DEFINING THE "BEST" ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN CANADA

ABSTRACT

With immigrants expected to be the only source of population growth in Canada by 2020,[1] there is an increasing recognition of the need to facilitate newcomers' full contribution to the socioeconomic spheres. However, progress in crucial areas of research in this field – policy and program delivery for the immigrant population – is still in its developmental stage. Much as there is no single best model in this regard, the purpose of this article is to highlight the current trends in recognizing and responding to the diversity in this area while outlining the best practices that could serve as guiding principles. Although the article underlines perspectives that are common to different cultures and generations of immigrants, distinctions will be made in issues specific to second generation families, and especially youth.

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With immigrants expected to be the only source of population growth in Canada by 2020, there is an increasing acknowledgment of the need to facilitate their full contribution in the socioeconomic spheres. The ageing Canadian population coupled with declining fertility rates and retiring baby boomers more than necessitates the appreciation of the skills and contribution of immigrants. However, the progress in the crucial areas of research, policy and program delivery for the immigrant population is rather in its developmental stage.

There is no denying the fact that there are challenges in responding to the diversity among immigrants, especially in light of the varying generations of families with different cultures that have made Canada their home country. Whereas there is no single best model that could serve as a ready-made solution to ensure the full participation of immigrants in the social and economic fields, there are guiding principles that could help research move forward in this direction.

Although the article outlines specific trends and guidelines under the realm of policy and research, these are not necessarily limited to the respective areas and may overlap.

Research

The biggest limitation in the research on immigrant families is the tendency to examine issues in light of the "Western" model, which is usually considered to be the benchmark. For instance, it is not uncommon to find immigrant experiences such as parenting, marriage, academic skills and professional achievements being evaluated against the predetermined Western model. An analytical framework that draws upon Western concepts may not reflect the values and beliefs of the immigrant population. This is especially true for second generation youth, who are perceived as "integrated" with the "Canadian" culture and hence usually analyzed through a Western lens. Not surprisingly, there are biases and stereotypes in literature that prevent a realistic understanding of and response to immigrants' experiences. To avoid this pitfall, it is essential to challenge one's assumptions and media-created stereotypes about the immigrant population being researched.

For instance, the definition and meaning attached to various concepts in the mainstream Canadian culture might not necessarily be the same when viewed from the perspective of the population being researched. To quote an example,[2] a Canadian-based NGO, while working with a small village in a developing country, determined that it was "oppressive" for women to walk several miles to fetch water, as there was no water supply in or near the village. The NGO therefore built a water facility in the village. However, the women were unhappy with this development as they saw this time to walk together in groups to fetch water as an opportunity to socialize with other women. They now felt that the only relaxing and enjoyable time they had to themselves, away from their family pressures and responsibilities, had been taken away.

The bias in literature is self-propagating and heightened by the significant gaps in research on immigrant population in Canada. Despite the wide-ranging and often complex issues facing

immigrants today, research continues to be concentrated in specific areas, such as labour market participation of immigrants, racism, etc. Significant as these issues are, there are others – such as the role of immigrant seniors, implications of delays or denials in family reunification and causes and consequences of immigrants returning to their origin countries – that also require attention, both to enable and to sustain the optimal socioeconomic participation of immigrants. Even more limited is the focus on second or third generation families, especially youth. It is important to recognize that the experiences of second generation youth could both resemble while being quite different from those of the first generation. There is a need to expand the scope and areas of research in order to ensure a holistic examination of immigrant experiences and subsequently, ensure effective development of policies and programs to facilitate newcomers' contributions to society.

Another essential principle to follow while researching immigrants is to be aware and responsive to the diversity in the immigration population in Canada, whether it be in in terms of culture, country of origin or generation, to name a few. Combining different cultures, each with their unique skill sets and experiences, under one big "immigrant" umbrella, is often misleading and unhelpful in developing a comprehensive understanding of these issues. Similarly, there should be recognition of the diversity in the issues of first and second generation youth of the same culture.

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Policy

The most important – yet least practiced and/or honoured – principle in the policy framework is the acknowledgment and appreciation of the voices of those most affected by the policy outcome. This is especially true for the diverse immigrant population whose experiences and skills, more often than not, remain unrecognized and hence underutilized. There is no dearth of existing policies to support this argument – be it the struggling doctors-cum-cab drivers or the systemic discrimination faced by the first and second generation youth in the labour market, especially while competing for senior management positions.

