

Creative Integration: Persian Bahá'í Newcomers in New Brunswick

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Abstract

Our paper analyzes the experiences of Persian Bahá'ís who arrived more than twenty years ago and stayed in New Brunswick. We conducted seven interviews involving ten people. This paper presents a widely ignored aspect of immigrant life: namely, the creativity that immigrants use to overcome local residents' hesitancy in reaching out to them in friendship. This paper further analyzes two aspects of these immigrants' arrival that account for their success. First, the receiving Bahá'í communities integrated them immediately into the social and administrative affairs of their communities. Second, the immigrants' recent spiritual connection to the birth place of the Bahá'í faith became the means of Canadian Bahá'ís to welcome their brothers and sisters from Iran.

L'intégration créative : les nouveaux venus Persans Bahá'ís au Nouveau-Brunswick

Résumé

L'article analyse l'expérience qu'ont connu les Persans Bahá'ís qui se sont installés ici, au Nouveau-Brunswick, il y a plus de vingt ans et qui y sont restés. Nous avons mené sept entrevues avec dix personnes. L'article présente une facette souvent méconnue de la vie des immigrants : notamment la créativité dont ils doivent faire preuve afin de vaincre les hésitations des résidents de la région pour se lier d'amitié avec eux. De plus, cet article analyse deux aspects de l'arrivée de ces immigrants qui favorisent leur réussite. D'abord, les communautés d'accueil bahá'í ont intégré immédiatement les immigrés dans les affaires sociales et administratives de leur communauté. Ensuite, les liens spirituels récents des immigrants envers leur pays natal ont contribué à ce que les Bahá'í Canadiens accueillent leurs frères et sœurs de l'Iran.

Wider Context of the Research

With few exceptions, recent research about immigrants probes the way that the receiving society can help newcomers to Canada, the Atlantic region, and New Brunswick. Governments and others see themselves as service providers (Cottrel), whether in terms of encouraging the provision of credit history (Connellan), providing services to children (Quaicoe, "Canadian Heritage. . ."), education (Quaicoe "Role of Education. . ."), and networks (Weerasinghe). Increasingly, however, one also finds discussions about creating "welcoming communities" (Flint; O'Hara) as an integral part of retaining immigrants, and thus scholars and policy makers are paying attention to the community-personal, subjective components of the immigrant experience. Our own research points to the crucial need for the members of the receiving society to make a personal effort to welcome newcomers.¹

Taken as a whole, research has identified the many crucial elements that make up the web of life of the newcomers: on the one hand, the receiving society has become painfully aware of the tribulations of the newcomers' daily life, family, and work; on the other hand, research sets out policies, services, and strategies to alleviate these difficulties. The index in Lisa Gilad's ethnography on immigrants to Newfoundland (1990), for example, reads like a catalogue of seemingly unbearable hurdles that newcomers inevitably face: unsuccessful adjustments, isolation, unemployment, lack of sense of belonging, facing "come-from-away" attitudes, invisibility, discrimination, mental illness, and linguistic frustration.

Our paper, however, addresses one crucial element that is missing from the research, namely, the creative means newcomers use to draw themselves closer to members of the receiving society. Our study of the Persian Bahá'ís in New Brunswick and elsewhere in Atlantic Canada can serve as a model by which newcomers resort to creative, imaginative, and innovative ways to befriend members of the receiving community and, as a consequence, find ways to contribute to the receiving society. We must point out, however, that the presence of the Bahá'í community in Canada is quite unlike that of other religious communities. It is not an immigrant religious community (such as the Sikh community) and is not a diasporic community. Its boundaries are porous as it intersects (individually and collectively) and engages with the wider society. Its diversity prevents observers from easily identifying it with a particular ethnic, cultural, or occupational group. It has a high rate of civic participation, including the exercise of voting in municipal, provincial, and federal elections, despite its being apolitical.² Yet, it has a distinctive history, teachings, administration, and practices that give the Bahá'í community its form and purpose.

Because our research delves into the subjective realities of a community, our research takes on a symbolic-interactionist perspective, a deeply rooted approach in sociology (Fine 73). This approach entails the view that human beings construct their realities through social interaction. While humans enter interactions with preconceived meanings, those meanings change through social interaction, laying the groundwork for future interactions. Meanings are therefore not static but dynamic. Humans are active agents in constructing, maintaining, and revising meanings. As researchers in this tradition, we attribute importance to what people think, say, and do. In the context of research on newcomers, it is important to consider the interactional components between the newcomers and the members of the receiving society. It is insufficient merely to study the “needs” of newcomers (or the “needs” of the receiving society, for that matter). If we are truly to grasp the situation of newcomers, we must consider their interactions with the larger receiving society. Only when we consider these social dynamics do we get a fuller picture.

