

Overseas cultural orientation programmes and resettled refugees' perceptions

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Despite widespread participation in cultural orientation programmes, resettled refugees often have misconceptions about their potential for self-sufficiency in the United States, and experience adjustment problems after their arrival. Making changes to these programmes could improve outcomes of the refugee resettlement process.

Cultural orientation (CO) programmes operate in over 40 countries to facilitate the resettlement of refugees in the United States (US). These programmes focus on employment, housing, education, health, money management, travel, hygiene and the role of the resettlement agency.

Previous reviews of CO effectiveness have evaluated refugee camps and refugee resettlement as separate entities. However, few investigations have attempted to understand the relationship between refugee preconceptions, CO and refugee experience after resettlement in the US. We interviewed 17 resettled refugees – six African, five Bhutanese and six Burmese – who had attended programmes and seven case-workers.

It emerged that the refugees had primarily formed notions about the US from the media, friends and family but some also referred to what they had learned during their CO programme (mainly about job applications and related information). Refugees' comments reflected the emphasis in CO programmes on the need to seek employment as soon as possible, and the reality that most would enter the employment market on the lowest rungs, regardless of their previous experience. One refugee said that CO taught him that family ties would not assist him with employment as it did in his native country: "This is not like back home where your uncle knows someone and you bring your son and he can start with me, my company, tomorrow... it doesn't work that way... it's not going to be the same when you come to America."

Though refugees acknowledged their potentially limited opportunities regarding higher-level jobs, they nevertheless were surprised by the fast-paced working environment, the number of hours they would be working, and the manual labour involved, or the difficulties in entering their field of expertise. A Burmese refugee, formerly a history teacher, remembers, "I thought it would be easy and that there would be a lot of jobs." A caseworker noted: "A lot of individuals... have owned their own businesses before and so they haven't even had the experience of having to... explain why they should be considered for the job." Additionally, though many refugees are trained, educated and employable in their home country, they lack certification for the US. An African refugee also pointed out that more highly skilled positions in the US require references, and newly resettled refugees often do not have these.

Many caseworkers explained that a common misconception is that agencies have "jobs to hand out" and thus that refugees do not have to be active

in the job application process. The majority of refugees believed that the US government would provide them with unlimited welfare, and they would have unlimited rights after arrival. Refugees who were housed in camps for significant portions of their lives were more likely to overestimate the support they would receive from the government.

Refugees mentioned many barriers to economic self-sufficiency, happiness and the fulfilment of their dreams. Their lack of English proficiency was their greatest challenge in being hired or keeping a job. Refugees recalled being qualified for certain jobs but not being hired because they lacked the proper English to communicate effectively in interviews. Other refugees were hired but quickly fired, because they could not understand instructions.

Most refugees recalled learning about activities of daily life in the US, including paying rent and utility bills and budgeting for food. Two refugees credited the CO programme for their knowledge about transportation in the US; however, one refugee complained, "They showed us the train but not how to use it. They showed us the bus but not how to use a bus pass."

Four refugees remembered learning from CO about the difference between their cultural norms and those of the US, particularly regarding domestic violence. An African refugee recalled learning about body language, greetings and gestures, and reflected, "You don't greet people the same here as at home. We would practise giving each other handshakes." Finally, refugees had misguided notions of the ethnic, racial and socio-economic diversity of America, believing rather that America had a homogeneous population of white, wealthy individuals.

Recommendations

Some common themes emerged from the interviews, suggesting ways in which CO programmes might more effectively help refugees in their transition into America:

- Extend CO length to increase the chances of accurate, relevant refugee perceptions. Several interviewees also requested starting class earlier in relation to their departure time to the US.
- Have fewer topics and more in-depth discussion on issues deemed most important for the early resettlement period: employment, culture and initial services provided, plus individual responsibilities.
- Provide English instruction.

- Tailor teaching methods to a) allow refugees to learn in an active and multi-media environment and b) take language, culture and variations in skill level into account in the curriculum (and create lesson plans tailored to requirements).

The US has committed to resettling 80,000 refugees annually. The more useful CO instruction is, the more prepared these refugees will be for the demands of

early self-sufficiency and acculturation and the more efficient their transition into American society will be.

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