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# Review of The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community by Mary Pipher.

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# Book Review

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**The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community.** Mary Pipher, Orlando, FL. Harcourt. 2002. 352 pages.

Patricia A. Hoffman

## Overview of Related Work

*Women's Ways of Knowing* was one of the first widely read books to note the silence of women in style (hesitant, qualified, question posing) and content (concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal) and with it the awareness that firsthand experience is a valuable source of knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 17). The book allowed scholars to consider the inability of women to separate the personal realm from their public selves. Nowhere is the personal context more evident than with immigrants, many of whom are women from refugee experiences.

Although immigrants are grateful for the safe haven of America, their resettlement can also be a traumatic experience requiring patience and understanding from the communities and individuals who must interact with them. A realization of the

intense grief for the things they left behind: their place of birth, culture, language, and a familiar way of life . . . social status, personal identity, and the ability to operate effectively in the environment" can be frustrating and disempowering. (Vaynshtok, 2002, p. 27)

Many recent immigrants also come from non-majority racial backgrounds. The subtle and often unrecognized phenomenon of white privilege permeates U.S. culture. White privilege is described as an unearned advantage and conferred dominance. What is defined as "normal" or the "standard" is generally based on white, middle class values that may not reflect the immigrant experience. As McIntosh stated in her seminal article, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* (McIntosh, 1990):

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will . . . whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal. So that when we work to

benefit others this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us.” (pp. 31-32)

### About the Author

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Pipher, author of *The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community*, has written an intensively personal narrative exploring her own consciousness as well as giving an eye-opening treatise on the immigrant experience. As she finished the book, the terrorism of September 11th shocked America’s consciousness. For some, the tragedy was an unsettling wake-up call that Americans may be vulnerable to an enemy they do not understand. For others, it precipitated a call for increased understanding of global partners and those immigrants seeking refuge on American shores. Although some approached this conflict with a combative spirit, patriotic zeal, or a call for isolationism, Pipher chose a personal approach culled from her first hand experience with some of these newest immigrants.

Pipher did not set out to do an ethnographic study. One emerged spontaneously as she became involved in the lives of refugees, migrant workers, and other recent immigrants. As she sought to understand their reality, first as therapist and later as interviewer, she became aware of her own world view that colored and shaped her understanding of the lived reality facing these newcomers.

The juxtaposition of her Nebraska homeland with the compelling narratives makes the book engaging. For many, a vision of Nebraska, the homogeneous heartland of America, would be plain white folks, potlucks, farmland, and the flat prairie portrayed by Willa Cather. The new reality of the Nebraska described by Pipher includes mosques emerging from cornfields, dark faces bearing facial scarring from manhood ceremonies, and women veiled behind chadors. Rather than an isolated phenomenon, the scenario is one being repeated in small and large communities across the

United States and much of the world. It is no longer necessary to travel to a distant location to be faced with a culturally diverse population.

Pipher is a storyteller, and although many of the accounts are exotic and engaging, they also portray trauma and desperation. Stories of families in need of financial help, legal advice, or English lessons; parents trying to understand school attendance policies and curriculum; mothers trying to negotiate the health care system as they seek help for sick children; and a wide array of concerns that must be answered by social service agencies, schools, and the medical community are recounted.

The author intuitively perceives connections that would remain hidden if one only took a cursory look at the lives of these immigrants. She weaves the stories of sisters, mothers, sons, and daughters into the readers' hearts and minds as she creates an awareness and understanding of how lives are mutually enriched when one risks getting to know the strangers among us. Pipher reminds the reader that many of the newest arrivals are not so different from his or her own grandparents and great-grandparents who also may have faced unspeakable tragedy, yet managed to endure and even triumph in an alien culture, the United States of America.

### **Hidden in Plain Sight**

*The Middle of Everywhere* has several recurring themes and is organized into three parts. Chapter 1 fleshes out the characteristics of the latest wave of immigrants by contrasting them with their predecessors who, not surprisingly, resemble the typical American. Yet even in these descriptions she reminds readers that, ironically, the nation's first immigrants were not as homogeneous as collective memory recalls.

Since 1990, many of the newest immigrants are calling the Midwestern region their home. Amato (1996) described the influx of immigrants in southwestern Minnesota. "Newcomers enter southwestern Minnesota on different trajectories. They are so different and often move through so rapidly that they are not easily observed even by those who care to look" (p. 5). Amato described the misunderstandings that occur because host communities have not been taught to understand how many people live provisionally in one place, until new possibilities or stern necessities lead them elsewhere.

