SEEING THINGS FROM DIFFERENT CORNERS:
A STORY OF LEARNING AND CULTURE

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This is very important, Lynette, believe me. Because half of the problems, or tension, or suffering, that the immigrant or refugee has, when they come not only to Canada, anywhere in the world, is this big question, "How can I become a European, or a Canadian?" And they feel, "I am not... I am Middle Eastern. This is terrible, I want to go back. I can't fit here." They need somebody to tell them, you don't have to be Canadian. You have to understand Canada.

These words were spoken to me by Mira, a Lebanese refugee whose life history is the focus of this study. Like most newcomers, Mira encountered many challenges in Canadian society. Some international migrants respond by integrating, while others assimilate, separate, or marginalize themselves. The profusion of literature on migration says little about learning and its relationship to these individual responses and social interactions. This study investigates migrant transition through anthropological life history, an interpretive methodology which links the personal perspective with abstract theories and large social processes. I worked in collaboration with Mira to construct a rich contextualized description and interpretation of her life.

This life history challenges current linear models of culture learning and adaptation. It describes an evolving transition process of interdependent changes, which take place on many levels. Mira experienced culture shock when she confronted something that didn't make any sense to her, something that contradicted her own expectations and meanings. This triggered a process of transformative learning, in which Mira's ethnocentrism and dualism shifted towards cultural pluralism and a relativist epistemology. She built upon her own subjective insights and acceptance of different opinions to develop what she called "flexibility", a repertoire of understandings and an awareness of possibilities which she assessed through critical reflection to create her own choices and commitments. At the same time, Mira developed "practicality," a sense of agency associated with her growing autonomy and competence in Canadian society.
The contradictions posed by her migration from Lebanon to Canada forced issues of identity to Mira’s consciousness. Even as she began to articulate and reflect upon herself in relation to a pluralistic society and culture, her need for intimacy and belonging led her to a deep emotional affiliation with her homeland and with other Lebanese. Mira constructed a “harmony”, a coherent sense of identity based on stable values and a strong ethnic identity. While outwardly she appeared to conform to mainstream Canadian ways and values, she chose to locate herself on the margins of Canadian society, and to actively resist aspects of both Canadian and Lebanese society through teaching and storytelling.

Mira’s peripheral position and strategies are like those of an ethnographer studying a foreign culture. Her life in Canada was a personal research project, motivated by the search for a safer place to live and a commitment to personal growth. Her story reveals extraordinary courage and strength, and testifies to the resilience of the human spirit despite the traumas of civil war and migration.

My interpretation of Mira’s story overlays her narrative, drawing upon scholarly literature to reveal intersections between theories from various disciplines. This life history suggests ways to further develop and integrate theories of learning and culture, and directions for educational policy and practice. As Mira said at our last meeting:

When you talk about cultures, and people, and adult education, it’s nothing like when you say I want to write a story, and at the end you put a full stop and that’s the end. No. It’s like art. There is no final stop. You always find something, you always learn about something, every time you learn about something you discover that there are so many things you still need to learn about.
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Most of all, I thank Mira, for everything that she has shared with me.
INTRODUCTION

Half of the problems, or tension, or suffering, that the immigrant or refugee has, when they come not only to Canada, anywhere in the world, is this big question, “How can I become a European, or a Canadian?” (Mira, personal communication, April 30, 1992)

Millions of people move across national and cultural boundaries every year. These migrants must learn to cope with new and different ways of life, no matter what their age. Individuals respond differently to the challenge of new social, political, and cultural environments. They may adapt or resist, and choose to integrate, assimilate, or marginalize themselves within their new communities. What determines their response? And how does the experience of migration influence their sense of identity?

I am a grandchild of immigrants, foreigners who arrived in Canada with dreams of wealth and adventure. Though neither of my grandparents received any formal education in this country, they learned well enough to become Canadian citizens and full participants in the social, economic, and political life of their community. Their story is not unique. Last year 245,000 people migrated here from other countries. Immigrant services and education programs are proliferating amidst changing government policies of integration and multiculturalism. The planners and policy-makers involved usually make their decisions based on what they believe is necessary, from intuition and experience. Immigrant education programs emphasize language acquisition and local customs. Studies of adult learning have rarely considered how migrants learn and adjust in new cultural environments. It is even rarer to hear the voices of immigrants and refugees giving their own perspective on the process.

When I first embarked upon this study, my purpose was to gain an understanding of how an adult learns a second culture, through a rich contextualized description of an immigrant woman’s life. But while working collaboratively with Mira, a Lebanese refugee, I found myself exploring new ideas about migration and learning,
and negotiating the focus of this study with her. Instead of shaping her words to fit a particular theory of culture learning, we let Mira's own description and analysis of her life story guide the research. The complex processes associated with her migration led me to seek concepts and frameworks from several academic disciplines.

For Mira, migration was a life transition which triggered significant personal learning and development, profoundly influencing her sense of identity and her strategies of acceptance and resistance. This study investigates the links between migration, adult learning, agency, and identity. It explores the dynamic tensions between internal and external processes, between personal transformation and participation in society. It also documents the life of a refugee, revealing the extraordinary courage, strength, and perseverance of an Arab woman and newcomer to Canada.

The first day I met Mira, I asked her "How did your life change since coming to Canada?" That question lingered in our minds, shaping our research and writing process. This life history text is a synthesis of two perspectives, the ways we each make sense of our worlds. I have tried to separate Mira's interpretations of her life experiences, as described during our taped interviews, from my own interpretations. At the same time, though it could not have been created without Mira's collaboration, I am entirely responsible for what is presented here. I have written and edited this study based on my own experiences and understandings, informed by my readings of theories developed in the fields of adult education and psychology, sociology, anthropology, and cross-cultural communications.

This empirical study blends the conventions of qualitative reporting with anthropological life history. I have attempted to respect the academic standards which provided the initial motivation and guidelines for the study, and at the same time honour the words of the research participant. Chapter One locates the study in a theoretical context, providing background and delineating the research purpose and
questions. The methodology and the methods used are discussed in Chapter Two, which also introduces the research participants and our assumptions. Chapter Three locates Mira’s migration in a personal and historical context, providing an overview of Mira’s life history in her own words. This story is interpreted in Chapters Four and Five in a hermeneutical process which interprets Mira’s personal narrative in the context of theoretical frameworks. These help to make sense of the wholeness of Mira’s life, and relate her experience to current issues and lines of research. Mira’s story, in turn, illuminates the theoretical formulations, revealing their strengths and their inadequacies.

Chapter Six presents both Mira’s and my reflections on the research process and its implications for theory and action. What began as a graduate research project on culture learning and migrant adaptation became an exploration of processes of transition, transformation and agency as they are lived by an individual in a pluralistic society.
Chapter One

A THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Charting the theoretical terrain

This is a story of change - in space, in time, in consciousness. In this life history, I trace a refugee’s movement from Lebanon to Canada, and interpret changes in the ways she made sense of herself and her world during her time in Canada. Migration is an external change of locations, a move from one place to another. International migrants do not just encounter differences in geography, however. They have to learn to cope with a new social milieu, with differences in culture and history.

Just as a life story has a particular geographical setting, every research project is located in a particular theoretical context. This life history is interdisciplinary and moves through a landscape complicated by overlapping and sometimes contradictory routes. This chapter provides an orientation to that intangible terrain, a rough map which identifies guideposts in the form of overlapping theoretical frameworks and research trends.

A profusion of frameworks for studying responses to migration

Migration precipitates change in every setting of life. It is a transition event, posing challenges and contradictions which may trigger learning and development. While many people struggle to cope with the changed environment, others resist change and fight to maintain old ways, or withdraw altogether. Most of the literature on responses to migration has originated in North America, where immigration and ethnic diversity is an ongoing concern. Though adult education has made few contributions to research in this area (Mastai, 1981; Taylor, 1992), individual responses to changed cultural circumstances have been studied from
many other disciplinary perspectives, and the result has been a profusion of terminologies and frameworks.

Research has focussed on identifying and predicting group patterns rather than individual responses. Until recently, most studies were based on the assumption that newcomers would eventually assimilate: that they would cease identifying with their former group and culture, and be absorbed into North American society, adopting dominant cultural values and behaviours (Gibson, 1988; Kim, 1988; Mastai, 1981). Theories of assimilation assume the process is unidirectional, and disregard individual differences in internalizing cultural values.

Current research is informed by a pluralistic philosophy, which proposes that assimilation is only one among many adaptive responses. A multitude of transition strategies have been identified among immigrant groups, who may integrate, assimilate, separate, or marginalize themselves within their host society (Berry, 1988). Other groups react by trying to change society, or by withdrawing through another migration.

The learning of culture

Anthropological studies of learning have been preoccupied with the learning of culture. A number of frameworks have been generated for infant and childhood learning, including enculturation, socialization, culture acquisition, and culture transmission. They usually trace group patterns, and are concerned with comparing and predicting behaviour within stable integrated societies. Recent work in cognitive anthropology, for example, has identified hierarchical "cultural schemata" which serve as active mechanisms for the interpretation of events and objects (Wolcott, 1991). These schemata are learned, communicated, and intersubjectively shared by members of a social group.
The concept of "second culture learning" emphasizes the individual psychology of learning that takes place when a person crosses cultural boundaries (Hoffman, 1988). Most studies of second culture learning have been conducted with children and youth, and emphasize the outcomes rather than the process of learning. Outcomes have been described using a variety of constructs such as "biculturalism," "constructive marginality" (Spindler & Spindler, 1989), and "syncretism" (Pai, 1990). Syncretism, for example, refers to the development of a new and unique culture (which may be held by an individual or a group) and a new personal identity, by interweaving different cultural elements together. Wolcott (1991) suggests that individuals create their own unique version of culture, a "propriospect" based on individual experience which encompasses all the cultural settings, activities, and systems of which a person has knowledge. As individuals acquire new cultural competencies, they do not necessarily abandon old ones. Using this scheme, the capacity of an individual for cultural pluralism may be infinite, limited only by the opportunities presented and the choices that are made.

Hoffman (1988, 1989) provides a rare and detailed description of adult responses to the migration transition. Based on Kimball's (1972) work with unintentional learning of cultural meaning systems and her own empirical studies of Iranian immigrant youth and adults, Hoffman has developed a concept of culture learning as a process of identity creation and reformation through the communication and acquisition of nonexplicit cultural meanings. She proposes that the acquisition of psychological and behavioural patterns is closely related to deep affective identity rather than superficial behaviour.

The subjects of Hoffman's (1988, 1989) studies in the U.S. maintained a deep affiliation with Iranian culture and resisted attempts, by schools and other American institutions, to change that affiliation. The Iranians who achieved the greatest academic, professional, and economic success in America relied upon a transitional
strategy that Hoffman characterizes as "cultural eclecticism." They selected behaviours that they believed represented the best of both Iranian and American cultures, creating a blended social self with characteristics of both cultures. "On the surface, these Iranians appeared to be the most well-adjusted. . . . Although they seemed to be learning American culture to the greatest degree, they were in fact learning about the culture rather than becoming American" (Hoffman, 1988, p. 177). These individuals believed cultural identity and behaviour were independent. Hoffman hypothesizes that they are able to invent symbolic structures that act as "intercultures," bridging the different systems of cultural meanings.

Other less successful Iranian immigrants were unwilling or unable to change their behaviour without sacrificing their cultural identity. They experienced either alienation or "loss of self." Alienation from American society occurred when immigrants were unable to compromise their values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour; a loss of self was experienced when immigrants became superficially assimilated, but were unable to reconcile their behaviour with their deep affective commitment to Iranian beliefs and values.

Agency and strategies of resistance

The anthropology of education is currently re-examining the learning of culture in institutions such as schools in light of reproduction and resistance theories (Gibson, 1988; Ogbu, 1991). Resistance theorists emphasize the active role of human agency in reproducing or resisting relations of power within a system (Giroux, 1983). Their work represents a trend in anthropological research to explain individual responses to conflicting systems of power and knowledge by drawing upon the concept of agency, defined as an individual’s capacity to make meaning in interaction with others (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Mahoney & Yngvesson, 1992). Hoffman’s (1988, 1989) work on immigrant learning is based on assumptions of agency, and
makes important distinctions between identity and action. She raises questions about the extent to which culture can be perceived, valued, and integrated within a person’s sense of self, and about the relationship between a person’s identity and actions.

In a study of Japanese adults, Kondo (1990) suggests that individuals can strategically consent to, cope with, and resist social expectations at different levels of consciousness at the same time. Kondo interprets people’s lives as “shot through with contradictions and creative tensions” (p.224), and suggests that people caught in contradictory situations creatively and strategically construct their own arrangements of meaning and power, constructing their identities in relation to and in opposition to others.

Strategies for cross-cultural adaptation

Outside the field of anthropology, most studies of adult culture learning are based on assumptions of reproduction. Adaptation theorists working in the emerging field of cross-cultural communications are only concerned with the ways newcomers fit into and reproduce existing social structures and cultural understandings. Their work offers some insights into the dynamics of the transition process, although it doesn’t describe or explain the range of individual or group responses.

Kim (1988) has attempted an integration of interdisciplinary studies of adaptation in her framework for analysis and prediction of individual adaptation success. She defines cross-cultural adaptation as “the process of change over time that takes place within individuals who have completed their primary socialization process in one culture and then come into continuous, prolonged first-hand contact with a new and unfamiliar culture” (1988, p. 37). She proposes that all individuals in a changing and changed cultural environment (including immigrants, refugees, and long and short-term sojourners) share common adaptation experiences. Based on a
comprehensive review of relevant research, she describes adaptation as a dynamic, multidimensional, internal process of change that influences, and is influenced by, changing external conditions. The central dynamic of the process is a three part cycle of "stress," "adaptation," and "growth," a repeating cycle of activities which shift between "out-looking, information-seeking behaviour and tension-reducing, defensive retreat, and the resultant capacity to see a situation 'with new eyes'" (1988, p. 56). Each turn of the cycle gives the individual an increased capacity to handle future stresses and adaptations.

Kim's (1988) perspective is one of dozens of descriptive schemes and variations found among transition and development frameworks (Knox, 1977; Schlossberg, 1984). Rather than seeking a common framework for what may be a complex and individual process, Schlossberg suggests that it makes more sense to consider the transition process in three broad phases. The introduction is a time during which the individual is pervaded by the transition. For a migrant, this is usually called "culture shock," what Kim calls the "stress" phase. Culture shock was once considered a form of mental illness, but has been reinterpreted as a stress which triggers a normal process of adaptation and change (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Kim, 1988). Empirical research has demonstrated that culture shock is not only responsible for anxiety, helplessness, and frustration, it also provides the stimulus for learning and personal growth (Church, 1982).

Kim's (1988) "adaptation" phase is a variation on the middle period of transition, which is one of disruption, when the individual finds old norms and relationships are changing and new ones are in process (Schlossberg, 1984). In the final period, an individual integrates the transition. Kim assumes this third phase to be "growth", but Schlossberg suggests this can take several forms: renewal, acceptance, or deterioration. This recognition of alternative forms is more useful than Kim's framework for interpreting the wide range of responses to migration
including separation, marginalization, and withdrawal as well as group integration or assimilation.

Both Schlossberg (1984) and Kim (1988) identify no finite end point in the transition process. It continues through time, overlapping and interacting with other life transitions in different life settings, while each individual consciously or unconsciously appraises, and reappraises, the impact of the transition upon her or his own life. But Kim does identify three distinct and critical outcomes of cross-cultural adaptation. One is "functional fitness," an improved ability to communicate and meet social as well as survival needs in a new environment. In turn, this outcome of the stress-adaptation-growth cycle reduces the migrants' cultural stress, and leads to a second outcome, improved psychological health. The third related outcome is the development of an "intercultural identity." This construct represents an individual's self-concept in relation to a cultural group. Kim suggests that as individuals adapt, their identities become increasingly flexible, no longer intellectually or emotionally bound by membership in either their original cultures or the host cultures.

Immigrants, refugees, and sojourners

Like most theoretical work on the processes of migrant transition, Hoffman's (1988, 1989) analysis is based on empirical research with immigrants. Kim (1988) looked for commonalities among different categories of migrants, though her framework draws primarily upon studies of temporary sojourners. Sojourners are migrants who intend their residence in a new country to be short term, unlike immigrants, whose settlement in a new country is intended to be relatively permanent. Neither framework refers specifically to refugees, although Kim clumps them together in her "immigrant" category with all other long-term migrants.
The twentieth century has been called the century of the refugee because of the vast numbers of people uprooted by war and politics from their homes and their accustomed lives (Bateson, 1989). Yet it is common for researchers to overlook distinctions between immigrants and refugees. Perhaps as a result, refugees have not received as much attention as other immigrants in theoretical research (Emminghaus, 1988). A refugee has been defined by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees as “any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (Goldschmidt & Boesch, 1983, p. 17).

This distinguishes the refugee from other immigrants. While most immigrants choose to come to a new life, refugees are forced to flee, often for their lives. The attraction, or “pull,” of the host country is less significant to their migration than the “push” from their previous country. They face what sociologist Rumbaut (1985) calls a double crisis. The first, shared by all immigrants, is crisis imposed by the straightforward need to survive: to find shelter and work; to learn to speak an unknown language; and to adjust to a drastically changed environment despite barriers of poverty, prejudice, minority status, pervasive uncertainty, and culture shock. In addition, the refugee must also come to terms with what has been involuntarily lost from the past, including home, country, family, friends, work, social status, material possessions, and meaningful sources of identity. Rumbaut calls this double challenge a “high-demand, low-control situation that fully tests the refugee’s emotional resilience and coping resources and produces severe psychological distress even among the best prepared and even under the most receptive of circumstances” (pp. 435-436).

This distress is intensified by the complex and restrictive regulations imposed upon refugees in many host countries, including Canada (Rockhill & Tomic, 1992).
Regulated in their new country, and excluded from participation at home, refugees can become alienated from culture and society (Emminghaus, 1988). The limited theoretical work that does exist on refugee responses to migration, mostly conducted in the field of mental health, emphasizes the importance of external circumstances. An individual refugee's transition process cannot be understood in isolation from social and political circumstances.

**Adult learning and culture theory**

The study of culture learning and cross-cultural adaptation among adult migrants has developed separate from research and theory in adult learning. Though learning is its central concern, the field of adult education in North America exists in a kind of monocultural cocoon. Theoretical discussions of adult learning seldom take culture into consideration, but instead emphasize individual psychological explanations (Rubenson, 1982). Research in adult learning theory has steadily shifted away from a focus on behaviour towards a concern with internal consciousness. While it shares much with childhood learning, adult learning has been characterized as "transforming" or modifying knowledge, skills, strategies, and values through experience. This can be distinguished from childhood learning, which is more often viewed as "forming" knowledge, skills, strategies, and values (Brundage & MacKeracher, 1980). This study, like most recent research in adult education, will consider learning as a process of change in a person's understanding which is brought about by a reconstruction of ideas (Entwhistle & Marton, 1984).

An important direction in adult educational research focusses on large qualitative transformations, conceptualized as paradigm shifts, critical consciousness, or perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1985). Transformative learning is the revision of meaning systems, long-held psychological and cultural assumptions which have limited or distorted the way people see themselves and
others (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1990). Most studies of transformative learning have been framed by the concerns of educational practice, and have interpreted culture primarily as a constraint. It is based on a concept of culture as norms and standards:

A society's culture consists of whatever one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members...standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it. (Goodenough, 1965, p. 259)

This life history has been shaped by another approach to cultural analysis. Just as the study of learning has shifted from external observable behaviours to internal consciousness, a parallel trend in anthropological studies of culture has led to an emphasis on the abstract values, beliefs, and perceptions which lie behind actions (Haviland, 1989). I have taken an interpretive approach to cultural analysis. Interpretivism assumes that culture isn't limited to the internal psychological structures which guide behaviour. It seeks to interpret shared cultural meaning systems, which are described in Geertz's (1973) influential formulation:

The culture concept. . . denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men [sic] communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. (p. 89)

This is more integrative than Goodenough's approach. While Geertz does not exclude the notion of culture as standards for behaviour, he does not limit culture to a purely psychological phenomena. Culture can be visualized as a web or network of meanings both internal and external to the individual, a lifelong dialogue of action, interaction, and meaning (Spindler & Spindler, 1989).

Like anthropology itself, the interpretive understanding of culture was developed by anthropologists studying stable and distinct societies. It is currently being challenged by shifting boundaries in the modern world, where complex societies, social change, and migration problematize definitions and studies of culture (Fox, 1991). Post-modernist and feminist critiques have exposed the relativism of
anthropological authority; some critics suggest that the concept of culture should be discarded or replaced with studies of social practice and human agency (Abu-Lughod, 1989, 1991; Bourdieu, 1977; Clifford, 1986; Fox, 1991).

Few theorists in adult education are aware of this ferment of critical debate in anthropological theory. An exception can be found in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), who have developed a theory of learning as social practice. Their analytical perspective emphasizes the relational interdependency of "agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing. . . . This view also claims that learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (pp. 50-51). They propose that learning increases the degree of an individual's participation in a community of practice. As individuals move from peripheral participation towards full participation, their changing "locations" and perspectives influence their learning, identity development, and forms of membership. Lave and Wenger name this analytical perspective "legitimate peripheral participation." It is legitimate because there is an initial acceptance of the individual by members of the community, along with interaction by "adept practitioners." They suggest that changes in an individual's cultural identity and social relations are an inevitable part of the process of moving towards full participation. These changing social relations involve relationships of power, for while moving towards the centre is empowering, being kept on the periphery is disempowering.
Research purpose and questions

The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the multidimensional process of personal change which is associated with international migration. My goal is to explore a migrant’s transition process, tracing the relationship between internal events and understandings and the migration context. This rich descriptive example contributes to adult learning theory by providing an empirical basis for assessing the adequacies of existing theories, and by suggesting new integrations of existing theory.

From this interdisciplinary review of literature, I have constructed a theoretical map for the research journey. Rather than providing clear directions and hypotheses for assessment, the current state of research and theory on migrant transition appears more like a maze, raising contradictions and questions.

While Kim (1988) considers adaptation to be a natural response to migration, Hoffman (1989) suggests that immigrants can make their own decisions to adapt or resist aspects of their new cultural environment. Is the transition process unconscious and incidental, or a conscious and intentional strategy? What is the role of learning in the process? How are these internal processes related to the context of the migration?

More contradictions can be located in the studies of interactions between a migrant’s sense of self, cultural identity, and behaviour. How does the transition process influence the nature of an individual’s commitment to her or his first culture? Is it possible to be deeply committed to more than one culture, or cultural group? Does cultural identity influence the nature of the transition process? How does an individual’s sense of self and cultural identity relate to participation in a new cultural system?

These questions have guided my own process of research, providing direction to the analysis presented in this text. The complexity of the questions reflects the
complicated nature of migration and the transition process. To search for the answers, I required a sensitive and powerful research method. Chapter Two explains my choice of the anthropological life history process, and explores the implications of the methodology. Before outlining the course of the fieldwork and analysis, I locate the participants by describing my own background and the local community through which I met the narrator of the life history. In Chapter Three, a brief history of Lebanon and Lebanese migration provides further context for Mira’s life story. Mira’s own interpretation of the stages in her life is presented in a large chunk of text from the life history interviews.

Chapter Four juxtaposes my own interpretations with text from the interviews, to trace the dynamics of Mira’s learning process since she migrated to Canada. Changes in Mira’s understanding are related to intersecting theories of adult learning and culture. To gain an understanding of Mira’s strategies for living in Canada in Chapter Five, I draw upon theories of identity and agency to consider both her inner sense of self and her actions in the social world. In Chapter Six, both Mira and I consider the implications of the life history research process. Though we each discuss the relevance of this life history, my words are directed to the academic community and educational practitioners, while Mira’s words are directed to Lebanese and Canadian readers in general.
Chapter Two

METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Choosing a methodology

The effects of extralocal and long-term processes are only manifested locally and specifically, produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words. (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 150)

From the moment I learned about life history research in a university classroom, I wanted to do it. Since childhood, I have often sought out personal narratives, both written and spoken, for entertainment and for guidance in making life decisions. The life history is a form of biography, a kind of common denominator for data and theory in all the social sciences, a relatively unspecialized method for collecting data relevant to any set of concerns about human existence in society (Langness, 1965). The genre struck me as a powerful tool for doing and disseminating research, so I was not surprised to learn that there has been a growing interest in life history studies in sociology, psychology, anthropology, women's studies, and adult education (Bertaux, 1981; Warren, 1982)

As I reviewed literature about migration and transition, and the parameters of my research purpose began to emerge, I wondered if life history would be appropriate for the task. I needed to adopt an approach sensitive enough to trace the delicate webs of cultural meaning amongst the tangled strands of a person’s actions, values, and beliefs, without neglecting larger processes and structures. Cultural analysis encompasses two divergent perspectives, which have been named the ‘emic’ and the ‘etic’ (Wolcott, 1982, p. 93). Most life history research emphasizes the emic, also referred to as the insiders’ perspective, concerned with the individual and the personal. The emic perspective has been pursued through various forms of phenomenological and constructivist research, which stress the importance of
subjective experience and the study of multiple constructed realities. The etic is concerned with theory and abstraction, with general principles underlying phenomena. Positivism and objectivist paradigms fit well with an etic perspective.

