

# *A Conceptual Framework for Research and Practice*

Some changes in our lives were created by our own decisions, but others were forced upon us by the impersonal circumstances of life. (Ira Progoff, 1975, p. 134)

The lives of refugees, like others, are constructed in broad and multiple contexts. For refugees, these contexts include the family, neighborhood, and community in the part of the world from which they immigrated and those same broad groupings in the new host society. The experiences and perceptions of refugees are shaped by the opportunities, limitations, possibilities, and constraints that are naturally available in all of these milieus. Our conceptual framework for the study of Bosnian refugees draws on a number of models. These include an ecosystems perspective for refugee populations, a framework that lays out the stages of refugee experience, and an acculturation model for refugee adaptation. We also discuss the resettlement experience as the product of the interaction of the human and social capital that refugees bring to a new culture with the characteristics of the host society. We propose an ecosystems model of refugee resettlement as our theoretical framework for this volume.

## **Conceptual Framework Models of Resettlement**

Bosnian lives changed dramatically, beginning in April of 1992, and these changes were largely beyond the control of the common man. Lives were lost because people were identified as Muslim. Others were killed, especially men and boys, because they lived in a town such as Srebrenica, where “cameras rolled . . . as Serbs entered a UN ‘safe haven’ and led thousands of Muslim men to their death while Dutch troops stood by and did nothing” (H. Goldman, personal communication, August 2004). Still others escaped death or injury by chance, as a result of either an early escape over the border to another country, or, as we shall see later, a momentary distraction that altered an intent to murder. Factors that impact the outcome such as the network of family and other social relationships, roles held and status achieved, first in the original and then in the new culture, and

the experiences of exodus, transit and resettlement all make up the refugee's life story (Hein, 1993). The historical context of the refugee experience includes the patterns of life prior to the war, events during the war itself, and the progression through displacement and resettlement. The models that follow provide a context for listening to refugee stories and for understanding the ways in which the stories unfolded.

### ***The Ecosystems Perspective***

The ecosystems perspective “was developed to arrange, integrate, and systematize knowledge about the interrelationships of people with each other and with their environments” (Pillari, 2002, p. 7). Sociological and social work practices have long focused on the dynamic interactions suggested by systems theory between individuals, families, groups, organizations, and their environments. Such a focus is effective in mitigating harmful social conditions and in bringing about a change for improved psychosocial functioning (Morales & Sheafor, 2002). The ecosystems perspective combines the principles of ecology (the study of the relationship between organisms and their environment) and general systems theory (all organisms are entities with boundaries and subsystems) in working with people.

An ecosystems perspective (Figure 2.1) that illustrates critical layers of refugee lives and their environments is adapted from Morales and Sheafor (2002) and based on Brofenbrenner's work in ecological models (1977).

At an individual level, there are *biopsychosocial* factors that affect a refugee's interactions within the rest of the system. Biopsychosocial factors acknowledge the contributions of an individual's natural endowments (human biology) together with psychosocial factors (the person-in-situation). Biopsychosocial factors comprise a cluster of individual characteristics, such as personality and temperament, lifestyle, skills and abilities, a personal world view, and customary responses to stress and problems arising from interaction with the other levels of the system (Morales & Sheafor, 2002, p. 9). People are affected by stress within themselves and also from aspects of the environment which press upon them (Payne, 1991, p. 83).

Inside the family context, individuals are influenced by the lifestyle of, and interactions with, family members, including one's spouse, children, and extended family members. The organization of family roles and the negotiation of authority, gender, and emotion reflect values and beliefs held within the family. The family also has a capacity for interacting internally, *within* the system, to deal with the interactive dynamics between individual members. It also reacts to external factors originating in other levels of the system, in the culture, or the environment, for example.

