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**Reconstituting the Family:
Negotiating Immigration and Settlement**

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Reconstituting the Family: Negotiating Immigration and Settlement

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Abstract

This paper draws on focus groups to illustrate ways in which immigrant families are heterogeneous, fluid and constantly being negotiated and reconstituted both spatially and temporally. The research took place in five neighbourhoods in the greater Vancouver area and examines three broad themes: network making; the dynamics of gender, generation and racialization; and the negotiation of educational and employment opportunities. Findings suggest that families interact in various respects with local, national and international networks that extend, blur and otherwise make problematic the boundaries and meanings of family. Further, the paper highlights the multiple ways in which immigration unsettles family relations and may give rise to new forms of independence, dependence and identities. Finally, the paper illustrates how education and employment become family projects, requiring strategies that occur over time and space, and that shift as negotiation takes place.

Key words: immigrant families, networks, focus groups, heterogeneity, fluid boundaries

Introduction

Academic research tends to view the immigrant family in two quite different ways. The dominant view for many years has conceived of 'the immigrant family' as a naturally bounded, unified whole. For example, one can analyze 'the Greek-Canadian family,' 'the Polish-Canadian family,' and 'the Chinese-Canadian family' (Ishwaran 1980). According to this idea, the immigrant family experiences a linear process eventually resulting in integration, a process sequentially contained within the two national boundaries of the home culture and the new culture. Such a model of immigration assumes the existence of two original, distinct cultures and a unidirectional process of adaptation; it also assumes that the primary dynamic exists between host and immigrant culture, ignoring dynamics within immigrant cultures as well as across them.

The notion that the two cultural poles of home and new culture are fixed or monolithic is difficult to sustain (Kibria 1997; Pizanias 1996). How can we say, for example, what is the Canadian family, when it can best be typified as diverse and in flux (Eichler 1997)? Or what is the 'Asian' family, differing as it does according to country, region, social class, ethnicity, religion, and so forth? Such monolithic versions are fictive families with an uneasy relationship to lived experience. Further complicating the definition of the immigrant culture is the time of immigration, restructuring and globalization processes, and the emergence of diaspora cultures (Kibria 1997). Finally, such a model of immigrant family integration privileges cultural values and treats them as autonomous from everyday practices, discourses, structural constraints, and power relations.

A second way to understand immigrant families is to see the family as fluid and constantly being negotiated and reconstituted both spatially and temporally (e.g. Lawson 1998). This view considers ways in which immigrant (and migrant) families are unfixed categories that are not discretely located in space. Families may adopt spatially extensive survival strategies incorporating multiple members in diverse places who remain part of the income-pooling unit, or who continue to exercise influence over household dynamics. As such, families may be situated in the home country, the new country and elsewhere —

the family redefined as transnational (Hyndman and Walton-Roberts 1998) — and it can blur with local, national and international networks that include kin, friends, and contacts. Moreover, according to this second perspective, immigrant families (like other families) are heterogeneous, multiply positioned, and stratified — they differ in their composition, their social positions according to social class, ethnicity, race,¹ and locality, and in the experiences of various family members, especially in relation to gender and generation. (e.g. Das Gupta 1995). Thus we cannot speak about ‘the’ immigrant family because this denotes a far too static picture of what is a shifting set of complex social relations, with unpredictable outcomes.

Our research suggests that the second view of immigrant families as fluid and heterogeneous is the more fruitful way to understand migration processes. Such processes may have more than a single country of origin and take place through a web of daily practices connected to immigration policy, neighbourhood, networks, housing, the labour market, consumption, leisure, health, schooling and so forth. Some immigrants celebrate this fluidity. In one of our focus groups, a woman from Poland, recently divorced (since coming to Canada) and a mother of a 13-year-old daughter, observed: “The family here looks different.” She likes how the family looks in Canada: “for me it's absolutely right that immigration changes the picture of the family.” In contrast, others voiced deep concern over the reconstitution of family dynamics. For example, a grandfather from India spoke about his disappointment over “the breaking of the family” in Canada. These different views reflect the variety of family, gender and generational anxieties and struggles that emerged as themes in our research and provide preliminary insights into different ways that people negotiate immigration and settlement.

