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## The Acculturation of Former Yugoslavian Refugees

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### ABSTRACT

Although the displacement of people from their home countries is of growing concern, little attention has been paid to refugees in the counselling literature. Experiences of refugees are more complex and difficult than those of voluntary immigrants because refugees are typically pushed out of their countries. Using heuristic inquiry, four main categories of themes characterized acculturation and identity reconstruction experiences for six individuals from the former Yugoslavia. These categories suggest that the acculturation and identity reconstruction are multifaceted and lifelong processes for refugees. Suggestions for counselling personnel who work with refugees are discussed.

### RÉSUMÉ

Même si le déplacement forcé des gens de leur pays nataux suscite de plus en plus d'inquiétude, très peu d'attention a été accordé aux réfugiés dans la littérature sur le counseling. Les expériences des réfugiés sont beaucoup plus compliquées et difficiles que ceux des immigrants volontaires, parce que les réfugiés sont généralement forcé de quitter leur pays. En utilisant une investigation heuristique, quatre catégories principales de thèmes ont caractérisé l'acculturation et les expériences de reconstruction d'identité pour six individus de l'ancienne Yougoslavie. Ces catégories suggèrent que l'acculturation et la reconstruction d'identité sont des processus à multiples facettes qui durent toute la vie d'un réfugié. Des suggestions pour les conseillers qui travaillent avec les réfugiés sont discutées.

Every year thousands of refugees arrive in Canada in search of a better life. Statistics show that international immigrants represent 70% of Canada's total population growth. Over the years 2004–2006, 55,500 international immigrants accounted for the first quarter average of population growth (Statistics Canada, 2006). Furthermore, it is estimated that 7,300 government-sponsored refugees arrive in Canada each year (Simich, 2003). Although the phenomenon of immigration has been researched and documented over the last few decades, refugee needs are often misunderstood and sometimes neglected due to the lack of knowledge about this population and their experiences. Counsellors and counselling personnel who work with refugees would provide better services if they understood the difference between voluntary immigrants and refugees.

Voluntary immigrants choose to immigrate to Canada willingly in search of a better life. On the other hand, refugees typically leave their homes against their will. In addition, refugees often witness serious trauma in their countries of origin, which further complicates their ability to acculturate in a foreign society and positively reconstruct their ethnic identity. Refugee experiences of stress may have long-standing psychological impacts (Yakushko, Watson, & Thompson, 2008).

Counsellors may work with refugees during the resettlement process or for several years after arriving in Canada. Although counsellors' mindfulness about assessing for trauma while working with all immigrants is important, we cannot assume that trauma will be an overriding counselling focus.

Acculturation is defined as a cultural change that is provoked by the clash of two or more autonomous cultural systems (Social Sciences Research Council Summer Seminar on Acculturation, 1954). In addition, acculturation represents progressive adaptation in which people separate from their cultural group in order to become members of the new dominant culture (Berry, 2001). Ethnic identity has been defined as a clear sense of who one is as a member of a particular ethnic or cultural group (Phinney, 2002). Both immigrants and refugees undergo changes, including reconstruction of ethnic identity. However, refugees' experiences may be more complex due to pre- and post-migration circumstances (Yakushko et al., 2008).

This article details a research study that explored the acculturation and identity reconstruction experiences of the researcher (first author) and six other individuals from the former Yugoslavia. Using heuristic methodology, the researcher examined the meaning of acculturation and identity reconstruction experiences to portray what it is like to be forced to leave one's homeland and begin a new life in Canadian society. In addition, the researcher explored the factors that contributed to successful/unsuccessful acculturation, the experience of losing and reconstructing one's ethnic identity, and support that is needed for counsellors to effectively address the needs of former Yugoslavian refugees. To begin this exploration, an overview of acculturation and ethnic identity frameworks is presented, followed by an introduction to heuristic inquiry. Categories and themes are discussed to explore the experiences of acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction for former Yugoslavian refugees. Additionally, implications for counselling personnel who work with refugees are reviewed.

#### ACCULTURATION AND ETHNIC IDENTITY FRAMEWORKS

Counsellors who work with immigrant populations require theoretical frameworks that are relevant for understanding client experiences. Several such theoretical frameworks are available in literature about immigration. The authors felt that it would be informative to provide an overview of acculturation and ethnic identity development models for professional practice. While there are similarities between the widely utilized models, their utility for counselling has not been systematically debated. To encourage that debate, readers are provided here with several popular frameworks.

