SPEAKING WITH FAMILIES FROM WITHIN THE 'FAMILY CLASS'

ABSTRACT

This article draws from a study of family migration networks in order to examine public perceptions regarding family class immigrants. It is determined that, far from representing a burden on the national economy, immigrant family networks provide a valuable source of economic and social support during settlement. Over time, family networks can significantly facilitate long-term integration, at times even permitting the re-negotiation of individual identities. The maintenance of these networks has implications for the longer-term settlement of newcomers, and in this case, particularly among newcomers to a small Canadian city.

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Contemporary Canadian immigration policy emphasizes the desire of policymakers to foster immigration growth, particularly in less populated areas in Canada in order to stimulate balanced regional economic growth. Although Canadian immigration policy has liberalized over the years, it has continually evolved in favour of prevailing economic conditions, labour market tendencies, demographic trends, and national security interests. Considered at a broad level, Canada is a major source country for skilled migration, benefiting from high numbers of immigrants who bring with them various areas of expertise and proficiency in considerable demand by the Canadian labour market.

Recent statistics indicate that family class migrants currently make up about 26% of all new permanent residents to Canada, while economic immigrants constitute 56% (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2004). Economic immigrants, which include skilled workers, business immigrants, provincial nominees and Live-in Caregivers, have consistently comprised over half of all permanent residents for the past decade, while the proportion of family class newcomers has declined since the 1980s. Despite the high number of skilled entrants, the a question can be raised as to whether the strong emphasis on immigration as an engine for economic growth has implications for other classes of newcomers to Canada, including family class immigrants.

There is a prevailing assumption among immigration critics that family class immigrants create more of a burden on receiving countries' economies; they are at times portrayed as draining the support of federally-funded social programs, while contributing relatively little growth to national economies. Rose Folson (2004) identifies two competing images of newcomers prevalent in host societies: that of the passive migrant, who is caught up in larger globalization processes, and that of the individual migrant making independent decisions irregardless of global trends (2004:14). Family class immigrants, including spouses, children and other sponsored family members, are often viewed as belonging to the former category, with the implicit assumption that they are highly dependent on the resources of others.

Another predominant assumption is that immigrant communities, within which family networks play an important part, may be perceived as precluding social integration. Immigrant families and ethnic communities are often perceived as turning inwards to form exclusive so-called enclaves. This line of thinking short-sightedly relies on a unified, static vision of ethnic groups, whereby such homogenous and 'ghettoized' communities actively exclude others and impede social integration.

In response to these perceptions, recent migration scholarship has provided alternative viewpoints. Jeffrey Reitz (2002) contends that minority communities, instead of hindering integration over the longer term or for the second generation, may provide positive resources for social integration in the larger society (2002: 1009). In his work on Canadian immigration, Peter Li (2003) highlights the importance of recognizing family networks as facilitating the settlement and integration process: "The formal selection system does not place much value on immigrants' family and ethnic networks in Canada, and does not recognize that social networks or social capital can be productive in assisting immigrants economically and socially" (1993: 102).

It is from the above logic that this article attempts to draw its objective; that is, to demonstrate that strong family-based networks significantly aid the immigrant settlement process, both initially and over the long term. Integration into host communities is significantly facilitated by the maintenance

of family networks, at times resulting in a more flexible identity of place, or, concept of 'home' over time. From this angle the article will respond to the negative public perceptions often aimed at family class immigrants.

The argument is based upon an acceptance of the concept of social capital and the importance of social capital networks throughout the settlement process. Though it remains widely disputed within academic circles, the concept of social capital is greatly important for understanding the networks that facilitate migration. Social capital is used to describe the set of voluntary relationships between individuals, or, put simply, "the sum of social expectations" (Portes and Sensenbrenner, cited in Breton, 1997). Robert Putnam (2002), who is credited with popularising this concept within the social sciences, finds that social capital can generate crucial patterns of reciprocity; these patterns are measurable and have 'value' - that is, public and private returns - for society (2002: 42). Sociologists can therefore study the positive and negative 'externalities' that may arise from social capital in a similar way as other forms of capital, such as economic capital or human capital.

