IMMIGRATION AND PARENTAL SPONSORSHIP IN CANADA

Implications for Elderly Women

ABSTRACT

This paper examines competing immigration discourses and practices that contribute to the fluctuations and contradictions in Canada's parental sponsorship program. In using a gender-based analysis, the paper considers the implications immigration policies and practices have for sponsored elderly women who make up the majority of parental sponsorships.

Though Canada's immigration program claims that reuniting families is one of its key priorities, and while parental sponsorships were increased in April 2005, the pattern had been one of gradual decrease. This paper briefly traces some of the fluctuations and contradictions in Canada's admission of sponsored parents[1] to reveal the ways in which prevailing practices and discourses inscribe immigrant parents as burdens on Canadian society. The paper suggests that the immigration point system and its reliance on human capital theory contribute to 'deficiency discourses' of sponsored immigrant parents that legitimate social exclusions and inequalities. The paper also considers co-existing, competing discourses and research that recognize the rights of parents to live with their children who have immigrated to Canada as well as the contributions that elderly parents make to their families and society. Finally, the paper discusses briefly the implications of various discourses and practices for elderly women who make up the majority of parental sponsorships.[2] The paper concludes by raising questions for future research and immigration policy.

Immigration admission trends and family class

Canada's immigration policy includes several major immigration classes of permanent residents: the independent or economic class, the family class, and the protected persons or refugee class.[3] The immigration system selects the economic class[4]on the basis of the principal applicant's human capital, financial and/or investment capacity and uses the point system, in particular, to choose 'skilled workers,' the largest category within the economic class.[5] The family class consists of 'close' members such as spouses/partners, dependent children, orphaned brothers/sisters, orphaned nephews/nieces, orphaned grandchildren, parents, and grandparents whom a citizen or a permanent resident may sponsor to immigrate to Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005).

While longitudinal analyses are difficult due to changing definitions of categories, it would appear that in the 1980s and early 1990s, Canada admitted a substantial proportion of family class immigrants relative to economic immigrants.[6] Since the mid-1990s, economic class immigration has expanded steadily while family class immigration has declined (Baker and Benjamin, 2002). In recent years, Citizenship and Immigration Canada has explicitly sought to admit approximately 55% to 60% economic immigrants of new permanent residents (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005). Of the 235,824 people that Canada admitted as permanent residents in 2004, 57% came as economic and 26% as family class immigrants.[7]

During the past decade, the numbers of parents and grandparents that Canada admitted in the family class has fluctuated, but overall, declined substantially. In 1994, Canada admitted 41,477 parents and grandparents – 44% of the family class (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2003b). In 2004, Canada admitted 12,732 parents and grandparents –20% of the family class – and targeted even lower levels for 2005 that would allow 5,500-6,800 parents and grandparents to become permanent residents – 11%-12% of the family class (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005). In April 2005, the government reversed its low forecast and indicated that it now expected to land an additional 12,000 parents and grandparents in 2005 and another 12,000 in 2006 (altogether 18,000 in each year) (Volpe, 2005). Nonetheless, this level of expected parental sponsorship continued a gradual reduction since the mid-1990s. In what follows, I explore ways in which the point system and its reliance on human capital theory to select 'skilled workers' have contributed to the overall decline in parental sponsorship.

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Prevailing immigration practices and discourses

Increasingly, the point system in immigration policy has used human capital criteria – education, possession of an official language, and job experience – to select immigrants who will "enhance Canada's advantage in the global competition for skilled workers" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2001: 1). Rather than providing a neutral measurement of immigrant eligibility, the point system's reliance on human capital theory rests on a market-based definition of immigrant 'value' that legitimates social exclusions. The core of human capital theory postulates that: "higher levels of skill and knowledge, achieved through education and training, lead to higher productivity which is expressed in higher earnings for those who possess them" (McBride 2000: 161). By exercising human capital criteria, the point system draws upon neoliberal ideological premises that skilled, market-based workers drive the economy and represent the 'ideal' immigrant (McLaren and Dyck, 2004). In giving priority to economic over family immigrants and refugees, the immigration system reflects a growing neo-liberal emphasis on economic self-sufficiency that reduces notions of citizenship and citizens' rights and results in a corresponding "new problematization of the immigrant family" (Abu-Laban, 1998: 200).

In addition, the point system exacerbates worldwide gender inequalities inasmuch as women generally have fewer opportunities than men to meet education, linguistic and marketable skills criteria (see Arat-Koc, 1999b) and are therefore less able to enter Canada as principal applicants in the economic class.[8] The point system also obscures the many contributions that non-selected immigrants make in the paid workforce, the home, and the community (McLaren and Dyck, 2002). For example, often immigrant families initially rely on the labour force participation of wives, though categorized as 'dependants' (Ng, 1992). Many immigrant women occupy low-wage jobs that fill important niches of the labour market (Spitzer et al., 2003) and have come to Canada under the family class (Satzewich and Wong, 2003). As Arat-Koc (1999a) suggests, sponsored parents may often contribute to the care of children in the home or work in family businesses. They may also work outside the home, for example, as farm workers (Black, 2003), or they may contribute to community activities. Yet, researchers have paid little attention to determining the nature and extent of sponsored parents' various activities, which reinforces the belief that they are burdens on society.

