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## **Roots & Routes: A re-imagining of refugee identity constructions and the implications for schooling**

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### **Abstract**

The ways in which refugees are assumed to adapt to United States society have serious consequences on their enjoyment and fulfillment in their schooling experiences. This is further compounded by the incorporation of refugees under a more general umbrella of "immigrant" studies. Here, excerpts are shared from an experiential study of fifteen adolescent Bosnian female refugees in New York City schools to articulate an alternative identity paradigm, *roots & routes*, which captures the ways in which refugees consciously balance their ethnic and new national identities in understanding themselves, their lives, and how they represent themselves to others. This paradigm enables a more holistic view of refugee experiences in schools. It allows one to see the individual experiences of refugees who are often high academic achievers and assumed by their teachers to be "adapted" while actually still reporting relatively high rates of isolation.

### **Introduction**

Scholars and practitioners in the field of comparative and international education, especially in the United States, have recently turned their attention towards the extent to which immigrants and their schools and families need to adapt to or accommodate each other's needs. In this article, I posit that before we can address this issue, we need to question assumptions of "adaptation," "accommodation" and especially "assimilation" to view the processes at work for the students in question. Further, I problematize the use of the term "immigrant" as an umbrella term that includes refugees and sometimes even non-immigrant minority groups. I discuss these points through an analysis of data collected in a qualitative study of the experiences of relocation and schooling of fifteen female adolescents from Bosnia in New York City. Ultimately, I argue for a re-imagined paradigm of identity constructions in exile that breaks from the linear and sequential paradigms of traditional psychology towards recognizing individual growth and experiences. I then delve into the implications of this new paradigm in a study of refugee academic achievement and behaviors in the classroom, discussing my notion of Masks of Achievement.

### **Background**

Despite an influx of refugees into the United States during the last few decades, there has not been a parallel growth in the study of refugees in the U.S. (Ahearn & Athey, 1991), with most studies remaining under the rubric of "immigrant" studies. Ethnic studies of refugees overlook developmental processes and subjective experiences, while psychological approaches neglect cultural issues in identity formations. Refugees are a product of conflicts in international,

national, and regional politics, and the reception of refugees in host countries is also influenced by international, national, and regional politics. Both refugees and immigrants have similar experiences; all newcomer children are in direct confrontation with the language and culture of the new land and must learn to balance or reconcile previously held beliefs and values with the norms of their new societies (Kaprielian-Churchill & Churchill, 1994). There remains a fundamental difference between the situations of immigrants and refugees. Immigrants exercise a measure of control over their futures as they prepare and plan for emigration. Refugees, in contrast, are compelled to leave their home and homeland usually by force and often on short notice. They have little choice about where they go and typically never have the possibility to return home. They often find themselves without a state, without citizenship, without nationality, and without a home. This basic absence of a real freedom of choice and of movement is a fundamental cause of their powerlessness (Ogbu, 1991), and a source of anguish. It is within this context of exile that their experiences and needs can be understood (Kaprielian-Churchill & Churchill, 1994; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Studies comparing refugee and immigrant achievement rates consistently show higher academic success among refugees than among immigrants (Suárez-Orozco, 1989; Loescher, 1993; Kaprielian-Churchill & Churchill, 1994; Jones & Rutter, 1998). This suggests that the reason behind flight to the U.S. impacts the people involved in at least one area, that of education, and thus contexts of exit seem to play a role in the transition of refugees and immigrants to their life trajectories in their new homes. This illustrates the vitality of studying refugees as a group distinct from immigrant groups (see Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) and from minority groups (see Gibson, 1988). It is clear that the identity construction of refugees is closely linked to coping mechanisms utilized in response to their refugee situations. Furthermore, their status as a group who lived through a war situation and whose country has been dramatically changed by war deeply affects their identity formation. Identity acts as a rooting point from which individuals make decisions (Elliott, Kratochwill & Cook, 2000). Given the centrality of identity and the centrality of refugeeness on identity, it is evident how greatly refugees differ from immigrant and nonimmigrant minority groups.

Adolescent refugee students are most at risk with respect to school performance and general well-being, whether they are considered within the refugee group separately or within the secondary school population as a whole. At a time when they are undergoing the physical, emotional, and sexual changes of adolescence (Blos, 1967) and also trying to deal with the trauma of their young lives, they must adjust to a new country, with different language and behavioral patterns, and they must make decisions and take steps toward career goals.

