

Somali Family Strength: Working in the Communities

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A report from Meanings of Family Strength Voiced by Somali Immigrants: Reaching an Inductive Understanding. Ph.D. Dissertation supervised by Jean W. Bauer, Ph.D., Family Social Science Department, University of Minnesota.

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Two decades ago, the presence of immigrants and refugees could largely go unnoticed by residents in Minnesota. However, in addition to increases in Southeast Asian and Hispanic immigrant groups, the Twin Cities has become home to about 35,000 residents from East Africa, including the rapidly growing Somali population. (See page 11 for trends in migration to Minnesota). Somali community leaders estimate the Somali population in Minnesota to be 25,000 with an expected increase to 50,000 by the year 2000. The growth in Somali immigration to the Twin Cities has been described as “totally unforeseen” and prompts estimates by state demographers and Somali immigrants in the nation. The most recent immigrants are those forced to migrate due to circumstances related to the collapse of the Somali government in 1991.

Immigrant families often face difficulties in adjusting to resettlement contexts. Perceptions of what family life will be like in the “host” country are often in stark contrast to the realities that immigrant families face. Displacement from homeland is especially significant for refugee families, and involves an “uprooting” from the very essence of family life embedded in cultures of origin. Refugee family members experience benefits and challenges as they go about the tasks of establishing and maintaining strong families after resettlement into the United States.

Understanding Family Strength is Important for Working in Local Communities

- Strong families help members increase their capacity to form positive relationships and self-sustaining lives.
- Strong families help members gain knowledge, skills, and tools they need to better meet their day-to-day responsibilities.
- Strong families contribute to maintaining and creating constructive and responsible community relationships.¹

Uprooted and transplanted refugee families are significantly challenged in their efforts to remain strong families within vastly different cultural environments. There is little known about what supports family strength among Somali immigrant families within the Twin Cities resettlement context. Trustworthy knowledge is needed in order to better understand the unique perspectives, strengths, and challenges of Somali immigrant families in Minnesota. Research is needed to contribute to a reliable knowledge base for those working in the community.

Knowledge about Somali families must be provided from the perspective of Somali family members themselves in order to facilitate effective programming within public institutions such as educational systems, health care settings, and opportunities for employment. Importantly, credible research knowledge is needed to promote cross-cultural understanding where it has not existed before. This summary report was prepared from a study of Somali families in the Twin Cities to provide insight into ways some newly-arrived Somali family members describe what it means to be a strong family, and how strong families can be both supported and challenged upon resettlement (Heitritter, 1999).

¹ These three statements adapted from Family & Children’s Service Strategic Plan 1997-2001: Principles of kinship.

A Study in the Twin Cities

The study used focus group transcripts of Somali immigrant family members from “The Minnesota Family Strength Project.”² Somali family members described three categories of their experiences of family strength upon resettlement into the United States: (a) meanings of family strength; (b) challenges to family strength; and (c) strategies to reduce challenges and support family strength. The study resulted in the identification of 12 main ideas essential to strong families. The core theme of *unity* was foundational to Somali family strength in four areas: physical, social, psychological, and spiritual. The study results can be understood by looking at Figure 1 on the next page.

Explanations of a Model of Somali Family Strength

Meanings about family strength originated in Sunni Muslim religion and Somali cultural traditions. **Religion** provided a foundation for **Tradition**, for **Community Solidarity**, and was the source of a religiously-affiliated social **Brotherhood**. A deeply-rooted belief in the **Sanctity of the Family** was grounded in the sacred text of the Holy Koran. Religion was the starting point of family structure and the center of family organization. Religious traditions provided family members with priorities of values for promoting *family unity* within strong families.

