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LEARNING THROUGH LIFE TRANSITIONS: RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON MIGRATION, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relational dynamics that shape learning during life course transitions, particularly in the context of migration. Adopting a relational doing transitions framework, the study investigates how the interplay between transitions, such as migration and transitions into parenthood, along with different actors influences learning processes. Data were collected through 20 biographical-narrative interviews with those dubbed "skilled" migrants to Canada and analysed using the documentary method. The analysis empirically underscores that learning is co-produced through complex social interactions, rather than being an isolated individual process. The findings suggest that aspects such as family roles, cultural dislocation, and gender norms can both enable and constrain learning during transitions. This research challenges linear models of transitions, highlighting the intertwined nature of personal and social dimensions in shaping learning experiences and educational opportunities. The paper concludes by emphasising that adult education practices must consider these relational factors to better support persons navigating transitions during times of societal change.

Keywords: *transitions, learning, migration, family, community, gender*

UČENJE NA PODLAGI ŽIVLJENJSKIH PREHODOV: RELACIJSKI POGLEDI NA MIGRACIJE, DRUŽINO IN SKUPNOST – POVZETEK

Članek obravnava relacijsko dinamiko, ki vpliva na učenje ob prehodih v življenjskem toku, zlasti v kontekstu migracij. Na podlagi relacijskega okvira življenjskih prehodov raziskava odgovarja na vprašanje, kako medsebojni vpliv med prehodi, kot so migracije in prehodi v starševstvo, skupaj z različnimi akterji učinkuje na učne procese. Podatki so bili zbrani z 20 biografsko-narativnimi intervjuji s tako imenovanimi usposobljenimi migranti, namenjenimi v Kanado, in analizirani z dokumentarno metodo. Analiza empirično prikazuje, da se učenje soustvarja v okviru kompleksnih družbenih interakcij, torej ne gre za izoliran proces na individualni ravni. Ugotovitve kažejo, da lahko dejavniki, kot so družinske vloge, kulturna dislokacija in spolne norme, tako spodbujajo kot omejujejo učenje med prehodi. V raziskavi je poudarjena prepletenost osebnih in družbenih razsežnosti pri oblikovanju učnih izkušenj in izobraževalnih priložnosti, s čimer kljubuje linearnim modelom prehodov. Prispevek se končuje s poudarkom, da morajo prakse izobraževanja odraslih upoštevati te relacijske dejavnike in v času družbenih sprememb osebam pri prehodih ponuditi kakovostnejšo podporo.

Ključne besede: *prehodi, učenje, migracije, družina, skupnost, spol*

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INTRODUCTION

Times of societal, technological, and environmental change are associated with an increasing diversity of transitions with which individuals are compelled to engage. These transitions can serve as opportunities for learning (Ecclestone et al., 2009; Hof & Bernhard, 2022, 2025; Merriam, 2005) but may also act as a requirement that is imposed upon individuals (She & Bernhard, 2025). Learning in the context of transitions has been studied in different life course domains, such as worklife transitions (Billett et al., 2021), transitions between educational contexts (Field & Lynch, 2015) or in the context of migration (Bernhard, 2023a, 2023b; Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Although these studies address the relationships between the individual and the social to a certain extent, the relationships among different subjects whose transitions are linked are often relegated to the background. Although learning is acknowledged to be inherently socially situated (Lave, 2019; Lave et al., 2026), there is a need to further empirically analyse and theoretically conceptualise this situatedness. This paper addresses this need by focusing on the relationships among various actors to analyse learning during transitions as relational and co-produced. Thus, the question guiding this paper is: How do the relational dynamics between individual and social dimensions shape learning during life course transitions, particularly in the context of migration, and what role do these dynamics play in co-producing and influencing learning processes? This lens will drive a deeper analysis of how norms associated with family roles and gender, community ties and institutional interactions shape learning opportunities.

