

Cross-Cultural Experiences of Laotian Refugees and Mennonite Sponsors in British Columbia and Manitoba

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Abstract

The end of the Vietnam War and the establishment of a Communist government in Laos led to massive exodus of Laotian refugees, approximately 10% of its entire population. Mennonites, through the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Refugee Assistance Program, sponsored a large number of Laotians in the late 1970s and 1980s to Canada. This study examines the cross-cultural modes of conflict resolution that were used. Knowledge from the research increases understanding of cultural groups, enhances future refugee programs and adds to the increasing research on cross-cultural approaches to conflict resolution. Cultural awareness and understanding facilitate positive relationships in the community.

Introduction

There is relatively little literature on Southeast Asians in North America, particularly the Laotians (or Lao) in Canada. Southeast Asians represent many diverse ethnic groups including the Laotians, Vietnamese and Cambodians. These are distinct groups, and each of these groups is composed of numerous smaller ethnic subgroups. The Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) recognizes more than 40 distinct ethno-linguistic groups (Levinson & Ember, 1997). The most prominent group is the Lao Loum (Lowland), which constitutes approximately 68% of the total Lao population (Leibo, 2003).

Canada is known historically for assisting refugees. More than a half-million refugees have settled in Canada since World War II. The Canadian Mennonites, an ethno-religious people, have had a long history in refugee work. North German Mennonites gave asylum to English Calvinists fleeing from their Catholic queen in 1553; North American Mennonites assisted in bringing people of their faith to Canada and the United States in the 1870s. Canadian and American Mennonites helped Soviet Mennonites resettle in various countries in the 1920s. In 1945, at the conclusion of WW II, Mennonite Central

Committee (MCC) assisted again in providing asylum for Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union. In the 1970s, Mennonite churches of Canada and the United States began to focus on helping non-Mennonite refugees, primarily from Southeast Asia, at the end of the Vietnam War (Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, 2003).

During the last 20 years, the concepts of narrative and life story have become a significant part of the repertoire of social sciences research (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). In studying Lao refugees who fled their homeland after the end of the Vietnam War, it is important to use the methodology that most accurately reflects their culture. For centuries storytelling has been an important part of the Lao culture. Stories are told at various social gatherings and celebrations, such as wedding receptions, ordination ceremonies, and wakes (Tossa, 1999). Narrative methodology states that interviews reveal life stories that change over time, and are influenced by the context of narration and the audience (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). As a researcher with the same ethnicity, cultural background and history of escape from Communist Lao, I was able to personally relate to the narrators in the interviews. Narratives allow researchers to:

explore the world by listening to the voices of the people telling their life stories, knowing that people create stories out of the building blocks of their life histories and culture, and at the same time, that these stories construct their lives, provide them with meanings and goals, and tie them to their culture (p. 168).

Face-to-face narratives encourage rapport building and more in-depth retelling of a person's story.

This study is a cross-cultural examination and comparison between Lao refugees and Mennonite sponsors during the late 1970s and 1980s. The research focuses on the Laotians' and Mennonites' experiences in the resettlement process in British Columbia and Manitoba (Canada), the kinds of cross-cultural conflicts encountered, and suggestions for improvements in future refugee programs.

Method of Examining the Experience of Laotians Coming to Canada

Twenty-nine people participated in this study: 12 Laotian refugees and 17 Mennonite sponsors. Ten refugee interviews were conducted with 2 couples and 8 individuals (6 men and 6 women). All participants came to British Columbia or Manitoba between 1979 and 1982. Upon arrival, the average age of the refugees was 27.75 years old. Ten sponsor interviews were conducted with 7 couples and 3 individuals (8 men and 9 women). At the time of sponsorship,

the average age of the sponsors was 43.82 years old. The refugees and sponsors were identified through personal contacts and the MCC Refugee Assistance Program. The participants were able to leave any questions unanswered as well as discontinue the interview at any point in time. The volunteers were not paid for their participation in the study and have been treated in accordance with the University of Winnipeg Senate Committee on Ethics in Human Research and Scholarship (SCEHRS).

