

Converting Cultural Capital Among Teen Refugees and Their Families From Bosnia-Herzegovina

Stevan M. Weine, M.D.

Norma Ware, Ph.D.

Alma Klebic, B.A.

Objectives: The objective of this study was to identify the processes by which teen refugees adapt and apply cultural capital in conditions of refuge in order to develop preventive interventions for refugee youths. **Methods:** The study was a multisite ethnographic study in Chicago that involved observation of Bosnian participants in schools, community sites, service organizations, and households as well as in-depth interviews with a subsample of 30 Bosnian adolescents and their families. Field notes and interview data were subjected to thematic analysis. **Results:** The concept of converting cultural capital emerged as a useful construct for representing the cultural resources that Bosnian teen refugees and their families bring to the refugee trauma experience. Conversion of cultural capital refers to processes of adapting and applying the meanings, knowledge, customs, achievements, and outlooks that teen refugees and their families bring to new environments in order to enhance teens' cultural vitality and social incorporation. Nine mechanisms of converting cultural capital were identified, labeled, and defined in emic terms: using our language, obliging family, sticking together, returning to religion, going ghetto, building a future, taking pride in tradition, critiquing America, and seeking freedom. These mechanisms represent cultural strategies by which teen refugees attempt to manage enormous historical, social, cultural, economic, familial, and psychological changes associated with refugee trauma. **Conclusions:** Ethnography is an important methodologic tool in mental health services research, and the concept of converting cultural capital is useful in designing preventive interventions for teen refugees and their families. (*Psychiatric Services* 55:923-927, 2004)

Of 22 million refugees and 20 million internally displaced persons worldwide, it is estimated that half are youths (1). This estimate is reflected generally in the large numbers of refugee families

who have resettled in the United States and specifically in the city neighborhoods and public schools of Chicago, where refugee and immigrant youths from many countries live. The experiences of teenaged

refugee youths are a special concern given that these youths are the future of their families, their ethnic communities in exile, their homeland's diaspora, and their new cities and countries. Too little is known about how refugees cope with trauma. Even less is known about teen refugees.

Existing concepts of psychological healing for survivors of political violence, including teen refugees, construe trauma in the clinical psychiatric sense as traumatic stress symptoms, as behavioral problems, or as a traumatized self (2-4). However, refugee trauma encompasses not only exposure to war and other forms of political violence but also the experiences of economic, social, and cultural marginalization associated with being a refugee. One Bosnian teenaged girl spoke of "the extreme sadness that comes of the death of relatives and loved ones." But she also said, "To come here and to have my whole life change so drastically was a shock to me." An understanding of teen refugee trauma that is not conceived only as psychiatric disorder is needed in order to develop preventive interventions.

Because trauma affects not only individuals but also families, communities, societies, and cultures, the consequences of refugee trauma among teen refugees can be wide-ranging (5-7). Identity confusion, social isolation, academic underachievement, or high-risk behaviors may not only reflect individual psychopathology but also be manifestations of trauma to families, to communities, and to cul-

Dr. Weine and Ms. Klebic are affiliated with the department of psychiatry of the University of Illinois at Chicago, International Center on Responses to Catastrophes, Fifth Floor, 1601 West Taylor Street, Chicago, Illinois 60612 (e-mail, smweine@uic.edu). Dr. Ware is with the department of social medicine of Harvard University in Boston. A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, held October 29 to November 1, 2003, in Chicago.

tures. Institutional and societal failures to promote teen refugees' social incorporation and cultural vitality may also exacerbate trauma's effects. For example, a bilingual teacher said, "I really believe that we do not know how to teach refugee kids." At the same time, it is important to consider that refugee trauma may stimulate adaptive responses that lead to positive outcomes, including closer families, stronger communities, and enhanced spirituality and morality (6,8–10).


Both adverse and beneficial facets of refugee trauma have important cultural dimensions. In a review of refugee mental health, Bracken (11) criticized traumatologists for overemphasizing traumatic stress and minimizing the role of culture. Culturalists, in contrast, claim that cultural differences between refugees and the host population are so fundamental that they preclude the possibility of common experiences (12). Culturalism is embodied in multicultural services for refugees that adopt a "difference multiculturalism" framework (13). Difference multiculturalism emphasizes culture as "things" or "essences" that form the basis for constructing categoric distinctions between ethnic groups. Other groups are represented as different and exotic in culturalist thinking. In mental health, this approach includes emphasizing ethnocultural distinctions concerning diagnosis, symptoms, and treatment (14).