This paper draws on a research project involving 20 adults who moved to Canada as "skilled" migrants, having obtained a post-secondary level education prior to arrival. Earlier findings from this project point to different ways in which the interviewed migrants learn to engage with migration-related challenges associated with boundary-making processes (Bernhard, 2022), structural discrimination in the labour market (Bernhard, 2023a) and with regard to the temporal dimensions of migration (Bernhard, 2023b). Building on these prior studies, this paper focuses on the *linkages* between different life course transitions, for example, migration and the transition into parenthood, and the relationships between different actors that participate in the transition, such as family members, migration regimes or societal norms.

After a review of the literature pertaining to learning and the relational dimensions of migration, the theoretical perspective of *doing transitions* adopted in this study will be elaborated upon. I will then describe the research design before presenting and discussing the findings with a focus on their conceptual and procedural implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW: LEARNING THROUGH MIGRATION

Transitions in the life course can serve as an impetus for learning, understood not solely as an individual transformation of orientations, frames of reference, mindsets, and meaning perspectives, but as a socially situated phenomenon (Bernhard et al., in press;

Hof & Bernhard, 2025). Of particular interest for the study of learning in transitions are thus not only the individual responses to disruptions and dilemmas but also the social dimensions. After all, "people make and have experiences in and of the social world. They interpret and reflect on these experiences against the backdrop of perspectives and expectations deemed relevant in this social world" (Hof & Bernhard, 2025, p. 9). One particular transition during which such active and socially embedded interpretation of experiences can be investigated is migration in adulthood (Bernhard, 2024; Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2022). Previous studies have explored learning how to integrate into the labour market (Kloubert & Hoggan, 2021; Liu & Guo, 2021; Nohl et al., 2014), the potential for and the challenges of transformative learning (Eschenbacher, 2020; Morrice, 2012), the temporal dimensions of learning in migration (Bernhard, 2023b), the skill regimes to be navigated (Bernhard, in press; Shan & Fejes, 2015), and learning how to deal with barriers to the recognition of prior learning and experience (Bernhard, 2023a; Guo & Shan, 2013).

Shifting the focus beyond the individual processes of dealing with the challenges of migration, a body of research emphasises the linkages among migration, family, and gender. According to Apitzsch (2013, p. 99), it is thus more appropriate to speak of a "dialectics of family-migration" rather than of individual migration pathways. Migration and gender are deeply interconnected, with gender dynamics influencing migration patterns and outcomes (Amelina & Lutz, 2019; Mora & Piper, 2021). As Lutz and Amelina (2017) argue, a gender-focused approach in migration research sharpens the analysis by focusing on gendered occupational sectors, the unequal distribution of domestic and care work, and the changes in the welfare regimes within both countries of destination and of origin.

Haas et al. (2020) have observed a feminisation of migration, driven by shifts in labour migration patterns. While in the past labour migration was predominantly associated with male-dominated professions, and women's migration was largely categorised under "family reunification", the authors note an increasing demand for labour in the service and care sectors in many regions, such as the rapidly growing Gulf region, which is predominantly met by female migrants (Haas et al., 2020, p. 180). In this context, Parreñas (2000) highlights a complex international division of care work which has given rise to "global care chains" (Hochschild, 2014) and has expanded the career opportunities of many middle-class women in destination countries:

> Ironically, women in industrialized (Western) countries are often assumed to be more liberated than women are in developing countries. Yet, many women are able to pursue careers as their male counterparts do because disadvantaged migrant women and other women of color are stepping into their old shoes and doing their household work for them. As women transfer their reproductive labor to less and less privileged women, we can see that the traditional division of labor in the patriarchal nuclear household has not been significantly renegotiated in various countries in the world. (Parreñas, 2000, pp. 577–578)

The objective of this paper is to cast a spotlight on the interplay of migration with different life course transitions and to elaborate on how the relationships between different actors enable and constrain learning during transitions. The primary focus of this paper will be on learning processes – broadly understood as changing participation in everyday practice (Lave, 2019, p. 1) – particularly outside of formalised arrangements. However, as will be shown, the data and analysis indicate that transitions and relations also impact opportunities and constraints in formal education, commonly understood as contexts in which "responsibility for developing the knowledge, skills, and identity of students rests with the educator or the educational institutions" (Rasmussen, 2017, p. 98).[1]

