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**ARE WE PREPARED WHEN THE WORLD COMES TO US?
APPLIED SOCIOLOGY WITH
IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE ISSUES**

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— *CREATING CAPACITY FOR QUALITY RESULTS* —

Research Overview

In an attempt to address the question of how to conduct culturally competent evaluation of service provision to immigrants and refugee populations in the United States, the REFT Institute, Inc. and the Latin American Research and Service Agency (LARASA) embarked on a two-year research project funded by The Colorado Trust in the years 2001 and 2002. The Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Families Initiative (SIRFI) was The Colorado Trust's response to the need to make mental health and acculturation services available to the rising numbers of immigrants and refugees in Colorado. This initiative was developed to provide nonprofit agencies and organizations with funding over a three-year period to carry out programs designed to assist immigrants and refugees. Funding grants provided to 23 agencies averaged \$50,000 - \$75,000 per year and were based on a plan of activities developed individually by each agency.

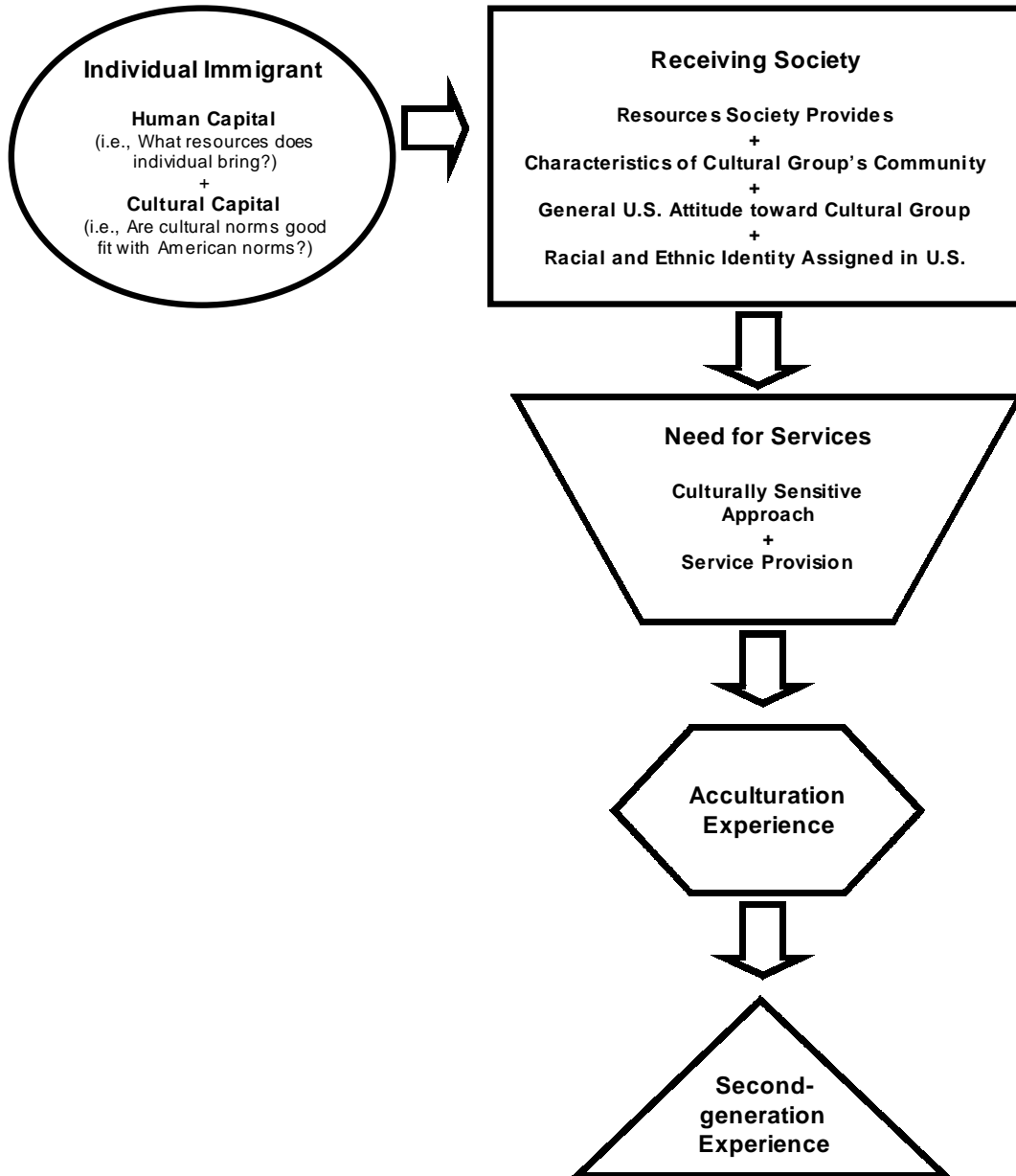
The linguistic and cultural entities in the study were extremely varied, with this variation dependent upon such aspects as the amount of time resident in this country, the physical and mental health of the individuals, the educational level achieved by individuals in their home country and other characteristics. The research team worked with eight culture groups: Mexicans, Q'anjob'al Mayan from Guatemala, Hmong from Laos, Vietnamese, Bosnian, Russian, Arabic-speaking north Africans, and Amharic-speaking Ethiopians. The groups were selected to represent some of the larger immigrant and refugee cultural groups in Colorado as well as a variety of countries of origin.