An interview questionnaire (Refugee Interview Questionnaire and Sponsor Interview Questionnaire) and an audiotape were used to record the conversations in the study. The questionnaires were semi-structured and the interviewer was able to adapt questions as the interview progressed.

Each individual or couple participating in the study was contacted and arrangements were made for interviews between June 2004 and June 2005. The interviews took place in various settings: homes, restaurants, and workplaces. The lead investigator conducted a 1-2 hour semi-structured interview. The interview followed the interview questionnaires, either asking them to share their thoughts and experiences in coming to Canada or in sponsoring refugees. The process was flexible, allowing the participants to tell their stories in their own way. The questions were open-ended and the responses were unprompted by the investigator. One refugee interview was conducted in English and nine were in Laotian according to the preferences of the participants as the lead investigator is fluent in both languages. The interviews in Laotian were translated into English by the chief investigator ensuring consistency in interpretation. All sponsor interviews were completed in English.

Each interview was transcribed (non-verbatim) following the questionnaires. Additional information gathered during the interviews was also included in the transcription. For each group of participants, the interviews were analyzed according to themes identified in the questionnaires and similar responses were identified and grouped under broader categories. Responses in the tables were identified according to the number of interviews and not to the number of interviewees as some interviews were conducted in pairs as well as with individuals.

The findings on “Cross-Cultural Experiences of Laotian Refugees and Mennonite Sponsors in British Columbia and Manitoba” was presented at the “Mennonite Hosts and Refugee Newcomers: 1979 - the Present” Conference (September 30 - October 1, 2005) at the University of Winnipeg in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The interviews provided rich information regarding the experiences of refugees and sponsors during the time of sponsorship and resettlement. Each individual story revealed cultural differences,

misunderstandings and growth in adjustment, friendship and understanding between the two groups. This paper focuses on the experiences of the refugees' escape from war-torn Laos and the sponsors' participation in the refugee assistance program. The paper also deals with cultural issues, perceptions and challenges from both groups, as well as suggestions for improved refugee programs.

Involvement in Refugee Assistance Program

Discussions on why Laotians left their country revealed important personal stories about their life in Laos, often relating to their fears and struggles with the new government. Exploring the reasons behind sponsoring refugees showed the values and beliefs of the Mennonites, and their strong connection to refugee and immigrant work. For the greatest learning from this history, each story, in itself, needs to be written down and shared with future generations.

Through their personal narratives the interviewed refugees identified reasons as to why they risked their lives to leave Laos. All feared the new Communist government and the political change that accompanies a new regime. Sixty percent of those interviewed feared for their safety and future. Fifty percent felt the economic changes, including nationalization of the private sector and the collectivization of agriculture, reduced any opportunity for private businesses. Those who owned businesses before the Communist regime had their businesses taken away and were sent to agricultural farms. Forty percent of the refugees interviewed had political ties to the former government and knew people who did not return from re-education camps. This made them fear for their safety. Another 40% stated that they no longer had freedom of speech and thought. There were many restrictions and constant surveillance. One interview revealed how young people were sent to "Monkey Island" in order to re-educate them in how to behave and think.

The Mennonite church was instrumental in informing congregations on the crisis in Southeast Asia, the plight of the Vietnamese "Boat People," and the MCC umbrella agreement that facilitated private sponsorship. Seventy percent of those Mennonites interviewed responded to the refugee assistance program through church projects. Sixty percent of the Mennonites mentioned that it was through the media that they learned about the Vietnam War and the sheer number of Indochinese in need of resettlement. Fifty percent of the sponsors cited the Anabaptist tradition of helping those in need as one of the factors that led them to become sponsors of refugees. Other reasons identified by sponsors included personal interest, personal experience as refugees and immigrants, response to injustice, and friendship with newly arrived refugees who encouraged them to sponsor other refugees.

Many Laotians left their country because of their fear of persecution and their concern about government run “re-education” seminars. They were also afraid that they would be unable to meet their basic subsistence needs under the new economic system (Magocsi, 1999). The frustration and desperation caused by a lack of basic needs is well documented. Burton’s Human Needs Theory states that “conflict is not resolved constructively unless the parties’ basic needs are brought out and dealt with to the satisfaction of each party” (Sandy, Boardman & Deutsch, 2000). For many Laotians, this was not possible under the new communist regime. One option was to flee Laos and resettle in another country where it was possible to meet their basic needs.

