

Immigrant and Refugee Youth: Migration Journeys and Cultural Values

By Rowena Fong, Ed.D.

The populations of immigrant and refugee youth in the United States are characterized by extraordinary diversity, as are the difficulties they experience in their migration journeys and the clashes they have in competing cultural values. Some are challenged by the common problems of identity crises, peer pressure, parental conflict, and questions of self-worth. Others suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from having witnessed or experienced violence, physical and mental torture, death threats, rape, or extreme harassment before fleeing from their countries of origin (Webb, 2001). The experiences of immigrant youth may differ from those of young refugees because their legal status and the reasons for leaving their countries of origin often differ. Immigrant youth and families frequently leave their countries of origin voluntarily to join family members or to pursue better economic and quality-of-life opportunities (Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Refugee youth and families, on the other hand, are typically forced to leave their home countries because of political or religious persecution with no option of returning. They leave behind family, friends, culture, customs, and familiar environments and supports (Delgado, Jones, & Rohani, 2005; Fong, 2004; Potocky-Tripodi, 2002).

Professionals working with immigrant and refugee youth in schools, mental health clinics, hospitals, and adolescent-serving organizations are better equipped to offer culturally appropriate interventions and prevention strategies if they understand their clients' migration journeys and legal status. Professionals who understand the cultural values of immigrant and refugee youth and families are also better prepared to recognize the strengths and protective factors present in those cultural values when developing prevention strategies. This article will explore these three important factors—legal statuses, migration experiences, and the strength of cultural values—and offer practical prevention strategies.

Different Statuses

Demographic data for the United States reveal a multicultural society absorbing ever-greater numbers of immigrants and refugees. Since 1990, immigrant families in the U.S. have increased seven times faster than native-born families (Delgado et al., 2005). One out of 10 people in the U.S. today is foreign born (Zuniga, 2004). Professionals who work with youth would benefit from understanding the intricacies of terminology and legal statuses of immigrant and refugee youth as each term connotes a different migration experience and service availability because of legal status. The most common are detailed below and a glossary is included in Table 1.1.

Documented Immigrant Youth

A documented immigrant youth is one who leaves his or her country of origin expecting to live in the host country legally because his or her parents decided to move for better job or educational opportunities, frequently joining family members who have migrated earlier. These youth have the usual struggles of establishing peer relationships and seeking identity during the adolescent years. However, additional struggles with racism, prejudice, and discrimination put them at greater risk of mental health problems. According to Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001), the

“remaking identities” or dual frame of reference (p. 87) is a process the youth go through in acculturating to their new environments.

However, the youth are more likely to be “at the margins,” meaning they can never truly belong to either “here” or “there” (p. 92). Never completely belonging can create stress for the immigrant adolescent, with emotional and social consequences.

Undocumented Immigrant Youth

Not all immigrant youth arrive in the U.S. with parents who have legal documents. The stereotypical image of the undocumented youth is one whose parents came over the Mexican border illegally. In fact, just over half (57%) of all undocumented immigrants are Mexican (Passel, Capps, & Fix, 2004). Additionally, the literature notes that the terms “illegal” or “undocumented” may also apply to young adults whose parents are foreign students or working professionals whose legal documents have lapsed, thus placing the whole family in an illegal or undocumented status (Delgado et al., 2005; Fong & Earner, 2007). This undocumented status limits the



Table 1.1

Glossary of Terms

1st Generation Immigrant: A person who was born in a country of origin and is the first person in his or her family to move to and reside in the United States or another host country.

2nd Generation Immigrant: A person born in the United States who is the child of parents who are first generation immigrants.

Asylum Seeker/Asylee: A person who leaves his or her country of origin, usually because of political persecution, and who seeks protection or refuge in a host country.

Documented Immigrant: A person who has legal documentation allowing him or her to live and remain as a resident in the host country.

Human Trafficking Victim: A person who has paid for passage from his or her country of origin to a host country but is deceived and forced into labor or sex slavery.

Immigrant: A person who leaves his or her country of origin expecting to live in the host country legally with the option and freedom to return to the country of origin.

Mixed Status Family: A family coming to the host country like the United States where the parent(s) in the family does not have legal documentation but the child is born in the United States and has citizenship.

