



# *Cultural Orientation: Considerations and Essential Messages*

*~Houston, Texas~*

*CO collaboratively provided by  
YMCA International Services,  
Interfaith Ministries,  
and Bilingual Education Institute*

*funded by  
Texas Health & Human Services Commission  
Office of Immigration and Refugee Affairs*

*prepared by Shawn Webb, YMCA International Services*



# *Primary Goals of the Cultural Orientation Program*

- ◆ To promote and facilitate self-sufficiency among refugees and asylees
- ◆ To assist each client in her or his efforts to fulfill personal goals and dreams through cultural orientation education
- ◆ Empowerment through information



# *Commonly Encountered Problems in the Cultural Orientation Classroom*

- ◆ Some clients do not feel comfortable asking questions during CO, particularly if they come from cultures in which the educational system encourages a formal and strict teacher/student relationship.
- ◆ **Refugees must constantly be encouraged to ask questions** about any concerns, interests, or confusion. This simple aspect is the primary basis for effective cultural orientation. This is extremely important in regard to women who come from patriarchal societies who may be even more reluctant to ask questions.
- ◆ Refugees should be told that asking questions in the U.S. is a very acceptable part of life in general. Most Americans expect to be asked questions, and most people respect those who ask questions.



# *Teaching Methods in the CO Classroom*

- ◆ The delivery of orientation information seems to work best in an **interactive atmosphere** where refugees ask questions of the instructors, and instructors ask questions of the refugees.
- ◆ A lecture-based format should be avoided, as it inhibits questions from the refugees; an **interactive seminar-style format** seems to facilitate the most effective dissemination of information.
- ◆ Refugees should always be encouraged to **participate** in the classroom discussions. Trainers should ask them questions in order to ensure that they have understood the information provided.



# *The Importance of Cultural Relativism for CO Instruction*

- ◆ In general, the anthropological concept of **cultural relativism** means that one must suspend judgment on other peoples' cultural practices and beliefs in order to understand them in their own terms and cultural context.
- ◆ Adopting this concept is not only important for CO Trainers, but for the refugees themselves, as they are often resettled in cities of great cultural diversity.



“We don’t see things  
as they are, we see  
them as we are.”

Anais Nin



# *Cultural Relativism in the CO Classroom*

- ◆ As CO Trainers, it is crucial that we let refugee clients know that it is not our job or intention to change their beliefs and values. Rather, we are responsible for exposing/orienting them to the dominant beliefs and values of the United States in order for them to better navigate their paths to self-sufficiency and adaptation to life in the U.S.
- ◆ Culturally relativistic instruction allows refugee clients to listen to the information being presented instead of feeling as if they are being judged or manipulated.



## *Consequences of CO Classrooms without the Atmosphere of Cultural Relativism*

- ◆ Refugees may feel that their own cultural values and practices are being denigrated, or viewed as inferior to U.S. values and beliefs.
- ◆ As a result, they may be less likely to listen to the CO Trainer and retain important information. They may even reject such information if they feel that their own culture is being ridiculed or judged negatively.
- ◆ In such cases, they will not be able to accept the importance of acquiring knowledge about their new cultural environment, which will impede their paths to self-sufficiency and cultural adjustment.





*Importance of Emphasizing the  
Consequences of Not Following U.S.  
Customs and Practices*

- ◆ While it is important to let the refugees know that we are not trying to change them, it is equally important to inform them of the **negative consequences** that may occur if they do not follow certain U.S. customs and practices, especially if they are laws (e.g., domestic violence, sexual harassment, driving while intoxicated or under the influence of illegal drugs, underage drinking, etc.).



# *Importance of Honoring Individuality*

- ◆ CO Trainers should always honor the individuality of each refugee. Although people refer to them categorically as “refugees,” they are in fact individuals with very diverse needs, personalities, desires, interests, aspirations, and personal beliefs.
- ◆ Additionally, we should never fall into the trap of stereotyping, such that we see “Sudanese” simply as “Sudanese,” or “Cubans” as simply “Cubans.” This is very detrimental to providing quality services (in addition to being very disrespectful and ignorant). We must listen to the needs of individuals and never assume that we know what they need based on our previous experiences.
- ◆ This consideration is especially important because we serve groups of people based on their native-language (e.g., Arabic speakers) when such common language speakers come from dramatically different cultures with diverse beliefs and values.



“The greatest gift you can give another is the purity of your attention.”

Richard Moss, M.D.



# *The Central Importance of English Language Proficiency*

- ◆ All CO Instructors should stress the ultimate importance of learning the English language. **English proficiency is the key for attaining all other pursuits and goals**, such as decent employment, livable wages, access to higher education, family cohesion, and respect from others in the U.S.