Our study is based on sixteen focus groups that we held in five districts in the Greater Vancouver region.² We selected the five districts on the basis of their different residential type and unique history and profile of immigrant settlement: East Vancouver, West Side Vancouver (including Kerrisdale, Oakridge and Shaughnessy), Richmond, north Surrey-Delta, and Tri-cities (Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, and Port Moody). East Vancouver is an inner city residential area that has long been a reception area for diverse groups of immigrants; Vancouver’s affluent West Side, until recently largely British in

ethnic origin, now has a large Chinese origin population; Surrey is an outer suburb with a diverse immigrant mix, including a significant South Asian population; and Tri-cities is an outer suburb that has only recently begun to attract new immigrants among its residents. The focus groups varied in their composition. In all districts, we conducted focus groups with recently-arrived immigrants. In most districts we carried out focus groups with service providers, second-generation young adults, and women-only groups. And in one district, we organized a focus group with members of the 'host' community. We intended the focus groups to serve as a preliminary stage of research to help familiarize ourselves with immigrant issues and as preparation for an in-depth longitudinal study of immigrant families in each district. These overlapping case studies, we believe, will shed light on the complex connections between the everyday practices of immigrant families and how these interact with locality and larger regions.

Although talking about family in the public setting of focus groups is difficult, we were often struck by the animation of the discussions. In the focus groups, participants also discussed employment issues and relations with native-born, which we have reported on elsewhere.³ In this paper, we have chosen to report on three broad themes to do with living the family that arose in the focus groups: network making; the dynamics of gender, generation and racialization; and the negotiation of educational and employment opportunities. These themes – which we briefly illustrate — highlight the struggles, contingencies, heterogeneity and fluidity of the everyday practices of immigrant families in a variety of localities.

1. Network making

Informal networks may come into play as immigrants settle into a new location, whether used on their own or in conjunction with institutional service provision. Most immigrants are faced with a vast array of information that has to be accessed and processed in the first months of settlement as they attempt to find housing, jobs, schools and negotiate everyday needs. This is often complicated by lack of English language ability, or French for those first settling in Quebec. Some immigrants have friends, relatives or other contacts through

ethnic affiliation who may be able to help; others have fewer resources in place when they arrive.

As some research has shown, immigrant families interact in various ways with local, national and international networks (e.g. Hyndman and Walton-Roberts 1998). What struck us in the focus groups is how vastly networks may range from being densely organized, operating transnationally, to being thin and confined to the localized context; and for some immigrants, being nonexistent. Furthermore, such networks may extend, blur, and otherwise make problematic the boundaries and meanings of family. For example, an Indo-Canadian participant from Surrey described a migration process including marriage and extended family reunification that involved buying land, building houses together, setting up jobs for one another, and working together. He said, “And that is where we all stayed together just like a network, like support mechanisms and everything, housing, food, set up a job, and those kinds of things. We always move together.” Reciprocal support within families across generations was important to some. The reunification of families allowed grandparents to support adult children, including those pursuing studies in Canada, through participation in the running of a household or caring for young children. Others from the Punjab mentioned common village origin (rather than just blood and marital relatives) as an important dimension of chain migration and available support on arrival in Canada, extending notions of family in the new country.

In contrast to densely organized chain migration, a woman from Poland living in the Tri-cities, narrated networks contingent upon changing family structure, migration, and different locales. When she first arrived in Toronto with her husband, they relied heavily on extended family and the Polish community for help: “They were like the sail boat by this ocean of new information.” Later, after divorce and a move with her child to British Columbia where she profoundly missed the benefits of the large Polish community in Toronto, she deliberately sought Polish contacts, partly activated by links to Toronto, to help her find housing and health service providers, thus extending a network that had begun with family connections.