Cultural values and belief systems are important features of the ecosystems perspective because of the way in which they are embedded in individual and family level characteristics. Cultures have unique value and belief systems that shape our

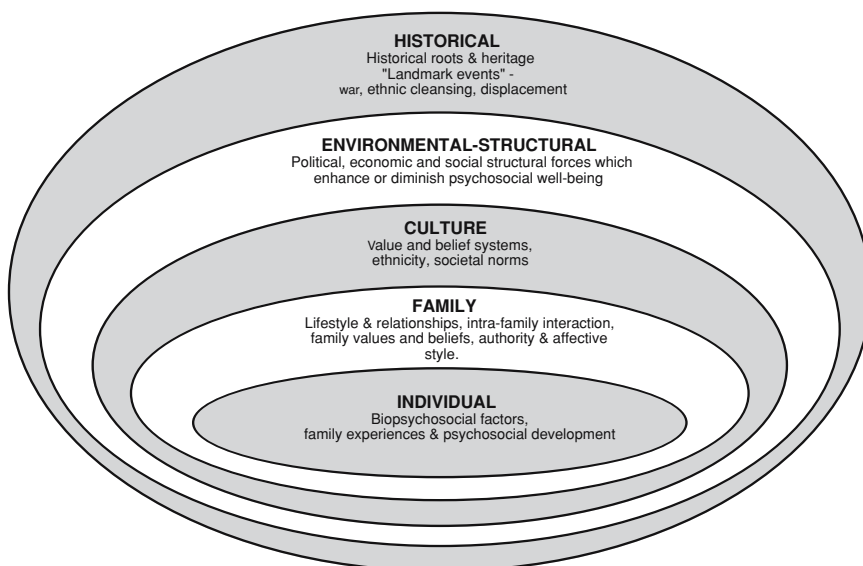


Figure 2.1. An ecosystems perspective for refugee populations. Source: Adapted from Morales and Sheafor (2002, p. 10).

response to stressors and to social problems (Morales & Sheafor, 2002; Kirmayer *et al.*, 2003). Culture develops over time in interaction with environmental and historical factors and incorporates specific structures in the process: language, food, ethnic identification, gender roles, kinship styles, religion, customs, and styles of communication (Morales & Sheafor, 2002, p. 10). These aspects of a refugee's culture of origin may be quite different from those encountered in the culture of resettlement.

Environmental factors include political, economic, and social structures. Morales and Sheafor (2002) suggest that many problems affecting special populations such as refugees are caused by these structural arrangements. We address the structures of education, welfare, health and mental health, and public safety later in the book in terms of the challenges they present in the process of adaptation. Social structures can support or enhance adaptive efforts in resettlement, or they can be the source of psychosocial problems for special populations.

Morales and Sheafor (2002, p. 10) acknowledge the importance of the historical experience of special populations and emphasize the potential impact of "landmark events" such as war, ethnic cleansing, and displacement. It is critical to assess the duration of experiences, and the age when they were experienced, and to be aware of both the contribution of historical influences and their interaction with each of the other levels of the system.

*Habitat and Niche*

Two concepts drawn from ecological theory, *habitat and niche*, are especially relevant to explore in order to understand adaptation to a changing environment (Hepworth *et al.*, 1997). *Habitats* are the physical and social settings where individuals and families live, set within cultural contexts. Physical and social settings may be either rich or deficient in resources vital to human growth and development. Furthermore, such wealth or deficiency may be interpreted in ways that are specific to that cultural context. For instance, a westerner may look upon a third-world village with no indoor plumbing or electricity as terribly impoverished, but a family within that village owning animals, growing crops that provide more than sufficient food for the family, and having healthy children may view its environment as very rich in resources for the well-being of the family.

Niches can be thought of as roles held by members of a community, roles that are representative in a particular stage of life, or as a task of human maturation (Hepworth *et al.*, 1997). For instance, the roles and status one holds as a young child in a family evolve over time to that of student, young adult, worker, spouse, and elder. Roles and niches are shaped by family and social relationships and cultural norms as we mature. For example, elders are more highly respected in some cultures than others, and the roles and status of women differ considerably between cultures. Hepworth and colleagues also note that opportunities to find one's niche, thereby "achieving self-respect and a stable sense of identity" are unequally distributed in modern society (Hepworth *et al.*, 1997, p. 17).

