COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND WELL-BEING OF IMMIGRANTS: THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

Participation, integration and engagement in one's community lead to a range of individual and community benefits. However, civic and social engagement can be challenging for immigrants. We review the literature on community engagement and present data on barriers and facilitators of community engagement in newcomer communities.

Community engagement has been recognized as playing a central role in the well-being of individuals and communities. Evidence for the benefits of integration into one's community comes from a range of disciplines, using different terminology and focusing on different outcomes, but coming to similar conclusions. Community engagement research in the context of immigration and ethnic minorities often focuses on social exclusion of specific groups, where social and structural barriers prevent certain social groups from participating fully in their communities. Exclusion from the social life of one's community has negative consequences for the well-being of excluded individuals, and that of the community as a whole. It prevents excluded individuals from having full access to community resources such as education, employment or housing, and from achieving socially valued capabilities. It can also lead to elevated levels of unemployment and social unrest, and a weakening of social values in the community as a whole (Bhandari, Hovarth and To 2006; Schellenberg and Maheux 2007). Social support researchers studying the social isolation of individuals, as opposed to groups, consistently find serious negative consequences for physical as well as psychological well-being, with social isolation being linked to increases in both morbidity and mortality even after controlling for other social and health related variables (House, Landis and Umberson 1988). These findings support the importance of governmental and non-governmental organizations' efforts to improve the social, economic and political engagement and integration of diverse community members (e.g., Singh and Hynie 2008).

BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement can occur through both social and civic participation. Social participation includes informal activities, such as visiting with neighbours; group activities, such as joining support groups; and activities in public spaces, such as attending community fairs or street parties. These activities build social networks and opportunities for participation in reciprocal social support relationships. Civic participation is comprised of volunteer activities for the benefit of others in the community and may be undertaken individually or in a group. Examples of individual activities include voting or signing a petition, while a group activity may be illustrated by one joining a community action group. Some forms of participation include a mix of social and civic participation. For example, participation in a group associated with one's place of worship may be social but also civic in nature, depending on the group's activities.

Participation in community events is both determined by, and results in, a feeling of attachment to a community and concern for its outcomes. Chavis and colleagues refer to this feeling of attachment as a "sense of community" (Chavis et al. 1986). Having a psychological sense of community has been associated with a range of positive psychological outcomes. It enables

community members to develop emotional ties with each other and to develop a sense of membership and belonging. It imbues individuals with feelings of autonomy, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. Research suggests that it also promotes personal growth and self-acceptance (Evans 2007).

Community engagement by individuals also benefits the community as a whole by contributing to its social capital. Social capital refers to relationships and structures within a community that promote cooperation for mutual benefit (Minkler and Wallerstein 2005; Putnam 1995). Social capital is observed in healthy communities with high levels of leadership, skills, networks, psychological attachment to the community, understanding of community history, and critical reflection (Goodman et al. 1998). Participation in community activities plays a key role in developing these resources. Social capital enables communities to maximize their potential, and progress from individual to collective action to achieve social and political change that can more effectively influence the well-being of community members (Butterfoss 2006).

PARTICIPATION AMONG IMMIGRANTS

Despite the benefits of active community involvement on individual and collective well-being, research suggests that civic engagement may be decreasing in inverse proportion to communities' increases in diversity through immigration and settlement. In the United States, residents in highly-diverse communities are less likely to trust their neighbours, regardless of whether they are from different or same cultural groups (Putnam 2007). They report lower socio-political control, lower confidence in political leaders, decreased instances of registering to vote, volunteering and charitable giving, constricted social networks, and weak confidence in personal and collective efficacy in influencing community outcomes. These results persist even when controlling for factors that have typically been associated with engagement, such as increased pressure on time and financial resources. While similar research has not been conducted in Canada, the tensions associated with reasonable accommodation of cultural differences suggest decreased social cohesion among at least some communities in the face of real or potential community diversity (Bouchard and Taylor 2008).