Rather than being constrained by either one, I wanted to link the emic with the etic. For a fuller understanding of the transition process, I needed to relate an individual migrant’s experiences to my theoretical map, using an approach that could integrate internal systems of meaning with contextual structures and systems. Anthropologists have long addressed the tension between the emic and the etic through a dialectical process of analysis which moves back and forth between the emic of the experiential data to the etic of theory, each perspective resolving questions and contradictions posed by the other, leading to some form of synthesis in interpretation.

Anthropological life history research has been used for over a century to study individual and cultural processes. It begins with the goal of understanding an individual, and builds from there towards understanding the general characteristics of the relationship between individual and culture. Since it gives a great deal of insight into the texture and detail of that relationship, life history has been described as “an extraordinarily sensitive source of information for testing hypotheses about the dynamics and processes of social organization” (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985, p. 138). Mandelbaum (1973) was the first of many anthropologists to focus life history analysis on “turnings,” the major transitions that people make when taking on a new set of roles, entering into fresh relations with a new set of people, and acquiring a new self-conception. Studies of these critical turnings have illuminated social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of experience (Knudsen, 1990).

To study the transition process associated with migration, I chose to use anthropological life history to look for cultural meanings in the subjective reality of
one individual. The emic data of the life story provides a single contextualized point
of view from which to consider the fragmented, overlapping, and sometimes
contradictory etic frameworks of my theoretical map.

This chapter is an exploration of the theory and practice of life history
research. I will first describe the research process, the issues and implications
raised by the method, the text, the genre, and the afterlife of the document. Then I'll
respond to those issues with a description of the research participants and the course
of our fieldwork and analysis.

The anthropological life history process: Interaction and interpretation

Anthropological life history is a research method (a means of collecting and
manipulating data), a text (the completed account, also called a document), and a
genre (a written form whose conventions embody certain shared assumptions and
beliefs) (Harper, 1991). All three are based on the life story, a retrospective account
by an individual of her or his life, in oral or written form. The life history is a life
story which has been elicited or prompted by another person.

Anthropologists once considered the life history method to be an objective and
neutral tool for producing a document that represents the actual experience of a
person. Early writers did not reflect on the process of constructing a life history,
nor on the multiple influences shaping their texts. But this changed as
anthropological inquiry gradually shifted towards a more subjectivist ontology.
Since Kluckhohn's (1945) first critical look at the life history, there has been a
growing emphasis on the narrative process itself, a focus on the story rather than on
the life. Most life histories now focus on the translation of oral narrative to text, on
narrative text as literature, on the cultural construction of the self through
narration, and on cross-cultural dialogue (Blackman, 1992).
The starting-point for this life history is how one person, at one point in time, makes sense of the world. Its goal is to describe an individual’s way of thinking about personal changes that are related to changes in geography, culture, and self, and to analyze those changes. Rather than describing things the way they are, this study explores the way they are believed to be—the way they are interpreted. It focusses on the individual as the center of a context of experience, and inseparable from it. And it asks how a person comes to terms with her subjective understanding of the events in her world.

This life history has been shaped by many storytellers. It arises from an interaction between a narrator and a listener; layers of interpretation have been created in the telling, the listening, and the analysis and writing of the text. These layers of interaction and interpretation raise methodological, epistemological, and moral issues, which I will consider through three lenses: story, storytellers, and text.

The story

Life stories are intentional revelations, interpretations which may draw from fact and fiction. Denzin (1989) persuasively argues that life stories always come in multiple versions, without clear endings or beginnings; that they are grounded in highly variable personal or group criteria for truthfulness; that the story that is told is never the same as the story that is heard; and that stories are shaped by larger ideological forces, which put pressure on persons to establish their individuality in the stories they construct. Narrators may not mention influential external circumstances or structures by choice, or because they are unaware of them.

These characteristics may make it difficult to establish the “objective truthfulness” of a life story. But the purpose of this life history research is not to identify the “facts” of a migrant’s transition, but to understand the personal meanings that transition represents. Knudsen’s (1990) perspective on the life story
as a strategy for self-presentation and legitimization is more relevant to my purpose. His work indicates that however loosely the narrator bases the life story on past and present experience, its very construction reflects that person’s dreams and rationalizations. The story reveals self, identity, and personality when the speaker describes ways of handling problems and dilemmas, attitudes towards others, and feelings about self.

A life story is not only told in the present, it must be considered in relation to moment of its telling. Its purpose is not so much to describe the past as it was, or even as it was experienced, but to confer a certain meaning to the past which will contribute to the meaning of the present (Bertaux-Wiame, 1979). Memory is selective, endowing prominence to certain moments and not to others (Passerini, 1987). The life history is both less and more than memory. It is a particular selection and arrangement of memories, an encounter between what is remembered of the past and a current social reality. The narrator may, in effect, be building a theory of self: “as we give meaning to our experience by reflecting on it, we form and reform ourselves” (Young & Tardif, 1992, p. 137).

A life story doesn’t exist inside every person’s brain, waiting to emerge consistently and clearly in an interview. Most life stories are ambiguous and often contradictory, slowly unfolding and twisting back and forth on themselves as people seek to find personal meanings in their own experiences (Denzin, 1989). But neither are all life stories improvised. In her study of working class women in Italy, Passerini (1987) found that life stories seemed to follow pre-existing storylines and ways of telling stories. Though each personal history was unique, their form and content echoed older Italian storytelling traditions of female social life that involve the passing on of experiences and stories from grandmother to mother to daughter, and between neighbours, friends, and relations. She argues that to consider life
stories only as a spontaneous product of a research interaction is to ignore this "double reality."

Whether based on traditional forms or on idiosyncratic construction, every telling of a life history is likely to be different, influenced by the participants' perceptions of the purpose of the project, their sense of privacy, the relationship between the speaker and the listener, relevance, the conventions of an interview, the presence of others, and the recording devices used. From an objective empirical viewpoint, these are biases, sources of error which have led to charges that the life history is unscientific due to its unreliability. But these same sources of error exist in all interview situations, and serve as a hidden bias in other methodologies (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985). By making these factors explicit through a reflective research process, the credibility of a life history can be established.

The storytellers

Even though a life history may take a different shape if it were collected by a different person at a different time, the narrator can nevertheless remain recognizable, just as he would if he were to sit for a portrait by two different photographic artists with their own photographic styles. Karsh's portrait of Churchill, while instantly recognizable as a Karsh photograph, is nevertheless a portrait of Churchill and not of Karsh. (Freeman, 1989, p. 431)

Life history is not just one person's story. It is the product of two interpretations, located in two consciousnesses: that of the narrator of the life story, and of my own, the instigator, interviewer, and writer of this life history document. I have influenced the life story by eliciting it in the first place, by my presence during life history interviews, and by the questions I have asked.

Freeman has noted that the life history is "a rearrangement of the raw data of a narrator's original account...consciously staged and directed - both by the investigator and the narrator" (1989, p. 430-431). During the life history process, the participants construct a collaborative biography in which the relationship between
them is inseparable from the context. To establish the validity of a life history document, the reader needs to know more than is usually reported about how each has shaped the process and the text. Since the “effect” of the investigator cannot be eliminated, it must be understood through an explicit, reflexive description of the research process, the participants, and the participants’ relationship.

A reflexive awareness of power relations between research participants has moral implications which are critical to epistemological concerns. Research does not occur in a vacuum, but in a social, cultural, and historical environment. Together with other forms of anthropological writing, the life history has come under increasingly intense scrutiny. As a result, the balance of power between investigator and narrator, the researcher and the researched, is shifting towards a more collaborative model (Blackman, 1992; Cruikshank, 1991).

The collaborative nature of life history projects raises complex questions of voice and power, “about who speaks in the text and whose story is being told, who maintains control over the narrative and by implication over the purposes to which the story is put” (Smith, 1993, p. 399). These questions are further complicated by power inequalities already existing in society, if participants cross the invisible but socially significant lines drawn by ethnicity, nationality, race, class, or gender. If the narrator and the investigator are not working towards an explicit common goal, their differing motivations may be another source of tension in the research process, reinforcing power differences (El-Or, 1992; Freeman, 1989).

In an unusually sensitive description of a life history project, Young and Tardif (1992), respectively the investigator and the narrator, depict “the ebb and flow of trust, power, reciprocity, and collaboration. . . an explicit contract that becomes a much more complex implicit one” (p. 144). These two women each describe the building of trust and rapport over time. For the narrator, this began as a feeling of vulnerability which was dispelled over time as mutual trust was developed.
For the investigator, the empathy and rapport which she used as an interviewing strategy were transformed into an ethical issue. As Young developed a sense of responsibility for the private information entrusted to her, she felt the need to reciprocate both by making her own disclosures during the interviews, and by making more of an effort to be honest and sensitive in producing life history documents.

For Young and Tardif (1992), the process became "an intimate experience," an exchange resulting in a co-created biography. This may have been made possible because they had much in common in terms of class and educational background. Intimacy has been named as an issue in other life history research. El-Or (1992), working with a narrator from a cultural and class background very different from her own, found the intimacy that developed between them to be illusory. During the research, intimacy blurred the working nature of their relationship, eventually interfering with the life history work, and complicating their disengagement after the project was completed. El-Or writes, "we can't be friends because she was my object and we both know it" (p. 71). Based on another study, Stacey (1991) suggests that the greater the intimacy and apparent reciprocity in the relationship between the researcher and researched, the greater the danger for the participants, whose disclosures may make them vulnerable to exploitation. Narrators who have experienced personal tragedies or traumatic events in their lives present another moral dilemma. Retelling a life story may cause further pain, as the traumatic experiences may have left deep wounding memories, or may be considered humiliating or demeaning (Knudsen, 1990).

These issues of power, privilege, and intimacy frame every life history, whether or not they are explored and articulated by the participants.

The life history text
The interpreter must be willing to broaden and modify his own preunderstandings as he enters into dialogue with another’s life, which is embedded in its own... meaning... (Watson & Watson-Franke, 1985, p. 21)

This text, like every life history text, encompasses layers of interpretation. The life story was constructed during interviews, a form of discourse which is the most important source of data for most life histories. The text is my interpretive translation of that discourse.

In the past, most scholars assumed the investigator had the final authority in writing, editing, and publishing the life history (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). This assumption continues to define university regulations and practice, including the requirements of graduate research. Collaboration seldom extends to the analysis stage. Involving the narrator in shaping and writing the final text is rare in anthropological life history writing, though the narrator is usually consulted to confirm the accuracy of the document, and to guarantee its confidentiality (Stacey, 1991; Young & Tardif, 1992). The dialogic, collaborative nature of the life history is sometimes recognized in the research product, in multivocal texts which juxtapose the voices of narrator and investigator while each remains distinct (Crpanzano, 1980; Myerhoff, 1979; Shostak, 1981).

To acknowledge the interacting subjectivities of the narrator and the writer, the experience and the text of the research process, I have followed this practice by including large segments of the life story as it was presented to me, and by disclosing my epistemological assumptions. My own story provides a counterpoint to the life history which is the leading melody in this text.
The genre

A genre is a social practice, a written form which is created and maintained by a discourse community (Harper, 1991). Van Maanen (1988) has identified historical and disciplinary constraints in anthropological writing, shared assumptions which influence the narrative and rhetorical conventions of a text as much as personal style and modes of expression. This life history upholds the beliefs of the anthropological community, to the extent that it conforms to a genre that was developed within that community.

One essential element of anthropological writing is the ethical obligation of the writer to respect a participant’s right to remain anonymous. Though some research participants may request recognition in the document, most prefer to maintain their privacy. This can have a significant impact on the life history, for if the narrator is concerned about protecting the identity of others who play a part in the story, she or he may edit the life story during its initial telling, or request sweeping changes in the text. In order to conceal individual identities it may be necessary to change or omit descriptive detail. “The rights of privacy... [may have to] take precedence over the claims of science for well-documented data” (Langness & Frank, 1981, p. 124).

This life history conforms to the genre in its focus on the individual and culture, its reflexive approach to the research process, and its recognition of issues of power and confidentiality. The genre itself is undergoing a political evolution, as themes of reflexivity and collaboration permeate and are gradually redefining different aspects of the research process. As primacy and authority gradually shifts away from the investigator and towards the narrator, life history is more often used for empowering and giving voice to those who have been regarded as silent or oppressed. The genre provides a form of critique directed towards both academic traditions and modern society.
Though anthropology and the life history genre have shaped the form and approach of this study, other communities have also had a profound influence. As I write this text I am always aware of its intended audiences, particularly the academic discipline of adult learning and education. I feel like a mediator between the spoken word of the life history and the writing- and theory-based world of academia.

The purpose of this project crosses several academic communities concerned with migrants, transition, and culture. Rather than be constrained by a single discipline, in this text I have compared, contrasted, and sometimes attempted a synthesis of, constructs from several fields. By relating my analysis to a multidisciplinary knowledge base, I hope that its meaning will be translatable and that it will fulfill its potential to support and extend the work of other researchers.

I am not making "discoveries" in the data itself; rather I am creating meaning, constructing knowledge whose value lies within the parameters of the community through whose discourse it is generated. (Harper, 1991, p. 41)

Afterlife of the document

The life history process doesn’t stop with the collection and analysis of the life story, or even with publication of the text. Some life histories, such as Shostak’s (1981) story of Nisa, have a power and popularity far beyond that of most research reports. This has been called the “afterlife” of the life history, a “powerful mix of narrator, collaborator, text, and context that is subject to multiple interpretations and applications” (Blackman, 1992, p. 2). The afterlife encompasses audience response to the published work, reflections on its construction as text, and its impact on the lives of its narrator and writer.

The research participants may have very different expectations and interpretations of the afterlife of their work, differences which may become points of tension or of negotiation. Just as a writer constructs knowledge for a particular community, a narrator may tailor the life story to a perceived audience from the
very beginning. As the themes of reflexivity and collaboration slowly but steadily reshape the genre as well as the process, narrators have demanded increasing control over the representation of their lives.

This text has been constructed at a point of tension where the desires and motivations of the life story narrator intersect with my own. I undertook this project to advance my learning process, to contribute to scientific knowledge, and to acquire a graduate degree. My research has been framed by academic requirements such as sole authorship, which are designed to achieve these goals. When those requirements have posed conflicts with my moral and ethical obligations to the narrator of the story, I have negotiated the contested terrain with difficulty.

Life histories...are, despite problems and issues, helping other voices and other lives to be known and understood, and [the life history] endures and flourishes as a form fitted uniquely for this need.” (Peacock, 1992, p. 79)

**My story: A reflexive counterpoint to the life history**

One of the most important criteria for judging qualitative research is that the researcher’s guiding theoretical framework be made explicit so that the reader can judge the findings from the position offered by the researcher. (Mitchell, 1993, p. 1)

I was born in Vancouver Canada, of parents who were themselves born and raised just 30 miles outside the city. Our circumstances were simultaneously modest and advantaged. The Harpers were a middle class family with two working parents, a family that placed a priority on education and learning, personal achievement and contributing towards society. By the time I finished university, I had thoroughly internalized cultural assumptions that I have only recently come to realize are peculiarly Canadian. I felt comfortable with mainstream North American culture and the “white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant” neighbourhood that I lived in. I looked like I belonged, with my fair skin, tall body, and my father’s Scottish-English Protestant heritage. But my personality and values were also influenced by my mother’s
Lebanese immigrant family. I have always been sympathetic to minority rights, but it wasn't until I visited the Middle East that I recognized that other aspects of my character may be more Lebanese than Canadian.

After completing an undergraduate degree in anthropology, I spent 15 years working in museums. I sometimes felt like I was working and breathing anthropology, as I moved from urban to rural settings, working closely with researchers, First Nations peoples and ethnic minority groups. When I decided to pause in my museum career, I entered the university to stretch my mind, and explore other career options. While doing graduate work in adult education, I became familiar with the vocabulary and theory, philosophical approaches and assumptions in the field of adult learning and education. At the same time, I found the language of the social sciences useful for interpreting and reflecting upon my own assumptions, and I have recently begun to acknowledge the personal commitments which have framed my life and my work.

My philosophy is strongly marked by subjectivism. I believe that each one of us creates our social world, and that research should be concerned with explaining and understanding those multiple constructed realities through holistic studies. My understanding of culture has evolved in tandem with this belief, and parallels the anthropological trend to conceptualize culture as shared meaning systems which are fluid rather than static, and which are both internally constructed and contextual.

My beliefs about the political nature of North American society are less clear. Intellectually, I subscribe to the "conflict" paradigm, which perceives deep structural conflicts and is concerned with radical transformations of society (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Rubenson, 1989). But when I reflect upon my actions, most can be situated in an "consensus"-based humanist paradigm, supporting the status quo. My feminism, a commitment which I acknowledged two decades ago, has both liberal and socialist dimensions. Perhaps these ambiguities are related to my developing
political awareness, since I continue to grapple with the contradictions between my own experiences as an advantaged member of society (which justify support of the status quo), and my growing awareness of social inequities (which demand radical transformation).

My choice of methodology has been strongly influenced by my subjectivist commitments rather than by a political stance. Three concerns of feminist inquiry have further shaped the research process: to reflexively place the inquirer in the same critical plane as the subject, to use women's experiences as a source for social analysis, and to conduct research for women (Harding, 1987). The first feminist concern coincides with the anthropological emphasis on reflexivity. By acknowledging and scrutinizing my role in an interactive research process, I have placed myself within the critical plane of the life history. By sharing control over data collection and analysis, I hope to reduce the inequalities of power in the conventional narrator-investigator relationship, and to encourage a more collaborative form of inquiry.

**Studying my own**

The other priorities of feminist research, to conduct research about women for women, determined my choice of narrator of the life history. Though my decision to work with a woman was politically motivated, it is readily justified by reasons related to the research methodology and purpose. The literature of migrant studies, cross-cultural adaptation, and culture learning overlook gender as a variable for analysis; the third person singular pronoun is invariably "he." Yet rich and diverse bodies of literature in many other academic disciplines, including adult learning research, suggest that men and women have fundamentally different experiences and perspectives (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Gilligan, 1982; Meyer, Persico, & Luttrell, 1986). I purposefully selected a woman to be the narrator for this life history, which
describes a woman’s problems, and her solutions, in the transition process. In a practical sense, this is research about women, which aims to assess and integrate theoretical frameworks for addressing the needs of women.

In the Western world, anthropology originated as an outgrowth and a tool of imperialism. Anthropologists have continued to focus their research on isolated, bounded societies and the exotic “other,” an approach which smacks of ethnocentrism as the society or person being studied is most often described and assessed, objectified, and depersonalized (Whittaker, 1992). In the last two decades, some anthropologists have questioned the relevance of conventional anthropological practices in a contemporary world of complex modern societies. Abu-Lughod (1991), for example, argues that any study of the “other” enforces separations that inevitably carry a sense of judgement and hierarchy. Researchers’ motives for studying and interpreting the lives of people who can study and interpret for themselves are being questioned, and sometimes rejected, as cultural appropriation and misrepresentation (Fox, 1991).

To avoid such political implications and exploitation, and to lessen the power differences between myself and the narrator of the life story, I chose to work with a woman from a group with which I am connected, the Vancouver Lebanese community. By acknowledging and validating her voice, I am addressing a longstanding imbalance in Western empirical research. Though Lebanese women are a familiar part of my world, they have long represented a very exotic “other” for most Western researchers. Until the 1970’s, Arab women were consistently portrayed as unidimensional characters relegated to a “private sphere” of limited significance (Eickelman, 1989). In studies of Arab communities, whether in the Middle East or other parts of the world, women were described and dismissed as completely subordinate to men, and treated as a homogeneous whole which ignored social, economic, religious, ethnic, regional, rural-urban, and individual differences
(Nelson, 1974). Modern mass media continue to perpetuate this stereotype in the 1990’s. But Western academic literature has slowly and inconsistently come to acknowledge that Arab women, and Lebanese women in particular, are not passive, veiled victims of oppression as they have most often been portrayed (Keddie & Beck, 1978).

My own relationship to the Vancouver Lebanese community is not a simple one. As I was growing up, my family maintained a distance from the community, and I became involved only as an adult. My status is one of “halfie,” defined as a person whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage (Abu-Lughod, 1991). Halfies doing research within their own communities face the same dilemmas as feminists doing research with women: issues of objectivity, partiality, and multiple audiences.

Since the investigator cannot maintain objectivity through distance, feminist and halfie research is sometimes considered suspect and accused of presenting only a partial picture of social reality. Such accusations are countered, both philosophically and practically, by the use of reflexivity. This has recently been reconceptualized as positioning, a feminist practice which acknowledges the situatedness and partiality of all claims to knowledge (Marcus, 1994). Historically, most social science research has been based on the “partial perspectives” of men, who served as the primary subjects and informants for empirical and theoretical study. This life history does not claim to represent a large social or cultural group. It focusses on a particular person and her situation, which can be located in relation to larger communities and processes.

Multiple audiences pose an ongoing dilemma for halfies and feminists, who are obligated not only to the academic community, but also to the communities and individuals they are working with (Abu-Lughod, 1991). I have been subject to the politics and ethics of several communities throughout the research process. This has
further complicated my careful and reflexive mapping of the research terrain.

But there are advantages to a halfie status. By choosing to study a society of which I am a member, I am practising a form of research which has been called “insider anthropology” or “native anthropology” (Messerschmidt, 1981). This approach has grown in popularity in recent decades, linked to a growing concern with relevance and authenticity, and compatible with subjectivist and feminist methodologies (Altorki and El-Solh, 1988). Among the practical benefits, my network of connections with local Arabs made it easy to meet potential narrators, and I found it easy to establish rapport with them. As an insider, I was already aware of Arab expectations of close relationships between women. Joseph (1988) has characterized these relationships as “merging”, which is defined as a strong identification with another person, with a deep understanding and reciprocity in emotional investment. I was familiar with this immersion into others’ lives from relations among women on the Lebanese side of my own family.

Experiences of closeness and embeddedness are not unique to Arab or Lebanese women. Based on research with North Americans, Gilligan (1982) has suggested that women are more embedded, attached, relational and nurturing than men (who are more individuated, separated, assertive, and aggressive). Young and Tardif’s (1992) reflections on their interview process reflect the mutual disclosure and self-discovery that can take place when women interview women over a period of time. But Joseph’s (1988) experiences suggest that Lebanese women are more intensely relational, more deeply embedded within their families, and more ready to extend their merging with family to merging with friends. Although it was not originally her intention, she found that merging was a research tool which allowed her to figuratively “get inside” people, to experience and learn about the nature of interpersonal relationships and self from a specialized vantage point.
To gain a better understanding of a refugee’s transition process through life history research, this study values the voice of an Arab woman. I purposefully sought a Lebanese narrator who felt comfortable in Canada, and who had vivid memories of her migration and transition.

**Finding a narrator: The Vancouver Lebanese community**

When my grandfather arrived in British Columbia in 1908, he was one of the first Lebanese to settle in the province. There are no statistics available on the number of Lebanese-born or their descendants presently living in the Vancouver area. Since there have been no formal studies of the Lebanese community in B.C., this description is based on my own observations and personal communications with members of the Lebanese Canadian Society of B.C.. Most of the local Lebanese community is made up of middle class immigrants, people who voluntarily came to Canada for economic reasons, or to join family members already living here. Some have arrived as temporary sojourners while studying at a university, while others have obtained a Canadian passport to supplement their Lebanese citizenship. This gives them the choice of residing in either country, and overcomes international travel restrictions on Lebanese passport-holders. Since 1975, Vancouver has been the destination for many Lebanese fleeing their nation’s tragic civil war and the later occupation by Israeli forces. Some, but not all, of these arrivals have been given refugee status. The majority would rather be living in Lebanon than in Canada, and some have already returned during recent periods of uneasy peace.

In Vancouver, Lebanese make up an “invisible” minority which may consist of as many as 5,000 people. Like other Lebanese communities in Canada, its members are far more strongly involved with their family groups and relationships than with the short-lived ethnic organizations that form and disperse at irregular intervals (Jabbra & Jabbra, 1984). Most Lebanese in Vancouver are Christians of various sects,
though there is a small and growing Moslem population. Connections among the loosely-knit Lebanese community are mostly maintained through informal family social gatherings, and at occasional special events like picnics, dances, and music performances arranged by the Lebanese Canadian Society and a recently formed Arab Community Centre Club.

