
An Investigation into the Sense of Community of Muslim-American Parents of Children with Special Needs in a Support Group

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The purpose of this qualitative study, to bring to life the unique voices of the individuals who make up the support group of Muslim parents of children with special needs, examined how these parents created and then maintained a sense of community as their group transitioned from being a self-formed support group to being a part of a mosque's non-profit infrastructure. This study used McMillan's Revised Sense of Community theory (1996) as a conceptual framework to examine group participants' perceptions.

This was an instrumental case study design that included semi-structured interviews, multiple non-participant observations, and group artifacts to explore and examine how group members and leaders describe and make sense of their experiences in this particular situation. Supporting sub-questions were: 1) How do members describe their interactions within the group? 2) How do they describe the organizational structure of the group? and 3) What role, if any, does religion play in the group?

Given the scarcity of research on these American Muslim parents, this research offers a unique glance into the inner workings of a support group and how it operated both independently and as part of a non-profit structure. This research reviewed types of engagement offered to participants as well.

Overall themes related to how members described and made sense of their experiences emerged around the importance of member visibility and collective power. Themes of how participants described their interactions within the group emerged around emotional support and the exchange of formal and informal resources. Results found that the organizational structure and leadership model changed over time. The cultural broker's role was found to be critical to the organization being better integrated into the nonprofit structure. Lastly, religion was found to play a role upon the group structure and group members' view of themselves as a parent of a child with special needs. An additional theme regarding the less visible role of fathers emerged as well. Insight gained from this study highlights the need for further study on the specific population segment.

References

McMillan, David W. 1996. "Sense of community." *Journal of Community Psychology* 24, no. 4: 315-325.