

Agency within refugee families and (dis)integrations in Canadian society: A Toronto case-study

Enquire 3(1): 39-57

©The Author, 2010



Heather Laurel Peters

York University

Abstract

Current attention on the situation of refugees in Canada often focuses on the challenges that newcomers face in transitioning to a new cultural homeland. However, research using a model of the active subject uncovers agentic qualities and resources that enable refugees to succeed in their new surroundings. There is no smooth journey in cultural adaptation and misunderstandings frequently arise between service providers and those who must access these systems. By examining the trajectories of a particular refugee family as individual members and as an integrated social unit, this article provides insight regarding the negotiating processes in which newcomers engage and prioritize their values as they are impacted by new cultural systems. Selected narratives from a family's life history are presented in an auto-ethnographic form in which the researcher explores her own positionality, complicity, and unique insight as a family friend who has participated in slices of this journey on both sides of the Atlantic. Relational understandings guide the interpretation of formal interviews, which in turn add new knowledge and academic rigour to previously held assumptions. Most importantly, the assumption that family crises and inadequate access to social services indicate adaptational failure is overturned by discovering family values and perspectives regarding success which are not far removed from those of mainstream Canadian society.

Introduction

Settlement into Canadian civic life involves a maze of navigation for new refugee families. While cultural disparities and knowledge gaps often lead to misconceptions on the side of both service providers and those whom they are attempting to service, new immigrants demonstrate great resourcefulness in circumventing obstacles and working with the knowledge and networks they manage to establish. This resourcefulness, however, is rarely represented to the public, service providers or policy makers in positive terms. Newcomers are frequently depicted either as vulnerable, victimized and needy

dependents, or as deviant groups and individuals intent on obtaining personal benefits through subversive means that conflict with the aims of greater society (Suarez-Orozco and Carhill, 2008). This paper discusses the settlement experiences of one refugee family over their first three years in Toronto by using a model of the active subject. In contrast to a cultural deficit model, this framework exposes the kinds of agency various family members employ in their decision-making as they actively and knowledgeably work within the world as they know it. Despite strategies that may be culturally unconventional, values and priorities emerge which are in many ways congruent with those of mainstream society, such as education and family unity. The challenges of cultural transition and various pathways taken during this time may obscure these values to outsiders and the refugee family's strength in obtaining them. Individual narratives obtained from formal interviews with members of an Albanian Roma family of refugees are juxtaposed with elements of life history research and a semi-autoethnography through which the researcher's long-term relationship with the family is explicated. These narratives, combined with insight from research regarding psychological coping processes of families during crisis, together shed light on apparent contradictions while highlighting the trajectories of agency taken by a particular family unit and its individual members.

Perceptions of Roma Refugees among Canadian Providers of Social Services

In 2004, The Roma Project was conducted by Christine Walsh (University of Calgary) and other researchers, in Hamilton, Ontario, a city with the third highest proportion of people of foreign birth in Canada. These researchers state that recent studies have shown that newcomers in general face significant challenges in accessing Canadian social services in the country's major cities (Walsh, 2008, p.3). In particular, the Roma Project's impetus was the identification of Roma refugees as one of Canada's most vulnerable groups of newcomers. An extensive survey and interview process among various service providers (i.e., welfare, health, police and education) revealed a gap in perspectives and expectations between Roma refugees and the community of service providing agencies. Most disturbing was the perception among many of these employees that the Roma people are 'unworkable within the limits of human service delivery' (Ibid., p. 26). Conceptualizations that various teachers in this study held, for instance, concur with an interview I recently conducted with an inner-city Hamilton school teacher (November 2008) regarding her colleagues' views. She asserted that many teachers hold concerns about Roma students' and their families' grasp and use of the English language, social relationships and absenteeism. In particular, they suspect that Roma do not sufficiently value or prioritize schooling.

Ecological Systems and the Family Unit

'Ecological models characterize human systems as integrated networks of social units – individuals, families, organizations and institutions – that exist within a constantly changing... environment'(Edwards, 1998, p. 119).

The family, a network of closely-knit members engaged in internal and external social interactions is a frequent unit of study in areas such as sociology, social policy, immigration and education. While the results of a particular family case study must be viewed as belonging to a unique sample rather than as a generalizable representation of the workings of a particular group, the insights gained from such a complex and interactional unit of analysis may contribute to further questions and considerations regarding family agency and immigrant adaptation. Most significantly, the family case study may supply an account demonstrating how and why specific choices are made and how individuals and the larger unit are transformed over time. It provides an opportunity to examine 'the dynamic interplay of the personal and the ecological' (Thomson, 2007, p. 580) on a small but pertinent scale, as family members are generally the most influential members of the social network upon which individuals draw during times of mutual crisis (Edwards, 1998) or cultural transition. It also provides a miniature model of social structure, depicting how the parameters and processes of personal agency are shaped in daily life. The interplay of the personal and the ecological may also be understood as closely related to the notion of 'embedded agency', which explores how individual autonomy is enacted in relation to social structure.