Difference multiculturalism has shaped the mental health discourse on acculturation, which is largely subsumed under a psychopathologic rubric, emphasizing that culture change causes stress (15). Although the immigration literature has described several models of acculturation among immigrant youths that may help us to understand refugee youths, by and large these models are not manifested in services for refugee youths (16–18).


Some have called for improving mental health services for refugee youths through the development of preventive interventions for refugee teens and their families (19). To build such interventions requires better understandings of both the cultural processes that shape the lives of these

individuals and the cultural strategies that they and those close to them are using to respond to trauma and to manage their survival and adaptation. These understandings must acknowledge culture as a primary interactive force. Cultural and social theory helps us toward such understandings.

Cultural capital is a concept introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (20,21). In analyzing the experiences of working-class and immigrant families in French schools, Bourdieu used this concept to explain how the social structures of a host society tend to perpetuate themselves.



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His analyses focused on the reproduction of social class through the family, the school, and the state (20). Bourdieu argued that cultural capital is parceled out through "information capital"—for example, some immigrant families know more than others about how the education system works. It also takes the form of a "system of preferences . . . which induce immigrants either to privilege art over money, cultural things over the business of power, and so on, or the opposite" (20). Through the uses of information and the internalization of

cultural preferences, immigrant families' decision making and lifestyle are shaped in such a way that the structure of social class is maintained.

For teen refugees and their families, cultural capital may be defined as the meanings, knowledge, customs, achievements, and outlooks that are related to their social positions. Teen refugees and their families possess cultural capital that originated in their homeland, was transformed as a consequence of exposure to refugee trauma, and is now called upon to shape their response to refugee trauma and to facilitate new social and psychological growth in the conditions of refuge. It may be repeatedly transformed as a consequence of new experiences, with old forms adapting and new ones being introduced.

The purpose of the ethnographic investigation reported here was to describe specific components of cultural capital among teen refugees, to understand how those components are operating in the social spaces of refuge, and to consider the implications for preventive interventions.

Methods

Chicago, home to a small Bosnian community of refugees and immigrants after World War II, was chosen by governmental and voluntary organizations to be a major site of resettlement for a large number of Bosnians beginning in 1992. The evidence presented here comes from an ongoing multisite ethnographic study in the Bosnian community of Chicago. Data collection consisted of participant observations and in-depth, qualitative interviewing carried out over more than two years by an American psychiatrist and a Bosnian field-worker as part of a multidisciplinary, collaborative services research team. We chose to use both an American and a Bosnian field-worker conducting participant observations and interviews both together and separately in order to enhance the variation and internal validity of data collection.

Participant observation focused on adolescents and their families who had been exposed to refugee trauma. Observations were carried out at sites selected for their importance in the lives of Bosnian refugee families.

These sites included two public high schools attended by a large number of Bosnian refugees, several service organizations (for example, an after-school program), and a large number of family homes and other locations in the Bosnian community (such as sports clubs and cafes). Detailed field notes were recorded immediately after each observation period.

Approximately 150 observations were completed, and more than 400 pages of field notes were generated. Interviews were conducted with members of 30 Bosnian refugee families with teens, mostly in their homes. Interviews lasted one to two hours and were audiotaped and transcribed. The interviews included a focus on individual and family beliefs (about trauma, displacement, resettlement, communication, and services), adapting beliefs, and factors that shaped beliefs as well as on delineating the family, community, and cultural contexts. Consent was obtained by using procedures approved by the institutional review board at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The initial study questions were refined through an iterative process of data collection and analysis (22–25). Through writing and reading of the field notes and transcripts, the concept of converting cultural capital emerged as a useful construct for representing the cultural resources that Bosnian teen refugees and their families bring to the refugee trauma experience. Several specific forms of cultural capital as well as a number of conversion mechanisms were also identified on the basis of the ethnographic data. These are described in emic terms—that is, using the words and from the perspective of participants in the research. The findings were reviewed by the entire research team to enable checking for other explanations and contrary evidence.

