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Family Functioning and Migration: Considerations for Practice

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International migration is increasingly dominated by family considerations. Despite conflicts and tensions, the support system of the family is the main agent through which the adjustment to migration occurs. Social workers are in the front line in the treatment and acculturation of new immigrants. The present study explores how 145 social workers, comprising about 70% of those who treat new immigrants in the northern part of Israel, perceive family functioning in two very different migrant populations: arrivals from the former Soviet Union on the one hand, and from Ethiopia on the other. Results indicate that practitioners viewed families from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia as less adaptive and more cohesive than the norm. Families from the former Soviet Union, however, were seen as more adaptive and less cohesive than families immigrating from Ethiopia. Implications for culture sensitive practice are suggested.

Major political and social changes have multiplied the number of international migrants in recent years. Demographers point out that international migration is increasingly dominated by family considerations (Boyd, 1989). Migration may involve many families from a particular country, region, or culture, or it may be an isolated experience for a single family; mostly it falls between the two extremes. The ease with which a family, individual, or group undertakes and resolves the transition process is also greatly influenced by the level of choice that determined the decision. Forced migration is far more likely to result in transitional conflict than is a move or change by choice (Landau-Stanton, 1990). Another consideration is the compatibility between the host culture and the culture of the migrating family (De Anda, 1984).

The factors determining the ease with which each family resolves issues of transition are both intrinsic and extrinsic to the family unit. If the resources of the family itself and the support

systems of the community around it are adequate, and more particularly, if the other families in that social group are at a similar stage, problems of acculturation are more easily overcome. If such resources are not encountered, the family may face a migratory conflict and severe migratory crisis, which may lead to symptomatology.

The focus in this paper is on the family as the agent of change and acculturation. Families from two very different parts of the world have recently migrated to Israel: from the former Soviet Union about 150,000 families, and from Ethiopia about 8,000 families. Social workers are the first to encounter the families in their distress and hardships. The way services are delivered to these families depends in large part on the attitudes and perceptions of the service deliverers, the on-line social workers. The present paper examines perceptions of family functioning in these two culturally very different populations by social workers and the implications of these differential impressions for culturally sensitive practice.

Migrants and their families: Millions of people migrate each year from one part of the world to another. During the years of its existence, Israel has been regarded as a safe haven for Jews escaping persecution in a variety of the world's troubled regions. Unfortunately, a safe haven is not necessarily a familiar one. A successful cultural transition can be affected by a myriad of considerations, including the degree of consonance with the culture of origin (De Anda, 1984) or degree of harmony between the cultures (Landau-Stanton, 1990).

Most immigrant families experience a prolonged period of acculturation (Bar-Yosef, 1980). During this period immigrants have to sever ties with places and people, and to transplant their home base, their life projects, their dreams and their memories (Sluzki, 1979). During these periods of transition, migrants tend to cluster more around the family. On the one hand migrants need and value the support of the family more during these periods of instability. On the other hand, the family may become a source of conflicts which may impede the adaptation process of individual family members. In any case, it is clear that the family is an important agent in the acculturation process, and in the adjustment and adaptation to the stress of migration of the family members.

One approach to understanding the adjustment to migration centers on the responses of the family to stress. Theories of coping under stress focus on the process of adjustment to changed conditions which can result in a breakdown of family functioning (Figley & McCubbin, 1983; Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Falicov, 1988). Generally, coping is viewed as a combination of cognitive process and behavioral response by which the family tries to maintain balanced functioning. Coping resources have been found to play a considerable role in determining family adaptability and functioning in times of stress (Ben-David & Lavee, 1992; Ben-David & Lavee, 1994).

The two main components of family functioning that have been found to be related to family coping under stress or during transitional periods are cohesion and adaptability (Olson, 1989). However, the family dynamics prevalent among different cultures profoundly affect the way these two factors are viewed (Comas-Diaz, 1992). Traditional norms do not apply equally to families from different cultural origins, and what can be considered dysfunctional in one culture is considered functional in another. This approach reflects the values of cultural pluralism, where there are no absolute norms for family functioning.