# *English Language Acquisition*

- ◆ Since many refugees have never learned a second language as an adult, it should be stressed that learning a foreign language can be extremely difficult, time-consuming, and, at times, very frustrating.
- ◆ They need to know that most of their progress will occur outside the ESL classroom, when completing homework or interacting with others in English. They should not expect to learn English by simply attending class.



# *Cultural Adjustment and English Proficiency*

- ◆ CO Trainers should stress that the process of cultural adjustment is generally very difficult and is usually accompanied by stress, anxiety, apathy, fatigue, and, sometimes, depression.
- ◆ All of these conditions are made even more troubling when one can not express these complex feelings due to lack of English-language skills.
- ◆ For most refugees, all of these symptoms are exacerbated by a lack of English proficiency. In this sense, learning the English language is one of the most important factors in achieving productive cultural adjustment and a sense of well-being.



## *Cultural Adjustment*

- ◆ CO Trainers should stress that the process of cultural adjustment is often very difficult, even for those with basic English skills.
- ◆ Refugees need to know that it is normal to experience feelings of stress, home-sickness, anxiety, and sadness. It is very common to feel overwhelmed in the initial stages of resettlement, especially for those who are resettled as individuals. These reactions are common and normal for all humans adjusting to foreign cultures, even those with the best attitude and positive outlook.



# *Employment and English Proficiency*

- ◆ Refugees should be informed that without English proficiency, they will be confined to **minimum-wage, entry-level jobs**, which are generally below the poverty line measure. In times of a poor economy, without basic English-skills, they may not find employment for several months.
- ◆ Advancement to **higher-paying positions** is always predicated on advanced English, and fluency is generally expected for most livable-wage jobs.





# *Parenting and English Proficiency*

- ◆ Refugee parents need to know that learning the English language is central to retaining influence and control over their children.
- ◆ Without English proficiency, parents will not be able to interact effectively with school personnel, and they will be ill-equipped to assist their children with homework. They will not be able to read report cards and notification letters sent home from school.
- ◆ Parents who do not learn English often feel alienated from their children, and vice versa.



# *Common Difficulties of the Resettlement/ Adjustment Process*

- ◆ Refugees should be informed that their initial year of resettlement will most likely be very difficult and challenging for the following reasons:
  - economic assistance from the government is very short-term
  - most are only eligible for low-paying, entry-level, service or assembly-line factory, positions due to lack of English skills
  - college education in the U.S. is not free; it is very expensive
  - homes are very expensive to purchase and most will need to live in apartments in less desirable neighborhoods
  - automobiles and transportation are also very expensive
  - **\*\*Many refugees arrive in the U.S. with very unrealistic expectations regarding all of the issues above.\*\***

# *The Centrality of Employment*

- ◆ CO Trainers need to emphasize that obtaining employment is the refugee's first priority. In governmentally-funded resettlement programs, employment is considered the most important aspect of successful resettlement and it is often expected that the refugee will accept the first job that becomes available.
- ◆ Educational development always comes second to getting a job. For example, refugees are not even eligible to participate in governmentally-funded GED classes until they are employed.
- ◆ Refugees need to know that most people, including Americans, must work simultaneously while attending school. The majority of people cannot afford college without also working at the same time.



# *Employment and American Values*

- ◆ In general, Americans value work more than anything else, and refugee families should be aware that it is expected by governmentally-funded programs that both males and females will work.
- ◆ Refugees should understand that the first job they get is usually not the one they will want to keep as a career, but is a stepping stone to self-sufficiency.
- ◆ Nothing is “free” in the U.S. Refugees are expected to “work their way up”. This ideology is part of the “American Dream” and has been so since the founding of the country. It is a deeply imbedded cultural value that is held by the majority of Americans, as well as by the government.

# *Importance of Time and Punctuality*

- ◆ It is extremely important to inform refugees that time and punctuality are incredibly important in the U.S. Americans are extremely time-conscious.
- ◆ Particularly in terms of employment, refugees need to know that the primary assessment of their **job performance** is whether they are **on-time for work**. Many employers expect them to be there 5 or 10 minutes early.
- ◆ For most Americans, **time is money**. If someone is late for an appointment, Americans view it as a waste of time and money. Additionally, they may also interpret it as a **personal insult** if someone is **late** for an appointment with them. Refugees can damage their future relations with someone if they are late for appointments.
- ◆ Refugees' personal goals and aspirations will always come more quickly if they learn to be punctual. This is often stressful for many refugees who view Americans as being time-obsessive, rigid, and always in a rush.



