

Iraqi refugees in Spanish-speaking Californian communities

Ken Crane and Lisa Fernandez

Cultural orientation is necessary but needs to be appropriate for the realities of the place where refugees are resettled.

Many of the Iraqi refugees resettled in California are in areas where there is a dominant 'Latino' Spanish-speaking cultural environment. They have to meet the challenges of life by building bridges with their Spanish-speaking neighbours (as well as other ethnic groups), not just the English-speaking ones, in order to adjust to their new life. Success at integrating requires individuals to forge ties beyond their own group, and adults had a more difficult time achieving this than the youth, who quickly made a diverse set of friends and learnt both Spanish and English.

During cultural orientation in places like Istanbul, the refugees were told that although "not everyone in America will look the same", learning to master English was essential to their success in America. What they found however, was that the Spanish language was equally advantageous when it came to finding a job and they were frustrated with having to negotiate a Spanish-speaking community as well as an English one to find a job.

When I first came here, I went to some store, looking for a job. I thought: California, all the people are American, you know ...I'm looking for a job, and they said, "You speak Spanish?" so I said, "No, I'm living in California, I don't need Spanish." He [the employer] said, "No, here the first language is Spanish."

Some older adults felt it was a waste of time to go to English language classes where all the other students were Spanish speakers. Some complained about not being able to practise English with their neighbours – and were unable to communicate in Spanish with them. What they found problematic was not cultural differences but being economically disadvantaged in the labour market, because of both their lack of English fluency and their lack of ability in Spanish.

Young Iraqis in particular were quick to recognise that they had many things in common with Spanish-speaking students, who were also struggling to learn English. They recognised that Latinos were less conservative than themselves in their public demeanour but they did not see the cultural differences between them as insurmountable. Parents and older adults clearly had a more difficult time adjusting.

The resettlement agency provided cultural orientation to all new arrivals. However, these sessions tended to be poorly attended and focused primarily on the practical issues of dealing with social welfare agencies, securing a driver's licence, following immigration laws, setting up bank accounts, and so on. The cultural component was weak, only discussing generic notions of 'American culture' such as being on time for appointments; it did not address the actual social geography of the region.

The agency therefore requested help from a local university to develop a 'Latino cultures' component for their training. An important factor in creating a more culturally grounded orientation was the use of a 'bridge person' – a representative of those communities, trained in cross-cultural skills – who acts as a kind of cultural emissary between communities. Other agencies can learn from this experience but the challenge may still be that attendance for cultural orientation trainings has been generally disappointing.

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