# IMMIGRATION AND FAMILIES: INTRODUCTION

This issue of *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* provides a fascinating look at the complexities within which current debates about family class immigration and family reunification are immersed. Some of the articles focus specifically on issues related to family class immigration policy, while others take a broader perspective by examining the importance of the role of the family within the immigration experience. As one reads through the articles it is increasingly apparent that policy makers are faced with public voices fraught with competing discourses of economic, social, and cultural considerations, compassion and humanitarianism, and international legal obligations. It is also apparent that while using many of the same words the authors do not necessarily speak the same language. With no shared operational definition of concepts such as "successful integration" or "social and economic well-being" (let alone what constitutes the "best interests" of the nation), the possibilities for meaningful, policy-informative, cross-discursive discussion are not always readily apparent. Likewise, comparisons between individual research projects are hampered by contradictory measures of what constitutes an "immigrant family" and one must take care in making temporal comparisons without careful reference to DeShaw's article which maps the changes in immigration policy and definitions over time. In addition, the debate among the discourses is exacerbated by tensions between arguments made at the macro level and stories of human strength, adversity (and duplicity) evidenced at the micro level.

At the same time, none of the authors suggest that families are not an integral part of immigration. Decisions about whether to move and where to settle are usually family decisions (Lewis-Watts). Settlement and integration outcomes are closely tied to social capital, which itself is closely tied to families (Jedwab, Potter and Bergeron). Moreover, absence of families can have serious and negative impacts on the well-being of individuals (Dench, Pratt). Recognizing this, Canada's *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (2001) explicitly lists family reunification as one of its key objectives (Thomson). Nonetheless, we know very little about how families work together to achieve economic, social and cultural goals.

Perhaps a partial explanation for this gap is that existing data sources on immigration focus on the individual as the unit of analysis, rather than the family. Consequently, researchers, as Kustec points out, cannot estimate immigrants' actual family size. Rather, all that is known is the size of the immigrating family unit. This may represent only a portion of the actual family, and additional members may later join the family in Canada. Additionally, researchers cannot explore individual outcomes within the context of extended family circumstances and chain migration (Bailie and Denis). We are no more likely to know whether one successful skilled worker has managed to sponsor a whole network of "burdens" (as those who question the value of family class immigration would suggest) than we are to know whether, within the larger family context, there are balances between supportive and what appear to be dependent relationships. What is required are data that would allow us to link the sponsoring individual to those he or she has sponsored. This would enable us to assess existing immigration policies and programs from the more realistic perspective of the overall contributions of families, rather than the contribution of each immigrant individually.

In the same vein, we need to broaden the operational definitions and empirical base for what constitutes "contribution," and what we hope newcomers will contribute to Canada. Narrow definitions of "economic contribution" are not only too restrictive in what they capture, but they ignore immigrants' social contributions, not to mention the very rationale behind reunification policies (Telegdi). A number of the authors, including Sweetman, argue that the very nature of family class immigration requires a more holistic lens through which to view its impact. Sponsored family members are not selected explicitly for their potential contribution to the economy yet, in the absence of other indicators, the economic argument remains a powerful discourse against the value of family class immigration (Collacott). Moreover, definitions based on the "national interest" may minimize the importance of family class immigration and chain migration to regional economic development and the protection of official language minority communities (Fournier and Lara).

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An additional concern that runs through a number of the articles is the extent to which family class immigrants are characterized as vulnerable, dependent, and more of a burden than a benefit to Canadian society. This "deficiency discourse" is, in part, supported by the data limitations discussed above. It is also supported by the fact that considerable family class research does focus on vulnerable and dependent populations like elderly women (McLaren) and sponsored wives (Merali). Continuing research on these populations is critical if we are to foster an evidence-based approach to service delivery and reduce the extent to which Canadian policies may exacerbate vulnerabilities. However, within the current debate, it is crucial that the need to draw attention to vulnerabilities does not detract from the need to demonstrate value and success, as do Boyd and Vatz Laaroussi.

Conceptual and methodological issues, while certainly important, pale in comparison to some of the moral dilemmas posed by family-class immigration. This is particularly evident in the articles focusing on children, including those on refugees (Dench, Thomson) and adoptions (Daniel, Dorow and Lepatsky). Are regulations that permit the adoption only of "completely separated minors" justified? Are children forced to remain in poverty or harsh circumstances as a result? There are moral dilemmas on the trade-offs that countries are willing to make to balance their own national interests with international commitments on human rights and refugees. And there are dilemmas surrounding how we choose to define "family," which can result in dramatically different outcomes at both a micro and macro level (Triadafilopoulos).

The articles in this issue clearly demonstrate the need for more policy relevant research on immigration and families, including more emphasis on the family class. A few suggestions are offered here. First, we need to start generating longitudinal data that will allow us to explore the overall social, political, cultural and economic well-being of immigrant families, not just individuals. Given the family's critical role in connecting the individual to society, and increasing concerns with the successful integration of second-generation immigrants, these data are as vital for family reunification policies as they are for any immigration policy. Second, even if our interest is purely economic in nature, we need to develop better indicators for measuring the contributions that unpaid labour makes to the overall well-being of the family unit. For example, sponsored women may postpone or forego entry into the labour force to take on unpaid and yet critically important familial responsibilities (as do many Canadian-born wives, mothers and daughters). Likewise, we need to look at the experiences of men within the context of the larger family unit. Changes to gender roles, which often result from immigration, can have serious consequences about which relatively little is known. Third, we need to build our capacity to integrate existing pan-Canadian data sources. For example, there would be considerable value in developing stronger linkages between Statistics Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth and the New Canadian Children and Youth Survey, which has been developed by the Metropolis Centres of Excellence. It is clearly the responsibility of those devising data collection and research strategies to develop methodologies that capture the experience of the reality that is studied. At the moment, the family nature of immigration is obscured, and sometimes distorted, by data and research that are overly focused on the individual. This must change if we collectively as policymakers, researchers and service providers are to better serve the interests of newcomers and Canadians alike.