The ecosystems perspective places individuals in the niche and habitat of their social and physical environment. Refugee lives are notable for the habitats and niches that they have lost. In order to appreciate what refugees have left behind, it is critical to understand the resources that existed in the old way of life, in the former environment. Refugees also often witness the destruction of those resources before they are able to leave. Decisions to flee may be triggered by "the disintegration of long-standing family and community resources . . . the uprooted realize that there is little to keep them in their home villages or towns, because everything of importance has already been destroyed" (Martin, 2004, p. 14). Having made the decision to leave the old environment, refugees are confronted with a new environment, with its unknown resources and deficiencies, where they will discover a new habitat and carve out a new niche.

Next, we explore the stages of refugee experience as a temporal framework, which we find useful for evaluating resettlement outcomes. Major disruptions occur in the natural evolution of the ecosystem during times of war and displacement. The types of disruption and their particular effects on the ecosystem vary as the following "stages" will illustrate.

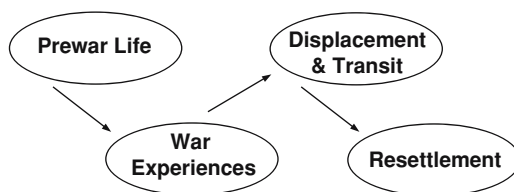


Figure 2.2. Stages of migration.

### ***Stages of Migration***

In order to understand the resettlement and adaptation of refugees in a host society, it is critical to examine all aspects of a refugee's migration path. Drachman (1992) advocates conceptualizing a process of flight and recovery for refugees as comprising three stages: premigration and departure, transit, and resettlement. For our purposes, we find it more useful to conceive of four stages of refugee life: life before the war, experiences during the war, displacement and transit, and resettlement in a new community (Figure 2.2).

The literature on refugee resettlement, in our view, pays too little attention to the first stages, that is, pre-war, war, and transit. An exception is the work of Weine and colleagues (Weine, 1999; Weine *et al.*, 1995b, 1998; Weine & Kuc, 2001), who primarily focus on experiences in war and the impact of war trauma on mental health. Miller, Muzurovic, Worthington, Tipping, & Goldman (2002, p. 342) also draw attention to prewar life as an important context for refugees to define their current lives, noting, "life prior to exile becomes a central reference point among refugees for the evaluation of their present life circumstances."

Because it can serve as an ongoing frame of reference for evaluating and comparing their current experience in the host society, a consideration of refugees' lives before the war is important (Owens-Manley & Coughlan, 2002). Refugees' experiences during the war and in transit are also important to understand because refugees do not finally begin to relax and attempt to regain a sense of normalcy until they have arrived in the host country. The experiences of transit do not allow refugees to feel that they have arrived at their journey's end. For Bosnians especially, transit may have involved a significant period of time in a country of first asylum where they felt their lives were in limbo (Mertus & Teanovic, 1997). Many Bosnians were settled temporarily in countries of first asylum such as Germany, Turkey, or Pakistan before they were granted asylum in the country of final resettlement. Miller and colleagues (2002, p. 341) provide a broad view of the "stressors of exile" in the last stage of resettlement, documenting significant sources of postmigration distress such as lack of adequate income, language barriers, and social isolation.

And finally, models of refugee adaptation suggest different strategies that refugees may adopt to cope with a new community and new culture. Characteristics of both the individual and the host society may influence the choice of strategy that refugees make (Berry, 2001).

### ***Model of Acculturation***

Berry has argued that the importance attached to the maintenance of one's culture and the degree and amount of contact with members of the host society will be reflected in the kind of acculturation strategy an individual adopts—assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization (Berry, 1992). An adapted model of Berry's work is presented in Figure 2.3. In this particular conceptualization, assimilation involves giving up one's attachment to the culture of origin and committing to the host culture; integration allows for maintaining a commitment to the old culture while simultaneously accepting the values of the new society; separation suggests a strategy by which one remains committed to the old ways and involves little or no interactions with members of the host society; and marginalization results in a lack of connection to both the culture of origin and to the host culture (Berry, 1986).

