationships within the community, helped craft the research protocols and ensure that they were culturally sensitive and clearly distinguished between arranged and forced marriages. We also worked with them to identify a small number of respondents or "initial seeds" (n = 15) to initiate RDS. Once identified, we interviewed the seeds and gave them each $30 as an incentive. The proposed strategy was to give seeds three unique and coded coupons to pass along to other young women and men of South Asian descent who may have experienced a forced marriage. The coupons listed a toll-free, 24-hour phone number set up by the project for arranging interviews. Seeds would receive $10 per successful referral. To ensure the sample and social network attributes reached

equilibrium, we planned four or more waves of chain referral sampling (Heckathorn 1997, 2002; Wang et al. 2005).

Actual Sampling Strategy

Early in the study, however, it became clear that seeds were not recruiting within their social networks. This may have been the result of several factors, including that many may have felt uncomfortable discussing this topic with friends and family and because the people they knew who had experienced forced marriage were not based in the Washington, DC, metropolitan region. We understood, given the low number of respondents identified with RDS, that we would not meet the target sample size with this method alone, and so we supplemented RDS with other forms of participant outreach and recruitment, including posting fliers at various physical locations in the study region, sending e-mails to dozens of South Asian community organizations, and displaying the research flier to potential participants through online advertisements (in the form of Google and Facebook ads). Although these methods were more successful, they still did not bring us close to our target sample size. Ultimately, just one respondent participated after receiving a coupon; the other 23 participated after seeing the research flier.

In a final attempt to increase our sample, we expanded the eligibility criteria to include anyone 18 years or older from anywhere in the United States who had experienced a forced marriage or knew someone who had been forced to marry. We then conducted screening calls with various service providers across the United States (n = 14) to gauge their willingness to forward the research study information to their clients. In the initial screening calls, we learned about service providers' caseloads and asked if they would be able to share with their clients the opportunity to interview or take an anonymous online survey about forced marriage. Of the service providers we engaged, very few shared this option with clients, primarily because they were no longer in contact with them or they did not have forced marriage clients they felt comfortable contacting about the study.

Although our final sample size was much smaller than we had initially anticipated (n = 24), our findings and lessons learned hold implications for future research. This brief is intended to be transparent about the methodological challenges we encountered throughout the study in hopes that future research can build on these hard-learned lessons.

Challenges in Researching Forced Marriage

Forced marriage is a complex issue, characterized by divergent understandings of its nature and root causes, meaning researchers attempting to contribute to the knowledge base on forced marriage must be careful and nuanced when crafting their research designs. Below, we list the methodological challenges we faced in hopes that future research designs will leverage these challenges and employ innovative methods to shed light on the understudied practice of forced marriage.

Most service providers were challenged with recruitment. Most had very small forced marriage caseloads and often did not remain in contact with forced marriage clients after their cases closed.

Active clients were reluctant to participate in the study. Strong relationships with local service providers are essential to build trust with potential respondents; for these relationships to contribute successfully to RDS, however, service providers must have a large enough client base to refer clients to the study. In our study, most service providers had worked on only one or two forced marriage cases in their entire career.

The stakeholders interviewed provided a collective range of services in their work, including case management, safety planning, legal assistance, domestic violence resources, immigration assistance, therapy, religion-based services, English classes, and technical assistance and training. Forced marriage was a very small component of their service provision caseload, but every service provider felt strongly that forced marriage was a real issue for potential clients. Earlier research has documented that it often goes undetected among an agency's existing clients because screening and intake protocols do not ask about forced marriage and clients often have other more immediate needs, such as domestic violence relief. Service providers felt that most people experiencing forced marriage are unaware that services exist or are too unfamiliar or distrustful of the service provision landscape in the United States to seek outside assistance. Most service providers had lost contact with past clients in their few forced marriage cases and did not know how to reach them again. Many stakeholders were reluctant to participate in the study because they feared compromising their clients' safety; others simply did not have the time to commit to an interview or referral. For all of these reasons, service providers rarely referred clients to the study.

Forced marriage respondents felt uncomfortable sharing coupons with their personal networks after participating in an interview. For RDS to be successful, seeds must recruit members of their community into the study over a number of successive waves until the sample reaches equilibrium (Magnani et al. 2005). The low participation rate from the coupon, compared with the rate from the research flier, underscores the barriers people face in disclosing forced marriage experiences to others. Although not unique to forced marriage, reluctance to disclose victimization may be caused by a fear of retaliation and a desire not to further stigmatize their communities, bring shame to their family, or harm or risk criminal consequences for others (Kazimirski et al. 2009; Robbers 2008; Sabbe et al. 2013; Samad and Eade 2002; Tahirih Justice Center 2016). This is especially true for men and LGBTQ people, who fear greater stigmatization from disclosing victimization (Samad 2010). Despite the various recruitment channels, our partnership with the Tahirih Justice Center, and the community connections of our advisory board members, we were unable to recruit an adequate number of study participants. In many cases, our research interview was the first time respondents had discussed their forced marriage experiences with others, and therefore respondents were not likely to share their study participation with their community.