Theorizing Agency

There are diverse conceptualizations of agency in academic literature. In psychology and related fields, for example, there has been a tendency to differentiate between autonomous 'agency' and socially-driven 'communion'. Abele and Wojciszke describe the dichotomous construction of these concepts as follows:

Agency arises from strivings to individuate and expand the self and involves such qualities like instrumentality, ambition dominance, competence and efficiency in goal attainment. Communion arises from strivings to integrate the self in a larger social unit through caring for others and involves such qualities like focus on others and their wellbeing, cooperativeness, and emotional expressivity (2007, p. 751).

More often in sociology, however, these qualities are not polarized. Instead, there may be acknowledgment of what has been termed 'embedded agency' – an agency that does require both 'an underlying sense of self' and the ability to make reasonable choices based on circumstances and anticipated consequences, but which is 'always informed by social contexts' (Korteweg, 2008, p. 437). Emirbayer and Mische contributed to this notion when they explained the temporal and relation dimensions of human agency as

... a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment) (1998, p. 963).

Agency is conceptualized in this study as the liberating power to make decisions and take action while embedded within and influenced by a social structure. In addition, this paper examines agentic trajectories of individual family members as well as that of the family as a unit of social structure, operating within larger structures of a cultural society. Culture is perceived in anthropological terms as being socially-constructed at the same time that it structures social life (Hays, 1994). Since the family in this case study has been immersed in several cultures and social structures (Romani, Kosovo-Albanian, Bosnian and Canadian), they are shaped by and respond to multiple influences. These influences (past and present with a view to the future) continue to reshape the values, priorities, and practices that impact their decision-making. At the same time, the family is comprised of individuals who are affected by different personal and ecological variables (i.e., gender, age, position in the family, religion). Each responds within the roles that she or he imagines these factors represent with their corresponding requirements, all within the parameters of influence produced by a cultural social structure. Within these cultural influences, the individual is also considered unique in her or his personality, strengths and autonomy, which affect how she or he will uniquely employ agency.

Finally, agency is understood as not being confined to the conscious realm of decision-making but as being present in both the conscious and unconscious realms which often function inseparably. For example, conscious decisions often become unconscious practices. Agency may in this way be understood as spanning temporal dimensions as well as being patterned (Hays, 1994).

Autoethnography

Ethnographers have often experienced a tension between their roles as participants in the research context and as research analysts (Hammersley, 2006, p. 4). Analytic autoethnography offers a unique vantage point for addressing this tension. The autoethnographer, who is both a full member of the research community as well as an engaged member of the community under study, shows a commitment to theoretical analysis. Consciously visible in the text, this researcher engages in a reflexivity that 'involves an awareness of reciprocal influence between ethnographers and the settings and informants' (Anderson, 2006, p. 382). Voloder suggests that the autoethnographic approach provides 'a strategy for negotiating the challenge of incorporating personal reflection into ethnography and utilizing self to understand the experiences of others' (2008, p. 28).

While there are specific advantages to this methodology that utilizes a dual community membership and the access to and facilitation of analyzing and disseminating empirical data, there are pitfalls which require caution. While self-absorption can result in a loss of focus on the community under study, it is also important to maintain awareness of the 'otherness' of the researcher (Anderson, 2006, p. 384). Writing self into the text for the purpose of clarifying the interplay of researcher and subject relationships, impact on behaviour, and the influences upon interpretation must be balanced with a concentration on the researched subjects themselves. Another tension can arise from this very same awareness, however. Voloder describes, for instance, the artificiality created when she attempted to distance herself as 'researcher at work' from other members in her own Bosnian community. Since she was relationally involved with individuals before her formal study, she experienced a sense of betrayal when she moved into the more distant role that she had originally imagined representative of the objective researcher (Voloder, 2008, p. 33).

My own trajectory is similar to Voloder's in that I was intimate friends with the family in this study years before I entered formal research. My focus is on the family and its members, but my life is intricately woven into their story, both in the past and in our present interactions. In my research pursuits I have sometimes arranged visits with the prior consensual understanding that I was coming to conduct a few interviews, only to find that my primary role as a friend must give way to the structure and purpose of our time together. Interestingly, this has placed me in the position as a participant observer of family life at times that I had expected to construct a more formal interview, and has added to contextual knowledge and understandings. It has also revealed to me my primary and inescapable role as family friend. It is from

this vantage point that I am involved both in the life of Kaltrina's family and the study which has ensued.