Research Strategy

The original material from which data for this study was extracted comes from an ongoing, in-depth interview study with Persian Bahá'í newcomers³ who have lived in New Brunswick (and Prince Edward Island) for at least ten years, and, in most cases, twenty. We conducted seven interviews involving ten people. Three couples generated three interviews because we sat down together with each couple whom we interviewed; one couple generated two interviews because we interviewed the wife and the husband separately, and finally, a woman and a man unrelated to each other resulted in two interviews.

The approximately fifty Persian Bahá'ís in New Brunswick provide a unique situation because, although they did not have an in-place ethnic group in which to embed themselves, they were greeted by an eager local community of co-religionists made up of Canadians. Gilad's ethnography of refugees from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who settled in Newfoundland describes the integration of Iranian Bahá'ís into the community as “somewhat astounding.” She notes that they, “quickly prove an asset to the [Bahá'í] community” (238). We now provide a brief overview of the Bahá'í faith to lay a foundation for understanding the unique attributes of the Bahá'í community that facilitates the integration of the newcomers.

The Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í faith originated in Persia (now Iran) in 1844. Its founders are the Báb (1819-1850) and Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892). They proclaimed a new religion that included the need to promote gender equality, a universal language, racial amity, and education amongst others. The Ministry of the Báb lasted four years and ended with his execution in 1850. Bahá'u'lláh was exiled and imprisoned. Bahá'ís assert the common foundation of all revealed religions and that there is one God.⁴

From its inception in 1844, Persian authorities and clergy persecuted the Bahá'ís, sometimes in a horrific manner. After the revolution in 1979, the persecution intensified again, including widespread arrests and the execution of more than 200 Bahá'ís. The authorities now regularly circumscribe the life of Bahá'ís, whether old or young. It is a persecution that includes the bullying of children in and out of school, the suspension of employment and pensions, and the destruction of Bahá'í properties, including holy places, cemeteries, and homes. A number of Bahá'ís are now imprisoned without formal charges, falsely accused of crimes punishable by death. They have been deprived of access to their lawyer, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi. The European Union, the United Nations, and numerous governments,

including Canada, have taken note of the innocence of Bahá'ís.⁵ Although not part of the narrative of the Persian Bahá'ís in this paper, we readily see the importance of the persecutions in the stories told to us by every Bahá'í in our research. These stories relativize the difficulties and hardships experienced by the “refugees” as they settle into Canadian culture. Persia as the birthplace of the Bahá'í faith holds a unique place in the heart of Bahá'ís around the world, including Canada. The current waves of persecution, while wrenching, have created a surge of affection among Bahá'ís outside Iran for the Persian Bahá'í refugees.

In Canada, the Bahá'í community numbers over 33,000 members. The Government of Canada was the first government to welcome Bahá'í refugees in response to severe persecution following the Islamic revolution in 1979. In the early 1980s, many Iranian Bahá'ís⁶ came to Canada through a program cooperatively set up by the Government of Canada and the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. By the summer of 1984, over 1,000 Persian Bahá'ís (“refugees”) had been resettled in 150 localities across Canada (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1999). The Persian Bahá'í newcomers have a different experience from other immigrants for two reasons. First, the welcoming nature of the New Brunswick Bahá'í community to these newcomers originates in the excitement of knowing that the newcomers come from the historical and spiritual cradle of their faith. Second, having lived under conditions in Iran that only allowed the existence of the Bahá'í community at a highly circumscribed level (to the point of official strategies to eradicate it), let alone not permitting the Bahá'ís to disseminate the Bahá'í teachings, the Persian Bahá'í newcomers have seized newfound opportunities to reach out to the larger community, especially by acts of service.

