APPLYING A LIFE-COURSE LENS

to Immigrant Integration

ABSTRACT

Can the life-course approach be applied to immigrant integration? The answer to this question is affirmative, for two reasons. First, because immigration is an important and often perturbing experience that has an effect on the most important life trajectories. Second, because integration is a dynamic process that plays on the interactions between immigrant and the host society, both at the local and national levels. The author maintains that a dynamic analysis is necessary for this type of study.

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Life-course is likely the second most popular sociological concept, after social capital, exported to the policy and research community. Broadly referred to as the social processes that extend over one's life span, the life-course has several properties. First, it is a dynamic process, consisting of many overlapping trajectories over an individual's course of life. The key trajectories are family and household formation, formal learning, paid employment, and community participation.[2] Second, each of the trajectories is marked by a series of transitions, some of which are often age-graded and socially regulated, such as the age to drive, to vote, to work and to retire, and so on. These transitions present opportunities and challenges to the individual. Third, along the various trajectories, each individual accumulates resources through his/her interaction with the society in which he/she lives. These resources appreciate or depreciate over life, affecting the person's ability to respond to changes brought about by significant transitions such as from school to work, being in between employments, marriage, or childbirth.

The life-course approach marks a departure from current thinking on social policy, which is based mostly on aggregate point-in-time statistics. It allows for analyses beyond simply categorizing people in different stages of life, such as being poor or unemployed, to examining the dynamics of changes between stages of life and the associated factors.[i] Such analyses are possible due to the availability of longitudinal data in recent years. For example, longitudinal data shows that being in low-income circumstances is a transitory state for most, except for individuals and groups with certain social and demographic attributes who are more vulnerable to low-income for several consecutive years.[ii] In addition to transitions, the life-course approach centers on the individual, particularly the two-way flow of resources between the individual and social institutions.

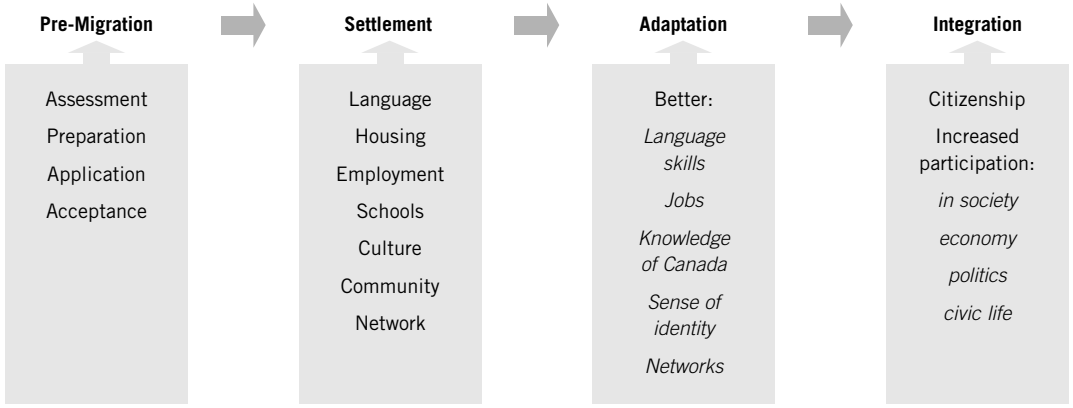
In Europe, the life-course approach has been applied to issues such as poverty and exclusion. It has been argued that each individual is endowed with a set of resources, such as human capital acquired through education and life experiences, income and assets, support from government and community organizations, as well as social relations through family and friends. Along the course of life, these resources become 'buffers' when a person faces setbacks, including family breakdown, health problems, and employment disruptions. Changes in policies and the social and economic conditions inevitably affect the amount and type of resources one is able to accumulate. If these buffers are not strong enough to overcome life's calamities, then the person risks being at the margin of society.[iii]

