

Arabs in Qatar are more vulnerable to psychotic experiences: study

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Qataris and Arab residents in Qatar suffer from a higher prevalence of psychotic experiences than non-Arabs living in the country, a recent [study](#) found.

A 2016 survey of 1,353 Qataris and Qatar residents asked people if, and how often, they experienced hallucinations and delusions, the results of which were published in the journal of Psychological Medicine in May. The study also reported that the prevalence of psychotic experiences in Qatar is especially high when compared to other psychological reports in the world.

“Psychotic experiences are common globally, and reported rates across the world vary between 1 to 31 percent. Our report of 27.9 percent [in Qatar] is at the high end,” said Peter Woodruff, chairman of the Psychiatry Department at Hamad Medical Corporation and one of the study’s authors.

The study found that 34.7 percent of Arabs in Qatar experienced psychotic experiences compared to the 16.4 percent of non-Arabs. Mental illness is stigmatized in Arab countries more than any other locales, according to experts, and which may lead fewer Arabs to discuss their experiences with others or to seek mental health treatment for abnormal sensory episodes.

“The cultural ramifications for receiving diagnosis or being treated for mental illness may be greater in our [Arab] culture. This makes people from Arab ethnicity less likely to seek treatment earlier in the course of the illness and potentially more susceptible to develop severe forms of the illness as a result,” said Salma Khaled, an epidemiology professor at Qatar University and the lead author of the study.

However, even ethnicity cannot be claimed as the main cause of psychotic experiences because there is no information on the participants medical history and clinical data to supplement this claim. Though definite causation cannot be established due to the lack of medical history and clinical data claims, ethnicity was found to be independently associated with the prevalence of psychotic experiences.

The study also reported psychotic experiences were 48 percent higher among Arab expatriates in Qatar than Qataris. The authors note that migration and urban stressors were found to be possible contributors for Arab and non-Arab expatriates in Qatar experiencing more frequent psychotic experiences and psychotic episodes.

“Both urbanicity and migration disrupt social structure and social networks and are associated with increased exposure to...pollution, noise, population density as well as psychosocial stressors [like loneliness], which subsequently reduces the person's ability to cope” said Khaled.

However, the claim that Arab expatriates are more vulnerable to psychotic experiences than non-Arab expatriates should not be taken at face value, as one of the weaknesses in the study, according to authors, was that non-Arabs were not surveyed.

Non-Arabs in Qatar, particularly frontline workers from places like Nepal and Bangladesh, may be under more migration and work stress than other demographics in the country. However, since only a small portion of Qatar's population was surveyed, there were non-Arabs who may be susceptible to psychotic experiences but were inaccessible. Even so, as the history of mental illnesses of non-Arabs prior to migration is not known, migration cannot be assumed to be a definite cause for the prevalence of psychotic experiences.

The study also reported that men in Qatar are more likely than women to suffer from psychosis. Psychosis is in fact a more severe form of psychotic experiences while psychotic experiences are temporary and a minor symptom of psychosis. Women in Qatar were found to be more likely than men to suffer comparatively minor psychotic experiences.

“This could mean that women are more resilient than men to developing clinical forms of the illness [psychosis]. There are currently no well-designed studies that explore this hypothesis and understand what factors may make women more resilient to the clinical forms of the illness,” said Khaled.

Psychotic experiences not only affect the individual but relatives often suffer as well, say mental health experts.

“Not only is it a taboo topic, but if anybody finds out that [someone] has psychosis or schizophrenia, not only does it impact them but it impacts their family and it impacts marriage[s],” said Patricia Collins, counselor and coordinator of Health and Wellness at Northwestern University-Qatar.

Collins said despite the growth of mental health awareness in Qatar, there is not enough information about mental health problems and the culture makes some people suffering from mental health disorders reluctant to get help for fear of ostracization.

“One of the biggest steps that we can all take, whether we are currently suffering from a mental health issue or not is to arm ourselves with information...and seek help,” said Collins.

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