**Refugee Children Acculturation: Group Process in Schools**

**as Cultural Microcosms**

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**Abstract**

In the US, school attendance is mandated for refugee children. These children endure sudden immersion and must acculturate into this novel culture, whose customs often vastly diverge from their native culture's values. Refugee children often struggle with acculturation-related mental health issues, such as internalizing significantly clashing native and host cultural values. Without navigational assistance, refugee children may get lost in the new culture. Possibly the best-suited helpers for them are school counselors, who are uniquely positioned to facilitate acculturation with group work experiences. This paper provides examples of group interventions and explores implications with a theoretically grounded acculturation model.

*Keywords:* refugee, groups, acculturation, integration, and school counselors

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The population and needs of diverse individuals and families entering into and residing in the US are ever-expanding. As these families migrate into the US, many bring children and adolescents who will attend public schools, and could feel under-equipped to handle the acculturation process. School counselors are put in the unique and challenging position to meet the singular needs of these children and adolescents as they attempt to acculturate into the US school system. This paper will provide school counselors with three important tools to assist in refugee children with the acculturation process such as practical knowledge regarding the role of acculturation and its utilization of group processes, strategies to support the refugee population in their schools, and specific examples for facilitating integration to the host culture through the group process.

**Refugees in the United States**

At the conclusion of the Second World War, close to 42 million refugees, almost half of whom were children, were displaced from their native homes (U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2010). By definition, refugees are persons who have fled their native countries due to extreme persecution based on factors such as race, ethnicity, nationality, religious opinions, political affiliations, or social group membership (UNHCR, 1951). Around the world, the effects of continuing and increasingly violent political engagements have caused growing numbers of obligatory displacements (UNHCR, 2014), and now several countries have the largest numbers of forced displacements in recorded history (UNHCR, 2016). Due to ongoing threat,

conflict, and discrimination, each day an average of 34,000 individuals are forced to migrate (UNHCR, 2016). In fact, the number of refugees was estimated at over 17 million by 2014's start, with almost half identified as children (UNHCR, 2014). Of the western world, the US is considered a top resettlement host country (UNHCR, 2015), in the past decade, over half a million refugees, including children and adolescents, gained refuge status in the United States (Department of Homeland Security, 2012).

Refugees by definition, have complex multicultural identities, as opposed to the single identity – refugee – often attributed to them. Refugees enter into new systems with a multitude of various cultural identities, some of which are directly related to having a refugee status such as, political affiliation which has caused their flight. Refugee children, like refugee adults, are just as subject to this complexity when they enter the US school system and become the responsibility of the schools' counselors. In order to best serve this vulnerable population, school counselors must acknowledge and conceptualize the complex cultural identity of an individual refugee, this understanding will provide school counselors with valuable assistance in how their complex cultural identity is situated in the new host culture.

The term "culture" is often used in very broad and ambiguous ways and has various interpretations. Poppitt and Frey (2007) define culture as a process of one's self-conceptualization, this can include morals, ethics, personal insights, mindsets, linguistics, personal behaviors, personal history, meanings ascribed to life circumstances, and socioeconomic status (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). From this definition of culture, one can begin to grasp how cultural identity influences one's personal identification and placement within a particular setting, and how disruption of that identity

through a permanent cultural change might be stressful. As a matter of course, all people identify with their native cultures through constant and prolonged exposure from an early age, and refugees bring with them their native cultures when entering their new, often permanent, life situations.

The process of combining the elements of the new culture with the old and familiar culture is referred as acculturation (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Although a smooth acculturation into the host culture would be ideal, the UNHCR (2011) indicates that refugees experience extreme discrimination, maltreatment, and oppression because of their multiple cultural identities and characteristics. Acculturation describes the congregation between two cultural groups, which results in the progression of cultural transformation, and mental and emotional alteration (Sam & Berry, 2010).

All refugees go through an acculturation process in transitioning from a native culture into a native-and-host-culture coexistence. It is important to know adjoining of two differing cultures, or acculturation, can create psychological transformation (Berry, 2003). When embarking on the journey into a new culture, individual refugees begin to become comfortable with that new culture by learning and acquiring dominant traditional individualities and personalities of the host cultures (Hwang & Ting, 2008; Poppitt & Frey, 2007), cultural changes will include alterations in a particular refugee's exercise of customs, their beliefs, their values, and their financial and political understandings (Poppitt & Frey, 2007).

Acculturation in leaving one culture and entering another is a difficult process, which is essential for those working with refugees to understand. How can anyone comprehend a culture of which they have never been a part of? While refugees come

from many different countries and cultures, studies examining psychological interventions with refugees frequently cluster all refugees as a homogeneous group, without the intentional exploration of native cultural variables that have the potential to directly impede or support treatment. While there is some research focusing on specific refugee subgroups (e.g., Bjorn, Boden, Sydsjo, & Gustafsson, 2013; Cumming & Visser, 2009; Hurley, Saini, Warren, & Carberry, 2013; Mirdal, Ryding, & Sondej, 2011; Renner, Laireiter, & Maier, 2012; Uguak, 2010), these studies lack a provision for detailed background information and cultural variables between, the specific groups in question. Effective acculturation strategies for helpers require an understanding of each refugee's unique cultural situation. Instead of proceeding from the assumption that refugees are all the same, people from the host culture must try to act with multi-cultural competency rather than from merely an us-and-them mindset.

