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

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary of Terms</th>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>2nd Generation Immigrant: A person born in the United States who is the child of parents who are first generation immigrants.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>Documented Immigrant: A person who has legal documentation allowing him or her to live and remain as a resident in the host country.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undocumented Immigrant: A person who comes to live in the host country without legal documentation.</td>
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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 diffusing 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 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. <a>

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References


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