Such fluidity and blurred boundaries of families and networks, as illustrated in these examples, suggest that network making is far more complex than is the often-used simple distinction between nuclear and extended family networks. The meaning of family structure and networks, how they operate and the purposes they serve, may be transformed as they interact with different spatial and social patterns. For example, Hong Kong's small geographical area enables nuclear families to be in close proximity to relatives not living in their households, a situation amenable to developing a close-knit family network that is in effect an extended family. Such an extension of family beyond the household may not be possible (or work in the same way) in more spatially stretched locations as in large Canadian cities (Man 1996). On the other hand, immigrant families who lack the support networks of the extended family that were available to them in their home country (Man 1996; Pizani 1996), may attempt to replicate them by symbolically adopting friends as relatives (Dhruvarajan 1996). In other words, networks may include a variety of family structures and contacts, these may change over time, and may extend beyond a specific neighbourhood to cross a sprawling city, a nation or international borders. How families construct support networks is a critical issue for understanding the everyday practices of immigrant settlement. We intend to explore such questions as: how do immigrants construct networks? What barriers do they face in doing so? How is network making linked to the wider social context that includes immigration policy, time of immigration, locality, labour market conditions, globalization processes, and the dynamics of social identities (e.g. gender, generation and racialization)?

2. The dynamics of gender, generation and racialization

The fluidity of immigrant family life is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the dynamics of gender, generation and racialization. Immigration unsettles family relations in multiple ways and may give rise to new forms of independence, dependence and identities. Recent research has shown, for example, how immigration policy, procedures, and discourses produce women's 'dependence' within families and other sites of interaction, including employment, by frequently categorizing family men as independent applicants

and women as their dependents (Agnew 1996; Boyd 1997; Ng 1988; Vanderbijl 1998). As Satzewich (1993) argues, immigration policy reinforces the myth of women's dependency (i.e. by categorizing them as if they were unemployable when in fact immigrant women have a high rate of employment) and promotes their marginalization (i.e. the stereotypes of dependency make it difficult for immigrant women to find decent employment). Thobani (1998) further argues that immigrant women are racialized. The very term 'immigrant women' connotes women who are racialized as non-white. White immigrant women more easily slough off their immigrant status whereas women of colour, whether immigrant or Canadian born, may continue to be treated as immigrants, who really 'belong somewhere else' and who are a drain on Canada's resources. Immigration can, therefore, be understood as an ongoing process that in many ways promotes the marginalization of women of colour and those for whom English is a second language.

While immigration procedures may frequently inscribe women as dependent upon their husbands, focus group narratives enunciated processes that were more complex and contradictory. A prominent narrative in the focus groups emphasized new family independence that immigrant women acquire in Canada. Participants from a variety of backgrounds talked about the position of women in the family as more equal in Canada, with laws that better protect them compared with their places of origin. As a woman from Hong Kong argued: "I am better protected here. The laws in Canada are protecting the women." Another participant, the woman from Poland who had divorced since coming to Canada, commented on the greater freedom that women enjoy in Canada, while acknowledging that new expectations placed additional stress on family relations:

The woman has more freedom here. The stress on the families, you know they are appointed to cooperate as partners. For example, in my country still is this tradition to treat woman as the family person...the women are growing faster than the men...they are going to ask for some bigger freedom, some bigger partnership between them.

The idea of women's improved social status was often double-edged causing some participants to worry about increased conflict between spouses. Participants in a service provider focus group linked to Tri-cities, for example, suggested that domestic violence is

widespread and particularly exacerbated by women's vulnerability to the sponsorship process.

Furthermore, immigration to Canada can mean less independence and freedom for women, especially for those who are mothers. Some women were surprised to find how difficult it was to care for children in Canada and, at the same time, pursue other activities. As a young woman from Latin America argued, in Canada jobs were more essential to have yet more difficult to find, and mothering and employment harder to combine than in her country of origin where extended female kin shared child rearing responsibilities. Many of the women were primarily responsible for negotiating child care and, as a result, suffered severe isolation and often a sense of danger. As a single mother living in the outer suburban area of Tri-cities poignantly remembered:

It is such a difficult time when you are landed, the language skills mostly are very crude during this time and the family, the child mostly – everything is your responsibility – and you don't have the communication skills, you don't have the knowledge about the country. Everything is strange, everything is danger almost. You have to do everything by yourself. It is really stressful and almost killing as an immigrant.