Berry's work demonstrates that refugees experience the least stress when there is cultural similarity between the old and the new society, when they have extensive interaction with members of the host society, and when individuals are in favor of integrating the various features of the two cultures (Berry, 2001).

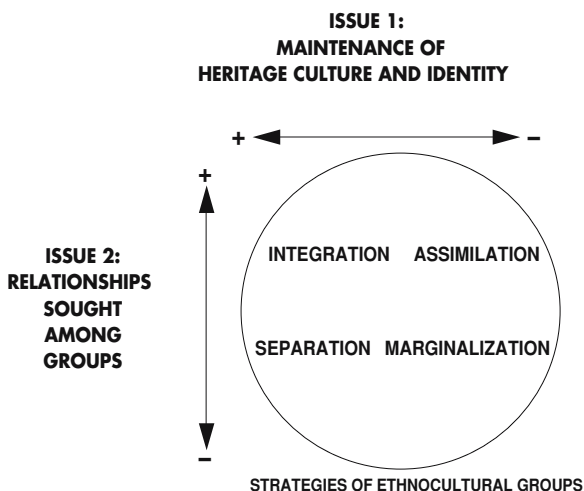


Figure 2.3. Adaptive options for refugee groups during acculturation. Source: Berry (2001).

*Refugee and Host Society Interaction*

Refinements to the acculturation model proposed by Berry (1986) come from researchers who argue that the choice of adaptation strategy is the outcome of the interaction of refugee characteristics and characteristics of the host society (Berry, 2001; Berry *et al.*, 2003; Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003). Refugee characteristics include the human and social capital they bring with them to the host society. *Human capital* includes education and skills, English language ability, and cultural sophistication; *social capital* refers to the network of relationships that a refugee has with others and the systems of social support available to him or her (Portes, 1995). The visibility of refugees and their cultural similarity or dissimilarity to the dominant group in the host society will also have a bearing on their acculturation experience (Berry *et al.*, 2003).

Relevant features of the host society include receptivity to newcomers, especially refugees, and its resettlement policies and services. How receptive a host society is to newcomers is reflected in the degree to which the society welcomes cultural diversity and the extent to which refugees can choose to engage with natives, without constraints from the dominant group in a process of *mutual accommodation* (Berry, 2001, p. 619). Integration is the preferred goal of refugee resettlement (Berry, 2001; Valtonen, 2004) and is defined as “the ability to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and political activities, without having to relinquish one’s own distinct ethnocultural identity and culture” (Valtonen, 2004, p. 74). The ability to participate fully in the host society may be impeded by prejudice and discrimination. Discrimination, which is usually based on racial and ethnic prejudice and stereotypes, can effectively constrict opportunities in areas such as housing and employment. Constraints on full participation in a new society can also be greatly influenced by refugee policies and services.

Refugee policies and services, where they exist, vary tremendously in countries around the world, and as Berry (2001) points out, policy development is rarely informed by research findings. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2003) juxtapose two resettlement paradigms: the medical model and the social inclusion model. The medical model emphasizes a mental health perspective and assumes that refugees suffer from trauma and require counseling and medical intervention, first and foremost. The social inclusion paradigm, in contrast, emphasizes labor market integration designed to promote independence through employment for adults and school for children as soon as possible after arrival. Australia’s resettlement services generally emphasize mental health needs, whereas policies and services in the United States are oriented toward early labor market integration (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003).

Some have argued that resettlement in the twenty-first century has moved toward a social rights orientation for immigrants and refugees which considers “duties of the community” toward newcomers (van der Veen, 1993, p. 78) and emphasizes full participation and integration in society (Breton, 1992; Bottomore,

1992; Kallen, 1995). Other researchers, however, have shown that well intentioned and benevolent resettlement programs can be dysfunctional (Harrell-Bond, 1999). Even, or perhaps, especially, highly developed and extensive refugee resettlement services and programs can inadvertently foster dependency and undermine autonomy (Harrell-Bond, 1999). For example, according to Korac (2003), the resettlement paradigm in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark results in systems of reception and settlement that disable "... individual initiative, hence undermining self esteem or as limiting basic rights" (Korac, 2003, pp. 407–408). Valtonen (2004) focuses on the "societal and institutional context of settlement" (p. 70) in Finland and examines how the status of being a refugee relates to labor market participation, social relations within one's ethnic group and with the host society, encounters with the new culture, and involvement in the political or civil spheres of society (p. 75).