Research has been dominated by the acculturation framework developed by Berry (1997, 2001, 2002, 2006). In his research, Berry focuses on studying acculturation strategies that immigrants and refugees choose to adapt to the new culture. According to Berry (2002), acculturation of immigrants depends on two factors: (a) the extent to which immigrant groups maintain their original culture, and (b) the level of interaction they seek with other cultural groups. In addition,

Berry (2001) argues that immigrant groups, including refugees, typically choose among four strategies of acculturation: (a) assimilation (low retention of one's original culture and high maintenance of the dominant culture), (b) separation (high retention of one's original culture and rejection of the dominant culture), (c) marginalization (low maintenance of the dominant culture and low retention of one's original culture), and (d) integration (high maintenance of the dominant culture and high maintenance of one's original culture), with integration proposed as the healthiest strategy.

Berry (2001) challenges the traditional view that acculturation is a unidimensional process involving only individuals who move across cultures. Rather, acculturation is a multidimensional process involving newcomers and the host society. The receptiveness of the host society to immigrants is seen to play a large part in the integration and acculturation process of newcomers. Immigrants' acculturation process is understood in terms of preferences for the four acculturation strategies (Berry, 2002).

Additional research conducted into acculturation focuses on different modes of adjustment styles that immigrants use to adapt to a new country. These include individual and sociocultural pre- and post-migration factors such as age, language, education, job skills, religion, and kinship ties (Khoa & VanDeusen, 1981; Meszaros, 1961; Westermeyer, 1989; Wong-Rieger & Quintana, 1987). Other research focuses on the phenomenon of cultural shock and how it relates to the acculturation process (Eleftheriadou, 1999; Pedersen, 1995; Westermeyer). Lastly, the Relative Acculturation Extended Model (RAEM) emphasizes the relevance of other acculturation domains (political, economic, occupational, family, social, religion, and diverse cognition), as well as the importance of distinguishing between the acculturation strategies that are perceived as ideal by immigrants and strategies that are adopted in reality (Navas et al., 2005).

Loss and reconstruction of one's ethnic identity is closely tied to the process of acculturation. Ethnic identity has been defined as a "dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group" (Phinney, 2002, p. 63). Phinney distinguishes between three concepts of ethnic identity: (a) the ethnic self-identification, (b) the personal sense of belonging to a particular cultural group, and (c) the degree of ethnic identity growth, pointing out that development of ethnic identity cannot be viewed as separate from the acculturation process. In addition, ethnic identity can be best understood through an interactional model, which takes into account all of the aspects of ethnic identity and acculturation (e.g., cultural background, identity attitudes, and personal preferences) and as such varies across time and generations (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001).

Immigrant groups typically develop four different kinds of ethnic identity, depending on which acculturation strategy immigrant groups prefer, including (a) assimilated identity, (b) separated identity, (c) marginalized identity, and (d) integrated identity. One's ethnic identity is constructed over time and is profoundly influenced not only by individuals' experiences, but also by their actions and

choices (Phinney & Ong, 2007). As such, ethnic identity is a dynamic construct and is subject to ongoing change depending on the time and context (Phinney, 2002). Using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, Phinney and Ong (2007) examined the core aspects of ethnic identity (i.e., attachment, belonging, commitment, and understanding) and concluded that ethnic identity can only be viewed as a complex multidimensional sum of constructs influenced by the dynamic process of exploration and learning.

Other research focuses on a stage development model of ethnic identity. For example, according to the Minority Identity Development Model (MID), ethnic minorities enter different stages of identity development and ultimately resolve identity issues through building awareness about their original cultural background as well as values of the dominant culture (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Sue et al., 1998). Additionally, research relevant to ethnic identity development focuses on development of African-American identity (Cross, 1971; Jackson, 1975). Similar to other models, African-American identity development models emphasize stage development and point out that the healthiest stages are those in which ultimate integration of one's ethnic/racial identity and the dominant culture identity occurs. Recent models of identity development are reviewed by Sue et al.