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: DOING TRANSITIONS RELATIONALLY

To bring into view the interplay between individual and social dimensions of transitions, I take a *doing transitions* perspective, which posits that transitions are formed and influenced by social practices and continually evolve through the interplay of discourses, institutional regulation, and individual learning and coping processes (Walther et al., 2022, p. 5). This perspective further holds "that transitions are not individual as much they are relational – constantly co-produced or shared with, conditioned by, or otherwise involving multiple others who are constructing and enacting roles and relationships and interpreting behavior in a social world" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 237). The authors point to the limitation posed by common perceptions of linear, choice-based, and isolated transitions: for instance, person A decides to migrate from country B to country C:

> However, in contrast to the normativity underlying an 'institutionalized' life course, transitions most often are not linear and unidimensional but are instead complex and involve interpersonal and nonlinear processes. Linear conceptualizations of educational, occupational, or other types of life trajectories too often attribute or reduce those trajectories to individual choices, obscuring the complexity of life course transitions. (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 239)

Instead, transitions are to be seen as intertwined with other people (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 239), which prompts discussion of *linked lives* (Elder, 1994; Settersten, 2015) and *linked transitions* in space and time (Nägler & Wanka, 2022). Moreover, transitions occur in larger socio-political contexts and are shaped by "institutional regulation that reinforces genderism, bodyism, racism, classism, and ageism" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 240).

A relational perspective of transitions further brings into view "patterns of relationality", which is to say that different configurations, strengths, or directions of the relationship

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1   For further discussions on the conceptual relationship among learning, education, and everyday life, see Dreier (2011), Kemmis et al. (2024), Laros et al. (2017), and Lave et al. (2026). Arguing against a notion that limits learning to educational institutions and practices, Billett et al. (2023, p. 424) propose the concept of *educative experiences*, which comprise not only intentional arrangements in educational institutions but more broadly any affordances provided to individuals by communities and in the course of daily living.

which, rather than constituting distinct forms, may operate simultaneously or interactively (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 241). These patterns include *determination*, understood as "activity that directly affects changes in the world" or *coincidence* as a temporal relation without the claims of causality associated with determination (Settersten et al., 2022, pp. 242–244). Further, relationality may emerge as an *interactive spiral* which "refers to the diversity of actors and processes involved and their effects over time, creating loose relationships or indirect chains of activities" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 244). More complex than this interactive spiral is the relationality of *genealogy*, as it "brings a longer time frame into view and involves more institutionalized rules, leaving power even more dispersed across a greater variety of actors, dimensions, and times" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 245). Lastly, the pattern of demarcation points to the marking of boundaries, and differentiation as well as processes of inclusion, exclusion, and othering associated with transitions (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 247).

This relational notion of transitions – as will be argued in this paper – is central to understanding learning processes in the context of migration. As migrants transition into new environments, their learning is influenced by their social relationships and networks, turning learning into a co-constructed process rather than an individual one. These relational dynamics influence how migrants adapt, negotiate their identities, and acquire new skills, often determining the success of their integration into their new environments. Conceptually drawing on relationality allows for a deeper analysis of how family roles, community ties, and institutional interactions either facilitate or constrain learning opportunities. This perspective underscores that learning during migration is deeply interwoven within social contexts, where the interplay between personal agency and social structures becomes critical.

In this paper, I will empirically explore these relational dimensions by drawing on the research design described below.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Data and Sample

This study's findings stem from a larger research project examining learning processes throughout adult migration. Data were gathered between February and August 2021 through biographical-narrative interviews (Chase, 2018; Schütze, 1983) with 20 individuals who had moved to Canada as adults from the following countries: Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Germany, France, India, Cameroon, Kenya, Mexico, Nepal, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine. I chose narrative interviews as I am interested in individual meaning-making and the re-construction of the transition experience and learning processes, including relationships with other actors. Biographical-narrative interviews offer "a way of empirically capturing the diversity, complexity, and transformational character of migration phenomena and of reconstructing them" (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007, p. 3).