Canadian Mennonites had varied reasons for sponsoring refugees from Southeast Asia. Many Canadian Mennonites at the time were either first or second generation immigrants from Europe or the Soviet Union. The majority of the sponsors responded to the crisis through the promotion of church projects. It was a way for church communities to address the need of refugees by helping them to resettle in Canada. The media also played a large role in educating the general public about the plight of the Indochinese refugees and eliciting memories of the Mennonites fleeing Communist Russia. Mennonite history has been one of fleeing persecution, and some of the sponsors themselves were in fact refugees from the Soviet Union. This history has helped to develop a tradition of assisting refugees from other places.

Moving to a new country is challenging, especially for refugees who had to flee their own countries. Obvious problems in cross-cultural resettlements are climate, language, and food. Other subtle differences include identity, style of expression, and nonverbal communication. Laos is characterized as a collectivist society or high-context culture, whereas Canada is considered an individualistic society or low-context culture. High-context cultures have more internalized understanding of one another through shared physical context, implicit communication, greater concern for interdependence, indirect face negotiations, and focus on mutual or other-face maintenance. Low-context cultures are characterized by concern for privacy and autonomy, explicit communication, greater concern for independence, direct face negotiations and focus on self-face maintenance (Augsberger, 1992 & Jandt, 2004). Misunderstandings and conflict can result if one does not understand these cultural characteristics.

Refugees’ Challenges and Perspectives

All refugees had issues with general adjustment to their new environment. Many did not know what to do and often felt anxious

about their future upon arrival. Their stories revealed difficulties in adjusting to Canadian culture, to language, family and kinship traditions, physical environment, food, religion, community living, and male-female relationships. All refugees had to adjust to living in a completely new environment with its cold climate and open spaces. Laos has an average temperature of 25-29 degrees Celsius during the rainy season with a high temperature of 38 degrees Celsius (Cummings, 1994). Eighty percent interviewed spoke no English or very limited English upon arrival and relied heavily on non-verbal communication. One family recalled arriving in the middle of winter, and their sponsors could not communicate to the refugee children that they should not go outside in bare feet as the snow was far too cold. The children learned the word "cold" very quickly. Adjustment to foods such as bread, butter and potatoes was also difficult. Many Laotians have an aversion to milk, as a high percentage of them are lactose intolerant. Ninety percent of the first wave of refugees had no access or limited access to ethnic foods, such as sticky rice, fish sauce and papaya salad.

All refugees experienced the difficulty of exercising Laotians' great respect and admiration for elders and those in authority in the Canadian context. Refugees often referred to their sponsors as "Mom and Dad" out of respect for their age and status. Thirty percent of the interviewees mentioned that the sponsors were sometimes confused as to why they were being referred to in those terms. In a couple of interviews, the Laotians mentioned treating the sponsors as real parents and their desire to be treated as biological family members as they did not have parents here. One person mentioned that the sponsors wanted to be friends, but in Laos one cannot be friends with one's parents because of their higher status. Another had called the sponsor "Grandma" out of respect, but instead had thereby insulted the sponsor. The importance of respectful language ("doy" or respectful "yes") and hand gestures ("nop" or prayer-like hand greeting) to address someone older are lost by the second generation immigrants. Laotians expect that older parents will live with their children, but the Laotians found that grandparents in Canada were treated more like babysitters.

Living conditions also presented problems. One individual, who was not accustomed to living on the farm where the land is so vast and neighbors are far away, felt very isolated. Laotians are very sociable people who will use every opportunity to enjoy informal conversations and companionship. Sharing meals, getting together, and giving gifts, are vital aspects of their culture. Differences in cultural boundaries, expectations and living arrangements often created conflicts between refugees and their communities. Seventy percent of the Lao refugees felt uncomfortable about the unspoken rule of making

appointments first before showing up at the door. In Laos, schedules and appointments are not necessary. Not understanding the cultural differences made it difficult for both refugees and sponsors to be clear about one another's expectations.