The acculturation and identity reconstruction discussion in this article emphasizes refugees' perceptions about their adaptation to the new life in the new society and offers a unique view of refugees' experiences. The purpose of this study was not to generalize the results to a larger refugee population; instead, its goal was to capture participants' subjective experiences of acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction. In order to capture the true essence and meaning of participants' experiences, the researcher used heuristic inquiry, which is a qualitative research method that captures participants' stories in an unstructured manner. Heuristic inquiry allows for development of rich descriptions of people's experiences. This methodological approach permitted the primary author to take into account her own and her participants' subjective experiences and contributed to the creation of an alternative picture of the acculturation and identity reconstruction process. The details of heuristic inquiry are described in the next section of the article.

#### HEURISTIC INQUIRY

Heuristic inquiry attempts to discover the true meaning of a phenomenon through internal pathways of self using the processes of self-reflection, exploration, and elucidation of the nature of the phenomenon that is being studied (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). As such, it encourages a researcher to explore openly and pursue the creative path that originates inside of one's being and that discovers its direction and meaning within oneself. Heuristic inquiry is a unique research method that places human experience above numbers and is deeply rooted in tacit knowledge that leads to a deeply subjective and creative connection between the researcher and the phenomenon (Sela-Smith, 2002). Through a compassionate

approach, the researcher moves toward the open discussion with participants and facilitates an emotionally connected scientific inquiry (Anderson, 2000).

Heuristic research does not exclude the researcher from the study but incorporates researcher experiences with the experiences of the participants (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2008). Heuristic research requires the researcher to have direct experience of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1990). "Heuristics is concerned with meanings, not measurements; with essence, not appearance; with quality, not quantity; with experience, not behaviour" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1984, p. 42). Heuristic inquiry allows the researcher to let go of the structure of quantitative research and engage in an intense self-reflection, as well as reflection on others (Etherington, 2004). Heuristic inquiry begins and ends with the researcher. It represents a rigorous research method that requires one to enter a disciplined pursuit of immersion, incubation, illumination, and explication of the phenomenon. The final product of a heuristic study is the creative synthesis, which represents a creative integration of the data, qualities, and themes discovered (Moustakas).

### *Participants*

Six individuals volunteered to participate in this project. They were selected because (a) they identified themselves as refugees from the former Yugoslavia, (b) they arrived in Canada between 1992 and 1997, (c) they were between 18 and 25 years of age at the time of arrival, and (d) they intensely experienced the phenomena of acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction. Participants were collected via recruitment notices placed in community centres and through snowball sampling, which involved asking participants in the study if they knew of others who would also be interested and eligible to participate in this project.

Four participants were of Serbian descent, and the other two participants were of Croatian and Bosnian descent, respectively. All participants had post-secondary education and were steadily employed. Although participants were of different religious and cultural backgrounds, their experiences of acculturation and ethnic identity seemed to be very similar. Consistent with the heuristic method, the researcher was also a participant in this study.

The saturation of themes (i.e., efficient elucidation of the phenomena studied) determined the number of participants interviewed. The purpose of the research described in this article was not to generalize to a larger refugee population. Instead, the goal was to capture the true essence and the meaning of experiences of six individuals who participated in this research.

### *Research Process*

Data were collected following the same procedure with each participant. All participants were interviewed by the first author in the English language via an informational conversational interviewing method that allowed for free flow of data and allowed participants to share in natural dialogue "consistent with the rhythm and flow of heuristic exploration and search for meaning" (Moustakas,

1990, p. 47). Each interview began by asking participants to share the story of their journey from Yugoslavia to Canada.

The overarching research question that guided the interview was “What is the experience of acculturation for former Yugoslavian refugees?” Additional research questions were asked to increase the succinctness of the interviews and to create better focus upon the phenomena of interest. These questions included (a) What are some factors that contributed to successful/unsuccessful acculturation? (b) What is the experience of losing and reconstructing one’s ethnic identity? and (c) What kind of supports need to be developed in order for counsellors and refugee agencies to effectively address the needs of former Yugoslavian refugees?

Each interview lasted approximately two hours. The experience of the interview was debriefed with each participant, after which participants were given the opportunity to include any additional information. The researcher met again with participants after the completion of their narratives and reviewed their stories with them in order to verify the accuracy of each depiction. In addition, after all themes were captured, participants were given a theme-based questionnaire and were asked to examine the themes and verify whether or not they accurately depicted their experiences. The themes that received fewer than three affirmative responses were not included in the final data analysis.