While all members of diverse communities may demonstrate reduced engagement, enhancing community engagement among immigrant community members may be particularly challenging. Immigrant individuals and communities in Canada achieve social inclusion, identification and engagement in their communities with varying degrees of success. In an analysis of data from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, Schellenberg and Maheux (2007) found a substantial portion of immigrants to Canada struggle to build social relationships in their communities. Seven percent of recent immigrants to Canada reported that lack of social relationships and interactions was one of their greatest challenges since arriving, more than the number citing discrimination or racism, access to housing or education, or access to professional services or childcare as one of their greatest problems. Rates of participation in volunteer activities are lower among immigrants to Canada than among non-immigrant Canadians, and especially among recent immigrants. The results from the 2004 Canada Survey on Giving, Volunteering and Participating indicated that approximately 30% of immigrants volunteered between 2003 and 2004, in comparison with almost 45% of the Canadian-born population (Statistics Canada 2006). Similarly, approximately 60% of immigrants voted during these years, compared to 75% of the Canadian-born population. These data show that immigrant community members experience less social and civic engagement than their Canadian born peers. Given the benefits that engagement and participation can bring to individuals and communities, understanding variables that can increase community engagement in immigrant communities is essential.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

While recent immigrants may value participation, research suggests that many experience social exclusion as a result of multiple barriers, which include language differences, time constraints, and discrimination (Goodkind and Foster-Fishman 2002). Perhaps as a result of these barriers, immigrant families that are trying to establish themselves in new environments typically rely upon closely-knit, but small, social networks established within their cultural communities (Omidvar and Richmond 2003). In the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada, among immigrants who made new friends, three-quarters reported that at least half of these new friends were of the same ethnic or cultural group (Statistics Canada, 2005). Thus, new immigrants are more likely to establish social networks with individuals from the same ethnic background as themselves. Moreover, they are more likely to volunteer with religious groups, which are less likely to be integrated in the larger community, than with community service organizations (Scott et al. 2006).

Other factors influencing participation that have been identified include the physical characteristics of the community (Oliver 2000), access to financial and time resources (McBride, Sherraden and Pritzker 2006) and

length of residence in Canada. Participation and community engagement may be particularly challenging for recent newcomers because they are struggling with limited personal resources. This lack of resources can make it difficult to provide support for others which prohibits participating meaningfully in reciprocal social support networks (Osborne, Baum and Ziersh 2009). Thus, at a time when support networks might be most needed, participating in social networks may actually increase immigrants' stress and distress, rather than contributing to their well-being (Hynie and Cooks 2009; Stewart et al. 2008).

Barriers to participation can also vary as a function of the size of the community to which newcomers have immigrated. Large metropolitan areas, like Toronto, facilitate culturally-based social and community groups as they are the hubs of immigration and sustain a large pool of diverse immigrants. The situation is different in smaller urban municipalities. However, social isolation seems to have a weaker negative impact in small communities and some researchers argue it may be because small urban centres foster more social integration (House, Landis and Umberson 1988). An interesting question is thus whether immigrants become more engaged in smaller communities. In one study conducted in Peterborough, a town of approximately 71, 000 people, we interviewed recent newcomers about the barriers they experienced to participating in local community events and organizations (Lai 2009) and found patterns of engagement that differed from those of larger metropolitan centres.

Twenty-one participants participated in semi-structured interviews about their participation and engagement. Participants came from a range of different countries and had been in Canada for an average of about 18 months. These recent newcomers were satisfied with the physical characteristics of their community and appreciated the relative calm and safety of being in a smaller urban centre, and were optimistic about their future there. Despite positive attitudes towards the community, however, recent newcomers noted several barriers to engagement. Several structural barriers to engagement existed. For most newcomers, facility with the English language was a major challenge, without which they felt as if "they have their tongues cut off." However, many were unable to attend formal and informal English language classes because of conflicts with work or childcare responsibilities, making this a difficult challenge to overcome. They also faced high rates of unemployment, a challenge shared by many in this small urban centre. Participants also reported that they actively refrained from joining community activities because they felt that "[staff and volunteers of community-based organizations] can't understand immigrants". They did not report feeling discriminated against, but, rather, felt that community organizations were unaware of the unique experiences and needs of new immigrants and this discouraged them from participating.