Can the life-course approach be applied in the context of immigrant integration? The answer is affirmative, for two reasons. First, immigration is a significant and often disruptive transition in life, affecting major life-course trajectories. Second, integration is a dynamic process involving the interactions between immigrants and the receiving society at a local and national level. Immigrants are a diverse group in terms of age, gender, family status, category of admission, and socio-economic status. These attributes have implications for how well individuals fare in society.[iv]

Immigration Experience in the Life-Course

Transplanting from one society to another is a long-term process that begins prior to migration and continues beyond the initial settlement stage.v Immigrant integration is a challenging and two-way process. It requires effort on the part of immigrants as well as the receiving society, including

Figure 1 – Life-Course Transition of an Adult Immigrant



Adapted from Frank and Kunz (2004)

governments, communities, the private sector, family and friends. ('Integration' here refers to the full participation of immigrants in the receiving society. It does not imply that immigrants are to be 'assimilated' into the mainstream society.)

Over the past decade, academics as well as researchers in government departments and agencies have generated an impressive amount of evidence on the social and economic integration of immigrants in Canada.[3] By now, most people are familiar with the immigrant story. On average, immigrants have higher education levels than the Canadian-born, but their credentials seem to be depreciated in the Canadian labour market.[vi] Recent immigrants make up one of the five groups most at risk of persistent low income.[vii] [4] Moreover, immigrants often need additional language training to fully participate in their new communities, given that many come from countries whose official language is neither English nor French.

In light of these findings, researchers and policy practitioners are asking the following questions: What responsibilities do Canadian institutions have with respect to the economic well-being of newcomers? What are the responsibilities of newcomers vis-à-vis the labour market and integration in general?[5] To address these questions, one must first appreciate what it is like to start life anew in a country that is often culturally and socially different from one's own.

The Story of Tang

The following chart illustrates the transition of Tang, a hypothetical male in his late 30s, who came to Canada.[viii] [6] Tang was a doctor of Chinese medicine. He was invited by his friend and former colleague to work in his thriving Chinese medicine store and clinic in Toronto. His friend knew that Tang was proficient in English and that Tang was a good acupuncturist. After a self-assessment on the selection grid, Tang decided to apply to immigrate to Canada under the skilled worker category. While waiting for the application to be processed, he learned about the culture and customs of Canada, especially in Toronto. He continued to improve his English by taking night classes. In his communications with his former colleague, he found websites and addresses of settlement organizations in Canada, and started contacting some of them for information on living in Canada. After two years, his application was successful. With some of his savings and his anticipation, Tang boarded a plane for Toronto.

Such a move came with a cost. Tang declined an offer of promotion and resigned from his job at home. He left behind his wife and five-year-old son, as well as relatives and friends.

Upon arrival, his friend picked him up at the airport. Tang rented an apartment with the help of his friend, who also introduced him to other people in the Chinese community. Life was difficult at first. He was not able to practice as a licensed professional. Following Canadian news and entertainment required much effort. He worked in his friend's store and clinic during the day and took language classes in the evening. With the help of a settlement agency, he started to approach the appropriate licensing bodies to get his credentials recognized. To meet people outside the Chinese community, Tang participated in the Host program offered by another settlement organization, which paired him with a Canadian volunteer.

After a few years, Tang became a licensed homeopathic doctor and acupuncturist. His language skills improved. After saving enough for a down payment, he opened his own practice. Networks were formed among people in the Chinese community and beyond. Tang developed a greater understanding of Canadian society, its rules, laws, values, and institutions. He applied to become a Canadian citizen. In the meantime, he sponsored his wife and son to immigrate to Canada.

The story also suggests that newcomers and the receiving society both bear responsibility for immigrant integration. In addition, it illustrates the flow of resources between Tang and the receiving society, including governments, the market, and community organizations. Tang brought his skills, knowledge and ambition with him to his adopted country. The Canadian Government granted him permanent resident status, allowing him to work and live in the country indefinitely. Licensing bodies permitted him to practice his profession, and Tang paid the association fees. The market provided Tang with the opportunity to make a living, and Tang filled the need for alternative health care. Further, Tang paid taxes, purchased goods and services. The community offered a safe, healthy and welcoming environment, and Tang reciprocated by volunteering.

