



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 16  
Issue 3 *September*

Article 7

---

September 1989

## Eastern European Refugees: Implications for Social Work

Richard P. Baker  
*Boise State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Baker, Richard P. (1989) "Eastern European Refugees: Implications for Social Work," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol16/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

# Eastern European Refugees: Implications for Social Work

RICHARD P. BAKER

Boise State University  
Department of Sociology

*The project examined and analyzed the adaptation and ethnicity of Eastern European immigrants. The methodology consisted of in-depth interviews with 28 families. White ethnic groups are able to rapidly adapt to their new environment, but their ethnic heritage diminishes. Securing employment and learning the language are the two most serious problems for immigrants. A serendipitous analysis concerns the estranged relationship between the immigrants and the refugee center. Improvement of social services to immigrants is also addressed.*

This paper focuses on the adaptation and ethnicity of Polish and Czechoslovakian refugees who had been living in Boise, Idaho, for two years. The subjects left their native countries because of oppressive political conditions, and blamed the communist government for the terrible economic conditions. All of the refugees said they left their countries illegally, escaping by taking vacations to other European countries. They spent six months to a year in refugee camps before obtaining permission to enter the United States. They did not have many options regarding the country or city to which they would be sent. There has been no prior immigration of Eastern European immigrants to Boise.

## Methods

The author, with the cooperation of the local refugee center (Southwest Idaho Refugee Services Program), conducted 28 in-depth interviews with immigrant families. At the time of the study the refugee center's records revealed that 52 refugee families resided in Boise, Idaho. Through the records of the refugee center and the telephone directory, and by relying on the "snow-ball" effect, the author contacted 31 of the families. Three fam-

ilies refused to be interviewed. Some families had undoubtedly moved and some were without telephones; therefore, the exact number of immigrants was unknown.

The interview schedule was partially standardized by asking the subjects to respond to 25 topics which explored the subjects' institutional relations and interpersonal relationships. Most interviews occurred in the subjects' homes in the evenings or on the weekends since most of the subjects worked. The immigrants were friendly and eager to share their experiences. Frequently, the whole family participated in the interview. Interviews were tape recorded except for one-fourth of the families who insisted that the author take notes.

It was necessary to include two ethnic groups in the project because of the small number of available respondents. Thus, the study is a qualitative project which assesses how a unique group of immigrants are adapting to life in Boise, Idaho.

### Theory

Extensive adaptation literature exists, mostly associated with the study of Southeast Asians (Bach, 1980; Bromly, 1987; Cohen, 1981), but some adaptation studies of Slavic peoples have been written (Weinfield, 1985). The interviews were analyzed to assess how the respondents fit the adaptation model. Figure 1 identifies the factors that assist and impede adaptation of the immigrants to Boise.

The interviews were also analyzed to evaluate the ethnic identity of the subjects. Sociologists in both the United States and Canada (Weinfield, 1985; Frideres and Goldenberg, 1982; Alba, 1985) found that ethnicity has been relegated to family reunions, holidays, and an occasional folk festival. Gans (1985) conceptualized "symbolic ethnicity" to represent the curtailment of ethnicity, which entails a limited expressive psychological attachment where only a small portion of identity is ethnically oriented.

Feagin's (1984) concept of "modernity" holds important implications for this study. He contends that European immigrants to North America no longer come from folk cultures. The white ethnics come from industrialized societies. These modern European countries are less distinctive culturally. However, a body

Figure 1.

*Factors that assist and impede adaptation.*

Assist Adaptation	Impede Adaptation
Small population	Working class
Cultural similarities	Poor language skills
Employment	Unrealistic expectations
Lack of an ethnic enclave	Limited education
Mostly American friends	Weak local economy
Weak religious ties	Brief time in host country
Low prejudice/discrimination toward immigrants	
Rapid assimilation of children	

of research on the white ethnics in North America (Lopata, 1976; Sandberg, 1972) supports the view that ethnic identity has survived. The present research project assessed the degree of ethnicity of the Boise immigrants.

Gordon's (1964) classic book on assimilation is still relevant. In his analysis, ethnic groups assimilate on the cultural level but retain significant aspects of the ethnicity in their informal and primary relationships. In his view, ethnic groups, in their family, friendships, and civic groups, retain a sense of their heritage. This research explores and explains how the Boise immigrants are coping with the immigrants' experience.

### Employment and Language

Adaptation research supports the view that the two most important factors in adaptation are employment and language (Bach, 1980; berry, 1987; Finnan, 1982; Haines, 1982). The subjects of this research believe that the most crucial variables in successful adaptation are having a good job and command of the English language.

