

VIEW to the U transcribed
Season 3: Global Perspectives; Episode #2
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[Intro music fades in and then out]

Neda Maghbouleh (NM): This was as our pilot study with Syrian mothers was coming to a close and as *fairly* mainstream researchers, methodologically speaking in sociology, we dipped our toe into something slightly inspired by a participatory action research [PAR] via convening a panel at that conference that included the three professors who had spearheaded the original project, a team of our RAs, who had been integral into actually conducting the ethnographic work.

These were graduate students across UofT who speak Arabic and were able to really be these incredible interlocutors without whom we couldn't have done this. But we also had the voices of two mothers who were very keen to be part of the research process with us. We had invited the mothers also to join us on this panel. And so, as you would imagine, the audience was *vaguely* interested in what the profs said, a little bit more interested in what our RAs shared, but keenly interested in the insights from our two research participants, the mothers.

[Theme music fades in]

Carla DeMarco (CD): Mothers and migration

On today's episode of *VIEW to the U* we are hearing from Professor Neda Maghbouleh from the Department of Sociology at UofT Mississauga, who may sound a bit familiar because she was featured last year on the podcast during our "Women in Academia" season.

And, in the spirit of International Women's Day, which falls on March 8, I am reposting the interview with Neda because some of her research has focused on a project that specifically looks at the stress Syrian newcomer mothers face in settling in a new land.

Also with this new, third season of the *VIEW to the U* highlighting UTM's "Global Perspectives," Neda discusses her research, which largely stems from her passion for Sociology, but also outlines the inspiration for her book, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian-Americans & the Everyday Politics of Race*, that was inspired, in part, by her own experience of crossing the border at Niagara Falls when she came to Canada from the US to start her academic appointment at U of T in 2013.

Hello and welcome to *VIEW to the U: an eye on UTM Research*. I'm Carla DeMarco at U of T Mississauga.

VIEW to the U is a monthly podcast that will feature UTM faculty members from a range of disciplines who will illuminate some of the inner workings of the science labs and enlighten the social sciences and humanities hubs at UTM.

[Theme music fades out]

CD: Neda Maghbouleh is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at UTM and the U of T. Her research integrates the study of race with the study of immigration by examining settlement- and discrimination-related challenges faced by Middle Eastern and North African – or MENA – -heritage immigrants, who settle in North America.

Neda completed her BA in Sociology at Smith College before earning her MA and PhD at the University of California Santa Barbara. Prior to joining U of T in 2015, she was a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Faculty Diversity.

Neda's first major project on Iranians and race in the US culminated in a sole authored book, *The Limits of Whiteness*, published in September 2017 by Stanford University Press.

She is currently the principle investigator on a recently funded five-year SSHRC insight Grant that is a longitudinal study of integration-related stress among Syrian refugee newcomers to Toronto and Peel Region. In 2018, she was also awarded the Ontario Early Researcher Award by the Ministry of Research, Innovation, and Science.

NM: My name is Neda Maghbouleh. I am Assistant Professor of Sociology and my work broadly is at the intersection of the sociology of race and the sociology of immigration.

I have a specific interest in groups from the MENA region, which is the Middle East and North Africa, who migrate to North America. The first project I did, which culminated in a book that came out this past September, was about the case of Iranians in the United States and how both at home in Iran and in America they have been integrated as a white racial group but a wealth of evidence about their racialization and discrimination contradicts that status. The literature in sociology isn't quite able to account for the experiences of that group. My first monograph looks at some of the nuances of that case. The book is called *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*, and it's out with Stanford University Press.

Throughout the course of sort of finishing up with the book I was really lucky to be here in Canada for that epic federal election in 2015 where we had a regime change here and suddenly this newfound commitment to integrating 25,000

Syrian refugees by the end of that year. With Prime Minister's Trudeau's commitment came a targeted research grant through SSHRC and the government of Canada for researchers from any field to do a project related to the wellbeing of Syrian refugee newcomers.