Though Lebanese do not physically appear very different from the Europeans and their descendants who dominate Canadian culture and population statistics (Filion, 1990), their Arabic language and culture is substantively different (Abu-Laban, 1980; Altorki & El-Solh, 1988). Though newcomers from Lebanon have much to learn about Canadian culture, sociological and historical studies of Lebanese in Canada indicate a rapid rate of assimilation and adaptation using standard measures such as acquisition of Canadian citizenship, socioeconomic status, and language acquisition (Abu-Laban, 1980; Jabra & Jabbra, 1984). As a group, the Lebanese seem to be successful in learning how to adjust to Canadian life.

**Meeting Mira**

I renewed my connections with Vancouver Lebanese by attending some social events, and by calling upon longstanding friends who were active in the community. I received a warm welcome and many offers to assist in my research. I asked several people who were well respected in the local community to refer me to Lebanese women who had been here for at least 3 years. This was a time period that the Canadian government has specified as the average time required for immigrant adjustment (Ornstein & Sharma, 1983). I was introduced to several women, each of whom invited me into her home for an interview. They had all left Lebanon during the civil war, though not all of them had official refugee status in Canada.

Several people suggested I speak with Mira. I was told she was a refugee from a Lebanese village, someone who had experienced the civil war first-hand, and
someone who I would like. When we arranged our first meeting over the phone, I was surprised to find that she lived in the same part of the city as I did. And I was even more surprised at how comfortable I felt when I was with her, despite the usual tension of a first encounter. Her fashionable apartment, with its contemporary art and furniture, all felt familiar, more like the homes of my Canadian middle class friends than some of the other Lebanese women I'd visited. Her origins were visible in the presence of some Lebanese folk art, and the Arabic and French books which shared the bookcase with English ones. I was impressed by her friendly sincerity and openness. During our pilot interview, Mira was reflective, answering my questions thoughtfully, clearly, and thoroughly. She often illustrated her abstract ideas by citing from direct personal experience, or by using metaphorical language. After a two hour interview, we spent another two hours looking through photos of Lebanon and discussing life in Vancouver.

When it came time to decide which woman to work with on the life history, Mira seemed like the right choice. I felt that we had many things in common. We were both middle class, university-educated, and involved in the field of education, things I hoped would minimize the inequities of the research relationship. Though Mira had spent her time in Canada as a refugee, and could not yet apply for Canadian citizenship, she easily met the Canadian government's social and economic indicators for successful adaptation (Ornstein & Sharma, 1983). She was well-qualified and employed full-time in her chosen profession, fluent in English, and living comfortably in Vancouver with many Canadian as well as Lebanese friends. She was also proud of her Lebanese identity, and her ability to adjust to Canadian society. In these respects, she was typical of Lebanese immigrants to Canada since the 1950's (Abu-Laban, 1984). But Mira told me that she was not a typical Lebanese woman in two important ways. Unlike most Lebanese women of her age, she was unmarried, and she lived independently, far from Lebanese friends and family members.
A few weeks later, I asked Mira if we could meet again. Over coffee at one of her favourite restaurants, I asked Mira if she was willing to do a series of interviews, and be the focus of my life history research. She listened closely as I explained the method of my research, and my goal: to understand the personal changes she experienced after moving to Canada. Mira was enthusiastic about the idea of life history research. She told me that she prefers to learn by reading about people and their stories, so it made sense to her that my research would focus on her and her story. She agreed to take part, saying that she would be happy to help me with my university research.

Mira emphasized that she wanted to help me learn more about my Lebanese heritage. She also felt that it was important to tell people about Lebanon to counter popular misconceptions perpetuated by North American media, like the notion that all Arabs are terrorists. She had done several interviews with newspaper reporters on her experiences in Lebanon, and often spoke out on the topic at social gatherings. She was particularly pleased that I, a third-generation Lebanese in Canada, wanted to learn about Lebanon, and that I wanted to educate people about Lebanon through my study. We shared another motive—we both admitted that we enjoyed each other’s company and looked forward to becoming friends. So the next phase of the research, the life story interviews, began in a research relationship already complicated with a dimension of intimacy. As we began, Mira was the narrator and speaker; I was the investigator and listener.

Our research process

The interviews

Mira and I met about once a week for four months. By her choice, we usually met at her home on a weekday evening. A few times she came to my apartment for an interview. During each session I would tape about 2 hours of interview, and
before and after that we would converse informally about various subjects for several hours while drinking coffee or herbal tea, sometimes eating some light snacks. A few times a friend dropped by, and then Mira and I would stop the interview while we all talked together.

Though I originally planned to videotape some of the interviews, Mira was very uncomfortable with the idea. Instead of recording and analyzing audio-visual records as I had originally planned, I used only an audiotape recorder with a small clip-on microphone. I made some written notes during the formal interview, and after our meetings I made more notes about our general conversation. I also kept a journal of my own reflections on our meetings and the research process. All of these sources informed the later interviews, as well as the interpretations presented in this text. All of our conversations were conducted in English. Though it was her second language, Mira never seemed frustrated by her ability to express herself. When a friend joined us, even when it was an Arabic speaker, they usually spoke English in my presence.

During our first interview, I suggested that she use a pencil and paper to draw a timeline and mark all the periods of her life. Though Mira outlined her entire life for me in that interview, she didn’t draw much. At the next interview, I tried to focus our discussion around themes that were used with North American autobiography groups (Birren & Deutchman, 1991). That session seemed to drag even though it proved to be our shortest meeting. In retrospect I think it was the least successful, or comfortable, because I had imposed thematic categories that did not fit Mira’s interpretations, and seemed hardly relevant to our research focus.

After that, I began our interviews by introducing topics that had come up in previous interviews. I transcribed the tapes myself as soon as possible after each meeting, identifying potential themes for expansion or clarification. I let Mira choose which ones were most important to her, and let her talk with minimal
interruption during the interviews. Only during the last two sessions did I become more directive, pursuing specific topics that I hadn’t understood, or that I felt needed expansion.

During those four months, our roles of narrator and investigator took on new dimensions. With Mira’s stories and interpretations dominating our sessions, I came to feel more like a student, with Mira as my teacher. This feeling was confirmed when we attended a few Lebanese community events together, and I found myself relying upon Mira to patiently explain traditional customs and behaviour.

During the first formal interview I began to experience merging, despite the presence of the tape recorder and my sense of restraint as I minimized my interruptions of her narrative. We were already developing a sense of intimacy, which increased the sense of obligation between us. While it underscored my ethical responsibilities towards Mira, the merging made it far faster and easier than I expected to establish and maintain rapport between us, for Mira to reveal deeply held beliefs and emotionally-charged subjects, and for me to understand her meaning.

My admiration and affection for Mira grew immensely during this time as I came to appreciate her cheerful and generous spirit and tremendous courage. She demonstrated these qualities often during our interviews. She always found time in her very busy schedule to meet with me, and showed endless patience with my probing, sometimes repetitious questions. Her narration often led to very painful memories, but she would continue to speak through her tears. After this happened a few times, I asked Mira if it was helpful or hurtful to discuss such traumatic events. She told me that it hurt a lot, but that people had told her it was good to talk about such things, that it could be therapeutic. During later sessions, when I asked the same question, her answers varied. At first, Mira thought it was helping her emotionally to “get it out”. At one of our last interviews, she decided that it wasn’t helping after all, the wounds were still deep.
Though I was concerned about being an inquisitor, Mira never said or behaved as though she was resentful. Instead, as we neared the end of the interviews, we spoke more often about how we had become friends, and how we would miss our regular weekly meetings. We made plans to meet on other social occasions.

The shift to analysis and writing

Our last life history interview was a critical one. We both knew that Mira would shortly be leaving for a long trip to Lebanon, and that this might be our last chance to talk about the life history together. My role would change from that of listener to the writer and interpreter of Mira’s spoken story. The power, and the control over Mira’s story and its interpretation, would shift from her to me.

Before our last session, I gave Mira a rough outline of my thesis, including all the edited transcripts of our interviews that I was planning to use. Those transcripts were identical to the interview text included in this thesis, already excerpted and lightly edited from the original transcripts. As the thesis is a text, and my own words are written for this medium, I felt that leaving the transcripts in their original form made them seem awkward in contrast. Read without accompanying facial gestures and body language, they were also misleading. So I “smoothed” our words, so they can be read easily as text. A sample of the original text with edited text beside it can be found in Appendix A.

When I arrived to discuss the text, Mira told me that she had found the reading to be overwhelming. While it made her very sad to read it, at the same time it seemed “just titles,” as if each sentence was too brief a mention of an event or feeling that could be expanded to tell its own story. As I explored her misgivings, I realized that she was not sad about the state of the text, but about the life events that were described.
Though Mira liked the idea that her story would be used to assess theory, she was concerned that I might be cutting up her story "in bits and pieces" to prove or disprove some academic theory. I explained my intention to use selections from the interview text just as she was reading them, in large chunks, interspersed with theoretical frameworks and analysis. After some discussion, she accepted my approach, but wanted to clarify and add the messages she felt she were most important to convey to different readers: for Canadians (particularly those with political power), for immigrants to Canada, and for people still living in Lebanon. These can be found in the last chapter, together with my own analysis.

An important part of our last discussion revolved around issues of privacy. Although Mira wanted the finished work to be publicly accessible, she also wanted to be sure that she could not be identified, and together we altered aspects of the story to that end. It felt like a game, and we began to chuckle as Mira chose alternative names for each person or location mentioned in the text, and we discussed other changes. When we were finished, we had made only very minor changes to disguise Mira, her family, and her friends.

During our early interviews, I noticed that Mira didn't mention certain topics. I already knew that Lebanese have a different morality with more restrictive standards than Canadians, particularly for unmarried women. We did eventually discuss some sensitive topics during later interviews, within our evolving intimate research relationship. But the same intimacy placed upon me the obligation to omit certain information from the text. Most of the cuts were easy to make, because they didn't seem to add anything new to the life history. But I did leave some potentially sensitive segments in the text, and I made a point of discussing them, as well as the omissions, with Mira during our last interview. I was relieved to find that she agreed with my editorial decisions. It seemed to confirm that I deserved the trust she had put
in me to this point, and gave me confidence to proceed with other interpretations of her story.

We completely finished the life history interviews two weeks before Mira flew to Lebanon for her summer holidays. But it took me over a year to write the thesis, mostly due to interruptions by other work and courses. During that time, I found myself re-examining my own and my family’s beliefs and behaviour, particularly in light of what I’d learned about Lebanese family relationships. I began to irritate some of my close friends, with constant references to my family’s “Lebaneseness.”

Once Mira returned from Lebanon, we met socially at least once a month. At first, our visits and conversation were much like the interview sessions. I would mostly listen, while Mira talked about her life. Slowly this changed, until our participation in conversations was more balanced. Mira was busy with her own work and social life, and though she was politely curious about my progress on the thesis, she seemed content to leave me to do the analysis and writing. Aware of the academic requirement to present my own analysis and interpretation, I didn’t pursue her collaboration on the analysis.

Instead, I became very familiar with the interview text, reading it, pursuing different approaches to analyzing our words. I used a simple software program to search for particular words that had seemed significant to Mira, and to extract segments of text. This helped me to clarify Mira’s usage of the words, and contributed to my overall understanding of her interpretations. At the same time, I read extensively in many literatures: cross-cultural communications; transformative learning; developmental and transitional learning; and immigrant and ethnic studies; as well as historical and sociological studies of middle eastern societies, Arab women, and Arab-American history. To respect the unique richness and wholeness of Mira’s life story, I sought theoretical frameworks flexible enough to address integrated and complex systems of meaning. I went back and forth between the
literature and our interview text, developing new insights and interpretations as themes and ideas emerged from one or the other.

During this process, I felt torn between wanting to develop a single concise theme, and wanting to explore the many complex dimensions of Mira’s story. In order to honour Mira’s own words and respect the wholeness of her life, I had to resist the tendency to make it look neat and tidy. Marcus (1994) argues that “messy texts” are necessary in ethnographic writing, to portray a sense of the whole which can never be described or analyzed in its totality. It is misleading and artificial to simplify a life story, just as considering a single life separate from its context can give a false impression. Freeman (1989) has noted that the life history requires an expansion of complexity in order to describe the phenomena. He suggests that the life history text is rather like a prism which temporarily splits apart complex wholes into a spectrum of meanings, just as beams of light passing through a prism are separated into the colours of the spectrum.

I used many lenses to identify the hues of interpretation in Mira’s life story, and the life history adds to the array of colour with further interpretation. Yet during this analysis and writing, I often found myself overwhelmed by the number of different but overlapping perspectives. As I slowly began to synthesize ideas from the literature with my own, I tested the credibility of each new interpretation by returning to the interview text, along with my field notes, journals, and my memory of our encounters. Although I saw Mira often during this time, I avoided sharing my confusion with her. Instead, I discussed and revised them during intensive discussions with people who were familiar with my research goals: my advisor and members of my research committee, a few of my fellow graduate students, and my husband.

When I completed a rough draft, I met with Mira to give her a copy and discuss it. But we talked only briefly about the research, because she was leaving for a six
month visit to Lebanon the following week, and was more interested in talking about our personal lives. She was looking forward to reading the text, and was planning to write me about her life in Lebanon. With her departure, I turned once again to my advisor and committee, this time embarking upon a formal textual process of submitting drafts for written comments and making revisions to each draft.

This text is the outcome. I expect it will have an active "afterlife", for many members of the Vancouver Lebanese and Arab communities have expressed interest in this research. I am eager to do more writing based on this life history for both general and academic publications. When I approached Mira to co-author other publications with me, she was flattered by the idea. But since she was moving on to other absorbing projects, and wanted to remain anonymous, she simply encouraged me to do more writing on my own. She reminded me of something she'd told me during our interviews:

Mira: I used to write before, every single night I'd write. In journals, you know, my impressions about different things. With small pictures, and little sketches. It was like saying my prayers before going to bed. I would read and write. But after the 11 of September 1973, everything stopped. Totally. There was no way... I remember, I wanted to list down the date they blasted the house. There was no paper. I couldn't find a paper, I couldn't find a pencil. We lost every single thing. So that's why it was the last time I wrote.
Chapter Three

MIRA'S LIFE STORY

The historical context: A brief story of Lebanon

Mira: There are long histories. History behind everything, you can't separate yourself from your past in Lebanon.

The relationship between Arabs and the West has never been a simple one. There is a dynamic tension in the Middle East between modernizing influences which Arabs perceive as emerging from the West, and Arab traditions. Arab society and culture can be described as conservative, even though its traditions are not uniform or static, or antagonistic to modernity. Within Arab societies, there are individuals, structures and institutions which resist change (Patai, 1976). In Arab regions during the last century, the dynamic tension between Western modernizing influences and Arab traditionalism has been subject to extreme pressure. This has been expressed at every level of Arab society, and is a primary cause of the internal and international violence which racks the Middle East.

The Lebanese, and Lebanese Christians in particular, have lived at a focal point of this tension. The nation and its people have experienced profound change in the wake of nineteenth century colonialism, twentieth century modernization, and recent internal and external aggressions. Throughout this period, vast numbers of Lebanese have left the country as immigrants or refugees, creating a global diaspora. A few have returned to Lebanon, accelerating the processes of change within the region.

Lebanon, a green and mountainous country on the east coast of the Mediterranean, sits strategically at the meeting of major historical trade routes. It
has been influenced by traders, migrants, and conquering armies, which contributed not only new ideas but also an ethnic diversity. The highlands of Lebanon have provided places of refuge for minority groups and individuals with unpopular beliefs. According to Lebanese historian Salibi (1988), the many Christian and Moslem sects occupying Lebanon during four hundred years of Ottoman rule had a long history of accommodation, sharing the Arabic language and an Arab identity. Their relationships became seriously disrupted in the mid-nineteenth century, when various European powers competing for dominance in the declining Ottoman empire allied with rival Christian sects, heightening the division between Moslems and Christians as well as between Christian sects. A series of religious civil wars took place from 1840 to 1860, marked by bloody massacres which still live in the memories of Lebanese Christians, Moslems, and Druze (a distinctive Moslem sect).

Active European influence in Lebanon continued and expanded after that time through trade and missionary schools. With a long history of Western-style schooling, the Lebanese found their skills in demand as Arab states were shaken by major social and economic changes in the twentieth century (Salibi, 1988). Until 1975, Lebanon was considered the most successfully modernizing country in the Arab region. Its literacy rate was the highest in the Middle East, and the participation of women in the labour force was one of the highest in the region—18% of the total workforce. The majority of working women were Christian, between 20 and 25 years of age (Hijab, 1989; Jamjoon, 1983).

In 1975, civil war once again broke out in Lebanon. In the long and terrible history of the war, which only abated in 1993, the Lebanese have been victims not just of internecine aggression, but of actions involving the Palestinian Liberation Organization, UN peacekeeping missions, and the armed forces of Israel, the U.S., and Syria (Friedman, 1990).
It's not a village anymore

Mira: My home is a town now, it's not a village any more. Because it's about 8,000 people.

Lyn: Let's talk about what it was like when you were a child.

Mira: It was very nice, a small village, not that far from the Mediterranean, it's only a few minutes by car, and it's 350 metres above sea level. It’s scattered on three hills.

People like my parents, they used to work. We have factories, a cement factory. It's the biggest factory, I think, in the middle east. And my father used to work there. And we also have olive trees. We export the olives, and olive oil to Arab countries and other places. And soap, too. And some of the people, especially men, they used to go to Beirut, to work in the factories.

They’d come back on the weekend. Even some of the women, some of my mother’s friends, this was a long time ago, they’d go with their brothers, or with their relatives. They’d rent an apartment in Beirut, and they’d come back on the weekend, or every two weeks. But now it’s different, because in my generation, and the generation before, after we finished our education, most of the men became engineers, and the girls either nurses or teachers. And also doctors, lawyers, now most of them are professionals. So just before the civil war, maybe twenty years ago, everything has changed in the village. We started to see the beautiful new houses and cars, and they built a new school in our village.

All the village, everybody in all the families in the village, they became well-off. Because those who were working in the Gulf, Saudi
Arabia and Kuwait, used to make a lot of money. So they send back to Lebanon, and they build. Those who have small houses, they build bigger houses, and they buy new cars, they invest the money in different things. And you can see it. Most of the money, most of the things that we have now in Lebanon, is from outside. Either North America or the Gulf. And that’s what happened to us, because two of my brothers, one of them was in the U.S., the other was in the Gulf. In Saudi Arabia, and they were helping my dad. That’s how we got to go to good schools in Lebanon, and to the university.

And it’s not only us, not only our family. Everybody. So that’s why now, if you go to my town, everybody is rich! And those who are not rich, maybe they have somebody in the family, or relatives, who can help them. A lot of people had to leave, during the civil war. Now they have started to go back. But there are so many families who are in Boston, and Australia, and I don’t think they will come back, because they have been there for a long time.

My brothers, they are very happy there, they have everything they want. Because they already tried life outside, and they were not happy at all. They have their houses, their land, their cars, their friends, their families, what else do they want? My eldest brother, the one who was in Saudi Arabia, he doesn’t work, because he has a lot of property. But my other brother was in Abu Dhabi. He left a few years ago, now he’s in Lebanon, and he works for a big company there. And he’s very happy, he has three kids....

Some of the people in my hometown, they have their own companies in the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia, and some of them were in Kuwait. And they are very wealthy people, millionaires.
Lyn: Would you say that's generally true for many villages, and towns in Lebanon?

Mira: No, just my region, fifty villages, most of them are like that. Because we have schools, both English and French schools. And most of the people, especially of my generation, and those who are a little bit younger than me, and a little bit older than me, they all are educated, so this helps to find a job. Unfortunately, the civil war has destroyed everything.

The first thing you see when you arrive in my village is the Syrian checkpoint. There used to be beautiful houses. They are destroyed, totally destroyed. About twenty-two houses were blasted, and one of them was our house. So it's very sad when you see the rubble, and the destroyed houses. Now, I think, people have started to remove the rubble. And some of the families who left the village, they left the province, they started to come back, because it's safer for them.

We have everything. We used to go to Tripoli, or to Beirut, for shopping, now we don't have to go there, because we have lots of cute little stores, and banks, offices, doctors, hospitals, dentists, everything. Because of the civil war, it was not safe enough to go, because travelling, or commuting, was not that easy. They have to go through lots of checkpoints. So it's better to have your office, or your business, close to where you live. It's safer...

If you go to the grocery shop, if you go to the bakery, wherever you go, people know each other and so you are very important, you are something. If you get sick, everybody will come and see you. There, you have no time to think about your problems, if you have problems,
because it's everybody's problem. It's not easy sometimes, when you're very close to people, when you have no privacy, it's hard.

What I like about the village, there are very narrow and old streets. The houses are so close to each other, we can hear the neighbours talking sometime. And people are neighbours, they become like relatives, like one family, they have coffee together, they eat together sometimes, they cook for each other sometimes. Which is really nice.

Lyn: Is your whole village Christian?
Mira: Yes. So we do lots of things together. For example, on Good Friday, they cook the same kind of food, special things for Good Friday. If you go on Christmas day, the same thing. And because of the marriage, you know, people become relatives, the families.

My eldest sister is married in the same village. They have a huge house. It's built on something like a castle. But it's not high, just one floor, and it's very dark. It has no windows, nothing in it, and the walls are so thick, eight or ten feet, and it's built of limestone. That's where people in my village, a long, long time ago, when the Ottoman Empire was in control, they used to go there and hide, in that place. It's like a chain of rooms, and it's dark, and the doors are very low, so that the horsemen can't go inside with their horses. The Ottoman soldiers used to go and get people by force, whether they like it or not, to go and work for them, in the fields or on the roads, or whatever. So when they attacked the village, people go and hide in there. They built their house on top of it, because it would take a long time and a lot of money to demolish it. And during the civil war, a lot of people used to go and hide there, and I am one of them.
A quiet and desperate diaspora

Diasporas... are a testimony to the inherent fragility of the links between people, polity and territory and to the negotiability of the relationship between people and place. Diasporas come in many forms... But whatever these differences... diasporas always leave a trail of collective memory about another place and time and create new maps of desire and attachment. (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1989, p. 3)

Beginning in the 1880's, large numbers of people from Lebanon began to emigrate to the Americas. In the areas ruled by Ottomans, military conscription and heavy taxes drove young men like my grandfather to leave the country (Jabbra & Jabbra, 1984; Naff, 1985). Most of them were lured by rumours of economic opportunity, and planned to work in the Americas until they became wealthy and could return home with money and prestige (Naff, 1985). Though some of them did return, more remained abroad. Until World War One, approximately 15,000 Lebanese emigrated every year, a movement that was curtailed only because of the war and limitations imposed by host countries such as the Asian immigrant tax imposed by Canada (Jabbra & Jabbra, 1984; Abu-Laban, 1980).

Yet the Lebanese continued to emigrate, most frequently to join family members abroad. It has been estimated that there are 5 to 6 million Lebanese and their descendants now in North and South America, many times the number of Lebanese in their home country (Orfalea, 1988). The average annual number of emigrants to Canada from Lebanon was less than 3,000 from 1950 until 1975 (Abu-Laban, 1980). Since the outbreak of the civil war, that number has sometimes doubled or even tripled. In 1976, a new Canadian Immigration Act created for the first time a refugee class, which followed the UN Convention definition of refugees. Since that time, over 70,000 Lebanese immigrants and refugees have entered Canada (Statistics Canada, 1982, 1990, 1993). Mira was among the many individuals and family groups arriving in Vancouver in the late 1980's.
Just a few lines of Mira's life story

Mira: You are Lebanese first, and then you are an Arab, right? You can't separate one from another. You are Lynette, you're a girl. I am Mira, I am a girl. I'm a teacher, you are a student, that's fine.

Perhaps it was Mira's friendliness and cheerful demeanor, or the ordinariness of the living-room that we met in, that made me feel like we had so much in common. Whatever the reason, I was unprepared for the deep pain in Mira's life story. During our first formal interview, my composure was shattered as she spoke about the tragic circumstances of her life and her flight from Lebanon. My daily life in Vancouver was relatively comfortable, orderly, and peaceful, far from the upheavals and tragedies that still rack Lebanon and the Arab world.

The following text includes most of the transcript from that first interview. It follows her narrative structure, though I've made minor grammatical alterations and removed a few paragraphs. I have also added some text from a later interview, in which Mira spoke in greater detail about her years in Canada.

At our last formal interview, after Mira had seen the edited text, she told me that it had been painful and frustrating to read.

Lyn: That must have been a strange thing, when you read those pages.