As this study is interested in post-arrival processes and the ways in which persons deal with the (non-)transfer of previously acquired skills and experiences, I selected participants based on their having moved to Canada three or more years ago and on having obtained a post-secondary level of education outside of Canada before their initial arrival. This focus on so-called "highly skilled migrants" aims to bring into view the ambivalences of ostensible desirability – as expressed through skills-focused migration regimes – and the challenges faced by this group of migrants. These challenges include precarious employment (Ellis & Triantaphyllidu, 2023), discounting of previously acquired skills and experience (Nohl et al., 2014; Reitz et al., 2014), and subtle yet persistent forms of discrimination that have been described as "racism without racists" (Ku et al., 2018, p. 291). Thus, choosing to conduct the interviews three or more years after arrival allowed the interviewees to share their experiences regarding settlement and integration processes which may take several years.

The study participants were recruited through iterative opportunity sampling, assisted by organisations that employed or worked with migrants, with the goal of including participants from different countries of origin, genders, and occupations. At the time of the interview, the research participants were between 27 and 62 years of age and had arrived in Canada between 3 and 21 years prior. Whereas the commonality of the sample is the circumstance of having been born outside of Canada and having moved to that country, it shall be noted that from a relational and intersectional perspective, the migration experience is but one dimension that shapes individual experiences. In addition, and as has become clear in the analysis, the research participants carry other roles and potential markers of difference, such as those related to family and caregiving responsibilities, gender, and age.

The interviews were conducted following the approach to narrative interviews as outlined by Schütze (1983), encouraging participants to "speak off the cuff about a part of their everyday life that is of interest to the researchers, be it their entire life story or just their working life" (Nohl, 2010, p. 196). The interview participants were asked to narrate their stories with the following prompt: "To begin, could you please tell me your life story? I will listen and make some notes, and I will not interrupt you until you have finished. Please take as much time as you feel necessary and tell me all the details you remember that, in your opinion, are connected to your living in Canada." After the initial narrations, follow-up questions were asked regarding topics raised by the interview participants, as well as questions from the interview guide that had not yet been addressed. These topics included challenges encountered by the interview participants, their ways of dealing with them, as well as the role and actions of others involved in the transition.

Analysis

The data were analysed using the documentary method (DM; Bohnsack, 2014; Nohl, 2010), which originated in Mannheim's (1936/1982) sociology of knowledge and distinguishes between communicative or theoretical knowledge, and practical or conjunctive knowledge. The latter can be understood as meaning perspectives based on "implicit or

tacit knowledge which guides our practical action" (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 220). Applied to the analysis of interviews, DM presupposes that "what is communicated verbally and explicitly in interview texts is not the only element of significance to the empirical analysis, but that it is above all necessary to reconstruct the meaning that underlies and is implied" (Nohl, 2010, p. 200). Put differently, the narrations document different patterns of experience, orientation, and action that are to be reconstructed. Thus, I interpreted not only what was being said but also reflected on how it was being said. Of interest were modes and figures of speech, such as positive or negative images, or counter-horizons, which point to participants' implicit knowledge and frames of orientation.

Following this approach, I first identified thematically dense passages by initial coding. I then conducted analyses of individual cases through formulating and reflecting interpretation, followed by comparisons across different cases. The goal was to reconstruct and contrast different forms of experiencing and processing transitions with particular attention to the role of other social actors and societal norms and their enabling and constraining effect on learning.

FINDINGS

The interview analysis points to several relational factors which enable and constrain learning during transitions in different ways. These are personal and family-level factors, belonging and cultural dislocation and issues of personal agency, as well as gender roles. In the following section, these factors will be elaborated upon more thoroughly by drawing on interview excerpts.

Personal Factors and Family Dynamics

The process of migration presents individuals with multifaceted challenges that are deeply embedded in social and relational contexts. The relational dynamics between individual and social dimensions significantly shape the ways in which learning occurs during these life course transitions. Particularly at the personal and family level, these dynamics manifest in both enabling and constraining factors, influencing how migrants navigate their new environments and integrate into their host societies. By clustering key themes from the interviews, this section explores how family roles, cultural tensions, personal agency, and gendered responsibilities shape learning processes in the context of migration.