Where migration is concerned, social capital may be defined of as a set of social connections that facilitates the mobilization of economic resources, information, and employment connections, among other advantages. It is by now firmly established in the migration literature that prospective migrants draw upon social capital in order to facilitate settlement abroad. Well-established network theories of migration hold social capital as a central component to understanding how people maintain transnational relationships over time (Vertovec, 2003: 646). Massey *et al.* (1994) view social capital networks as mitigating the risks associated with migration, stating that migrants rely upon social ties that carry reciprocal obligations for assistance based on shared understandings of kinship, friendship and common community origin (1994: 1499). In discussing the role of family class immigrants, therefore, it is imperative to consider the value of the social capital networks as they operate in the host society.

Over time, these networks can facilitate integration into host societies, even easing the way for re-negotiating individual identities. Broadly defined, identity can be understood as: "the distinctive character belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category, or group" (Rummens, 2004: 6). Migration researchers often accept flexibility and hybridity as central to ethnic identity construction (de Ruitjer, 2001; Kelly, 2003; Basch *et al.*, 1994). Kelly suggests an approach that de-links identity from geographical place, as national borders define the boundaries of social life less and less (2003: 214). In this case, it is accepted that over time, migrants can come to accept a variety of forms of place-based identity, or, how they define a concept such as 'home'.

I will attempt to use the above concepts to examine the support provided by family networks in the migration process, which carries implications for widespread views on family class immigrants. This will occur not by examining family class immigrants as an explicit category of entry or citizenship classification, but by taking a broader look at family networks and their role in the settlement process. The remainder of this article refers to a study performed in the small Canadian city of Guelph among Filipino immigrants.

Analyzing immigration to a smaller city in Canada provides an interesting angle from which to study family networks, as these are places with smaller populations, less international recognition, relatively fewer services, and smaller proportions of existing immigrants. Settlement in smaller cities, therefore, may add some additional challenges whereby social capital takes on particular importance.

In August of 2004, in-depth semi-structured interviews were held with 14 individuals who had migrated from the Philippines and who had settled in Guelph, a small city located 100 kilometres west of Toronto. All participants had migrated as permanent residents under either the economic class and the family class categories, and their period of residency in Canada ranged from over 20 years to as little as three months. Interview questions were primarily concerned with the migration decision-making process, initial settlement experiences, perceptions of the host society, and ongoing social and economic relationships with family members in Guelph and in the Philippines.

In deciding where to settle, important information regarding host communities, immigration procedures, local living conditions, and labour market information regularly passed through cross-border networks.

Most participants referred to their families as the primary reason for choosing to migrate. Migration often occurs as a process of household decision-making, one that emphasizes the well-being of the entire household, including the extended family, over the individual. Raul Pertierra emphasizes how families are often the primary agents of migration, with decisions based upon collective family considerations, rather than individual concerns (1992: 15). The willingness of many of the participants to migrate was inextricably linked to the well-being of their family members, and most heads of household described their decision as a means to obtain financial security for future generations, or in many cases, to ensure quality education for their children.

In deciding where to settle, important information regarding host communities, immigration procedures, local living conditions, and labour market information regularly passed through cross-border networks. Families – at times stretching between the Philippines and Canada – were the most common channel for such information, followed by friends and former colleagues. Guelph is

considered to be an important manufacturing centre within South Western Ontario, and among immigrants, the information that they received about Guelph was predominantly focused on the potential employment opportunities in the auto manufacturing sector. Some described the importance of having a family member living in Guelph who provided the information that they needed before deciding to migrate, while others were actively engaged in persuading family members in the Philippines to migrate at the time of the interview.

It appears that a combination of promising local economic and labour conditions, coupled with the social capital networks that provide information and job prospects to newcomers, serve to enhance the attractiveness of a smaller city such as Guelph. This supports the view that the economic and social factors are strongly intertwined during the migration process. As Peter Kelly (2003) aptly surmises, kinship networks play a role in "shaping migration and work decisions, tangles of emotional yearnings frustrated by economic necessities, and ongoing dislocations between 'home', citizenship and identity" (2003: 210).

Upon arriving to Guelph, the majority of participants reported taking advantage of familial networks to obtain both pragmatic advice and economic support. Whether through direct material assistance, such as the provision of food, clothing and furniture, or through the simple act of being greeted at the airport, participants describe their initial arrival as being facilitated by family networks within the community. Where employment is concerned, almost all newcomers in the study took advantage of their family-based networks in applying for work, as an 'in' is often needed to obtain the jobs that provide higher wages, permanent status, and benefits. Peter Li affirms the importance of these networks, describing: "the ability of immigrants to mobilize kinship and ethnic networks to improve economic outcomes in the labour market, especially to compensate for the absence of human capital" (2003: 103). One participant, a mechanic for a major auto parts manufacturer, reported securing multiple jobs for friends and family members, pointing out that at least five of his children and their spouses were currently employed at his plant through such connections.