Mira: Yeah. I was reading about that, and I felt, "Oh, my God." I mean, whatever I told you, it's like the titles of the stories. For example, when I told you about our house, how they gave us three minutes to leave. But before that, it took them six months. They kept going back and forth, and threatening us, and you know, asking for money, for six months. It's a whole story, but it took very few lines. Just a few lines.
But it seemed a lot more than just a few lines to me, on that rainy February evening of our very first life history interview. Mira had made us each a cup of very strong Lebanese coffee, and I'd set up the tape deck, clipping a small mike to the sofa between us. Mira looked very calm and composed, while I felt nervous and edgy, fingering a pen and paper to make notes about the drift of our conversation, carefully searching for the right words with which to begin our work together.

Lyn: The reason this kind of an interview is called a life history, is that although what I'm interested in takes place in a very short time in your life, everything that's happened before is relevant. Instead of just having one interview on a very narrow focus, my interest is to put the changes in your life into the perspective of your whole life. What I want to start out with today, is to get an idea of how you think of the span of your life, the important stages in your life.

Mira: You want me to look back at the past, and tell you about the different stages of my life from where I stand now. Oh, that's very interesting. . . .

I had a very, very happy childhood. We were very happy, I don't know whether I told you we are nine in the family, we grew up in a small town in northern Lebanon. I thought the whole world was here in my hometown. Because I was not that anxious to go and learn about something else, or know about anything else. Because I was so happy, I was the happiest, I was so spoiled. It was like a dream, everything a girl could wish to have in life, I had it. I had lots of friends and cousins, which is nice.
After that, most of my brothers and sisters... they were teenagers, about four or five of them, they went to school to different places. So I stayed. And after that I started to have different feelings. I was anxious to see my brothers and sisters on the weekend, and at that time we started to use the word pack and unpack. It's like migrating, not to a different country, but to somewhere else. They'd come back to visit, and that was so nice. I was maybe 8, 9, 10 years... 

It was very sad, in the morning, on Mondays. We'd say good-bye. ... You know, now, when I leave Lebanon, or when I go and visit, it reminds me of that feeling that we used to get, but it's much bigger.

When I was a teenager I was also very happy, I had my friends, and sisters, I had no conflict, no problems with my parents, at all, which was nice. And I was in love with the area. I liked the trees, and the vineyards, and the people, the farmers, they meant a lot to me. When people leave from my home town to Australia, or to Canada, I'd say, "How can they live there? How can they stay there, for one year, or two years?" It was much beyond my understanding, how can they live far away from where we live? We thought it was paradise there. They'd be much happier to stay there with their families, because family is very important to us, and friends. How can you live in a place where you don't know anybody? They are foreigners. You can't relate to them. That's how I used to think about it.

Lyn: When you say family, I think of my parents, and my sister, as my family. Do you mean something bigger than that?

Mira: Sure, your family is not only your immediate family. Your mother, father, sisters and brother, your cousins, the neighbours, sometimes. So you are not only responsible if you did something in
front of your immediate family, in front of the whole society, the community. Especially if you live in a small town, like where I grew up. People know each other, and they help each other, and they care for each other, and sometimes, you know, they gossip a lot.

But there were a few things that I didn’t like in our society, and I couldn’t find an answer to why it’s like that. There was no logical explanation to convince me that we should keep it. I always felt that there are a few things that we should throw away, because we don’t need it any more, especially when it comes to the relations between men and women. For example, why should I make my brother’s bed? Why doesn’t he? Why should I make him the breakfast? He has to make his own breakfast. These are little questions, but before, when I was twelve, thirteen, I never thought about it because this was the way we were brought up, I didn’t know how to talk about it. But after that, when I was fifteen, sixteen, you start to wonder and ask, why?

At that time I started to think on my own, and analyze, and wonder why is it like that. I was in the residence, I used to come home every weekend. It was so hard for me. This was after I finished, after I finished my grade thirteen in Lebanon. I went to Beirut, and it was my first trip outside my small world. And it was big, it was the first time in my life I stayed outside our house. I found it very hard. I took pictures of my sisters, my brothers, my mom, and every time we missed them we put them on the bed in front of us and we cried, we wanted to go back. Plus, it was a totally different world, much bigger than where we grew up.

Lyn: You had a roommate?
Mira: Oh yes, my parents would never send me by myself. It was much easier for me, and for her, to be together. Because we were both shy, and you know, and we found it very hard to be on our own, and it was the first time in our lives, we had never done that before. Even though you know my brother, and her parents, they used to drive her from where we lived to Beirut, every Monday. We were not allowed to go by bus, or by taxi. It was safer to drive us.

Because it was a big thing at that time. In the fifties, and forties, very few girls used to go to Beirut, where the universities are. In the seventies, things were changing. So by the time I had to go to university, it was much better. And I had lots of friends, from the area where we lived.

Lyn: How long did you live in Beirut?

Mira: Well, unfortunately, because the civil war started, I couldn't stay. Just one year and we couldn't finish the whole year, the whole thing. It was very dangerous. Because we couldn't go back home. We couldn't go back. We were stuck for more than two months one time, no telephones, nothing, and our parents were so worried about us. . . . We had to stay in the shelters, because at that time they started to slaughter people, just if you were either Moslem or Christian. That's how it started. It was very, very bad. So even though you were innocent, even though you are not affiliated or involved in any political organizations or anything, just because your last name is Christian or Moslem, they put an end to your life, and that's it.

Lyn: That was '75?

Mira: '75, '76.

Lyn: So, finally you got home. . .
Mira: Yes, yes, I got home, and I thought, oh, we are very lucky, because one of my brothers, and one sister, they came, and it was incredibly dangerous. They were fighting very badly in Beirut, but they exposed themselves to danger to rescue me, to pick me up. Because they thought that maybe I got killed.

So I went back home, and was so happy, I cried a lot, I couldn’t believe that this was my room, everybody was still there. I thought everybody died in the family. I’m not going to see anybody. And I wanted to die, why should I live, by myself. So I was so happy. But unfortunately after a few months, two or three months, it started in the north, where we lived. It was much worse than in Beirut. Because we had no shelters, nothing. We just stayed in our house. Luckily, we had two storeys, two floors in the house, and we used to spend the whole day in the first floor.

Here it was terrible, it was horrible, this was the worst part of my life. And it stayed like that until I came in Canada. I came in 1987! We lost every single thing. I couldn’t bring the books, or anything, that I had in the university. We lost everything in our house, and the house was blasted. Most of my brothers were outside the country, they couldn’t come back to see us. And I was always wanting to leave Lebanon, and to go somewhere else. I’d left about four or five times, to England, to Italy, to Canada, to the U.S. But every time I left I’d say, “No, I want to go back,” I’d feel so guilty after a few weeks. Because everybody there is suffering, is dying, and I’m here. I’m safe. So, I wanted to go back. And I was working, so hard, in a very subtle way on one important thing, to help people to understand that hatred leads to hatred. And love is the only route, the only way for peace and
happiness. But there was no way for people to listen. I was very idealistic at that time.

Lyn: But it must have given you strength.

Mira: A lot of strength. Even though I knew it was incredibly dangerous for a young girl like me to move from one area to another, I was moving and talking to people from different religions, from different political groups. It was incredibly dangerous, yet I felt I should do something. I can't fight. I don't believe in violence, so, we should talk.

I never quit university. After that they moved the university, somewhere much safer than before, so I continued. It was dangerous for me to go there, but I continued. I stayed with one of my sisters, and we also used to commute. So, we went through a lot. Sometimes we'd prepare for the exam. We'd study day and night, I'd go to the gardens, or to the orchards outside. I'd say, "Mom, please don't tell them where I am, if my friends come, or if people want to come and see me, because I'm busy studying." And after you prepare, and study, and everything, you go to do the exam, they start fighting, you just quit everything. And you have to wait another four or five months, and again, and again, and it was--it was hell.

There were lots of things I couldn't understand. I know it's crazy. We were living in a country where everything was sick--the atmosphere, the mentality. I was trying to convince myself that I have to be more tolerant, and try to be patient. But you know, thirteen years is enough for a young girl, more than enough. So it's time to do something else, because there are more challenges in life than being worried all the time, and scared and waiting for death. Why should I die
like that? If you die for a cause, you know that you are dying for something, but, just to die, because an idiot enjoys killing people or destroys people's lives. I don't want to be a victim, even though I was a victim. I didn't want to continue.

I wanted to do something. I wanted a major change. So I told my sister that I want to leave, but she didn't believe me. My sister Reem was in Canada, she was encouraging me to come to Canada. She left before the war started. She came to study, and she wouldn't go back. I didn't wait, I just went to Damascus, to the Canadian embassy, and I got a visa right away, and after two weeks I came here. In the family, nobody believed me. Because we used to travel before, and they thought it was like every time I left the country. But it was not like before. They cried a lot, and I didn't know why, I asked, "Why am I crying that much?" Especially when I see my mom, I cry a lot, and my mom, she never wanted to leave me one minute by myself. She wanted to stay with me every time, everywhere I go. I didn't know that it was the end, I wasn't going to see her any more.

So, I came here in 1987. But I never thought I was going to stay five years. I thought six months, maximum one year. Because I needed a good rest. At that time, I was so exhausted. Every time my sister came to see me at the airport before that, the moment we would meet, we hug, and we kiss, and we scream, and we're so happy. At that time, even though I was very happy to see them, I was exhausted, hardly able to move my body. I was very lucky to leave. I had the money, because the terrible inflation started around that time, and people lost their money. I was very lucky to buy a ticket. After I graduated, I taught for two years.
There was so much struggle, and yet you were doing so much at the time, it's remarkable...

Otherwise, you know, you can't continue. You can't live. If you don't keep yourself busy, doing something very constructive, there's no way to accept the terrible life that we were living, or the things we were going through. That's why, after graduation, I was working twelve hours a day, I was teaching in four different schools, four different contracts, it was part-time. It's like running away from something that is following you--you have this kind of race with something very bad and evil. And you don't want this bad or evil thing to trap you, or smash you.

So I thought the best thing to do was not to sit down and think about what's going around us, but to use my time. To try to tell people, through the work that I am doing at schools, that it is much better to sit down and talk to each other. I was travelling to an area where it was very dangerous for me to go there. Because one of my family, he is very well known in a political party. At that time, if they are after you because you belong to a certain political belief, and they don't like that, if they can't get you, they get your brother, your father, your husband.

Why did I do that? It was incredibly dangerous for me. I remember driving my car, and I was a crazy driver, too. I wanted to fight everything that is causing death and destruction in my country. I thought that I'm the only one responsible, I should do something. All my friends left, to different places in the world, and I stayed. They said, "Mira, why are you doing that? Why do you stay? Why don't you go? When you go outside, don't come back, stay there." I said no. I always believe that it's very exciting to have a challenge, or a cause, in life, to
live for a cause, no matter what it is. It doesn’t give me great pleasure when I do things for myself. I’ll be very happy if I give from myself, to people around me. It doesn’t matter whether they’re my people, or not. For example, look now, I am teaching here in Canada, and the only thing that is in common between me and the kids, or the parents, is we are human beings. That’s all.

I didn’t want to leave. Until the very last moment, I didn’t want to leave. But after thirteen years you get tired because, you know, I was giving, giving, giving, not getting anything. I felt that if I’m going to stay there, something wrong was going to happen to me. I might have a nervous breakdown, or I might end up in a mental institution. . . . I never had hatred towards anybody. Even those who blasted the house and almost killed us. I knew that it’s a big dirty game, and they are using some ignorant people. But after that I got tired of ignorance, and being with ignorant people. I couldn’t see anything, I couldn’t hear anything. I was sick and tired. Of everything around me. So I left, because I was not learning anything, and was spending all the energy, everything that I had, for nothing. Nothing was improving. So I thought no, it’s not my place, I have to go. Even though my roots are deep there, and I didn’t want to leave.

Well, when I came here, I was not equipped. It’s like a soldier going to a big battle, no weapons, nothing. Just myself. And my belief in myself, and God. That’s all that I brought with me. Everything was so discouraging. I didn’t go to school here, my English was not very good. I didn’t have confidence, I was tired, I didn’t know whether I was going to make it or not. I didn’t have money, and I didn’t want my family to help me, though they did. I was living with my sister in a small
apartment. She was happy! She was very, very happy. And I was very happy the first six months. I'd rest, and I gained weight, six kilos. I wondered, why do people get depressed here? Why are they upset? When we go on the bus, or when we go shopping, if people have a serious face or they're not smiling, I say, "Why?" There's no reason to be so serious, or worried, they have no reason at all. It's peaceful, they can go everywhere they want. The government is like a family, to everybody.

I told my sister, "Why? People here, they have everything that we dream about. It's so nice, the system here, everything is organized, and people know what time to go, to eat, what time to come back, they don't have to worry whether somebody is going to stop them, or to kidnap them. It's so nice, it's like heaven, it's heaven here! People should be cheerful, they should be thankful. Why are they on welfare, why don't they go and work? It is safe, they can go everywhere they want, it's not like us."

I never thought that they were going to reject my sister's sponsorship to me at immigration. I thought it was nice to spend one year here, and then go back. I decided to take courses here, like English as a Second Language. Then I'd go back to Lebanon, I'd take new experiences, new things with me, which is nice. And after one year, you know, I was sure I'd be much better than when I left. But that was not the case, because they rejected my application. They wanted me to go back to Lebanon and to apply from there.

So that's why I had to become a refugee. Because that was the only way to stay in the country. And at that time, it was very bad, the situation in Lebanon, I couldn't go back anyway. So I stayed, and it took
them a long time to give me a work permit. It was very boring, very frustrating. I took a course at a college, and I took another course here and there, but that was not what I wanted. I was taking the courses, just to feel that I'm doing something, like anybody here. I know the first year, I was very, very miserable and upset and depressed. I found it very very hard, after suffering 13 years in Lebanon, to come to Canada and claim refugee. I waited all this time, and I thought that things were going to be better, but we ended up at the door of the Immigration saying, “Please, accept me here.”

The feeling that I got, it was something burning, as if I had all the mountains around here, Vancouver, on my shoulders. It was very hard, because I was in the air, I was not on a solid base. In Lebanon I was upset, I was depressed, and everything, but I was on a solid base, with a family. The land. But here, I was like a feather in the air, the wind. You don’t know where you are going to be. You are nothing here, nothing at all. You have to start from the very beginning. It took me a while, to stand up on my feet. I was not working, and it was not because I can’t work, or I don’t want to work, it was because I am a refugee. So after suffering thirteen years, I came here to stand at the doors of the Immigration. Claiming refugee.

I didn’t have permission to work. It was very hard to get a job, my language was one of the barriers too. But the most important thing, I couldn’t believe the fact that I had to stay in Canada. And I didn’t know for how long. Some people told me it takes three years, some others longer than that, some others less than that. My parents, and my family, wanted me to go back, my friends wanted me to go back, and
I didn’t want to tell them that I’m stuck here, I can’t leave the country because I don’t have papers. . . .

I didn’t want to stay here. It was so hard for me to spend the whole day at home. We used to go out, and get invited, and everything, but I didn’t want to commit myself to anybody here. At that time, I realized how difficult it is to be uprooted and thrown away, in a different place, far away from everything I was used to. So I found it very hard. Everything is different. The mentality, the relations, and the family. And I missed my sisters a lot. I wanted to go back, I wanted to see my mom. I was not working, I didn’t know what future I was going to have in Canada, and things start to build up, until I knew that my mother is sick.

The second year, my mom got sick. She wanted me to go back, and I couldn’t leave the country. They didn’t tell me it was serious, it was cancer, they didn’t say that. And after that she died. I couldn’t go back to see. And it was the worst part of my life. I mean, we struggled so hard, me and her, and we survived. And the moment I turned my back, she was sick. It was hard. . . .

One day, my sister told me, “I have to tell you something.” My mom had cancer. She had known. But she didn’t tell me, because she knew that if I went there, I was going to lose everything. I was going to pack and go, but two days before that they called, and said, “Stay where you are, the situation is very bad here.” Anyway, two weeks later, Reem came here. I knew, right away, that my mom died. What can you do? You can’t do anything. It was very sad, very frustrating. It took me more than two years, until I went back last summer actually, to believe that. That was the time I started to ask, “Is it worth it,” you know, to
leave everything behind and come here. Because I never thought that something like that would happen in our family.

Anyway, they told me on Monday that my mom died. On Tuesday, they called me in the morning to tell me about this job. It was the first of September, the day I got a job at the school. And this was the first time I got a full time job in Canada. I couldn’t talk on the phone, my vocal chords were swollen, I couldn’t talk. My sister answered the phone, and I couldn’t see, because my eyes were swollen. I couldn’t sleep the night before at all. The principal wanted to talk to me, she said we want you to come and sign a contract. My sister said, “Go Mira, because you are not going to change anything, Mom died, but you have to be wise, and you can’t lose this job.” So I went, but I couldn’t read the contract, I couldn’t see anything, the principal read it for me. She was very nice. I just signed it, I didn’t care what they have in the contract. After one week and a half, I have to start to go to school, and I had no clue at all about what to do. She told me that I was going to teach grade one. I had to concentrate, and it kept me busy. And they were very nice, all the teachers were very very nice. But I was very sad. Deep down, I wanted to cry, didn’t want to do anything, just to cry. But I couldn’t afford it. I had to work, and I had to learn, to do research, and I had to read books. It’s a big responsibility.

I thought, “Mira, you have to go, to move forward, you can’t stop here.” I lost a lot of weight. I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t look at myself in the mirror, it used to make me worried. I couldn’t help myself, because all what I wanted to do was cry, and I couldn’t sleep at night. I felt so guilty. Because I had left, because my mom didn’t want me to come.
After she died, my brother needed an operation. It was very risky, very dangerous. Everybody advised him not to do the operation, but he insisted. He had the operation, but he never got to walk after that. So he ended up on the wheelchair. And I didn’t know about that, until one year and a half after my mother died. It was by accident, you know, the mother of a friend of mine came from Lebanon, and she told me, “Oh, your brother was in the hospital, and now he’s left, he’s fine.” And I said, “Which brother?”

I was the last one to know about my brother. But I was teaching now, everything was fine. After that, last summer, my sister wanted to go to Lebanon with the children. It was the end of June. School had just ended. And here I am, by myself. Everybody left, and I didn’t have my papers. And I can’t leave Vancouver, because I was waiting, they told me maybe one month, maybe two months, they were not sure. Believe me, I was about to die. I couldn’t take it anymore. I didn’t know what to do. I went to the Immigration office, I used to go every single day. I said, “I have to get my papers. Because I need to leave this country.” I was pushing them. One day I woke up, and I was fed up. I wrote a letter to the manager. I was on my way to take the letter by hand, I didn’t want to mail it. So I thought, let me go check the mail first. I checked the mail, and I found a letter. I opened it, and it was the papers that I was waiting for. I stood for maybe four minutes. I couldn’t do anything.

So I came back, right away, and I called the travel agent. I said I wanted to get to Lebanon as soon as possible. And after nine days I was in Lebanon! I had had more than enough, in a way, so that nothing was exciting anymore. And at that time I realized, here it is, the dream was to go to Lebanon, I’m going to Lebanon, but my mom is not there. My
brother is on the wheelchair, and God knows what else. But don’t forget that I’m going to Lebanon. Some people lost their families. My mom, she was 69, and we’re all grown up, she had children, grandchildren, she had achieved a lot in her life, that’s what people tell me, and that’s what I know. But what about those young mothers who died before they saw their children.

And after nine days, I was there, it was like a dream. Until now, I can’t believe it. I was doing something, but not for myself. It’s not excitement, it’s a combination, a mixture of everything, all kinds of feelings. I was happy, because I’m going back home and everything, but I was very very sad.

My sister and her husband, my nephew, my other nephews, my brother, were waiting at the airport. And the moment I arrived at home, I don’t remember what happened, what I did in the first few minutes. I went to my bedroom, and I was so happy to see my new nephews and nieces. You know, things are different, they are not happy, the people at home, not only my family. They were sick and tired of the civil war.

When they knew that I was there, people started to come early in the morning, and my friends, and it was so nice. But I couldn’t believe it, it was like a story. This separation, this part of me that was away for a long time, a big part of me stayed there when I was here. There was no words to express my feeling. So I was silent all the time, it took me more than two weeks, three weeks. It was very hard, to accept the fact that my mom was not there.

After that, we started to go to different places with the kids. I went to see most of my friends, and everything was OK...
Lyn: Last time when we were talking, you were telling me about a girlfriend of yours who told you about how hard it would be here in Canada, for a girl especially. Did you go back and talk to her?

Mira: This is the one. She couldn't believe it. She thought that I changed. After four years, I thought that she was going to be more flexible, and more mature. And I found that she was still in the same place, where I left her. But she found that I have changed, I became stronger. Maybe she expected me to be very depressed, because of what happened. She thought it was going to affect my life, my attitude, and everything. But she was so surprised, as she thinks that I've never changed, my shape or anything. But I'm stronger, I am more flexible, and I have courage. When we sat down and talked, she's too logical about things. She's not flexible. So I told her, it's nice to learn, to accept that everybody makes mistakes, and I think that one of the mistakes you make, is that you are not flexible, and you are not learning.

Deep down we meet. Spiritually, she's very rich. She thinks that I'm very cheerful, and she wanted to stay with me all the time. And my other friends, they also thought that I've never changed. They think that I'm very lucky to be outside, to be away from everything that happened, and they missed me a lot. I don't know, I felt sorry for some of them. Because I left them, four years ago, and when I went back, they are still in the same place. The same thing was going to happen to me, because no matter how hard you tried to help yourself, there is no room for improvement. So, you come here, you try to learn more about life and yourself, but you pay a very high price.

This is one thing that when any immigrant, whether a man or woman, loses somebody in the family, it hurts a lot. You start to think,
"Why am I here," and "Is it worth it?" "Wasn't it much nicer and better to be beside them, they need me, especially when it comes to Mom and Dad." So this was the worst part. It took me a long time to recover.

Mother to me now is not, you know, my biological mother. It's the land. The country. When I talk about mother, or motherhood. These are things we start to think about, or feel, when we are far away. So now my mother died. But I still belong, very strongly, somewhere--to the land. I envy people, who have the chance to stay wherever they live their childhood, and they put their first roots.

This is one of the things that's very hard. You get to learn a lot, it's very, very nice to be far away, to learn about different people, different cultures, to be free, to be important, and everything. But it doesn't help you, as an immigrant. It doesn't help you. It doesn't change anything. Because where you're established, or where you started your first roots, it's very important.

Well, this is a very very interesting stage, or part of my life, that I spent here. It's a mixture of everything, it was very sad, it was very frustrating, it was very confusing, very challenging. I came here exactly as a soldier, with no weapons. But I survived, I think. I'm not that great, but I'm OK. I'm working, teaching, which is good, because teaching for me is very important. I can't see myself doing anything else.

And I learned also a lot, about myself, through dealing with other people. From different cultures, and different religions, and different mentality. I also got to appreciate a lot the things that I had in Lebanon that I didn't have here. And at the same time, I have stronger belief in
throwing away the things that I wanted to throw away when I was a little girl.

The thing that is surprising me, is the harmony between the different stages [in my life]. I stayed myself. Sure, when my mom died, I cried a lot, even though I am a happy person. I was not working. I had to wait, it was very frustrating, and I was very depressed, but still, I was looking forward to the time when I'd start again, and put more smiles on the wounds. The little girl I was at the beginning is in every single part of my life. And she's so stubborn. It's very hard sometimes to stay innocent, or pure, when there is this thick veil, and you have to dig a big hole, to show your face from behind this veil. It is very hard, because of all the things that I went through. I didn't want this to cover my face. Even though there's a very thick black dark veil. War, killing, fighting, violence. But I always believe in turning, going around the bushes. I came here.

So, now, if you want to know what's next, I myself, I don't know what. Maybe, I'm going now, with this new image, a relaxed face, smiling again to my people, with more energy, starting again. Or starting the dream that I used to have when I was a little girl, to be a teacher. To be very active in my community, and to help, and to make people happy. To have lots of friends, and to educate people how to be happy. How to give, and spread, happiness.

I wanted to be exactly as I am now, when I was a little girl. I did a few things that I didn't want to do, because but there was no chance to do anything else, so I did it. I didn't want to leave my country, I love Lebanon. It's the beginning and end of all what I want, and my longing. But I had to.
Chapter Four

SEEING THE WORLD FROM DIFFERENT CORNERS:
PROCESSES OF LEARNING, CULTURE, AND TRANSFORMATION

Identifying a transition process

As I listened to Mira’s story, and later read the transcriptions, it was so huge, so complex, and so full of life and feeling that all of the theoretical frameworks I had been studying seemed inadequate by comparison. Themes of transition, learning, and culture were deeply interwoven with Mira’s personal development and remarkable self-awareness. While the major events in her life were separated by time and space, the effects of each change on her life weren’t so easily isolated.