Situating the Researched and the Researcher

The particular family represented in this study is Albanian-Roma from Kosovo, and later, Bosnia-Herzegovina, before emigration to Canada in 2006. Kaltrina (all names are pseudonyms), is the single mother of ten children, the youngest five of whom are with her in Canada. In Bosnia, they were refugees of a visible minority – Roma are among the most marginalized ethnic group in Former Yugoslavia, as in many parts of Europe (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2007; Goldston, 2002)¹. I came to know them when I worked in a humanitarian aid capacity in Sarajevo between 1998 and 2000. When I met her, the mother was supporting her children by collecting salvageable materials from neighbourhood dumpsters in Sarajevo and fixing, cleaning and selling these items in the market where the poorest of Sarajevo's population sold such goods. Kaltrina's life has been difficult, with threats on her life, multiple sojourns and ever-worsening health, but her entire life path has demonstrated strength, agency, and a commitment to family survival.

Our relationship in Sarajevo emerged through acquaintanceship with mutual friends who were Albanian refugees and knew of the food aid distribution centre associated with my work. As the mother of many daughters living in a foreign country, Kaltrina viewed me, an unmarried foreign woman in Bosnia, with protective affection. As a humanitarian worker and volunteer at a local church, I was also considered a respectable companion with whom her older daughters could associate freely. Six years after I moved back to Canada, Kaltrina and her unmarried children arrived in Toronto as convention refugees, and we were reacquainted. The nature of our friendship has shifted slightly and deepened. The youngest children are now entering adulthood and both shyly and fondly recollect me as their older sisters' 'best friend' from Bosnia-Herzegovina who brought them 'dolls and other gifts' (November 2008). Kaltrina introduces me alternately among her friends as a 'Canadian' (signifying my language, status and resource capacities) and 'from Bosnia' (signifying the origin of our friendship and commonality) and I often have the sense that the family has forgotten that I was a foreigner in Bosnia. After three years in Canada, the children are beginning to mix English into their Bosnian, and both they and the mother are confused when I do not

¹Kaltrina's husband was Albanian and the children do not all identify as Roma. Three of the four interviewed say they are 'half-and-half' and Mirlinda identifies only as Albanian. This may be due in part to the stigma and racism which several of the young people admit to being subjected to for being 'Gypsies' (their English translation of the derogatory term, cigany, for Roma) in Bosnia.

understand a word in our second language. When they fumble for a Bosnian word, for example, they will ask, 'How do you say it in yours [your language] again?' In essence, we have come to know one another and continue to communicate through the medium of a second language and second culture which continues to define us personally and brings assumptions of mutual understanding, although we have come to this shared, second world view from entirely different backgrounds. In Canada, however, it provides a type of common heritage and I find myself appearing as a protagonist in family stories which I had forgotten.

The gap of six years in our acquaintanceship is perhaps more acutely noticed by me than by the family members. My return to Canada caused another 'rebirth' and fresh perspectives of my own home-country (I had been overseas for three and a half years). Associating and working with new immigrants with whom I partially shared a non-Western cultural perspective exposed me to gaps between the intentions undergirding Canadian social service delivery and the perceptions of immigrants attempting to access these services, thus motivating me to pursue research that would address such areas.

Being both researcher and family friend, participant in family functions and local resource in the family's new host country, has put me in a unique position. I have been exposed to personal details of daily life that few researchers experience when conducting research outside their own culture. I have a form of 'relational knowledge' as described by Renato Rosaldo (1993, p. 207), in which both my perspectives and those of individual family members overlap, intertwine, diverge, and at times seem to run parallel without ever managing to merge. Approaching research from this position provides me with access to emic knowledge that anthropologists and other ethnographers today strive towards attaining over time. Ethnomusicologist J. Titon states that fieldwork is no longer viewed 'principally as observing and collecting... but as experiencing and understanding' as engaging and enacting lived experience (1997, p. 88). He also comments on the different types of knowing that arise from the

structured interviews that were a part of the old fieldwork, versus those life stories told to sympathetic listeners or friends in a "real life" situation that could not, then, be described as fieldwork, but whose resultant texts [he]... valued, not as a form of data gathering, but as a means toward understanding

(Titon, 1997, p.89).

Commenting on her own experience with fieldwork, Nicole Beaudry admits that with time she 'began to understand that human relationships' rather than a particular methodology were most important in determining information, and that friendships were essential to 'ensure the depth and truth of our understandings' (1997, p. 68).