The interaction of these two sets of considerations—refugee characteristics and characteristics of the host society—will affect both the adaptation strategy that refugees adopt and resettlement outcomes. Colic-Peisker and Walker (2003, p. 349) point out that the refugee's choice of strategies is made following:

... a more or less conscious self-assessment of one's resources based on sex, age, urban and cultural skills, formal education and skills, language proficiency, family situation, social networks, as well as physical and mental well-being.

In Chapters 7 and 8, we describe this process of self-assessment among the Bosnians we interviewed and we discuss why the outcomes differed for various groups in the sample.

Three frameworks have been described: ecosystems that constitute the layered contexts of a refugee's life experience; the temporal stages of that lived experience; and individual strategies and mutual accommodation in the process of acculturation. They are presented together in an ecosystems model of refugee resettlement that integrates the theoretical perspectives with which we framed our final understandings of what our respondents told us.

## **An Ecosystems Model of Refugee Resettlement**

The ecosystems model in Figure 2.4 illustrates the changes that occur as refugees proceed through the stages of refugee experience, moving from pre-war life to experiences in war, to the events of transition in a country of first asylum or a refugee camp, and to arrival in a new country as a place to start over. There is no single refugee experience for, as Malki (1995, p. 496) points out:

It would seem that the term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable 'kind' or 'type' of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations.



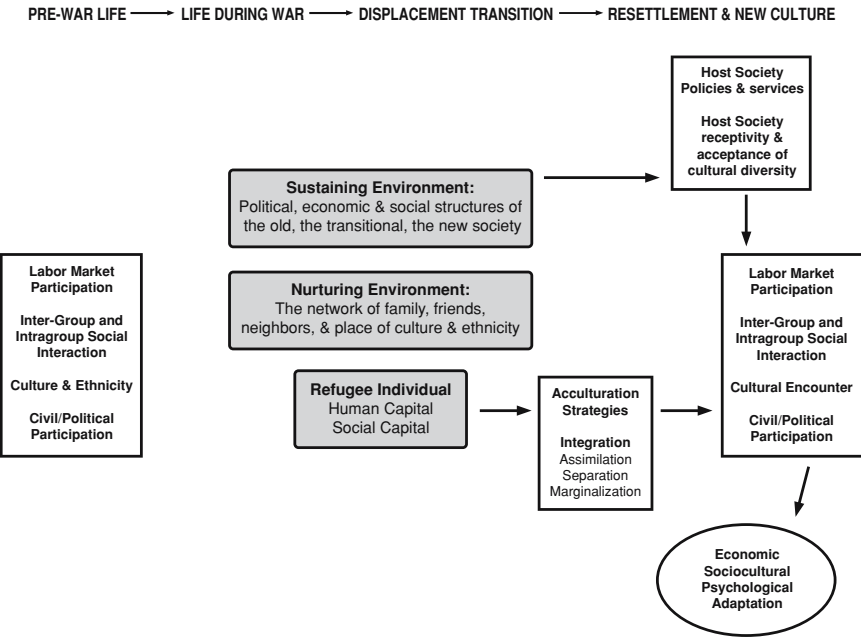


Figure 2.4. Ecosystems model of refugee resettlement.

Nonetheless, we believe that it is possible and helpful to identify the social and psychological processes and structures that typify the experiences of flight and resettlement.

The *nurturing* environment surrounding an individual prior to emigration typically includes family, friends, and close neighbors in familiar surroundings (Sheafor *et al.*, 2000). Ways of communicating, buying goods, visiting, and all aspects of one's culture and customs are well known and integrated as a part of self.<sup>1</sup> During times of war and displacement, the familiar ways of doing things are lost, family and friends may be separated or killed, and transitional living and final resettlement in host countries present demands for adaptation.