Assisting refugees to acculturate is difficult, the impossibility of knowing everything about every culture means that true and complete multicultural competency is aspirational rather than actual, and cannot truly be achieved (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016); however, knowledge of the refugees' cultures is still crucial. Multicultural competency must be used as an aspirational guideline alongside a model, and should not be misconstrued as a complete understanding of the refugees' backgrounds and motivations. Even without understanding the refugees' culture, counselor can comprehend the emotional reactions of refugees to their situations, allowing for a connection despite never truly arriving at a complete, intrinsic understanding of any culture not their own (Killian, Cardona, & Hudspeth, 2017). If

counselors aim at treating every refugee as a unique individual, they will positively affect the acculturation process for each refugee (Knezevic & Olson, 2014).

Each particular acculturation process will look distinctive depending on the individuals and the native cultural group from which they came (Hashim, 2003; Steinglass, 2001). This process can sometimes include the corrosion of deeply rooted customary beliefs, traditions, and values (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). When an individual has competing and oftentimes conflicting cultural clashes, a phenomenon known as acculturation stress occurs. Acculturation stress is the psychological stress which results from the refugee's internal conflict in reaction to the clash between the unlearned tenets of the refugee's new culture and the familiar, but different, values left behind in the former culture (Berry, 2006).

Transitioning into a new culture poses a significant challenge, and navigating between two differing set of worldviews and values proves to be a difficult endeavor for many individuals. Even after leaving their homes, exposure to some form of trauma is not unusual for refugees during their occupancy in refugee camps (Robertson et al., 2006), and the associated mental health issues have been well-documented. However, the role of acculturation stress has often been overlooked.

**Impact of Acculturation Stress**

Acculturation stress is defined as the reaction of individuals in response to personal events that are embedded in intercultural interaction (Berry, 2006). With this in mind, it is important to comprehend that acculturation stress correlates with adjusting to a novel culture (Cervantes, Padilla, Napper, & Goldbach, 2013). Acculturative stress is the divergence that occurs between acquiring the unfamiliar properties of the new

culture, while simultaneously discarding characteristics from the native culture (Berry, 1997). Berry (1997) notes that the course of acculturation is anxiety-provoking and is linked to mental health problems. It is important to understand that a heightened rate and force of acculturation can lead to greater acculturative stress (Phillimore, 2011). Many factors can bring about or exacerbate the acculturative stress refugees may experience, such as the transition period, the particular host country's historical reception of refugees, instances of discrimination, and opinions of refugees (Schwartz, Urger, Zamoanga, & Szapocznik, 2010).

Due to the many psychological implications related to this stress, coping skills are crucial for better dealing with the psychological ramifications involved in acculturation (Poppitt & Frey, 2007). Berry (2008) points out that the negative overall mental health of a refugee individual is intertwined with acculturation stress. Although the literature tends to focus on pre-migration distress, post-migration anxiety is identified as a more significant forecaster of psychological issues than pre-migration conflict-connected distress (Guerin, Guerin, Diiriye, & Yates, 2004). Post-migration stressors can result from family separation, and interaction, communication, and cooperation with immigration administrators (Guerin et al., 2004). Acculturation stress will manifest as deficits in interpersonal relationships, either somatically, emotionally, and/or psychologically, often developing into various forms of mental illness (Berry, 2006). For refugees, the multitude of issues can take various forms, such as disorganized eating, phobias, violent actions, disordered sleeping, and attentiveness complications (Nilsson, Barazanji, Heintzelman, Siddiqi, & Shilla, 2012).

All of these acculturation stressors, in addition to affecting adult refugees, can have significant negative consequences for refugee children. Counselors assisting adult refugees with acculturation and acculturation stress must be attuned to the specific cultural differences between varying refugee groups (Kuo & Arcuri, 2014), it follows that anyone using acculturation strategies with refugee children need to be attuned to the cultural nuances existent between various groups.

**Refugee Children**

While most of the focus in the literature is on refugees in general, one cannot overlook the refugee child plight, due to pre-migration political atrocities, and the process of entering the new host countries with potential mental health concerns. These mental health concerns may include post-traumatic stress disorder (Ellis, MacDonald, Lincoln, & Cabral, 2008), depression (Heptinstall, Sethna, & Taylor, 2004; Sack, 1998), and anxiety (Fazel, Doll, & Stein, 2009) in the same way adult refugees may experience the same issues (Fazel et al., 2009; George, 2012; National Child Traumatic Stress Network Refugee Trauma Task Force [NCTSNRTTF], 2005).