To ensure confidentiality, the researcher transcribed each interview verbatim. During transcription of the interviews, the researcher focused on maintaining the participants’ internal frame of reference in order to depict their stories accurately. Next, the participants’ stories were extracted from the transcripts. The researcher reviewed each transcript several times and eliminated background information that was not relevant to the research investigation. The researcher engaged closely with each participant and carefully examined which segments of personal stories were related to the acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction processes.

### *Analysis and Coding of Data*

Data analysis in a heuristic study begins with the researcher’s transcript (Al-derson, 1998). The researcher (first author) reviewed the transcript several times. While immersed with the transcript, she relived her journey of forced exile and immigration and acquired new insights concerning it. In addition, the researcher relied heavily on examining her feelings and memories, which in turn increased her awareness and allowed for new ideas to emerge (Boyd & Fales, 1983). After the detailed review of the researcher’s transcript, the researcher reviewed participants’ transcripts sentence by sentence and highlighted segments of interest.

The themes that were extracted from the transcripts were recorded on a specific template consisting of three columns: themes, issues, and content. After all themes were extracted, they were organized into categories. Subcategories and subthemes were also established. After all themes were integrated together, the researcher derived the creative synthesis.

In heuristic research, creative synthesis is the stage of data analysis that allows the researcher to create the whole from the parts and distinct elements that have

been generated during the search for essence and meaning (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Due to space restrictions, only the categories and core themes of the study are reported. Verbatim quotes are used to illustrate participants' experiences. Note that participants' first language is not English. Each participant selected a pseudonym to be used in the reporting of results from the study.

### *Validity of Heuristic Research*

Due to the specific nature of heuristic research, it is difficult to measure its validity. Its validity cannot be "determined by correlations and statistics" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32). The only way to increase the trustworthiness of heuristic inquiry is to identify the extent to which people can truly identify with the interpretations the researcher has written (Moustakas). The validity of heuristic research is enhanced when researchers engage in continuous self-reflection and self-examination. A general guideline follows: the greater the researcher's knowledge about heuristics, the smaller the possibility of biasing the interpretation of data.

To help ensure the validity of this study, the researcher has refrained from generalizing the results to a larger refugee population. In addition, the researcher engaged in an ongoing dialogue with her participants to ensure that their experiences were depicted accurately. Following a disciplined pursuit of heuristic inquiry led to uncovering the essence of acculturation and identity reconstruction experiences for the participants in the current study.

Lastly, to help ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, the researcher verified her findings with participants via a theme-based questionnaire. The themes were listed for participants to indicate whether or not they related to their personal experiences. After all questionnaires were completed, the researcher reviewed participants' responses and made final modifications to the themes. The themes that received fewer than three affirmative responses from participants were deleted.

## ACCULTURATION AND IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

Final thematic analysis generated 75 themes. Throughout the thematic analysis, four central categories emerged: *Triggers of Immigration*, *Land of Opportunities*, *Acculturation Process*, and *Identity Reconstruction*.

### *Triggers of Immigration*

*Triggers of Immigration* emerged as a category capturing the experiences of participants that led them to leave their country of origin and/or country of first asylum. Within this category, the emerging core themes were (a) *Loss of a Country*, including the subthemes *Desire to Leave*, *No Future*, and *Identity Diffusion*, and (b) the *Effects of War*, including the subthemes *Disbelief*, *Uncertainty*, and *Forced Exile*.

All of the participants indicated experiencing loss of a country and the effects of civil war in the former Yugoslavia. The *Loss of a Country* theme characterized

their sense of a bleak future, due to a lack of economic resources necessary for survival, and identity diffusion, due to disintegration of Yugoslavia into the new war-torn countries. Loss of a country for participants in this study was perceived in a deeply subjective way because they suddenly found themselves in a prejudiced society in which one's religious affiliation and nationality could represent both a tool of survival and a death sentence. Additionally, the civil war seemed to have left the participants in disbelief and uncertainty, which further intensified their desire to leave their country of origin. The core themes *Loss of a Country* and the *Effects of War* were expressed in the following quotes:

Maybe after a few months, I realized that wasn't my country because they [locals] still considered me as refugee in that country [former Yugoslavia] even though I thought that former Yugoslavia is my country ... (Olivera, age 31)

The life was just different ... no water ... no electricity. That was something that was the worst thing of all ... shelling was the big process too ... (Anita, age 32)

I personally went through a lot of hard times in the first few months of war because everything I knew ... the life I knew ... the country I knew was falling apart ... we were hoping for cease fire ... that life would eventually return to normal but ... after few months it became obvious that it wasn't going to happen ... (Alex, age 32)

Participants indicated that the loss of a country coupled with the effects of war, particularly forced exile, created a situation for them in which they did not have much choice. Participants experienced a profound sense of despair that led them to believe that returning home was almost impossible and choosing to immigrate to Canada was the only plausible option.