# *The GED*

- ◆ For refugees who never finished high school in their home countries, or who do not have the documents to prove such, earning the **GED** (General Educational Development) Diploma is essential.
- ◆ The GED is often required to apply for certain jobs. It is also a basic required to enter colleges or universities.
- ◆ There are many **GED** preparation courses available free-of-charge in the U.S. for low-income people.
- ◆ If they can not pass the GED examination, they will not perform well on college entrance examinations such as the **SAT** (Scholastic Aptitude Test). Additionally, they will not perform well in college, and will waste lots of time, money, and energy taking developmental courses.



# *Vocational Programs*

- ◆ It is often advantageous for refugees to earn **vocational certificates**. These are for such skills as air conditioning repair, truck driving, welding, pharmacy technician's work, medical assistant's work, cosmetology, auto repair, and child care work.
- ◆ In Houston, for example, these programs are provided for refugees at **Houston Community College** (through a governmentally-funded **refugee program**) for little or no charge. Often, these certificates allow refugees to advance in employment opportunities (and higher wages) much more quickly. Vocational skills also allow for excellent part-time jobs to support oneself through college education later.

# College and University Access

- ◆ In general, it is best for most refugees to wait for one year of residency before enrolling in colleges and universities. Until they have lived in the State, worked, and paid taxes for one year, they will be classified as “out-of-state” or “international” students, which means they will pay much higher tuition rates (3-4 times higher). After one year, they will be considered “in-state” or “in-district” students, and the tuition rates are much lower.
- ◆ The first year of residence might be better spent getting accustomed to life in the U.S. and developing employment history and skills. It seems that most refugees who enroll in college before one year of residence often become overwhelmed. The first year can be better spent exploring educational options, learning about the university system, financial aid options, and building English-language skills.
- ◆ Refugees should ask for assistance when applying for government financial aid; the applications are very complicated. Very important to stress the difference between grants and loans.
- ◆ Resettlement agencies do not provide tuition for refugees.





## *The Importance of Seeking Out Refugee Peers as Cultural Brokers*

- ◆ CO Trainers should emphasize the importance of getting to know other refugees from their home countries who have been in the U.S. for longer periods of time.
- ◆ Such connections can make the resettlement process much easier and faster. Peers can serve as teachers and advisors with regard to the details and contingencies of daily life in the U.S.

# *Difficulties for Refugee Families*

- ◆ Refugee parents are often surprised at how quickly they lose control and influence over their children, particularly those who attend public schools. They need to understand that this is a common problem, primarily because their children often assimilate much more quickly than they do. In general, they also gain control of the English language much more quickly than their parents. **Parents really need to learn English if they want to retain influence over their children.**
- ◆ Parents also need to expect that their children's cultural adaptation will usually include **adopting "attitudes of independence"** that are very common among American teens. They need to honor these adjustments within the bounds and limitations of their own expectations as parents. This is often very difficult to negotiate for both parents and children. Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. Similar issues are also problems within American families as well.

# *Refugee Parenting Skills in the U.S.*

- ◆ It is important to teach refugee parents that beating their children is illegal in the U.S. Government agencies can remove children from the home if beating is reported by the children or neighbors. Parents may also be prosecuted in court for such treatment.
- ◆ Parents need to learn new methods of parental control, such as “grounding” (i.e., taking away privileges) teens and “time-out” methods for younger children.
- ◆ What is considered “proper” parenting skills is a controversial topic even among Americans; many disagreements exist among lay people, as well as professionals, but refugees need to understand that beating is illegal. (There is a distinction between “beating” and “spanking” in the United States. It seems that refugees often use the word “beating” when describing what an American would call “spanking”. In either case, however, the parent could be investigated by Child Protective Services (CPS).

# *Domestic Violence*

- ◆ Refugees need to be aware that hitting or beating one's spouse is illegal in the U.S. One may be arrested and put in jail for this offense. Additionally, children may be removed from the home and put in foster care by Child Protective Services (CPS).
- ◆ It is very common for neighbors to report such behavior to the police because in the U.S. most people do not consider domestic violence to be a private, family matter.
- ◆ While it is unlikely that a CO Trainer will actually change the beliefs of refugees who come from cultures where spousal beating is considered normal, or even advantageous, it is important to stress the negative consequences of domestic violence in the U.S., such as arrest, imprisonment, and removal of children from the home.

# *Sexual Equality in the U.S.*

- ◆ Refugees must be informed that men and women in the U.S. share the same rights and those rights are protected by law. It is illegal in the U.S. to treat people differently based on their biological sex.
- ◆ Refugee males need to be aware that their supervisors at work may be women. They will be required to accept instruction from such women, and they must accept this.
- ◆ Workplaces in the U.S. include both men and women, often working side-by-side. Refugees who come from cultures where men and women are often segregated should be made aware that they will be expected to adjust to such U.S. workplaces.