The comparative models used in policy analysis focus largely on G8 or OECD countries. Although such an approach is undeniably a practical one, keeping in view the similarities among these nations, it should not preclude the examination of best practice models in the developing countries that could be adapted to the Canadian system. The need to look beyond the developed countries is most pronounced when analyzing immigrant-related issues. Is it perhaps too much or too radical to ask for such an approach, considering the general assumption that immigrants come to "the land of opportunities" and hence should be the ones making adjustments? Such a viewpoint is unhelpful not only to the immigrants themselves but also to the host country, Canada, as it prevents the full "utilization" of immigrants' potential, not to mention the possibility of losing them to their home countries or to other countries. Such a loss could prove to be an incalculable setback to Canada's ability to compete internationally in this globalized era.

Other trends, often evident in the policy frameworks, include the disconnect between different policy areas, and the ever-existing disconnect between policy and practice. Policies and programs designed specifically for immigrants usually function in isolation. It is crucial to ensure that linkages are made with other policies and that the "diversity" lens is adopted for every policy, as opposed to just being limited to the ones specifically dealing with immigrants. This is particularly relevant for second generation youth who do not benefit from sufficient policies that are specifically designed for them and who are not always included in the mainstream policy. For instance, a policy framework designed to analyze the caring needs of seniors in general should leave room for the experiences of immigrant seniors, both first and second generation. In other words, the fact that many immigrant seniors are predominantly cared for in their families as opposed to finding themselves in nursing homes should determine how the "general" policy on caring for seniors gets designed and subsequently what kind of programs are delivered. Using this approach becomes all the more significant when looking at population projections, which identify immigration as the only source of population growth. Hence, the policy frameworks need to adopt a long-term vision in order to adequately reflect the outlook of the ever-increasing number of immigrants and to avoid the danger of being redundant in the face of changing demographics.

Furthermore, the existing policy-practice disconnect reflected in the policy decisions needs to be bridged. Input from communities, women's groups and grassroots agencies in the policy-making processes can help ensure informed decision making. Although both the grassroots agencies and policy-makers are experts in their respective areas, the communication gap between them is rather unproductive. A limited, if not negligible, understanding of the "other side" often creates and widens the gap between what is required and what ends up being delivered, thus leading to quick-fix solutions as opposed to addressing fundamental problems. There is a wealth of knowledge and community experience at the grassroots level, which should be validated and fed into social policy.

Conclusion

Underlying effective analytical framework is an understanding of immigrants' perspectives. Even as simple a term as "family" may refer to more than just the spouse or children; for many immigrants, it includes parents, grand-parents and even close relatives. Research, policies and programs that use a different definition of families pose systemic barriers. It is nuances like these that need to be paid attention to in order for any analysis to prove useful. Moreover, there is a dire need to focus more attention on second generation families, especially since there is limited data and information available on their experiences in Canada.

While there are policies and research that are mindful of the guidelines discussed here, these are perhaps not enough to adequately reflect the changing face of Canadian demographics. "Diversity" must be incorporated into research, policy and program delivery in Canada to create a win-win situation, both for the immigrants and for the nation.

Lastly, and most importantly, it is essential to remember that although families immigrating to Canada may require support in order to adjust, the contribution that they make to the socioeconomic development of the country is invaluable. Hence, the discourses on immigrants should focus more on their abilities and potential to contribute than merely focusing on their "needs." A needs-based analytical framework that fails to recognize the skills and strengths of immigrants is incomplete and disempowering, to say the least.

Notes

[1] Statistics Canada. 2005. *Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories*. Ottawa.

[2] This example is based on a presentation given by one of the representatives of the NGO in question, and which the author attended.



Immigration and Families

Special issue of
Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens

Metropolis continues its successful partnership with the Association for Canadian Studies and produced special issues of the magazine *Canadian Issues / Thèmes canadiens* on immigration and diversity topics. This issue (spring 2006) focuses on immigration and the families. It features an introduction by Madine VanderPlaat of Saint Mary's University, an interview with then Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Monte Solberg, and 20 articles by knowledgeable policy-makers, researchers and non-governmental organizations. Like earlier issues, it has been assigned as course readings in many disciplines at several universities.

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