All the refugees interviewed were Buddhists in Laos. Ninety percent of those interviewed attended Mennonite churches out of obligation and gratefulness. All mentioned the importance of showing "boun koun" or gratefulness to the sponsors for bringing them to Canada. Forty percent discussed the similarities and differences between Buddhism and Christianity in very simplistic terms. For example, all good teachings are similar, but Buddhists will go to the temple to pray every day, whereas Christians go to church once a week. Fifty percent of the refugees said they adjusted to Christianity and accepted it as part of the new culture, but only 30% attended church regularly. Fifty percent attended once a week with their children for the first few months after their arrival, but still considered themselves Buddhists. Those who considered themselves Buddhists still attend special celebrations at a Christian church. They do not see any contradictions with their beliefs. Forty percent mentioned that Canadian holidays and rituals were meaningless at the beginning. For example, one family did not understand why the sponsors were giving them a baby shower. In Laos, it is considered taboo to buy gifts for unborn babies.

Sponsors' Challenges and Perspectives

The sponsors also recognized that language was a barrier. None of the sponsors spoke Laotian and all relied on nonverbal communication to express their concerns and thoughts. Some relied on drawings and dictionaries to convey their messages. In 60% of the interviews, the sponsors were able to use translators who were relatives of the refugees or refugees who had arrived earlier. Many of these translators were used only at the time of airport arrivals, during detailed discussions, and at large gatherings. Forty percent used no interpreters as the refugees were able to get by using broken English and hand gestures. The sponsors also recognized that the environment and food would be different for the refugees.

Thirty percent of the sponsors felt that the Laotians families were close-knit and had strong family loyalties. This is evident in the way the families interacted, shared meals and helped one another in difficult times. They soon realized that Lao families could consist of biological, friendship and social relations. During the interviews, 40% said that some of the people that were sponsored were not biological family members. For example, some who came to Canada as cousins or siblings were really lovers. This was not unusual in the immigration process. Families were seen as a priority and two lovers

applying as family members would ensure that they would resettle in the same community. Only ten percent of the sponsors understood the importance Laotians placed on respecting and listening to elders. This was part of their cultural upbringing. Another 20% acknowledged the expectation of Laotian children that they would care for their parents in old age. In the Canadian culture, everyone including a child is shown respect and needs to be listened to. In the Lao culture, the parents or elders are always right and know what is best for the children. The Laotian children are expected to listen to the parents' advice even after they become adults. In Canada, the children are not expected to care for their aging parents and have them move in with them. Most elderly Canadians live independently and have access to Registered Retirement Savings Plan and the Canada Pension Plan.

Seventy percent of the interviewees discussed the Laotians' generosity and appreciation for the sponsors. All the sponsors received numerous gifts from the refugees and many continue to receive Christmas gifts to this day. One group of refugees organized an appreciation day for their sponsors with meals and gifts. Fifty percent mentioned that the Mennonite or Canadian culture is much more "closed" than the Laotian culture which is more "open." Many Laotians are open to being close to their sponsors and make a significant effort to stay in touch with them. In their observations, the sponsors recognized that the refugees found it difficult to live in small communities on the farm and preferred to live in apartments in the city where they could be closer to others. However, some sponsors later realized that housing different ethnic Southeast Asian groups close together could create conflict due to their biases, associations and previous relationships in Laos. According to 50% of the interviews, important celebrations and rituals, such as weddings, funerals, "cupping treatments" and even toilet training are very different in Laos than in Canada. For example, red flowers at Lao funerals would not be acceptable as they are associated with blood. The traditional "cupping treatment" of aches and pains often left bruises at the sites of the treatment and led sponsors to be concerned about physical abuse.

Seventy-percent of the sponsors said that Laotians are quite accepting of the Mennonite faith and so they will include Christian prayers before meals at their own Lao gatherings. All the refugees attended church and Sunday School at the beginning of their arrival in Canada. Differences in religions are acknowledged by 50% of the sponsors, but only 20% recognized that some refugees attend church out of politeness. The sponsors invited them to attend church services but did not want to make them feel obligated.