Obviously, this is the 'ideal type' of immigration process. There are many other alternative paths and endings. Take a different scenario, for example. Prior to immigration, the information Tang acquired on credential recognition and job opportunities in Canada was not very useful. He socialized primarily with his own ethnic community. He would have liked to meet people outside his own ethnic community, but was not comfortable with speaking English. Occasionally, he attended social events outside his own community, but was left out of the conversation because he could not understand the cultural references that were common to Canadians, nor did anyone bother to explain these cultural references to him. He lived in an over-crowded apartment with several other migrants. In addition to working at his friend's store, he took on two other part-time jobs to make ends meet. Consequently, he was not able to attend language classes. The licensing process overwhelmed him and the counseling he received from service agencies was not very helpful. In the meantime, his former boss was asking him to go back. Eventually, Tang returned home.

Implications for Research and Policy

What does a life-course approach mean for research and policy on immigrant integration? First, it requires longitudinal data. Much of our knowledge to date on the topic derives from cross-sectional surveys. They show how immigrants compare to the Canadian-born at one point in time, taking into account a certain set of attributes, such as gender, age, education, and so on. Monitoring a cohort of immigrants over time, one would be able to see factors that contribute to changes in the labour market and other outcomes. Longitudinal data also enables researchers to map out pathways to integration, identifying transition points where individuals are vulnerable to exclusion, and the resources useful for preventing such exclusion. Second, with an understanding of these transitions and resources, proactive measures could be developed to facilitate the transitions. As shown earlier, integration begins before migration. Language training, credential assessment, and cultural orientation could be offered overseas to potential applicants so that they can be on their feet soon when they come to Canada. This does not simply mean giving out an information flyer. Rather, it takes the collaborative efforts of governments and stakeholders to deliver appropriate, effective, and systematic programs. Third, while settlement agencies have the specific mandate to assist newcomers in the years immediately following arrival, the full inclusion of immigrants requires the efforts of all sectors of society. In addition to language training and credential recognition, the success of immigrant integration depends on a society that values equity, diversity, and progress.

In conclusion, the life-course approach is about focusing on dynamics rather than the static. It is about building resources and capabilities. There has been awareness among researchers and policy practitioners of the need and the utility of dynamic analyses. One example is the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC), which monitors a sample of newcomers from six months to four years after arrival. Collaborative efforts are underway to improve the labour market integration of immigrants. TRIEC, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, brings together stakeholders representing employers, labour, occupational regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions, assessment service providers, community organizations, and all three orders of government. Its objective is to build bridges between immigrants and the local labour market, by preparing skilled immigrants for the labour market on the one hand, and equipping stakeholders and governments to better appreciate the values of newcomers on the other.[7] Finally, there are no magic ingredients to create instant 'ideal immigrants.' As a Chinese would say: you cannot eat a hot bun in a hurry. Life-course is about time.

Notes

[1] The views expressed here are those of the author and not of the Policy Research Initiative.

[2] For a full discussion on the life-course framework, please refer to the discussion paper by the Policy Research Initiative, *A Life-Course Approach to Social Policy Analysis: A Proposed Framework*, August 2004.

[3] Readers should refer to the web sites of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Statistics Canada, and the Metropolis Project for literature on immigration and integration.

[4] The other four at-risk groups are older unattached individuals, the disabled, lone parents, and Aboriginals living off-reserve.

[5] Adapted from the discussion questions at the Metropolis Interdepartmental Committee, February 16, 2005.

[6] According to Citizenship and Immigration's annual immigration overview, Facts and Figures, men are more likely than women to be principal applicants.

7 Information is available at www.triec.ca

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