### **Methodology**

In 2001, I conducted an experiential study of how female adolescent refugees from Bosnia described and understood their resettlement experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In semi-structured interviews with fifteen refugees between the ages of 15 and 24 who attended school in the New York City area, the themes of identity construction and schooling experiences were explored. Each interview lasted between 2.5 and 5 hours and was participant-driven, which, while there was a specific list of topics that needed to be covered, looked more like an informal conversation than an interview. In addition, I interviewed ten members of the Bosnian refugee community in order to triangulate and contextualize the core participants' self-narratives, although it is the data from the teenage refugees that is presented here. All refugees were

contacted using personal contacts and the chain effect, whereby those in the community know others who are information-rich. The personal nature of the selection process helped increase trust between the researcher and the interviewees, and confidentiality was guaranteed for all participants. Pseudonyms were chosen together and are used exclusively in transcripts and reporting. The interviews were coded and analyzed for specific themes and interpreted based on readings of developmental psychology and expectations of refugee schooling experiences. The research was delimited by choices made in target population and selection process. While these factors contributed to flattening differences amongst a typically extremely heterogeneous population, they also posed potential limitations to the generalizability of the findings. Thus, it is with caution that one transfers these findings to another population. However, the participant-focused research and analysis process puts the refugee voices at the center of the research and serves as a starting point for understanding the nuances of the resettlement experience from the perspectives of the refugees themselves.

### **Roots & Routes: An alternative paradigm for refugee identity constructions and its implications for educators**

This study uses the interpretive frameworks of critical psychology and cultural studies to argue, based on my findings, that the identity constructions of refugees can be better understood in terms of their attitudes to their country of origin and their diasporic community in the U.S., rather than in terms of their relationships with hegemonic U.S. society. Developmental psychological paradigms frame identity development in terms of a linear sequence of stages, with a set goal being an assumed successful assimilation or adaptation measured by attitudes towards and relationship with the mainstream culture (Broughton, 1987). These theories do not account for the ways in which individuals depart from such stage theories and fail to deal with the diverse forms of coping mechanisms, assimilative and adaptive responses that occur. This research exposes a gap between identity development paradigms and the actual experiences of the refugees. In this current era of increased cultural hybridization (Appadurai, 1996), refugees may be more concerned with issues of their own personal cultural hybridity as they navigate their new understandings of nationality and identity, which are reflective of their individual experiences and aspirations, and less concerned with issues of adaptation or assimilation to U.S. cultural norms.

My work articulates an alternative paradigm, a coupling of the refugee's *roots & routes*, which captures the ways in which refugees consciously balance their ethnic and new national identities in understanding themselves, their lives, and how they represent themselves to others. This emergent paradigm illustrates a re-imagining of the ways in which refugees' identities are responsive to the unique situations of each refugee's life. I expand on Gilroy's (1991a) work on origins and orientation to form this new hypothesis. Gilroy makes important departures from established identity theories by suggesting immigrant and minority identity is characterized by past ethnic experiences and future ethnic expectations. I suggest that, for refugees, because of the added component of their experiences of, and responses to, war trauma, identity can be better characterized by their descriptions of where they came from (*roots*) since the country of their youth no longer exists as they knew it, and their responses to their ethnic diasporic communities as epitomizing their future directions (*routes*). Further, it became clear that each individual's identity changed over space and time, in response to past and current events and future aspirations; in other words, their identities remained fluid. Viewing refugee self-understanding in this manner allows for a move away from reliance on

the linear and sequential paradigms that posit identity development as movement through specific stages towards a goal of assimilation or "identity resolution." Such paradigms gauge the developmental progress of the refugees in comparison to each other, rather than in terms of their individual experiences and place them perpetually in a peripheral relationship to the larger society. The more holistic approach offered by the *roots & routes* paradigm allows one to see more processes at work as illustrated in the final section of this paper.

The *roots & routes* couplets privilege the individual experiences of the refugees in understanding their adaptive processes to the flight and resettlement phenomena. This paradigm is based on a notion of couplets. Each couplet represents an orientation which I claim most appropriately illustrates the way the refugee constructs her identity in order to balance her past experiences (her roots) and her future aspirations (her routes). The couplets which best describe the responses of the fifteen refugees in my research population are: *multicultural & transient; nostalgic & loyalist; nonchalant & pragmatic.*

