

Between Memory and Anticipation: Exploring the Role of Language in Shaping Refugee Mothers' Perceptions of Past, Present, and Future

What role does language play in refugees' memory-construction on the one hand, and imagining of the future-self on the other? In my paper, I examine how Syrian refugee mothers construct their identity and imagine their future in Canada based on two conflicting conditions: on the one hand, their proficiency in the Arabic language—their mother tongue—is associated with a sense of nostalgia towards the past and feelings of comfort and security in their home country. On the other hand, their lack of proficiency in the English language limits their ability to conceive of a concrete future and integration in Canada. Using semi-structured interviews with 41 Syrian refugee mothers who have recently arrived in Canada, my paper examines the ways in which these newcomer mothers associate their future English language proficiency with other important goals related to economic (employment opportunities), social (community creation) and cultural (feelings of belonging) integration. I argue that Syrian refugee mothers view successful language acquisition as necessary to conceiving of a long-term future in Canada. I also assert that Syrian refugee mothers recognize language-learning as empowering in its ability to propel them towards opportunities that challenge and transcend the traditional, household-bound roles that they occupied in Syria, thus reshaping and transforming past family dynamics.

Bio:

Laila Omar is a Sociology PhD Candidate at the University of Toronto, and a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship (CGS) Doctoral Award Recipient. Her research interests in the fields of immigrant and refugee integration, qualitative methods and language-related questions intersect with her passion for French Literature and language translation as well as her proficiency in four languages. Laila's current research focuses on questions of language acquisition and language loss for Syrian refugee mothers and youth in Canada, and how this affects their identity-construction in the host country. Her most recent paper (in press) highlights the importance of having linguistic and cultural knowledge in doing research with Arabic-speaking Syrian newcomers in Canada. Laila is also a recent participant at meetings of the World Youth Forum and UNESCO Youth Forum, and part of the Global Catalyst Youth Exchange program under the direction of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

Education

MA (Sociology), University of Toronto

BA (Sociology, Minors in Middle East Studies and International Development Studies), McGill University