Both refugees and sponsors acknowledged that there were

general adjustment issues with new environment, language and food. Orientation packages for sponsors identified these specific needs. Most of the Lao refugees did not speak English or French and the sponsors had no knowledge of Laotian, but with the help of interpreters, Lao-English dictionaries and nonverbal gestures they managed basic communication. Most sponsors were able to obtain rice, though not sticky rice that Laotians preferred. One family recalled their sponsors giving them one kilo of rice. This had not been enough for even one day as they ate rice with all meals.

In terms of family and kinship, relationships are recognized and reinforced through sharing of goods and produce, labor reciprocity, and participation in family and religious rituals. Close family friends are referred to as “uncles” and “aunts.” There is a tendency for the youngest daughter to live with her parents and to care for them in old age (Hockings, 1993; Savada, 1995). The importance placed on age is the most distinctive characteristic of the Lao family system. The Lao language delineates a person’s birth order in the family and lineage through paternal or maternal family ancestry. Older siblings and relatives have different titles than those who are younger. The language, itself, is constructed to enhance these elements of respect and the English language is not able to represent these principles in the same way. These cultural expectations and forms of addressing those who are older tended to create confusion for sponsors who were not prepared to be parents to refugees. An extreme example of the importance of age and respect occurred when there was a conflict between an older Lao woman and a younger Lao woman. During the conflict, the younger woman shouted and refused to listen, causing a grave insult to the older woman whereby the older woman ended up stabbing the younger woman. Fortunately, it was a superficial wound but the older woman was required to do some community service after the case had gone through the Canadian court system.

Residences in Laos are built in close proximity to one another and the communities are warm and welcoming. The doors to homes are always open and when people walk by they are always offered something to drink. If the family is enjoying a meal at such a time, the strangers are invited to join. To the Lao, food means hospitality and it is offered to all people (Muir, 1988). Lao refugees prefer to live near other families for mutual support, common language and culture. This is particularly important as refugee families do not always have other family members residing with them in Canada. Cultural differences in community living can be stressful for the Laotians as they are not accustomed to single households, keeping the doors closed, and making appointments before visiting neighbors.

The Laotians entered Canada through government-sponsored and privately sponsored refugee programs. Almost half of the private

sponsorships involved religious institutions and organizations, such as the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Christian Reformed, Roman Catholic and the United Churches (Magocsi, 1999). Concerns regarding expectations of sponsorship, interaction and reciprocity can occur in privately sponsored cases. Religious organizations may attempt to integrate refugees into church communities, creating further interpersonal conflicts. Kehler, in his report on "Making Room for Strangers" (1980), discusses some examples of this relational conflict. A spokesperson for the Lao Association commented that:

They (the refugees) recognized that their religion was one area in which they would need to make some adaptations... Many sponsors don't understand our needs. Our concern is about eating, jobs, shelter. This isn't recognized in the sermons we hear. We are concerned about what will happen after the first year. At this time the newcomers don't give much thought to religious commitment or to morality...If you ask "Would you like to go to church?" the answer will always be yes, because in a situation like this we cannot say no. (p. 18)

All the individuals interviewed attended church in the beginning. Most Laotians do not make distinctions between different Christian churches. A few Laotians mentioned that it was difficult to attend a Christian church as Laotians have a significant family history of practicing Buddhism. Many continued to be Buddhists even though they would attend Christian celebrations with their sponsors. Currently, only 2 of the 12 Laotian interviewees attend a Mennonite church regularly.

The Laotians continue to be involved in Lao community celebrations and social activities. Theravada Buddhism is the primary way to express their identity and many have worked hard to continue this practice in Canada. The temples, though not elaborate, are the "venues for creation and maintenance of patron-client relationships and for the establishment of support networks" (Magocsi, 1999). Lao Buddhists believe that Christianity and Buddhism can co-exist and share similar ethical and moral teachings. Magocsi noted:

The Lao are generally uninterested in analyzing the historical or epistemological basis of each tradition, but they are aware of the social and political implications of deciding to participate in Christian or Buddhist activities, particularly for refugees who have been sponsored by church groups. (p. 908)

Some Lao Christians will continue to participate in traditional Buddhist ceremonies as these are expressions of the Lao culture, and not only religious celebrations.