After resettlement, refugee children must adjust to the host culture, which can include issues of discrimination, limited community support, and impediments to education (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010), refugee children come to the US facing common barriers which impede their ability to successfully thrive in the US, including poverty, a deficiency in language proficiency skills, conflicting cultural beliefs, lack of knowledge of legal practices and of valuable community resources, and distrust of those in authority positions (Chiumento, Nelki, Dutton, & Hughes, 2011; Cumming & Visser, 2009; Fazel et al., 2009; Bjorn et al., 2013; Hurley et al., 2013). Given the strains associated with

both pre- and post-migration, many refugee children report increased levels of psychological issues (NCTSNRTTF, 2005). Refugee children are potentially more emotionally vulnerable because they are not as cognitively and emotionally capable, as adult refugees of understanding the necessity for and requirements of fleeing their homeland situation (NCTSNRTTF).

**Acculturation for Refugee Children**

As refugee children enter the US, they are required by law to attend public schools, refugee children may enter into these schools with multifaceted physical and psychological needs (Cumming & Visser, 2009; Fazel et al., 2009). Acculturation stress greatly contributes to psychological stress and its impact on refugee children on a daily basis. Schools, as a fundamental representation of the mainstream culture into which a refugee settles, are a profoundly appropriate setting for the effective and positive acculturation of refugee children (Schwartz et al., 2010), and school counselors are easily the most logical and best choice for school-based assistance with acculturation for refugee children. Keeping in mind the ramifications of acculturation and acculturation stress for the general refugee population, school counselors must understand the importance of being acquainted with the acculturation process and its possible complexities, which differ for each individual undergoing acculturation, and be aware that a myriad of possible hardships will come with that transition.

Understanding the role of acculturation stress and its possible influences is important when working with refugee children in the schools, in order to best facilitate their healthy acculturation adjustment. Before a school counselor can begin working with acculturation stress, it is important to understand how this phenomenon presents

itself for a refugee child since refugees' adjustment to the host culture can greatly affect their general mental health and overall acculturation process (Chiumento et al., 2011; George, 2012; Hurley et al., 2013; Mirdal et al., 2011; Renner et al., 2012). According to Ellis et al. (2008), the risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a danger for refugee children and adolescents at any point in their cultural migration because the process can, and often does, result in trauma at multiple stages along the way. Refugee children are also at significant risk for developing depression associated with post-migration trauma (Heptinstall et al., 2004; Sack, 1998), while post-migration trauma is related to the acculturation process, school counselors must also understand that the trauma of acculturation is ongoing and does not stop because the refugee has stopped migrating. After migration, refugees face a multitude of challenges when attempting to adapt to a host country (Keyes & Kane, 2004), for example, they must learn new cultural customs, unfamiliar verbal interactions, and new political, work-related, and scholastic systems (Sabbah, 2007).

The same cultural clashes that affect refugees in the general US society will also affect refugee children in the microcosmic setting of the school. This conflict manifests itself particularly within the new school systems to which the refugee children are introduced often precipitously. Exposure to a new culture as complex as the one in the US, refugee children may face an assembly of factors that can greatly affect their transition into the school system (Cumming & Visser, 2009; Fazel et al., 2009). Understanding how these various cultural confrontations manifest is imperative when comprehending the differing cultural variances in anxiety and coping skills dependent upon the culture of origin (Poppitt & Frey, 2007).

Given the challenges that many refugees face, counselors must be aware of refugee children's needs, including acculturation stress, which can prevent refugee students from effectively accessing resources that can impede academic and social success. In addition, school counselors must understand the role of each student's cultural identity and how it can be influenced by competing cultural values. While personally interacting with individual refugee children, school counselors can observe how each refugee child transitions into a new culture, which will provide valuable information on how to conceptualize the needs of each child. They may also access the literature for support in their work with refugee children.

**Refugee Children in US Schools**

Some studies (Chiumento et al., 2011; Cumming & Visser, 2009; Fazel et al., 2009; Bjorn et al., 2013; Hurley et al., 2013) do show the importance and clinical implications of working with refugee children. The role of school counselors has not been at the center in the literature regarding this topic, to date the current literature focuses on the use of outside mental health professionals and on linking these resources within the schools (e.g., Chiumento et al., 2011; Cumming & Visser; Fazel et al., 2009; Schottelkorb, Doumas, & Garcia, 2012; Uguak, 2010). A scarcity of studies examines the role of school counselors, and there is an absence of specific strategies for school counselors to use when working with refugee children in the school environment, as they become accustomed to their new way of life. School-based interventions can be an important tool to address the complex needs of refugee students. School services are a particularly successful modality because they provide familiar and consistent environments within which to support and nurture refugee

children (Chiumento et al., 2011; Cumming & Visser, 2009; Fazel et al., 2009; Hurley et al., 2013). Schools can often offer a shield from the outside world and provide a sense of safety to refugees, proving consistency, exposure to mainstream culture, and access to community resources, and support (Chiumento et al., 2011; Cumming & Visser, 2009). Immersion in the safe school environment will greatly assist in the acculturation of refugee children (Chiumento et al., 2011).