Before Mira began her life story, I drew a single line on a piece of paper, and asked her to indicate the important stages in her life on the “timeline” (Figure 1). As she spoke, Mira marked off four major stages, which she went over with me at the end of the interview. The first stage was her “very, very happy childhood.” The second stage began during childhood and continued through her teens, when she “started to have different feelings,” becoming anxious about her siblings’ comings and goings. The third stage began when she went to university, when “I started to think on my own.” She wrote “Beirut” beside the third stage, but as she spoke she drew dozens of black lines to cover the duration of the stage. The dark lines represented the civil war, which darkened her stay at the university, and then followed her to her home village. At the end of this blackened stage, she wrote “87,” the year she left Lebanon. She drew a spiral to link the date with the fourth stage of the timeline, her life in Canada. At the end of this stage was the present, which she marked with a stick figure-person to represent herself, beside a big question mark. As we completed our first interview, Mira drew lines from below each stage which intersected at a single point, the “harmony” between every part of her life.
While I wanted to focus on Mira’s migration transition, that process overlapped and interacted with other events and transitions. Her 1987 migration held many meanings for her, “a mixture of everything.” It was both voluntary and involuntary. She had planned to leave Lebanon and the war, and in that sense it was an anticipated, voluntary change, an action in which she took control over her own life. Her initial reaction to the departure was relief. But when she found she couldn’t return to Lebanon and was subject to restrictions imposed by the Canadian government, she involuntarily lost her country, her family, and her control over life decisions.

As she spoke about her time in Canada, Mira subdivided it into three periods. During the first six months she was very happy. But a sharp, curved line indicates when she found couldn’t go back and had to claim refugee status. After this she was “miserable and upset and depressed,” and during this time her mother died. Near the end of the time line, leading up to the present, Mira drew a group of circles as she said, “everything is fine.”
Mira characterized each of these three periods of her transition with a particular emotional state: happiness, followed by misery and anxiety, followed by a kind of equilibrium. These correspond to the three phases of the transition process. Mira experienced the first phase, when an individual is overwhelmed by transition not as a negative stress but as a positive one in which she appreciated the peace and order of her new environment. Her second phase corresponds to the disruption of changing norms and relationships. For Mira, as for most refugees, migration represented estrangement and the loss of everything familiar. When Mira’s mother’s became sick and died, her sense of loss intensified and merged with her grief. Some theorists have drawn parallels between the severe emotional distress of refugees and immigrants and the grieving process (Disman, 1983; Schlossberg, 1984). Mira had to cope with both crises at the same time. Whenever she talked about her mother’s death, the depth of her grief was overwhelming. Almost every domain of her life was affected: her sense of self; her health; her work; her economic status; and her relationships with family, friends, and community. She was estranged from her previous life, “uprooted and thrown away.” She had moved from a place in which she belonged to a place in which she felt marginal, “like a feather in the air. . . you are nothing here, nothing at all.” The impact on her relationships, roles, actions, and understandings was tremendous.

A year after her mother’s death Mira felt, “I’m not that great, but I’m OK.” She acknowledged her positive growth and integration when comparing herself with a friend in Lebanon, who hadn’t changed. She concluded her story with a self-appraisal, acknowledging the changes and continuities of the past and present that have prepared her for whatever is coming next.

**Changes in Mira’s understanding**

*Family life here, it was really shocking*
I wanted to learn more about Mira’s transition process since her migration. At one of our early interviews, I suggested several different themes that we might pursue, themes that she had mentioned during previous sessions. When Mira chose to speak about culture shock, I expected her to speak about her period of depression and grief. That second phase of her transition matched the “classic” concept of culture shock, a stress reaction to a new cultural environment when a person is anxious, confused and apparently apathetic, and lacking points of reference to guide their own actions and understand others’ behaviour (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). But for Mira, culture shock was a series of minor episodes.

Mira: You said something about culture shock? For any immigrant, you know, this is the main topic. Culture shock. Whether you are aware of it or not, it’s there. But it depends on how you express it, how you talk about it, how you live it, how you deal with it.

Lyn: What was it for you?

Mira: Well, it was shocking! It was a big, big shock. As you know, it was not my first visit to Canada, or to North America, it was my third visit. You know the first time I stayed in Canada was 1980. I stayed only for five months. So I had an idea of what life is. And when I came in 1984, for my sister’s wedding, it also gave me an idea of something else, of the wedding and how people socialize, because we got invited a lot, and this also gives you an idea about people, and a new country, and everything. So when I came here, it’s not as if I was not ready, but there were many things that I had no clue about before I came here. I remember, a few things that we used to discuss and talk about, me and my friends in Lebanon, when they knew that I was leaving for Canada, they said Mira, are you aware, are you ready, because there are so many things that are
totally different. You are a girl, it's not like a guy, they have more freedom, the man in the middle east. Whether they are in Lebanon or outside Lebanon, they want to live on their own, they want to travel, it's no problem, but when it comes to the women, or the girls, we have to think twice about taking decisions, because it's not easy. And so, that's why when I came here, I came first of all because I have my sister, otherwise there's no way at all to come here...

When I was in Lebanon, it was not that difficult there. If I wanted a job, I don't have to apply, because the school knows my father, or my brothers. It's below my dignity to go and apply for a job. Now, when I came to Canada, and I started to look for a job, staying here for two years without working... It was something very, very, very difficult for me. It was a big shock! Because I told you, there, you don't have to apply, because if people, they know you, they know who you are, from which city, or town, or family, and that's it. This is one of the things that I found very hard.

Something else, the family life here, it was really shocking. For example, where my sister was, I stayed with my sister the first two years and a half. And there were many buildings, close to where she lives, only for senior citizens. I said, why senior citizens? She said, because, you know, here in Canada, it's not like in our families, their children don't have to look after them. They get money from the government. It was a big shock to me. I said, what do you mean, because my grandpa was very important in the family, even though he was ninety-eight when he died, we used to look after him. Somebody has to eat ahead of time to go and feed him, because he couldn't sit. I said, "What about if somebody is like my grandpa? And cannot help himself." She said,
"They send him to the hospital, or to a special place. And they go and visit him." I couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe it, even now, I couldn't.

I'm not saying that all the senior citizens or all the people in Lebanon-- some of them, if they don't have anybody, they send them to nursing homes. It's very bad, the service, it's not like here, it's not clean. I remember one in my home town. She had no child. Her husband died, and she had nobody, no sisters, no brothers, nothing. So my brother-in-law, who is the priest, he used to look after her. How? He sent her to the hospital, and we used to go and visit her, everybody.

It is very different from here, very different. We don't have help from the government like here, so we have to look after each other. And it's not only that. Sometimes people have money to put their seniors in the best hospitals. But we need emotional support from each other.

Lyn: Are there other kinds of things you found shocking?

Mira: Something else is to have single mothers. We don't have this. If you have children in Lebanon this means you are married. And it was a big shock to me, when one time I took Tina, my niece, for a walk. And I met a lady, and she was also with her son, who was maybe two years old. So we're talking, and it happened that she was living in the same building as my sister lived, and I asked her, do you have any other children? And she said, he is the only one. And I asked her something about her husband, and she said, I'm not married. I said, "Oh. So, where did you get this boy?" [laughing]

Lyn: What were you thinking when you said that?
Mira: Well, that's what I thought. Not married? And you have a child, and not married? Because, this is a shock. It is a big shock.

I'd heard about single mothers, and everything. So, I didn't say anything. I was shocked. Because in Lebanon, for example, or in the Middle East, if you ask a child about his father, and he says his father is dead, you know people feel so sorry for him. I felt so sorry for the children. And sorry for the woman, herself, because it's very sad.

Children, they need father and mother. When I think about myself, how important my dad, and my mother, are in my life. Maybe because of the way I was brought up, maybe because my mom and my dad were so close, and they had good relations, and it was reflected on us. So I couldn't imagine it. I thought that everybody else is the same. And the rate of divorce is very low in Lebanon.

Lyn: After that shock, do you think that you've changed now, in your understanding of it?

Mira: Now I understand why it's like that. It took a long time. But I couldn't understand before, why. I mean, I couldn't excuse that. If you want to have a child, you don't only think about yourself, it's very selfish. What about this child, when he grows up, or when she grows up. They have the right to have a father, and mother, because this is not normal, it's not natural.

I myself, I'll never do that. I still find it very, very sad, to have a child without a father. And one of the reasons why I didn't want to be married in Lebanon, because I was not sure whether I was going to live, to lose my husband because of the war, or not. And in case I have children, I didn't want them to grow up in this life without a father.
It’s very sad. For example, I was on the bus. There was a teenager, and she has a baby. I was looking at her, and looking at the baby. Why bring more people to this world, and make them live in agony? This teenager, she still had a long way to go. She was carrying him on his back. I was looking at the eyes of the child, he was such a beautiful baby. I said, “Why?” That’s cruel.

Now I know why it is like that. The girls or the boys, once they become seventeen or eighteen, they can leave, and stay on their own, right? So, what about if they didn’t fall on the right person, after that, to look after them? Because at nineteen, seventeen, they still need more attention, and love, and somebody to direct them, and tell them what to do, and what not to do. What about if they didn’t fall on the right person after that? Because nobody is like the parents, who care. And because of the gap between the generations, they have to fill this gap. By having more people, more children.

This would never happen in Lebanon. It is out of the question. And this is one of the advantages of being so close, living in a society which is family-oriented. There is something that we have to remember, that I lived with my sister when I came. So, had I had to live on my own, it would be a totally different story. I still had the feeling at that time that I’m living at home. People can understand you, you don’t have to translate or explain.

Something else, it was not shocking, but it was surprising. When people talk about animals here. They love animals, they respect animals, they care a lot for animals and pets, especially for pets. . . . I sent a letter home, and I told them how nice it is here, and how lucky people are here, and how lucky the cats are here, and the dogs.
Now I've got used to how people think. I know why they do that. There were so many things that I couldn't understand, because I didn't know what they mean, or why they do that. I didn't know that the cat, or the dog, is very important in the life of a lonely person here. I didn't know that people were so lonely, and they need anything, even an animal. Really, it's very sad. I understand that, definitely, and it's a very important thing, thank God that there are animals, and pets like this.

Lyn: Do you think people ever become lonely like that in Lebanon?
Mira: No way. In Lebanon, you have to find a way to be by yourself for a few minutes.

Lyn: Was that a surprise for you, to discover that people could be lonely?

Mira: It was very sad. I felt so sad. And now, sometimes, we are lonely here. I mean, we have friends, and everything, but we still feel that we are lonely. Because we know how our families are living there, our friends are living there. So, this is not enough for us. We come from work, you cook dinner, you eat and that's it. On the week-end you socialize, or you see people, or you go somewhere, and that's it. Even though you go with friends, you still feel that something big is missing.

Lyn: If you were in Lebanon, what would be different?

Mira: I told you that in Lebanon, the family is very important, when I say family, it's the expanded family. For example, I go visit my uncle, because I have to go and see him, my aunt, my friends, the old people, the sick people. You always go and visit, you have to visit. You have to see your friends, you have to see your relatives. If I am at home, for example, you know what home means. My dad, my mom, my brother,
and the nephews, and the friends come over, and we have coffee, and we put the dinner, and everybody has to sit down and eat, and so you are busy. You are always busy. Doing little things, very little things, but it's a very nice feeling, such a nice feeling.

Lyn: Even after you would work, you would come home, and there would be all this.

Mira: This is one of the things that I used to complain about. When I come home, I want to have lunch, and go and rest. But, if people come over, this means I have to stay with them, and one time, I didn't. I went to my bedroom, and I wanted to have a nap. Somebody came. She said to my mom, "Where is Mira?" She said, "She's asleep." "Oh, every time I come here, Mira's asleep, as if she doesn't want to see us." So my mom came to wake me up, and I said, "No, I don't want to go and see them, you tell her that I'm asleep, I'm tired." So my mom said, "Sorry, it seems that she's very tired," and she has to justify, or to find an excuse. I think my mom didn't like that, because she was embarrassed. I embarrassed her in front of her friends.

When I went to Lebanon last summer, believe me, I was so tired, I wanted to sleep the first week, because I had jet lag. And my sister-in-law had to wake me up one time, and I was so tired. I wanted to sleep. She said, "Mira, they came Beirut, all the way from Beirut, please, you have to wake up." Because if they come, and I didn't wake up, it's a scandal. They'd say, "Oh, she's Canadian now."

In Lebanon, you are not by yourself. If you wanted to ask yourself, where am I now, you can't, or the answer will be vague. There's nothing called "I." It's "ours," or "our," or "us." Because you, it means your family, it means you yourself, your family, the neighbours-
-so you can’t separate yourself from your surroundings. So you feel that you are part of the world, and you don’t care. Whatever will happen to you, will happen to everybody else. It’s so secure. That’s how we feel. And it happened to us, for example, when we were living in danger. We think, if it will happen to that person, it will happen to me, so that’s fine. That’s how it was! It was very dangerous. Now, when I think about the things we went through, there were a few things that I don’t dare now to think even about it, to remember it, to recall it again, it was so scary. But we survived.

Believe me, no matter what you have in this world, nothing is like just a little touch of love, from your family, your friends, people around you. Everything you have in this life, whenever we leave here, you leave it, you can’t take anything with you. As a person, you only take maybe memories. Whatever you have in the bank, or in the garage, or in the garden, or in the house, it will stay there. And what you take with you is your feeling, how you feel, and these feelings, you can’t get it by yourself, you make it with people. That’s why we need, we need each other. You can’t get it from 911. You can’t get it from social insurance. You need direct contact with feelings, with emotions, with affection.

Lyn: Do you think that your feeling about life has changed at all since you’ve come here, or is this something that has continued through your life?

Mira: Nothing has changed at all, but now as I’ve told you I’ve become more aware of things, and more practical, and more flexible, and more experienced.
Practical means, for example, if something didn’t work out, it’s not the end of the world, we can do something else, if not exactly, something similar. A little less, a little more, it doesn’t matter. Before I would say, “No! It has to be like that.” As I told you, I was over-protected in Lebanon. I didn’t have the chance to see, because I had this big umbrella, a beautiful parasol. It was very nice, but I couldn’t see anything beyond it. So now, once the beautiful umbrella was removed, I was able to use my own eyes, and see the sky, and the clouds, and the rain, and the rainbow, and everything. By my own eyes.

I didn’t have to wait until somebody tells me what’s beyond the umbrella. But I'm still myself. Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed, I'm still myself, and if you ask me why, I don't know. I never felt that I needed to change. There are a few things that I wanted to develop in myself. Because, as I told you, I didn’t have the chance before. But I'm very happy with the things that I was brought up with. I'm very satisfied with what I have, and nothing will shake my belief, or my faith, in whatever I have.

Identifying a cultural meaning system

As I read the transcriptions of Mira’s discussion of culture shock, I noticed that every one of the incidents related to the same theme: her understanding of family. Each time Mira experienced culture shock, she was confronted with something that didn’t make any sense to her, something that contradicted her own meanings and expectations. Though many things in Canada were different from Lebanon, only those relating to family were important enough to trigger a memorable emotional response. Many significant themes appeared in Mira’s stories, such as her lifelong commitments to teaching and learning and her Christian faith.
But the theme of family was pervasive. Mira related every aspect of her life to her family, which provided her with a framework for understanding the world.

Inspired by our discussion of culture shock, I explored the topic of family further, both with Mira and in the literature of Middle Eastern studies. From my reading, I learned that Mira’s emphasis on family is not idiosyncratic, but a shared cultural meaning system. Familism is a form of social structure in which the needs of the family as a group are more important than the needs of any individual family member (Eickelman, 1989). It is a critical aspect of Arab life for both women and men, one which has been systematically observed among Lebanese families both in Lebanon and in North America (Kassees, 1972; Naff, 1985; Patai, 1976).

Though the family is important in Canada, studies of North American cultural norms indicate that family commitments coexist alongside a pervasive emphasis on individualism (Podeschi, 1986). These cultural differences between Lebanese and North Americans are not distinct or separable culture traits, but a matter of emphasis within each integrated meaning system. The same schemata or meaning systems that are integrated one way in one culture may be present in another culture, but integrated into different large patterns, or not integrated at all (LeVine, 1984). The family and the individual are important in Lebanon and Canada. But while Canadians tend towards individualism, the way that Lebanese understand and participate in the social world is shaped by familism.

Removing the umbrella: Perspective transformation

After living 3 years in Canada, Mira was no longer shocked by Canadian family life. But this doesn’t mean that she unquestioningly accepted a Canadian interpretation of family. Instead, she found a way to understand and explain it, based on her own expanding frame of reference. Culture shock provided the catalyst for Mira’s learning. Two of Mira’s stories of culture shock, those relating to single
mothers and pets, include an explanation and resolution of the shock. Her explanations were new interpretations, although they maintained and affirmed her previous belief in the importance of family to satisfy an essential human need for affection and belonging. Her revised understanding integrated the concept of loneliness, what was for her a new and significant force shaping human relationships. At the same time, while contrasting Canadian and Lebanese approaches to family, she began to scrutinize her own assumptions relating to familism as she had known it in Lebanon. She came to think of familism as a beautiful umbrella which separated her from the world.

Culture adaptation theorists have reinterpreted culture shock as the core of the cross-cultural learning process, a stress which triggers a learning process of adaptation and change which is an essential part of the transition process (Adler, 1975; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Taylor, 1991). Mira’s changing understanding of family was a form of learning triggered by a series of minor shocks. Her new interpretations developed in a kind of hermeneutic spiral, which resembles Kim’s (1988) progressive cycle of “stress-adaptation-growth,” resulting in a new perspective and an improved ability to handle future cross-cultural stresses.

Mezirow’s transformative learning theory provides a more sophisticated and precise framework for analyzing changes in Mira’s perspectives:

Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167)

The phases of perspective transformation, like the phases of a transition process, begin with a disorienting dilemma and culminate with a reintegration. Mezirow explains the process using two constructs, “meaning perspectives” and “meaning schemes.” A meaning perspective is a habitual set of expectations, the structure of
assumptions within which "one's past experience assimilates and transforms new experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 42). Meaning perspectives provide a framework for classifying experience and a lens for defining expectations, selectively ordering what and how a person learns. Meaning schemes are concrete manifestations of meaning perspectives, the particular knowledge, beliefs, judgements, and feelings that guide our actions. Multiple meaning schemes arise from a single meaning-perspective.

With each shock, Mira reflected on her assumptions about family, questioning and revising her meaning schemes. These small changes accumulated to effect a broad transformation in her familistic meaning perspectives. By reaching a new understanding of the meaning of family in Canada, she became aware of alternatives to the "beautiful umbrella" of her previous assumptions. Mira realized that there were different ways of seeing the world, "By my own eyes".

Mira didn’t have to unlearn or forget to change her previous perspective. Instead, she developed a more critical awareness of her familism, and identified it as something that she shared with other Lebanese, something that provided structure and meaning to Lebanese society. With this newfound awareness, Mira was able to make comparisons and judgements about Canadians and Lebanese ways. She had the opportunity to see "the rainbow," to cope with life in Canada with new understandings, flexibility, and practicality. But she could see negative aspects as well, "clouds" like selfishness and loneliness.
Mira’s transformative learning process

Mira’s familism wasn’t the only meaning-perspective that changed during her time in Canada. Mira often spoke about “seeing things from different corners,” finding new angles for thinking about her life and her environment. During a later interview, she explained how she developed those new perspectives.

Mira: One of the things that I learned here, or one of the things that made me change in life, is to look into things from different corners, different perspectives. That’s how I started to know about myself, what I really want, what I don’t want. And I also started to review certain things I used to think about, as perfect, or the best. It was the best that I knew in Lebanon.

But every place has its best and its worst. Every place. So whatever is best in Lebanon, is not the best here. But I am still myself. You can take yourself wherever you go in this world, but you learn. If you know how to look left and right, you get to learn a lot from the different places, and corners, and stops, in life.

Lyn: So what were your stops in life? When you came here?
Mira: Well, you have to stop, and look at the red lights, and stop and think about yourself, “Where am I now?” Because as I told you in Lebanon, you are not by yourself. You can’t separate yourself from your surroundings. Which is nice, but at the same time, sometimes it takes a long time to find the answer to, “Who am I?”

Lyn: What do you mean by “looking at things from different corners”?
Mira: Well.. perspectives. Corners means like taking photos. In order to take different shots, you have to move. And each one, it has its own beauty. So, if you stay in the same place, you might think that this is
the only shot you can take, or only picture you can take, which is wrong. It looks like when you take profile, and face, and while you are reclining, and sitting. You are still the same person, but you see yourself from different corners.

That's how I started to look into life. When I started to travel. That's why it's very important to move, I think, from one place to another. For some people, it doesn't make any difference, they don't change at all. If you move them, they are like rocks. But some others, they develop, and they grow, and change.

What I really liked about travelling, and living in a different country, Canada, is you learn a lot about yourself, and you get to learn a lot from people, from Canadians, from different ethnic groups here. The most important thing that I really liked about the time I'm spending here is what I'm learning. What I learned and I'm still learning about people, and myself. Because before that, I thought that if I say no, it's not good. Every time I tried to think about saying no, I'd feel so guilty. Because they told us to say yes, all the time. That's how we were trained. Whether it comes to our politicians, our religious leaders, our parents, submission. Total submission. Look our countries. We say yes, yes, yes, even about things that we have no clue about, we say yes. We are always followers to somebody, even to idiots. And here, I learned that I have the right to say no. Whenever I feel that I have to say no.

That's the minimum I should do, is to talk about things I like, and to say no to things I don't like. I have the courage now. Much more courage to say it, and in front of anybody, any leader, any priest, any bishop, in Lebanon. No, you are wrong. That's not the way it should be. You see? And I did it, when I went to Lebanon. I did it,
I was so mad, because I woke up, and I found that I was fooled, or I was used, for a long time, by our leaders, our politicians. Misused, not only used. How did I say no? Whenever I see something wrong, I talk about it, that's not the way it should be. Shame on you, wake up. Learn something. You think that you are the smartest under the sun, but you are the most idiotic.

Lyn: You would never have done that before?

Mira: No. I didn't. The civil war started, and I was so young, I didn't know how to talk about it before. After that there was no time, there was no chance, there was no way to talk about things because we were busy hiding, and running from one place to another. And then I came here. Now, I have time to think about all these things. Last year, and the year before. Because after my mom died, I couldn't think about anything. So only last year is the time I accepted that my mom died, and my brother had the accident, and everything. And I started to think about myself, life, what happened to us, what happened to my country. Why am I here? You put all these things together, and you come out with what you learned.

Lots of things make sense, lots of things doesn't make sense, you expect a lot you got nothing; you got a lot, you expected nothing before. See? So, you think about, you put all these things together, you mix them, and--you get the juice! The essence, I mean. So, I realized that there are so many things that I'm so fed up of. Not only in Lebanon, here or there. We have our problems here also, in Canada.

Lyn: I find myself wondering about this change, and the strength to say no. I wonder if you were older, if you were your present age in
Lebanon, before the civil war, if you might have come to feeling this way anyways.

Mira: I don’t think so. Because when I came to Canada, I was 29. But I used to think about things as if I was ten years old, fifteen years old. I got to learn a lot about different things here, so this means age is not everything. It's the experience. Look at my mom! She was sixty-nine, and when we sit, when we talk about a few things, she used to agree with everything they say there. Because that's the way she learned! She stayed in the same place, and she thinks the whole world is there. There is no need to learn about anything else, for her, that is all what she saw.

In my case, in my sister's case, it's different. It's not enough for us to go there anymore, and stay there. It’s not enough. What they think, how they look into things, it doesn't make sense sometimes to us. Especially when it comes to the way they analyze different issues, or aspects of life. Whether it's religious, political, social, mental. I'm talking about those who stay there, and don't go anywhere else. . . .

Before, whatever my mom told me, whatever my neighbours told me, whatever the old women in the neighbourhood told me, that was it. It was absolute. I thought that there was nothing beyond that, there can never be anything better than what I learned from them. And when I came here and I started to see how people live here, how people deal with each other. How people here make their living, for example, how people go to school, how people socialize, and sometimes I compare it between here and there. It's not to see which one is better. I found that no, there's no “this is better than that,” or “that is better than
this. But there are many interesting things in life. More than the one that I learned. And that's the beauty about the whole thing.

For example, one of the things that when I came here I used to say, "Thank God I am Christian." Now, I don't say that. Thank God there is a chance to go and meet people from different religions, and learn about other religions. And thank God for learning that I'm not the best. But, if you live in one place, you think that the whole world, everything is there. You can't think of anything else, on the other side of the globe. You know what I mean? So it's not age, it's how much you learn.

Lyn: How did that happen?

