SEPARATION AND REUNIFICATION AMONG FILIPINO FAMILIES IN VANCOUVER

ABSTRACT

We report on the experiences of 23 families who have reunited in Vancouver, after years of separation while the wife/mother was registered in the Live-in Caregiver Program, working as a live-in domestic worker on a temporary work visa. We identify several problems, including poor academic performance among youth. We argue that the long period of family separation plays a large role in creating these problems.

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In October 2005, Immigration Minister Joe Volpe stated: "We have to start thinking about the Immigration Department as the recruiting vehicle for Canada's demographic and labour market needs…we are the lungs of the country (Jimenz, 2005, A1). He recommended a more flexible system that would allow temporary workers to apply for landed immigrant status after working in Canada for several months, "in the same way that live-in caregivers can apply for permanent residency after two years working as nannies" (Jimenz, 2005, A6). Before taking the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) as a model to emulate, we need to look closely at the experiences of those who have passed through it to become Canadian citizens. A key issue is that temporary work visas are issued to individuals. These individuals frequently have families – husbands and/or children – who are left behind while individuals labour in Canada on temporary visas. This was the case for roughly one third of the women who came through the LCP in 2003. Many families separated through the LCP have now reunited in Canada, and this allows the opportunity to examine closely the challenges posed by an extended period of family separation.[1] We will review a number of serious problems. We insist that these problems arise, not from inherent deficiencies of these particular individuals or families, or within the Filipino community, but as a direct result of the period of family separation regulated by the Live-in Caregiver Program. To return to Volpe's anatomical analogy, if our goal is for healthy lungs – a young, vibrant, well-educated and highly skilled labour force employed in jobs suitable to their training, we need to think in terms other than temporary work visas.

We have attempted to document family separation during and reunification after the LCP by interviewing families in Vancouver who have lived through it. These interviews were conducted between June 2004 and June 2005 and drew upon networks developed within the Kalayaan Centre and the help of a settlement worker, who provided further contacts. Altogether we gathered the experiences of 23 households.[2] As shown in Figure 1, the majority of these families have reunited in Canada since 1995.

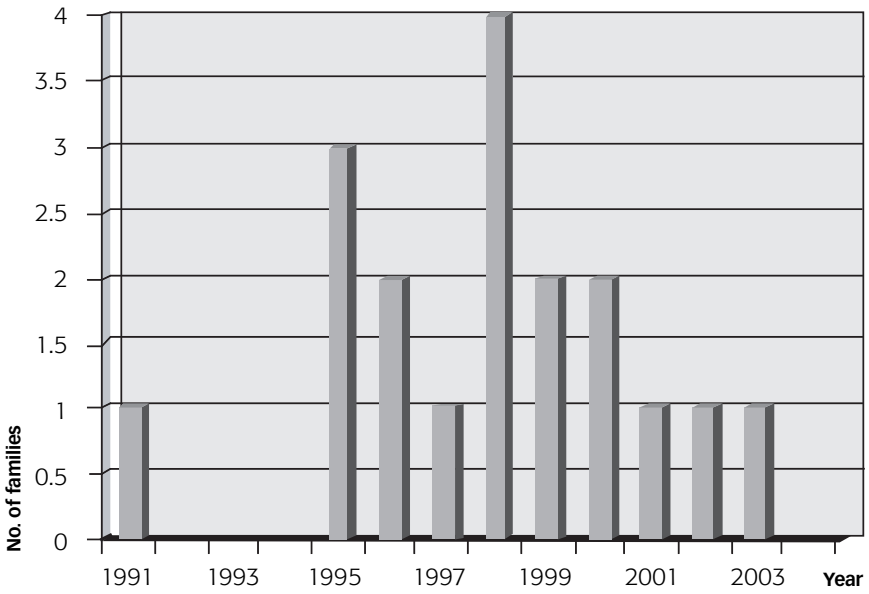
Identifying Problems

Ours is not a representative sample, and every family in our study did not experience the same problems, or not to the same extent. Nonetheless, there are three common experiences: marital discord; strained relations between parents and children; and poor occupational prospects for children. The latter is particularly troubling because so many of the hopes of immigration are tied to dreams of children's success.