When conceptualizing how refugee children acculturate, one particular model (Berry, 1997), offers insight into the various acculturation strategies utilized by this population. Berry's model provides a contextual framework for the course of acculturation and for the coping strategies utilized by individuals. This particular model provides a potential foundation for working with refugee children in schools, since schools are a microcosm of US society (Aldridge, Ala'i, & Fraser, 2016). Berry's (1997) model explores the various avenues of acculturation and how the host culture influences the acculturation process, once refugees have entered the US culture.

## Model of Acculturation Strategies

In the daily life of refugee children, each must resolve two major issues: cultural maintenance, and contact and participation (Berry, 1997). The term *cultural maintenance* is concerned with the "extent" to which "cultural identity and characteristics" are "considered to be important, and their maintenance strived for" (Berry, 1997, p. 9). *Contact and participation* asks to "what extent should they become involved in other cultural groups, or remain primarily among themselves" (Berry, 1997, p. 9). These two ideas describe *how* an individual identifies him or herself and to *what level* does he or she interact with the dominant culture. Berry proposed that these two

concepts taken together, result in four possible acculturation outcomes. Which one is pertinent to an individual is dependent upon how he or she reacts to circumstances and resolves the clash between cultures. Integration, assimilation, separation/segregation, and marginalization are all different possible ways in which a refugee may attempt to resolve the crisis of entry into the dominant society (Berry, 1997), integration is the only one of these that manifests in a positive way.

Berry (1997) describes integration as the acculturation mechanism within which an individual maintains both native and host culture in daily interfaces with others. For example, this could present itself in a Somali child who wears a hijab out of respect for her native culture, but also wears blue jeans to better conform to the inherent American culture at her school. Assimilation occurs when an individual rejects native culture in daily associations with others (Berry, 1997). In assimilation a refugee would leave behind all cultural identification and completely adopt that of the host culture, such as a Syrian refugee who, when questioned about his origin, insists that he was born and raised in the US. Separation/segregation takes place when an individual maintains native culture while simultaneously circumventing contact with others (Berry, 1997). This could occur when a refugee of Myanmar chooses to exclusively continue speaking Burmese, interacts only with other people from Myanmar, and avoids all contact with anyone from the host culture. Finally, when resorting to marginalization, an individual places no importance on the maintenance of native culture and rejects interactions or relationships with other people (Berry, 1997, p. 9). This is common when a refugee has experienced prejudice and discrimination. This refugee is rejected by the host culture, but, in turn, rejects all cultural identification from the native culture.

School counselors must be attuned to how each of these manifestations appears as they occur among refugee children in the schools, early identification of acculturation approaches can better assist in a smoother acculturation process for the child, who otherwise might receive little attention or guidance. Berry's concepts may provide valuable insight into refugee children's acculturation status. School counselors must be familiar with the strategies adopted by refugee children and determine whether they are beneficial to the child's personal development. Identifying acculturation strategies can provide school personnel with a clear direction for how to approach cultural adjustment groups and how to guide the conducting of culturally sensitive interactions.

Identifying acculturation strategies can provide school personnel with a clear direction for how to approach cultural adjustment groups and, how to guide culturally sensitive interaction, and implement adjustment groups to better assist in cultural transition groups. Group process can provide a safe and natural environment for refugee children to share their current and past experiences with others who have been through similar experiences. We would argue that Berry's (1997) model of acculturation constitutes a powerful and effective tool for creating transitional groups, also called cultural adjustment groups, to support refugee students.

**Cultural Adjustment Groups**

Cultural adjustment groups are crucial to the process of acculturation for refugees, and critically assist refugee children in adapting to the host country's culture. However, it is imperative to understand that our use of "adaptation" does not imply total assimilation by and immersion in the new culture with a concomitant rejection of the original culture as necessary or desirable. Healthy functioning in a new society requires

that refugees understand and integrate the new, and it does not imply that they reject their original culture. Cultural adjustment groups can potentially accomplish both of these goals effectively. Understanding the nature of group dynamics is imperative to the successful facilitation of any group. Gladding (2015) defines groups as "a collection of two or more individuals who meet [in] face-to-face interaction, interdependently, with the awareness that each belongs to the group and for the purpose of achieving mutually agreed-on-goals" (p. 472). Gladding's definition provides a practical and concrete definition for the basic understanding of groups and their makeup. Yalom (2005) recognizes groups as an active force that has both explicit and implicit influences on its individual participants. Research demonstrates that groups are an efficient and successful system in the delivery of mental health services (Kivlighan, Coleman, & Anderson, 2000). Understanding the variables of what constitutes a successful group is essential and consequently, school counselors need to carefully plan the delivery of group guidance for refugee children.