Suggestions for More Effective Adjustments

Refugees and sponsors were asked to provide suggestions for sponsorship programs and more effective resettlement in Canada. Those interviewed identified many actions that the government, refugee programs and sponsors can take to help refugees and sponsors better adjust to the integration of refugees into Canadian society.

It is important to acknowledge that most refugees do not have the time to prepare for difficulties in living in a new culture. "Refugees have much less of a chance to plan for their life, learn English, or collect capital...[they]generally arrive without assets" (Gold, 1992). The interviewees identified a few actions for those involved in the sponsorship programs to take in order to help future refugees better adjust to living in Canada. The top five suggestions will be discussed:

1. All the refugees agreed that governments, sponsoring agencies and sponsors should have more specific knowledge of the refugees, their situation and culture through information orientations and manuals.
2. Ninety percent discussed the importance of allowing refugees to concentrate on learning English before being immersed in the workforce. More English as a Second Language (ESL) courses with different levels and grades can motivate people to learn.
3. Ninety percent would like to see more work opportunities and the matching of skills to various occupations. Some financial support for retraining and fast-tracking foreign credentialing would be useful. Mentors from the refugee's own country would be helpful for refugees with foreign education and training.
4. Fifty percent identified the importance of governments, sponsoring agencies and sponsors in educating refugees with regard to Canadian culture and life style as these are very different from the refugees' own culture.
5. Forty percent acknowledged the importance of education and emphasized that refugee children need to be encouraged to attend school to obtain better jobs and opportunities in Canada.

Other suggestions included the need for more government support of grass-roots organizations, such as MCC and the Lao Association. Many also expressed the need for adequate housing and the need for interpreters and others who could regularly visit refugee families in their homes in order to provide friendship and emotional support. It was also suggested that people from poor countries be given opportunities to visit Canada.

Sponsors were given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences

and discuss ways to improve the sponsorship programs in Canada. They were able to come up with a list of suggestions for helping sponsors and refugees adjust to living and working together. Again, their top five suggestions for effective adjustment will be discussed.

1. Ninety percent of the sponsors said that more background information about the refugee family, their history and culture would help them better understand the refugees.
2. Eighty percent discussed the importance of regular sharing of stories and experiences from everyone involved in the sponsorship programs including refugees, sponsors, governments and other interested groups in order to learn and improve future programs.
3. Seventy percent identified knowledge of refugees' skills, appropriate job placement and accreditation that provides allowances for training and fast tracking of foreign credentials as very important in adjustment and resettlement.
4. Seventy percent said that governments and sponsoring agencies, such as MCC, should provide a more detailed list of resources, manuals and guidelines to assist refugees and make people aware of these resources (health, education, social services, community services, etc.).
5. Sixty percent identified the need for an extensive orientation for churches that would include interpreters, packages, Internet searches, culture lectures, basic vocabulary of refugee families, information on how to welcome newcomers, etc...

Other suggestions included providing more friendship, love and commitment to refugee families; clear expectations and better preparation of refugees for Canadian living and job situation; more open government policy on refugee and immigration that allows for exceptions to the rules; more community involvement along with professional services; separate refugee and immigration selection criteria; handbooks on the principles and skills of conflict resolution, mediation and reconciliation.

