REIMAGINING SETTLEMENT SERVICES SO THAT THEY ARE ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-OPPRESSIVE: THE CARES (CO-DESIGNING FOR ANTI-RACISM AND EQUITY IN SETTLEMENT) PROJECT

Julie Rodier is a Principal Research Associate at the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), a not-for-profit research organization. She has extensive experience collaborating with community and government stakeholders in carrying out evaluations and research projects that are evidence-based and feasible in real-world settings to produce useful and relevant results for diverse groups. Much of Julie's work focuses on ensuring the long-term vitality of French-language minority communities and on improving integration and employment outcomes for newcomers to Canada.

Established in 1991 as a non-profit research organization with a mission to raise the standards of evidence in social policy and programs, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a full-service research and evaluation firm that designs and manages projects of many sizes and types across Canada, including program evaluations that involve formative, summative, implementation, impact and cost-benefit analyses; strategic program reviews; and policy analyses. To date, we have conducted over 450 projects across a wide range of sectors, including education and training, employment, migration, youth development, and health and well-being. SRDC is currently involved in leading and/or evaluating numerous projects focused on workforce development, essential skills training, demand-led approaches, and innovative solutions to support populations with significant and/or multiple barriers to employment.

This study is the result of the collective efforts and contributions of the entire CARES project team.

INTRODUCTION

CARES is a research project funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, concluded in March 2024. SRDC investigated how racism and discrimination affect newcomers' access to and experiences with settlement services. This project brought together lived experience, and professional experience to identify essential, meaningful, and achievable changes. The generated insights are a first step in reimagining settlement services free from oppression and racism.

METHODOLOGY

Our research project was conducted in two phases: inquiry and synthesis, and co-design.

Phase 1 involved gathering insights and inputs from newcomers based on their lived experiences, collecting information from immigrant-serving organizations (ISOs), and reviewing existing literature. This information was synthesized and used to facilitate the co-design workshops in Phase 2. As part of

this phase, we consulted with newcomers mainly through 17 focus groups (n=104 newcomers; in French and English) and an online survey (n=351). We also consulted with ISOs through an online survey (n=125).

Phase 2 brought ISOs and newcomers together through three (2 in EN, 1 in FR) co-design sessions to identify and develop ideas, priorities, and ultimately, actionable insights to remove racism and all forms of discrimination in settlement services. These sessions were conducted online with 47 individuals (17 from ISOs, and 30 newcomers).

A Gender-based Analysis Plus lens was applied throughout the project to ensure that project activities were inclusive and equitable.

EXPERIENCES OF RACISM, DISCRIMINATION, AND OPPRESSION IN SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION SERVICES

One of the key aims of this project was to understand the experiences of racism, discrimination, and oppression of newcomers in settlement and integration services. Half of the newcomers we consulted were satisfied with the settlement services they received. The varied satisfaction levels can potentially be explained by the experiences of discrimination and unfair treatment reported by participants, which was the primary focus of this research. In the newcomer survey, participants reported race (55%) as the top reason for their experience with discrimination followed by physical appearance (22%), language (22%), sexual orientation (11%), and religion (10%) while accessing settlement services, echoing existing research (Mohamed et al., 2022).

We grouped the experiences shared by newcomers and service providers into three categories: individual and interpersonal levels, organizational level, and a replication of oppression found outside of settlement services.

INDIVIDUAL AND INTERPERSONAL LEVELS

Many newcomer participants described experiencing racism, discrimination, and oppression in their interactions with individual service providers while accessing settlement and integration services. Although not named directly by newcomers, participants indicated several instances of racial microaggressions such as being treated differently by service providers compared to other clients because of their race or ethnicity, being neglected by service providers, and being ignored or talked down to by service providers.

Newcomers who accessed settlement and integration services described encounters with service providers who were not culturally understanding or sensitive to their needs, aligning with previous research findings (Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2019). These experiences of racism and oppression contributed to newcomer participants' feelings of frustration and disrespect. Service provider survey respondents acknowledged this perspective, explaining that settlement organizations lack service providers who understand the differing cultural needs of their newcomer clients and thus neglect to ask key questions to understand newcomers' unique situations. Newcomer participants noted that service providers' lack of cultural sensitivity enabled power imbalances and contributed to the marginalization of newcomers, consequently leading to feelings of discomfort for some newcomers when accessing settlement and integration services.

Black newcomer participants shared situations where service providers made negative assumptions about their education or field of work based on racial stereotypes. Both ISOs and newcomers agreed that service providers often make assumptions about the kinds of support or services newcomers need based on their country of origin or appearance. Participants described how being treated unfairly due to prejudice or receiving differential treatment compared to other non-Black newcomers contributed to the exclusion and marginalization of Black newcomers.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

Many newcomer participants described their experiences of oppression at an organizational level, where they were treated merely as a checkbox or part of a daily quota to be met by settlement organizations. Participants expressed frustration at not being seen as whole individuals and not receiving meaningful support, leading them to question the true intentions of settlement and integration services.

Newcomer participants' perceptions of service provider's lack of sensitivity and empathy due to the need to meet bureaucratic requirements, further highlighted the oppressive dynamics that exist at an organizational level. This dynamic often results in newcomers not being seen as individuals with unique needs and experiences but rather subjected to impersonal and insensitive treatment.