Often well meaning individuals in the host communities also lack an understanding of their own status and privilege within American society. McIntosh (1990) began her essay with the statement, "I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group" (p. 31). For most Americans, the "American dream" of upward mobility is unquestioned and taken for granted because the social systems in place work to their advantage. For newcomers,

there are invisible constraints that, at worst, deny them the same advantages and, at the very least, create misunderstanding.

McIntosh (1990) contended the process of understanding must become a two-way street. The primary issues that emerge wherever the host community is located always include housing, law enforcement, social welfare, and education. Advocates who hope to succeed in integrating newcomers into the larger community must develop in-depth profiles of themselves and should facilitate a similar understanding among the newcomers.

Sleeter and Grant (2003) observed that analyzing the circumstances of one's own life will help resolve the contradictions between practical consciousness which is a "common-sense understanding of one's own life, of how the system works, and of everyday attempts to resolve the class, race, gender and other contradictions one faces" (p. 209) and theoretical consciousness or "dominant social ideologies, explanations that one learns from how the world works that purport that the world is fair and just as it is" (p. 209). These contradictions are often the source of the misunderstandings between newcomers and their hosts. Freire (1985) and Shor (1980) used a similar strategy of problem posing that helps students to become historians and use history to shape their understanding of the problems of their own lives.

In a regional description of rural Minnesota, an area of the country that is facing similar demographic shifts as those described in Pipher's book, Amato (1996) suggested communities look at their heritage, stories and critical histories of their past, as well as take a look in the mirror. In this way the complex sets of problems surrounding new immigrants can be deconstructed and policies and strategies to deal with immediate and long range needs will emerge. Amato described how seemingly small cultural differences such as hunting, driving, or courting styles may evoke greater conflicts.

Pipher's work uses similarly descriptive narratives and first hand accounts as she serves as a cultural broker. In Chapter 2, Kurdish sisters are the first newcomers the reader encounters. Pipher befriends them, teaching them to drive, connecting them with a GED program, taking them to garage sales, and acting as their cultural informant and confidant. Pipher captures their hopes, dreams, frustrations, confusion, and mental anguish as they negotiate their new environment while dealing with issues from their past. What emerges is a picture of resilient women dealing with survival. As a trained therapist, Pipher also recognizes the signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome as the sisters speak of their "journeys and losses and the great sadness they all carried in their hearts" (p. 46).

Chapter 3 describes the attributes of resilience that make it possible for refugees to survive and even thrive after dislocation and serious trauma. These characteristics include future orientation, energy and good health, the ability to pay attention, ambition and initiative, verbal expressiveness, positive mental health, the ability to calm down, flexibility, intentionality, lovability, the ability to love new people, and good moral character (pp. 69-70). Language development and acculturation processes highlight some of the difficulties that occur when North American values collide with a third world view.

An example of the difficulty of acculturation is the debt that many newcomers soon accumulate because they are not familiar with credit, charge cards, nor the advertisements and consumerism that plague American society. Many immigrants are not prepared for this onslaught; they come from cultures where barter is the norm, clothes are made at home, food is grown by the family, and entertainment is other people in the village.

When we give refugees charge cards long before we give them green cards, we set them up to be debtors. Newcomers experience a lethal combination of poverty and bombardment with ads. They do not understand the American way and almost immediately are into trouble with money decisions. (p. 88)

Gay (2000) described the paradox faced by most refugees and immigrants:

They come to the United States to escape poverty and persecutions, and to improve the general quality of their lives. In doing so, they often suffer deep affective losses of supportive networks, and familial connections . . . cultural and psycho-emotional uprootedness (that) can cause stress, anxiety, feelings of vulnerability, loneliness, isolation, and insecurity. (p. 18)

This, explains Pipher, is where cultural brokers become a lifeline to help the newcomers survive in their confusing new world. She lists five pages of mundane tasks most Americans take for granted that could cause confusion, frustration, or worse for an immigrant. Everything from how to cross a street at a traffic light, to what to put in a refrigerator, to what elections are, to what a birthday is, all may be foreign concepts. Housing, transportation, education, work, health care, and mental health issues are all part of a confusing barrage of paperwork and bureaucracy that collides with the cultural traditions of most refugees. Pipher elucidates the confusion and the chasm between cultures when she describes her attempt to help a woman from Afghanistan deal with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

I had entered the twilight zone. This was a mess for me and I am a native-born, English speaking clinical psychologist with a telephone. What was it like for a desperate refugee with no cultural broker . . . I had learned something about how our government works and Sadia was grateful she hadn't been tortured. (p. 109)