- **Loyalty, Respect, and Stability of Hierarchical Role Structure** supported *spiritual unity* within families.
 - Hierarchical role structure within the family was considered to be essential for the stability necessary to promote family strength.
 - Men and elder family members were assigned positions of highest respect by religious tradition, as well as overall responsibility for family unity and well-being.
 - Patterns of family interaction directed women to defer to men, especially in public.
 - Lifelong respect of parents was believed to be the parents’ right and the children’s obligation.
- **Cooperation and Responsibility of Role Functioning** supported *social unity* within families.
 - Specific role responsibilities were prescribed by religious tradition according to distinct categories for men and women.
 - Responsible role functioning for men and women was defined differently according to public and private (home) domains. Family dynamics were reported “to shift” by domain: men dominant in public, women dominant in home management.
- **Peace, Harmony, and Health** promoted *psychological unity* within families.
 - Peace was valued for promoting strong families “without disturbances” within family relationships.
 - Harmony was experienced when family roles functioned in complementary accord with one another as prescribed by religious tradition.
 - Health was described as a sense of holistic well-being. Health incorporated notions of physical, mental, and spiritual health as integrated and linked together rather than separated categories of well-being.

² See details about the study on page 12.

- **Interdependence** and **Support through the Sharing of Resources** maintained strong families through the *physical unity* of family members.
 - Families were accustomed to living difficult lives as nomads and farmers by relying on both the physical environment and on the physical proximity of extended family members for necessary resources.
 - Interdependence and sharing of resources was expected between generations within families, and between families and the greater Somali community.

Together the Teeth Can Cut

Somali proverbs play an important role in everyday living and speaking. The proverb literally translated as “Together the teeth and cut” means “Unity is power.” This proverb underscores the notion of family unity as the foundation of family strength found in the study.

From: Putnam and Noor (1993). *The Somalis: Their History and Culture*.