Over multiple years, numerous analyses and observations have focused on the use of groups in the schools (Gladding, 2015). However, only a small number of the studies were grounded in research methodology (Shechtman, 2004). Myrick (2003) has noted several advantages to group counseling with children. These advantages include: efficiency, since large proportions of the children can be met at one time; interpersonal interactions; the use of modeling and direct feedback; a supportive environment; encouragement of tolerance; increased positive risk-taking; and use of group members as resources (Myrick, 2003).

Groups for children and adolescents could find homes in many possible locations, but K12 schools are one very effective place (Corey & Corey, 2006). Counseling in schools promotes the healthy development of students (Erford, 2014; Gladding, 2015). Children devote a majority of their time within the school system to intermixing in groups, which makes school counseling groups a natural extension of an already-occurring phenomenon (Kulic, Horne, & Dagley, 2004). While groups are an alternative to individual counseling, it is important to understand the difficulties of group counseling with refugee children from different cultural backgrounds. Schools provide a unique environment in which continual exposure to mainstream and other cultures influence children's interpersonal interactions.

Effectively implementing groups for refugee children requires constant and vigilant attention to cultural differences and commonalities between group members. Gladding (2015) points out that an individual's culture will impact his or her own personal comfort and interpersonal connections within the group. Since leading a multicultural group can be a challenging task, group leaders must familiarize themselves with their individual group members' cultural heritages (Gladding, 2015). While group members may identify with one cultural group (i.e., Somali refugee), it is important to understand that each member has experiences and cultural dimensions which form a personal identity that differs from one to another. In order to facilitate the transition while helping the refugee child maintain a sense of identity, school counselors should take a two-pronged approach, both as a guide and as a learner, so group leaders must continuously and consistently be self-aware while listening to and mediating cross-cultural exchanges within the group environment (Bieschke, Gehlert, Wilson, Mathews,

& Wade, 2003). Focus on cross-cultural exchanges must also include group leaders, who need to be aware of their own cultural identities and makeup and understand how those differences can influence group dynamics (DeLucia-Waack, 2004).

Cultural adjustment groups are designed with the purpose of exploring the acculturation process, while utilizing the advantages of group dynamics, these groups normally are comprised of 12-15 refugee children, and meet for 8-12 weeks, and run for roughly 40-45 minutes per session (Olujic, Rano, & Badwan, 2012). According to Olujic et al. (2012), the intention of this type of group is to offer a safe and secure environment within the schools, where refugees can explore feelings, trepidations, opinions, and reflections surrounding their own migration and acculturation experiences, to combat personal feelings of aloneness and seclusion. It is important to note that cultural adjustment groups are centered on broad premises of pre-and-post migration, acculturation, and relocation experiences (Olujic et al., 2012). When planning these groups, it is important for school counselors to be aware of the background specifics on each refugee, which include the following: language proficiency, amount of time spent in the US, mental health concerns, academic concerns, and any behavioral problems within the school. Once background is understood, school counselors can design an appropriate group accordingly (Olujic et al., 2012).

When working with refugee children, the goal of acculturation should focus on integration. Berry (1997) points out that the acculturation strategy labeled integration is the most effective; marginalization is the least effective; and assimilation and separation strategies are intermediary. David, Okazaki, & Saw (2009) note that research on the acculturation process suggests that an integration approach toward acculturation will

result in the most favorable mental and emotional consequences. Consequently, school counselors are encouraged to focus on interventions that assist in the acculturation strategy of integration. Cultural adjustment groups that use this strategy will be effective in acculturation assistance, while simultaneously decreasing acculturation stress, this strategy focuses on the integration of a refugee's native cultural values and beliefs with those of the dominant culture, while making the transition to that culture.

Integration supports the expanding of cultural views, and this will look different for each refugee child. Refugees in cultural adjustment groups that foster integration should recognize the refugee's position in the acculturation process. Since the acculturation process looks different for each individual member, close attention must be paid to group member differences and how they will play out in-group dynamics. Refugees should receive assistance in seeing the strengths and limitations in weaving together both cultures and in finding positive ways of integrating cultural values in productive ways. Group activities should focus on exploring native cultural values while concurrently learning about the host culture. The safe and non-threatening nature of the groups will help facilitate this process. Some examples of topics that may promote integration in cultural adjustment groups include: refugee children introducing their native country, identifying likes and dislikes of the US, what the refugee child misses about home, emotions surrounding the adjustment to the US, and other topics relevant to both cultures as they affect the refugee child. Topics should promote the understanding of cultural values and the ways in which they complement and, oftentimes, conflict with each other, while giving each child the time to process and explore this in the group environment.