Results

Cultural capital in the lives of teen refugees

Cultural capital may appear as characteristics of teen refugees and their families that reflect shared cultural values. For example, many Bosnian teen refugees and their families have

a strong sense of family togetherness. When families spend time together, converse, share experiences, engage in collective decision making, and help one another, the teens receive important guidance and support as they face losses and navigate difficult transitions associated with refugee trauma.

Cultural capital may appear in the deployment of cultural strategies to fit new conditions. A majority of Bosnian teen refugees have Internet access and regularly use Bosnian chat rooms to interact with other Bosnian teens throughout the world. By speaking the Bosnian language and sharing Bosnian music online, these young persons enact and reaffirm their identity as Bosnians while also creating a culturally synchronous, virtual community.

Cultural capital may also appear as changes in the social activities and status of teen refugees. Some teenaged refugees have joined Islamic prayer groups. Some get admitted to better than average high schools or colleges. These positional changes provide access to new stores of cultural capital above and beyond what was previously available.

Converting cultural capital

Converting cultural capital refers to processes of adapting and applying meanings, knowledge, customs, achievements, and outlooks of teen refugees and their families so as to enhance their cultural vitality and social incorporation. The ethnographic evidence indicates that teen refugees respond to refugee trauma in part through strategies that convert cultural capital. Nine mechanisms for converting cultural capital, taken from the ethnographic data, are presented below. Not all these mechanisms are used by all individuals, or at the same times, or with the same effects.

Using our language. In addition to learning English, speaking in the native tongue is a connection with cultural heritage and an affirmative expression of ethnic and national identifications after ethno-political violence and forced migration. Many Bosnian teens especially enjoy mixing Bosnian and English as if to say, “we

are able to contain and creatively manipulate the linguistic and cultural differences that confront us.” For some, however, this practice may limit English proficiency.

Obliging family. Staying committed to parents and elders links teens to a cultural and historical legacy that has persisted over centuries. Being a refugee can both strengthen and weaken such links, because teens rely more on their families—for example, by living with them and respecting their values and behaviors—at the same time that losses, separations, and burdens undermine the family as a resource.

Sticking together. Being with other young people from one’s ethnic group is a readily available affirmation of collective identity. Bosnian teens especially express this affirmation in their social behavior in school, where there is often little interaction with other ethnic and racial groups. There is the question of whether the advantages of sticking together outweigh the risks of being isolated from other students.

Returning to religion. Attending religious services, saying prayers, reading religious texts, and participating in rituals express solidarity, spirituality, discipline, and asceticism. For many Bosnian teens, turning to religion means reconnecting with a cultural heritage that was attacked by aggressors but also questioned by many Bosnians because of the potential association between religion and ethnonationalism.

Going ghetto. Embracing urban hip-hop clothes, language, mannerisms, and music is a convincing expression of meaning, belonging, and power in 21st century global youth culture. Many Bosnian teens are inspired by talking, walking, dressing, and acting like the white rapper Eminem, whom they see as having found a resilient voice amid diversity, betrayal, adversity, and struggle.

Building a future. Dedication to a better future propels teens toward vocational and educational experiences that are pathways to achievement in the new society. Regardless of the strength of this dedication, to build a future, Bosnian teens also need information and a longer-term vision.

Taking pride in tradition. Embracing the rituals, mannerisms, folk culture, and celebrations of one's ethnocultural heritage are potent reminders of where one comes from and who one is. In Bosnian families, traditional ritual activities are generally more encouraged for girls than boys, given that in the former Yugoslavia men had to suppress cultural expressions in order to participate in socialist society (26). Bosnian teens find tradition in music, folk dancing, coffee drinking, soccer, and holidays.

Critiquing America. Teenaged refugees like to speak their minds about what is wrong with American life and adult life and contrast these with their experiences of the Bosnian and European lifestyle and even of life during wartime. Some of the youths experience rejection as a result, and some are able to use their critical voices and knowledge as the basis for cultural and social growth.


Seeking freedom. Both because they lost their freedom when they became refugees and because life in the "land of the free" feels disappointingly constricted and regulated, Bosnian teens seek ways to feel free. Even if it puts them at risk of other troubles, it is understandable, for example, that Bosnian boys love fast cars and that the girls spend hours on Internet chat groups, enlivened by this powerful social imagery of freedom.