So myself and two colleagues in my department, Professor Ito Peng in Public Policy and Sociology and Doctor Melissa Milkie here at UTM campus who's also our graduate chair, we put together a proposal and somehow got the funding. We did a one year pilot study of stress among Syrian newcomer mothers. It was really cool just to get those sorts of insights directly from the newcomers themselves about the things that were working and working less well in their first 12 months in Canada.

I just recently stepped up as PI on a kind of five year longitudinal expansion of that first project. We got both grants we went out for. We just found out about that, so it's exciting. We have about half a million dollars now both through SSHRC and also the Ontario Early Researcher Award to expand the project and to bring in mothers, teenage children, as well because – surprise, surprise – the teenagers were stressing them out. We can imagine that the relationship between parents and teens is fraught in even the best cases but there are particular nuances to the case of refugees that actually really exacerbate that relationship. Yeah, we're expanding the project. Once REB and everything is settled over the summer we are aiming to recruit and begin that study in September.

At this point we are recruiting about 100 families into the study. The pilot study was split between Peel Region and Toronto and we're going to maintain that split because there were *really* interesting differences between the experiences of newcomers who had settled in, in many cases sort of Arab or South Asian majority neighborhoods in Mississauga or more broadly in Peel, versus folks who are a bit more spread out across Toronto. The composition of those neighborhoods was often really different so we want to maintain that split in the sample.

CD: Are there any findings or results that you have come across over the course of your work that you have found particularly surprising?

NM: Sure. There are surprises everyday in this line of work, which I think is part of why we do this. But one that sticks out in my brain came from the Canadian Sociological Association congress last year which was held in Toronto.

This was as our pilot study with Syrian mothers was coming to a close. As fairly, I don't know, mainstream researchers methodologically speaking in sociology, we dipped our toe into something slightly inspired by or resembling participatory action research [PAR], which is a different kind of way of imagining the research endeavour as something that researchers and participants are working really collaboratively, that boundary is troubled.

We didn't do a full-on, PAR type of a project, but we dipped our toe via convening a panel at that conference that included both the three professors who had spearheaded the original project, a team of our RA, who had been integral into actually conducting the ethnographic work, so these were graduate students across U of T, who are natives of the region, who speak Arabic and were able to really be these incredible interlocutors without whom we couldn't have done this. We also had the voices of two mothers. There were two mothers who were very keen to flex their sociological imagination and to be part of the research process with us. We had invited the mothers also to join us on this panel.

As you would imagine, the audience was, like, *vaguely* interested in what the profs said, a little bit more interested in what our RAs shared, but *keenly* interested in the insights from our two research participants, the mothers.

One of the things that the moms, they were full of these incredible insights but one of the things that they said which should not have surprised me, it's like intellectually I knew it. The moms said, "At the same time that these professors were studying us, we were studying them. We were deriving, sort of, our wisdom or insights about Canada based on how we were being treated throughout this project. We were able to sort of extrapolate different hypotheses or just to draw conclusions about how we could project into our futures based on looking closely at these RAs, looking closely at these profs." Again, that's not a gee-whiz moment. It shouldn't have been. But for me that was very profound, that really like the tables had turned and that this was just as much their knowledge production and sort of involvement in the research as it was for us, too.

CD: I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how you got into this particular field of study in the first place.

NM: Yeah. Mine is, I think, quite typical story of someone who goes off to University as an 18 year old and had never heard the word *sociology* but took that first class. It was like worlds opened to me where things that I had observed, or sort of validated as patterns that were linked to structure. I had a whole new vocabulary, the language to put into words things that had often bothered me or just things that stuck out as intriguing.

That's the genesis of my whole career just was that one first sociology class that blew my mind. I think the reason why I stayed in sociology all the way throughout undergrad through my PhD, and now in an appointment in a sociology program, is I appreciate it's a broad umbrella methodologically, substantively.