In an effort to allow Persian Bahá'ís to contribute to the life of the Bahá'í community in the Atlantic provinces, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada encouraged their dispersal in that region. A relatively small number of 200 Persian Bahá'ís have come to live in the region since 1984. We estimate that one-third to one-half have left the region since their arrival. Today, in New Brunswick, one finds these Persian Bahá'ís in more than a half-dozen towns. While some came directly from Iran, many more came from Pakistan, Malaysia, Oman, India, Morocco, and other countries to which they had escaped from Iran or where they were unable to secure their Iranian passport. Occasionally, when friendships with Persian Bahá'ís become deeper, one will hear of horrifying accounts of deprivation and torture. Unable to visit family in Iran, the Persian Bahá'ís feel a particular grief in that area of life. Their creative ways to engage the wider receiving society—the focus of this paper—become a particular testament to their ability to overcome challenges.

There are at least two significant aspects of their arrival in New Brunswick. First, the receiving Bahá'í communities accepted them completely and integrated them immediately into the social and administrative affairs of existing communities. Lisa Gilad made this independent observation of the similar phenomenon regarding the Bahá'ís in Newfoundland:

The speed of their integration into this community on the basis of their faith is somewhat astounding to the outsider. It may be that their known persecution in Iran encouraged their co-religionists to embrace them so completely. (238)

The experience in New Brunswick echoes that of Newfoundland.

Second, the spiritual significance of this dispersal is not lost on these Bahá'í communities; it became the means of these communities to welcome their brothers and sisters from Iran, which is the birthplace of the Bahá'í faith. In this regard, a Bahá'í from a small town offered this sentiment:

Certainly the situation in Iran is very near now, one gains a closer perspective on the lives of the martyrs and their families and dear ones. We feel the cry and the worry for the well-being of the friends [i.e., the Bahá'ís] back in Iran far more intensely now. (Mahar 38)

Another Bahá'í from Nova Scotia, Sandra Phinney (33), feels “a tremendous sense of honour in having [mentions names of Persian newcomers] living in our midst.” Moreover, she writes

We are so blessed! Such a precious gift! Such gems! Will we ever be able to reflect our thankfulness? . . . [T]he task is sweet, simple and *not* complicated. Any ounce of love, energy, prayers, material assistance etc. given is returned in bounties to our community. . . a thousand fold. [emphasis in original]

There are a handful of studies about the experiences of Persian Bahá'ís in Canada. In Vancouver, Bahá'ís “presented moral cosmopolitanism as a constitutive component of belonging to a world community. . . a concept that embodies the notions of unity, diversity and the oneness of humanity, central teachings of the Bahá'í faith” (Swanton 32-3). From the same general geographic area, we find Parin Dossa's study⁷ using narrative accounts of Canadian Iranian women's experiences of displacement and resettlement. One of the accounts pertains to an older Bahá'í woman (“Sahra”). One cannot remain unmoved by Sahra's exceptional account of her and her family's suffering in Iran and that “Canada does not have space for her in her old age” (Dossa 131).

Gilad offers us one of the most detailed ethnographies about refugees. Her work focusses on Newfoundland and portrays Bahá'ís alongside other newcomers. Her findings are highly relevant for our own research:

The intriguing feature of waiting for the Bahá'í in Pakistan is that they attempt to engage in the same sorts of community involvements after arrival in Newfoundland: their way of life is communal. They recreate the community of Bahá'í wherever they go. . . and have an immediate claim to belonging to the Bahá'í community on arrival in St. John's. Their resolve to survive is appreciated locally, and their co-religionists are relatively well informed about the reasons for Bahá'í flight from Iran. The Bahá'í. . . , knowing nothing about their rights and privileges as new immigrants, knew the least about what would greet them in Canada. But their life skills as community-oriented people help them to find their niche soon after arrival. (121)

These studies indicate that their adjustment and integration has, in the main, proceeded more successfully than that of other Iranians, such as those in Los Angeles (Bozorgmehr) and Australia (Feather et al.).⁸

Creativity in the Face of Negativity

The creative means by which the Persian Bahá'ís negotiated their new environment in Canada betrays a backdrop of challenges and problems that, in the early instances of their lives in New Brunswick, can be seen as overwhelmingly negative. The newcomers noted that the broader community demonstrated prejudice, fear of people who are “dark,” and an unwillingness to include newcomers in their social lives. “It was really hard to get a job,” says one, “and everybody was fearful: ‘Is this guy a good guy to work for me and is he going to be able to talk in a [way] that I can understand? Is he going to drive my customers away?’” The unwillingness of employers to hire people who looked and sounded different was palpable:

It's what motivates the idea of saying, “No, I can't hire you. Sorry”. . . “We'd rather have someone who is white, speaks with the same accents. . . and has the qualifications”. . . That's what they think.