**Implications for School Counselors Working with Refugees**

In promoting integration, it is important for school counselors to create interventions that facilitate appreciation of cultural merging. The idea of creating and facilitating interventions that meet the unique needs of refugee children is imperative to culturally competent practices, while the range of culturally responsive practices can appear different and be delivered in diverse ways, the main theme of integration should be present. When remembering Berry's (1997) explanation of integration, it is important to understand that it is defined as the period when a refugee child accepts and incorporates both indigenous and host cultural beliefs. Interventions should encompass both the identification of conflicting cultural values and the discovery of ways to integrate these values, so that the refugee child is able to successfully acculturate to the new environment.

Each of the following examples provides an opportunity for refugee children to process host and native cultural values. These examples can be modified to meet the distinctive requirements of each student. School counselors provide a safe and supportive environment in which refugee children feel comfortable enough to explore the conflicting values and how those values are impacting their own acculturation processes. The following activities have been adapted from the *RESPECT Guide for School Social Workers, Counselors, Psychologists, and Educators* from Jewish Family Service of Colorado (Olujic et al., 2012). The authors have provided examples in culturally sensitive practices that promote successful integration.

**Describing Your Native Country**

The refugee children will share, with the other children in the group, their impressions, memories, and understanding of their native culture, if they are able to speak a common language well enough to do so. Other possibilities, in the event of an absence of linguistic facility, would be having the children draw pictures of their native culture, with as much detail as possible, or act out the salient things they remember from their culture of origin. This activity can provide a chance for the refugee child to explore thoughts and feelings about their native country. The hope is that this activity allows the child to reveal values that can often conflict with host cultural values. In this activity, school counselors give the child an opportunity to provide a cathartic illustration of their native country.

**Discussing Cultural Differences**

A child can discuss, draw, or act out cultural differences between host and native cultures at increasingly more complex levels if the child has the maturity to understand. For example:

- differences between group members' cultures (illustrating that they are all refugees and have commonalities centered on their refugee status while simultaneously recognizing the differences in the group members' native cultures)

- differences between native and host familial cultures, religious, and common customs/rituals

- differences between small-group (i.e., towns or local areas) native and host cultures, and

- differences nationally between native and host cultures.

This activity provides refugee youth the opportunities to comprehend and share differing cultural values, both between group members and within the larger host culture. Refugee children may benefit from understanding what each child has experienced being in the US, which can conflict with and/or complement their native culture. Ideally, this activity provides a normalizing experience between group members, as well as a psychoeducational experience for the school counselor.

**What Do You Miss About Home**

Refugee children need the opportunity to process thoughts and feelings revolving around what they miss about their native culture. For example, children could be asked to construct a collage representing aspects of their native culture about which they are sentimental. In addition, they could be asked to write a narrative, if they are proficient in English, or draw pictures to express aspects of their native cultures. Doing so allows them to understand that being a refugee does not imply that everything about their native culture is negative or bad, and that leaving it physically does not mean they have to entirely leave all facets of it behind. Giving voice or picture to individual expressions of isolation, sadness, depression, and anger incorporates a normalizing experience into the group. This specific topic can also provide a catalyst for a deeper discussion on cultural discrepancies.

**My Voyage to the United States**

This activity focuses on the journey from native to host country. It is important to note that, while many group members may be from similar counties and cultures, their journeys can look drastically different. Creating a board game in which each group member crafts and contributes, as game pieces, cards representing their native

cultures, their journeys, and their arrival into the host culture will promote understanding among the group members. The leader (i.e., school counselor) may contribute cards representing the host culture and the arrival of the refugee children from the host culture's point of view. The cards represent anything the children may be feeling regarding their physical and psychological journey from their native culture, to the host culture, the children should not be encouraged only to create cards with positive images and emotions, in order to effectively allow the activity to assist in the often scary and anxiety-provoking nature of migration to a new country. The dialogue created from this activity can further facilitate discussion about the things that constitute successful acculturation.

**Discrimination and Oppression**

This activity focuses on the role of implicit and explicit oppression and discrimination in the host culture. It can be a difficult topic, both to absorb and to explain, and must not be avoided. Role-playing of bullying behavior and ways to combat bullying and other discriminatory behaviors (i.e., telling a teacher, walking away) is a very effective method for addressing oppression and discrimination. Before introducing this activity, however, group leaders must acknowledge, within their own minds and with the group, that refugee children quite frequently, if not most of the time, experience discrimination and oppression at some level, even if slight at first, from the moment they set foot on the shore of their host country. Group leaders must also acknowledge that they have privilege in the host culture, gained from possessing an intrinsic and automatic knowledge and understanding of the multiple meanings, unspoken rules, and cultural knowledge inherent in living daily in that culture. They must acknowledge and

understand that refugee children do not have this form of privilege at all. Since the school counselor is a part of the dominant culture, it is also imperative to be sensitive to the potential anxieties and hesitancies in the reception of this activity. The delivery of this activity could also be presented through the use of bibliotherapy or storytelling. Although difficult, it is important to provide these topics in a language that the refugee child can understand.