The challenges for children differ depending on their age when they arrive in Canada. As shown in Figure 2, the median age of children at reunification was 12. Those who arrived in their late teens had a particularly awkward relationship with educational institutions and accreditation. The case of Melanie is indicative. Enrolled at the Central Philippine University studying business management, she was able to join her mother in Vancouver at age 18. Her English was assessed at a grade 10 level and she required both English and Math to receive high school accreditation in Canada. She enrolled at an adult education learning centre for 6 months but "lost interest" and got a job at McDonald's, where she has worked for the last 5 years. Her friends are mostly daughters of mothers who have come through the LCP and, like Melanie, they have no high school accreditation in Canada. In other cases, the children were too old to be sponsored as dependents. In one such family, the daughters, one trained as a nurse, are now themselves registered in the LCP, literally repeating their mother's passage (complete with the deskilling – from nurse to domestic worker) into Canada through the LCP.

Unfortunately the prospects for younger children seem little better. Of the 14 children in our sample who are now aged 18 or older, half had not completed high school and only 4 were enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions. Analysis of the BC Ministry of Education data sets indicate that

Figure 1: Year of Reunification



children who speak Tagalog at home (likely first generation immigrants) have among the lowest graduation rates from high school in the Vancouver Mainland, and the lowest median grade point averages among those who do graduate.[3]

Implicating Family Separation

We identify 6 ways that the period of family separation, integral to the way in which the Live-in Caregiver Program is structured, is central to these problematic outcomes. First and most simply, the separation itself causes stresses on marriages. One quarter of the women in our small sample separated from their husbands during the separation enforced by the LCP or soon after reuniting in Vancouver. It is important to recognize how long are the periods of separation. Families have been separated for many, many years (Figure 3): the median number of years separated was 9. As the figure makes clear, not all of these years were spent in Canada; many LCP registrants have already spent years working as domestic workers in Hong Kong or Singapore. Even so, the median number of years separated through the LCP was 5. It is deceptive, then, to gauge years of actual family separation from the regulations of the LCP, which stipulate that 24 months must be completed as a live-in caregiver within a 36-month period, before registrants can pass onto the stage of applying for permanent resident status. The reasons for the delays are various, and in many cases are tied to the need to save in order to cover the costs of processing the application in both Canada and the Philippines.

But beyond the brute fact of separation, there are more subtle dynamics at work, also related to the period of

Figure 2: Children's Age When Reunited

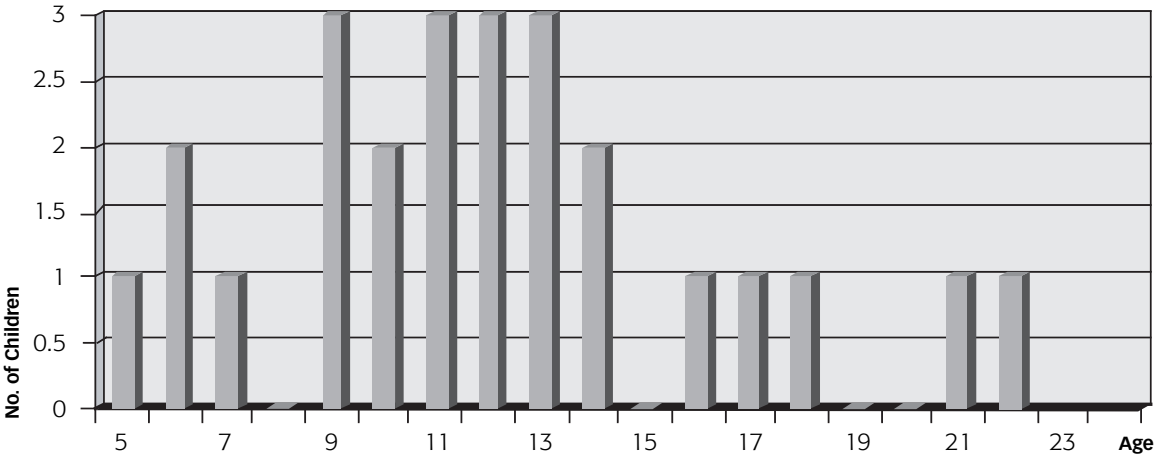
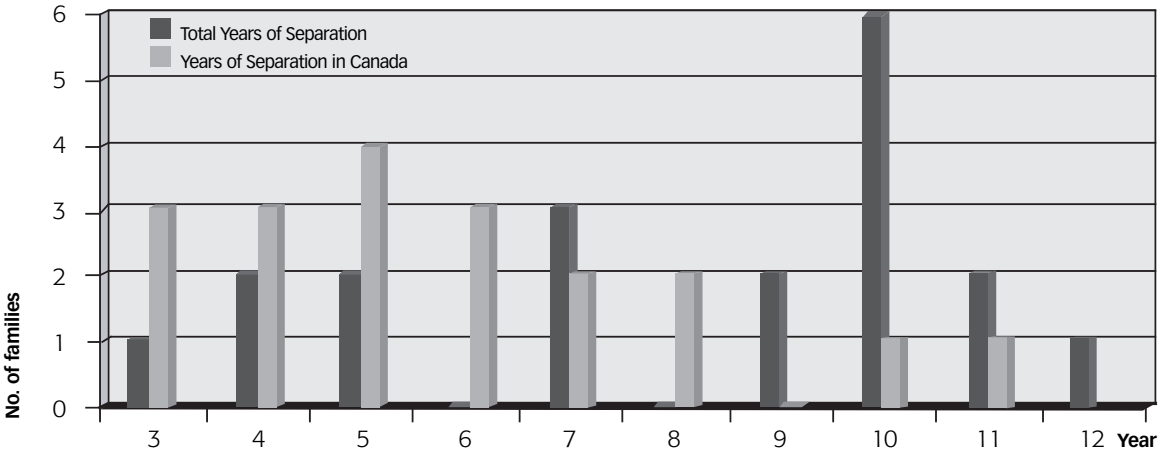