Mira: That's a very interesting question. I didn't know about other religions. I could only see through the limits that they drew for me. Jesus Christ, Christians, the priest, the nun, church, that's all. That's the whole world to me. And I thought that everybody who is not exactly like me is so unlucky. Until I came to Canada. Canada is a multicultural country. Being a Lebanese, I am only one drop that makes the whole ocean. So I said, "Oh, who are you, Mira. You think that you are the best. No, you are not the best." So when I started to go, and talk to the Chinese, to the Italians, to the Sikhs, to the Indians. They have also very interesting things, maybe much more interesting to me, and they have lots in common, sometimes, with me. But the way they conduct their culture, or their religion, or themselves, they have different strategies. I'm not talking who is better than who, but when it comes to the substance, lots of things are in common. I started to read more about religions. I wanted to know, when I see the Hare Krishna running and playing drums on the street, and I feel like dancing, I want to know, why are they doing that? And I got to meet a lot of Moslem people here.
I had some Moslem friends in Lebanon, but I stereotyped Moslems in Lebanon. Moslems and Christians, black and white. And I met Shadia, and we had lots of things in common, and now she's family to me. Like my sister, the same way I'm committed to my sister, I'm committed to her.

Lyn: How did you meet all these people?

Mira: Through the Lebanese Club, when we go to parties, I talk to them. I found it very, very interesting and very educational. And my sister has lots of friends. And there is something that I discovered, and I'm very happy that I got to this-- It's not a conclusion, I don't have this "full stop." That I'm not going to change my mind. I have noticed that people who think that they are the most civilized in the world are the most intolerant. And very snobbish. And now I don't have patience for them at all. And I feel more close to people who have respect, for themselves, for the cultures, for the religions, and for others.

It's very, very, very enriching, you know, meeting people here from different religions, and cultures, it enriched my life. It's so boring to be just the way you were brought up, and that's all. To be exposed to only one way. It's so boring. To open one window, or to have one window in your house. You can't have this current, you can't have fresh air. You get rotten, you get rotten soon. It's exactly like having one window.

You don't have to change. I'm still myself. But now I find, when I sit down and think about myself, and how I relate sometimes to other people, and what I learned, I have lots of things to think about. I find myself not empty, as before. I mean, when I sit down to talk, I have lots
of things to talk about. Before, I had very little, because I don’t know. Now, it’s like having lots of resources.

But wherever I go, I am myself. I’m building on whatever I had. The base, the solid base, is still there. I’m still Mira. And there is no way to change. Nobody can touch whatever I have, the very basics. But you add touches here and there. Until you get the painting that you want. Some people say, “We don’t want to change, we are Lebanese, we will stay, we will die Lebanese.” But nothing will stay the same, except the rock. And even the rock, day after day, it changes. That’s how I was when I came here, that’s what I thought. The first year. No way! I don’t want to change. As I told you, the same way I used to think, “Oh, thank God that I’m Christian,” I used to say “Oh, thank God that I’m Lebanese.”

I got to learn lots from people. You can’t learn by yourself, everything. When you are with people, that’s how you get to learn about life.

Lyn: Would you talk about it with Reem?

Mira: Sure, we always talk about it. About here and there, about things we can’t accept anymore in our society, things we can’t accept here because we are Lebanese. Me and my sister, because we are Lebanese, it’s not like you, Lynette. You were not brought up there. There are things deep down in us, in our blood, we can’t ignore it. It’s carved in us, in our personality. It’s like your name. You can’t ignore it. And there are things, in our society, if you go there, we can’t relate to it anymore. Because, from the very beginning, we didn’t like it.

I told you, that from the very beginning, since I was a little girl, there was something in me, that didn’t say yes all the time. To certain
things, and I didn’t know why. I didn’t like it. And I couldn’t
understand why it was there—I mean, in our society.

Lyn: But other things were part of you?

Mira: Yes. For example, our religion. The way, when we have people
over, the way we feel towards each other, and our values. You know,
values are the same. Faith is faith, whether you are Canadian or
Lebanese, there is no Lebanese faith and Canadian faith. Honesty is
honesty, there is no two honesties, or three honesties, there is one,
everywhere in the world. Forgiveness. Values are the same
everywhere in the world, but it depends on the way you conduct them.

The values, the way our parents passed their values to us, I like it
very much. It’s carved in me. Because my personality was built on
these, if you take the foundations, that’s it, I’m not Mira anymore. I am
Mom and Dad, and the society, and the schoolteachers, and myself, when
I became mature and I can analyze and think on my own. . . .

Sometimes, when I do something and I talk like mom, I say, “Oh my God,
Mom is talking.” I use the same words, sometimes. Because, as I told
you, we are so close, in our families in Lebanon, children and their
parents, so they get to take a lot from them. So, this is part, whether I
like it or not, it’s there. When I think about myself, who am I, I am this
combination of everything.

Lyn: But there was a change in the way you looked at things.

Mira: Well, the main change was when I started to accept people. Or
start to accept the fact that people are different. And they conduct
themselves in different ways. Before, that was very hard to accept,
everybody should be exactly like me.
Lyn: Didn’t you meet different kinds of people when you lived in Lebanon?

Mira: If you don’t intermingle with a people, and socialize with them, and live their problems, and they live your problems, you get to know about them, but very little, which is not enough to say, “I know about this,” or, “I know about that.” I don’t think that you get to think about people if you don’t need them, and they don’t need you. And then you start to know about them, how they act, how they react, what stance do they take.

Lyn: So how did that happen when you were here in Canada?

Mira: When I started to work here. I don’t know whether I told you, that the first job I got here, it was in a store. It was the first time in my life I did something different.

Lyn: What kind of things was it selling?

Mira: Clothing. It’s Jordan’s, a French designer line. Before that I was substituting at schools, but it’s different when you become responsible. It was very frustrating, because to tell you the truth, I had no clue, about what I’m doing. I know about clothing, and fashions, and colours, and how to coordinate, and put things together, but I never thought in my life, that that’s what I’m going to do for a living, for one year and a half. Because at that time, I didn’t have my certificate, I was a refugee, and I was limited to certain jobs. At the beginning it was very interesting, I got to learn a lot about, you know, the cash, and the money, but I found that people here are very nice, and very polite, very professional. And I learned how to be humble in work. Because, if I tell my friends in Lebanon I was working in a store, they would feel so
sorry for me, they would not believe me. They would think that it's below my dignity.

I had to do it, because I needed the money. I made a big effort, I was very flexible. I didn't know how to do anything. In Lebanon, I never did anything other than studying and teaching. I came here, I didn't know how to type, and my English at that time was not that good. Because it's true that I studied English, but I was not speaking the language, I was not practicing, just in books and tests. So I used to translate. It was very, very, very tough and very frustrating. But I decided that I have to keep going. If I want to live in the past, there was no way to stay here one more day. So I decided not to forget about the past, but to cope with the present, and move forward, no matter how slow it was. And that's what I did. I got to learn a lot about people, and the mentality here, and the society, and the system. And different little things here and there. That every new immigrant needs to learn about: How to talk in a professional way. How to deal with people, what to say, what not to say. Not to be very friendly with people. All of these things. How to sell yourself. For example, this is totally against my beliefs. But after that, I learn that you have to present yourself. I didn't like the words, "sell yourself." But to represent yourself, in a good way, in order to get a job.

I started there, and I was doing very well, I was very happy. But after that, I found it very boring. And I felt so guilty. What am I doing here, towards myself? I'm doing nothing, I'm not developing, just killing myself, my energy, my days and nights, that's not for me. It's enough to learn, one year and a half, you get a diploma good enough to learn about the basic things. I felt after that, that I should move
somewhere else, where I can fit. Where I feel that, this is my place, I can do it. Because I couldn’t see myself doing anything else other than teaching.

To tell you the truth, I was depressed most of the time. I felt so sorry for myself, where I was, and where I am now. I left everything in Lebanon. I worked so hard to have a name, and to do something for my life. I left everything behind, to come here, claim refugee, and work in a store. As if I did nothing in my life. I felt so sorry for myself, all the nights and days that I worked so hard, I studied so hard, to have my degree, to be a teacher, and now I end up making four, five dollars an hour. I tried to be patient. I thought, maybe I’m lucky I have this little job, because it’s better than staying at home. Until I get my papers, and my certificate, and everything. And I was thinking seriously about going back home.

I stayed on my feet, you know, eight hours, nine hours, and sometimes ten hours. By the end of the day, I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sit, I’d go home and put my feet up. I didn’t want to tell my sister, you know, about how much I was suffering, emotionally, I was suffering a lot.

Lyn: Did you have rude people to deal with?

Mira: No, they were very nice. But maybe I was too sensitive, because I was not used to that. Some of them were very aggressive, and I didn’t know what they meant. I couldn’t interpret it the way I do now, why they were like that. So it used to hurt me a lot. Sometimes I cried, I cried so bitterly, and I said, “No way, I want to go back home.” You know the civil war, the worst days we had in Lebanon were much better. Because there, it’s true we were scared and everything, but we were together.
In my life, I've never had the tension that I've had here in Vancouver. I felt so guilty towards myself, what did I do to myself? Is that why I left Lebanon? Especially because, it was around the time my mother died. I lost weight, and I was so skinny, I was totally depressed. I couldn't eat, I couldn't talk. I was in a terrible situation.

I used to walk a lot, by myself. I didn't want to be with anybody, I just wanted to be by myself because I was in a lot of pain. Emotional pain. I didn't like to talk, because anything I talk about doesn't have a taste or colour. Like talking about the weather. And I always had this feeling of guilt. What did I do to myself, what did I do to my mom. I started to smoke.

I was by myself, most of the time. That's what makes things really hard. It was very hard, because it was like a ping pong game. You know, these things that were really, really bothering me, I tried to get them out of my system, but there was nobody to take them, or to help me. So they came back, they were coming, going, coming, going. Reem was not able to understand. Because Reem was already trained to live in this society. And she wanted me to be exactly like her. What you learn in fifteen years, it's not like what you get in one year. She wanted me to get everything so fast, and to forget totally about Lebanon. My sister didn't have to go through the narrow gates that I had to go through in Lebanon. She was here, she was thinking about herself, and how to get her degree, how to stand up on her feet in this society here. She didn't have to worry about all the things that I used to worry about, day and night in Lebanon. So I became more mature, because of the war.

Now, it's in the past. Now, if I go and walk by myself, I enjoy it a lot. Before, I used to see the water black, the mountains black, the
houses like graves. Everything was black. It didn't mean anything to me. Now, I enjoy the mountains, and the water, the sun.

But you know, I got to learn a lot from the people I worked with in the store. To learn about the suffering, and hardship, that people go through when they don't have enough education. And I also got to learn about the horrible things that people go through when they don't live with parents who really care for them, because most of them came from battered families. They were abused. And they used to tell me about their stories, I got to learn a lot. And not only that, I also became very humble. I never thought that there are people who suffer, who work hard to stand on their feet, ten hours a day, and they can't sit down. I thought that everybody is like me, they have everything they want, and easily. A car, house, money, friends, parents, people who love me and care for me. I came here, I found that they are lonely, they are desperate to find somebody to say a nice word to them, or to invite them, or to care for them. And that's all that they have, the hours what they work in the store, no security, nothing. I felt so sorry for them, in a way, I forgot about myself.

And they couldn't believe me, when I told them about myself, they think that I'm so innocent, like a little girl. They think that I am still like a little girl, and the way I was living with my parents. And now I'm living here with my sister, and the way I understand things.

I used to make lots of mistakes at the beginning because I had no clue what to do. One of them, Barbara, was very, very nice. We were very good friends. She was an alcoholic, and she left her son in Montreal. She came here, and she's living with a man. But she has reason to be like that, because her father left them, four or five kids
with her mother. That’s how I started to accept people the way they are, because now I know. They tell me about their stories, not only like pictures, you see them from outside.

That’s how I started to learn how to accept things, how to be flexible, because I see, I’m suffering like her, I’m standing up the whole day like her. And now I know why she needs somebody to live with, somebody to take care of. So now I don’t say, “Oh, how come she lives with a man if she’s not married to him.” I know why it’s like that. Because she doesn’t have anybody, because she needs somebody.

At that time, I realized that people hate what they don’t know. Once you start to know about things, you don’t hate it, you either accept it or not. It’s like Canadians here, and the Arabs, or North Americans and the Arabs, they don’t know the Arabs, they don’t like them. Once they get to know about them, they change their mind. That’s what happened to me at the school. But when they started to know about me, when I started to talk, they saw the way I am, how I deal with the kids. Now it’s, “Oh, you are our Lebanese sapphire.” A Lebanese white sapphire. So now Mira is very special. And what is so special about me, because I’m a terrorist? That’s what I tell them sometimes, “I was a terrorist when I first came here, now I’m very special.” I told them, “What is very nice about you, is you have the patience to learn about me and my culture. And I hope you do the same thing to everybody. Don’t judge people. Just be patient. And don’t attack people. You accept people the way they are, first of all. And listen to them, wait until they tell you about themselves, or wait until you discover things about them. And then you say whether you can accept them or not.”
Learning through participation

While she was in Canada, Mira began to accept other people and their way of life. She shifted from ethnocentrism, her belief that to be Lebanese and Christian was the best and only way, to a form of cultural relativism, an acceptance of differences. She began to contextualize, recognizing that while something may be appropriate in Lebanon, it may be inappropriate in Canada. She discovered that all of humanity has much in common, but that different peoples have developed different “strategies” for conducting themselves.

Before she came to Canada, Mira hadn’t had much direct experience of people different than herself. But she had a strong commitment to learning and personal growth, something that she felt was part of her life and way of being in the world. Her culture shocks led to emotional responses, provoking serious reflection on the differences between Canada and Lebanon. She made an intentional decision to learn Canadian ways, even though it was “very, very tough and very frustrating. . . . I decided not to forget about the past, but to cope with the present, and move forward, no matter how slow it was.” Through observation and social interaction, Mira learned about the Canadian mentality, society, and systems.

Learning is not just an internal, individual activity. All the strategies that Mira described were socially situated. She believed that travel was a way to broaden personal perspectives, because one can observe and meet people with very different ways of life. She traced her social interactions with people of different religious and cultural backgrounds to her sister’s circle of friends, and to the Lebanese Club. This contradicts common assumptions about the functions of ethnic associations, which are assumed to provide a familiar refuge from a strange and different cultural environment, a place where immigrants and refugees can speak in their own language with their fellow expatriates (Jabbra & Jabbra, 1984; Kim, 1988). That was only one of the Club’s functions for Mira, who also found that it provided a safe and
secure context for meeting people from different backgrounds. Over time, her growing understanding of differences led her to revise a significant meaning perspective, her deeply held beliefs that only one way, the Lebanese Christian way, was the best.

From her observations and social interactions, Mira learned how to deal with Canadians, how to maintain distance, and how to be professional and “sell yourself.” She selectively changed her behaviour in order to cope with her new environment. She resisted the notion of selling herself, but did accept the idea of presenting a positive image in order to get a job. She was hurt when customers at the store were aggressive, but eventually learned to interpret their words so it was not disturbing. Mira did not think of these as significant changes, just “different little things here and there. That every new immigrant needs to learn about.” These were changes that either didn’t affect her meaning schemes, or that she was able to accommodate by revisions to existing meaning schemes. The same was true for her language learning. Since Mira had already learned English in Lebanon, she had a pre-existing framework for interpreting new words and ideas. Though it was difficult and at times frustrating, learning English as it was spoken in Canada was something she had to do to cope.

Mira felt it was important to distinguish between learning from casual social interactions, and learning from people that she was strongly connected with. “I don’t think that you get to think about people if you don’t need them, and they don’t need you.” This observation is supported by Taylor’s (1992) study of American sojourners in foreign countries. Taylor uses Mezirow’s transformative learning theory to explain individual cross-cultural adaptations, and suggests that the degree of immersion in a foreign culture influences behavioural adjustments. He records degrees of immersion ranging from simple observation, to socializing and interacting with people, to the deepest level of immersion: developing long-term
committed relationships with members of the foreign culture. Close friendships had the most significant impact on sojourner adjustment.

Mira experienced profound changes in meaning perspectives as well as meaning schemes as a result of her friendship and interdependence with Barbara and other people whom she worked with in the store. During this time, she was suffering alongside the other workers, both on the job and because of her own depression and loneliness, and she did more than listen to their stories. Merging, a Lebanese woman’s ability to “get inside” people and affectively identify with their troubles and their patterns of belief, enhanced learning through these relationships. She learned about dark sides of Canadian family life, about abuse and loneliness, by listening to people she cared about. Mira respected her coworkers’ stories and interpretations of their lives, and attempted to understand the very different cultural meaning system that framed their beliefs and actions. In order to accommodate and accept a very different sense of family and morality than she had previously understood, Mira had to revise her own meaning perspectives.

Mira didn’t need to invent new strategies for learning to cope with Canada. Learning from people was familiar to her, and her merging approach to friendship made it easy, though not painless, to reach a deep level of understanding. But before she came to Canada, Mira had little opportunity for reflection. During the civil war, there was no time or opportunity to think or talk about her life, and before the war she had neither privacy nor a well developed sense of independence.

**Reflection**

Mira: So only last year is the time I accepted that my mom died, and my brother had the accident, and everything. And I started to think about myself, life, what happened to us, what happened to my country. Why
am I here? You put all these things together, and you come out with what you learned.

Reflection was critical to Mira’s transition and learning process, particularly her perspective transformation. Reflection is not the same as introspection, which is simply being aware of one’s own feelings and perceptions. During long walks by herself after her mother’s death, Mira’s introspections seemed like a ping pong game, coming and going without leading anywhere. But later in her prolonged period of disorientation and depression, Mira’s self-awareness led her to reflect on “the essence”, and develop a strong sense of integration and commitment. She felt she had resolved the contradictions posed by changes in her life and had a much better understanding of herself.

Reflection is the deliberate appraisal or reappraisal of learning and experience, and a central dynamic for transforming meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Mezirow (1991) has identified three different forms of reflection: content reflection, which focusses on what we perceive, think, feel or act; process reflection, which examines how we do those things; and premise reflection, which involves awareness of why we do them, our reasons and the consequences of our judgements. Mira decided to “cope with the present” in Canada as a result of her content and process reflections on the circumstances of her life, and that decision led to further reflection and changes in her meaning schemes. Mira’s premise reflections challenged and reshaped her previous understandings. They were triggered by small culture shocks and changing meaning schemes, and further catalyzed by an intense period of grief and disruption.

Mira: That’s how I started to know about myself, what I really want, what I don’t want. And I also started to review certain things I used to
think about, as perfect, or the best. It was the best that I knew in Lebanon.

Instead of confirming her meaning perspectives, Mira’s reflections were transformative. She became aware of the perspectives she shared with other Lebanese, and constructed new schemes and perspectives which accommodated alternatives and possibilities she had learned about in Canada. Then she took reflective action, making commitments and taking action based on new insights.

Just as Mira’s meaning perspectives were both internal and shared, her reflections on those meanings were both psychologically and socially situated. Though her independent reflections were critical to her perspective transformation, Mira also relied upon the reflective process she shared with her sister, a family member who was experiencing similar changes in meaning perspectives.

Mira: We [my sister Reem and I] always talk about it. About here and there, about things we can’t accept anymore in our society, things we can’t accept here because we are Lebanese.

Culture learning and perspective transformation

Most theories of culture transmission, acquisition, or adaptation assume that an individual internalizes a new culture after intensive exposure or immersion. But Mira didn’t resolve the contradictions of her transition by simply internalizing or accepting the new meanings she encountered. Instead, she became cognitively and emotionally aware of different meaning perspectives and assessed those new meanings through critical reflection. By becoming conscious of the alternatives to her pre-existing assumptions, she was able to make comparisons and to intentionally decide how to position herself in relation to those meanings and perspectives. She
decided whether to accept or reject alternatives, made commitments, and took action on her decisions. Mira referred with pride to the flexibility she has developed in Canada, and her practical ability to have some control in making decisions among her options.

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning framework provides a powerful tool for describing and understanding Mira's cognitive response to transition.

Transformative theory emphasizes that people make an intentional movement in adulthood to resolve these contradictions and to move to developmentally advanced conceptual structures for transforming meaning schemes and perspectives through critical reflection. (p. 147)

Mezirow's constructs of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives are useful not just for explaining changes in personal meanings, but for relating those changes to Mira's interpretation of shared cultural meanings.

Anthropologists of education have extensively studied "instrumental linkages" and instrumental learning (Spindler & Spindler, 1989), changes in the cultural norms and rules which influence individual behaviour. Changes in meaning schemes correspond to instrumental learning. But the construct of meaning perspective transformation explains less tangible and perhaps more crucial changes in cultural meaning systems, the fluid relationship between individual and culture.

Culture can be conceived as a network of individual and shared meaning perspectives. By revising her meaning perspectives, Mira could construct and redefine herself in relation to a culture system.

The elements of a culture are not like a pile of sand and not like a spider's web. It's more like an octopus, a rather badly integrated creature--what passes for a brain keeps it together, more or less, in one ungainly whole. (Schweder, 1984, p. 19)

Mezirow's work has been criticized for an over-emphasis on individual agency (Clark & Wilson, 1991). But its intersection with other theories of culture, learning, and participation in Mira's life history provides the opportunity for an integration which extends our understanding of culture learning. This integration has the
flexibility and power to explain Mira's creative cognitive response to changing cultural meanings as well as norms and behaviours.

Mira redefined herself through a transformative learning process which was participatory and charged with emotion. It involved cycles of reflection and action which took place through introspection and social participation, often in the context of merging relationships and storytelling. When Mira revised and acquired new meaning schemes, she did not need to abandon old ones. She constructed a personal interpretation of culture by revising her meaning schemes and perspectives. Though these were linked to broader cultural schemata like the familism she shares with other Lebanese, their collective nature did not prevent her from making her own reinterpretations. When Mira revised her meaning perspectives through reflection and action, she altered her ways of understanding and categorizing the world.

**Changing ways of knowing**

Mira believed that if she had stayed in Lebanon, she would not have grown in the same ways. She contrasted herself with her mother, whose world was circumscribed and shaped by her village. Like her mother, Mira had once believed everything that people in the village told her, "It was absolute." After her migration, Mira's epistemology changed dramatically, and she actively questioned the limited world view that she grew up with. Mira was no longer willing to accept whatever she was told, by her neighbours or by the Christian establishment.

Mira's descriptions of her mother closely correspond to "received knowing," a category of women's epistemological development described by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986). Received knowers look outward for moral as well as intellectual knowledge, and their moral judgements correspond to the conventions of their society. They selflessly devote themselves to the care and empowerment of
others, just as Mira described her mother. "Since they accept that the world is and should be hierarchically arranged and dualistic, they channel their increasing sense of self into their growing capacity to care for others" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 48).

Unlike her mother, Mira developed a different way of knowing following her migration to Canada. She shifted from an externally oriented perspective on truth and knowledge to one that is personal, private, and subjectively known. But Mira did not rely solely on her own feelings and intuition to make sense of her world. She actively listened to others, reflecting critically when she was alone and during social interactions. Mira developed a sense of control in her life and became a pragmatic problem solver, building upon her own subjective insights and her acceptance of different opinions. Her ways of knowing and learning did not arise out of conformity to external authorities, but out of a need to understand other people whose beliefs at first seemed obscure, alien, and sometimes threatening.

Reflecting on this change, Mira felt that her life had been enriched, that she had grown and developed new resources. Her interpretation coincides with North American learning theory which interprets the shift from dualism to relativism as positive growth to a higher developmental level (Belenky et al., 1986; Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Perry, 1970).
Chapter Five

STRATEGIES FOR IDENTITY AND PARTICIPATION

Flexibility and practicality: Adaptive strategies

Mira: Nothing has changed at all, but now as I've told you I've become more aware of things, and more practical, and more flexible, and more experienced.

Mira adapted to Canada with developmental changes in her understandings and behaviour. She gained a cognitive "flexibility" through her perspective transformation, which gave her a wider repertoire for action and more options for coping with her new Canadian environment. Mira felt that she had more resources to draw from, that her life was not as empty or boring as before.

Mira: Theoretical means, it's exactly like sitting in the corner and watching. But practical means, when you go, instead of watching, instead of sitting in the corner and just watching, you go and live, you do something.

Her practicality was associated with her increasing competence in Canadian ways and growing sense of autonomy. But it was more than that. Practicality represented a developing sense of agency—her ability to act on her reflections and beliefs. Working in a store, for example, would have been beneath Mira's dignity in Lebanon, and a source of shame to her and her family. In Canada her flexibility and practicality, based on experience and changing understandings of what was possible
and acceptable, gave the store job a different meaning. It became a viable way of earning a living while learning more about her new environment.

Mira did not respond to her Canadian context by simply fitting in and reproducing existing social relations. Instead, her cognitive transformation led her to develop and implement strategies of adaptation and resistance, both in Canada and in Lebanon. As Mira learned about Canada, her changing understandings influenced her relations with culture and society, as well as her profound internal transformations. Following her migration transition, Mira not only had more time for "theoretical" critical reflection, she was also able to act on her criticisms in a "practical" way. While she has adapted many meaning schemes and some meaning perspectives, Mira has actively resisted making other changes.