It must be noted that Barber (1992) has shown that this pattern of familial and ethnic recruitment also benefits employers. Those who nominate family members tend to feel at least partly responsible for the conduct of these new employees in the workplace, and firms are able to capitalize on this behavioural influence (Barber, 1992). Nonetheless, the employment opportunities afforded by such connections demonstrate the vital role that family networks play in the economic strategies of migrants.

Family networks – both in Canada and in the Philippines – appear to play a major role in determining whether immigrants will stay in Guelph over a longer period of time. Once again, it is important to consider both economic and social factors as mutually reinforcing elements. A major incentive for remaining in Guelph is the prospect of well-paying employment, which, coupled with social services provided by the government, permits the achievement of a standard of living often unachievable in the Philippines.

Related to this is the fact that most participants reported sending economic remittances to family members in the Philippines, whether regularly or only intermittently. Economic remittances serve to finance important expenditures such as educational fees, health care, nursing for elderly relatives, home improvements, basic needs, and consumer goods. For some families, the ability to send economic remittances constituted the main reason for deciding to migrate. Indeed, remittances can often represent fundamental familial migration strategies, as well as a manifestation of ongoing involvement between families at home and abroad. This allows immigrants to cement both financial responsibilities as well as social ties over time and across space.

It has been determined that family-based social capital networks are highly important for facilitating the arrival of newcomers within the host society, and for permitting long-term settlement.

The social aspects of family networks in the destination city were consistently mentioned as one of the major reasons for choosing Guelph and remaining there for the foreseeable future. Participants spoke of the importance of social ties within the workplace and in the neighbourhood, through family networks and common acquaintances. Over time, these ties form the basis of the friendships that provide emotional support and companionship during initial settlement and beyond, permitting a sense of social embeddedness within the host community. Many participants reported an eagerness to sponsor other family members to immigrate to Guelph, in order to reunite the family within a new context.

As participants sponsored successive family members to settle in Guelph, several individuals described a change in place-based identity, or what they called 'home'. It became evident that there exists no unified place-based identity among the interviewees; 'home' can be constructed over time according to personal and familial obligations, employment, and the amount of time spent in Canada, among many other reasons. Furthermore, notions of home can be fluid and negotiable over time; one's identification with a place is not fixed according to a current place of residence or citizenship status. Several participants expressed the growth of a dual sense of belonging or attachment; for these individuals, 'home' can exist both in Guelph and in the Philippines simultaneously. Although it is impossible to qualify what constitutes a 'successful' integration into a host society, it is suggested

that these accounts of shifting identities can point to the likelihood of longer-term settlement.

It has been determined that family-based social capital networks are highly important for facilitating the arrival of newcomers within the host society, and for permitting long-term settlement. Having broadly explored these networks, it is possible to draw conclusions relevant to the negative perceptions of family class immigrants presented earlier. First of all, it is of little use to theorize about immigrants as homogeneous groups or 'immigrant communities' with regards to attachment to a perceived homeland. These attachments and individual place-based identities can and do vary widely.

Strong family-based and ethnic networks do not promote exclusionary behaviour or preclude long-term social integration; it is the presence of these networks that can assist newcomers to settle in a community, especially in the absence of formal immigrant settlement services. The initial social and economic support received by newcomers serves to ease their entry into the paid workforce, which also presents a challenge to the assumption that family class immigrants contribute little to economic growth. Over time, these networks serve to strengthen ties to the host community, and even broaden the boundaries of belonging to a particular place.

For Canadian cities, and in particular for smaller areas seeking long-term immigrant attraction and retention, the impact of such family-based social capital networks carries great significance. The family networks that both contribute to the decision to migrate and as well as assist with initial settlement can also be a factor in determining whether newcomers decide to stay in an area over the long term. Overall, it can be asserted family class immigrants, far from representing a resource or economic liability, can represent a valuable source of social and economic stability, and this must be recognized by Canadian communities. Public perceptions regarding family class immigrants must be responsive to the significant community social and economic support offered by immigrant family networks.

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