### *Land of Opportunities*

The *Land of Opportunities* category captures participants' perceptions and experiences of Canada and what life in Canada would hold for them. Three subcategories emerged from the thematic analysis: (a) *Freedom*, capturing the core themes *Personal Freedom* and *Societal Freedom*; (b) *The Better Life*, capturing the core themes *Positive Future* and *Cost of Immigration*; and (c) the *Realities of Culture Shock*, capturing the core themes *Change in Status* and *Lack of Sense of Belonging*.

For participants in this study, Canada represented a new beginning and freedom from war. Participants shared their views of what it means to have both personal and societal freedom in Canada. They all related to the notion of having a better life in this country through a positive future but also experienced costs associated with immigration. All of the participants were seeking opportunities to begin or continue post-secondary education in Canada. Subsequently, they would obtain employment that would allow them to live normal lives away from the chaos they experienced in the former Yugoslavia.

Although the costs of immigration that participants experienced could be explored as a separate category, the researcher chose not to view it as such because it seemed that the costs of immigration are inseparable from the experience of

a positive future. Conflict that arises between the positive future Canada offers and the costs of immigration seemed to have played the crucial role in clarifying what the better life in Canada entailed for participants. Resolving the paradoxical nature of the conflict between the two opposite experiences also represented the resolution of the existential struggle participants initially experienced during their resettlement. Participants realized that even though Canada represented an ideal choice for them, living in it still carried some challenges, such as losing family bonds, enduring a faster pace of life, and ethnocentrism. When coupled with the realities of culture shock, those experiences seemed to complicate the participants' process of adaptation to the new life in Canada:

When I left Yugoslavia ... that country was going through its darkest hours I believe ... in its entire history so there wasn't much freedom when I left, and then when I came here I was overwhelmed with the freedom that I found here ... (Alex, age 32)

There is almost some kind of security here [in Canada] ... I knew I was not going to be hungry for at least a year ... (Olivera, age 31)

When I got to Ottawa to reception house ... it was just a bit strange ... people of different nationalities, different backgrounds, Black people, Brown people, Yellow people ... people from all over the world ... it was just strange for me ... and that first night ... I didn't sleep first night ... the first night I think I spend entire night praying ... I was praying to God to help me get through that ... (Alex, age 32)

Although participants indicated struggling with their initial experiences of Canada and nostalgia for their country of origin, they all agreed that despite the hardship upon their arrival in Canada, they understood the benefits of being able to live far from the horrors of war and destruction.

### *Acculturation Process*

The *Acculturation Process* emerged as a third major category in this study, and it encompasses participants' experiences of adaptation to the new life and the new culture. The acculturation process was extremely complex for all of the participants and, although they all reported achieving integration, their journeys also differed from one another. Acculturation for participants was a circular and multifaceted process. Even though all of the participants achieved integration of two cultures, it was still possible for them to experience competing desires to assimilate and rebel against the host culture:

My goal was from day one ... to adapt to this society as quickly as possible ... I am still working at it and I'll be working at it for the rest of my life because as I said that's an ongoing process ... for an immigrant ... an ongoing process which will last for as long as I live ... (Alex, age 32)

I am just able to live in two different worlds at the same time. Not a lot of people are ... they start mixing ... it starts with language and then with the culture ... I think it's my way of dealing with it, living two parallel worlds ... (Vladimir, age 25)

Therefore, the acculturation represented in this study does not seem to be a fixed process. Rather, it is fluid and may vary over time. Despite integrating the two

cultures together, participants occasionally revisit their old ways of acculturation (e.g., desire to assimilate, rebelling) to resolve internal conflicts they experience as a result of challenges produced through an ongoing contact with the host culture:

I really wanted to show Canadians that ... I am a good person that is born in Yugoslavia, so that they don't actually have some prejudiced thinking that these people from Bosnia are so and so. I was ashamed because of the way that country [former Yugoslavia] was portrayed on TV ... they [media] never showed anything good about that country ... and ... with the time I felt I was responsible ... that I should educate Canadians ... that ... that country actually was ... a really beautiful country before the war ... (Olivera, age 31)