**What Do My Friendships Look Like?**

This activity discusses the role of the children's friendships within the host culture, both with other refugee children and with children from the host-culture. It is an effective way of judging the progress of a refugee child's acculturation. Again, the children can role-play the way they feel (i.e., lonely, accepted, in friend groups), the way they go about making friends, and the way they might comfort another child. Not only will this provide the refugee child an opportunity to discuss the process of making friends with children of similar and differing cultures, it will also provide invaluable clues to the group leader as to the children's progress, their mental health, anxiety levels, the level of comfort/discomfort they feel with the new culture surrounding them, and the people in it.

**What I Like About Being Here**

With this activity comes the moment to accentuate the positives in the refugee children's transition to the host culture. Drawing pictures of the things that make them happy, that soothe them, that give them fulfilment, and then showing them to the group, will allow all of the children in the group to see that happiness is possible from many sources, and will give them ideas for seeking out those areas of satisfaction. This

activity provides an opportunity for the counselor/leader, as well. The group leader must in addition to understanding that the children may be deeply troubled and anxious about their migration, also understand a child may feel great relief and happiness at having moved. The importance of such understanding on both sides of the coin allows for the reminder that each child has a unique background and no two will react identically to the circumstances of being a refugee. The activity will provide the refugee child an opportunity to discuss positives about the new culture from the perspective of the other children, and will reflect the concrete positives such as safety and resources.

Any of the above-mentioned activities can be used effectively while introducing or exploring each topic. The group leader should choose methods that are suitable to the make-up of the individual cultural-adjustment groups. The activities should explore cultural differences and values in a group format once a week for 45 minutes (Olujic et al., 2012). These activities provide an opportunity for school counselors to find creative and intentional ways of facilitating successful integration. School counselors need to be mindful of how these differences can present themselves and provide an environment that is inclusive to all manners of expression. These are merely starting points to a larger overarching discussion and utilization of the group process. It is important to consider that each refugee child will express their experiences differently and be at different places in the acculturation process. One such story will serve as an example of the work in progress.

**Vignette**

**Background**

Muhammed is a second grader who just arrived in your rural elementary school from a major metropolitan city a week ago. Previous to his arrival at your school, he states that he lived in this city for four months, and prior to that he lived in a Kenyan refugee camp. He lives with his family: his father, mother, and two younger sisters. His family moved to the new community due to its high concentration of East African refugees. Muhammed speaks little English and, at times, has his classmates who also speak his native language, translate for him. In fact, Muhammed and his siblings are the only ones in the home who speak English, he is referred to you by his teacher and the principal. The teacher reports that Muhammed is having difficulty staying in his seat during class time. He has frequent anger outbursts towards classmates and he is getting into fights with other refugee peers because he is being bullied. Consequently, you decide that Muhammed would be a perfect fit for your cultural adjustment group.

**Group Process**

The cultural adjustment group is made up entirely of East African refugees who have been in the US for anywhere from two weeks to two years. You believe that exposing Muhammed to others like him will best assist in normalizing his experiences. However, during the first group meeting you notice that Muhammed is shy and withdrawn. While he knows many of the group members, he appears hesitant to interact with them. At times, other members will engage him and Muhammed will look away. To take action and utilize group process you begin by presenting an activity that will encourage each member to discuss his or her acculturation process.

You present an activity called *describing your native country*, for this activity you tell the members that this is a time for each to discuss their impressions, recollections, and experiences of the native culture. Your goal is to have each member discuss the cultural aspects of his or her native culture and begin to introduce how this can conflict with the host culture, each member is given a sheet of paper in order to draw an image representing their native country. After each child has drawn an image, each is given time to process the image by discussing it with the group. During this activity, you see that Muhammed is reminiscing with another member about their shared culture, when Muhammed is presented with the opportunity to share his image with the group, you notice that he appears hesitant to discuss the image and, as a result he offers only a quick and very vague description of the image. You reflect to Muhammed that he is not sure how to discuss the image and normalize his feelings, given his hesitancy to discuss the activity with the larger group, but you reassure him that his hesitation is normal. Eventually, you know that the other group members' interactions with him, from their differing levels of acculturation, will encourage him to open up. You know that progress is largely reliant on each other and their interactions, not principally on instructions from the group leader, you are aware that your role as group leader is facilitative rather than instructive.

As the group leader, you introduce new topics each week, which highlight the intersection of native and host cultural values. As your group time progresses, you notice that Muhammed is slowly engaging with group members. He begins discussing his thoughts and feelings related to his time in the US and in his new school. The feedback from his teacher and principal appears to highlight the progress Muhammed is

making in the classroom. However, you are still having difficulty getting Muhammed to engage in activities related to his native culture.