On the surface, human capital theory may be particularly powerful because it appears to resolve long-standing racial tensions in immigration policy. The point system endorses the selection of immigrants who possess human capital, even if they are racialized, a process which attributes social significance to groups based on superficial attributes such as skin colour (Li, 1998). As immigration policies and practices align with neoliberalism, however, it can be argued that they continue racialization but in more complex and hidden ways. Attacks that vilify sponsored parents and grandparents as "the worst abusers of the welfare system" (see Brunet, 1998: 7-8) may not use the language of 'race', class or gender, but they share in the deficiency discourses associated with racialized immigrants and immigrant families. The problematization of immigrant families "fuels legitimacy for the idea that immigrants are a social/welfare/economic cost to Canadians and Canadian society and may, ultimately, negatively impact all…Canadians who are ethnocultural and racial minorities" (Abu-Laban, 1998: 205).

In arguing that Canadian immigration policy should be concerned with the *quality* of immigrants not their *quantity*, Collacott (2002), for example, suggests that family class is the most harmful form of immigration and that "family class immigration may gain votes but does not help the country" (p. 19). As Li (2004: 26) notes, such immigration critics as Collacott[9] not only use selective evidence and fallacious arguments; they dwell on a "harsh utilitarian dictum: immigrants not obviously enriching Canada are useless to Canada." In drawing on narrow, economic definitions of worth, recent studies (e.g. Baker and Benjamin, 2002; Dempsey, 2004) provide evidence that sponsored parents may be a burden on Canadian society. The authors, however, ignore how the sponsorship program itself may contribute to immigrant inequalities and marginalization and do not consider other discursive understandings about the centrality of older parents to family life.

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Inclusionary discourses and research

In immigration practices, deficiency discourses of sponsored parents prevail, but competing discourses co-exist that are more socially inclusive, that stress social justice concerns and allow for broader notions of worth, citizenship, and the family. A recent submission, for example, to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration on family reunification suggests that many compelling reasons exist for promoting family reunification, which include international legal obligations, Canada's traditional policy of family reunification, and the promotion of newcomer integration (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), 2005). Another submission argues that recent reductions in target level of parental sponsorship appear to be "deliberately trying to kill the longstanding program" and have occurred without adequate public debate (Canadian Bar Association, 2005: 4).

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) itself has kept a distance from whole-heartedly embracing human capital theory and provides a discursive space for contesting meanings about sponsored parents. In its commitment to

gender-based analysis, CIC has acknowledged that human capital selection criteria have different impacts on women and men and that a substantial sociological and economic literature criticizes the definition and understanding of 'skill' as "reflecting traditional male occupational experiences and excluding an appreciation of the kinds of skills associated with women's work, particularly in many of Canada's top source countries" (2002: 6). In addition, the Minister recognized recently that Canada needs to be culturally sensitive to different concepts of family and that parents and grandparents are essential in supporting and improving the situation of immigrants in this country (Volpe, 2005). In an interview, he reflected critically on the government's admission criteria and indicated he would like to make it easier for immigrants to rebuild their family networks in Canada. He argued: "If we want skilled workers, we have to offer them a psychologically healthy environment" (Goar, 2005). In supporting family class immigration, he nonetheless stressed skilled workers as the primary immigrants.

In drawing on definitions of worth that are not reduced strictly to narrow economic concerns, recent studies suggest that both families and society benefit from reunification programs. Khoo (2003), who is concerned about the global competition for skilled migrants and its implications for Australia, concluded that family reunion promotes permanent settlement. Leung and McDonald (2001) documented the ways that elderly women in Chinese-Canadian households took care of grandchildren, made meals, did household chores, and comforted adult children.

Studies also suggest, however, that family reunification programs place parents in vulnerable positions. In a study of older Mexican immigrants in the U.S., Angel et al. (1999) stress that recent anti-welfare and anti-immigrant public sentiment and tightening of social welfare eligibility criteria result in older immigrants' fragile dependency (especially women who arrive with few resources and have limited opportunities) on their families. A study of farm workers in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia suggests that sponsored elderly immigrants (many of whom were women) felt obliged to work under exploitative conditions to repay their families (Black, 2003).

Canada's immigration policy only admits elderly parents and grandparents through the sponsorship program, which creates conditions of vulnerability not only for the parents but also for families who are obliged to provide them with a 'safety net.' Other families, who cannot afford the obligations of sponsorship and avail themselves of parents' or grandparents' support, may also be made vulnerable. Research is needed that draws on inclusionary discourses and theories to critically examine why immigration policy does not consider parents and grandparents to be 'immediate' family, why the policy requires families to sponsor them, and what the costs are of these measures to families and their elderly parents and grandparents. To address such questions, it will be necessary to place the perspectives and experiences of parents and their sponsors at the centre of the analysis (McLaren and Black, 2005).

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Notes

[1] The family class program permits a citizen or permanent resident to bring family members to Canada on the basis of a sponsorship agreement with the Canadian government. The sponsor agrees to provide accommodation, care and maintenance for the family member for up to 10 years (Côté et al., 2001).

[2] In 2004, 58% of parents and grandparents were women; 42% were men (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005).

[3] Because of their complexity, issues relevant to the refugee class require separate investigation.

[4] The economic class consists of skilled workers, business immigrants (self-employed, investors, and entrepreneurs), provincial/territorial nominees, and live-in caregivers as well as 'immediate family' members who accompany the principal applicant.

[5] The immigration system uses the point system to select business immigrants, but less strictly than in the case of skilled workers. In 2004, Canada admitted 113,442 immigrants under the 'skilled workers' category out of a total of 133,746 economic immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005).

[6] According to the categories during that period of time, family class immigration often outnumbered economic immigration (see Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2003a).

[7] 14% entered as protected persons and 3% in the humanitarian and compassionate/public policy category (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005).

[8] In 2004, 13,514 women came to Canada as principal applicants in the skilled workers category, in contrast to 34,375 men (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005).

[9] Besides Martin Collacott, Li (2004) refers to immigration critics Diane Francis and Daniel Stoffman.