The present study reflects on how these issues affect social work practice by asking social workers about the family functioning of migrant families from two very distinct cultural origins. A short review of the family characteristics in these cultures follows.

The Ethiopian family: Families coming from Ethiopia constitute a significant minority in Israel. As blacks they are visibly different; but more important, they come from a world into which modern technology never penetrated.

The families coming from Ethiopia lived in rural communities and were based economically on farming. As in any community that had struggled to preserve religion and tradition, the community was closed, and the rules were rigid. Life was based on the extended family. The core family lived alongside the multigenerational extended family, a well-developed community in which each member had responsibilities to each of the others and to the community in general. The family was patriarchal and traditional and the eldest was the leader (Barhani, 1990). The extended family was highly cohesive and roles were interchangeable. A

large family was an advantage because of its ability to protect and support its members.

Marriages were arranged by heads of families and were extremely important in community life. The wife, a girl of about 14 went to live with her husband's family which became, upon her marriage, her family. Only after a while did the young couple go to live separately but in close proximity to the husband's parents (Ben-David, 1993).

Bar-Yosef (1980) contends that "migration is one of the most obvious instances of complete disorganization in the individual's role system" (p. 20). This has a direct effect on the family life, its sets of values and role system. Following the Ethiopian immigrants' arrival in Israel all their customs changed radically, when the Ethiopian culture clashed with the Westernized-Israeli culture (Schindler & Ribner, 1993). The old community base was lost, and with it the family lost nearly all its cohesive-protective-security functions. Ethiopians came to Israel as a very visible minority, with little or no economic or educational resources. These conditions led, on the one hand, to assimilation in the majority culture: young people moved to the large cities, where they found themselves isolated from their families and their community. Without a model for imitation and with no norms for a new family life, their families started to disintegrate. On the other hand the degree of commonality between the majority culture and the migrant's culture determine, among other things, the degree of assimilation and socialization in the host country (De Anda, 1984). Since the overlap was meager, the difference between the two cultures was presumed to function as a buffer against rapid and radical change. Thus two contrary forces worked against each other in the process of absorption of the Ethiopian community.

The Soviet family: In the early years of the Soviet regime, when the state and its official ideology were in a position of ultimate authority, the official doctrine was that the family is ceasing to be a necessity for its members as well as for the state (Lapidus, 1978). The state, in its drive to minimize private pursuits and private life, encouraged a myriad of public activities and social duties, aimed at demonstrating loyalty to the regime, which minimized the time and energy devoted to family life. In addition, squalid

living conditions, which characterized the family life of millions of Soviet people since the Revolution, made home itself less than attractive for most people (Shlapentokh, 1991).

In the mid-1930's the official Soviet position started changing, and the undeniable attachment of the Russians to the institution of the family was acknowledged. The collapse in the 1970's and early 1980's of the ideology and material practice of socialism sent shock waves through Soviet society, with powerful effects on the family. The data collected over the last two decades by Soviet sociologists have demonstrated that the family has replaced official ideology as the chief determinant of societal values (Lapidus, 1978, 1988; Kharchev & Matskovskii, 1982; Shlapentokh, 1991).

Ever since the Iron Curtain was lifted, hundreds of thousands of Soviet families migrated. Two main factors influenced the family in the last wave of immigration: first, there were structural changes in the family as a result of the migratory process and the economic constraints of refugee migration. Many families found it necessary to reside three or more generations together either because there was a scarcity of cheap lodgings or because parents needed the grandparents to help care for the younger children while parents were either working or looking for work (Ben-David & Lavee, 1994; Mirsky, 1992).

The second influence on the family was that many migrants from the former Soviet Union felt frustrated in their inability to satisfy their employment needs, they were often underemployed, and their skills were under-utilized or unappreciated. This problem was especially upsetting for immigrants from the former Soviet Union, since work and employment were two of the pivotal ideological bases of the Soviet society (Ben-David & Lavee, 1994).

Research Questions: The present study focuses on the front-line social workers who deal with client families from two very different cultural backgrounds—the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Specifically, this study examines how social workers perceive the differential family functioning of these immigrant families in relation to the process of migration and absorption in a new culture. Particularly, the question is whether family characteristics such as cohesion and adaptability are viewed as dysfunctional in different cultural contexts.