Family is often the primary unit through which migrants experience both support and constraint during their transitions. The dual role of the family as both a source of emotional and practical support as well as a potential limitation of individual opportunities is evident in the participants' narratives. Families serve as crucial support systems that help migrants manage the disruptions and challenges associated with moving to a new country. The collective resilience of the family unit can mitigate the stresses of migration, enabling smoother transitions and facilitating learning. For example, this interviewee reflects on how her family's collective effort helped them cope with the initial shock of relocation:

> We started to slowly adapt to [the] Canadian way of life: very few people on the road, a sense of isolation, and people would tell us, 'Oh, during summer you'll see a lot of people outside', except that we never ever really saw that many people as we expected. So, there was all this adjusting initially. Thankfully because we were immigrating as a unit of a family, we were able to sort of, I think, absorb that shock within ourselves and were busy at the same time. (A. B.)

This shared experience of navigating a new environment can foster a sense of unity and mutual support, which the interview participants experience as essential for adapting to new social norms and learning the unwritten rules of their new society. In another instance, a different interviewee highlights the importance of extended family support in helping his immediate family through tough times, illustrating the crucial role that the extended family network plays in the adaptation process:

> And these moments of my layoffs were very painful for me. But I was trying to show my children resilience, even my daughter, which is a very down to earth person. She said, 'What's going on with you, they laid you off for a second time?' So, of course, we're very lucky at the end that we had the support of my wife's family. They're really amazing people. So we felt supported. (B. Y.)

However, the responsibilities associated with family life can also act as significant constraints, particularly when these responsibilities conflict with individual aspirations. For many migrants, the need to prioritise family stability often means delaying or forgoing personal educational or career goals. This interviewee's experience of postponing her plans to ensure her children's well-being is a poignant example of this:

> The longer I stayed there, the longer I worked, the more it became clear to me that I would need at some point go back to school to be able to take a new direction. […] At the same time our family grew, we had another baby. So, we had to recalculate our … the things that … originally, I was going to do school, for instance. I put that on the backburner because now I had, you know, a family that needed me. (A. B.)

This tension between personal aspirations and family responsibilities can lead to feelings of frustration and sacrifice, where the individual's opportunities for learning and professional development are curtailed. Another interviewee's narrative further illustrates how the decision to prioritise family needs led to a more settled, yet constrained, lifestyle:

> So, when they eventually came over, my son … when they came over, I think he was almost two months shy of two years and he was a walking stand up baby, so he came there and when he was two, three, walking around and it was a pleasure seeing him grow. And I thought, 'Okay, now I have somebody I have to work for: my family. I need to do something for them, I'm not going to be a nomad

my whole life, looking for one place or the other', probably that's what settled it for me. (A. I.)

Cultural Dislocation and Intergenerational Search for Belonging

The experience shared by the interview participants indicates that migration often entails a profound sense of cultural dislocation, where the familiar cultural practices and social norms of their prior country of residence clash with those of their new environment. This cultural tension is particularly acute at the family level, as migrants strive to maintain their cultural identity while adapting to a new environment. This paradox of belonging – where one feels torn between different cultural worlds – both enables and constrains learning.

For many migrant families, the dislocation is most strongly felt in the intergenerational transmission of cultural values. This interviewee discusses the challenge of raising children in a cultural context that is vastly different from their own upbringing, which complicates the preservation of cultural heritage:

> I was raised as a Hindu, and I have that South Indian culture which is a very specific type of an environment. And when we all moved here, my brothers, my siblings and my family and my cousins, everybody moved here [at] once. A big struggle that we go through is the next generation, right, the next generation is growing up in an environment that is not similar to the one that we grew up in, part of our cultural values part of our background, the language, values that we picked up from our world, the rituals that we do. They were … they are all lost, and the other challenge that I'm finding is, as they grow up, they grow up in this environment and they're not compatible with their counterparts in India, and they think that they can't find a partner or a spouse. (N. K.)