The general intent of the research project was to determine what the primary concerns of these immigrant and refugee populations are as they reside in the United States and struggle to deal with daily tasks and the emotional upheavals associated with their acculturation process. Specifically, this analysis attempted to define what the salient themes are that cross cultural boundaries, yet are critical to culturally competent work with immigrant and refugee populations. These themes include such topics as social networks, intergenerational and gender conflict, social identification, youth at risk, education and employment, war trauma and discrimination. The knowledge gained by REFT Institute and LARASA led to a refinement of Portes and Rimbaud's (2001) interpretive framework for understanding immigrants' and refugees' experiences in their new country.

All agencies were visited to learn as much as possible about the cultural characteristics of their clients and how clients should be approached for an interview to be culturally competent, questions and topics of special sensitivity, areas to avoid, etc. In addition, information was gathered about the particular services provided by each agency.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 47 immigrants and refugees served by the grantee agencies. In relating information about their lives in the United States, immigrants and refugees offered insights about both early and ongoing issues that affected them as individuals, their families and their co-ethnic community. This included relevant information pertaining to their country of origin and travel experiences, their initial experiences in their receiving community in the U.S., their immediate critical needs, as well as longer-term experiences and impressions of life in the United States.

Interpretive Framework



* This interpretive framework builds on, and complements, the work of Alejandro Portes, Ph.D., of Princeton University, and Ruben G. Rumbaut, Ph.D., of Michigan State University, as presented in Portes A, Rumbaut RG. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. New York: The Russell Sage Foundation; 2001: 62, 283.

Immigrant and Refugee Sample Characteristics (n=47)

Arrival characteristics:

- 5 groups refugees
- 3 groups immigrants (2 undocumented, 1 legal)
- 41% escaped war or violence
- 61% received by family
- 20% received by non-government organization
- 12% received by US government agency

Characteristics at time of interview:

- 8.5 years average time in the US
- 47 years average age
- 14.3 average years of education
- 66% with spouse in US
- 17% divorced, separated, or widowed
- 81% with children in US

Immigrant and Refugee Self-Reported Needs (n=47)

Self-Support Needs:

- Employment (47 interviewees or 100%)
- Language acquisition (39 or 85%)
- Education (27 or 59%)

Health/Mental Health Needs:

- Mental health (38 or 83%)
- Physical health (33 or 72%)

Basic Survival Needs:

- Housing (42 or 91%)
- Transportation (42 or 91%)
- Food (19 or 41%)

Family Support Needs:

- Couples support (34 or 74%)
- Children/youth support (21 or 46%)
- Senior support (18 or 39%)

Other Over-Arching needs:

- Legal assistance (26 or 57%)
- Discrimination (16 or 34%)
- Poverty (15 or 33%)

Grantee Self-Reported Services (n=23)

Self Support Services:

- Translation, interpretation (18 grantee agencies)
- Life skills classes (10)
- ESL classes (10)
- Dropout prevention (6)
- GED preparation (5)
- Tutoring (5)
- Job placement (4)
- Job skills training (3)

Health/Mental Health Services:

- Crisis intervention (20)
- Counseling, therapy (17)
- Support groups (13)
- Health assistance, clinics (10)
- Psychiatric evaluation (9)
- Pregnancy prevention education (5)
- Respite care (4)

Basic Survival Services:

- Basic necessities provision (food, clothing) (12)
- Transportation (12)
- Emergency financial aid (9)
- Housing (6)

Family Support Services:

- Family support (19)
- Home visits (16)
- Domestic violence outreach (14)
- Parenting classes, support (12)
- Child care, preschool (10)

Other Over-Arching Services:

- Advocacy (20)
- Cultural activities (17)
- Recreational, social activities (13)
- Leadership, community building (12)
- Legal assistance (11)
- Citizenship assistance (10)

Adequacy of Services

Immigrant and refugee needs were identified through analysis of grantee agency and immigrant interviews. Significantly, every major need was addressed either directly or indirectly by several agencies. Though grantee services and client needs overlapped considerably, some gaps remain.

