

## Career Counseling of Immigrants and Refugees

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### Introduction

In spite of the tragedies of September 11, 2001, the United States (U.S.) continues to experience influx of immigrants and refugees. It is estimated that about four million immigrants and refugees came to the U.S. between 2002 and 2005 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005). These individuals arrived from Africa, Asia, Canada, Central America, Europe, and Oceania. Additionally, according to the U.S. 2002 Census, it is believed the foreign-born population ranged between 28 to 31 million, with one in ten people being an immigrant or a refugee (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2002).

Given the above statistics, it is important that counselors understand the career development concerns of immigrants and refugees to enable them facilitate the preparation of this segment of the population for gainful employment in the U.S. work place. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to highlight these concerns and also briefly discuss effective career counseling strategies for working with this nascent and burgeoning population.

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## **Who Are Immigrants And Refugees?**

Immigrants are individuals who willingly leave their home countries for better opportunities in other countries usually due to economic, career, and family reasons (Chung & Bemak, 2007; Khamphakdy-Brown, Jones, Nilsson, Russell & Klevens, 2006; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005). According to a recent study, over half of all new legal immigrants in 2003 arrived from just ten countries - Mexico, India, the Philippines, China, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Columbia, Guatemala, and Russia (Meyers & Yau, 2004). This reflects a significant diversity in the backgrounds of these immigrants.

Refugees are individuals who sought residence in the U.S. and are unable or unwilling to return to their countries of origin because of well-founded fear of persecution due to nationality, race, religion, and membership in a particular social group or political opinion (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2005). In other words, these persons are involved in forced migration, often times with little or no planning. Consequently, a majority of the refugees experienced a lot of difficulties due to loss of properties and social support (Chung & Bemak, 2007; Segal & Mayadas, 2005).

## **Career Development Concerns**

In order to have a good grasp of the career development concerns of immigrants and refugees, it is important to briefly discuss their pre-migration and post-migration experiences.

### **Pre-migration Experience**

Some immigrants who were very skilled professionals such as medical doctors, pharmacists, engineers and lawyers in their home countries may not be able to practice in the U.S. due to certification or licensure challenges in their respective fields. This may lead to these individuals being underemployed and working various low-income positions in order to make ends meet (Chung & Bemak, 2007). This situation could result in a high level of frustration, stress and depression for this group of immigrants.

With reference to the refugees, studies have shown that they were subjected to atrocities such as torture, rape, forced labor, observation of violence, and murder as well as suffered the loss of loved ones especially during wars (Bemak, Chung & Bornemann, 1996; Bemak, Chung & Pederson, 2003; Chung & Bemak, 2006; Chung & Bemak, 2007). Thus, the likelihood of refugees developing serious mental health problems like anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation is very high. Furthermore, there is no gainsaying that these mental health problems would pose some difficult challenges for the refugees as they attempt to enhance their career development.

## **Post-migration Experiences**

Although immigrants leave their homelands on their own volition, nevertheless, they encounter similar problems as the refugees in their resettlement countries. These include language barriers, culture shock, cultural differences in beliefs, values, attitudes, and worldviews (Lim & Wieling, 2004). In addition, mental health issues may develop or persist as a result of loneliness, loss of social support, and property, and also the perception that they are being marginalized in their new countries. Other challenges relate to identity development issues due to cultural conflicts and generational differences particularly with reference to the younger immigrants and refugees.

The above problems may eventually lead to poor self-concept and low self efficacy issues for this group of individuals. Ultimately, the career development of the immigrants and refugees could be negatively affected as a result of some or all of the above identified problems. The case study below illustrates this situation.

### **The case of Sadat: Pre-migration and Post-migration Experiences**

Sadat is 19 years old. She came to the U.S. from Iraq as a refugee with the help of a local Christian church at the age of eighteen. She lost her parents and three brothers in the ongoing violence and war in her home country, Iraq. In fact, she narrowly escaped death in her homeland (as she was in the bathroom) when some gun men came into her home and shot dead the rest of her family members.

Sadat is currently in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Since her arrival in the U.S., she has been taking intensive lessons in English as a second language course, but she continues to experience serious communication problems in the language. She has also been diagnosed with severe depression and PTSD.

Sadat, prior to the loss of her family members and migration to the U.S. had hoped to become a medical doctor like her paternal aunt in Iraq. In discussing with her school counselor she indicated she has given up that dream due to language challenges which led to her perception that she lacks the ability to be successful in that career pathway in the U.S.

A career or school counselor working with Sadat will need to use an integrative and holistic approach that addresses her mental health problems, poor self concept and self-efficacy concerns. The approach should also be empowering and supportive of Sadat to enable her to make an informed and realistic career decision.

Additional career counseling interventions for working with immigrants and refugees are discussed below.

## **Effective Career Counseling Strategies**

### **Theory-based Conceptualization of Client Concerns**

This is very important in career counseling as a theory provides a useful professional framework for identifying client's counseling goals and intervention strategies for attaining the goals. Super's theory is recommended for working with immigrants and refugees. This is because it is developmental in structure and also deals with life-span career development concerns and issues (Zunker, 2006). However, the focus when using Super's theoretical stages would be the following - growth, exploration, and establishment. The reason for such an emphasis relates to the fact that most members of the target population would be dealing with a variety of career development issues. This includes developing a realistic self concept and accepting one's limitations (growth stage), learning more about opportunities in the world of work (exploration stage), as well as getting started in a chosen field (establishment), (Zunker, 2006). Super's concepts of mini cycle and career adaptability would also be useful as some immigrants and refugees may be involved in career transition. Hence, being able to identify these individuals' transferable skills is vital in order to facilitate a relatively quick placement in the world of work.