**Conceptualization of Acculturation**

As a new member of not only the US culture and a new school system, Muhammed is attempting to navigate between cultural values. The differences between cultures appear to have greatly impacted Muhammed, the culture at school is vastly different from the culture Muhammed came from, and he has not yet reached integration stage but rather has steered into assimilation as he rejects his native culture. One symptom of this is his refusal to discuss or engage in activities regarding his native culture, about which he seems very uncomfortable. In part, this is because the culture at his family home resembles native culture much more than the host culture, as Muhammed's parents are not immersed in the US culture as profoundly as is Muhammed. Through this experience, Muhammed is having to continually switch cultures between home and school, he is forced to face his native culture when he goes home, and face how different he and his family are from the people around them in the host culture. This continual switch between cultures is causing a great deal of psychological distress, and he is dealing with it by rejecting his native culture through rejection of his parents and any reference to where he came from. He needs to adjust from assimilation to integration in order to achieve healthy acculturation. Ideally, the group will provide the venue for him to do so.

**Promoting Integration**

Group time will provide an opportunity for Muhammed to meet others at different stages of the acculturation process. This normalizing experience will afford him the

chance to learn about himself within a new context, as the group leader you will have given Muhammed an occasion to explore the cultural values from his native country and the new cultural values from his host country. You will have provided an opportunity for Muhammed to embrace the new values and embrace his established values. Eventually, with much work and support from the group, integration of both native and host cultural values will provide Muhammed with a liberating feeling that will best assist him in adjusting to a new environment and experiencing the freedom of healthy and successful acculturation.

## Discussion

This specific group model provides an accessible way for school counselors to conceptualize and effectively work with refugee children. Berry's (1997) model, used concurrently as a theoretical underpinning for cultural adjustment groups, provides intentional and impactful counseling services to refugee children. The use of the school environment provides an adequate and detailed experience of the host cultural values, which will sometimes conflict with the native cultural values that refugees bring to their new country. This immersion into the school microcosm provides an environment well-suited for promoting integration through cultural adjustment groups.

This group model provides a practical and theoretically-based tool that promotes self-awareness and integration of complex multicultural identities within individual refugees who have migrated to a host country. The group model requires multiculturalism to be effective and it is applicable to most refugee children entering the US. The school counselor needs to have an intrinsic understanding of his or her own culture and have a willingness to embrace different cultures.

**Ramification for Practice**

  The role of multiculturalism in the counseling profession is growing and its use and understanding are aspirational in nature. However, a respect for and use of multiculturalism is imperative for ethical and effective practice, this understanding includes conceptualization of each refugee's individual identity and the counselor's own identity and the potential impact on the therapeutic relationship.

  The role of identity is complex and cannot be viewed in a vacuum. School counselors must be attuned to the multiple intersecting identities that an individual internalizes at any given time. This means that school counselors must not view refugees from a homogenizing single lens, but rather acknowledge the multiple identities and their impact on each other, as well as the impact of the school counselor's multiple identities on the refugee individual. While this notion can seem impossible and overwhelming, the school counselor's call encompasses an aspirational position of becoming well-versed in the populations with whom they are working.

  If you, as a school counselor, learn to understand disparate cultures on a large scale you will also begin to cultivate the ability to recognize disparate smaller cultures within every culture, allowing you to even better succeed with non-refugee children who stem from multiple cultures within their culture. The profession of counseling can only benefit from the awareness of cultural factors that motivate and move individual people, whether they are refugees or not.

**Limitations**

  This model is not without its potential limitations, every individual carries biases and prejudices, which could influence the use of the model, even when those biases are

seeded subconsciously. School counselors must continuously be attuned to these influences and how they can impact group process, and are encouraged to seek out clinical supervision in order to explore and challenge these harmful beliefs. Use of this model could create the impression that multiple identities are overly simple to recognize and their acculturation, therefore, is easy to facilitate. This can unintentionally promote the false notion that one size fits all and that different dimensions of acculturation look the same for each individual. Carefully taking the time and care to be familiar with each student is essential. The importance of group screening should never be underestimated, not all refugees may be a good fit for the group. The group processing, as laid out in this model does not account for individuals for whom appearance and speech in front of a group causes additional psychological and cultural disturbance, such as placing Sunni and Shi'ite Muslim children in the same group, since these two factions are in conflict in many parts of the world.

## Conclusion

Most refugees will enter into new schools with mental health concerns resulting from pre- and post- migration concerns and stressors. Exposure to the mainstream culture may come with forced acculturation and often acculturation stress. The nature of schools offers a unique environment of constant, consistent, and safe exposure to the mainstream culture. Being knowledgeable of the acculturation process and stressors, as well as how the process is experienced by refugee children can prove to be valuable in assisting the successful transition of refugee children. Providing an avenue for refugee children to explore and become comfortable with the process of acculturation, school counselors are in a unique position to offer these services using group process. In order

for these groups to be successful, school counselors should foster a supportive

environment for exploration and normalization, utilizing cultural sensitivity and their

individual natural strengths to support the group members' own acculturation resources.

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