For the most part, the subjects had found work in a variety of low-income positions. The single largest employer was a producer of computer chips. The five most successful male immigrants secured employment as computer programmers. Some of the immigrants continued their crafts such as cabinet maker and barber. The few professionals found their training to be non-

transferable and exhibited less enthusiasm about their immigrant experience than other types of workers. The women, as a group, had less education and training. Most of the women worked as homemakers or found employment in the low paying service sector of the economy. About 20% of the adults, male and female, had matriculated to vocational schools or the local university. The most popular vocational goal of the immigrant women was nursing. Ten percent of the immigrants planned to enroll in educational programs in the near future.

The majority of the immigrants expressed satisfaction with their employment status. However, one third of the subjects responded negatively about their economic situation. These immigrants had experienced more unemployment than those who responded positively, and when they worked the pay was minimum wage.

The immigrants expressed anger that so many of them had experienced serious unemployment problems. Idaho's economy had been in a long recession. Many of the immigrants reported that 200 Eastern European immigrants had left Boise because they could not find steady work. The refugee center supervisor responded that this claim was grossly exaggerated and estimated the number to be about 100.

The subjects responded that they had experienced considerable stress and insecurity associated with the world of work, including lay-offs and the frustrations of seeking employment. Almost all had received government financial assistance. They expressed displeasure with governmental bureaucracies. The fluidity of the job market and the necessity to be assertive left some with a "Kafkaesque" sense of mystery about the employment market. The need to seek out employment was not part of their previous experience. Here is how one immigrant described his work experiences,

My first job in Boise was janitor. Oh, this job last about ten months, I think. I was working these two jobs because the second job was not exactly full-time, so I was this job and this job in restaurants, too. My employer sell his business to someone else. Is new management and I think this is, temporary, therefore—I don't like this job but it is not the kind of job which give me much money, much more to do this what I would like to do.

Nonetheless, the immigrants appeared optimistic about their economic futures. The following representative quotes indicate this optimism as well as unrealistic expectations. "Oh sure, I would like a different job. I would like a lot of money, twenty apartments and big house. I would like to be wealthy, why not? (Do you think you will be able to reach this goal?) Yeah, I think so." "Life in America is better than I expected. You really have, I believe, very strongly, that you have thousands of opportunities in American and all you need is your decision and your work, what you would like to do with yourself."

The immigrants sensed a potential for economic advancement in comparison to the economic situation in their native countries. The next quote is not atypical,

See my friend he sent me the letter, George, don't work so hard, see we have the first years when we are young and to use your life, OK go to skiing and lots of traveling and you know. You can do everything in Czechoslovakia because you don't go Friday to the job and you just tell the supervisor that you don't feel good and you leaving for three or four days for the mountains. O.K. The people here, they looking more how nice is car, how many—you have, I feel here, if I live right life, I can be really better, you know. It was like I didn't care in Czechoslovakia.

Most of the immigrants seemed highly motivated and willing to work hard to get ahead. The following quote depicts the immigrants' commitment to economic success,

I still, I must finish, I think that I—see I start my college with computers and I never work with computers in Czechoslovakia. I just go to college now and here is the big opportunity and maybe I want to finish my college with the computers. It is my dream.

Considering that the immigrants had been in Boise for only two years and that most were not skilled, it is surprising that they felt economically successful. Even those having employment problems felt optimistic about their economic future. By American standards they had a low standard of living, however they were not unhappy because they believed this was a temporary condition. Subjects expressed anxiety, with good reason, about the insecure nature of their employment. One subject summarized his work experiences in a way that is representative

of the subjects who had problems with work. "Oh, I have so many jobs, I janitor, I be painter, and now I be salesman, but I don't know, you know, how it will last—Oh, yes, I was laid off; it hard to get job here, Boise."

The immigrants exhibited concern about their deficiencies in speaking English. They considered it their second most serious problem and believed that it burdened their employment opportunities. However, in only two cases was a translator needed to assist with the interview. Some of the immigrants had limited English vocabularies. In several interviews the adults asked their children to translate for them. The response below was common.

Because I think I had possibility to do much quicker what I did and, for example, my language can be much better than it now is and I think language just now is most important limitation for me. I think that I waste some time and I should spend this time to learn much quicker English. I feel that I can do much more and better and only I have problems because of language.

The immigrants believed their language problems hindered their overall social adjustment. They frequently remarked on how their language problems affected their social relationships. "It's pretty good neighborhood for me because I know who I am and I can't want to be—I do what I can do now, because my language is not good. I have to learn better language to be neighborhood part."