Some mothers feared that if they ever left their child unattended (which they had done in their country of origin) in Canada they could be accused of neglect. Caring for children could be far too much of a focus and prevent the women from being involved in the community, though such involvement may be necessary for mothering practices and settlement more generally. As a woman living in East Vancouver commented:

If you come as an immigrant woman you get that blockage whereby your children become your focus, and you have some hours when children are in school, which you can use to explore what it is about the community, because how do you know who [to go to] unless you have connections in the community.

Helping to organize other women in her community is now a central part of her life.

As this illustration suggests, how mothers interact with the community is a vital issue for understanding immigration settlement. Very little research, however, examines immigrant mothers' networks. Several writers (e.g. Boyd 1989; Pedraza 1991)

note that research on social networks and migration has tended to be indifferent to gender. Zhou (1997), for example, focuses on immigrant families and the significance of social networks in providing various resources, but treats this process as if it were undifferentiated by gender and ignores the specificities of mothering practices. Some studies examine the significance of mothers' networking as family and gendered strategies (e.g. Bell and Ribbens 1994; Dyck 1992), but few look at how mothers who have immigrated construct networks and make use of them. In particular, we need to understand how mothering, which is located spatially both within the home and outside it, is central to constituting the reproduction and transformation of social relations (Dyck 1992): how, for example, do localities and the ways that mothers extend their practices beyond the household contribute to variations of social practices over time and space; how do the distinct forms of locality facilitate and constrain mothering practices? As Man (1996) suggests, women's independence and control over their lives are shaped by how localities are socially organized. For example, due to the proximity of services, close relatives and the accessibility and cheapness of transportation in Hong Kong, mothers are less concerned about their children's safety than in Canadian cities. As a result, children may be more independent and, as a result, their mothers may be able to pursue their own activities more freely in Hong Kong than in Canada.

In our focus group research, neighbourhood locality interacted in various ways to form new relations of dependence and restricted movement. A young woman from Hong Kong living in Tri-cities, for example, commented on her dependence on her sister and father to get to school and visit friends until she got her driving license. At the same time, her mother, who did not speak English, was now dependent on her and her sister to get out. Both the young woman and her mother resented these new forms of dependence, feeling constrained in their activity. The same young woman expressed a strong sense of loss accompanying the geographical and social dislocation of immigration: "I felt like I lost my whole life, my own space."

As a great deal of research suggests, immigrant family experiences can differ considerably according to generation (e.g. Maykovich 1980). Many participants, for example, suggested that parents struggle during migration while children adjust quickly

and the second generation integrates more easily than the first. Not all agreed, however, that children adjust easily. Some participants talked about the isolation that many immigrant children feel, especially those who arrived in their teens. A woman expressed anxiety about teenaged children who often face greater difficulties than adults: “I see a lot of the newcomers, immigrants, where the children are just sitting at home and they don’t know what to do” and suggested “the newcomers’ children are mostly outsiders from our society,” especially those in families with limited financial resources to pay for community activities. Other women talked of the feeling that children weren’t welcome in Canada. As a woman said about her difficult search to find housing: “many people didn’t like children, they thought it was a bother, too noisy.”

Two focus groups with young adults who grew up in the Lower Mainland — Chinese-Canadians in Kerrisdale and Indo-Canadians in Surrey — highlighted the complex interaction of changing immigration policy, different family migration strategies, and changing settlement geographies in generating distinct and shifting generational identities and intergenerational relations. Conversation in these focus groups turned to feelings of being a racialized minority while growing up, often one of only a few Chinese- or Indian-origin children in their schools and neighbourhoods. Some expressed a sense of fragmented identities: “All my friends were white and I thought of myself as white except when I got home I was Chinese. You don’t notice until you look in the mirror that you are different.”

One may take for granted that parents, especially perhaps immigrant parents, should stress the importance of education and the need for scholastic achievement. However, some participants who had gone to school in the Lower Mainland reflected critically upon their parents’ emphasis on scholastic achievement and the necessity to excel and work hard at school as a factor that inhibited their ‘integration’ with their white peers. Young Chinese-Canadian men and women in Kerrisdale, for example, mentioned that these family attitudes and expectations around education, such as attendance at Chinese school, limited their opportunities to make friends with white children. One commented: “It was always ‘get the highest mark that you can’.” The importance of education for this Chinese-Canadian group was further reflected in comments on how the family would

support the children through school and university, and how this family life style acted as a source of division between themselves and white students who were not supported in the same way.