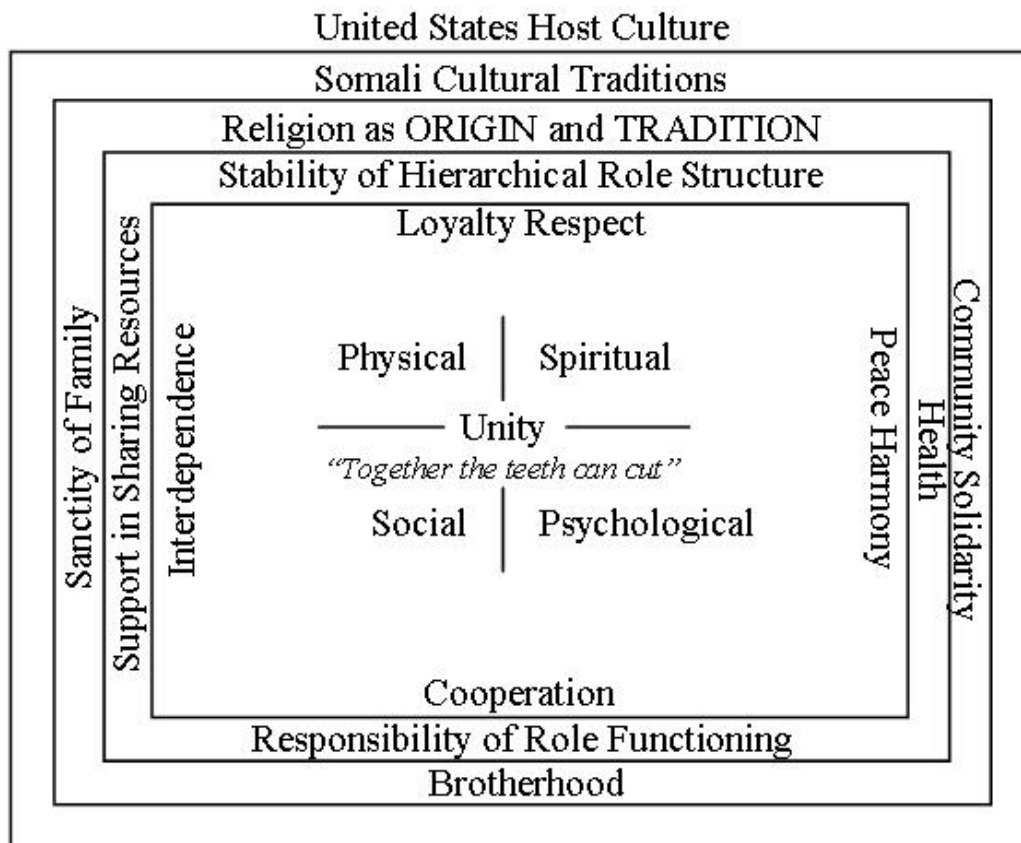


Figure 1. Somali Meanings of Family Strength.

© Heitritter, D.L. (1999). Meanings of Family Strength Voiced by Somali Immigrants: Reaching an Inductive Understanding. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

If you are working with Somali families...

Somali family strength was described in the study from the cultural perspective of Somali family members. Family strength can be thought about across three levels of systems within Somali culture: individual views, perceptions of family groups, and cultural contexts. It is helpful to identify the level at which you are interacting with Somali families, whether it is at the individual, family group, or community level.

Insights into individual beliefs:

- **Unity is Essential to Family Strength.** Individual family members in the study placed family unity as most essential to family strength. Preserving family unity was the primary motive behind strategies used by family members to reduce challenges to family strength and to promote strong families.
- **Unity is Supported in Four Ways by Family Members.**
 - Family members needed to be physically present in order to support each other through the sharing of resources, and to contribute to physical unity within the family. Absent or missing family members challenged the physical unity needed for functioning in specific gender roles and limited access to resources for family survival.
 - When family members adhered to prescribed roles within the religious brotherhood, they promoted social unity. Lack of cooperation and individual independence apart from family groups challenged family and community strength.
 - Psychological unity was experienced as a holistic sense of harmonious well-being and was promoted within community solidarity. Uncertainty caused by situations in which family members were separated or missing created high levels of psychological stress for family members resettled in the Twin Cities without their loved ones. Many individual family members reported high levels of distress if they were unable to provide financial resources for “scattered” family members.
 - Spiritual unity formed the foundation for unity within the family, and required reliance on religion as the origin of family structure, as the basis for family interaction patterns for well-functioning families, and as the source of cultural traditions.

Insights at the family group level:

- **Women’s specified gender role functioning is essential to strong families.** Women’s roles in the family were described as the “cornerstone” of family life and central to preserving family strength across cultures. Women in the study supported family strength by endorsing hierarchy in public and functioning with much greater power within the private domain of the home. Some women increased their religious practices by wearing traditional Islamic dress to emphasize cooperation and responsible role function as well as to separate themselves as more devout from less devout Somali women. Women in the study believed that the status of “single mother” among some Somali women was a negative result of Western influence. These women tended to describe challenges to Somali family strength as caused by

public assistance programs that empowered—or compelled—women to “chase their husbands out of the house” in order to increase financial resources within the family. Men in the study tended to consider changes in women’s roles to be violations of moral conduct.

- **Somali child socialization goals contrast sharply with U.S. mainstream child socialization goals.** The Western view of Somali parenting as hierarchical, and therefore authoritarian and controlling, may be misleading. Such perceptions are based on American concepts for child socialization and are not necessarily relevant to Somali child rearing practices. Parents described their primary role as “guardians” of their children according to religious tradition. Thus, child socialization practices of control and “guardianship” are viewed positively. Responsible parenting can be conceptualized as “educating” and “training” children by parents who are deeply concerned about their children’s well-being in a foreign country.
- **Shifts in social and financial resources pose challenges to family strength.** Women’s role as primary household manager required interactions with many different U.S. social institutions to acquire needed family resources. Women’s roles as a sort of “liaison” between the family and necessary resources promoted family strength. Within this family context of increased responsibility, some women also preserved traditional hierarchical role structure, while others placed higher demands on husbands to contribute to family resources. Increased responsibilities in the U.S. host culture often gave Somali women more control over family resources at the same time that men’s provider roles were diminished in the U.S. money-based economy.