Subjects

All social workers who deliver services to either Russian or Ethiopian immigrants in the northern part of Israel (about 200 in all) were approached to participate in the research. The final sample size was 145 (73% response rate). The mean age for the sample was 35. In terms of academic background, 104 (72%) of the participants held a B.S.W. degree, and 31 (21%) held an M.S.W. degree, while 10 participants (about 7%), had an M.A. in psychology. The origin of the participants was: 73% born in Israel, 10% born in Eastern Europe, 7% born in North Africa and Asia, and the rest born in North and South America. Women constituted 91% of the sample. Half the therapists had less than 7 years experience, and the other half had been working in the field up to 20 years and more. Most of the participants (92%) had participated in workshops sensitizing them to both the immigration experience and Ethiopian and Soviet family culture.

Design and procedure

A survey instrument was constructed consisting of four possible intake vignettes. Two of the vignettes had to do with a possible case of child abuse, and two concerned neglect of an elderly family member. The case vignettes were identical for both populations.

This design produced a two (population: Russians and Ethiopians) by two (case: child abuse and elderly neglect) design. Each participant was randomly assigned only one case situation in order to avoid contamination and bias. The master case situations were presented accompanied by a cover letter requesting participation in a research project on immigrant families; a demographic information sheet; and a detailed questionnaire on detailed processing of case management of the specific master case. All questions in the questionnaire referred to the master case only and to the family and situation described in the master case. This procedure ensured homogeneity of responses to the specific immigrant minority family.

Of the 145 respondents, 81 (56%) completed the questionnaires dealing with Russian immigrants, and 63 (44%) completed

those dealing with Ethiopian immigrants. Approximately half of each group completed questionnaires dealing with child abuse (73), and half the questionnaires dealing with neglect of the elderly (71).

Findings of the demographic characteristics of the four groups of practitioners who answered queries about how to treat immigrant families are shown in Table 1. There were no significant differences among the four groups for all the demographic variables.

The present paper reports on a segment of the study where the respondents were asked to answer questions regarding family functioning (FACES III) about the family presented in the vignettes.

Instrument:

Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scale III (FACES III): FACES III (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985), is the third in a series of FACES instruments that operationalizes the Circumplex Model of Family Functioning. Thus, FACES III is a theoretically derived self-report instrument developed to assess two dimensions of family process: cohesion and adaptability. The Circumplex Model was developed by David Olson and colleagues (Olson, 1989) in an attempt to bridge research, theory and practice. The Circumplex Model classifies families into 16 specific types or three more general types, i.e. balanced, mid-range, and extreme. In the Circumplex Model, cohesion is defined as, the emotional bonding that family members have towards one another. Adaptability is defined as the ability of a marital or family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress.

Internal consistency estimates for Cohesion and Adaptability, are .77 and .62 respectively and test-retest estimates are .83 and .80. The correlation between the Adaptability and the Cohesion scales was reduced significantly so that the scales can be considered empirically independent. The FACES III instrument was translated and standardized to Hebrew (Taichman & Navon, 1990). Internal consistency for a sample of 400 was found to be .85 for Cohesion and .67 for Adaptability.

Table 1:
Characteristics of the sample

Group	Russian Clients		Ethiopian Clients		Total
Variable	Child	Elderly	Child	Elderly	
N	38 (26.2%)	43 (29.7%)	35 (24.1%)	29 (20.0%)	145 (100%)
Sex F	36 (95%)	37 (86%)	34 (97%)	25 (86%)	132 (91%)
M	2 (5%)	6 (14%)	1 (3%)	4 (14%)	13 (9%)
Origin					
Israel	27 (71%)	28 (65%)	31 (89%)	19 (66%)	105 (72%)
Eastern Europe	6 (16%)	6 (13%)	0	2 (7%)	14 (10%)
North Africa	1 (3%)	3 (7%)	1 (3%)	5 (17%)	10 (7%)
Other	4 (10%)	6 (13%)	3 (8%)	3 (10%)	16 (11%)
Education					
BA	23 (61%)	31 (72%)	29 (83%)	21 (72%)	104 (72%)
MA	11 (29%)	10 (23%)	4 (11%)	6 (2%)	31 (21%)
Other	4 (10%)	2 (5%)	2 (6%)	2 (7%)	10 (7%)
Age (Mean + SD)	34.4 (7.2%)	36.6 (6.9%)	32.9 (6.1)	36.6 (6.9)	35.1