This disconnection from their cultural roots can lead to a sense of loss and identity fragmentation, particularly for the younger generation, who may find it challenging to align their parents' cultural expectations with their new social realities. This cultural dislocation not only affects personal identity but also complicates learning processes, as the norms and values underpinning education and social interaction may differ significantly from those in their prior country of residence. Yet, as this excerpt indicates, this challenging intergenerational family dynamic may also stimulate learning precisely by becoming aware of the cultural disconnection and identity fragmentation as the younger generation grows up.

Conversely, the establishment of a family in the new country of residence can facilitate a deeper sense of belonging, which in turn enhances the learning experience. Having a family can anchor individuals in their new environment, providing them with a sense of purpose and connection that eases the transition and fosters social integration. A different interviewee's narrative reveals how her sense of belonging in Canada deepened not through obtaining formal education but only after starting a family, which also marked the point at which she began to feel more integrated into Canadian society:

I actually started feeling at home when I actually had a family here in Canada. Because when I came to Canada, I was single. Basically, when you don't have the responsibility of family you are just … you are basically like a free bird, like a bachelor, right? You don't have anything else to do, you just enjoy what is there, what is the environment you're in because you chose to be there, so you enjoy that you … you have your focus on getting your degree and get everything done and then get a job, so I kept doing that. So, I actually started feeling [at] home when I actually had my family, I got married, I had my kid, and that's when I actually started feeling home in Canada. (M. J.)

As the interviews indicate, this process of establishing a home and family life in a new country can be seen as a form of social integration, where the family unit becomes a microcosm of the larger society, helping individuals to learn and internalise the social norms and practices of the new country of residence. The excerpts also point to the situated nature of learning and the significance of others who are joined and linked to the transitioners in different ways.

Personal Agency and the Impact of Family Decisions

The decisions made within the family unit – such as who pursues employment and who manages household responsibilities – have significant implications for individual learning and educational opportunities. These decisions often reflect broader social norms and power dynamics within the family, which can either empower or constrain personal agency, learning, and educational aspirations.

Family decisions often require individuals, particularly women, to make sacrifices that prioritise the needs of the family over personal aspirations. This interviewee's narrative highlights this dynamic, in which her husband's career took precedence, and she assumed the role of the primary caregiver, delaying her own educational and professional development:

> And then I was really focused on getting the kids settled, so we agreed that I wouldn't look for a job immediately in a new space like that. We wanted to make sure that our kids were as well adjusted as possible. So we agreed that my husband would look for a job first and I would help the kids transition to the new way of life throughout the summer. (A. B.)

Such decisions underscore the gendered nature of agency within the family, where traditional roles may limit the opportunities available to women, forcing them to defer their ambitions in favour of fulfilling family obligations.

Similarly, a different interviewee reflects on how her children's needs influenced her decision to settle in Canada despite her personal adaptability and willingness to live in other countries. This decision, driven by the desire to provide a stable environment and better educational opportunities for her children, constrained her ability to pursue her own aspirations:

> And I was thinking, maybe for my kids growing up and my kids settling in comparison, I started comparing the two countries, and I was starting to feel in a long-term basis Canada was a better place for my kids. Not necessarily me, I can live anywhere, I can live here, I could live in the UK, I could go back to Kenya. But I started feeling, in terms of settling down for my kids, Canada would be a better country education-wise. (A. O.)

This illustrates how family decisions, while necessary for ensuring stability, support, and opportunities for children, can also limit the scope of personal agency and constrain individual learning and career opportunities.

Gendered Constraints on Learning and Education

Gender roles within the family context significantly influence learning opportunities, particularly in how responsibilities are distributed between partners. Often, greater caregiving responsibilities are placed on women, which may restrict their ability to engage in learning, education, and professional development.

Among the interviewees, traditional gender expectations constrain women's opportunities for learning and education by placing the burden of caregiving and household management on them. This interviewee's experience exemplifies this, as her role as a mother and wife dictated her professional and educational choices, leading her to delay her career aspirations in favour of her family's needs:

> So I went back to Germany. But, of course, I cannot stay there by myself, but at that time I was [a] student. I changed my status from dependent to a stud– … that I can study. That's the only thing I can do. And then, because my first child was born, so I think, 'That's not good,' so I moved from Germany, give up my study and to Japan. Again, when I went to Japan, I became a dependent again, so my status is dependent on my husband's status, and I don't feel I can work. (L. K.)