Understanding, more than explication, Titon claims, is the goal of knowledge in the humanities (1997, p. 89). The fieldworker typically seeks to come to a place of relationship and understanding of her or his subject through intentional time spent in participatory observation. This study is unique in that I have begun formal research after the establishment of relational knowledge, and later sought clarification and explication of my understandings through formalized interviews, the questions of which have arisen from various communal, although not equal, experiences and understandings. However, as relationships provide access to the most personal exposure and vulnerability, issues of representation become more critical. Ultimately, the researcher holds power in the selection and interpretation of data. The members of Kaltrina's family have willingly shared their personal stories and perceptions in order that a larger public might gain insight into the complexities facing refugee families transitioning into life in Canada. This entrustment is not taken lightly and the identities of individuals and specifics of certain situations are withheld to respect privacy. My own positioning is explicated at times to indicate where interpretation and access to knowledge may be limited or biased and where I as a protagonist in their lives have become complicit. In this way, the accounts become autoethnographic, but the main narrative centres around the experiences of this family rather than myself.

Perceptions of Family Life: (Dis)integrations in Canadian Society

As a family friend and regular visitor in Kaltrina's home, I have personally witnessed highly distressed reactions to numerous challenges that have arisen during the family's three years of transition upon moving to Canada. From this experience, I developed the assumption that the challenges produced while adapting to the Canadian system have actually weakened their family life, but that at the same time family members have significant strengths which enable them to strategize, cope and take action. Surprisingly, interviews with five family members (Kaltrina and four children now ages 18 to 23), countered my observations: while acknowledging that life is harder for immigrants than for the Canadian-born, they all stated that life in Canada has strengthened their family life. I thus decided to explore the apparent

contradiction between the consistent expressions of distress, family tension, conflict and disruption, and the reflective conclusion expressed through interviews that family life has improved in Canada. I sensed that I was missing something in my understanding of the seeming contradictions between family discussions and observable behaviour that pointed, somehow, to a strategic negotiating process aimed at success in transitioning to life in this country.

Kaltrina came to Canada with a 20-year-old son and four adolescent daughters. Unsurprisingly, many of the challenges facing family-life have centred around the various stages of the girls' 'coming of age'. As a Canadian who is assumed by the family to 'understand their ways', and as an oldersister type of role model and partial confidante, I too, have frequently been placed in a role of negotiation, sometimes as a cultural broker and perhaps, to a lesser extent, as one of the family mediators. Following is a scenario from a visit I made in February of 2009.

'Coming of Age': Scenario 1

We exchange greetings as I enter Kaltrina's apartment, and then sit down to catch up on one another's lives: health, work, and the young people's schooling. Shortly, over coffee, Kaltrina shares with me their most recent concern – Flutura has just turned eighteen. Since Kaltrina's health is poor and she cannot work, the family barely makes ends meet with the welfare received from Ontario Works. Kaltrina is distressed because her monthly cheque will be reduced now that Flutura is an adult and no longer considered a dependent. Since Flutura received little schooling in Bosnia, it is critical that she continue school for several years rather than immediately pursue a dead-end job to support the family income. They understand that Flutura must leave the family and find an apartment on her own in order to receive support from Ontario Works and go to school, an option unimaginable to each member of the family. It is too late in the day to attempt a call to the social worker and I am unfamiliar with the policy. However, Kaltrina shows me the notification from Ontario Works. Realizing that no solution is coming from the English-speaking Canadian, Kaltrina changes the course of conversation from an appeal for help, to a discussion of the strategy she has already devised. They have contacted a neighbor down the hall who is willing to give her apartment number for Flutura to use as a new residence, saying that Flutura had left the family.

Sure enough, the next time I visit, Flutura is on social assistance which helps cover family expenditures, is registered as having moved out, and lives securely with her family while attending school. Later, through a several-day maze of transferred phone calls, grueling even for an English-speaker, I

learned that the mother should have been able to receive continued support for Flutura as long as her schooling is not post-secondary and if she has not lived independently within the last two years. Registered as having moved out, this option is no longer available if any problems arise with the present solution.

It is not difficult to imagine how the media, policy-makers, social service workers and the Canadian public in general might perceive the family's action. Ignorance, social deviance and even criminality are each pronouncements which could be leveled at the family. They are charges recent immigrants easily face and judgments frequently made of Roma people (Walsh, 2008). Understanding the processes by which such survival strategies are developed may contribute to discovering where Canadian systems fail to facilitate transition, as well as provide insight into the unique and culture-specific ways that immigrants understand and prioritize both their own and Canadian values with the knowledge and resources available to them.