RESULTS

Two way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were performed for each of the dependent variables, cohesion and adaptability. A 2(groups: Russian and Ethiopian) X 2(content: child and elderly abuse) ANOVA was performed for each of the two components of family functioning. Table 2 shows the means, SD, and F values for each of the dependent variables.

Difference in perception of Russian and Ethiopian family cohesion: The results indicate that there are differences in how social workers perceive the cohesion in the families of migrants from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia, regardless of the issue being treated. There is a significant main effect between groups in cohesion [$F(1,142) = 7.81, p < .005$]. Significantly more social workers tended to view families from Ethiopia as more cohesive than families from the former Soviet Union.

Difference in perception of Russian and Ethiopian family adaptability: The results indicate that, regardless of the issue being treated, there are differences in how social workers perceive family adaptability in families originating from the former Soviet Union or from Ethiopia. Significantly more social workers thought that families from the former Soviet Union are more adaptable than families from Ethiopia [$F(1,142) = 15.26, p < .0001$].

Table 2:

Means, SD and F scores of cohesion and adaptability

		Cohesion	Adaptability
Russians	Child	2.95 (0.51)	2.11 (0.5)
	Elder	3.73 (0.4)	2.73 (0.5)
	Total	3.36 (0.6)	2.43 (0.5)
Ethioians	Child	3.33 (0.5)	1.90 (0.5)
	Elder	3.88 (0.4)	2.31 (0.5)
	Total	3.58 (0.5)	2.09 (0.5)
F	Russian/Ethiopian (Group)	7.81**	15.26***
	Child/elder (content)	71.09***	38.82***

** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Differences between child abuse and elderly neglect: Participants thought that regardless of the family's origin, there is a difference when either a child or an elderly family member is targeted. Respondents viewed differently the level of cohesion of the family when the issue was child or elderly abuse [$F(1, 142) = 71.09, p < .0001$]. Significantly more social workers saw the family as more cohesive when the family had to deal with taking care of an elderly family member neglect rather than child abuse, assuming, probably, that child abuse brings the family more apart than elderly neglect. In the same vein, more practitioners saw the family as significantly more functionally adaptive when the issue was elderly neglect than child abuse [$F(1, 142) = 38.82, p < .0001$], implying that the family is less functionally adaptive when it has to resort to child abuse than to elder neglect.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that social workers tend to perceive family functioning of families from different cultural contexts in different ways. Practitioners tend to see migrant families in general as less adaptable and more cohesive than the norm, with the Ethiopian families as less adaptable and more cohesive than the Russian families. In addition, the results seem to support the assumption that regardless of family background, social workers see the family as more dysfunctional when they deal with child abuse than with elder neglect.

Migration and family adaptability: Adaptability is defined as the ability of a system to change its power structure, role relationships and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress (Olson, 1989). As stated above, migration is regarded here as a stressful event for the family. This requires a measure of flexibility from family members enabling them to change and adapt to the new circumstances.

For the Ethiopian family the changes in the structure of power, roles, and rules were radical. The main change that occurred was that the man lost his source of power as main provider, since he moved from being an independent farmer, to being dependent on government provision. Concurrently, his wife gained in status. Since she had to take care of her children and household needs,

she was automatically more in touch with community resources like social workers, nurses, and teachers. Due to her enhanced contact with the Israeli environment, the woman acquired Hebrew language skills more quickly. Many women used their contacts to obtain work in the unskilled labor market, thus affording them a degree of independence previously unknown to them or their husbands. For the first time the woman had control over money, since even without work, the children's allowance was paid by the government in her name (Ben-David, 1993). All of these circumstances brought about radical changes in family and couple rules.

