Syrian colloquial Arabic idioms of emotion. An assessment and therapy tool to promote cultural formulation.

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Introduction

The war in Syria has displaced over 11.5 million people. Difficulty communicating distress is a major barrier to care for refugees[1]. Health care practitioners need to take the time to understand their clients' difficulties through the lens of that client's explanatory models of distress[2]. We drew on the STAIR model[3], which uses the emotion wheel to help clients differentiate emotional states to improve emotion regulation, and help build a shared understanding in the therapeutic relationship.

We employed the clinical and cultural knowledge of Syrian and Jordanian psychologists working with Syrian refugees in Jordan to develop a list of idioms common in Syrian colloquial Arabic, within six domains of emotional experience. This allowed us to develop a clinical assessment tool designed to promote cultural formulation of emotional distress.

Fig. 1 Emotion Wheel in Syrian Arabic. Idioms expressing six domains of emotional experience in Syrian colloquial Arabic

Conclusion

Developing a shared understanding of distress is a necessary step to effective therapeutic work. Many health practitioners avoid comprehensive cultural formulation as they are unsure how to generate such a discussion[2].

The tool may help clients put difficult feelings into words, in terms they can identify with. Therapists can use this as a starting point to cultural formulation, delving deeper into the socially constructed meanings of idioms, and how this connects to the client's own understanding of their distress.

We hope this tool will help psychologists working cross-culturally with Syrian refugees to explore constructions of self and suffering with curiosity.

Methodology

11 psychologists working in psychosocial support organisations servicing the Syrian refugee community in Jordan participated in a skills training workshop in Amman, Jordan in November 2015. The workshop was part of a larger participatory action research program to assess needs and build the capacity of local psychologists to address the psychosocial needs of Syrian refugees. Participants worked in groups to develop lists of idioms commonly used to express emotions by members of the Syrian refugee community, within each of 6 domains. The lists were presented to the group, who made suggestions. The lists were translated into English and reviewed by 3 independent Syrian psychologists. Final lists were placed in a wheel format to enable clients to easily point to expressions that describe their feelings.

Results

Workshop participants reported that the tool would be useful for assessment, psychoeducation and building a shared vocabulary. Psychological disorders have traditionally been stigmatized in Syrian culture, and community members may not be accustomed to talking to professionals about emotions. Men in particular may face pressure not to discuss feelings. As a result, clinical conversations about emotional experience may be difficult to initiate. Participants indicated that the tool would help to normalize distress and open discussions in which clients could indicate a range of emotions in terms familiar to them.
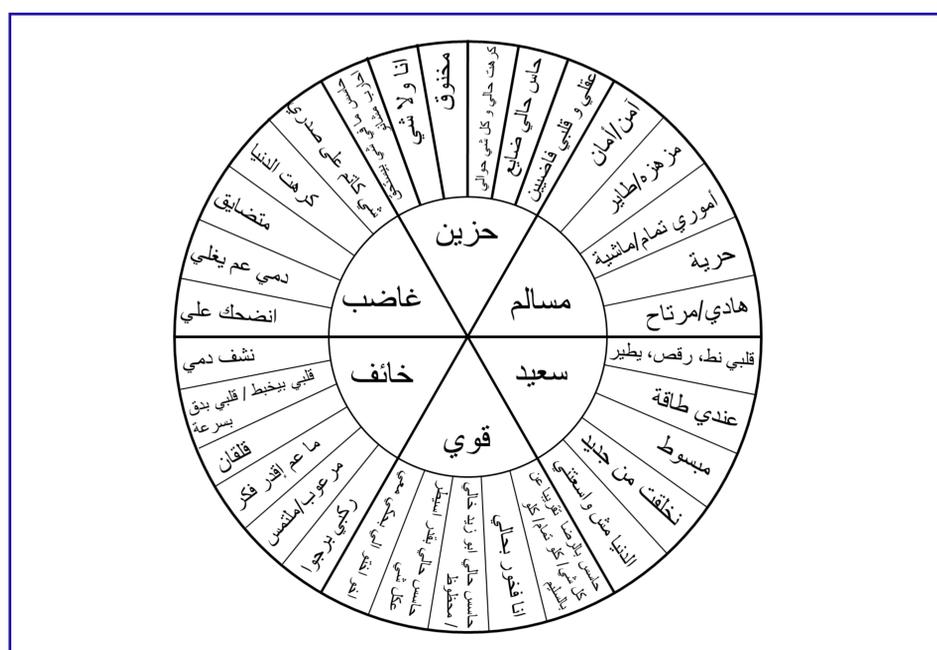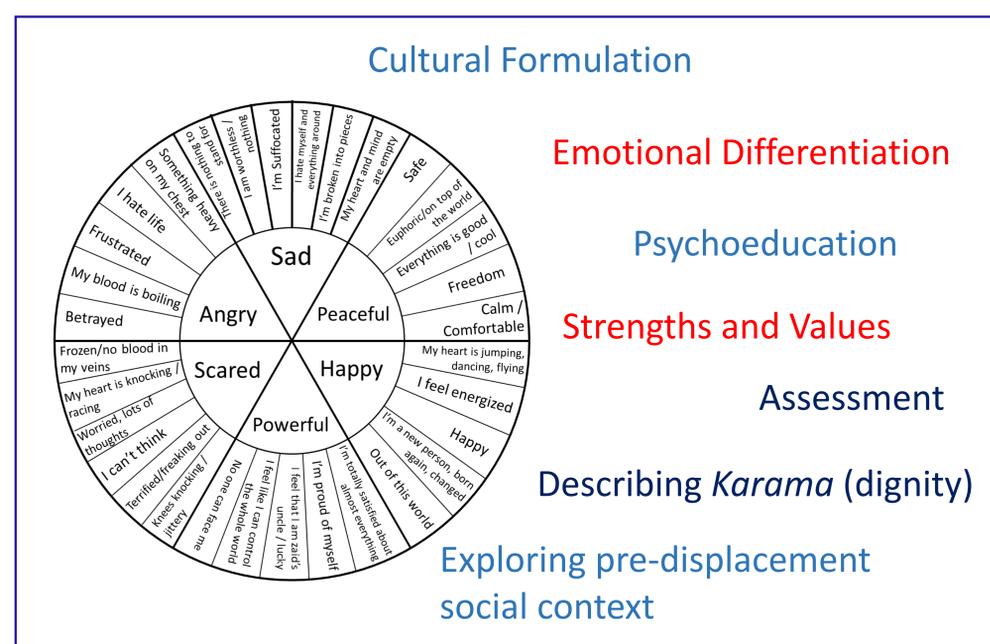

Fig. 2 Emotion Wheel (English translation) and suggested clinical uses.

Limitations

Given the diversity of dialects and sub-cultures within Syria, and that the idioms were colloquial, it was difficult to reach consensus on the best idioms to include. While many Syrians may identify with these phrases, others may not. The tool should be used with this in mind, encouraging clients to make changes. Clients and translators may differ in the way they pronounce and understand the idioms. These regional linguistic differences can be used to learn more from the client about the precise part of Syria they come from and how this connects to ethnicity, class, rural vs urban, and cultural aspects.

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