Kaltrina's family has shown agency in not merely surviving, but in actually facing and overcoming some particularly challenging experiences in the last year and a half of settlement and transition in Canada. While decisionmaking among different family members varies, it is evident that the agency of individuals in this family is exercised with a strong consciousness of the family unit. It can be helpful to understand the strategies and active choices they have made as involving the following five factors, which span the temporal realm, and operate in turn through negotiation between various cultural influences:

1. Knowledge bases and perceptions of situation, risk and consequence
2. Previous practices
3. Accessible resources
4. Values and priorities
5. The changing subject (age, family role, acculturation)

Flutura's predicament was rather smoothly resolved by the mother. Kaltrina perceived family-togetherness as being under threat because of the girl's new status in Canada as an adult (the changing subject), and the impossibility of making ends meet for all family members with a reduction in financial resources. I have recalled and witnessed how family-togetherness and financial provision has been her mothering practice for decades. Kaltrina had told me, for instance, how she had strategized to gather her youngest eight children and flee to Bosnia to escape their abusive father when he finished his jail term in Kosovo. Many years after this event, I met her in

Sarajevo – a refugee woman who worked in the poorest market. She would gather discarded items from garbage dumps and roadsides by night, and wash or repair them to sell in the market by day and purchase food for her family. Now that she was in Canada and limited by health and language barriers, I noted that Kaltrina relied on social provision to meet basic material needs, but that she had also internalized new forward-looking priorities. For instance, she understood the importance of Flutura's continued schooling for a future in Canada. The latter consideration is a new priority and opportunity made possible in Canada. Previously, planning for the future would have involved marriage arrangements rather than schooling.

Kaltrina consulted the resources available to her – the notification from Ontario Works, previous consultation with a social worker, advice from immigrants who had been in Canada longer than herself, a sympathetic neighbor, and myself – a Canadian-born friend. Since her oldest daughter had recently moved out, she understood the process of applying for Ontario Works for a young adult renting independently and attending school (a new knowledge base). Thus, she provided security and a future for Flutura while keeping the family together and avoiding the increase of financial hardship. All this was arranged according to the restrictions and provisions of Canadian law and social structure as she understood it. Kaltrina was consistent in maintaining her previous practices as a mother who provided materially, protected family unity, and prepared for her daughter's future, now within the new parameters of Canadian life. This demonstrates the fluidity of temporal aspects in applying agency as well as the influences of ecological factors within an altered social structure.

My own perceptions concerning the consistency of priorities and adaptive flux within the new context were formed over long-term acquaintance with the family, by having observed their survival methods in a previous culture and social structure, and through the personal stories about the family's past that Kaltrina had shared during our friendship. Likewise, Flutura's present predicament and its resolution were made known to me only as a result of our friendship. Without this close relationship, Kaltrina would have been unlikely to have expressed her distress or have held me in trust regarding her secretive solution.

'Coming of Age': Scenario II

The cause of Mirlinda's move from home (Kaltrina's oldest daughter in Canada), arose from a much more disruptive challenge. As the oldest sisters (late teens to twenty) began making friends with boys (a Canadian 'norm'), the mother and brother feared that they were making secret boyfriends (a 'norm' with young women in the various cultures within which the family has

lived). In this family, the 21-year-old brother took the culturally expected role of father in the absence of having one, and was most controlling of his 20-year-old sister. In short, he was frequently physically violent when his sister Mirlinda did not exercise the prudence necessary for the family's honour and that which they felt was important for her own safety. One day while I waited with Mirlinda outside a doctor's office during an appointment to which I had accompanied her mother, Mirlinda secretly informed me that she was not returning home.

I was placed in the delicate balance I frequently encountered while overseas: as a confidante of secrets shared by maturing young women, I was yet required to maintain the trust of family members in authority. While I had more cultural experience at this point to help me work within this balance than when I was new in Sarajevo, certain knowledge in the Canadian setting could burden me with the possibility of further ethical and legal responsibilities that would undermine this trust. After accepting Mirlinda's explanation, I made a few quiet phone calls to a school counselor and friend from her church to provide her the support she would need immediately, slipped her a \$20 bill and my cell phone number in case of emergency, and having left the matter in other hands, returned quietly to her mother.