This interviewee's moves were brought about by her husband's studies and academic work, which took him first to Germany, then to Japan and finally to Canada. As the excerpt indicates, she was able to leave the status of a "dependent" behind by taking up formal education, only to lose that independence again upon having a child and following her husband to Japan. This contrasts with the interests she developed in China, her country of birth:

> And in China you are educated as [a] woman, [it] is the same as [a] man … the women get the same opportunity of education, work, every- … so in my mind I cannot depend on my husband and the feeling of wanting to work is so strong, especially in China, especially when you have [a] very good education. […] So I thought, 'Why should I stay at home as a …', because at that time I didn't value

> mother to stay at home but now I changed my mind. After, in Canada, now I changed my mind, I regretted … I actually enjoyed the time staying home, staying home [as a] mother, taking care of two kids. (L. K.)

Here, the interviewee experiences and processes the tension between her original expectations regarding gender relations, her work aspirations, and the roles she now inhabits. While she initially did not value being a stay-at-home mum, her perspective shifted and she learned not only to embrace but to enjoy taking care of her children.

This narrative highlights the internal conflict that many women face between fulfilling traditional gender roles and pursuing their own professional and educational goals. The pressure to conform to these roles often results in the postponement or abandonment of personal aspirations, limiting the potential for learning, education, and career development.

However, migration can also provide an opportunity for renegotiating gender roles within the family, as the new social context may offer different opportunities and challenges. The narrative of another interviewee illustrates how migrating to Canada allowed her to eventually pursue further education and career development, although this was initially delayed due to family responsibilities:

> My ex-husband at that time was planning to do his Master's in Canada, so I came with him. So while he was studying, I was at home, a stay-at-home mum. And when we got our permanent resident status, then I was able to go for applying for OSAP [student assistance loan] and I had more resources and I took more education after that, after I got my permanent residency. So coming to Canada, it was mostly my ex-husband's education plan, but we really enjoyed living here … and financially and education-wise, we can offer more for our kids, so we decided to stay long term. (D. A.)

This renegotiation of roles, while gradual, reflects the potential for migration to open up new avenues for learning and professional development, particularly for women who may have been constrained by traditional gender roles in their prior countries of residence.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings indicate that the relational dynamics at the personal and family levels play a critical role in shaping learning during life course transitions in the context of migration. Families act as both enablers and constraints, providing support systems that facilitate adaptation while also imposing responsibilities that can limit personal agency and learning opportunities. Cultural dislocation and the search for belonging further complicate these dynamics, as migrants navigate the tension between maintaining their cultural identity and integrating into their new society. Gender roles within family structures introduce additional complexity, frequently restricting women's opportunities for learning and

career progression. Understanding these dynamics is essential to more fully understand learning processes in adulthood during times of change.

Table 1 summarises the findings by categorising the key factors that shape learning during life course transitions, particularly within the relational dimensions of migration and family dynamics. This matrix highlights how family networks, cultural dislocation, belonging, agency, and gender roles function as both enablers and constraints in the learning process. Family support and the search for belonging, for example, can foster emotional resilience and adaptation, thereby facilitating learning. However, these same relational dimensions often impose constraints, where family obligations and cultural tensions restrict individual aspirations and professional growth.

The complex and sometimes contradictory nature of these relational factors is particularly evident in the intersection of traditional gender roles and personal agency. While migration can create opportunities to renegotiate such roles, the analysis has shown that it may also reinforce expectations that limit educational and career opportunities, particularly for women. The table thus provides a framework for understanding the ambivalent ways in which relational dynamics may both enable and constrain learning and education during complex life transitions.