The *sustaining* environment includes the economic, social, cultural, and political structures of society (Valtonen, 2004; Sheafor *et al.*, 2000). A refugee's sustaining environment provides access to participation in the labor market, the educational system, social welfare institutions, and the health and public safety systems. It might include neighborhood, religious institutions, and social or recreational

<sup>1</sup> Phibbs Witmer and Culver (2001) criticize the literature on trauma and resilience in Bosnian refugees for the lack of emphasis on knowing the Muslim and Bosnian cultures in order to better understand refugee adaptation and functioning for Bosnians. Bringa (1995, 1996) provides an excellent ethnography of village life in Bosnia prior to the war in both written and documentary forms.

groups. A refugee's sustaining environment undergoes significant changes as he or she moves through stages of the life experience. The structures of even the pre-war culture often begin to demonstrate discrimination and barriers to employment, education, and other forms of participation for a minority group, as the existing culture moves toward disintegration.

The experience of arriving in a host community is influenced by a variety of factors and circumstances in the nurturing and sustaining communities. The nurturing community in the new society will vary in its development prior to this new arrival, depending on the strength and size of the ethnic group, how many family members and friends came before them, and who is there to welcome them and assist with adjustment. It is also true that "...refugees may have their community of significant others dispersed in many parts of the world and their well-being may be intimately tied to events and relations in far-off places" (Eastmond, 2000, p. 76). The sustaining community may vary in the range and depth of resettlement services and programs offered by the local system of refugee resettlement and in the attitudes and behaviors of the host community toward newcomers.

### ***Refugee Identity and the Return to a Normal Life***

"Refugee" is a social category to which few aspire. It is an unwelcome mantle that is to be shed as soon as possible. It is a stigmatized and negative identity. It also suggests that important aspects of one's former identity have been overshadowed by this major life trauma of being displaced and forced to seek refuge far from home. Social identities are anchored in the niches and habitats that are embedded in the communities we inhabit. Forced displacement shatters those connections. As refugees move along the temporal continuum through war, displacement, transition, and resettlement, refuge implies opportunities to reconstruct, or construct newly, roles and statuses that constitute a social identity. A new community, in the form of the host society, as well as a reconstructed ethnic community need to be put in place to both nurture and sustain that identity. The process of reconstructing identity and community is at the heart of the acculturation effort (Colic-Peisker, 2002). This is what refugees mean when they say that they want to return to normal. They want to stop being refugees and to resume a normal life.

### ***Conflicts in the Nurturing and Sustaining Environments***

There may have been significant losses of family members or friends who were killed or left behind in the refugee family's nurturing environment. But there is also high potential for family conflicts within the family that resettled together. Conflicts may occur across generations, although children often serve as "the force for socializing their elders to a new culture" (Martin, 2004, p. 16). Women's roles change, and they may become heads of households, without husbands or older

children to help. Men may experience the frustrations of role loss and may lack employment or the ability to support their families (Jalali, 1988; Martin, 2004).

As family members “acculturate” at different speeds, family and social relationships may be disrupted or modified. Such potential conflicts for refugee groups may include changes in status of aged family members who are slower to adapt and become increasingly isolated; marital conflicts arising from an uneven adaptation of spouses or changing gender roles; challenges of adolescent children in their need for autonomy and differentiation that may be complicated and magnified by the refugee experience; and, for the youngest refugee children, the loss of their native culture, as they are most apt to assimilate easily and acquire new language skills and habits (Jalali, 1988).

Similarly, variables that have implications for the sustaining environment exert a positive influence on the adjustment of refugees. These may include a positive attitude among the members of the host society and the presence of other members of the same ethnic group (Brislin, 1981). These positive influences may be enhanced if incoming refugees possess marketable skills and are familiar with the host culture, especially the host language. On the other hand, discrimination experienced by refugees has a negative effect on their mental health (Pernice & Brook, 1996), whereas psychosocial wellness is bolstered in communities where there is a critical mass of co-ethnics. Refugees often experience a loss of status in occupation and find that skills, especially university credentials, licenses, or certifications, are not transferable (Haines, 1996). English language skills are highly correlated with positive adaptation, and there is considerable variation in the acquisition of language skills among even a single group of refugees.