It seems that revisiting the old ways of acculturation did not represent disconnection from integration. Rather, it suggests that integration is subject to an ongoing evaluation. Revisiting old acculturation patterns serves as an important catalyst for strengthening one's bond with both the original culture and the host society. Most of the participants indicated that visiting home strengthened their desire to integrate into Canadian society. Through returning, participants realized that their sense of belonging to their country of origin was lost and their desire to live in Canada was increased:

The city [Sarajevo] has changed a lot ... it's a completely Muslim city now ... it was frightening, it was spooky, it was ghoulish ... and I realized that I could never ever live there ... (Alex, age 32)

When I landed in Toronto I cried ... I was so happy. I was kind of happy to come home ... even though I wasn't home but ... I really felt I came home. I'll go there [homeland] again ... visit there again, but this is definitely the home right now ... (Vanesa, age 31)

For participants in this study, acculturation did not have a specific starting point. Some participants experienced rebellion and then integration, while others experienced a strong desire to assimilate. Acculturation in this case represents a flexible process and allows for individual variation among refugees. Due to the consistent contact with the host culture, participants in this study were challenged to continually examine themselves in relation to their culture as well as to the host culture. When seen together, the desire to fit in, rebelling, a turning point, and integration seem to be necessary components for acculturation to occur. These components are not separate from one another. Instead, they appear to be connected to each other and allow for functional adaptation to the new life in the foreign society:

I am getting to the point where I am proud of my background and it is my background and it made me who I am today and made me enjoy the balance like having the best from both worlds ... (Nikola, age 30)

It [my culture] is always going to be part of me ... it's part of my past, it cannot be changed, it's stuck with me for the rest of my life and it's not going to change ... it's always going to be with me ... (Alex, age 32)

I think I am a better person as a result of living in Canada. I really think so. I really think that this has forcefully opened my eyes to reality and although Canada is not perfect, it's got a lot of good things ... I think this has been a great experience ... (Vladimir, age 25)

According to the participants' experiences, acculturation seems to be an ongoing and life-long process that evolves as people mature, change, and grow. Therefore, the acculturation seems to be a dynamic process that may possibly continue throughout one's life. Additionally, acculturation may take place at different times in a person's life. For some people, it seems to begin immediately upon resettlement and resolves relatively quickly. For others, acculturation continues long after the initial shock of immigration has passed. It appears that acculturation requires refugees' reflective assessment of themselves over time. In this study, it seems that this assessment has been greatly influenced by the participants' visits to their country of origin. It is possible that participants' experience of visiting their home may involve several stages (e.g., sadness associated with not having a home anymore, no sense of belonging to Canada, struggle to fit in). Further exploration of this phenomenon would be worthwhile in the future.

### *Identity Reconstruction*

*Identity Reconstruction* emerged as the last major category in this study. It included participants' experiences of ethnic identity loss and reconstruction during the acculturation process. Identity reconstruction occurred parallel to the acculturation process and is not viewed as an independent process. With the onset of acculturation, participants' sense of self began changing. Participants indicated that they struggled with the loss of identity and identity confusion. They underwent a thorough self-reflective process in hopes of shedding light on where they belong. In the process of trying to discover which cultural group will be their primary reference group, participants began recreating their identities and the sense of belonging to their own culture. In the process of evaluating their sense of belonging, participants worked through the experience of identity confusion, rebellion against Canadian identity, and integration:

I didn't want to be Serbian, I didn't want to be associated with any of those newly formed countries ... I really wanted to be Yugoslavian and I realized I couldn't be ... (Olivera, age 31)

I associate a lot with the Croatian community because at the end of the day I am Croatian ... (Vladimir, age 25)

In my passport it says Canadian ... I can live with that but my ethnic background is Serbian Orthodox ... this is my country now ... my Canadian identity started forming the moment I landed here ... so well ... if you ask me if I consider myself Canadian I would say yes ... but ... I am also a Serb ... (Alex, age 32)

Similar to the acculturation process, the identity reconstruction process seemed to be an ongoing process. Participants experienced their identity reconstruction process as an ever-changing event that evolves over time and is re-assessed continuously; therefore, the identity reconstruction process is characterized as flexible. Even though integration was an outcome of identity development, participants reported experiencing occasional disconnection from their newly acquired Canadian identity due to the struggle they experienced in their everyday living. In addition, all of the participants reported that visiting their

homeland forced them to not only evaluate their acculturation experiences but also evaluate their sense of self.