Strategies of resistance

Mira's questioning of cultural and social expectations was a recurring theme in our interviews. Resistance is a narrative element commonly found in women's life stories throughout the world, "counter-narratives" which contrast self-image and experiences with dominant cultural models (Personal Narratives Group, 1989). Mira had questioned gender roles since she was a teenager. She was aware of patriarchal dominance and oppression throughout her life, particularly in Lebanon. There she felt the restrictions imposed on her gender, and felt dominated by men in her family and Lebanese society.

Mira: One time I came back from university, and we were having dinner together, me and my dad, and I was talking about equality between men and women. I said society should do something about it, and we should start at home by sharing the responsibility for doing things. "Why should I, for example, set the table, or clean the dishes?
My brothers should help us... He said “Yes, that’s right, but this is the way we’re brought up, and it will take time to erase this.” So I said, “Do you agree with me?” He said, “Yes, I do agree with you.” I said, “OK, fine, now you clean up, I’m going! Bye-Bye!” [we both laugh] See? It’s fossilized. There are a few things that girls have to do, and there are other things, that it’s not nice for women to do, in Lebanon.

Mira’s feelings about her duties and obligations as a daughter and sister were ambivalent. While she appreciated the absence of loneliness, and the nice feeling of always being loved and busy, she sometimes resented the lack of privacy. When she thought of objecting or resisting, she would feel guilty. Her every action reflected not just upon her as an individual, but upon her entire family. Despite the powerful forces of guilt and shame which operated to maintain traditional patterns, Mira’s story described feelings of resistance beginning when she was a girl. This isn’t atypical of Lebanese or Arab women, who may act in reference to norms and prescriptions for behaviour without strictly observing them (Krieger, 1986). Using current Western standards, Mira appeared to have less freedom of choice concerning basic life decisions while she lived in Lebanon. Yet women in Arab countries exert considerable power and control over their lives within the home and the extended family, manipulating social relations and the flow of information inside and outside the family sphere. Arab women do not fall into molds prescribed by social and cultural norms, they work to manipulate and use them to their own advantage (Altorki, 1988).

Mira frequently criticized Lebanese politics and religion. But before she migrated to Canada, if she felt critical of conservative Lebanese traditions, she could not question them openly. As long as she was living in Lebanon, Mira’s reflections on Lebanese religious and political conservatism remained theoretical and
unexpressed. It was only after migration and her perspective transformation that she felt she had the strength and commitment to act on some of her decisions.

In Canada, Mira was able to openly and intentionally act upon her world. She strengthened her desire to throw away the things that she wanted to throw away when she was young. Yet Mira’s resistance was tempered with her compliance with Lebanese and Canadian societies. She accepted the strictures of Lebanese moral codes and family life, and thus met her own desire for intimacy, belonging, and a Lebanese identity. Balanced in the tension between dependence and resistance, Mira creatively constructed her own meanings in her relationship with others. Since her migration, Mira has adapted by accepting and enacting some assumptions of Canadian society, while resisting other assumptions and behaviours. Mira felt empowered as she discovered existing cultural schemata, meanings that were shared among Canadians, and shaped her own interpretations from them. Mira’s developing sense of agency was empowering. It provided motivation not just for adaptation, but for further resistance through reflection and action.

Mira: The way people socialize here, in general, is very different from the way it was in Lebanon. . . . For example, if you want me to talk about details, we don’t have this “potluck dinner.” I was so surprised! And I like it very much, I find it very interesting. Well, people in Lebanon, when you go, you take things with you, flowers, sweets, and things, but we don’t have this. You know, it’s not tradition. When you invite people, you cook for everybody. You don’t ask people to bring anything. It’s very different, very practical.

And something else, I found that people here are not so - how can I say it, warm? For example, [when you walk in a room], they hardly stand up, they don’t shake hands, they just say ‘hi’, and that’s it. I
found it shocking. I arrived, and it was as if there was no one there. Well, in Lebanon, when you have guests, when you invite people over, you show them that they are welcome. This is one thing that I thought I would like to maintain. The way I got it. These are the things that I've noticed, the big differences. There's a big difference. No way, I can't do things like that.

Teaching was a significant way for Mira to take action on her personal commitments. In both Lebanon and Canada, she discouraged violence and promoted peace. After her migration to Canada, she added themes based on her revised meaning perspectives.

Mira: My eyes are always on the kids. I know that sometimes they can't talk about their problems, they don't know how to express their feelings. So I help them to put things out of their system, and I talk, on their behalf, and I teach them how to talk about it nicely, and how to solve their problems. . . . Because I myself, when I was a little girl, I didn't want to. I wanted to keep everything inside, especially when something hurts me. You know, being a Christian, we believe that pain is good. So no matter how painful the things, we used to keep it inside. . . I think, if you start teaching kids early, for example, six or seven years, the kind of training they get is very important, because it's like carving in wood. What ever you give them, it goes with them forever. And that's why I sometimes talk to the kids as if they are my age, about peace and war, and love and hatred, caring and sharing, how to help kids from other countries. I tell them about kids from my country, how sometimes they have to stay nights and days in the shelters. I tell them
about myself. I give them time to decide, to suggest. I'm very happy with what I'm doing because you can make a big difference with these kids. If you want to change the whole attitude, if you want to judge a tree, you don't look at the branches or the fruit. You look at the roots, the beginning.

**Storytelling as praxis**

Speaking about her struggles in Lebanon and Canada was an important way for Mira to take action on her new commitments. She once said to me, “I dare to talk about things, not like before.” Mira’s storytelling was a testimonial, a way of bearing witness to the suffering of the Lebanese people. As our interviews concluded, she articulated the lessons that she felt should be learned from her story, the messages that she wanted me to convey. She was enthusiastic and willing to speak to anyone in Canada about her beliefs, and I learned that her friends often referred people curious about Lebanon to Mira for that reason, including journalists, the descendants of other Lebanese immigrants, and myself.

The social nature of reflection and action through storytelling has implications for both participants. Storytelling can be a way of teaching and of learning. When Mira listened to other peoples’ stories, she began to accept them. And even as she told and “taught” her story to me she engaged in further reflection, learning from her own story in a multilayered cycle of reflection and action that has been called praxis (Brookfield, 1986).

There were moments in our interviews when I felt that Mira was actively reflecting on her life, particularly when she made use of certain metaphors. I noticed her enthusiasm and creativity when she spoke about meeting people from different backgrounds, and how it was like opening a window to let in fresh currents of air; as she talked about the beautiful umbrella; and again when she compared her
basic personality to a rock. In my presence, and sometimes with my encouragement, she used these metaphors to explore possibilities; to develop new interpretations; and to illuminate aspects of her experience for herself, as well as for me. Lave & Wenger (1991) have suggested that talk is a central medium of transformation, and that telling a personal story is a tool for diagnosis and interpretation.

But most of the time I didn't feel that Mira was actively reflecting on her life and making decisions. During four months of interviews, there was little change in the way she represented her story to me. Instead, her story was evidence of an earlier process of transformation. She made repeated use of the same anecdotes, and often the same metaphors, at different interviews. When I asked Mira about this, she told me that she had spoken to others about her life in Lebanon and Canada on many occasions, though she usually avoided speaking about the more personal and traumatic details. She had not only thought about the kinds of questions I was asking, she had already told much of this story before.

Mira's storytelling served many purposes for her. It was an active means for reflection, an ongoing appraisal of her transition processes, and a record of a previous reflective process. Telling her life story was a means of constructing her identity in relation to others, one which validated her interpretations and at the same time taught others about Lebanon and the refugee experience. It may even have been therapeutic, an attempt to retrieve the loss of mother and country by maintaining memories and validating them by sharing with others (Disman, 1983; Westwood & Ishiyama, 1991).
**Making a harmony: Mira’s sense of self**

Mira: I don’t want to be in bits and pieces here and there and everywhere. I want to live in harmony with myself, my people, my country. Even though I’m far from home, I don’t feel that I’m scattered everywhere. Because what I learned from it is part of me. And it’s very hard to separate the person from the land, the culture, the language, and the people.

Mira’s cognitive transformation, through an ongoing process of critical reflection, commitment, and action, was inextricably linked with other dimensions of her transition process. Her story describes the harmonious integration of significant external and internal changes with the continuities in her life. Unlike her feelings during the disruption phase of her transition when she was “like a feather in the air,” Mira had developed a solid base for living in Canada at the time of our interviews, which took place during a period of stability and integration. Western psychologists believe that a sense of continuity is essential for mental health (Laub, 1991). It is something which most refugees have to struggle hard to achieve in the face of personal, cultural, and structural contradictions (Rumbaut, 1985).

**The foundations are identity**

Mira: The values, the way our parents passed their values to us, I like it very much. It’s carved in me. Why? Because this is the way it is. That’s how you get to have roots, back to your roots. Because my personality was built on these, if you take the foundations, that’s it, I’m
not Mira anymore. Right? You can’t separate. I am Mom and Dad, and society, and the schoolteachers, and myself, when I became mature and could analyze and think on my own.

To create harmony in her life, Mira emphasized the continuity throughout her stages and transitions. Overwhelmed by tremendous changes in the social, political, and cultural environment since her arrival in Canada, Mira has based her sense of coherence on her strong personal value system, and on critical life themes of intimacy, belonging, and identity. Mira’s foundations and her concept of personality strongly resembles the concept of identity developed by Western psychologists: a stable, consistent and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world. Identity is “the interface between the individual and the world” (Josselson, 1987, p.8), a dynamic underlying theme which fits together aspects of personality with social realities, so that a person has a sense both of internal coherence and a meaningful relationship to the external world. It is a way of preserving the continuity of the self, linking the past and present. And by contrasting ourselves with others, we heighten our sense of what is uniquely individual.

Identity functions on many levels, both conscious and unconscious. Conscious dimensions of identity include idiosyncratic learning which may never have been part of a cultural meaning system, and social identities. Mira’s role as a teacher provided her with an occupational identity which was critical to her sense of worth and purpose in life, one that transcended international borders and placed her within a distinctive professional community.

Other dimensions of identity, like Mira’s familism, are tightly interwoven with shared cultural meaning systems. Every culture promotes and emphasizes different values. Cultural values, social norms, political ideologies, and psychological attributes interact to influence the formation of an individual’s identity and sense of
self (Pratt, 1991). These levels of identity function almost automatically, providing a means by which people organize and understand their experience and share their meaning systems with others (Ishiyama, 1989).

A person's identity is continually refined over the life course, but every time a major transition is experienced it triggers a crisis of identity (Shlossberg, 1984). The contradictions posed by Mira's migration forced issues of identity to her consciousness. Mira responded to dramatic changes in her cultural contexts by constructing a coherent self and identity. Mira felt that that she had stayed true to herself, despite changes in her meaning perspectives and ways of knowing. She often emphasized that her important values were "carved in blood" and endured throughout age- and event-related transitions, along with her Lebanese identity. Faith, forgiveness, giving, patience, honesty, humility, and simplicity, were all firmly held personal commitments that Mira associated with family, religion, and culture.

**Having two homes - And a strong ethnic identity**

Mira: People there [in Lebanon] have a totally different mentality. And the reason why it is like that, is because there are long histories, history behind everything, you can't separate yourself from your past in Lebanon. Because you are so attached to it, it's a part of you, whether you want it or not. You were brought up with it, with the traditions.

Throughout our interviews, Mira stressed the importance of being Lebanese. This was her ethnic identity: those dimensions of identity that express the continuity between her sense of past ancestry, and her future aspirations for belonging to a particular ethnic group (Weinreich, 1988). Ethnic identity is a complex set of
psychological processes taking place over time, in which biographical continuities of ancestry are constructed in the wider context of social groups. In Mira’s case, these processes were concurrent with her transition processes. She responded by strongly defining herself as Lebanese, affirming and reaffirming the primacy of this ethnic identity by telling stories of herself and her homeland to others.

Mira: Mother to me now is not, you know, my biological mother. It’s the land. The country. When I talk about mother, or motherhood. These are things we start to think about, or feel, when we are far away. So now my mother died. But I still belong, very strongly, somewhere--to the land.

Migration heightened Mira’s awareness and appreciation of her need for intimacy, particularly for close personal relations with family. Even though merging extended her intimacy to her female friends, Mira found it insufficient. Her experience in Canada introduced her to the pain of loneliness, which was the dark side of her need for intimacy. She relied as much as possible upon her sister in Vancouver. Mira told me that she wasn’t ready to consider marrying someone in Canada, because she feared that she would be torn between love for that person and for her country. He would have to be “my Lebanon, my family, my mom, my dad, everything, because I left everything.”

Mira’s sense of intimacy and belonging fused with her understanding of identity. Even obtaining Canadian citizenship did not change her deep emotional affiliation with her ethnic identity, though other aspects of her core identity had evolved. She identified with different patterns of belief and understanding among her coworkers and friends, and this sometimes led to critical internal conflicts between her own familistic identity and her coworkers’ individualism. But she did
not uncritically accept their meaning perspectives, nor did she resolve those conflicts by discarding or dismantling her own ethnic identity. Mira remained strongly committed to being both Christian and Lebanese, even though she no longer believed they were superior to other religious or national affiliations.

Mira felt no sense of contradiction in her cultural identification. She was living in Canada, not becoming Canadian. She was a competent and active participant in Canadian society, while maintaining her links with Lebanon by phone, letter, and occasional visits. In the late twentieth century, it is possible for immigrants to live in two worlds, socially, physically, and psychologically (Appadurai, 1991). Instead of having two selves, Mira felt she could simply have two homes.

Mira: I’m still Lebanese, because I am Lebanese. I was born in Lebanon, brought up in Lebanon, my parents are Lebanese. But, what’s wrong in being Lebanese, and knowing about another country, like Canada, and having two homes? What’s wrong in that? There’s nothing.

Amidst the discontinuities of her transition process, Mira’s ethnic identity provided a sense of continuity and stability, even as she began to articulate and reflect upon herself in relation to a pluralistic social and cultural setting. Tied to her powerful cognitive and emotional needs for belonging, her Lebanese identity strengthened her autonomy and ability to make decisions to accept or resist aspects of the Canadian culture system.

To understand Mira’s story, it is necessary to interpret her identity as a complex and dynamic web of perspectives, commitments, and dimensions. It is simplistic to describe this as an intercultural identity, an emotional identification
that is not limited to one’s own society, but includes other cultures (Kim, 1988). Adaptation theorists propose that intercultural identity either replaces, adds to, or coexists with previous cultural identities (Hoffman, 1988; Ishiyama, 1989; Kim, 1988; Taylor, 1992). But their interpretations disregard the subjective nature of cultural and ethnic identity. Like other social dimensions of identity, it is dynamic and self-defined. The constructs of intercultural or bicultural identity blur distinctions between the deeply and often unconsciously held dimensions of identity, like meaning perspectives and cultural schemata, and an individual’s conscious social affiliations. While aspects of Mira’s identity were transformed along with her shared cultural assumptions, her sense of ethnic identity was strengthened. Mira did not interpret her own identity as shifting, multiple, or intercultural.

Mira’s identity was a cultural and social construction which she revised through “flexibility and practicality,” her changing perspectives and sense of agency. As Mira reflected critically, strategized, and made decisions, she creatively constructed her own identity and actions from a broadening repertoire of possibilities. Her identity, like her social behaviour, took shape in relation to others, depending on the particular setting and historical and cultural context.

**Marginal by choice**

Mira: If you want to view a house, you have to step outside.

To an observer, Mira was successful in adapting and conforming to Canadian cultural norms. But at the same time she quietly resisted both social and cultural domination by minimizing her participation in Canadian society. Mira experienced large shifts in her status and participation in communities at different times in her life. Though Mira felt a deep need to belong, she learned that there can be
advantages to being a peripheral participant in a community. At the time of our interviews, Mira had chosen marginality as her strategy for living in Canada.

In Lebanon before the civil war, Mira was a full participant in mainstream Lebanese society, not an “I” but part of an “us.” Though she was aware of the inequalities of her female status, she shared that position with other Lebanese girls and women. During the civil war, her status changed in frequent and confusing ways, as her participation in different communities became a matter of life and death. During this stage power shifts were manifested in violence between religious, regional, family, and political communities, and she felt powerless and voiceless.

When Mira arrived in Canada, after the initial relief from the uncertainty and danger of the war, she felt very much Lebanese, and very much a refugee on the periphery of life in Canada: “We are nothing here.” Her fellow workers at the store treated her as a newcomer to society, “like a little girl.” Refugee legislation imposed barriers to her full participation in society, while her sister, friends, and government officials urged her to conform to Canadian cultural and social practises. Though apparently contradictory, they all delivered the same message. As a refugee, Mira was still powerless and voiceless.

When Mira became familiar with Canadian society and culture, she developed expertise and understanding, and identified herself as an agent in the Canadian social and cultural system. She believed that her positive transformations were only made possible by her migration, which provided her with both the motivation and the perspective to reflect on her life in both Canada and Lebanon. As her meaning perspectives changed, and she questioned the assumptions she had once uncritically shared with other Lebanese, Mira began to become different from friends and family in Lebanon. She no longer was protected by a “beautiful umbrella;” she had a more individualistic perspective on the world.
Many educated Lebanese who never leave their homeland experience conflict and psychological distress while attempting to reconcile traditional Arab culture with Western cultural and political influences (Patai, 1976, p. 198). In Canada, Mira found her own way of living with this conflict. While aspects of her identity were influenced by personal transformation and development, Mira did not compromise her commitment to a Lebanese ethnic identity, or to her social identity as a teacher. Returning to a teaching career was critical to Mira’s integration of her transition process, for it provided an affirmation of a longstanding occupational identity, and a sense of continuity. Mira’s teaching identity placed her within a particular professional community, and she developed friends among her Canadian colleagues at her school. She increased her participation in Canadian society on other levels as well. Her ability to merge with other women moved her towards an understanding of Canadian meanings, norms, and practices, without having to internalize those systems of belief.

At the same time, Mira’s Lebanese identity distanced her from full participation within mainstream Canadian society. Her Lebanese affiliation was deeply and emotionally felt, fulfilling her needs while fuelling her desire for family, belonging, and continuity. Her deliberate decision to maintain her ethnic identity, along with many cultural attitudes and behaviours, is a position of resistance.

Though it located Mira on the periphery of mainstream Canadian society, her ethnic identity made her a full member of the Lebanese community of Vancouver. The Vancouver Lebanese are a loosely knit group which is both part of, and separate from, Canadian society. Its marginal position supported Mira’s ambiguous status, a situation common to immigrants who maintain options outside the dominant society and retain a different collective social identity (Ogbu, 1982). Even though she was a refugee, Mira knew she had the option to leave Canada to return to her homeland, or to re-emigrate to another society. Mira didn’t have to conform in order to prove her
worth or position in Canadian society, because she had her own reference group against which to measure her personal success or failure. But she chose not to become a full participant in the Vancouver Lebanese community either. She only occasionally attended social events, and picked her close friends from both inside and outside the group.

Mira identified advantages which justified and supported her marginal position. It had led to her transformation, as seeing things from different corners and having the opportunity for reflection had given her new ways of knowing, flexibility, and practicality. And she found it a source of power, when she used her position on the margins of both Lebanese and Canadian societies to give her voice the authority to represent alternative perspectives in order to criticize and to educate. At her school, she educated her fellow teachers about the Arabs and Lebanese, using her voice to demystify the exotic Arab “other” stereotyped as a terrorist. When she returned to Lebanon as a visitor, she found that she could express her criticisms of religious and political leaders.

Mira’s motivations for remaining marginal included an uncertainty about whether she would stay in Canada or return to Lebanon. In some ways she felt more like a sojourner than a permanent resident of this country, maintaining a deep emotional connection and a sense of belonging to a Lebanese way of life. Long after her migration to Canada, and a transition process which had strengthened her desire to throw away things she hadn’t liked since she was a child, Mira felt pressure to conform when she returned to visit Lebanon. Though she had begun to speak out for peace and against conservatism, she wanted to adjust to family expectations of social behaviour. If she didn’t get up to greet visiting neighbours, despite her jet lag and exhaustion, she would cause a scandal and be accused of becoming a Canadian. This potent accusation implied that Mira had lost her identity as a Lebanese and a family member, and no longer belonged.
When Mira thought about returning to live in Lebanon, her speculations were marked by uncertainty and ambiguity. She knew that people in Lebanon were changing, forced by the war and a serious downturn in the economy to become more flexible and practical than they had been. But she expected that she would have to embark on another transition process to find her place in Lebanese society.

Mira: They do things like any place in the Middle East. Don’t ever think that Lebanon is different. They are very traditional, and they stick to their tradition, no matter whether they need it or not. It’s very important, to respect the traditions, but there are a few things that we don’t need, it doesn’t make sense. . . .

Now, if I go back to Lebanon, I have to use what I learned here, to adapt again there, and here we are, we start again. I have to explain to people why Mira doesn’t accept things she used to accept before, to make them get used to me, and to my way. And this will take time, and by the time they learn, by the time I readapt, I will be--not a different person, but I’ll learn something. So there is no reason in life, at all, to say, “Here I am, I know.” I don’t. Until I die, I’ll say I don’t know, but I’m ready to learn.
Chapter Six

THE MEANING OF A LIFE

You don’t have to become Canadian

Mira: I’m sure that the writers, the sociologists, the psychologists, they do a lot of research in order to write theory, or to get to their conclusions, to have this theory. But when you live, or when you talk to a person who has experienced lots of things, it’s different from when you are getting articles from here and there, putting them together, you know.

Lyn: What is so interesting, I think, is that people who study immigrants are often wrong, they think that you have to come here and you have to learn different things, but my feeling is that you learned about yourself. And you were like a sociologist, or an anthropologist. You were studying Canada. And it seems to me that’s like a skill. I don’t think everybody does that. You had to pay a terrible price to do it, but maybe other people can learn from your story, so that someone else won’t have to pay that terrible price.

Mira: This is very important, Lynette, believe me. Because half of the problems, or tension, or suffering, that the immigrant or refugee has, when they come not only to Canada, anywhere in the world, is this big question, “How can I become a European, or a Canadian?” And they feel, “I am not... I am Middle Eastern. This is terrible, I want to go back. I can’t fit here.” They need somebody to tell them, you don’t have to be Canadian. You have to understand Canada,
Lyn: What's so interesting to me is that although you did all that, you're still Lebanese.

Mira: Yes. Because I am Lebanese. I was born in Lebanon, brought up in Lebanon, my parents are Lebanese, but... what's wrong in being Lebanese, and knowing about another country, like Canada, and having two homes? What's wrong in that? In my case, it's very hard, you know, to deny the fact that I am Lebanese, and be totally Canadian; or not to be Canadian, and just be Lebanese. I can't. Because I am between here and there.

**Transition and culture learning**

Mira's life history doesn't completely conform to any of the linear models of culture and learning that can be found in the theoretical literature. It describes a nonlinear, evolving process of interdependent changes which took place on many levels. Migration was only one of many major transitions in Mira's life which triggered or catalyzed significant personal growth and transformation through reflective learning. It had a profound impact on every aspect of Mira's life. After migrating to Canada, Mira developed a flexibility and resilience in her outlook and her identity, at the same time as she articulated and defined herself through a process of critical reflection.

To interpret and understand Mira's story I have drawn upon multiple conceptual frameworks which provide overlapping and sometimes contradictory pathways through the theoretical terrain first charted in Chapter One. Sometimes my interpretive journey led to dead ends, but more often it came upon unexpected intersections, where theories from different disciplines met. The holistic approach of life history provided insights into the dynamics and interrelationships of certain theories of transition, culture, learning, and agency, which are embodied and
enacted in Mira’s story. By linking the emic of Mira’s story with the etic of academic interpretation, I have constructed a more comprehensive, precise, and integrated map for making sense of the complex processes of personal change associated with international migration. Theories of agency, participation, and transformative learning are most useful for understanding Mira’s interdependent relationship with Canadian and Lebanese cultural systems.

**Culture learning as agency and participation**

Mira: You can take yourself wherever you go in this world, but you learn. If you know how to look left and right. You get to learn a lot from the different places, and corners, and stops, in life.

Mira’s learning was central to her transitional process. Her participation in Canadian society gave it meaning; it was mediated by the differences of perspective between herself and others. Her learning was not just an internal and individual activity. It was a social practice, defined by the relational character of knowledge and learning, the negotiated character of meaning, and the dilemma-driven nature of her learning activities. For Mira, culture learning was both a necessity and an opportunity to develop alternative ways of thinking and being. She came to understand differences in cultural meanings as options that she could creatively choose from.