Table 1

Social dimensions that enable and constrain learning and education in migratory transitions

Dimension	Enabling	Constraining
Family as a source of support and constraint	Emotional and practical support, collective resilience, shared experience	Delayed personal goals, prioritisation of family over individual aspirations
Cultural dislocation	Sense of unity through shared challenges, establishment of belonging	Identity fragmentation, generational cultural disconnection
Search for belonging	Deeper sense of belonging through family establishment	Tension between cultural identity and social realities of the new environment
Personal agency	Agency in navigating and adapting to new roles	Sacrificing personal aspirations for family stability and children's educational opportunities
Gender roles	Opportunity for renegotiating traditional roles in a new context	Traditional roles limiting learning and professional development

Conceptually, the empirical findings of this study further differentiate a relational understanding of transitions that takes into account the significance of other actors (Settersten et al., 2022). Through interactive spirals, actors and processes related to family and community may create indirect chains of activities, sometimes at once enabling and constraining learning. Further, the findings – particularly on the enabling and constraining effects of gender roles – point to relationality in the sense of genealogy, which draws attention to longer timeframes, rules, and norms that have an effect on shaping the transition.

The social dimensions investigated in this paper thus identify different ways in which the precarity and contingency of transitions can have enabling and constraining effects on learning. Although the social aspects of learning are inherent in common adult learning theories such as pragmatism or transformative learning, they have often been relegated to a secondary position in interpretations that focus primarily on individual reflection and the processing of experiences (Hoggan, 2018; Strübing, 2017, pp. 44–45). The social dynamic of transitions – with particular regard to family arrangements and gender roles – discussed in this paper supports the view that learning during transitions should be understood as a social practice, and the relational nature of individual experience processing is fundamental to this understanding (Hof & Bernhard, 2025, p. 9). Learning thus appears not merely as a reaction to teaching but as a socially, culturally, and politically situated part of everyday life (Lave, 2019, p. 129; Lave et al., 2026). Moreover, the findings better illuminate the modes in which the "dialectics of family-migration" (Apitzsch, 2013, p. 99) affect learning opportunities both positively and negatively. The findings also differentiate the community contributions to learning in transitions (Billett et al., 2023), where community is broadly understood to encompass "affordances outside of the person such as family and familiars, ethnic/cultural affiliates, workplaces, opportunity, societal sentiment, or happenstance" (p. 428). As the findings of this study show, the learning of the individual and their community is linked in particular configurations that are of either an enabling or a constraining nature.

Procedurally, the findings indicate the ambivalent and nuanced nature of family relationships that are to be considered in the provisions of adult education programming: while mandating full attendance in language classes may in some cases exclude participants with childcare responsibilities, it may in other cases be a strong argument for reconfiguring childcare responsibilities within and beyond the family. However, as "government and public discourses are too often individualized and translated into questions of individual competencies and responsibility" (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 250), the relational approach taken in this paper serves to elaborate upon the ways in which transitions are entangled in ever-changing relationships and subject to varying societal norms, power structures, and cultural expectations.

While this research provides detailed insights into aspects of learning during life course transitions, the analysis is based on narrative interviews conducted at a certain point in time. Therefore, the narrated life stories are situated co-constructions created through the interaction between interviewee and interviewer (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). The co-construction of narratives between interviewer and interviewee may introduce biases, such as the potential influence of the interviewer's questions on the responses, or the tendency for participants to present their experiences in a more coherent and socially acceptable manner. These biases could be addressed by employing longitudinal studies that track changes in learning processes over time, or ethnographic methods that allow for more in-depth observation of learning practices. Building on the analysis of social dimensions and their enabling and constraining effects on learning presented here, continued work could

study the implications of these dimensions further to better understand and support adult learning during times of change.

This paper addressed the question of how the relational dynamics between individual and social dimensions shape learning during life course transitions, particularly in the context of migration and societal change. Adopting a relational doing transitions perspective, this study brought into view the relationships between different actors that participate in the transition, such as family members and the broader community. The findings provide a more differentiated and empirically founded picture of learning during life course transitions as co-dependent and intertwined with the actions and roles of other actors. Of the social dimensions discussed in this paper – family, cultural dislocation, the search for belonging, agency, and gender roles – most have been shown to have the potential to either enable or constrain learning and educational opportunities in transitions during times of societal change.

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