This being the first of several subsequent departures from home before eventually settling into her own apartment, Mirlinda was overcome with loneliness, regret and confusion. When I visited, she shared that her mother had told her to bear her brother's overly forceful control because it was nothing compared to what she herself had endured from forceful males in domestic settings. Yet Mirlinda told me earnestly, 'I don't want my mother's life!' In our last interview nearly a year later, she told me that she had always known that the day must come when she would escape her sense of 'bondage'. At the same time, however, she said that she had not known how to think for herself in Bosnia and would likely have entered an arranged marriage. Mirlinda's reflection on the significance of her decision to move from home marks the type of transition which Giddens describes as a 'fateful moment' (1991). Such moments, when individuals weigh 'the consequences and risks of a potential course of action' can result in empowering experiences (Millar, 2007, p. 534). In recent months, Mirlinda has repeatedly emphasized to me how much she has grown in strength and perspective since leaving the family and living on her own.

The family's responses have indicated a great degree of conflict. The brother's brief incarceration and bail has incurred large expenses and he is now working intermittently to complete payments on thousands of dollars in lawyers' fees. He recognizes that his English language acquisition is suffering

by frequent truancy but he manages to continue receiving Ontario Works by occasional school attendance and quietly working on the side. Although he takes an aggressive posture when speaking to his family about Mirlinda and forbids his sisters or mother to visit her with his knowledge, he spoke of her forgivingly in our interview. He acknowledges that he knows his sister never intended for things to develop to the point that he would end up in jail and with a debt of thousands of dollars.

Kaltrina's expressions fluctuate between anger, shame, worry and mourning for her daughter. To maintain family honour, Kaltrina cannot let extended family in the homeland know that a daughter reported her own brother to the police and now lives without a chaperone in her own apartment. After a disciplinary shunning which involved shutting Mirlinda off for a period of months, the mother now visits her occasionally, taking care not to alert her son. Mirlinda says that her mother berates her actions and their impact on her brother and constantly warns her against becoming pregnant². The sisters make secret contact with one another by cellphone or visits. For instance, Kaltrina told me that a week before our interview she caught Flutura sneaking from the house after dark to visit Mirlinda with a bag of rice and bologna from the freezer, knowing that her sister was struggling with finances and lacking food.

Based on my long-term observations of this household's family dynamics both within Bosnia and in Canada, I interpret the brother's aggressive stance as a cultural form of teaching and disciplinary control. While he may personally hold forgiveness and understanding towards Mirlinda, he must also be firm in denouncing her behaviour and maintain his authority. There is no doubt he is aware that the female family members visit Mirlinda. I sense that such secret visits are actually considered virtuous acts of mercy and familial loyalty that are expected of females. My own quiet visits to daughters at the time of shunning, for instance, have been questioned tenderly once barriers lift and have seemed to further endear me to the mother and brother. Interestingly, his actions are based on the value of maintaining family order and honour while he simultaneously respects his sisters' actions that are based on the value of maintaining relational and provisional connections between family members.

²I have observed this as a primary cultural concern and suspicion for a young female living alone. For instance, Mirlinda told me that her new Albanian boyfriend broke up with her because his parents assumed she was a 'loose' girl since she lived alone. She said that "everyone" in their culture would think she was a 'bad girl' (March 2009).

Reflections on Family Agency and Patterns from the Homeland

Had Mirlinda understood the implications for her brother, it is not certain how she would have acted. Each family member seems to have drawn his or her own conclusions concerning how and when to access or avoid resources external to the family networks when in crisis. The younger sisters tell me they consult friends only for advice but not teachers because they interfere and make a 'bigger mess' of problems. Perhaps this is an acquired knowledge from observing the consequences for their brother when Mirlinda confided in a teacher about her own trouble. When dealing with exploitative acquaintances who are potentially dangerous to her daughters, Kaltrina has threatened individuals with legal recourse and the leverage of knowing a 'Canadian' (myself) who is her witness if she should file a report. Yet she tells me that the police just make things worse in the long run and that making the threat is sufficient to prevent further abuse. She has seen this in the case of her son whose life now has more complications, but who is also more subdued in his demeanour towards his sisters. Mirlinda has relied on more Canadian-born, English-speaking acquaintances and resulting networks as resource than have other family members in the resolution of their problems. This may be attributed to the fact that she is the only Christian and churchgoer in her family and the church has provided her with a supportive network of individuals who operate within structures and norms of mainstream society. At the same time, this has produced a lot of inner turmoil as she has not always agreed with the recourse advised from these sources who seem to encourage more family severance through extreme action than she has at times been prepared for. The new social norms conflict with her long-held priority of family loyalty and unity.