### **Refugees Across the Life Cycle**

Part 2 begins with children, many of whom are parted from their mothers for the first time in their lives when they enter school. School can be overwhelming, scary, impersonal, confusing, or even hostile, but it is also therapeutic and the path to success. Interestingly, despite their many challenges, refugee children have lower drop-out rates than native born children and their parents often go to great lengths and make enormous sacrifices so that their sons and daughters can realize the American dream. Yet though most refugee parents desire a better education for their children, many are unable or do not understand how to be involved. "Work schedules, transportation, and language problems make contact with schools difficult" (p. 114). For many refugee children, relationships with school teachers and other adults at school offer predictability, order, and stability.

After the chaos and confusion of their lives, nothing is more comforting than routine. . . . Order, ritual, and predictability are part of this reassurance. . . . Teachers connect the dots between the world of family and of school, the old culture and America, the past and the future. (p. 115)

The enormity of what these children must learn and their differences and similarities became shockingly clear to Pipher as she began to volunteer in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class. She discovers the amount of trauma in their lives, parental and community support, family responsibilities, and developmental and acculturation levels varied from child to child. She states "It helped me to remember these kids had simple needs as well as complicated ones, needs to be hugged, helped with spelling words, smiled at, and read to. Even small acts of kindness made a difference" (p. 123).

This power of caring is a foundational pillar of the culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000):

Teachers demonstrate caring for children as students and as people. This is expressed in concern for their psycho-emotional well-being and academic success; personal morality and social actions; obligations and celebrations; communality and individuality; and unique cultural connections and human bonds. In other words, teachers who really care about students, honor their

humanity, hold them in high esteem, expect high performance from them. And use strategies to fulfill their expectations. (p. 46)

Older children and adolescents from refugee backgrounds often have very different cultural expectations from their American peers. They are often far more respectful of their elders and are amazed at how many American teenagers treat their parents and grandparents. "In fact the major identity struggles of refugee teens involve finding the balance between independence and their obligations to family and community" (Piper, 2002, p. 167). Gay (2000) described finding this balance as developing "cultural congruity" as students are able to successfully bridge the differences between the culture of their birth and their adopted U.S. culture.

Well meaning adults may contribute to the disconnect between cultures and to a division between children and parents. Sometimes school personnel will ask children to act as translators for their non-English speaking parents because the children are more facile with the language. This has potentially devastating consequences as power is shifted from parents to children who have become bicultural and bilingual before their mother and father.

Too often teens are caught between cultures in their desire to become like their American peers yet remain loyal to their families and cultural traditions. Chapter 6 illuminates how torn adolescents can be as they try to construct their new identity. Sleeter and Grant (2003) explained this as "resistance theory" which is overt behavioral opposition. The teenagers' resistance to dominant social norms can be interpreted as an attempt to create more meaningful lives for themselves, although most members of their community view such behavior as harmful to their group's status (p. 202).

Rather than fighting against this resistance, educators can use it as a springboard to analyze issues and conflicts (Sleeter & Grant, 2003). Pipher identifies the same issue:

Boys especially are trapped in a weird bind. Their peers teach them that "to act white": is to be disloyal to their ethnic group. Studying, making good grades, being polite, or joining school clubs are all defined as 'acting white.' So the boys must choose between social acceptance by peers and meeting parental expectations. Many conform their way into being rebellious at school. They learn not to learn. (p. 171)

The book includes a series of chronological entries that unfold the complex relationships that develop between teenagers and their adult mentors and teachers. Mentor, advocate, cultural informant, transmitter of knowledge, surrogate parent, truant officer, social worker, confidant, and friend are all roles assumed over the course of the year by an ESL teacher. She earned the



students respect and their trust. At the end of the year when she informs the students she has accepted a new position elsewhere, they are devastated. For them this unwelcome change feels like a betrayal, particularly because of their need for stability and trusting relationships.

The long term relationship Pipher establishes with many of the subjects in the book illustrates how easily the lives of refugee children become entwined with their new American friends. Often what is needed by students is help in negotiating new privileges and freedom, learning whom they can trust, and deciding which aspects of their new culture to embrace or avoid. Which language to speak in the home; how to maintain balance and order and respect for elders when family roles are being reversed; where to draw the line on friendship, dating, gender, or religion must all be negotiated by new immigrants.