The immigrants stated that they had not been the victims of prejudice or discrimination. Almost all commented on how friendly the people in Boise had been, yet they felt somewhat isolated because of their language problem.

The study had a small number of subjects, nevertheless the adaptation model described earlier was supported by the analysis of the interviews. Those with a higher social class background, with full-time employment, and more years of schooling considered themselves more adjusted and they had a higher sense of well-being. Those immigrants with lower social class background, with periods of unemployment, with less education, and who were not fluent in English felt less adjusted as well as having a lower sense of well-being.

The immigrants had unrealistic expectations; they experienced a weak local economy, and were newcomers in Boise. Yet these factors appeared to have little negative impact since, as a group, the immigrants expressed moderate satisfaction with their lives and the immigrant experience. Their satisfaction might be attributed to the small number of immigrants and the fact that no established ethnic community existed. These circumstances may have facilitated adaptation.

### Cultural Differences

The subjects retained a sense of cultural superiority. Most of the immigrants thought life in European cities more exciting than in the United States. The immigrants believe European cities have more cultural events that are accessible to everyone. They also disliked American architecture because they perceived it as functional and without durability. They did not approve of the reliance on automobiles for intercity travel. What they miss the most is captured in the following quote,

One thing which is perhaps not realized here, there is no street life. In big cities here is less street life. In Europe when you go for a walk there are many people there; there is a density of traffic or personal traffic, of persons that are walking around the streets and looking at the shop windows and just—you can meet many different people. There is not existing here—and here is just a, where people are coming by cars. In Boise there is no clustering of restaurants and night clubs for you to visit.

The Eastern European immigrants have doubts about the level of materialism in the United States. Many mentioned that Americans are always so busy.

Sometimes I think that Americans, they spend too much time working and they make money. They make lots of money, but they still work and they, I don't know. Maybe it's, you know, the level of education and they still work seven days a week. They still work and they don't have time for anything else because they have to make money.

The immigrants thought the quality of education and television embarrassing. They commented that their children's education far exceeded that of American children of the same age.



Many felt that cultural programming was more prevalent in European television. Two additional aspects of American society surprised the immigrants. The degree and severity of poverty in America shocked them. They thought the cost of health care exorbitant and they expressed chagrin at the inaccessibility of health care.

The similarity of advanced industrial societies is confirmed by the responses of the subjects who compared European and United States society. The immigrants did not experience culture shock. In the following quote, we have one of the more humorous accounts of adapting to life in Boise.

Now I like 'cause Boise is easier, easier, slow town. Is conservative town. I was afraid if I would go from Poland where the life for some reason is back twenty-five years, to find myself in the— another world, much far ahead, I would get lost, but in Boise I feel almost an equal to the people who live here— But Krakow and Boise, it's like some people are coming from San Francisco to Boise and they say, oh, here is twenty years behind San Francisco, so for me Krakow and Boise is almost more one level.

The findings of research on ethnicity report ethnic identity as a declining phenomenon among white ethnic immigrants (Isajiw, 1985; Elliott, 1979; Frideres, 1982; Alba, 1985). The immigrants agreed with this view of ethnicity because they recognized the insignificant role it played in their current lives. The immigrants observed minor differences in some mannerisms and social customs, such as holiday celebrations and food preparation, yet they also commented on the relative insignificance of such differences.

The immigrants had more American friends than ethnic friends despite the fact that many lived in the same apartment complex and worked for the same company. Most stated that they did not want friends from their native countries. Lopata's (1976) research on Polish immigrants explains this phenomenon. In her work, she developed the term "status competition" to explain the character trait wherein an intense rivalry develops among individuals of Slavic descent. The resulting animosity prevents social cohesion as illustrated in two representative quotes. "A lot of Czech people here are envious. I have a better

life than they do. So there is not a lot of close contact between us." "Yeah, we have some, not many because is like everywhere, some people are jealous or there—if I've got better job they asking why I have better. They have not the same. This still happen here in America."

### Political Views

The immigrants adamantly expressed their opposition to communism. The immigrants remarked that the researcher, as an American, could not appreciate the extent of the control over their lives. Many stated that life in their countries resembled life in a prison. One immigrant described the political situation in his country: "The communist party is absolutely controlling the country. Is trying to control almost everything. Almost every piece of your life."