The Soviet family, on the other hand, came from a culture which had been shaped by 70 years of Soviet ideology. Central to the Soviet approach—as it was to Marxist and Leninist theory—was the conviction that women's entry into social production held the key to the creation of a genuinely socialist society (Lapidus, 1988). Historical materialism was the "grand theory" and in this framework, the family held only a subordinate position in the functioning of society as a whole. A genuinely socialist society was based on sexual equality. This equality, however, meant only that women, as men, have to do productive work. It held nothing as to what should happen inside the family and the home. Thus, Soviet society devised policies that guaranteed women equal treatment as workers and citizens. To this day, however, women tend to be concentrated in lower status and lower pay positions than men (Lapidus, 1982, 1988).

From the above, it is clear that the main avenue for absorption of the Soviet family is through work. Soviet women immigrants readily adapted to the conditions of the Israeli labor market: they were more willing to change their occupation, they had a lower degree of frustration with labor conditions than the men, and their work satisfaction was higher (Ben-Barak, 1989). Thus, women found work more easily than their husbands, and as a consequence, role reversal occurred and the power structure of the family changed. Many marriages were not equipped to deal with these changes, and different forms of distress set in, either by marital conflict, problems with the children, or somatic complaints (Ben-David & Lavee, 1994).

It is evident that both families had adaptability problems, which was indicated by the fact that social workers perceived both sets of families to be less adaptable than the norm. However, the Ethiopian family was seen as significantly less adaptive than the Russian family. It seems that the Ethiopian family had to go through a more basic transformation in terms of adaptability and cultural transition than families from the Soviet Union. Thus, two factors combined to produce the workers perception of the difference in adaptability between the two families. First, the change in the Ethiopian family was much greater, but it was brought about by external circumstances, by the necessity of living in a new country and a new culture. Thus, the change, even now, seems external and dystonic to the Ethiopian family. It will take much longer for the Ethiopian family to make the necessary adaptational adjustments to the Israeli culture. Second, the change in the Soviet family seemed negligible since in so many ways the Soviet society is very similar to the Israeli society. This discrepancy between the need to change and the difficulty in changing, explains the perception that the Soviet family is more adaptable, but not yet at the level of the norm, and not quite as much as the workers would have liked to see them.

Migration and family cohesion: In contrast to the inclination to perceive immigrant families in general and the Ethiopian family in particular as less adaptive, the social workers perceived immigrant families in general and the Ethiopian family in particular as more cohesive.

The families that emigrated from Ethiopia fled religious and social persecutions, and in addition, some waves of emigrants escaped famine and political instability (like the last wave of the summer of 1991). Amongst the Ethiopian immigrants, there were two forces which worked in opposite directions. On the one hand, the cultural, economic, racial, educational, and social differences between the host and the Ethiopian cultures were immense. This factor promotes assimilation in the host country, because of the need of the new immigrants to become similar to their host country, with the consequent elements of loss of family cohesiveness and values. On the other hand, this was a minority community in Ethiopia that preserved its uniqueness because of its strong religious beliefs. This factor has a buffering effect in

terms of assimilation. The more different the immigrants are from the host community, the more they need their old and customary ways to protect them from losing their whole world outlook (Bar-Yosef, 1980). Both processes are at work at the same time in Israel. The more veteran families have started the process of assimilation with their movement to the large cities. There, young people found themselves not only isolated from their families, but this being a visible minority, from the large white majority of the country. However, social workers in this study, are more in touch with the families that have more recently arrived in Israel. These families live in more closed communities, and are going through the alternate process, more cohesiveness and less conversion.

The workers' perception of the diminished cohesiveness in the families from the former Soviet Union, may reflect the increasing rate of family dissolution, which resembles that of their country of origin (about 30%), but is still considerably higher than in the majority of the Israeli society (about 20%). The viable alternative of the dissolution of marriage (divorce) as an adaptive solution to marital distress as a consequence of the migratory process, (Ben-David & Lavee, 1994) contributes to the perception of these families as less dependent emotionally on the wholeness of the family.