Potential respondents may have perceived the study as generalizing or stigmatizing their culture or religion. Because RDS depends on connecting with seeds who can extend chain referrals to a close network of peers, we initially refined our target sample to include only South Asian women and men in the Washington, DC, metropolitan region. Although we did not intend to imply that forced marriage is a problem particular to one culture or religion, our sampling strategy may have inadvertently stigmatized

the community from which we initially set out to learn. In several interviews, respondents explicitly asked researchers why the study was focused only on the South Asian community; others took care to defend their religion and explain that the practice of forced marriage is not tied to any one religion or culture. These perceptions may have affected the extent to which respondents engaged in the study. They may have also reinforced the stigma faced by people from national, ethnic, or religious communities often misperceived as singularly associated with forced marriage.

Lessons Learned and Implications for Future Research

Our study demonstrates that even with an iterative methodology that builds on multiple recruitment methods, forced marriage is an incredibly complicated issue to study and one that requires cultural sensitivity and a trusting relationship with the target population, including service providers and those being recruited and interviewed. Research on forced marriage should take care not to exacerbate harm or contribute to stereotypical generalizations, particularly in political environments in which potential subjects experience increased xenophobia and racism.

For RDS to succeed in using stakeholder referrals to identify participants, researchers must cultivate strong working connections with local providers who are trusted in the community.

- A researcher-practitioner partnership using RDS demands an ongoing and deep sense of trust, not only between researchers and practitioners but also between the intended research population and those recruiting them. In cases where members of the intended research population cannot effectively recruit others, leveraging the relationships that service providers have with their clients may be a beneficial alternative. However, the success of this sampling strategy relies on building long-standing trust with community members and gaining their buy-in to participate in the study. This is particularly true for those experiencing forced marriage who fear that their participation may somehow be revealed to their partners or perpetrators.

- Service providers may also be concerned about how they would be perceived in the communities they serve if they refer clients to the study, particularly if the providers expect to encounter defensiveness around community targeting or assumptions that the study critiques arranged marriage. Local service providers may be unwilling to jeopardize their trust with the community for the sake of the study.

Researchers should consider triangulating different sources to identify respondents, given that many people who experience forced marriage in the United States are isolated and not connected to services. Researchers should also consider creative ways to enable participation because the communication and movements of those who experience forced marriage may be monitored and restricted. Given the current service provision landscape for forced marriage in the United States, service providers may not be the ideal source for identifying initial seeds. Service provider perspectives are valuable and should be incorporated in the study to the extent possible; however, the vast majority of people experiencing a forced marriage are not in contact with outside stakeholders. Researchers

should be creative when determining how to recruit respondents and should consider partnering with community groups, religious organizations, and other local programs to reach those who are not connected with services. These partnerships must be genuine; they take time and commitment to build and sustain. Researchers may also want to consider having someone from the community of focus conduct the interview. However, our advisory board did note that this may be off-putting for some victims because they may fear that their experience will be revealed to others in the community. Although RDS is typically most effective when applied to a tight-knit sample of respondents, it did not yield high participation rates in this study, and respondents were not likely to share their participation with others in their community. Future research should consider expanding the target population to include people from all backgrounds from the beginning.

Researchers should plan for the barriers people face in disclosing their experiences of forced marriage. They should also plan carefully for the location and relative size of the community targeted for RDS.

- Respondents' reluctance to speak about forced marriage within their community does not necessarily mean RDS cannot be successful with this population. It does, however, point to the need to carefully select a target community with the characteristics needed to facilitate success. The location and relative size of the targeted community matter. The Washington, DC, metropolitan region is home to the third-largest South Asian population in the country (Asian American Federation 2012), one of the fastest-growing communities in the area, particularly in Loudoun and Fairfax counties. However, this population is also geographically spread out. The region is vast, spread across state boundaries and connected largely through highways rather than an affordable and expansive public transportation system. For these reasons, the barriers to participating in a research interview may have been too high for potential respondents. Although we offered reimbursement for any costs associated with traveling to and from the interview, the time and effort it could take to travel may have influenced respondents' willingness to participate.

- As our study found, offering potential respondents the opportunity to participate in interviews virtually may be a promising way to strengthen recruitment. Examples of virtual participation may include calling into a password-protected conference line or using a secure video-calling platform such as Skype or Google Hangouts. This may reduce the burden and risk that potential respondents would otherwise face in meeting with researchers in person.

Research on forced marriage should take care not to exacerbate racial and ethnic assumptions and stereotypes.

- Early literature on forced marriage assessed the ways that cultural practices, notably traditions of South Asian and Muslim communities around arranged marriage and gender roles and norms, can reinforce gender-based violence (Outarra, Sen, and Thompson 1998). Research also shows that service providers have identified people from these communities as their clientele (Forced Marriage Unit 2017; Heiman and Smoot 2011). These findings can fuel the

misconception that forced marriage is predominately a South Asian or Muslim phenomenon. Echoing the concerns of some of our interviewees, scholars have suggested that its portrayal as an issue specific to any one community can be minimizing and harmful (Samad 2010; Samad and Eade 2002; Wilson 2007). Moreover, such a myopic view of forced marriage ignores the ways in which all women can face social expectations and pressures regarding marriage (Anitha and Gill 2009). Future research should take caution against using methods that may unintentionally worsen these stereotypes and isolate communities that already experience stigma.

The issue of forced marriage is undeniably nuanced, and the lack of an extensive evidence base impedes efforts to address it in the United States. Our study shows that future research endeavoring to tackle this challenge should be intentional and mindful in the way it frames forced marriage at every stage of the research process, especially in designing recruitment and forging partnerships; doing so might help avoid the pitfalls and challenges our study encountered.

Notes

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Acknowledgments

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