

Overview of Psychiatry in Arab Culture

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ABSTRACT

In this research, Arabic cultural psychiatry and the cultural background of mental health of Arabs are investigated. Awareness of cultural concepts of Arabs, their customs, relationship patterns and ways of verbal and non-verbal communication help the understanding of psychiatric conditions. The influence of Arabic language on expression and presentation of mental illness is discussed. Concepts and beliefs about mental illness in Arab culture include sorcery, evil eye and possession by "Jin". Public negative attitudes to mental illness are discussed together with the stigma attached to psychiatry in Arab culture. There are certain implications of the extended family pattern and gender role (role of women) in psychiatry in Arab culture. Regarding psychopathology and presentation of mental disorders in Arab patients, there are certain variations in features and presenting symptoms; mainly observation of preponderance of somatic complaints as indirect expression of psychiatric conditions. Affective disorders, hysteria, schizophrenia and other mental disorders have characteristic presentation in Arab patients. There are some preliminary observations about therapy of mental disorders in Arab culture. Among the therapeutic practices which some modalities are described e.g. traditional healing, visiting the shrines and "El-Zar". Polygamy is a special area of interest as a distinguished feature in Arab culture which has peculiar psychosocial patterns. Systematic study of psychiatric implications of polygamy in Arab culture can help identification and description of specific reactions and conditions which have no Western equivalent. In this paper, polygamy was investigated through study of the case of first wife in polygamous marriage in a local Arab culture. The sample included 100 women; half of them were first wives in polygamy, and the other half were a control group. Assuming that the first wife reacts to remarriage of her spouse to a new wife in certain pattern which is amenable to investigation and description the subjects were collected by 'Snowball' technique and studied by brief interview, demographic sheet and the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ). The findings of the study revealed some demographic characteristics of first wives e.g. lower education, higher number of children and almost being housewives. The initial reaction of the first wife to remarriage of the spouse took the form of severe psychological symptoms which are gradually replaced by acceptance and adaptation to the situation within 6 months in the average though physical, psychological and social consequences continue to manifest for long time. Certain symptoms were spontaneously reported or observed through G.H.Q application; the most frequent of them were the somatic complaints e.g. pains, psychological symptoms e.g. anxiety and irritability and mixed e.g. tiredness. The findings of this study suggested the proposal of an Arab culture-specific condition in women which has no Western equivalent, and this is justified by the almost constant pattern of reaction of Arab wives to polygamy. Further research in this area and other relevant culture psychiatric phenomena was recommended.

INTRODUCTION

CULTURE AND MENTAL ILLNESS:

Mental illness is a universal human phenomenon. It is an experience which is recognizable in any culture in which it has been sought (Bebbington 1993, Leff 1981; 1988). The influence of culture on the frequency and presentation of mental illness in general has been of persistent interest. The major psychiatric conditions are recognizable across cultures, but there are important variations in the form in which such disorders present,

which may well stem from cultural influences (Harding et al 1980). There are certain psychiatric features which are characteristic of Arabs and can be attributed to the influence of cultural background of Arabs on the mental illness (El-Islam 1982). The model characteristics of Arabs vary from one community to another, but there are certain widely shared features of general relevance to psychiatry which can be recognized