Looking at the list of suggestions, one can see that there are many similarities in terms of the needs of refugees and sponsors. Both groups identified the importance of understanding one another's culture, history and situation in order to learn to live with one another in the community. Direct sharing of these experiences can help groups to be clear regarding their expectations and, therefore, reduce misunderstandings. MCC provided an orientation package to sponsors involved in the Refugee Assistance Program that included an Introduction to Southeast Asian Refugees and Suggestions for Sponsors (1979). The Introduction to Southeast Asian Refugees and Suggestions for Sponsors was very helpful but limited because it

was MCC's first experience in assisting Southeast Asian refugees. Cultural issues that may raise conflicts were described briefly in a few sentences. The Basic English-Vietnamese Word List consisted of one page. There was no basic English-Lao Word List. Many of the resources focused on the Vietnamese culture, and then applied these resources to the Laotians. Such well-intended assumptions can lead to further difficulties for both parties. Very few Laotians speak Vietnamese. Laotian refugees coming to Canada were in fact trying to escape Vietnamese influence and the spill over of the Vietnam War. Therefore, more comprehensive orientation and information packages are needed to adequately prepare sponsors to meet their Laotian refugees. Refugees, too, need orientations in the camps before arrival in Canada in order to learn about Canadian history, culture and language. The refugees interviewed knew nothing about Canada except that it had a very cold climate. Through the stories and experiences of former refugees and sponsors, Canadians can learn more about specific ethno-linguistic groups' culture, values and customs. Currently, the Going to Canada-Immigration Portal (GTC-IP) provides on-line information and services to help immigrants make informed decisions about coming to Canada and prepare them for integration into the labour market and society before arriving (Lochhead & Mackenzie, 2005). This kind of service may work well for some immigrants but refugees from war-torn countries do not have on-line access.

Another area of commonality is the need to match skilled workers to occupations. There is also a need for retraining and fast tracking of credentialing of foreign trained refugees. Much of Canada's population is composed of immigrants and refugees who have contributed greatly to its economy. Many of the Lao refugees are employed in low-paying, unskilled jobs, and hold more than one job in order to make a living. A limited survey in Toronto revealed that the majority of men and women are employed as labourers (27%) or in semi-skilled jobs (15%) such as furniture makers, sewing machine operators and dressmakers. A smaller number hold higher paying jobs as office or government workers, welders and mechanics, or positions in health related employment (Magocsi, 1999). This is a common theme among many refugees. Most refugees are willing to do any kind of work and often hold two or three jobs in order to support their families. In the current research project, the 12 refugees listed one occupation each while living in Laos and 27 different jobs collectively while living in Canada. A couple of the interviewees shared their frustrations as a result of not having their foreign credentials recognized and, therefore, being unable to obtain quality jobs once in Canada. One couple had parents who were educated as a nurse and dentist in Laos, but ended up doing manual

labour in Canada. Another couple, both highly qualified doctors, encountered difficulty in acquiring retraining and licensing after moving to Canada. Canada says that new mentoring programs are being developed to match new immigrants with professionals in the same fields who can guide them through the training (Cordon, 2004). Recently, the International Centre in Winnipeg has developed a program to help highly skilled immigrants to land jobs in their fields by matching immigrant professionals with mentors who look at their career goals and provide advice, contact and moral support (Sanders 2004). Joe Fontana, Minister of Labour and Housing, in an interview stated (Siemiatycki, 2005):

Canada cannot afford to waste or under-utilize our skilled population, especially by newcomers who may need help starting a career and integrating into the community. We must ensure that competence and qualifications are the most important criteria for hiring, retention and promotion within our workplaces. (p. 11)

These kinds of provincial and national programs are vital in helping qualified individuals obtain the necessary retraining in order to contribute to the community. Unfortunately, retraining in certain fields is not always available in places where refugees end up. Retraining in a certain field may considerably narrow down places where individuals can expect to live. Most recertification programs are located in metropolitan centers, such as Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. Providing prospective immigrants with an “accurate and authoritative picture of immigration entry requirements, information on where jobs exist, and specific regulated occupational requirements will assist immigrants with their transition to Canada” (Lochhead & Mackenzie, 2005). Labour market integration requires various groups and organizations, such as governments, employers, unions, regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions and immigrants to work together and coordinate their efforts (2005).

A study conducted by Mwarigha identified three stages in the newcomers’ settlement process:

1. Newcomers’ focus on meeting immediate need for food, clothing, and shelter as well as orientation to the community and basic language services.
2. Newcomers’ need to access Canadian systems and institutions, such as labour market, community services (health, legal, housing) and advanced language training.
3. Newcomers’ focus on becoming full participants in Canadian life and dealing with systemic barriers to equal participation. (Farrell, 2005).