I'm thrilled that one of the courses I teach at UTM, which is considered a service course, meaning it's a slog and people typically don't like to teach the class but it's the one that renews my passion for sociology every term, is called Logics of Social Inquiry. It's a sort of survey course where students get a taste of

everything from demography and statistics all the way through ethnography and social network analysis – everything in between. So just recognizing that there are this plurality of methods, these means to actually collect data and analyze it. It just renews my passion for SOC and how it's unwieldy, can be troubling, but also it's the most exciting thing about it.

CD: I know though you have also an interesting story, if you can talk about it, but for your book *Limits of Whiteness* I remember you telling me that it sort of came about when you were coming to Canada.

NM: Sure. When I had done my PhD in the US, and I was also born in the US so all I had known was the United States really, except for a couple semesters of travel here and there. It had always been kind of this project that I imagined toggling between the racial ideologies and hierarchies that shape the socialization of people in Iran who would then be the immigrants to the United States later, and how they enter a different racial order that sometimes have rules that map onto but also differ dramatically at times from the racial order that people learned back at home. I was still thinking of it in this sort of binary: the home land, the host land, things that trans-nationalism had troubled many decades ago. I was trapped there, like just such an ugly American, frankly.

Then the simple act of getting an academic appointment in a third country – a different place – and the simple act of crossing the border at Niagara and my own race changed where on the Canadian census Iranians, Afghans, people from that region of the world, like Southwest Asia, technically would occupy the category in Canada called West Asian versus in the US where Arabs, Armenians, Iranians are classified as white. That was a very profound thing. Again, it shouldn't have been my Oprah, aha! moment the same way what I said about the panel we had at congress. It's like intellectually I had read the literature. I knew that this was a thing but it was that embodied act of crossing a border and the way the state made sense of or integrated me. It was different. That animated then all of the revision and really the shape that the book took.

The book was written entirely in three years in Toronto. It was data, the ethnographic data had been collected as a graduate student, but everything from the political philosophy of Charles Mills, who has his PhD from U of T, through just so many different influences. These were my Canadian influences that really actually shaped the monograph that ended up coming out.

CD: This is a very broad question, but I like to ask it because I think it could lead to lots of different answers. But what do you feel is the biggest impact of your work?

NM: I think the kind of immediate feedback I've gotten about my book since it came out in September has made me feel efficacious, I hopefully said that right, efficacious in a way I have not yet felt in this career.

Everything from when the book went online for presale on Amazon, and I had sort of a millennial readership begin to post photographs on social media of them holding my book, or going around North America speaking to a variety of communities including university communities but also taking it to retirement communities of older Iranian immigrants. Sort of the way that it's been read by book clubs in my community. I just am totally overwhelmed and shocked by the way it's been taken up by Iranians in Canada and in the United States.

In particular, because I think in some sub-communities or subcultures we sometimes have, and oftentimes deservedly so, a sense that people don't actually show up for you. They say they will but they're not going to put the resources there to support you. We sort of, I think, as artists or scholars can sometimes have an antagonistic relationship to the communities that we belong to sometimes. It was really one of those moments where I felt like people *showed up*. Even folks that politically or in other ways I thought might not be on board with the project, even though they might not agree with the claims or they try to debunk the evidence, they actually really have showed up for me.

The kind of impact I think it's made in Iranian-Canadian and Iranian-American spaces, I've had people reach out to say, 'I really want to pursue a Persian-language translation so that this book begins to circulate in Iran because we have cousins or people that we know that really want to learn more about this.' People have said, 'Would you consider recording an audiobook because my parents or grandparents don't like to read?' I've said to them I'll read it to them over the phone, but I don't think an audiobook is in the works. Just that's been totally exciting and a kind of immediate sense of gratification for sure.

CD: It's amazing to know that it's resonated with that many people, and as you say, beyond the academic audience.

NM: Yeah, because you always, I think, write with some audiences in mind. I think unabashedly at different points in the writing process I had prioritized this community of diasporic Iranians. There were times where I think other people in sociology either questioned that choice or wanted me to sort of pause and take stock of what I might be giving up to have made that decision. Ultimately I think that it reached the audience that I actually had in mind. Maybe that's not the same audience that other folks in my field more broadly are looking to write for.