Insights at the cultural level:

- **Family strength is shaped and supported through families’ reception within the local Somali community and religious brotherhood.** Both community solidarity and religious brotherhood were reinforced through kinship migration to Minnesota. Ties to family members across continents created linkages for further immigration via family reunification and sponsorship within the Twin Cities Somali community. The growing Somali community helped to reduce the costs and risks to family members who joined family members in the local area. Minnesota was described as a positive community for Somali families, in part, (1) because of its economy, (b) because the large Somali community provided resources for reinforcing child-rearing values of Muslim families, and (c) because the education system has a strong bilingual education program incorporating native Somali educators.
- **The interdependence of church and state in Somali culture stands in direct contrast to separation of church and state in U.S. dominant culture.** Religiously prescribed social norms effectively segregate Somali men and women into public and private domains and across social settings. In the U.S., such segregation by gender is often viewed as oppressive. Somali family members in the study emphasized that gender segregation in family structure and role functioning, as well as in social settings, is considered natural and modest rather than oppressive, and serves to promote strong families within the community.

It might be helpful for you to know...

- A two-parent family structure was described as the ideal family form for Somali families. Translators for the study reported that while there are Somali vocabulary words for the role of “divorced” and “widowed” mothers, there is no Somali word for “single” (never-married) mothers. “Single mother” in this sense violates religious family structure values.
- Leaving cultural and religious traditions is often viewed as a violation of loyalty and respect for family unity.
- Somali family conflict management strategies require arbitration by elders within the community rather than intervention by the U.S. legal or social service systems. A Somali “cultural constitution” for dispute resolution is foundational to family and community solidarity.
- Somali family members often view U.S. socialization of children as “appaling” and resent infringement on their parental authority to discipline their children in a culturally appropriate manner.
- Responsible role functioning for men and women involve shifts in power dynamics in public and private domains. To view Somali families as patriarchal only obscures ways in which women might utilize family resources to their advantage in partnerships with their husbands. An example of shifts in power dynamics is given by Somali women who pointed to Somali wives who “chase away” their husbands to decrease the drain on family resources if the husband is not adequately supporting the family.
- Loss of traditional extended family support creates increased stress for resettled family members. Family reunification is an overriding goal for families who have been separated by war, civil strife, and subsequent migration to foreign countries.
- Resources for family survival are made available through community networks and require harmonious interdependence among family members. If family members are missing, members often re-configure family loyalties to broaden their base of support. For example, “brothers” and “sisters” may be related by religious affiliation as well as by clan lineage.
- Behaviors of Somali family members can best be viewed in a family’s context, with a focus on problems that arise from the interface of systems rather than a focus on interpersonal interactions. Family context includes the family’s structural organization, Somali values about family strength, and linkages between the family and the Somali community.
- The notion of empowerment can be expanded beyond Western notions of self-sufficiency. Encouraging individual families to “stand on their own two feet” might violate values of interdependence. Empowerment for Somali families might take into account the religious brotherhood and community solidarity that is important for promoting family strength. Empowerment might be more effective through strategies to strengthen connections with social networks beginning at the family, neighborhood, and community levels.
- “Partnering” with parents in service providing may be in conflict with Somali family value priorities for hierarchical structure. Somali family members may not readily view each other

as “partners” or collaborators in problem-solving. One way of incorporating hierarchical structure into problem-solving might be to incorporate meanings of Somali parents, particularly fathers, as “guardians” of the family when working in the community. This also might mean that a female community worker, or a younger person, should not be placed in the role of “partner” or “collaborator” with fathers in problem-solving situations.

- Religious traditions are considered essential to strong families. Interventions to support spiritual health in Somali families can be considered as important as measures to support physical or mental health. Many Somali family members welcome attitudes of respect and openness to their religious beliefs from those who are neither Muslim nor Somali.