After 25 years in Canada, Laotian refugees are now entering

the third stage of integration into Canadian society. Out of the 12 refugees interviewed: 5 own small businesses, 2 are professionals, 2 are nursing assistants, and 3 are manual labourers. Some of them are facing systemic barriers. For example, one business owner is struggling to run a business with limited English and knowledge of Canadian laws. Access for the Lao people to the professional world has been difficult due to language and cultural barriers. This obstacle is starting to be alleviated as second generation children are starting to fill the gaps in professional services. Individual refugees are contributing to Canadian society in terms of taxes, labour and cultural enrichment. Multiculturalism programs need to “empower immigrant groups themselves in their process of becoming members of their new society, an empowerment that allows them to play a serious role in their own integration through which they... negotiate a partnership with the institutions of their new society (Duncan, 2005). After 25 years in Canada, many Laotians are reaching the final stage of “biculturalism” in being able to cope comfortably in both the Lao and Canadian cultures (Jandt, 2004).

In terms of MCC’s involvement in the Refugee Assistance Program, both refugees and sponsors interviewed all had positive comments regarding the program. The refugees are grateful for the assistance in bringing them to Canada and providing them with an opportunity to meet their basic needs and more. Comments regarding the sponsors include: “The church did a good job – can’t do more,” “They helped a lot,” and “Still grateful to them.” Some of the responses from the sponsors on the MCC refugee program include: “Very well run, gave support, good guidelines,” “Tremendous! Refine it! Did very well,” and “Did a lot for churches – sense of mission and purpose, catalyst to set up model.” In terms of the cooperation between the Canadian government and MCC, one sponsor said, “Canadian government had a good program. MCC ran it well. Amazingly smooth...” The private sponsorship, joint assistance program and designated class for Southeast Asian refugees contributed to the overall refugee assistance program. When asked about their involvement, the sponsors responded immediately that the experience was all very rewarding: “Happy to be involved,” “All very positive experience. Do it again – gave us more than we gave them,” and “Benefits of being sponsors... received more than what we gave... more global citizens... world bigger than Canada.” Seventy percent of the sponsors interviewed revealed that they have continued to sponsor more refugee families from various countries around the world since their first sponsorship of Laotian refugees 25 years ago.

Conclusion

Since the first wave of more than 60,000 Indochinese refugees came in 1979, Canada continues to assist refugees from various countries such as Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Salvador, Bosnia and Somalia. Canada's population of foreign-born is on the rise and has reached a 70-year high of 18.4% of the total population according to the 2001 Census (Van Ngo, 2005). In 2004, Canada accepted 32, 683 refugees (The Monitor, Spring 2005). Canada's diverse population creates a need for participation in newcomer issues. Learning from experiences of former refugees can enhance future refugee programs and ease the transition period in the resettlement process. Language acquisition, cultural awareness, retraining, and foreign credential recognition are necessary in order for refugees to contribute to Canadian life and economy.

"Narratives are flourishing as a means of understanding the personal identity, lifestyle, culture, and historical world of the narrator" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). Refugee stories enable minority ethnic groups to be heard, recognized and acknowledged by the larger community. One major concern of this research project is the memory of the refugees and sponsors. Asking participants to remember back to 25 years ago was challenging at times, depending on the ages of the refugees and sponsors. The refugees seemed to have a clearer memory of their resettlement process than some of the sponsors due to the fact that most of them were younger and the experience was more traumatic for them. Another concern of narrative inquiry is the issue of the voice of the researcher and the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It was difficult to evaluate the refugee narratives in that each story was unique and yet there were also common elements. How does one ensure that the individual's experiences are recognized within the group? The limits of life stories include the fact that life stories develop and change over time; each story is affected by the context of the narration and the relationship between the teller and listener (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). How does the researcher include his/her voice in the conversations without influencing the narrator's story? Different parts of the story may be more meaningful for the participant but less important for the research project. How does the researcher include those aspects of the interview? It is difficult to evaluate narratives, but Denzin and Lincoln state that the "processes of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished" (1994).

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