One of the most consistent early experiences was the challenge of being hired. Finding work was not a problem, but being hired was. “Do you have Canadian experience?” was the question that each newcomer had to face. Several newcomers reported that they were asked if they had Canadian experience even when they applied for menial jobs as a dishwasher. One informed his potential employer that people in Iran use dishes as well. He was hired.

Former training and experience do not seem to matter too much, as the following account of a wheel-balancer and mechanic in his former country illustrates:

So I was looking for something. . . wheel balancing, something with my skill. Anywhere I went and applied, they keep asking me “Do you have Canadian experience? Do you have Canadian experience?” And I just got to the country and how can I get Canadian experience when you don't have any? Even I said, “Well, okay I cannot get a good job so I may as well go be a dishwasher.” And I went to [a local motel]. I said, “Okay, I want to be a dishwasher. You're looking for a dishwasher. Okay, I'll be your dishwasher.” And she asked me, “Do you have Canadian

experience?" I said, "For God's sake, it is [just] dishes! How do you want me. . . what kind of dishes do you have that we don't have in our country?" "No, you need Canadian experience to wash dishes." I said, "Okay, if that's the way you guys want to treat the foreigners," I learned that next time to speak out about myself. So, you have to bluff a little bit. . .

Getting a job was hard enough, but promotions and recognition were even harder to achieve. One woman reported being passed over repeatedly for promotion to manager of her store even though she was the top salesperson. Another Bahá'í, who had risen to the position of director of a local federal government department, recounted the experience of being ignored by someone who had come from Ottawa to interview her as director about her work but could not seem to grasp the fact that it was the immigrant who was director. The official proceeded to talk only to the director's assistant. In the words of the newcomer (and director): "I was just the third person, just simply watching and I couldn't say anything. What could I say? . . . As far as I do my job and the government is happy, I'm happy."

Against this backdrop of early negative experiences, it is useful to trace the chronological path of employment of three Bahá'ís—a woman and two men. It is apparent that other Persian Bahá'ís follow a similar path in employment, moving from labour requiring hardly any skills to a position with considerable responsibility:

i. A woman (who was trained and worked as a teacher in Iran):

Working part-time in a fast-food restaurant → mopping floors and cleaning washrooms at a local college → making leather frames in a tannery → scrubbing and cleaning potatoes at a farm → cooking at same local college → becoming chief cook at the college → becoming staff at a local refugee-settlement agency → heading a local federal government citizenship committee.

ii. A man:

Mopping floors and washing dishes at a local motel → working as a cleaner at a local fast-food restaurant → being manager at above eating place [won awards for making restaurant the most efficient in chain] → working at a local micro-chip firm → working in a film-developing business → being on staff, major local photo studio → heading of a division in above-mentioned studio.

iii. A man (who was independently wealthy, but lost everything):

Unloading trucks → carrying frozen cow carcasses → picking apples at an orchard → opening a grocery store → advising as a tax consultant with numerous clients (after privately studying Canadian tax law).

It is possible that some challenges in being hired were related to inadequate mastery of English, but we have found that a number of immigrants were disqualified from being provided ESL classes because their English was "too good." One believed that the minimal level of competence in English that made her ineligible for classes has resulted in lack of advancement in her occupational and educational opportunities. Other newcomers found that ESL classes were far too basic given their level of English. One newcomer developed his English vocabulary (when studying Canadian tax law) with a dictionary on his lap. Our findings provide evidence that agencies should have English classes in place for those who have more than a basic knowledge of the language, thus allowing immigrants to develop successful and meaningful careers.⁹

Within the symbolic interactionist framework, it is helpful to "listen" carefully to the data and, once we find out what questions the data answer, to develop concepts grounded in those data (Becker). In relation to the creative approaches inherent in the way Persian Bahá'ís construct their reality as newcomers who wish to draw closer to members of the receiving society, we find these concepts: individualizing the problem, disavowing blame, taking preventative action, taking the creative route, and being of service. Our paper offers some empirical illustrations in support of these emerging concepts. On an empirical level, this paper dignifies newcomers who, despite their vulnerable situation (and against all odds in New Brunswick), have not only managed to remain in the region but have also found ways to negotiate a path through potentially problematic situations.