Figure 3: Years of Separation



separation. First, the process of staged migration – LCP registrant followed years later by her family – sets up a dynamic of indebtedness and sacrifice within the family which itself can generate conflict. Women who have laboured as live-in caregivers often feel that they have sacrificed a great deal for their families, and it can be difficult for their husbands and children to honour this sacrifice, especially when they are dealing with the shock of their own migration experience. Second, women who come through the LCP not only pave the way for their family's migration to Canada; in many cases they radically improve the family circumstances in the Philippines through the remittances that they send home. As Rhacel Parrenas (2005) has demonstrated, it is often middle class, professional families who send family members overseas as contract workers, precisely to maintain and enhance their middle class standing in the Philippines in the face of the privatization and deterioration of public services, especially education and health care services. Many of the children in our small sample went to private school in the Philippines and a number had nannies of their own. What this means is that there is often a disjuncture in the class and life circumstances of family members in Vancouver and the Philippines – enhanced through the remittances generated in Vancouver. Reunification is often experienced by husbands and children as a radical and surprising decline in class standing. Lily, for instance, described her daughter as being extremely angry for almost 8 months after arriving in Vancouver in 2003 at age 12, following a separation of 10 years. In her view, a good part of this was tied up with her daughter's distress about their economic situation in Vancouver.

The fourth and fifth impacts of staggered family migration are tied up with the fact that women who come through the LCP are typically already deskilled by the time their family arrives (Pratt, 2004; Pratt in collaboration with the Philippine Women Centre, 2003). Two thirds of the women in our sample had university degrees; most now work as housekeepers or home support workers in Vancouver. As a consequence they are often working at multiple jobs. The causality between deskilling and family separation is complex and circular because the staggered migration is an important part of the deskilling process. It is not only that women who have been registered in the LCP lose confidence in themselves and occupational experience whilst working as live-in caregivers. In the years immediately after completing the requirements of the LCP they have few financial resources because they are both sending large sums of money home and saving to bring their families to Canada. A common strategy is to take a short 6 month part-time or full-time course that allows entry into the most casualised and vulnerable parts of the health care employment sector: home support, elder care and nurses' aid. There are two important effects of this deskilling on family life and reunification in Vancouver. First, because many women are working at numerous jobs, they are little more available to their children and husbands in Vancouver then when they were in the Philippines. And second, many children expressed a tremendous responsibility to contribute to family income as soon as possible. As Albert expressed it: "You see them killing themselves working. You just get this feeling, like when you see your parent working so hard, you realize that you need to help them because you don't want to see them, like a 40 year old mom looking 60 because she's killing herself working. No sleep. No anything."

The final effect of separation is harder to pinpoint but possibly the most powerful, and this is the sheer trauma of loss and separation. Children told us many stories of their separation experiences, and quotations from the interview transcripts best express these experiences. Jovy, who was left in the care of her father's siblings at age 3 1/2, and was separated from her mother for 10 years, remembered: "And I don't remember hearing much from mom or seeing a lot of her since she went abroad…I cannot even remember what she looks like. I remember my dad showing my mother's picture to me and telling me that that was my mom. I said: that was not my mom. I was thinking at the time that he was introducing another lady and he was trying to brainwash me that the woman in the picture was my mom. That's why I said: No, that is not my mother."

The mother of two brothers, Jack and James, left to come to Canada when they were 2 and 7 and it was 7 years before she was able to bring them to Vancouver. Though she visited them for 2 weeks every year, they remember talking on the phone to her as "scary, because you are almost talking to a stranger. And she is asking us all these questions like, 'How are you?' I would say, 'I'm okay.' It is weird because you cannot see the face...The hardest part is when she comes home [to the Philippines] and leaves again. It is very distressing for us. She visited us, I think, 5 times before she finally sponsored us and got us. We would be scared [during these visits]. We would usually try to avoid her for the first week. It's just weird for us. We were little when she left, so we don't fully understand these things."