Based on the self-narratives of the refugees, I found that both their attitudes towards their countries of origin and towards the ethnic enclaves catalyzed their self-understandings and the ways in which they viewed their future--that they would eventually return home (nostalgic), that they neither plan on returning home nor remaining in the U.S. (multicultural), or that they may return home but may stay in the U.S. (nonchalant). These attitudes were coupled with views regarding the diasporic community. The nostalgic refugees separate themselves from the ethnic enclave, talking derisively about futile attempts to create a mini-country here; they prefer to limit their friendships, to remain loyal to friends at home or from home who are here and also plan on returning to their country of origin. The multicultural refugees reject the ethnic enclave for similar reasons but have the added dimension of fearing close ties with any group. They shun the community and find solace in the idea of transience, that they can be friends with people from many different backgrounds. They make the connection that if they were to find themselves in a state of flux again, they would have a group of friends anywhere in the world within a short time frame. The refugees who are nonchalant about returning home displayed an indifference to the diasporic community. They were ambivalent about their need for friends from the same place; yet they recognized the practical implications of being involved in the community but were content and comfortable with any friends that they made at school. Thus, it became clear that a coupling of the spheres was appropriate and captured the ways in which refugees in my population constructed their identities:

*TABLE ONE: Summary of the Roots & Routes Couplets*

ROOTING	ROUTING
<p><b>Multicultural:</b> value the possibility of being able to live anywhere in the world since the country of their youth no longer exists.</p>	<p><b>Transient:</b> prefer to distance themselves from the diaspora and the majority, enjoying relationships with other internationals, maintaining an eye on further international living.</p>

<p><b>Nostalgic:</b> remain focused on returning to their country of origin and are only here for the purposes of their education.</p>	<p><b>Loyalist:</b> distance themselves from the diaspora and prefer to keep their relationships with those they knew at home, or those who are in a similar situation to themselves, expecting to return home in the near future.</p>
<p><b>Nonchalant:</b> life is here; they entertain the possibility of returning home but state they probably prefer to stay here.</p>	<p><b>Pragmatic:</b> neither seek out nor reject diaspora as friendships but live in its milieu and appreciate the practical assistance the community offers them.</p>

This identity construction also acts as a coping mechanism for each of the refugees, again reflective of the individual experiences that are behind the couplets. The refugees in the multicultural and transient paradigm find solace in the idea that should they face a situation of uncertainty and flight again, they know they will be able to manage and be happy--"I know now that I will be happy no matter what happens to me" (Alina, 18). Refugees in the nostalgic and loyalist paradigm manage their war trauma and their relative guilt at taking advantage of opportunities here that are not available in Bosnia by keeping a strong focus on returning home, working hard in the meantime so that they can go back. Further, they strictly maintain friendships with Bosnians in similar positions. The refugees in the nonchalant and pragmatic paradigm are able to rely on the Bosnian community for assistance when needed, and take comfort from that fact. Each looks to her own attitudes to Bosnia and to the Bosnian community as a base from which to define her own identity.

The two parts of each couplet represent the ways in which the refugees understand themselves. The multicultural and transient refugees explain their adaptation in terms of their inability to return to Bosnia and their inability to bond with other Bosnians in New York City; they defined themselves first in these terms, and then explained how much they value being friends with "foreigners only" (Nives, 16), and the need to feel as if they are "just passing through" (Nataša, 24). The refugees in the nostalgic and loyalist paradigm also defined themselves through this dual referencing: first, by defining themselves fully through the temporary nature of their stay in the United States; second, by aligning themselves with a life in Bosnia. This naturally leads to a distancing from the Bosnian community. From this perspective (temporary purpose of being here and rejection of the ethnic enclave), the refugees explained their aspirations to return home and their determination to maintain their childhood friendships and befriend only Bosnians in similar situations. The refugees in the nonchalant and pragmatic group similarly understand their identities through orientations to the Bosnian enclave. They characterize their attitudes to Bosnia as being similar to attitudes toward a summer home--"it's fun, but it's not real life" (Denisa, 18). Additionally, they discuss their practical adjustment in terms of assistance from the Bosnian enclave. From this anchoring, they discussed their lives and their adaptation. Thus, all the refugees defined themselves from within the frameworks of Bosnia and the Bosnian community.

The differences between the identity constructions therefore epitomize the *roots & routes* of the refugees. They use their attitudes toward Bosnia and the Bosnian enclave to anchor their identities and to orient themselves toward where they are going. The specific *roots & routes* are thus interrelated and are indicative of past experiences and the individual's current situation, and both contribute to the refugee's future expectations. For example, those in the multicultural and transient couplet all experienced the loss of at least one close family member and the disruption of family life as a result, while the nostalgic and loyalist refugees all had intact families remaining at home. The nonchalant and pragmatic refugees traveled to New York with their most significant caregiver, with secondary family members remaining behind.