The Eastern Europe immigrants resented the communist control of their economies. They commented that the absence of basic necessities frustrated the people of their homelands. They felt cheated because only members of the communist party could improve their economic position. The following quote is indicative of the immigrants' views: "But you must be communist if you want to make money, if you want take some good job, you must be communist." The immigrants expressed a deep appreciation for the political freedoms that exist in America. "It's hard to explain feeling and you have to live there. I have quite different feeling here, since I came over—I think I am different person. I feel really more free." The immigrants frequently remarked on how much they appreciated the democratic system. One subject put it this way: "Perfect system. And I think this American system is, of course, not perfect, but is best from this what just nowhere in the world, but I think this is really best system of democracy in the world." The refugees initiated more conversation around the political differences between their countries and the United States than any other topic.

### Refugee Assistance

The community agency with primary responsibility to aid the immigrants in Boise, Idaho, is the Southwest Idaho Refugee Center. The majority of the immigrants had a negative view of

the refugee center. They believed the agency provided inadequate assistance and they questioned the level of training of the staff. Many of the immigrants criticized the employment assistance of the refugee center. Some of the subjects had to find their own jobs. Most of the immigrants believed that the refugee center would only place them in menial jobs. Some observed that the refugee center's staff did not appreciate their backgrounds and problems. The following quote is one example of their frustrations.

The refugee center, they are working with a lot of refugees, they don't have any idea where we are from. They didn't know anything about our culture, like that. They are very surprised that people have some good, how explain that, like we are from central Europe and a lot of us have very good education. Of course, is different situation and you can't imagine how you would feel if with your education somebody will make you situation that you have to leave U.S. You will feel not like part of—your education will be like zero, like junior high school and they will ask you maybe you will be dishwasher or some, you know, like that.

Three fourths of the Eastern European immigrants expressed dissatisfaction with the language training provided by the refugee center. Many thought the training too elementary and lacking in advanced classes. Some commented that classes were not offered at convenient times. Many immigrants thought the entire language program should be modified. The following quotes are representative of the immigrants's sentiments: "The language training was a disappointment because it was only few hours a day. It's not enough." "One would think what I really expect was really good language school, because if I America, I expect to get good English school, but it was not here."

The immigrants complained that no one on the staff spoke their language. The following quote best illustrates the subjects' view on this issue,

There was many of Polish people here, so one person supposed to talk Polish, I think. I mean from refugee center, one person supposed to talk Polish because of nobody from immigrants can speak English, so it was impossible to communicate.

The staff of the refugee center was interviewed to obtain their views about the immigrants' complaints. Every person on the staff rejected the validity of the criticisms of the immigrants. The supervisor said the center had an excellent record in securing employment for the immigrants. The staff defended their program and felt they provided adequate services. They felt disappointed because they considered themselves hardworking and dedicated to assisting their clients. They reacted with surprise when informed about the large numbers of immigrants dissatisfied with their programs. The staff recognized unique problems in working with Polish and Czech refugees and attributed a number of the problems to cultural misunderstandings. The staff felt that the Eastern European immigrants had a "poor attitude." The staff believed that the immigrants did not understand the employment market. They felt that the refugees did not understand that they had to be willing to start with low paying jobs and work their way up to higher positions. The staff believed that the subjects did not appreciate how hard it is to find jobs. The staff stated that the refugees thought that everyone in America was rich. They observed that no group of clients was as hard to work with as Czechs and Poles. They felt these refugees complained all the time.

The staff explained that Eastern European refugees distrusted them because they came from communist countries where government workers received kickbacks for placing workers in jobs. The staff thought such experiences made the immigrants cynical about the services of the refugee center.

The staff responded to the criticisms about the language program with surprise and chagrin. They stated that the language program provided a great variety of classes to meet the needs of clients at any stage of language development. The staff reported that the Eastern Europeans had low attendance at the language classes. The refugee center's staff believed their program merited high evaluation marks. They did not dismiss the criticisms; rather, they were concerned with how these attitudes had developed.

A number of the immigrants' comments indicated that they held some unrealistic expectations about social services in Idaho.

Idaho is a poor and conservative state that consistently underfunds its government programs. It appears that the immigrants, as a group, may be unable to separate how governmental agencies function in the native countries from that in the United States.

### Discussion

The data indicate that an isolated group of Eastern Europeans are experiencing a rather smooth transition to life in America. In a very short period of time they say that, for the most part, they feel adjusted. The subjects state that they feel happy and that they like Boise. When asked if they had it to do over again, would they still leave their country and come to Boise?, all but two said, yes, they would. The immigrants think the Boise community has accepted them. Though the immigrants feel a sense of job insecurity and language deficiency, they perceive these problems to be temporary. They expressed optimism about their futures. The subjects recognize that their ethnicity does not play a significant role in their new lives.

When examining the factors which assist and impede adaptation we find a complex pattern. The subjects of this research have characteristics that should assist adaptation and characteristics that should impede adaptation. The current research reveals that when only a small number of immigrants settle in an area without an established ethnic community, the immigrants appear to adapt rapidly regardless of features that generally would impede adaptation.