My interaction with family members and occasional, subsequent interviews, have provided me with insight as to how the Canadian setting, its influences, legal expectations and accessible resources are new, confusing, both liberating and also debilitating for various family members. However, I am also able to recall that family conflict arose in Bosnia as well when older sisters 'came of age'. My perceptions of the brother's family role, for instance, are influenced by an incident I observed in Sarajevo when he was merely twelve years old. One night when the mother was away, this young boy determined to protect the family honour by defiantly blocking the doorway to prevent his older sister's twenty-year-old boyfriend from entering the home. After some bemused banter and cajoling by the older, stronger male, the brother gave way, sulked on the couch for some time, and eventually joined the group for a game of cards. As a maturing adolescent he was already

aware of his protective role in the family at the same time that he looked up to these older males as role models. Recollecting this incident influences my perception of his controlling behaviour with sisters in Canada.

Several parallels are also clear between the girls' behaviour in Bosnia and in Canada and it is likely that Mirlinda and Flutura have recollections of their older sisters' decisions that have influenced their own exercise of agency in the Canadian context. I recall that when Mirlinda was still a child, for instance, her eighteen-year-old sister eloped with the young Bosnian in the previous scenario instead of keeping the family oath to a much older suitor. Eleven-year old Mirlinda would sneak food to her older sister who experienced severe poverty and loneliness until family communication was more openly re-established. Then eight-years-old, Flutura must have been aware of this activity as her secretive behaviour today is reminiscent to me of Mirlinda's furtive visits of loyalty and compassion. Previous practices reiterated in the Canadian context, albeit in new forms and with different consequences, attest to a continuation in family values and priorities.

It is possible to analyze the actions taken by individual family members from various perspectives. I have witnessed the grief, anger, regret and worry that individuals express at the height of conflict and have assumed that life in Canada has caused family conflict and distress that would not have occurred in their previous cultural setting. Social service providers and law enforcers might concentrate on school truancy, circumventive strategies and lack of an openness that is expected by mainstream society. The family has concluded that their lives are better here in Canada because they have the opportunity to attend school³ and more chance to achieve success than they had in Sarajevo. They mention that the provision of their mother's medical needs and the time they have to eat together as a family are signs that their family life is better. 'Mirlinda in her own apartment, my son with me, it's better like that,' Kaltrina concludes at the end of our interview as I listen almost disbelievingly. 'Kosovo had one way, Bosnia had another, and in Canada, it is different too. We must adapt. Girls will grow up, find their own way, and they will always listen to their peers. Canada has been good to us.' (February 2009).

Three Foci of Coping

A three-point model of psychological coping with stress has been developed from the work of Drs. Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, and referred to in various contexts such as disaster situations and family response (Edwards, 1998). According to this model, there is problem-focused coping

³In Bosnia, the children received little schooling because they had a weak grasp of the Bosnian language and also needed to devote time to helping their mother in the market.

which involves action-taking, emotion-focused coping which is characterized by feeling management and efforts to '[seek] reassurance from trusted others', and appraisal-focused coping, at which stage the affected individual reflects on circumstances, reassesses priorities and 'redefines the problem using comparisons (i.e., of other people's situations or worse possibilities) (Edwards, 1998, p. 120).

By understanding that coping with stressful circumstances involves several foci, it becomes possible to understand the apparent discrepancies in family members' reactions to the same problem at different times and in varied contexts. Prior to my interview, when I functioned primarily as a family friend rather than as a researcher, Kaltrina would openly express her emotional distress, trusting me not to inform outsiders (i.e., police or social services) of her problems, and to gain relief through my listening and encouragement. At times, she and Mirlinda also sought my advice as a knowledgeable resource who might help in making a decision to solve their problems. Most often, I was only of emotional help and the women would then realize that they must devise and rely on their own solutions. When I conducted the interviews, however, family members seemed to move into an appraisal-focused attitude. They had a chance to review their overall situation and compare their lives in Canada with the more intense survival needs they faced as impoverished and socially marginalized refugees in Sarajevo. This comparison contributed to their conclusion that their family life had definitely improved in Canada. They state that their increased opportunities and lessened stressors on survival have made room for more strength and tolerance among each other and for more family time. Because we rarely sat and reflected in this capacity as friends, I did not have the opportunity to observe this strength undergirding the transition process. The interview context opened a space to observe this agentic trajectory as family members were given the opportunity to articulate, and perhaps further construct meaning on their experiences. While acknowledging current challenges, they chose to position their family and individual experiences in strength and look optimistically over their life journeys and anticipated futures. Similarly, it was only by stepping into the more distanced role of researcher and probing with a new analytical lens (the interview) that I 'stumbled' into a knowledge I likely would not have gained through mere observation and immediate participation during crisis moments.

Final Words

The second language/culture immersion and intimate friendship developed over the criss-crossing of my own and Kaltrina's family's life

trajectories provide a broad and rich backdrop that adds depth and complexity to understandings of the present in a new cultural setting. Life in Ontario is new to this immigrant family but new also to me as I am 'back at home' – now understanding the setting and structure of my own country and culture as well as the relationships, priorities and values at work in this family through different eyes.