The research conducted for this study had several limitations. It used a relatively small purposive sample of immigrants and refugees, and grantees were funded based specifically on provision of mental health and acculturation services (as opposed to education or employment, for example). In addition, all information regarding needs and services were self-reported in exploratory, open-ended interviews. Comparing needs and services was therefore a challenge. Furthermore, this was not the primary intent of the research. Rather, determining the feasibility of conducting culturally competent outcome evaluation across various culture groups was the foremost goal.

By comparing immigrants and refugees' self-reported needs to grantees' self-reported services, an overview of adequacy of services can be inferred. For example, under the broader category of "Self Support", immigrant and refugee needs of employment (100% of interviewees mentioned this), language acquisition (85%), and education (59%) added together and divided by three, resulted in an overall figure of 81% of immigrants and refugees expressing a need for Self-Support assistance. By contrast, grantee services related to the Self-Support category (translation/interpretation, life skills classes, ESL, dropout prevention, GED preparation, tutoring, job placement, and job skills training) resulted in an overall figure of 33% of grantees providing these services. Indeed, Self-Support was the least well-balanced fit, with a 48% difference between reported needs and reported services.

Analysis of the broad categories of need provides the following perspective, listed in order of adequacy of services:

- Family Support 53% need : 62% service = +9% difference
- Over-Archiving Services 41% need : 60% service = +19% difference
- Health/Mental Health 77% need : 48% service = -29% difference
- Basic Needs 74% need : 42% service = -32% difference
- Self Support 81% need : 33% service = -48% difference

More specifically, when individual subcategories are viewed in terms of immigrants' and refugees' five highest priority needs, the following picture of adequacy of services results:

- Employment 100% need : 15% service = -85% difference
- Housing 91% need : 26% service = -65% difference
- Transportation 91% need : 52% service = -59% difference
- Language 85% need : 61% service = -24% difference
- Mental Health 83% need : 72% service = -11% difference

Conclusions

Immigration itself is a stressor and may significantly contribute to adjustment problems as pressure is placed on families, including displacement, culture clash, family dysfunction, economic strain and various forms of discrimination. The “receiving context” is vitally important to the positive adjustment of immigrants and refugees no matter what their country of origin, though the receiving context will vary for different culture groups. Forces such as local economic opportunities, political and legal frameworks, and resources in the social community determine to a great degree how well immigrants and refugees will adjust to their new circumstances. It is also important to monitor the racial and ethnic identity that is given to immigrants and refugees that enter the United States for that is the long-term reality - a label the American society gives its new members that will deeply affect the second and third generation experiences.

Confusion, miscommunication, lack of understanding about services, limited English proficiency, fear of deportation, and feelings of alienation are among reason for low participation rates in agencies servicing immigrants and refugees. On the other hand, service agencies don't necessarily have a complete understanding of immigrants' primary needs, lack sufficient funding, work within a limited scope of services, or are otherwise unable to provide adequate or appropriate support.

Clearly, the largest gap in services, at least among these agencies, are employment, housing and transportation. Employment viability is affected by English language capacity and mental health issues. Therefore, strategies for increasing employment success, language proficiency, educational attainment, and enhancing access to health/mental health support are critical. Providers of these service programs for immigrant and refugee populations need to have awareness of cultural relevance and significance of various beliefs and behaviors critical for accurate problem definition and problem solving. Conversely, misinterpreting target group behaviors, lack of awareness of salient need, or lack of appreciation for cultural differences will lead to inaccurate assumptions about service program functioning and outcomes.

Any meaningful and accurate program services for immigrants and refugees must first account for the demographic, socio-cultural and psychological characteristics that are unique to various culture groups, and differentiate them from one another as well as from mainstream American society. Culturally competent service providers must strive to appreciate not only inter-group diversity, but intra-group variability as well. Furthermore, providers must strive to comprehend the multi-faceted and complicated change that is inherent in the process of acculturation.

Positive first and second-generation immigrant acculturation experiences are critical to the well-being of future generations, and to the overall stability and progress of any multicultural society.