Refugee: A person fleeing his or her country of origin because of political, religious, or physical persecution without the option to return to the country of origin.

Unaccompanied Refugee Minor: A person under the age of 18 who is fleeing his or her country of origin because of danger without the accompaniment of an adult and without the option to return.

Undocumented Immigrant: A person who comes to live in the host country without legal documentation.

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kinds of services and entitlements family members can receive in a host country. As noted by Fong & Earner (2007), an undocumented status can render youth "invisible," with grave consequences for identity development, peer relationships, and the parent-child relationship.

A child born in the United States with U.S. citizenship but whose parents who do not have legal documentation is particularly at risk for mental health problems. The child in this situation is usually referred to being in a "mixed status family." The anger and depression engendered by the family's secrecy and fear of deportation impinges upon the adolescent's customary quest for such freedoms as speaking freely, exploring new environments, and experiencing different friendships and relationships.

Refugee Youth

Refugee youth and family members frequently leave their homelands to escape political, religious, or ethnic strife and persecution. Refugees in such circumstances often leave without the security of legal documents, grimly aware that their appeals for asylum could be denied, forcing them back into the war, poverty, political massacres, and persecutions of their homelands. In 2005, the largest numbers of refugees in the United States were coming from Somalia, China, Ukraine, Liberia, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

The Lost Boys of Sudan are representative of refugee children or youth who come to the United States as unaccompanied refugee minors. These minors enter the United States with no parents either because their parents are dead from the political or religious wars in the country of origin, or because they have been separated from their parents during the journey. Bridging Refugee Youth and Children Services (www.BRYCS.org), is a national resource which offers technical assistance to professionals who work with unaccompanied refugee minor youth. Professionals contending with scarce resources for all their youth populations are often inclined to give this population of refugees lower priority because their legal status is uncertain. Resource demands are particularly acute when language and cultural translators are required to work with adolescents from countries with unfamiliar backgrounds and spoken or written languages.

Victims of Human Trafficking

Youth who are victims of human trafficking are accompanied to the United States by a person or persons from their countries of origin. Their passage has been paid for and they expect to come to the United States and receive legal documents in order to live and work. However, upon their arrival the amount of money paid is declared insufficient and the youth is forced into slavery, in the form of labor or sex, in order to make up the difference in passage money and to receive the falsely promised legal documentation. Resources such as Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking (www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking) funded by the Department of Health and Human Services offers information and services to victims of human trafficking, including resources and programs for minors. Offering materials in multiple languages designed for social service workers and healthcare practitioners, Rescue and Restore provides the victims of human trafficking the support they need to rebuild their lives.

Implications for Prevention

Professionals working with immigrant and refugee youth need to conduct thorough and culturally competent assessments, paying close attention to the legal status of the youth and family and the

implications of that status for the availability of professional services. Many families are already at high risk because of their migration experiences and expect relief from political, religious, physical, or mental persecution when they arrive in their host countries. However, if their status is not considered legal by the host country they most likely will not receive the much needed mental health and social services required to facilitate their recovery from their trauma, acquired before and during migration (Busch et al., 2007).

In addition, an understanding of the ethnic culture, beliefs, norms, and customs in the native homelands of immigrant and refugee youth is of utmost importance. Without this understanding, professionals working with these youth risk making them feel most vulnerable and increase their burden of not being understood or accepted, in addition to adding to their feelings of being a stranger and unwanted in this new country.

Migration Experiences

For immigrant or refugee youth the journey from the homeland to the host country may have a variety of meanings, depending on the circumstance(s) of leaving, their preparation for the journey, their attachment to the homeland, and their reception in the host

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country. In general, when an immigrant youth leaves his or her homeland the decision has been made carefully by the parents, with adequate preparation for the journey.

The adolescent may be able to make trips back to the birth country to visit friends and families. The journey to the host country may be relatively uneventful unless language deficiencies create misunderstandings. Adjustments to the new country are routinely facilitated by friends or family members who have gone through similar experiences.