A. Individualizing the Problem

The Persian Bahá'ís dealt with prejudice in several ways. One Persian Bahá'í believed that one should never take the prejudice personally: "You know, it's very obvious, it's very obvious. . . I don't [take it] personally. . . even after

100 years. . . I am immigrant. You know, I have to accept that.” The same person reflected on the downside of accepting racism, particularly that it leaves no room for personal improvement:

Sometimes [racism] comes at work or, you know, whenever. But when I speak with my manager and. . . it's really very sad when I come home and [I say to myself], “don't get personal,” you know. If we do, and we think that way, we never improve ourselves. You know, don't get personal, that is our life and we have to accept it.

While some found it helpful not to take the prejudice or discrimination personally, others adopted the idea that these acts were reflections of a few individuals, not the community as a whole: “You find odd people that they are prejudiced, but you cannot really say that [about] the entire city or entire town.” An exchange between a wife and a husband reveals a similar understanding about not taking prejudice personally or at least that prejudice is an expression of “stupid things” and of a small minority in the population:

Wife: So, there have been that people. . . have said things, even now. Sometimes, people come at the store and say that [the] government give [me] jobs, money, you know, stupid things.

Husband: But that is a very [small] minority. . .

Wife: Yeah, a very [small] minority. But, I mean, there have been incidents, you know, its not all rosy. But, nothing major ones. . .

B. Disavowing the Blame

The ability to disavow blame is a key ingredient in fostering positive interpersonal relations, a much-needed ingredient in any climate suffused with prejudice and discrimination. One newcomer neutralized his feelings and explained that, given the circumstances in the world, no one should be blamed for being afraid of strangers, especially those with dark skin, and opined that fear results from ignorance.

Naturally, the immigrants are particularly worried about the impact of this fear on their children. A second-grader came to his mother after school and asked, “How come, Mom, I'm not pink?” The mother told us the story as follows:

I got it that there must have been some talk about that [his skin colour] and I said, “We have a neighbour [who] always tans.” I said [to my son], “Do you see her?” He said, “Yeah.” I said, “Do you know why she sleeps all day in the sun?” He said, “No.” I said, “because she wants to be like you. She wants to be like your colour.”

Rather than blaming the school or her son's friends, the mother was inspired to take the blame away and, instead, present a light-hearted comment that put the matter away without too much attention.

It is not only skin colour that sets the Persian Bahá'ís apart from the receiving society. Hospitality is a much-valued aspect of Persian culture. The issue of hospitality has become a major point of discussion and debate among the Persian newcomers. Its importance is probably ranked as high as being hired. A Persian Bahá'í tactfully described New Brunswickers as “a very reserved community.” Another Persian simply talks about the fact that New Brunswick culture is “different.” Persian culture requires one to be hospitable, and the newcomer analyzed, and later disavowed, the experience of not being invited into people's homes as simply a difference between cultures:

I love talking to the people [in the neighbourhood]. . . really nice people. . . .With our neighbors [in Iran] we can talk, and we can go to their house, but here [in New Brunswick] no. Maybe you can talk on the street, just few minutes and say, “hi, bye,” like this. You know, maybe their culture is different.

The contrast between the openness of the Persian Bahá'ís and the reserve of other New Brunswickers is striking:

Especially in a small places. . . they are [all] related. . . .They all know each other. They don't see anybody outside the family. And that's why, seeing somebody outside the family, and especially different colour, different colour of hair, different colour the face. . . .Maybe protecting themselves.

. . . Look at us, we're Bahá'ís, we never met each other but we so, lovingly, kindly, sitting and talking, and we came, [the local Bahá'ís had] never met us. . . and they sent [people] to airport to receive a stranger, a stranger from Iran. . . they came to receive us. . . . But we have to start somewhere. The sooner we start, the sooner we reach that goal.

For another, the Persian Bahá'ís clearly proclaim that prejudice does not belong to the entire town; in any case, it is never as bad as in Iran, where fanaticism against Bahá'ís is rampant:

You feel that people are looking at you and thinking that where you are from, [you] never felt that it's actually a drawback.

Mmm. So you never felt there was much prejudice involved?

Never. . . It's just that you find odd people that they are prejudiced. But you cannot really say that the entire city, or entire town [is]. . .