As immigration patterns changed, however, the increased density of various Chinese-Canadian communities made many participants feel not so ‘alone,’ and in some cases helped bridge the cultural/generation gap identified between children and parents. “In terms of my relationship with my parents, I can communicate so much better now. I talk to my friends in Chinese a lot now, so I’m a lot more articulate with my Chinese now than before.” For some Indo-Canadian participants, in contrast, strong patterns of family chain migration and extended family settlement strategies produced early residential concentration and strong community ties. This was sometimes double-edged, especially for the young women who experienced support but also strong pressure from the broader Indo-Canadian community which monitored their behaviour, even when parents were willing to allow them to become more ‘Western.’ In this context the boundaries of family that were not fixed and intact in the first place, became even less fixed and more permeable as the influence of community members filtered through the boundaries to control the behaviour of family members.

Most of the young men and women in these second-generation focus groups expressed an appreciation of their ability to move between cultures, to form, as it were, situational identities. One young woman commented on speaking English at Pacific Centre (a downtown mall) and Chinese in areas of Chinese business concentration. In both cases decisions about language were tied to notions of what was appropriate in a specific place, and possible sanctions for contravening conventions. Similarly a young Indo-Canadian woman from Surrey commented: “we all had a school personality and a home personality.” Yet this separation of school and home was not constant, but, according to participants, depended on the community in which the family lived — how white, multicultural or Indo-Canadian it was — and how liberal the father was.

The focus groups talked in ways that suggested immigrant families were shaped by dynamics of gender, generation and racialization. Participants indicated that, as

immigrants, women and men had different experiences and, as such, that relating to one another often shifted in unsettling ways. A consensus did not exist, however, about whether or not, in coming to Canada, women improved their social position, a topic of considerable interest to many of the participants. Despite the rhetoric that North American society promises more freedom for women, some participants suggested that immigration may lead to new dependencies and greater isolation. Mothers, for example, may face new constraints, (e.g. legal, linguistic, spatial) while they take on the onerous responsibilities of settling themselves and their families in their new country and community. Generation was also a dimension that differentiated experiences. Some parents, for example, became more dependent on their more linguistically able children. Racialization was a theme that second-generation participants particularly dealt with, especially because its shifting process was evident in changes over time, varied compositions of neighbourhoods, and situational locations.

3. Negotiating educational and employment opportunities

As countless research attests, education and employment are primary sites of negotiating ‘integration’ into local neighbourhoods. More than any other topic, people in the focus groups told us over and over again how worried they were about employment issues and they talked passionately about education. The disjuncture between hopes and actual experiences in schooling and employment often meant a fragile sense of the future and of family settlement in Canada. Many participants worried about their own opportunities as well as those of their husbands, wives and children. But they were also hopeful. As a participant from Surrey commented, “If children can pursue their education fully, they will have no problems in Canada.”

Research has not fully recognized, however, the extent to which education and employment become family projects in which women, particularly as mothers, play a central role, requiring strategies that occur over time and space, and that shift as negotiation takes place. Mothering practices are often shaped by schooling, and because of recent changes in the labour market, a sense of educational urgency presses mothers

more fully into the pursuit of educational opportunities for their children (Reay 1998).

Many of the parents in our focus groups talked about coming to Canada because of the educational opportunities they thought it promised for their children. Families often pin their hopes for the future on their children's education. As a Kerrisdale focus group participant commented, "The most important thing is the children's future." As a participant from Surrey commented, "If children can pursue their education fully, they will have no problems in Canada."

The focus groups talked in ways that suggested educational and occupational opportunities were central family projects, with a great deal of variability. How families were able to support their children's education, for example, was dynamically related to their resources. A young woman suggested that due to differences in age of arrival and parents' financial security, her older brother had far fewer advantages than she did:

I think my brother had a hard time. He is a smart guy. He would have liked to go to university and stuff but because of my parents' immigration process, I think it was hard for them to put him through university. So he started driving a taxi because my dad had a taxi at the time. He didn't have the same opportunities that me and my sister did.