At the same time, the participants reported very little knowledge of opportunities for participation in their community. Participants were unaware of any other community organizations in Peterborough outside of the settlement agency they were recruited through, including potentially useful services like Ontario Works, language training classes, and Legal Aid. None of the participants talked about seeking volunteer opportunities via notices on bulletin boards, despite wanting to feel that they were engaged in useful activities in the eyes of the community. Moreover, none utilized the drop-in services at the Family Resource Centre, or sought counseling services either in person or on the telephone via crisis help lines despite reporting a need for these services.

Interestingly, and in contrast to findings from larger metropolitan centres (e.g., Simich et al. 2005) participants did not highlight seeking support from other members of their own cultural groups. Rather, their support network tended to consist of immigrants from other cultural communities with whom they interacted at activities organized by the local settlement agency. By staying within the "comfort zone" of these activities, immigrants' exposure to services offered and activities organized by other community agencies may have been limited. Likewise, their exposure to other community members was limited to only other newcomers using these services, newcomers who also had limited knowledge of and engagement with the larger community. This social network was therefore unlikely to help them build an understanding of ways to engage and participate in the broader community. As a result, they may have been deprived of significant opportunities for assistance.

THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE IN ENGAGEMENT

In the study described above, several structural and personal obstacles emerged to recent newcomers' engagement and participation in their community. One barrier that could easily be addressed, however, was a lack of information and knowledge about one's community. Immigrants who were unfamiliar with the structure of formal social support services in the community were faced with navigating the system on their own or with informal assistance from friends who, in this case, often had little more information than they did. It seemed possible that increasing knowledge would be a simple intervention to help promote engagement among newcomer communities. We therefore conducted a second study to evaluate whether increasing knowledge about a community issue of relevance to immigrants

would be sufficient to increase immigrant engagement in this issue.

In collaboration with the Community Legal Clinic of York Region, we created an education program about property by-laws for immigrant residents of Markham, a moderately sized community (population over 260 000) situated just north of Toronto. Seventy recent newcomers participated in the education session and completed brief surveys before and after participation. Participants were more likely to participate by signing a petition to change property by-laws if they felt a stronger sense of community and community empowerment. A sense of community, in turn, was related to their knowledge of the Markham community. Increases in knowledge of the by-laws, however, did not increase participation by signing the petition. These results suggest that the effects of knowledge on community engagement are tied to a sense of knowing the community, rather than just knowing about specific issues. Indeed, knowledge of a community may be a by-product of engagement, rather than the other way around. What seems most likely, however, is that knowledge and engagement bear a reciprocal relationship to one another; you need to know about opportunities to participate in order to engage, but engagement in community activities will then increase your knowledge.

A greater focus on education and publicity may therefore be beneficial to engaging community members, but it needs to be a broad-based education about community norms, services and functioning, and it needs to be paired with initiatives to reduce structural barriers to participation. Two recent initiatives by the federal government reflect these priorities. The Welcoming Communities Initiative is a series of strategies between federal departments, aimed at improving the awareness and knowledge of discriminatory practices, and developing ways to counter these behaviours at a community-level. Another goal of the program is to increase immigrants' knowledge of their rights and entitlements in Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2006). This is supported by the Local Immigration Partnership program which supports communities in enhancing their capacities for delivering services to new immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2008).

The programs described above support the move away from the traditional needs-oriented perspective which fosters a reliance on outsiders to fix community problems, and towards an asset-based community development where members are encouraged to identify, nurture, and utilize their own assets (McKnight and Kretzmann 1990). At the same time, involvement of government and non-governmental agencies to provide additional support is essential to address the challenges faced by newcomer individuals and communities who may struggle with limited resources, especially in the first years of settlement. The increasing profile of diversity in Canadian society, occurring in tandem with the trend of immigration, has the potential of adding vitality to community life. Working with these communities to build their capacity for engagement and well-being will ensure that this potential is realized.

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