However, there appears to be some anxiety associated with the subjects' immigrant experience. For example, inconsistencies exist between their attitudes and behaviors. The immigrants expressed strong support for American democracy, without knowledge, understanding or interest in the everyday functioning of the American political system. Despite the immigrants' sensitivity about their language deficiencies, not one was involved in a language program. The immigrants felt pleased with their children's rapid adjustment, but simultaneously disturbed because their children preferred to speak English. The immigrants' favorite topic of conversation was their intense anti-communism.

Assimilation is a long-term process, yet the subjects have rapidly adapted so that one might predict a progressive integration of these immigrants into the Boise community. The effectiveness of the refugee center in assisting in this assimilation was severely hampered, because none of the staff had majored in social work or any related field. One must surely question the judgment of the entrepreneurial-grant writer who arranged for so many immigrants to settle in Boise in light of the limited employment opportunities. One must also question why the staff of the refugee center appeared so unaware of the immigrants' dissatisfaction with their services. The recent social work literature (Bromley, 1987; Brown, 1982; Goldstein, 1986; Humm-Delgado, 1986; Ryan, 1985; Timberlake, 1984; Sewell-Coker, 1986) recognizes the special problems in reaching clients from different cultures. Several recommendations are offered: (a) establish an inservice training program that addresses problems in working with clients from different cultures; (b) hire staff who speak the language of the immigrants; (c) establish an outreach program to reestablish meaningful contact with a reluctant clientele; (d) establish a client advisory board that would facilitate both the staff and clients gaining a better appreciation of each other.

### References

- Adolf, J. Z. (1977). *Adaptation of Eastern European refugees and political emigres in Toronto: With special reference to immigrants from Poland and Czechoslovakia*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, York University, Toronto.
- Alba, R. D. (1985) *Ethnicity and race in the U.S.A.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bach, R. (1980). Employment characteristics of Indochinese refugees. *Migration Today*, 8 (3), 10-21.
- Bach, R. L. (1980). The new Cuban immigrants: Their background and prospects. *Monthly Labor Review*, Oct., 39-46.
- Berry, B. & Tischler, H. L., (1978), *Race and ethnic relations*, Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Berry, J. B. & Uichol, K. (1987). Comparative studies in acculturative stress. *International Migration Review*, 21, 491-509.
- Bromley, M. A. (1987). New beginnings for Cambodia refugees—or further disruptions of Cambodian refugees. *Social Work*, 32 (3), 236-239.
- Cohen, J. D. (1981). Psychological adaptation and dysfunction among refugees. *International Migration Review*, 15 (1), 263-266.

- Elliott, J. S. (1979). *Two nations, many cultures: Ethnic groups in Canada*. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada.
- Feagin, J. R. (1984). *Racial and ethnic relations*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Finnan, C. (1982). Community influences on the occupational adaptation of Vietnamese refugees. *Anthropology Quarterly*, 55 (3), 161–169.
- Finnan, C. (1981). Occupation assimilation of refugees. *International Migration Review*, 15 (1), 292–9.
- Frideres, J. & Goldenberg, S. (1982). Ethnic identity: Myth and reality in Western Canada. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 6, 137–158.
- Gans, H. (1985). Symbolic ethnicity: The future of ethnic groups and cultures in America. In N. R. Yetman (Ed.) *Majority and Minority*. (pp. 429–442). Boston: Allyn Bacon.
- Gordon, M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Haines, D. W. (1984). Assessing the research on Southeast Asian refugees. *Social Thought*, 10, (3), 21–32.
- Haines, D. (1982). Southeast Asia refugees in the U.S.: The interaction of kinship and public policy. *Anthropology Quarterly*, 55 (3), 170–180.
- Isajiw, W. W. (1978). Olga in wonderland: Ethnicity in a technological society. In L. Driedger (Ed.), *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic* (pp. 32–41). Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Isajiw, W. W. (1985). Definitions of ethnicity. In R. M. Bienvenue & J. E. Goldstein (Eds.), *Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Canada* (pp. 5–17). Toronto: Butterworths.
- Lopata, H. Z. (1976). *Polish Americans*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Sandberg, N. C. (1972). *Ethnic identity and assimilation: The Polish American community*. NY: Praeger Publishers.
- Weinfield, M. (1985), In R. M. Bienvenue & J. E. Goldstein (Eds.), *Myth and reality in the Canadian mosaic: Affective ethnicity and ethnic relations in Canada*. Toronto: Butterworths.