Some parents, because they had adequate economic resources and knowledge about the local school, chose to settle in specific neighbourhoods. Some had resources that allowed them to provide their children with tutors (either paid or volunteered by members of their family or social network). Furthermore, some parents, especially those from Kerrisdale, a wealthy area of Vancouver, were knowledgeable about local schooling issues and talked about the ways that schools should be changed to reflect their interests. Some felt, for example, that schools kept children too long in English-as-second-language classes, and did not have enough Chinese origin teachers relative to the student body. Overall, the focus group participants had mixed opinions about the quality of Canadian schools, pointing to how Canadian education is less rigorous, but also less stressful and more creative, than in their countries of origin.

Family strategies intersected with education not just locally, but internationally, illustrating, again, how families are spatially fluid. Some parents with adult children

wanting to study in Canada migrated to support their children, in one case to provide child care for grandchildren. In other families, parents maintained economic and residential ties with their country of origin while their children attended school or university in Canada. In one instance, a young woman who was attending university in Vancouver and pursuing a master's degree had come to the realization that this education may not lead to good employment opportunities in Canada. She was considering the possibility of returning to Hong Kong, where her brothers were still living.

“I want a job that I can make progress [in] instead of just working as a cashier or helper. Because I'm young, I don't have a family myself, I want to develop my own career.”

The importance of having a job is summed up by her statement: “If you don't have a job you cannot see the future.”

Several participants talked of the transnational mobility and choice they had in employment due to their family resources, and some accounts referred to the phenomenon of the ‘astronaut family,’ where the husband in a family goes back to Asia to pursue business. Family costs were attached, however, to this strategy. For example, a Taiwanese woman perceived that such spatial separation of the family was a threat to family cohesion and encouraged marital discord.

Others without the choice to return to their countries of origin talked of stresses, discouragement and little income for family members unable to find paid employment. With restricted employment opportunities themselves, many participants adopted a family strategy of looking to the next generation for greater success because of their locally attained education and potential to speak English fluently. At the same time many parents' desire for their children's integration was double-edged, simultaneously wanting it and fearing the loss of cultural identity that might result. Those who explicitly wanted their children to “mix with other races” as one Kerrisdale participant put it, were also poignantly mindful of the many barriers that made this difficult. These barriers included living in a neighbourhood clustering of a specific cultural group which may end up reinforcing a lack of English language ability, and taking ESL classes which may unintentionally reinforce such networks.

Conclusion

Depictions in most texts of the immigrant family are strangely silent on the permeable nature of families as they experience dislocation and resettlement. To stress “the unit of intimate partners,” as do some texts (e.g. Advisory Group 1997), fails to capture the divisions within immigrant families and the shifting boundaries of their everyday experiences. The focus groups point to the inadequacy of normative views of nuclear and extended families, with examples of households with fluid and fluctuating social boundaries and whose physical boundaries may span several single-family dwellings and indeed national borders. The use of networks in finding jobs, housing and information about schools and other services appears to be a common, but not universal, strategy. Such networks take many forms that extend or blur the boundaries and meanings of family and disrupt notions of a linear immigration process. As part of the process of immigration, family households are constituted and reconstituted; ‘the immigrant family’ is a term to be made problematic.

Our observations from the focus groups suggest complex and changing forms of dependence and renegotiations of family life that may also include conflict and anxiety. Barely hinted at in the focus groups were such issues as the potential and the dilemmas posed for racialized children who act as ‘bridges’ to the broader community (e.g. Castaneda 1996), the nucleus of women’s networks that can be converted into information, practical support and child-rearing resources, as has been found in other research (e.g. Dyck 1996; Hanson and Pratt 1995), or the impact of immigration policy and discourse on how racialized immigrants construct themselves as being at ‘home’ in Canada.

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¹ We acknowledge the social construction of all categories of ethnicity or race, whether in the census, research or everyday language. Some researchers choose to signify this by using scare quotes around social categories such as ‘Indo-Canadian,’ ‘Chinese’ or white. We have chosen not to do this for consistency and stylistic reasons. The terms used by participants are preserved in quotations.

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³ See Dan Hiebert, “Immigrant Experiences in Greater Vancouver: Focus Group Narratives” (<http://www.riim.metropolis.globalx.net>).

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