### **Assessment**

The use of qualitative and informal assessment strategies such as card sorts, life career assessment, life line, occupational tree and life career rainbow (Okocha, 1998; Okocha, 2001) is highly recommended for working with this target population. This is because this form of assessment often fosters thorough career exploration as a result of the close and collaborative relationship that is developed between the client and the counselor. Furthermore, this type of assessment provides an invaluable opportunity for a holistic and integrative appraisal of clients' abilities, interests and values instead of the piecemeal process usually offered by the standardized tools. Moreover, research shows that qualitative assessments work well with diverse clientele (Okocha, 1994; Okocha, 1998; Okocha, 2001).

### **Multicultural Counseling Competency**

In light of the fact that the immigrants and refugees come from diverse backgrounds in the world, it is essential to be aware of adaptations to be made in traditional counseling in order to promote effective career counseling. Sue and Sue (2003) identified three major features of culturally competent counselors. First is the counselors' awareness of their own assumptions, biases, values, preconceived notions, and personal limitations. This competency is quite vital as it alerts counselors when to make adaptations in their counseling of culturally different clients, and when to refer them to culturally competent counselors. The second competency is the counselors' understanding of the worldviews of culturally diverse clients. In other words, having a good understanding of clients'

values, assumptions about human behavior, and their biases is necessary. This particular competency is very important in dealing with clients from collectivistic or group-oriented cultures especially regarding their psychological orientations relative to locus of control and locus of responsibility (Sue and Sue, 2003). The final competency is the counselors' development of, and the practice of appropriate, relevant and culturally sensitive intervention strategies. An illustration of such a competency is a counselor who uses a certified interpreter when language problems in counseling sessions are encountered.

In addition to the above, career counselors should be aware of identity development concerns that may be evident when working with immigrants and refugees. These problems may be most pronounced among younger persons who acculturate faster and tend to question or rebel against traditional norms and roles that impact their career decisions (Sue and Sue, 2003).

Related to identity development is vocational identity model used by immigrants and refugees as they move into the American world of work. Robin (2003) discussed four different vocational identity models. They include the following: cultural identity, assimilationist, partial assimilationist, and bicultural models. Cultural identity model reflects individuals who attempt to retain as much as possible their homeland culture including traditions, food, dress and even language. They appear uninterested in assimilating into the new culture which in some instances may create problems for them in the workplace. Robin (2003) suggested that career counselors should refrain from the use of a confrontational approach when counseling these clients. A "carefrontational" strategy is recommended. This involves the counselor sensitively explaining the consequences of the immigrants' retention of their traditional attitudes or behaviors. For instance, an individual who struggles with being on time at work due to cultural reasons may be motivated to change if made aware, for example, that an impact of lateness is holding up the co-workers and slowing down the production line. The assimilationist model is characterized by persons who try to completely adopt the new culture. Some of these individuals are likely to experience some stress and depression since they may encounter hostility from other immigrants from similar or same homeland who could perceive them as selling out and being ashamed of their culture. In this case, it is important for the career counselor to address the social isolation as this may have negative effects on the immigrants' work performance; otherwise, a referral to a culturally competent therapist is suggested. The key feature reflected in partial assimilationist, the third model, is that individuals maintain some aspects of their homeland culture and also practice some aspects of the new culture in the world of work. For an example, an individual may communicate very well in writing and orally, but still struggles with certain forms of non-verbal communication such as maintaining eye contact especially when dealing with authority figures. Hence, one major challenge arising from this model is the issue of identity confusion which may be evident during job search interviews. It is important that career counselors help individuals who manifest such a problem become aware of it and assist them in making a decision whether a change on their part is needed. If a change is needed, counseling them on how to go about

it is important. The final model, which is bicultural, is characterized by persons who attempt to manifest one identity that parallels the American cultural identity in the world of work, and have another traditional identity in their life outside of the world of work. Although immigrants and refugees with bicultural identities may find that this approach has a positive or salutary effect on their career development, nevertheless, they may ultimately encounter frustrations in their ability to clearly define their work and out-of-work identities. These frustrations could become quite stressful and eventually have a negative impact on their work performance. Again, in this situation, career counselors should offer these individuals assistance in clarifying their identities especially in relationship with their work life.

### **Advocacy**

Career counselors are expected to advocate for all their clients. However, their advocacy role when working with immigrants and refugees is very crucial. This is because cultural challenges such as language barriers make it difficult for immigrants and refugees to understand how to navigate the systems in their new homeland. Thus, career counselors should advocate for members of this target population when necessary. For example, advocacy is important for those in need of financial assistance from the government to acquire additional education in order to be gainfully employed. Another instance that calls for career counselors' advocacy is when these persons encounter discriminatory prospective employers (Okocha, 1994; Okocha, 2001). Career counselors can also educate immigrants and refugees to advocate for themselves via modeling.

### **Consultation**

In view of the diversity apparent among immigrants and refugees, career counselors are probably going to be involved in consultation with a variety of groups (such as educational institutions, social services agencies, banks, businesses, child care centers, mental health clinics and prospective employers) in order to foster the career development of these individuals. Therefore, career counselors must possess good consultation and leadership skills.

### **Conclusion**

Apropos of the theme of this paper, there is no denying the fact that career counselors play a vital role in the transition of immigrants and refugees to the world of work in their new countries. In order for counselors to be effective in this role, it is essential that they are aware of the immigrants' and refugees' pre-migration and post-migration experiences, and also integrate mental health counseling services if necessary when working with this population. Furthermore, they have to be multiculturally competent in their delivery of career counseling services including their advocacy and consultation functions.

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