John's mother left for Hong Kong when he was 3 years old and it was 10 years before they were reunited. When she came home to the Philippines, he remembered: "Once she leaves, they make me sleep first. And when I woke up, she is already gone. Because I won't let her leave. They would let me sleep before she leaves, and she would leave a recorded tape for a message." In a later interview, John repeated the memory: "It's really painful. Someone else raising you when you were a kid. It's family too [his mother's sister], but then it's different not being with your mom. I remember they had to put me to sleep before my mom could leave to go, because they know that I wasn't going to let her go if I was still awake."

Feelings of betrayal, of vulnerability to manipulation by a parent, of bewilderment, of not understanding or being able to interpret the sudden departure of one's mother, the repetition of the same memory: these all resonate with standard accounts of trauma. The effects of this trauma – experienced within many families in the Filipino community in Canada – needs to be recognized and factored into ongoing assessments and criticisms of the Live-in Caregiver Program. And it is important to consider that for many youth the trauma is two-fold; they not only experience the trauma of separation from their mother but that of the second separation from the person who has cared for them in the Philippines in their mother's absence, often a maternal grandmother or aunt.

Critical assessments of the Live-in Caregiver Program typically focus on domestic workers' experiences whilst registered in the LCP: the potential for a range of abuses because they both live and work in the employer's home, the violations of disreputable nanny agents; the process of deskilling experienced by many domestic workers. It is important to attend to all of these criticisms. Many women who come through the LCP endure these problems in order to achieve the great reward that follows the LCP: the opportunity to sponsor their family migration to Canada. Our recent work with families who have reunited in Vancouver indicate that new problems arise at the point of reunification, and that the long separation, enforced by the way in which the LCP is structured, is at the heart of these problems. Rather than celebrating temporary work visa programs as models of flexibility, we need to take a hard look at Canada's longest running temporary work visa program, to understand its problematic effects over the long term.

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Notes

[1] In 2003, 4074 women and 225 men came to Canada on temporary work visas through the LCP; 91.4 % of these came from the Philippines, and roughly one third were married. In the same year, 2230 LCP registrants across Canada were granted permanent resident status, 97.3% of whom were women. They sponsored approximately 1100 spouses and dependents (Live-in Caregiver Program Fact Sheet, distributed at National Live-in Caregiver Program Roundtable, January 13 and 14, 2005).

[2] The methodology was a mixture of individual and group interviews. The original plan was to interview families (adults and children) together, followed by interviews with individual family members. Few families were willing to agree to this, and the scheduling of interviews accommodated individual's willingness to be interviewed, and scheduling difficulties. Altogether, 23 interviews were conducted. Ten youth were interviewed without their parents, alone or with a friend or sibling. (Two of these are not included in this analysis because they describe the case of family separation that is quite different, where it was the father who worked overseas prior to immigrating to Canada.) For two, there was a repeat interview. For one family, children and mother were interviewed together. In the case of three families, children and adults were interviewed separately. For 5 families, husband and wife were interviewed together. For 6 families, the mother told the family story on her own, either because children were too young or did not want to participate. Four families participated in a dinner/focus group in which we reported back on initial impressions from the interviews, and they shared their stories among themselves. Altogether there were 6 interviewers, although the bulk of the interviews were done by three interviewers: Florachita Bautista; Cecilia Diocson and Charlene Sayo. Youth tended to interview youth; adults interviewed adults. The interviews were long, usually several hours. In some cases, a visit preliminary to the interview was necessary to establish rapport. Contacts came from existing networks of the Kalayaan Centre and those referred by an immigrant settlement worker (she asked families of their willingness to participate and passed along names of those who were). All of the interviews involving adults were conducted in either Tagalog or Ilocano. For youth, there was a mixture of English and Tagalog. Interviews were then translated and transcribed.

[3] This analysis — indeed a fuller version of this entire paper — is forthcoming as a RIIM working paper. It is important to recognize that the BC Ministry of Education data set does not allow one to identify children who have experienced family separation through the LCP. Speaking Tagalog at home is a rough proxy, which no doubt includes a good number of first generation immigrant Filipino children whose mothers have not come through the LCP. The grade point averages and graduation rates of Tagolog speaking youth were compared to those of youth who speak Punjabi, Vietnamese, Chinese and English at home.