## *Dealing with Bureaucracy*

- ◆ Refugees should be informed that they should take written notes when meeting with various personnel at any agencies, companies, or institutions.
- ◆ They should take names of people who assist them, or take business cards if possible.
- ◆ Refugees often get lost in the bureaucracy of the U.S., and they should know that taking notes and documenting communication will save them lots of time and energy in the long-term.
- ◆ Refugees should not sign any forms unless they understand them completely. Ask for interpreter assistance if necessary.



## *The IOM Travel Loan*

- ◆ Refugees should be informed that paying off their IOM travel loan is extremely important.
- ◆ It helps them establish credit history in the U.S., which is essential later when they attempt to purchase automobiles and homes.
- ◆ It also gives them status with USCIS when they apply for permanent residency. If they have not repaid their travel loan, it may affect their application for permanent residency.



## *Purchasing Automobiles, Driver's Licenses, and Liability Insurance*

- ◆ Refugees should be informed that purchasing automobiles can be very expensive, due to maintenance, repairs, and insurance. Used cars should always be inspected by a mechanic before purchase.
- ◆ They should never drive an automobile without a valid driver's license. Their immigration status could be affected or revoked.
- ◆ They should not purchase an automobile if they can not afford liability insurance. It is illegal to drive without such basic insurance.



# *U.S. Standard of Living*

- ◆ There is a relatively high standard of living in the U.S., however, most people, including American citizens, have to **work very hard** to maintain that standard.
- ◆ It is not uncommon for people to work **12 hours per day** in most jobs and professions.
- ◆ In salaried, professional jobs, people are expected to work much **more than 40 hours per week** without over-time pay compensation.
- ◆ Many people work **two different jobs** (one full-time and one part-time) in order to pay their bills.



## *Equality in the U.S.*

- ◆ Refugees need to be aware that “equality” in the U.S. is a cultural ideal. This means that all people should be treated equally, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, religious beliefs, etc.
- ◆ In reality, however, discrimination does exist in the U.S. and all people are not treated equally even though the law requires such.
- ◆ Racial, religious, and sexual discrimination is common in the U.S., and refugees need to be aware of this fact in order to protect themselves.



# *Crime in the U.S.*

- ◆ Crime is a reality in the U.S., especially in large cities.
- ◆ Crime is especially prevalent in low-income neighborhoods of the type refugees can afford during their first years of resettlement. **Theft and robbery** are the most common types of crime, but assault, rape, and sometimes murder also occur in these neighborhoods.
- ◆ Refugees should learn about various means of **self-protection** (e.g., taking self-defense courses and knowing when to call 9-1-1 for police assistance).





## *Refugee Arrests*

- ◆ If refugees are ever arrested, they need to tell the **criminal attorney** that they want to consult with an **immigration attorney**.
- ◆ Ideally, refugees should hire immigration attorneys to represent them in criminal courts.

# *Informational Resources*

- ◆ The Middle of Everywhere: The World's Refugees Come to Our Town. (2002) by Mary Pipher, Ph.D., Harcourt, Inc.
- ◆ Nuer Journeys, Nuer Lives. (2000) by Jon D. Holtzman, Allyn & Bacon.
- ◆ Refugee Resource Guide: Houston, Texas (2002); OIRA
- ◆ In Their Own Voices Series. Teenage Refugees from ----- Speak Out. Globe Fearon Educational Publisher.
- ◆ Out of Many, One: A History of the Immigration and Refugee Services of America Network. (1997). Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA).
- ◆ Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees. (2004). Center for Applied Linguistics, Refugee Service Center.
- ◆ World Refugee Survey: An Annual Assessment of Conditions Affecting Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Internally Displaced Persons. (Published annually). IRSA, U.S. Committee for Refugees.



# *Informational Resources (continued)*

- ◆ Welcome, Refugee Guide to Resettlement (Refugee Orientation Video). (2004). Funded by U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.
- ◆ Journey of Hope: Cultural Orientation for Refugee Women in the United States. Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA).
- ◆ [www.refugeesusa.org](http://www.refugeesusa.org) (IRSA)
- ◆ [www.refugees.org](http://www.refugees.org) U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR)
- ◆ [www.womenscommission.org](http://www.womenscommission.org) Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children
- ◆ [www.culturalorientation.net](http://www.culturalorientation.net) The Cultural Orientation Resource Center, Center for Applied Linguistics
- ◆ [www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org) The Center for Applied Linguistics