Child vs. Elderly Abuse: Another finding in this study was that practitioners viewed families with child abuse as less cohesive and less adaptable regardless of the cultural origin of the families. Mistreatment of family members has not been viewed as a generic problem but rather in terms of the status of the victim (Finkelhor, 1983). Thus, practitioners cope with different types of family mistreatment with separate sets of agencies, separate sets of theories and separate histories of the process through which each emerged as a social problem.

A possible explanation for these results may be that Protective Services for elderly abuse are not yet as developed in Israel, and practitioners are not as aware of an elderly family member as of a child who is abused. These results are similar to other studies in which victim groups are compared (O'Toole & Webster, 1988). It appears that different norms are at work when dealing with elderly or child abuse. Perhaps, as Hudson (1986) says, norms for the mistreatment of elders are just now developing, and in the

early stages of a newly recognized family social problem, specific meanings are not yet differentiated (O'Toole & Webster, 1988).

Implications for Social Work Practice: In view of the key role played by social workers in the integration of immigrants, the differential perceptions on the part of practitioners regarding ethnic and cultural backgrounds and traditions raise some important issues. A particularly relevant question is whether they are more sensitive to the minority that is more dislocated, or to the group that is more similar to the majority culture. Viewing migration as the primary origin of family difficulties presumes that barriers to well-being and success may be created more by situational factors, such as ignorance or poverty, than by intrapsychic elements, such as an abusive personality or structural family dysfunction (e.g., inappropriate disciplining techniques). Sue (1977) posited a theoretical model in which minority-group clients and counselors hold different world views. Workers may hold an intrapsychic view of difficulties, while minority clients may have a more situational explanation for their troubles. These different world views would very likely result in incongruency (and probable failure) of treatment and interventions (Latting & Zundel, 1986).

The findings of the present study suggest some directions for context responsive practice with immigrant families. Family adaptability and cohesion are always targeted when intervening at the individual, or more familial level. When working with cross-cultural groups whose lives and traditions have been interrupted by immigration or unplanned displacement, workers must be sensitive to the need for higher levels of cohesion due to the loss of customary and well known ways of functioning. For many immigrant families, from Ethiopia, for example, the Western emphasis placed on competitive individualism can be painfully incongruent with their own values which may emphasize more interdependence and cohesiveness with kin and extended family, and for whom the competitiveness and individualism of Israeli/Westernized society is strange and alien. Helping such families find ways to preserve and cherish their customs and old ways may be crucial in helping them make the transition to a new country. For other immigrant families from the former Soviet Union, for example, separation and autonomy are unfamiliar. These families function in a high multigenerational inter-

dependence, which is demonstrated by three generational living arrangements. Since the tightly-knit family unit is the strength of these families, any threat to family harmony may cause much anguish among the already grieving migrating families with multiple losses. An implied message of "enmeshment" in these families is somehow suspect. DiNicola (1993) views "enmeshment" as a culturally biased way of identifying family interactional styles. He prefers to reframe such styles as familism.

The social worker is called upon to be extra sensitive to the transitional stress of the recently arrived immigrants who may have been highly functional individuals in their country of origin but who are unable to find jobs at all in their new country because of their lack of language skills (Lieberman, 1990). This may apply equally to the Ethiopian and the Soviet family. They may be forced to work long hours at menial works to make ends meet. The former Soviet Union immigrant's prior sense of control may be restored only when they are able to find a niche in their new homeland commensurate with their education and training.

One of the most valuable benefits of studying and dealing with cultural diversity is that it promoted sensitivity to the gradients and nuances of different functioning aspects among families. Such individualized practice is consistent with basic social work values and principles. Practitioners attention and openness to looking for strengths in the wide variety of ways clients adapt to their environment fosters empathic connectedness. The resulting "togetherness" between the worker and the family client can serve as a growth promoting leverage for both sides to experience aspects of each other and enrich both cultures.

Finally, two qualifications are in order. First, the generalizability of this study may be limited to the specific cultural ambience and demographic complexity of Israel. Second, additional research is needed with other immigrant populations and in other areas of the world, in order to arrive at more final conclusions.

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