Unfortunately, these experiences reflect an administrative dynamic that one settlement provider participant referred to as "funding and reporting are based on colonial structures which create barriers for holistic service delivery." Funding and eligibility constraints within the settlement sector, as outlined by service providers participating in CARES, align with other research on the systemic environment that settlement services operate within (Thomas, 2015). In other words, while service providers understand the need to support newcomers holistically, one participant emphasized the tension between need and systemic constraints.

From this perspective, these findings emphasize how funding and reporting requirements may limit the ability of service providers to offer holistic support to newcomers.

REPLICATION OF OPPRESSION

Newcomers described situations where some service providers replicated oppressive practices commonly experienced while looking for employment and perpetuated discrimination from employers. Newcomer participants shared that service providers encouraged them to Anglicize their names on resumes or dismissed them as being overqualified without offering meaningful support on how to navigate the job market effectively. Several newcomer participants also spoke about service providers dismissing their individual employment goals and interests, despite their previous education and skills, and instead suggesting they pursue other paths or pushing newcomers to find "survival" jobs to obtain their initial Canadian work experience. This approach may replicate oppressive norms that devalue the needs and aspirations of newcomers.

IMPACTS OF RACISM, DISCRIMINATION, AND OPPRESSION ON ACCESS TO SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION SERVICES

When newcomer participants were asked to reflect on the impacts of discriminatory, racist, or oppressive experiences they had when accessing settlement and integration services, several participants reported these negative experiences decreased their self-confidence and sense of belonging in Canada. These encounters negatively affected their mental health and made them feel uncomfortable accessing future services because they feared they would encounter similar experiences.

Service provider respondents explained that racist and discriminatory experiences could negatively impact newcomers' trust in settlement services, self-confidence, sense of belonging, and physical and mental health (Drolet & Teixeira, 2022; George and Selimos, 2017; Thomas, 2021). These negative effects contribute to additional barriers and delays for newcomers to successfully integrate into Canada, as they face challenges accessing the settlement and integration services they need.

TOWARDS ANTI-OPPRESSIVE AND ANTI-RACIST SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION SERVICES

The co-design sessions brought together newcomers and ISOs to build on the experiences of racism and discrimination in settlement and integration services shared in this project. The aim was to reimagine settlement and integration services to be anti-racist and anti-oppressive.

> "For me, an ideal settlement service is one where you feel welcome and supported, so that you don't go there with worries, come back with the same worries, or come back feeling even more stressed. At least a place where, even if you don't necessarily have solutions to all your problems, you still have support until you're truly operational on the Canadian territory. And I also think that settlement services should be able to provide information in real-time and to everyone, to all those who have access to these settlement services. I'm thinking, for instance, of circumstances where people who use the same settlement service receive different information. For example, you meet another newcomer who uses the same settlement service as you, and he has information that you don't and tells you that he received it from that service. It would be nice if everyone was informed, I don't know, maybe by sending emails when there's an update. Why not inform everyone through the same service or channel? [...]. Support is very important." – Translated from a participant in the French co-design workshop.

The ideas and recommendations we heard from can be grouped into four categories:

1. Individual level (what people working in settlement organizations can do)
    - **Client empathy:** to better understand client needs, barriers, and experiences.
    - **Client-centered:** adjust service delivery to meet the needs of the client.
    - **Unconscious biases:** avoid assumptions based on characteristics such as ethnicity, culture, appearance, and gender.
    - **Information:** help clients navigate the system by sharing updated resources.
2. Interpersonal (how people and their interactions with clients matter)
    - **Trust:** building trust is a process that includes transparency, consistent communication, and generative listening.
    - **Diversity:** helpful to have staff working at organizations who understand the experiences of racialized newcomers.

3. Organizational (how organizational policy and strategies can reduce oppression)

    - **Training:** anti-oppressive and anti-racist training not only for front-line staff but agency-wide including decision makers.

    - **Accountability:** safe process/procedures for clients to provide feedback or file complaints.

    - **Policy and practice:** implement anti-racist, or respectful workplace policies and practices that are regularly reviewed.

4. Societal (macro-level, or what changes and advocacy will help change systemic oppression)

    - **Funding:** build anti-racism activities into funding proposals (e.g., include community of practice and lived expertise).

    - **Reconciliation:** meaningful partnerships with Indigenous organizations to ensure newcomers learn about Canada's colonial impact.

    - **Advocacy:** work with other groups (e.g., employers) to reduce systemic barriers

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the various ways newcomers encounter racism and oppression within settlement services. The pervasiveness of systemic racism and oppression undermines the purpose and effectiveness of settlement services, which are meant to help newcomers successfully settle in Canada. This underscores the importance of r proactive measures to address racism and unfair treatment in the settlement sector.

Efforts to promote equity and inclusion must go beyond simply acknowledging these issues. It is crucial for stakeholders within settlement organizations, policymakers, and communities to actively recognize and tackle these challenges. Taking specific and intentional steps to dismantle discriminatory structures and create supportive and empowering environments is essential. This involves actions as described in the CARES report, such as ongoing commitments to educating service providers about different cultures, ensuring diversity among those delivering and leading settlement services, delivering settlement services that are trauma-informed and person-centered, and making anti-racism within organizations a priority. Moreover, the voices and experiences of newcomers themselves must be central to these efforts, ensuring changes are responsive to their unique needs and realities.

By fostering a climate of understanding, empathy, and respect at all levels, settlement services can not only facilitate better settlement and integration for newcomers but also uphold the principles of fairness and dignity for everyone.

For additional information on this project, contact Julie Rodier, Principal Research Associate, at jrodier@srdc.org. *The report can be found on SRDC's website at* https://srdc.org.