'Canada has been good to us.' Each family member tells me this earnestly, although each one says they do not understand the ways here and will never feel at home. 'The country and its social system take care of the people. Although people as individuals are strange. You could fall down on the sidewalk and die and no one would notice you. I haven't figured it out,' Kaltrina tells me, wonderingly and laughing (February 2009).

There is a lot they have figured out, however. Their long-held priority of protecting and providing for each other and working towards family unity even as each finds his or her own way is consistently achieved. Access to new resources has arisen as a network of immigrant and Canadian-born acquaintances has been developed for friendship and advice. At the same time, various legal and social services are consulted only to the degree that is deemed necessary and as a final recourse, showing a deliberate and resourceful autonomy in problem-solving. Education is pursued instrumentally, to the extent that it will provide individuals and family members with employment possibilities that will secure their futures. Agency is contingent upon the interconnections of family relations and the multiple cultural influences that structure the social lives of the individual actors and the family as a whole. The positive outlook that family members bring to the analysis of their relational life and its conditions, despite the conflicting decisions that are sometimes represented by individual members, is itself an act of negotiation that shows resilience in adaptive subjects.

Furthermore, family members have entrusted aspects of their personal stories to be publicly shared by a Canadian friend in academic settings with which they are unfamiliar. Yet they desire that such research will help bring fuller understandings that may result in effective assistance to others who may find themselves in similar situations of uncertainty and unfamiliarity upon moving to Canada. They assert that every step of life holds more challenge for the new immigrant than for the Canadian-born. By conceptualizing newcomers as acting in strength and negotiation between various knowledge bases as well as value systems and practices that are responsive to these challenges in a new cultural environment, it becomes possible to counter notions of incapacity, inevitability, social deviance or criminality that are often assigned to refugee groups whose actions at times differ from the

expectations represented by the mainstream in Canadian society. As a reflexive research analyst and intimate witness who shares personally in the experiences of refugees such as this family, it is my own hope that perceptions based on confidence in the outcome of refugee agentic trajectories and adaptation in Canadian society may prevent reactive and restrictive policies made at times from a sense of protectionism that can inhibit the path of cultural 'others' seeking asylum, adapting and contributing to life in Canada.

References

- Abele, A. & Wojciszke, B. (2007). Agency and Communion From the Perspective of Self Versus Others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(5), 751-763.
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373-395.
- Beaudry, N. (1997). The Challenges of Human Relations in Ethnographic Inquiry: Examples from Arctic and Subarctic fieldwork. In G. Barz & T. Cooley (Eds.), *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (pp. 3-19). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Edwards, M.(1998). An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Disasters and Stress: The Promise of an Ecological Framework. *Sociological Forum*, 13(1), 115-131.
- Emirbayer, M & Mische, A. (1998). What is Agency? *The American Journal of Sociology*, 104(4), 962-1023.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goldston, J. (2002). Roma Rights, Roma Wrongs, *Foreign Affairs*, 81(2), 146-163.
- Hammersley, M. (2006). Ethnography: Problems and Prospects. *Ethnography and Education*, 1(1), 3-14.
- Hays, S. (1994). Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture. *Sociological Theory*, 12(1), 57-72.
- Korteweg, A. (2008). The Shariah Debate in Ontario. *Gender and Society*, 22 (4), 434-454.
- Millar, J. (2007). The Dynamics of Poverty and Employment: The Contribution of Qualitative Longitudinal Research to Understanding Transitions,

Adaptations and Trajectories. *Social Policy and Society*, 6(4), 533-544.

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2007). In R. Lee (Ed.), *The Romani Diaspora in Canada* (pp. 433-450). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

Rosaldo, R. (1989). *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Suarez-Orozco, C. & Carhill, A. (2008). Afterword: New Directions in Research with Immigrant Families and their Children. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 121, 87-104.

Thomson, R. (2004). The Qualitative Longitudinal Case History: Practical, Methodological and Ethical Reflections. *Social Policy and Society*, 6(4), 571-582.

Titon, J.(1997). Knowing Fieldwork. In *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. In G. Barz & T. Cooley (Eds.), *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (pp. 3-19).

New York: Oxford University Press. Volder, L. (2008). Autoethnographic Challenges: Confronting Self, Field and Home. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 19(1), 27-40.

Walsh, C.A., Este, d. and Krieg, B. (2008). The Enculturation Experience of Roma Refugees: A Canadian Perspective. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 38(5) 900-917.