It is important to note that the constructs remain fluid, and there is some overlap between each. For example, all the refugees in this study are pragmatic in their approach to benefiting from being in the United States. They recognize that opportunities exist here in terms of schools that do not exist in Bosnia and work to ensure that they can take full advantage of these opportunities. Further, there is overlap in how the *multicultural & transient* refugees and those in the *nostalgic & loyalist* couplets discuss their attitudes to the Bosnian community--all assume that the Bosnians in Astoria are unhappy because they are trying to create a "Little Bosnia" in New York City. The *multicultural & transient* and the *nonchalant & pragmatic* couplets also overlap in how the refugees describe their attitudes to New York City--both state that they are only here because of circumstances, and both are trying to maximize the opportunities that their circumstances have presented to them. However, the reasoning behind each of these attitudes is somewhat different (e.g., in the former example, the *multicultural & transient* refugees describe rejecting the Bosnian community because it stirs painful memories, whereas the *nostalgic & loyalist* refugees describe rejecting the community because they are going to return to Bosnia and not stay in the U.S.). Therefore, the various constructions are sound in acting as coping mechanisms through which the refugees understand their identities relative to each other. Yet, the constructions are neither static nor deterministic in their bent. Should the circumstances for each of the refugees change, their identities may undergo a similar shift.

### **Refugees and Education**

Building upon my individualized framework of *roots & routes* and borrowing from Gilligan et al.'s (1990) research on academically successful adolescent girls, I also worked with the refugees in this study to better understand their decisions and attitudes towards their schoolwork. The *roots & routes* couplets move away from stepwise developmental patterns that position the refugee in relational opposition to each other in terms of gauging their emotional well-being. The *roots & routes* framework allowed for a more individualized focus that could help educators better understand the refugees in their classrooms. I thus operationalized these identity patterns by placing them in terms of the school place and understanding the attitudes and approaches of refugees in terms of their education.

This led to my secondary hypothesis of Masks of Achievement (Mosselson, 2006, 2007), which echoes Gilligan et al.'s (1990) findings that high academic achievement can often mask depression and adjustment difficulties among academically successful adolescent girls. For refugees, the Masks of Achievement may serve not only to hide depression, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), loneliness, and so on, but may also serve as a way for the refugees to connect with their classmates and the school professionals with whom they work. The *roots & routes* perspective assists us to move beyond psychological categorization. It allows us to look at

the individual level and to engage in the interpretive frameworks of critical psychology and cultural studies as well as existing literature in comparative education, to see how the re-imagined identity constructions fit in with the educational aspirations of the refugees, what the implications of their attitudes are, and thus how schools and teachers can better meet the needs of refugee populations. Research has shown consistently that refugees, when not held back by school authorities, are often among the highest academic achievers in their host countries, a finding that has been born out over time and seen in Australia, the U.K., Sweden, the U.S., and Canada, among other places (Kaprielian-Churchill & Churchill, 1994; Jones & Rutter, 1998).

Education plays a vital role in the identity construction and coping of refugee adolescents (Jones & Rutter, 1998). Education has a dual function for many of the refugees in this study. First, it provides a sense of control over their transience; second, the refugees can transform themselves from the "foreigner" to the "A student." Refugees have experienced life as fragile and tenuous. They have learned that material assets and status can be lost. One refugee, Ines (age 19), told me that her family was financially privileged and well respected in Mostar before the war. Upon her arrival in New York, she had to adjust to "being the same as everyone else and getting furniture from the street." Her status and her relative wealth were irrelevant now. She states "the only thing that matters is education--if my dad could show people a Harvard degree instead of pictures of our old house, it would be better. They could use that, but his memories and stories are useless." The loss she has experienced informs her current attitude towards her schooling, and she is resolved to gain access to the best education she can. The centrality of education and its transportability was a theme repeated by each refugee. In every interview, both with the core and secondary populations, the importance and transportability of education was stressed to me. The research participants constantly referred to how "education goes with you wherever you go. It's possible nothing else does" (Fadila, 22). Education restores in the refugees a sense of hope in their futures, a hope which they previously may have doubted.

Education also allows the refugees space to retreat from the "exotic" or "foreigner" label. All the refugees complained of being seen as different and felt their teachers' anxiety and apprehension toward them during their first few months in the United States. For those who were initially resettled outside New York City, these feelings were all the more acute ( $n = 4$ ); however, all core participants reported unease from their classmates and school personnel during their immediate transition. As the refugees studied hard and excelled academically, the apprehension dissipated and the attitudes of their teachers underwent a palpable change for the better (Mosselson, 2007). As Alina (age 18) explained:

after six months they started saying, 'oh you should think of college, you're smart,' and 'how can I help you?' And I wanted to scream, but I needed your help then, and now I figured it out all by myself... I was the same person all the time, but they didn't know, because all they saw was my A grades.