However, refugee youth may have multiple traumas to process from their migration journey. Some refugee adolescents are exposed to violence rendering the home environment unsafe. The decision to leave home may have been sudden, without time to prepare or say goodbye to family and friends, exacerbating grief and loss. Stays in refugee camps, which are often violent and unsettled, can contribute to the trauma. Children suffer, too, when their widowed single mothers, whose husbands have been killed in the homeland, during the migration journey, or in the refugee camp, lack basic emotional or physical resources. Child abuse is another potential consequence when parents suffer from PTSD arising out of their migration experience and frustration with the limitations of getting and receiving help (Annie E. Casey, 2006).

Implications for Prevention

The value of understanding immigrant and refugee youth and their families in the context of their entire migration journey cannot be understated (e.g. Fong, 2004). Delgado, Jones, & Rohani (2005) stress the importance of eight contextual variables: 1) original culture, 2) country of origin, 3) pre-migration life, 4) circumstances of migration, 5) trauma experience, 6) family fragmentation, 7) legal status and resettlement process, and 8) host community. All of these factors should be covered in a thorough assessment before treatment planning and interventions are established for this adolescent population.

Cultural Values as Strengths

Mixed reports circulate about the impact of acculturation and the mental health of the immigrant adolescent. Some have asserted that the more the youth are acculturated in the United States the higher they are at risk for both physical and mental health problems (de Leon Siantz, 1999; Rumbaut, 1994). This is grounded in the belief that as youth become acculturated they lose their cultural values from their homelands and countries of origin. Cultural values are reflected in familiarity with traditional beliefs, awareness of traditional norms, proficiency in the native spoken language, and upholding traditional customs and protocols. As youth begin to lose the cultural values from their homeland and try to acculturate but remain "at the margin," as Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) describe it, difficulties may appear in both accepting and rejecting cultural values. Many immigrant parents fear their children are losing their native language abilities, knowledge of cultural norms, and cultural values (de Leon Siantz, 1999; Delgado et al., 2005; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Tensions between the parental, grandparental, and youth generations usually evolve around differences in upholding cultural values.

Traditional cultural values are sometimes not recognized as strengths and protective factors by professionals working with immigrant and refugee families. Cultural values are core to the lives and worldview of the parents of the immigrant and refugee youth. Every society promotes cultural values which reflect the norms and beliefs of that social, political, and economic environment. Cultural values esteemed in the family's or the youth's traditional society may not be valued in their host country. This clash in societal cultural values may help to explain the difficulties in adjustments between parents and youth. For example, in some societies, such as in Taiwan or India, there is still a high emphasis placed on preparing young women for marriage and motherhood rather than higher education and careers. However, when the immigrant family moves to the United States these traditional values may cause tension for the young woman who feels pressure from peers who are focusing more on self-fulfillment and fully realizing potential abilities. These situations usually result in tensions and competing cultural values between the homeland and host countries and among first and second generation immigrants.

Prevention Strategies

Professionals working with immigrant and refugee youth benefit from knowing the intricacies of terminology and legal statuses of the immigrant and refugee milieu (e.g., immigrant versus refugee, documented or undocumented immigrant). Each term connotes a

difference in migration experience and service availability. Clarity about the distinctions of each term avoids confusion in the practitioner's assessment and treatment, and would prevent alienation and distrust in the client's relationship with the professional.

Migration experiences need to be fully explored and acknowledged because the presenting trauma in the adolescent's life may not be due to the current circumstances but instead to PTSD acquired from the journey to the host country. This knowledge could prevent wasting time and effort on a presenting problem, which is not the actual root problem to the trauma or dysfunction.

Professionals working with immigrant and refugee youth should be familiar with the cultural values in the country of origin because those values are the context for understanding the attitudes and beliefs, and decisions and choices made by and between the youth client and his or her parents. Depending on the role of the cultural values in the youth's life, they can be used as strengths and seen as protective factors. This knowledge can help to prevent tension and defensiveness in the client who is "at the margin" and needs support to function positively in their new host society.

Competing cultural values between the country of origin and the host country may surface as generational tensions between parent and youth. Professionals need to honor both sets of cultural values and work toward helping parents and youth understand that both sets of values are important; it does not have to be a choice of one or the other.

While immigrant and refugee youth are extremely diverse, there are common starting points for professionals to explore while assisting these youth and their families in adapting to their new country. By understanding their legal statuses and migration experiences, and by building on the strengths of their traditional cultural values, practical prevention and intervention strategies can be created. →



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