### *Adaptation Strategies and Outcomes in Resettlement*

Refugees choose adaptation strategies along the defined parameters of maintaining the old culture and investing in the new. The options diagrammed by Berry include the decision to assimilate the new culture and throw off the old; to separate from the new culture and maintain the old; to remain marginalized from either; or to integrate important aspects of each (Berry, 1986). But the dominant group can exercise considerable influence over whether refugee groups may be allowed to integrate. If assimilation is desired, pressure may be exerted to “become American” to the exclusion of maintaining native cultural characteristics. If the dominant group seeks to keep refugees separate, segregation will be the likely result. When refugees are marginalized, they are excluded. The preferred strategy of integration is best realized as an individual strategy when the dominant group embraces cultural diversity or “multiculturalism” (Berry, 2001).

Overall adjustment to the new society may be measured along three dimensions: economic adaptation, socio-cultural adaptation, and psychological adaptation. Together they constitute three equally important measures of successful

adjustment in a new host country. Economic adaptation refers to how well refugees integrate into the economy and the labor market of the host community. Socio-cultural adaptation reflects the day-to-day ability to function in the community. Psychological adaptation encompasses the physical and mental health of a refugee family (Aycan & Berry, 1996). The various strategies for adaptation lead to different experiences in labor market participation, in social group interactions, both with the host society and the ethnic group, and in participation in civil or political activities. An integrationist will play a much more active role within these spheres than if the intention is to remain separated, or than if one is pushed out and marginalized by both groups. A refugee's participation in these areas determines his or her perceptions of health and well-being, adaptation to new cultural demands, and success in the labor market.

"Culture shock" may be experienced, and the experiences that occur postmigration in the host society can be just as stressful and damaging as the trauma of war. Western psychologists in particular may minimize the difficulties of cultural adjustment and the challenges of mediating the demands of a new society, especially if the host society is not receptive to refugees (Kanaaneh, 2000; Bracken *et al.*, 1997; Eastmond, 1998; Masic, 2000; Miller *et al.*, 2002). Chapter 7 provides a more expansive discussion of culture shock in describing the first year adjustments of Bosnian refugees in Utica.

The language barrier for refugees and the need to understand a new and different social system pose initial hardships but can also cause stress and anxiety for an indeterminate period of time. Newcomers will need to learn to negotiate transportation, medical aid, food distribution, and a multitude of common practices that are culturally and socially specific. If we do not include social systems and culture in our analysis, we cannot effectively understand or report on the refugee experience nor can we help with the aftermath. In the following chapters, we tell the stories that were so generously shared with us by Bosnian families in Utica, using the framework that we have described in this chapter.

## Summary

The purpose of our research was to understand the experiences of these Bosnian families in their lives prior to the war, the experiences and disruptions of war, and their current lives here in the United States. As we shall explore throughout the book, the physical and social settings in which the Bosnians lived before the war were blown apart by war and displacement. The ecosystems perspective places individuals in the niche and habitat of their social and physical surroundings as layers of refugee lives that either support or diminish their experience. It is critical to understand the importance of those layers of the ecosystem in terms of what the refugees left behind. It is also crucial to examine the new environment presented by a receiving society in all of its resources and deficiencies.

A framework that lays out the stages of refugee experience and an acculturation model developed by Berry and refined by others provide additional helpful models for understanding refugee narratives. The temporal experience of refugees requires that they adapt to changing environments as they move from a pre-migratory phase (in the case of Bosnians, a pre-war phase and then a “during war” phase) to displacement and transition and finally to a resettlement country. Refugees adopt different strategies of adaptation, and the optimal strategy for individuals and receiving societies is one of integration. Societies that value cultural diversity are most supportive of newcomers integrating into the community, and participation in key structures of society has the most positive impact on adaptation outcomes, economic, socio-cultural, and psychological.

Bosnian Refugees in America  
New Communities, New Cultures

Coughlan, R.; Owens-Manley, J.

2006, IX, 197 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-387-25155-4