Mira created her own strategies for living in Canada, a mixture of adaptation and resistance in her commitments and her actions. Though her location on the periphery of Canadian society was originally imposed by forces outside her control, Mira eventually saw an advantage in maintaining that position. She was both a legitimate participant willing to adjust to Canadian expectations, and a peripheral
participant who maintained an ethnic identity separating her from other Canadians. Mira's motivations were complex and ambiguous and led to actions which were strategic and creative, like her conscious management of her identity. Though outwardly Mira appeared to conform to Canadian society, she minimized her participation in other ways.

Mira responded to the transition of migration not through changing her identity, but through a transformative process of personal development associated with her learning and participation in Canadian society. Mira didn't passively receive or adapt to culture. She learned about Canadian rules and expectations, and gained a meaningful understanding of different cultural perspectives. Then she assessed those perspectives, strategized, and made decisions as an active agent of her own destiny, constructing her identity and actions through participation. Mira developed a sense of agency as she became aware of existing cultural systems and expectations, and realized that she could make choices from among them. Her culture learning was the simultaneous development of expertise and understanding, which led to an identification with cultural systems based on agency and participation.

Reflections on the life history process: Stories and text

Lyn: These interviews have been like a gift. I feel like you’ve given me so much of your time, and your thoughts, but I wonder, if in any way, it’s been helpful for you. One time you said, it was good to talk about it. But another time you said it wasn’t good to wake up old feelings.

Mira: It’s very important, yes, to talk about it, not to leave it there. Because, at any time, anything might happen, that will remind me about it. It will come back and stand in front of me, in my way. But it hurts, the time that I’m talking about it. Or just a little bit later on. But it’s
better to talk about it. It's very painful Lynette, it's very very painful. But it's good to talk. I feel more comfortable, because at the time, I couldn't talk about it. It was not permitted to talk about it. Lyn: What I appreciate, is that you spent hours and hours and hours talking to me! And that's why I want to make sure that when I write, that you're comfortable with it. Mira: Well, you are more creative when it comes to the writing. you know, and analyzing the whole. Now you have a clear idea about the whole thing.

More than a year after this dialogue was recorded, I met with Mira to give her the first draft of my thesis. She told me that she had often thought of our interview sessions. We had met many times since the interviews, exchanging social visits and sometimes gifts, but she particularly missed those evenings when we sat in comfort in her living room and talked about her life. Though we didn't explore what lay beneath her feelings, her words reminded me of something I had read in an article about oral history interviews with women: “Often fieldwork research offers to particular research subjects practical and emotional support and a form of loving attention, of comparatively nonjudgemental acceptance, that they come to value deeply” (Stacey, 1991, p. 117).

Though I had deeply enjoyed our interview meetings, I had not missed them during the last year. Mira and her words were still very much with me, occupying my thoughts and inspiring insights throughout my analysis and writing process. Langness and Frank (1981) have suggested that writing a life history is an attempt to understand another person's reality, a humanizing act of empathy that holds tremendous power for developing the human potential of those who use it. I have been deeply affected by my hours with Mira and her story.
Doing ethnography as culture learning

It is common knowledge that when you do fieldwork you find out about the culture you're studying, your own culture, and yourself. (Jackson, 1986, p. 264)

As I learned more about Lebanese and Canadian families from Mira, it dawned on me that I was going through a kind of transformation similar to that which Mira had experienced during her stay in Canada. I wasn't just studying Mira, I was learning about Lebanon through her stories--just as she had learned about Canada through sharing stories with Canadian women. While my ethnographic research was limited to the life history method, Mira used several conventional ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation: "living as much as possible with, and in the same manner as the individuals being investigated" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 109).

Participant observation may range from complete participation through immersion and identification, when the ethnographer becomes a member of another society, to comparative detachment, when the ethnographer maintains the role of an objective observer. Though a participant observer may adopt a variety of positions, the aim is to maintain a marginal position in order to generate creative insights.

Ethnographers... must strenuously avoid feeling "at home." If and when all sense of being a "stranger" is lost, one may have allowed the escape of one's critical, analytic perspective. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 102)

Like an ethnographer, Mira learned from her marginal position as an insider and an outsider, a stranger and a friend. Though her observations and life history studies were not recorded in text, they informed her reflective analysis of the Canadian society she lived in, and of her Lebanese identity.

Mira and I shared goals similar to other ethnographers: to make sense of individuals and of culture. We both used a reflexive methodology in which our self-
awareness was part of what we studied. Mira analyzed through critical reflection, and disseminated her findings through storytelling. My own research process was similar, though it was defined and moderated by academic standards for empirical research. Unlike Mira, who has avoided personal writing since the traumatic loss of her house and belongings, I used writing as a medium for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data. Each oral interview was converted to text through complete transcriptions. My analysis was text-based, unfolding through independent and socially situated reflection. I did most of my independent reflection while writing, and I regularly shared that writing as the basis for my analytical discussions with others about the research findings. The product of my research is this text.

Though ethnographers write about their experiences in the field as an aspect of research, their research can be interpreted as culture learning through perspective transformation. For ethnographers, fieldwork is a "rite of passage," an immersion which produces a form of authority based on personal and subjective experience (Cole, 1992). Agar (1982) has described ethnographic fieldwork as a three phase cognitive process of "breakdown, resolution, and coherence." His phases are parallel to processes of transition and perspective transformation, beginning with disruption and culture shock. This culminates in what he calls "coherence," encompassing not only an internal integration of different cultural meaning systems, but a new set of social relationships. An ethnographer strives to develop a sense of agency within the new environment, and strategically chooses appropriate roles and social identities:

As my comprehension of the "other" began to emerge, so did my comprehension of self, and I was eventually able to develop concrete strategies for field adjustment and a successful research venture. (Whitehead, 1986, p. 227)

Though Mira wasn't familiar with ethnographic methods, she used the same approach for learning culture. Like an anthropologist, Mira decided on the role and identity she would assume in Canadian society, and maintained a peripheral position.
Most ethnographers are voluntary sojourners, transients who maintain a separate identity and distance themselves from the community they study in order to maintain a degree of objectivity in their analysis. Mira used the same strategy, making only a tentative commitment to living in Canada. Her life in Canada could be considered a personal research project, motivated primarily by her refugee status and search for an alternative home. A secondary motivation may have been personal growth, something which Mira valued highly.

This intersection of ethnographic research with migrant culture learning has practical implications for both anthropology and adult education. Anthropologists have been accused of ignoring the potential of deep culture learning in their own work (Hoffman, 1989). Those who support the idea of exploring the cognitive world of others through experiential learning (Shweder, 1991) can learn about the method and the process from this life history. Mira’s descriptions of merging and storytelling for learning about Canada are paralleled by our research process, which made use of merging and storytelling for creating and interpreting the life history.

**Merging and storytelling**

Merging was important throughout the life history process, not just for my relationship with Mira, but for analyzing her story and for reading the theoretical literature. It was part of a hermeneutic process which functioned at a deep holistic level of interpretation. Merging involved identification: putting myself in another's place, so as to understand and share the other's thoughts, feelings, problems, etc. (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1988). Each time I read a relevant theoretical article, I would learn about it by identifying with that approach for a time, using it to review and interpret Mira’s story, and the other theoretical frameworks. If it made some sense, I would integrate it into a broader perspective for understanding. Sometimes I did that through a conscious reflective process, which was both internal and socially
situated. At other times, after a break of a few days or months, I would return to a theory or a phrase of Mira’s that had seemed confusing or contradictory and be surprised to find that it suddenly made sense in relation to other frameworks.

During the research interviews, I experienced a transformation of my own meaning perspectives through our merging and Mira’s storytelling. When Mira described the intimacy of relationships within her family during our first formal interview, I was shocked by the familiar in something I had assumed would be strange. It gave me a jarring sense of anxiety which struck very deeply, my own culture shock. I had suddenly gained a critical insight into my own family life! That moment, and later “shocks” of recognition as I listened to her descriptions, led me to develop a different yet satisfying way of interpreting my lifelong interactions with my own family, something that I had never before been able to explain to my Canadian friends. It was a kind of echo to Mira’s changing understanding of family: I confronted the longstanding contradictions in my life, between the Canadian individualism of my peers, and the familistic expectations of my home environment. Within this new perspective, I have found myself coping more easily with my own ambivalence and the dual expectations of family relationships.

Stories are my starting and ending point, and have shaped every aspect of this research. We began with Mira’s oral narrative, her means of defining her self and her way of teaching others like me. This stage of our process is completed with the production of this thesis text, a written narrative of my own which has been shaped to teach others about what and how I have learned. By transforming Mira’s story into this text, Mira and I hope that it will become meaningful to a different, broader audience.
The meaning of Mira’s life

Theoretical implications

There are some brute facts about the world of the twentieth century that any ethnography must confront. Central among these facts is the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity. As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories... the ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. ... insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogeneous. We have fewer cultures in the world and more “internal debates.” (Appadurai, 1991, p. 192)

The dynamic nature of contemporary social and cultural systems complicates the study of transition processes, while at the same time it underscores the need for further study. Mira’s life history illustrates the richness of a migrant’s story for exploring the relationship between culture and learning, and for refining existing theory. But how relevant are insights gained from one person’s life history for other individuals and groups? Are Mira’s experiences peculiar to her alone, or are they comparable to other migrants’?

There are many arguments against generalizing from one individual’s experience. Considering refugees and immigrants from a single region or country as homogeneous denies the diversity of communities, and the concept of individual agency (Meleis, Lipson, & Paul, 1992). But this life history is a significant departure from most studies of adult migrants, which focus on adaptation and adjustment to North American life (Freeman, 1989). Instead of suggesting that Mira’s life history is typical, or ideal, I have related it to broad social, cultural, and historical processes using existing theoretical frameworks from several disciplines. Mira’s strategies have broad relevance for understanding international migrants, and suggest alternative directions for migrant education.
There are a few other empirical studies of immigrant groups which support this approach. Similar patterns of behaviour have been described for west and central Asian immigrants to North America (Suleiman & Abu-Laban, 1989). Mira’s transition strategies correspond to “cultural eclecticism”, one of four patterns described by Hoffman (1988) among Iranian immigrants in America. Hoffman called it the most powerful strategy, because it allowed for behavioural adaptation without internal conflict or confusion. Gibson (1988) described a similar pattern among Punjabi Sikh immigrants in rural California, in which American norms and institutional standards were accommodated in order to reduce conflict while ethnic identity is maintained. She called this strategy, which is predominant in the Sikh community, “accommodation and acculturation without assimilation” (p. 24).

The implications of the culture learning process explored in this life history may extend even further. Spindler and Spindler (1989) suggest that social change within societies triggers personal transition processes similar to those of international migrants. Their description of “constructive marginality” among First Nations peoples bears a strong resemblance to Mira’s strategy of marginal participation.
Directions for further research

The study of migrant transition problematizes culture, learning, and identity. The intersections between theories of transition, agency, legitimate peripheral participation, and transformative learning provide fertile ground for research and theory development in adult education. They raise many questions for further study: Is culture learning always transformative? Must a transition process be traumatic, to effect profound changes in meaning perspectives? Is it possible to facilitate the discovery of cultural meaning systems so that they will have the cognitive and emotional salience necessary for personal development? The detailed emic description of Mira’s learning process suggests that reflection can be critical to a migrant’s transformative learning. Research in merging and storytelling may be fruitful not only for a better understanding of reflection and praxis, but for application in educational practice.

The nature of the life history process has limited this inquiry to Mira’s conscious interpretations at this point in time. Although this life history stops abruptly at a particular point Mira’s transition, the process continues. Was Mira’s present integration a temporary phase in her culture learning, to be followed by a different mode of identification with and participation in Canadian society? Other studies and methods must be used to identify dimensions of the transition process that Mira may not have been aware of. Taylor (1992), for example, suggests that some behaviour changes are related to non-reflective learning; and Kondo (1990) suggests that people in a marginal position can play a critical role in the functioning of a society.

Relevance for educational practice

Mira’s story reveals an extraordinary courage and strength. It testifies to the resilience of the human spirit, and is a tribute to a woman who has maintained a
lifelong commitment to personal growth despite the traumas of civil war and migration. Mira has experienced social change throughout her life as the very fabric of Lebanese society and culture has undergone dramatic changes in the last century, accelerated by modernization and war. Though Mira was raised in a small mountain village, she grew up to become a middle class professional, critical of certain aspects and sectors of her society. When she migrated to Canada, she was moving between complex modern societies in which she could continue her commitment to her profession and to her core values.

Mira never participated in education designed for immigrants when she arrived in Canada, but her experiences do suggest ideas for policy and practice. Most immigrant education serves a remedial function, providing cultural knowledge, particularly language, which adult immigrants and refugees ‘missed’ during their childhood years (Briscoe & Ross, 1989; Mastai, 1981). Mira’s story suggests that perspective transformation through reflection was a critical element in her emotional and intellectual transition, and belongs on the agenda for immigrant and refugee education. By developing a more comprehensive and relativistic world view which acknowledges and integrates alternative cultural meaning systems, individuals may be better prepared to create their own strategies for living in Canada, and to cope with further transitions in their lives.

Transition theory suggests that there may be teachable moments linked with culture shock when a migrant comes to question existing assumptions and to revise meaning schemes. The most appropriate moment for certain educational interventions may not be immediately on arrival in Canada, but after some time has passed, when minor incidents of culture shock have accumulated, or there is a major phase of disruption. Reflections on self, transition, and culture might be encouraged through storytelling and opportunities for meaningful dialogue and identification
with others. Identity management is another critical issue for migrants and their transition strategies, and this could also be addressed through storytelling strategies.

The most important message is peace

During our last life history interview, Mira emphasized what she felt were the critical messages of this life history. We each had many motives for participating in the research. Mira and I shared the desire to dispel popular myths about Lebanese and Arabs, to destigmatize people with whom we share a common heritage. For Mira, this project presented another important opportunity to bear witness to the tragedies which have befallen her family and her country, and to give testimony in support of her commitments for peace and against destructive political interference and ethnocentrism.

Mira: The most important message is peace, especially in the countries where there are lot of people who are helpless. Who are weak. Who are oppressed. That’s not fair, at all. Being in North America, one of the most civilized countries in the world, yes, we can do something. Definitely we can do something. I was so upset when Mulroney sent the troops to the Middle East [in 1992]. They always make fun about the Arabs, and the table cloth they have on their heads, and about the way they walk, with a lot of women behind them. They always make fun of the Arabs. And now they want to defend the Arabs, and the Kuwaitis? So if you want to do something, I think we should focus on this. That’s what I want everybody to do, not only the powerful and the rich should be protected. That’s not fair.

I told them, I don’t want to be a refugee. I’m very proud to be Canadian. But instead of accepting people here as political refugees,
why don’t you help them to have peace in their countries? Canada is built by immigrants, or refugees, and this is very healthy to have more people coming to this country. But not people who are leaving their countries because they were persecuted there. See? They should help people, who have to leave their countries. Because look at all the suffering we’re going through here. That’s not fair.

Lyn: I think that’s a message that I could put in, it can be part of the conclusion, because I wanted to conclude the conversation by saying what is important about this. Is that why you were asking me who was going to be reading this thesis?

Mira: Yes, because North Americans means Americans and Canadians, right? And the Americans were there. What happened, what did they do to help us? If they wanted to stop the fighting, and the war in Lebanon, if they really meant it, they could have done it. The same way they did it for Kuwait. You can’t separate the political situation in a country from the social and psychological and economic aspect. Because one of them is connected to another, in one way or another.

Lyn: So, if we were writing this for people in Lebanon, what would be the important thing to say? What do they need to hear?

Mira: Good. The Lebanese need to be more aware, and more mature. The Lebanese now, they have to realize that whether Moslem or Christian, leftist or rightist, that Lebanon is built by Lebanese. Regardless of religion, or political party, or whatever. They expected a lot from the West, the Americans, or Israel, but all that they got is destruction. Because every country was looking for its own interest in Lebanon, and they used the Lebanese in a very cheap way. So it’s time for the Lebanese now, not to forget about the past, to learn from the
past. And to accept the fact that Lebanon is for both, Moslems and Christians, leftists and rightists, and it’s time to depend on themselves. 

Lyn: I find myself thinking about you as a person, and wondering if the kinds of things you went through would actually be helpful for Lebanon—learning about yourself, and your past, and about change?

Mira: Mmhmm. It’s very helpful, yes. It will be very helpful for my country, because I have this balance. Because now if you talk to a person who was fighting with the Phalangist, with the very fanatic Christians, you know, he still believes that you can live without Moslems. And vice versa. If you talk to the Moslems, the very fanatic Moslems, very few people still have this balance.

Our problem, in Lebanon, this is in general, but our religious leaders, they are very bad. For example, Shadia was telling me about what a sheikh used to tell them: “If you are not a Moslem, you can’t go to heaven.” And, so, if you are a Moslem, and living in a Moslem village, and you only deal, and talk, and socialize with Moslems, it will fossilize, here in your head, that if you are Moslem you’ll go to heaven and everybody else goes to hell.

Lyn: This is why I wonder, if Mezirow’s theory might be useful. He suggests that all of us are limited by things we take for granted, that we just grow up and accept, without thinking. That “Moslems are the best,” or “Christians are the best.” He wants to build a way of educating people, so that they can realize what they’re taking for granted, and change themselves, without having to switch countries.

Mira: How can adults accept things that they don’t know about? How can I say that Hindus are very good, and I’m impressed by their religion, and I respect them a lot, if I don’t know about them? You
know, you can read, there are tons of books you can read in the library, about the Hindus, the Sikhs, and the Amish, but it's not like when you live with the people, it's very theoretical. It's different from when you live with the people.

Lyn: Still, I think that your story, which has been useful for me, can be useful for more people. It can help people who are working with immigrants and refugees, it can help people who don't understand people of different cultures. It can help in a lot of ways, because I think that what you are doing, is you are reflecting on things, and learning from them, and growing. I think that other people could learn from that, it's like a different way of thinking.

Mira: Yeah, I think you are right. Because Canada is built by refugees like me. Right? Your ancestors were one. Maybe your grandmother grew up, and went through the same thing I went through. Maybe a little bit more, a little bit less...

There is no final stop

Lyn: When you think about going back to Lebanon now, something that you told me before was that you were thinking about teaching there. Do you still think about doing that?

Mira: Yeah, I'd like to try, see how it is after this civil war has ended. I miss that, a lot. I wanted to do something there. Yet now, to me, Vancouver is like home. If I go back to Lebanon, I will have to come back, you know. I feel that I have roots now, here. With my passport, if I get my passport, and because I'm a landed immigrant, I don't have to go through the hassles and things I had to go through before to get a
visa. So, anytime I decide to come back, it's easy. We paid a very high price for this. So, I'd like to be between here and there.

The last time Mira and I met, she spoke at length about how much had happened since the life history interviews. They had taken place during a calm and stable time in her life, what the transition theorists call a "quiescent" period of calm and resolution. Since then a few dramatic events and many minor ones have altered Mira's lifestyle, and she believes her outlook has changed as well. A week after we met, Mira flew to Lebanon for a six month visit. She was going to see how the country had changed, to assess whether she wanted to return there to live. She has acquired her Canadian citizenship, and instead of quitting her job in Canada, Mira took a leave of absence so that she has the option of returning. Though Mira still has strong feelings about maintaining her Lebanese identity, her feelings about her position in Canada are changing.

Mira: Time is very important, Lynette. It helps a lot, not to change, but to get used to things. And it creates this kind of intimacy, between you and the place where you live, and you start to have roots.

For me, this life history has been a slowly evolving process of learning and transformation, one which has focussed on Mira's story but which resonated in my own life. Mira and I have both used stories as a medium for reflection, for learning, and for teaching. Mira "learned culture," developing new meaning perspectives and a liberating sense of agency by listening to and identifying with her coworkers' stories. Mira's story has inspired me to reinterpret my own meaning perspectives for understanding myself and my family--and to develop new theoretical perspectives on transformative and culture learning.
In research as in life, there is no final conclusion to this life history.

Mira: When you talk about cultures, and people, and adult education, it's nothing like when you say, "I want to write a story," and at the end you put a full stop and that's the end. No. It's like art. There is no final stop. You always find something, you always learn about something, every time you learn about something you discover that there are so many things you still need to learn about.
REFERENCES


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The following text is an excerpt from a typed transcript, the original text of an interview held June 3, 1993.

Mira: Well--my home town, is a town now, it's not a village any more. Because it's about 8,000. . . .

Lyn: Let's talk about it then. What it was like, when you were a child.

Mira: Yeah. It was--um--very nice, small village, not that far from the sea, the Mediterranean, it's only seven minutes by car, and it's 350 metres above sea level. So it's scattered on three hills. And. . . . But--people like my parents, they were either--they used to work, we have factories? Cement factories?

Lyn: Oh.

Mira: It's the biggest factory, I think, in the Middle East. And my father used to work there.

Lyn: Oh, how interesting.

Mira: He was employed. Yeah. And we also have--you know, the olive trees, orchards? Because we--you know, we sell--we export the olives, and olive oil, to-- Arab countries. And other places. Yes. And soap, too. And--that's how people, those who are not employed, or who are not working in Beirut, some of them--some of the people, especially men, they used to go to Beirut, to work in the factories.

Lyn: Every day, or ?
Mira: No. They lived there. And they'd come back on the weekend. Even some of the women. My mother's friends, some of her friends, this was a long time ago, they go with their brothers, or with their relatives, they rent an apartment in Beirut, and they come back on the weekend, or every two weeks. But now it's different, because my generation, and the generation before--after we finished our education, and most of them became--engineers, the men, and the girls, either nurses or teachers. And--they have also doctors, lawyers, now most of them are professionals. So--just before the civil war, maybe twenty years ago? Everything has changed in the village, we started to see the beautiful houses, new houses, and--and cars, and--the school, they built a new school in our village. We used to have a very old school, this public school, the one that we have, and--all the village, everybody in all the families in the village, they became well-off--

Lyn: What a change--

Mira: Because after, as I told you, those--who were working in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, used to make a lot of money. And it's very close to Lebanon, so they used to come at--two or three times a year, to Lebanon, so they send back to Lebanon, and they build. Those who have small houses, they build bigger houses, and--they buy new cars, they invest the money in different things

Lyn: Really.

Mira: Yeah. And you can see it--so most of the money, most of the things that we have now in Lebanon, is from outside. Either North America or the Gulf. And that's what happened to us, because two of my brothers, one of them was in the U.S., the other was in the Gulf. In Saudi Arabia, and they were helping my dad, and--that's what, how we
got to go to good schools in Lebanon, and to the university. . . . And it's not only us, not only our family. Everybody. So that's why now, if you go to my village, you--you can, you never--everybody is--I can say, is rich! And those who are not rich, maybe they have somebody in the family, or relatives, who can--who help them.

Lyn: Very interesting.

Mira: Well--lot of people had to leave, during the civil war. But now they started to go back. And--but, now, there are so many families who are in Boston, and Australia, and I don't think they will come back, because they have been there for a long time.

The following, which appears in Chapter Three (pp. 47-48), is the edited version of the text which was reviewed and approved by Mira during our last formal interview:

Mira: My home is a town now, it's not a village any more. Because it's about 8,000 people.

Lyn: Let's talk about what it was like when you were a child .

Mira: It was very nice, a small village, not that far from the Mediterranean, it's only a few minutes by car, and it's 350 metres above sea level. It's scattered on three hills.

People like my parents, they used to work. We have factories, a cement factory. It's the biggest factory, I think, in the middle east. And my father used to work there. And we also have olive trees. We export the olives, and olive oil to Arab countries and other places. And soap, too. And some of the people, especially men, they used to go to Beirut, to work in the factories.
They'd come back on the weekend. Even some of the women, some of my mother's friends, this was a long time ago, they'd go with their brothers, or with their relatives. They'd rent an apartment in Beirut, and they'd come back on the weekend, or every two weeks. But now it's different, because in my generation, and the generation before, after we finished our education, most of the men became engineers, and the girls either nurses or teachers. And also doctors, lawyers, now most of them are professionals. So just before the civil war, maybe twenty years ago, everything has changed in the village. We started to see the beautiful new houses and cars, and they built a new school in our village.

All the village, everybody in all the families in the village, they became well-off. Because those who were working in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, used to make a lot of money. So they send back to Lebanon, and they build. Those who have small houses, they build bigger houses, and they buy new cars, they invest the money in different things. And you can see it. Most of the money, most of the things that we have now in Lebanon, is from outside. Either North America or the Gulf. And that's what happened to us, because two of my brothers, one of them was in the U.S., the other was in the Gulf. In Saudi Arabia, and they were helping my dad. That's how we got to go to good schools in Lebanon, and to the university.

And it's not only us, not only our family. Everybody. So that's why now, if you go to my town, everybody is rich! And those who are not rich, maybe they have somebody in the family, or relatives, who can help them. A lot of people had to leave, during the civil war. Now they have started to go back. But there are so many families who are in
Boston, and Australia, and I don’t think they will come back, because they have been there for a long time.