CD: The last question I have, I've mentioned this season of VIEW to the U is a focus on women in academia and so the discussion of promoting and supporting women in all careers is an ongoing dialogue, but I was just wondering if you have personally come across any challenges in the course of your career, or if you have words of encouragement, or sometimes what's been brought up in this space is if there was a mentor that sort of inspired you to continue on. Any of that.

NM: Yeah. I think the challenges facing women in academia are connected to the challenges facing women in all career tracks. Some of the specifics may be

different but, nonetheless, these occupations, these industries, they all were designed to promote and benefit and serve, in every case, white men. That's all of it. That's not specific to academia. I think at best, this career is one that tolerates queer people. It tolerates women of color. But there isn't anything that I've experienced that *resembles* kind of acceptance, much less thriving. That sounds really negative or cynical, but I think that when I look across the character of women's work in a variety of fields that's pretty much the state of affairs.

There was just a study that came out, a report yesterday that said across sort of different occupations in the wider field of higher education, women of color make 67 cents on the dollar to what white men make. That's across administration and faculty and staff. Collectively 67 cents on the dollar.

I think a sociologist might say we could start with the material. We could actually start with equity in pay. I would say what has characterized the better parts of my trajectory in stark contrast to places where I struggled really was about cultivating a network of mentors or even something I'll share, which was like a piece of lingo I picked up along the way since starting the job at U of T, which is cultivating a network of *sponsors*.

You can think of sponsors as somewhat different than mentors. Mentors are kind of in the trenches with you helping you through kind of the ticky-tacky of everyday life and your job. It's good to have more than one. You're sort of sharing the load and getting multiple perspectives.

Also, that it's so key in this career to have sponsors. That's someone who sort of would vouch for you. They have access to opportunities or networks that you don't because actually they sort of in the power structure occupy a higher position than you. Cultivating a network of sponsors as well who aren't doing sort of the on-the-ground mentoring or peer mentoring with you but can sort of put your name forward when those little niches or those windows open up, that that's key.

I realize in my trajectory the places where I had momentum and where I just felt like I had synergy between my life, my goals, my career were these moments where mentors and sponsors either revealed themselves to me or it was serendipity we found one another.

Then there have been times throughout the career track where the mentors or even sort of peer mentoring, colleagues, that has felt more fraught or more frayed, those connections. Yeah, to the extent that women or other marginalized people in whatever occupation can lift one another up and find one another and cultivate those sorts of relationships, I think is really key.

It's interesting right now as Assistant Professor to be stepping into a more mentoring function for scholars who are coming up through undergrad or

graduate school, post-docs. Right now I kind of feel like I'm in between. I still need some mentorship *profoundly*, but also I'm being asked to mentor in new ways that are really challenging and interesting too.

CD: I just wanted to thank you so much for coming in today.

NM: Thank you.

[Theme music fades in & plays]

Carla DeMarco: I would like to thank everyone for listening to today's show.

I would like to thank my guest, Neda Maghbouleh, for telling us about her research in the Department of Sociology at U of T Mississauga. And if you would like to hear the full version of the interview that I recorded with Neda and her colleague Jasmine Rault, who has appointments in both the Department of Sociology and the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology, please visit our SoundCloud page for the 2018 season of "Women in Academia" [<https://soundcloud.com/user-642323930/beyond-limits-neda-maghbouleh-and-jasmine-rault>].

Thank you to the Office of the Vice-Principal, Research, for their support.

Please consider taking a moment to rate the podcast in iTunes. It helps others find this show.

Feel free to get in touch with me, my contact information is on our SoundCloud page, if you have feedback or if there is someone from UTM that you'd like to see featured on *VIEW to the U* in the future.

Lastly and as always, thank to Tim Lane for his tunes and support.

Thank you!

[Theme music fades out]