Participants' experiences did not show integration to be the healthiest strategy for successful adaptation. Rather, these experiences showed that acculturation and identity reconstruction are two processes unique to each individual and open to change. In revisiting their past experiences of acculturation and identity reconstruction, participants were able to re-evaluate their perception of integration more in depth. In other words, integration is reassessed and strengthened through continuous examination of who one is within the larger society.

Ongoing assessment of previous acculturation and identity reconstruction patterns is required for participants to be able to consistently acculturate into the new society and develop new identities. Through this process, participants evaluate their identities and discard identity components that are no longer functional in order to adopt new and more successful ones:

Although I am not fully developed yet, it [identity] has taken shape and I'm not afraid, and I'm not shy, and I'm not intimidated by others and their position in this world, and I believe right now I could just go anywhere in the world, into any society ... and ... I can preserve that identity of who I am ... (Vladimir, age 25)

Ethnic identity reconstruction may be affected by how refugees relate to different cultural groups in Canada and how this process changes over time, as the life of refugees changes. Examining the changes in refugee ethnic identity reconstruction in relation to other cultural groups would be useful to better understand the dynamics of the identity reconstruction process.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

The results of this study point to the need for counsellors to be knowledgeable about the complex processes of acculturation and identity reconstruction that unfold over time. Participants in this study highlighted that their acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction experiences were influenced by a number of complex factors, such as (a) loss of a country; (b) the effects of war; (c) the perception of Canada as the land of opportunity; (d) the experience of personal and societal freedoms; and (e) the realities of immigration, including costs of immigration and culture shock. Additional factors that further shaped the outcome of participants' acculturation included the desire to fit in and succeed in Canada, as well as the desire to embrace the positive characteristics of both their own culture and the Canadian culture. There are several implications for counselling that are relevant for counsellors and counselling services.

First, the results of this study illuminate the positive reflective processes that refugees use when acculturating to their new life in Canada. Having sufficient knowledge and understanding of the abovementioned factors would enable counsellors to work more effectively with clients at various stages of their acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction. Counsellors could become skilled in providing strength-based services if they have the ability to integrate general

knowledge about refugees with the specific cultural and personal circumstances of individuals.

Second, the categories outlined in this study are useful for counsellors because they highlight the importance of encouraging clients to tell their stories. The results provide possible domains for exploration in providing counselling services to clients, and ways to support clients in reflecting about their experiences and responsibilities when acculturating to the new country and developing new identities. The results suggest that some refugees may become disillusioned and overly focused on the past (e.g., the lives they used to have) when resettling in the new country. Helping refugees focus on the immediate present is perhaps the most challenging task for counsellors. A focus on refugee acculturation and identity reconstruction as they change over time allows for the “here and now” to be emphasized in the therapeutic process. Helping clients achieve connection with their present and de-emphasizing their past facilitates personal change and diminishes their irrational fears of the future (Yalom, 2002).

Third, the heuristic method represents a facilitative approach to research in that it encourages participants to tell their stories from their own internal frame of reference. The participants in this study provided more than 10 hours of information about their self-search and self-reflection. The final outcome was a rich personal account of each participant that illuminated the essence and the meaning of acculturation and identity reconstruction experiences. The participants reported that they felt empowered because they were able to have their voices heard and share their experiences in ways that were relevant for them. Therefore, the results of this study emphasize the importance of focusing on clients’ subjective experiences in the therapeutic process as a powerful tool for supporting clients and helping facilitate change.

Fourth, the results of this study identified participants’ needs when it comes to acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction, as well as the supports needed to adapt to living in Canada. Existing literature has been frequently concerned with mental health issues that refugees experience when resettling in a new country. Although interventions at the stage of arrival in a new country may be warranted, viewing refugee issues in a limited framework can potentially lead to unnecessary labelling and pathologizing. The results of this study point out that acculturation and ethnic identity processes are not traumatic and negative for all individuals who immigrate to Canada. Instead, the results emphasize that while it is important to keep in mind that refugees in general experience more complex adaptation, they also possess certain individual characteristics (e.g., desire to educate themselves, desire to provide for themselves, and positive outlook on life) that contribute to successful adaptation. Knowledge and identification of these positive adaptation characteristics could in fact enable counsellors to challenge their existing assumptions about refugee acculturation and their overall belief about refugee mental health.