The interviews are remarkable for the lack of anger or even disappointment among the Persian Bahá'ís. One Bahá'í thought that the relentless persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran had somehow made the prejudice experienced in Canada a rather mild matter, resulting from a lack of education:

[I am] used to people being prejudiced. So, I mean, it's great that we came to Canada. We came to Canada and you don't see as much prejudice [as] we used to see back home. And then [it's just] one or two people that we see. It's not that bad. [Yeah] You know, and obviously we really think they are not educated, obviously.

Thus, the prejudice experienced in New Brunswick can never be as intense as in Iran, which is a different world. If any blame is to be assigned to the presence of prejudice in New Brunswick, it is to ignorance, and to not being "educated."

C. Taking Preventative Action

Having become acquainted with the receiving culture, the Persian Bahá'ís were now able to take preventative measures to address the prejudice they experienced. It is striking that they took responsibility for the way others reacted to them. Take the example of a professional's decision not to carry his instrument case on a city bus:

I had a problem about two, three days ago. I had my. . . case in my hand, trying to catch a bus to go to work. And I felt that people were looking at me like, "Is this bus going to blow up?". . . You don't know what people are thinking; they're just nervous. . . with what's going on today. . . . The world is not that safe a place right now, unfortunately, but being dark. . .

In addition to being more friendly than usual, he decided to go empty-handed when he took the bus to work from then on.

Preventative action can appear in the most unlikely guises. One couple became reluctant to invite their neighbours into their home: the Persian Bahá'í couple became afraid that their offers of hospitality might be rejected:

I don't have the plan to invite all neighbours to come to our house, and to show them my culture even though I can cook food for them. So that kind of things we were just having, having what, maybe enough to drink alcohol, but we are not so into that kind of thing [i.e. serving alcohol]. I'm afraid to invite them.

Not inviting one's neighbour to the house was not about fearing neighbours but about the fear of being rejected by neighbours. The Persian Bahá'ís traced this fear to a time when they were invited to a wedding but found themselves "lonely"

because they are having alcohol, they're having the fun, and then we are from different culture which mostly stays [away from] alcohol. Then once you say, "no, I don't drink,". . . suddenly [you] are left [alone] and they are going away, all [to be with] their friends. They think you are strange, yes.

Interviewer: So you think that it makes them a little uncomfortable?

Yeah, uncomfortable because then next time we are not invited. They say, oh, okay, this is very [strange].

D. Taking the Creative Route

A number of researchers have noted that women's relationships with other women are often the means through which breakthroughs from social isolation occur (Dobrowolsky and Tastsoglou). Reaching out to other women *inside* the Bahá'í community was never an issue. The Persian Bahá'í women may appear to be no different to their finding except that they exemplify considerably greater efforts in reaching out to others *outside* the Bahá'í community, as the following accounts illustrate. Deprived of any opportunity in Iran to attract others to the Bahá'í community, the Persian newcomers avail themselves of the freedom of religion to acquaint others with the Bahá'í teachings, however indirectly and discreetly. Although the following is an example from a neighbouring province, it typifies both the suspicions of the receiving society and the great length that some newcomers go to alleviate those suspicions. A Persian Bahá'í woman had heard from a third person that her neighbour believed that "you have a rifle in your basement." She decided to take the creative route. She invited her neighbour to visit and gave her a tour of the whole house, including, "coincidentally," her basement. She commented that "now they are very, very friendly."

It is not uncommon for other creative strategies can be used. The same woman said:

It was actually my suggestion to just send somebody to the schools and have a presentation about newcomers, about refugees, and about colour, and other societies. I went once myself to one school and spoke about the refugees because [the children] had some problems. . . and I use the example. . . that in the garden, if you have two different colours of roses,¹⁰ it's beautiful, and they loved it.

For others, the creative approach involves the development of palpable trustworthiness and honesty. In the words of one immigrant:

Interviewee: At the beginning these people they were not accepting me. Oh yeah, they were not having the trusting foreigners. And gradually, gradually I did [the income tax form] for a few people [mentions the names of a mayor, a Member of Parliament]. Yeah, they got an amount of trust [in me], and they passed their life secrets. . . to me [laughter]. No, I collected good clients really. Once I moved from the house to the street level. Because I started from my home, from the room, and then gradually took a long time till I go to that building and I started on the business district and area.

Interviewer: So it's all through reputation?

Interviewee: All through reputation and honesty, and then just after only three years, four years, they don't have any problems [with me]. They are coming. They say, "This person is perfect" [chuckle].