Other important things to learn in the future...

As the Somali community grows, the need for greater knowledge increases. Future research might explore family strength in focus groups segregated by gender. Separate gender groups might provide a more culturally familiar opportunity for interactive discussions in “public” settings. Seeking out the perspectives of women who are not in traditional roles, such as those referred to as “single mothers” in the current study, would add depth to understanding a range of women’s role functioning as well as insights into how roles might be changing for Somali women in their newly resettled families.

Children’s views on strong families are important, such as understanding effects of sequential migration on family strength in cases where children come before, or follow behind, their parents into the Twin Cities. Children’s perspectives could enrich learning about ways in which immigration offers growth-enhancing opportunities for children. Children could also add insight into ways that shifts in family members’ responsibilities affect different family members in resettlement. For example, adolescents can be “caught” between a personal desire to pursue opportunities for higher education in the U.S. and family expectations for their full-time employment in order to send financial resources to disunited family members.

Learning how Somali families might change over time and across generations is important as the Somali community continues to grow. Increased migration to the Twin Cities raises questions about whether meanings of Somali family strength will be supported more by increased numbers of Somali immigrants and less by later generations of Somali family members or Western culture. Shifts in cultural identity toward retaining the Somali language and culture might be influenced in different ways according to future migration patterns to the Twin Cities.

Further inquiries could be made into the ways in which religion both supports and challenges family strength in the Twin Cities. Knowledge of variations of religious practice within the Somali community would be significant to understanding a range of religious beliefs and practices of Somali families.

Understanding the impact of loss of “home” and “homeland” across different generations of Somali families over time is a significant part of immigrant families’ contexts. Whether family members hold out hope that they might be able to return to Somali in the future can influence actions and choices in the current resettlement context.

Challenges to Somali Family Strength and Strategies for Promoting Somali Family Strength

Challenges to Somali Families at Interfaces of Culture	Strategies Used to Manage Challenges at Interfaces of Culture
Interference from U.S. institutions into internal Somali family conflicts	Utilize Somali cultural constitution for dispute resolution
Children's access to the resource of '911' and resulting shifts in power dynamics within families	Prohibit children's access to '911' Gather families together for problem-solving to reduce interfaces with '911'
Barriers to employment for women related to religious attire, especially <i>hijab</i> (the Veil)	Educate U.S. culture about Somali religious and cultural traditions
Alterations of role functioning, such as women becoming "single mothers"	Withhold cultural sanctions of the "single mother" role, e.g., no Somali word for "single" mother
Barriers of language in health care settings	Request Western training for Somali translators in health care systems
Lack of information on utilization of health care resources	Request instructions on health care access written in Somali for every Somali family
Bureaucratic barriers to family reunification	Utilize oral traditions for problem-solving in reuniting families
Lack of previously available resources from the physical environment	- - -
Limitations in access to necessary financial resources in U.S. money-based economy	Rely on networking in the community for employment opportunities and resources
Lack of knowledge of U.S. laws and institutions	Rely on oral tradition and inquiry within Somali community
Challenges to Somali Families within Family Groups	Strategies Used to Manage Challenges Within Family Groups
Disruptions of authority within religiously prescribed hierarchy	Use community resource of wisdom of elders for family conflict resolution Promote spiritual unity
Disruptions in responsible role functioning	Link responsible role functioning to religious decree; increase religious beliefs and practices Promote social unity
Psychological stress related to ambiguous loss of missing family members: Are they dead or alive?	Try to find out about missing family members through oral culture channels
Psychological stress related to uncertainty about well-being of "scattered" family members, especially those in refugee camps	Seek counseling resources within the Somali community Provide resources across continents through <i>xawilaad</i> (Somali money transfer system)
Psychological stress related to lack of financial resources of family members in other countries	Promote psychological unity Promote physical unity through reunification