Families arrive here intensely unified; they have survived great crises and stayed together. All have focused on the dream of reaching a safe good place. But once here, people develop individual dreams. These conflicting dreams create tension and sometimes break up families that have risked their lives to be together. (p. 224)

To help make sense of their new lives, Pipher asks her new friends what they want to keep from their old culture. She teaches them about resilience and transition time; she gives them tools for conflict resolution and negotiation of conflict; and she reminds them to have fun. "Fun can be deeply healing" (p. 230).

### **The Alchemy of Healing: Turning Pain Into Meaning.**

The final chapters of the book are devoted to dealing with pain and exploring the means of healing. It is difficult to read the stories related by individuals who had been tortured, raped, or made to watch family members be killed. The inhumanity and powerlessness of their struggle is indeed difficult to comprehend. Pipher found she needed to be respectful, direct, but full of clear guidance as many of these refugees did not know what they should or should not be afraid of or whom they could trust.

Much of their healing involved finding a sense of normalcy. School, outings, birthdays, and routines of all sorts helped to establish a sense of place and connection. Gay (2000) described a similar need for rituals and routines:

People survive because they partake of the alchemy of healing. They turn their pain into a deeper understanding of themselves and of what it means to be human. . . . To say that people can grow and learn from any experience is not to justify their experience or even to say that they couldn't have leaned

from an easier life, but it is to say that healthy people learn and grow from everything, even trauma. (p. 300)

### **Response to Suffering and Injustice: Advocacy**

As important as getting to the root cause of educational underperformance is addressing the violence, economic deprivation, and oppression found in refugees' home countries. As noted earlier, many of these newest immigrants are men and, even more frequently, women who have been victims of persecution, brutality, or torture. America's response must be threefold: addressing immediate and basic needs of housing, employment, medical attention, and transportation; addressing long-term needs such as mental health counseling, acquisition of English language skills, literacy, and further education; and addressing the root causes of social injustice that force these persons into exile in the first place.

Aburdene and Naisbitt (1992) reminded us that social activism among women around the globe has taken on a new form. As 21st Century women in first world countries are increasingly more educated and wealthier in their own right; and, rather than furthering the agendas of their husbands or continuing in their role as victim, these women are interested in advocacy and figuring out the root causes of violence against women. This includes action at home and abroad, much of which is centered on empowering the survivors as well as preventing and eradicating future violence.

Women have a critical role in both economic development and political stability across the globe. Women represent 70 percent of small business owners, produce as much as eight percent of the food in Africa, and are the key to stabilizing the world's population growth.

What supports people is to help them access their own power. Otherwise, one is not changing the world but mounting a relief effort, which is valuable indeed, but meant to remain in effect for a limited time. Long-term social transformation is an organic process; it is about power, self-reliance and prosperity. (Pipher, 2002, p. 303)

The mantra, "Think globally, act locally" has never been more appropriate. Pipher's response was to establish the *Thrive Project* with other mental health professionals. Mentors from various cultural groups were trained as cultural brokers on mental health issues. Mentors were action-oriented. If their clients were stressed by hungry children, rather than discussing stress management theory, the mentors drove them to the grocery store. The mentors helped the professionals understand that many immigrants view the world holistically and personally rather than with a compartmentalized, North-American mind-set with its boundaries between personal and professional relationships.

A personal response is most needed with victims of trauma. These individuals have experienced great loss; loss of loved ones, loss of personal power, and loss of trust. Of these, trust is often the most difficult to re-establish. Although Western society would approach these mental health issues acknowledging a need for professional counseling, the practice of sharing your personal life with a stranger is threatening and unheard of for most of the new immigrants. Although some may deal with their trauma, avoidance is also common. Avoidance takes many shapes, from memory loss, to survivor guilt, anxiety, depression or lack of energy. They may not be very adaptive and one "way refugees deal with their pain and difficulties in America is to move . . . as they find one town difficult and hear rumors that the grass is greener in other places" (p. 284). In general though the moves do not make the situation better, they postpone dealing with the inevitable.

### Conclusion

As person after person tells a story, each one more riveting than the last, the reader is reminded "The refugee experience of dislocation, cultural bereavement, confusion, and constant change will soon be all of our experience. As the world becomes globalized, we'll all be searching for home" (p. 320). Rather than viewing these newest immigrants from a deficit perspective, Pipher makes the reader long to meet them and hear their stories firsthand. The collective wisdom and sense of resilience represented by the individuals who grace this book touch a chord in those of us whose ancestors also came as seekers and lovers of freedom. Pipher reminds the reader that the stories are not just meant to inspire but to become a call to action for "all morality like politics, is local" (p. 321).

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