There are also some truly daring ways that demonstrate the creative manner by which some Persian Bahá'ís involve themselves in the life of the receiving society. For example, one Persian Bahá'í reprimanded a co-worker for his many anti-First Nations rants. What was interesting is that it involved a co-worker who did not talk to him for sixteen years. The Persian Bahá'í, however, did take the initiative, but in the form of a reprimand:

He didn't like foreigners. I heard a comment, "Yah, if I meet an Indian in the wood and I make sure that if nobody can see me, I can shoot an Indian in the wood." You don't want to hear this in the 21st century, 22nd century, like you don't want to hear stuff like that anymore. I said to him, "Don't even make a comment like that to me. . . It is against my belief. And if you make a comment like that again I'm gonna report you." And I told him frankly, I said, "If you make [another] discriminatory comments—prejudice, I'm going to report you to RCMP. Don't even think about it. Why do you even make a comment like that?"

That was the last time that the person uttered such invectives in the presence of this Persian Bahá'í.

E. Being of Service

When considering opportunities to render service in New Brunswick, it is striking that so many acts of service take place in the home. One couple organized a goodbye party in their home for a friend of a neighbour who was leaving for Ontario. In another instance, in the same home, the following transpired (in response to the large number of Bahá'í meetings in a home):

So this lady was saying. . .she passed our house there were lots of cars in our driveway, and she always thought that either we have a very big family or we are party people [Laughter]. And then I remember she was sitting in the living room and she said, "Now I know what is happening here!" [Laughter] and you would never think that. . .in our driveway if they park really nice you can have fifteen cars. Because even for my other neighbour's daughter's wedding we asked people to come and park in our driveway [which] easily could park fifteen cars.

In other instances, a newly arrived Persian family decided to cook for their Canadian hosts while staying in their home. In another family, a son's Grade 3 teacher was invited over; there was a lot of excited discussion about culture. When New Brunswickers respond to such invitations, a great deal of excitement ensues.¹¹

Conclusion

We see our article as a contribution to understanding some of the strategies that immigrants use to draw closer to the receiving society, a subject matter that has received scant attention in the scholarly literature. Those immigrant strategies gain particular significance when, on the one hand, one considers that the Persian Bahá'ís from Iran already experienced hardships at the hands of fanatical elements in Iran and when, on the other hand, they (not unlike other visible minorities) initially faced significant barriers in terms of the reserved atmosphere of the receiving society. Many faced the infamous "Canadian experience" question even for jobs as menial as dishwasher, not to mention advancing in meaningful careers.

The contrast between the welcome the Bahá'í refugees received from local Bahá'ís and the wider community is striking. The warmth of the local Bahá'ís greeting sheds a spotlight on the social distance that the refugees experienced in the wider community. Most non-European immigrants do not, in any case, have a significant community in the Maritimes to which they automatically belong—ethnic or otherwise. Thus, they are unlikely to remain in a region of the country where the local residents are unable or unwilling to integrate them into the mainstream of daily life. It is also likely that New Brunswickers are often unaware of this problem. We often hear that we need more programs for newcomers to help them adapt to the way of life in Canada. The findings from our exploratory study indicate the relevance of ongoing hospitality—beyond superficial cordiality—as one of the principal determinants that encourage immigrants to remain in the region. Our continuing study will provide examples of such hospitality both in its presence and absence.

Persian Bahá'ís are already taking the initiative in reaching out to the receiving society, well beyond the confines of the Bahá'í community itself. These initiatives involve not only depersonalizing acts of discrimination but also individualizing the problem, concluding that only a few people engage in discrimination, not the whole population. The Persian Bahá'ís also disavow any blame on the part of the receiving society: the fear of strangers (especially with darker skin) is understandable, the situation in Iran is far worse, and the lack of hospitality is merely seen as part of a "different culture." The Bahá'ís have also undertaken preventative action so as not to provoke fear among members of the receiving society. Moreover, among the more creative approaches, the Persian Bahá'ís have gone out of their way to open up their homes to their neighbours so that others can see that their homes have no weapons. Engaging in anti-racist speech is another way that some Bahá'ís have demonstrated a channel to the wider society, albeit quite a risky one. The slow process of demonstrating trustworthiness and honesty to one's neighbours and clients has demonstrable effects in drawing members of the receiving society closer to the newcomers. Finally, rendering work or actions in the spirit of service enabled others to see the value of allowing newcomers to stay in New Brunswick.