Fadila (age 22), like all the refugees in this research, had similar sentiments. She, however, had a simple explanation:

Before I proved myself in high school, they didn't know what to do with me. I was a refugee. They were afraid of what I'd seen, and they didn't know how to handle a kid who had seen the worst of life when they couldn't imagine it. But

then, when I started getting A's, they were so happy, because now they could talk to me.

School success also acts as a convenience for relating to others. As a cultural institution, school success signals success in America (Popkewitz, 1998). As a technology of power (Foucault, 1977), school plays a central role in cultural formation and understanding. By being successful in this arena, refugees are indicating compliance with American culture and values that can be easily understood by those working with them. Further, school success categorizes the refugees in easily identifiable ways, which makes them accessible to their classmates and teachers. Ultimately, refugees are then given the space from which to remain exotic or to understand their shifting identities without being burdened by others' misunderstandings or prejudices. Thus, education acts as a vehicle through which refugees can gain control over their situations on two levels--by creating both a sense of a more secure future and a more secure present.

### **Conclusion: Implications for the Schoolplace**

A *roots & routes* perspective on understanding the concerns and processes in play for adolescent refugees helps educators to see more fully the refugees in terms of their individual experiences rather than in terms of expectations of adaptation to the mainstream. This in turn can, I believe, help educators learn how to better understand the refugees in their classrooms. Getting high grades is often a lonely experience, and the refugees in my study confirm this. Further, teachers in New York City have commented informally to me that refugees do well in the U.S. and that "they're just so grateful to be here" that I "don't need to worry about doing research on them at all," with one teacher even telling me, "they're all fine, they're a tough bunch" (Mosselson, 2006). However, clinical studies have documented that despair, depression, PTSD, and even suicide are relatively high among refugee teens, despite their educational achievements (Rutter, 1994). Furthermore, the notion that school success indicates adaptation or even assimilation is superficial at best. By reformulating refugee identity construction in terms of their past experiences and future aspirations, combined with an understanding of their school performance in terms of how it interacts with their identity concerns, teachers can better work with refugee students to see beyond the Masks of Achievement and encourage their goals and understand their emotional needs, rather than relying on their grades to assess their emotional well-being.

Refugees often spoke to me about their ideas for ways in which to make their classroom experiences less painful. These ideas echoed many aspects of critical pedagogy, for example, including student voices in the curriculum. Further, many of the refugee students wanted to find a way to be student advocates, discussing ways in which they could become speakers at other local schools to share with teachers and students their refugee and resettlement experiences. Refugee students also discussed ideas of working collaboratively to provide peer support in the form of weekly meetings to work on issues of mutual concerns (e.g., peer counseling, homework help, and other group projects), and some students had ideas about action projects which were larger in scope. Many of the refugee students pointed out that they felt frustrated about being silenced in their classrooms; they felt that many of their classmates could be interested in their experiences and that they could contribute. Some of them talked about how their mathematics education in their country of origin could help explain concepts to other students who were struggling, but they felt discouraged in bringing it up--one student was even told by her teacher that she should not encourage the use of "shortcuts." Another

student told me, laughingly, that they had to watch a movie on living through war so that the students would understand the impact of war, but no-one ever asked her to talk about it. All the refugees talked about how their ethnicities were not valued and could not understand this as they see it as a form of "cultural capital" from which everyone could benefit.

To conclude, my research privileges the local or individual level as the unit of analysis over the more general or macro level. In working on identity construction among refugees, the *roots & routes* paradigm makes an important departure from linear and sequential, goal-oriented paradigms of development in favor of the individual level and more appropriately captures the experiences of the refugees themselves. Applying this micro-level analysis to the school place highlights individual experiences and brings awareness of Masks of Achievement that may more accurately assess the processes at play for refugees who are often high academic achievers but may be suffering various forms of trauma due to war, flight, and relocation. This approach can better address the needs of students, and inform teachers as it provides more fluid ways to work with individuals and moves away from hegemonic approaches towards identity development and education. In sum, the *roots & routes* paradigm enables a more holistic view of refugees in the school place and allows educators to see the individual experiences of refugees who are often academically successful and assumed by their teachers to be "fine" while actually still reporting relatively high rates of isolation.

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