Challenges to Somali Families by Family Members	Strategies Used to Manage Challenges of Family Members
Lack of respect for hierarchy, such as husband/wife conflicts	Call in relatives of the husband, and of the wife, for arbitrated dispute resolution Husbands “listen” to wives’ “complaints” and try to find solutions Wives “cool down” so men will “cool down” in family conflicts
Disloyalty to family unity	Support hierarchy and family unity in which all family members “listen to each other”
Disrespect for intergenerational boundaries	Socialize children to respect generational boundaries by “listening” to parents
On-going disruption of psychological peace and harmony due to missing or lost family members	Pursue family reunification Read verses of Koran for psychological comfort
Increased role responsibilities due to incomplete family structures created by missing members	Call on relatives who are present in the local community for assistance, even if distantly related
Isolation	Use the telephone to access resources support “Take custody” or be “under custody” of a distant relative in the absence of closer family members

Continent from Which Minnesota Immigrants Grew Most Rapidly in the 1990s

Country	Immigration Growth 1990-2000 (%)
Africa	620.7
Latin America	577.2
Asia	110.2
Oceania	92.6
North America	27.7
Europe	24.8

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census

About the Study...

The study analyzed data from two focus groups from “The Minnesota Family Strength Project: An Integrated Community Collaboration Developed by Family & Children’s Service, Minnesota Public Radio, Allina Health System, Minnesota Historical Society, and Allina Foundation.”³ The overall purpose of the study was to come to an understanding of family strength as experienced by 30 first-generation Somali immigrants to Minnesota. The term “immigrant” designates an overall category that includes the status of “refugee.” Participants in the study were primarily refugees from political unrest and clan warfare. Somali refugees in the study were likely to have experienced forced migration, severe conditions in refugee camps, and life experiences of being caught between danger at home and loss of identity in resettlement locations.⁴

The term “Somali” refers to the Somali ethnic group whose territory encompasses Somalia, half of the Djibouti Republic, the entire Eastern Ethiopia, and the Northern part of Kenya. Somalis have maintained their shared culture through oral traditions which override geographical divisions made in their historical past.⁵ Of the 12 countries that contributed over 99% of the new refugee arrivals into the United States in 1996, Somali ranked 5th in number of refugees. Nearly 12% of these Somali refugees were under five years old, while another 40% were school-aged children. Minnesota ranked 7th in the nation in providing permanent residence to refugees. Somali refugees comprised about 23% of the total refugees resettled into Minnesota in 1996.⁶

The research questions were: (a) What are meanings of family strength to Somali immigrant family members resettled in Minnesota? and (b) What strategies are used to promote family strength by Somali immigrant family members resettled in Minnesota? The study used a discovery-oriented qualitative research approach, committed to understanding family strength as it was presented by Somali family members from their perspectives at this time in their history. The research method corresponded to needs expressed by members of the Somali community for research “to help be understood.”

A five-step method of data analysis incorporated rigorous procedures to establish accuracy across all translations from Somali to English. Data analysis involved four native Somali speakers in different parts of the translation processes in order to gain depth of understanding of the research participants’ descriptions of family strength. Findings resulted in the model presented in Figure 1, as well as identification of challenges to family strength and strategies for promoting family strength. Members of the Somali community consulted with the researcher throughout the data analysis process and approved the outcomes of the study as authentic and accurately reflecting a Somali perspective of family strength.

³ Data analysis for the study was a secondary, in-depth analysis for the original MFSP data.

⁴ Stein, B.N. (1986). The experience of being a refugee: Insights from the research literature. In C.L. Williams & J. Westermeyers (Eds.), *Refugee mental health in resettlement countries* (pp. 5-23). New York, NY: Hemisphere Publishing Corporation.

⁵ Mohamed, M. (1997) Somali: Kinship and relationships derived from it. In H.M. Adam & R. Ford (Eds.), *Mending rips in the sky: Options for Somali communities for the 21st century* (pp. 145-164). Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press.

⁶ The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, United States Department of State. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998.