The question as to what leads members of a receiving society to be fearful of newcomers is beyond the scope of this paper but should be judiciously investigated. Is it a matter of fear of an unfamiliar religion? Does such a fear have too high a cost when it comes to not being able to retain immigrants? In New Brunswick, where so much social life is church related, being a member of a minority religion exacerbates the challenge.

Nonetheless, our participants have all managed to develop meaningful careers through persistence and creativity. The accounts of a broader spectrum of *successful* immigrants have the potential to provide the basis for policies that would enable more immigrants to find occupational and career success in New Brunswick and other parts of Atlantic Canada. This aspect of the research addresses one of the most, if not the most, challenging aspects of immigrants' efforts not to relocate to larger centres.

One of the most important, yet unrecognized, components of retaining immigrants is the willingness of local people to become friends with immigrants. Although the participants in our pilot project found people "friendly," particularly when one compares their actions to those who actively persecuted the Bahá'ís based on their religion in Iran, they reported that they initially had difficulty making friends outside the Bahá'í community. Our informal discussions with those in the mainstream community indicate that this situation is invisible to them.

It is clear that Atlantic Canadians in general and New Brunswickers in particular will need to find a way more authentically, warmly, and helpfully to welcome non-European immigrants, both to avoid a secondary migration from the region by these immigrants and to avoid their social isolation if they do stay. Persian Bahá'ís, according to the data in this paper, have demonstrated a willingness and a creativity to reach out to the receiving community. While governmental and non-governmental agencies have a crucial role to play in the lives of newcomers, there are some areas where citizens themselves need to be called upon to exercise what is in their power. Is it not time for members of the receiving society to reciprocate those stretching hearts and minds?

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Endnotes

1. One finds primarily theses, guidebooks, and reports about the immigrant experience in New Brunswick. Of note are theses by Cherrie Kenyon (2000), Wang (1996), and Barry R. MacKenzie (2009). Women Working With Immigrant Women of New Brunswick (1986) produced an evocative report, as have Destremes and Ruggeri (2005) and Clews (2005).
2. The issue of immigrants and civic participation is usually a defining feature of whether immigrants have a sense of belonging in the receiving community (Department of Canadian Heritage, 1997).
3. Although governmental authorities technically and formally designate the Persian Bahá'ís as "refugees," the Persian Bahá'ís themselves are uncomfortable with this term. As terms like "immigrants" and "newcomers" are less value-loaded, we prefer either one of those designations.
4. For more information on Bahá'í teachings see <www.Bahai.org>.

5. The reader can find more detailed information about the recent spate of persecutions at www.bahai.org. See also <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/iran-update/#recentactsofpersecution> (accessed 30 March 2010). One of the most recent events (July 2010) involved the razing and burning of fifty Bahá'í-owned properties in the farming community of Ivel, Mazandaran, Iran (see <http://news.bahai.org/story/780>).
6. Often, Iranian Bahá'ís refer to themselves as “Persian Bahá'ís,” perhaps to highlight the culture rather than the politics of Iranian society. Bahá'ís, whether Iranian or not, are politically non-partisan; they are the well-wishers of government.
7. Dr. Dossa is an immigrant herself, formerly of Uganda.
8. An early study of Montreal Iranians (Moghaddam et al., 1987) does not mention whether Persians Bahá'ís are included in the sampled population of eighty-one people.
9. *Inter alia*, we want to note that the immigrants in our research noted the low level of expectations directed at immigrants in terms of English classes. The immigrants also found that the schools were quite inadequate, sometimes teaching materials below the levels that the immigrants themselves are accustomed to at comparable levels.
10. Echoes of the flower-in-the-garden analogy are plentiful in the Bahá'í Writings, involving such expressions about unity in diversity as “the drops or the waves of one sea,” “the flowers of one garden,” “the blossoms of one tree,” “the members of one body,” “the fingers of one hand,” “the inhabitants of one city,” “the stars of one heaven,” “the drops of one river,” “the rays of one sun,” “the trees of one orchard,” “the blending of many notes,” and “in the making of a perfect chord.”
11. Most recently, a Persian Bahá'í recounted the story of his Canadian neighbour who had become unemployed. When a job opened at the workplace of the Bahá'í, the Bahá'í approached his own employer urging him to hire his neighbour because “he’s such a good worker.” The employer hired the neighbour. It was only then that the neighbour dropped by to visit the Bahá'í—the first time in the nineteen years that they lived next to each other.