Fifth, it is important that counselling programs and services be informed by input from the people who experience involuntary migration. A longstanding

criticism of existing programs for refugees is that they are often temporary and designed to address only short-term transition problems (Stein, 1986). The results of this study suggest that through the ongoing process of acculturation and identity reconstruction, the counselling needs of clients may change dramatically over time. For example, participants indicated that even though they feel that they integrated both cultures into their lives, at times they still experience struggles with acculturation and ethnic identity. These struggles are amplified when participants experience discrimination, ethnocentrism, and prejudice, which in turn can compromise their well-being and psychological functioning (Yakushko et al., 2008). This is not to say that all refugees require counselling. Rather, it is to emphasize the multidimensional nature of the immigration process, in which demands shift over time as the individual grows and adapts within a new cultural context.

Sixth, counsellors will be able to offer better services to refugees if they are prepared to introduce and discuss broader sociocultural and systemic issues that directly influence the acculturation experiences of clients (Arthur & Collins, 2005). Concerns have been raised about an overemphasis in counselling on individualistic values that fail to recognize how the individual is a member of a larger community (Bemak, Chung, & Pedersen, 2003). The results of this study highlight specific cultural issues that refugees face when resettling in Canada and point out that counsellors will be more effective in their approaches if they are ready to re-evaluate their worldviews and learn to adapt them to the worldviews of refugees. If counsellors rely only on their assumptions about refugee problems, chances are that they will not be able to provide adequate assistance (Pedersen, 2000).

Seventh, in light of recent attention being paid to issues of social justice in the counselling literature (e.g., Arthur & Collins, 2005; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysicar, & Israel, 2006), it is important for counsellors to expand their roles as advocates and educators to positively influence the receptivity of the host society. Counsellors need to be informed about services and resources for new Canadians or may choose to be involved directly with immigrant-serving agencies. Counsellors might also consider getting involved in specific issues and advocate for services and policies that directly impact the lives of refugees (e.g., foreign credential recognition). These suggestions emphasize the importance of counsellor preparation for working directly with individual refugees, with local community groups, with local agencies, and in advocacy roles that foster positive acculturation experiences in Canadian society.

#### SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study offered a unique perspective about refugees' acculturation and ethnic identity reconstruction experiences. It shows that the transition processes that refugees go through are fluid, ongoing, and ever-changing occurrences for refugees as they adapt to their new lives.

The existing acculturation frameworks portray acculturation as a process that can only be successful if refugees choose specific ways of acculturating (Berry,

1997, 2001, 2002, 2006; Phinney et al., 2001; Wong-Rieger & Quintana, 1987). In addition, the emphasis on acculturation measurements to determine acculturation frameworks has been criticized due to psychometric problems and, as such, an incomplete picture about refugee acculturation and identity reconstruction (Rudmin & Ahmadzadeh, 2001). In contrast, this study allowed the researcher to explore refugees' subjective accounts of their journey.

Alternatively, this study proposes the fluid nature of acculturation and identity reconstruction. The outcomes of acculturation and identity reconstruction are relative and connected to refugees' subjective experiences. As such, this study offers a new and unique outlook about refugee adaptation in Canada. The findings of this study suggest that integration is not the end result of acculturation but an ongoing process that enriches the lives of refugees. However, given the qualitative method employed in this study, generalization of the results to a wider population is limited.

More research is needed to increase the knowledge about refugees and their experiences of acculturation and identity reconstruction. Researchers need to expand their research studies and address the experiences of refugees with diverse cultural backgrounds from a variety of geographical regions of the world. Researchers need to stay open to refugees' experiences and include refugee voices into their analysis as well as address barriers to integration, such as ethnocentrism, prejudice, acceptance of foreign credentials, and limited interaction with the dominant culture. In turn, counselling would be enhanced through more research that identifies how the strengths of refugees influence positive acculturation and identity reconstruction.

Participants' experiences in this study have direct implications for counselling refugees, as well as implications for conducting research that can be used to enhance the lives of people experiencing forced migration. It is crucial that staff who work with refugees gain adequate background knowledge about common refugee experiences in order to serve their needs effectively (Arthur & Merali, 2005; Prendes-Lintel, 2001; Yakushko et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important for counsellor education to include curriculum about refugees so that counsellors develop general knowledge about involuntary immigration and develop skills to better serve and support refugee populations.

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