Discussion


Converting cultural capital is a concept that can clarify the cultural strategies by which teen refugees cope with the trauma associated with being a refugee. The ethnographic investigation reported here helped to extend Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital to the world of teen refugees by delineating nine mechanisms based on analysis of ethnographic evidence. These mechanisms are cultural strategies that aim to change the meanings and shapes of experiences that are a part of being a teen refugee. There are ways to combat the senses of sadness, isolation, confusion, degradation, dissatisfaction, and anomie that are common to refugee teens' experiences of refugee trauma.

Whether these strategies lead to demonstrable beneficial short-term

or long-term changes in any of these realms cannot be concluded on the basis of this study. Many of these mechanisms are presumed to be associated with positive outcomes, but some may be associated with mixed or negative outcomes. For example, the quest for freedom among teenaged boys may lead to their buying cars, which leads to getting full-time jobs to pay the insurance. Jobs may lead to failure in school and dropping out. It is also important to note that no one mechanism operates in isolation. Further investigations, including detailed case studies, are



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necessary to better explain the interactions of conversion mechanisms with other important factors in the lives of teen refugees and their families. Whether cultural capital can be regarded as beneficial in addressing refugee trauma must also take into account the meanings of cultural capital to teens themselves.

Although culture is important, we do not argue that everything is culture and culture is everything. Cultural capital is an outcome of historical, social, and economic processes

that act on communities and families. Refugees themselves cannot be held accountable for processes that are beyond their influence, such as violent crimes, the shortcomings of public schools, and economic marginalization. Portes and Rumbaut's (18) theoretical model of segmented assimilation and their corresponding empirical research demonstrate the phase-specific impact of such external obstacles on first-generation resettlement, intergenerational patterns, and second-generation outcomes. On the other hand, to recognize culture as a major—but not solitary or isolated—force is to appreciate that culture may be one realm of life in which people do have some capacity for making changes. For example, in terms of freedom, parents and teens can be encouraged to adopt the belief that urban adolescents in Chicago may actually be more free if parents are more involved in facilitating their children's school and city life.

Preventive mental health services may be able to assist in converting cultural capital for teen refugees and their families. To do this, those services would have to be different from existing trauma-related mental health and multicultural services in that they would specifically aim to facilitate adaptations and applications of cultural processes that bear upon refugee trauma. Prevention interventions can target changes in cultural processes through focusing on attitudes, beliefs, and information among and between teens, parents, and schools and other community service programs.

One example of a common and difficult situation for teen refugees and their families that services can address is the teens' response to the American life and "ghetto" culture. For many adolescents, seeking freedom means being free to explore certain aspects of American life. Freedom means moving away from parents, who may come to embody a kind of heaviness stemming from the burdens of work, money, memories, emotions, and tradition. Parents, in their turn, may be repulsed by American social freedoms and the idea of their kids "going ghetto." Perceiving

their children's behavior as a threat to their way of life, they may respond with a guardedness and rigidity that teens experience as stifling and restrictive. At the same time, parents may be reluctant to curtail their children's freedom, given all their children suffered during the war and given their own nostalgic memories of being free as teenagers in their home country. Either of these parental responses can become problematic, in part because in neither case are parents helping teen refugees to convert cultural capital.

Preventive interventions that address this problem for teen refugees and their families appear potentially beneficial because of the special role that families play in converting cultural capital. Families are repositories for cultural capital and managers of possible changes in cultural capital. The attitudes of parents toward cultural change, which may range from being open and flexible to being guarded and rigid, appears to be one important factor in the conversion of cultural capital of teen refugees. Family-oriented preventive mental health services such as multifamily groups could help in addressing the culturally based attitudes of parents and teenagers, thus promoting the flexibility and adaptation of beliefs and behaviors. Preventive interventions could also enhance teens' cultural capital through building partnerships between parents and teachers that increase parents' involvement in their children's education, social life, and cultural life.

Additional questions remain about services that were not addressed in this study but that could be the basis for future research. How is converting cultural capital developmentally timed? How could converting cultural capital be incorporated into designing preventive interventions for HIV-AIDS risk behaviors, such as unsafe sexual practices and illicit drug use? What do services that convert cultural capital mean to providers and to service recipients? Do these services have demonstrable beneficial outcomes? What does cultural capital and its conversion look like for teens from other cultures?

Conclusions

Ethnography is an important methodologic tool in mental health services research, and the concept of converting cultural capital is useful in designing preventive interventions for teen refugees and their families. ♦

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