

Vancouver Centre of Excellence



**Research on Immigration and
Integration in the Metropolis**

Working Paper Series

No. 02-08

**Becoming Canadian? Girls, Home and School and Renegotiating Feminine
Identity**

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March 2002

RIIM

Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

The Vancouver Centre is funded by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Citizenship & Immigration Canada, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. We also wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Metropolis partner agencies:

- Health Canada
- Human Resources Development Canada
- Department of Canadian Heritage
- Department of the Solicitor General of Canada
- Status of Women Canada
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Correctional Service of Canada
- Immigration & Refugee Board

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Becoming Canadian? Girls, Home and School and Renegotiating Feminine Identity

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March 2002

Abstract. This paper examines, through detailed interviews, the development of teenage identities among immigrant girls in multi-ethnic suburban Vancouver. It discusses sometimes conflicting relations between home and school in the shaping of Canadian feminine identities.

Key words. Mothers, daughters, school, feminine identity, suburban Vancouver

Introduction:

This paper focuses on the settlement narratives of mothers and their teen-age daughters, emphasizing how family members renegotiate family relationships and identities following immigration to Canada. In two related studies conducted in an outer suburban area of Vancouver, we have been struck by the resilience and efforts of families as they struggle to make a place for themselves in Canadian society, both materially and metaphorically, particularly in the first few years following arrival.¹ Focus groups with women immigrants, service providers, and educators indicated the common struggles of immigrants in gaining employment, in experiencing social isolation (particularly for women), and in getting to know ‘Canadian’ families. Children entering local schools appeared to have mixed experiences; we heard of both troubled teens and those who worked hard, and of a varying range of parental involvement with schools. We were told of tensions between school system expectations, and how social and cultural adjustments related to economic and social pressures affected students’ integration into the school system. New dependencies, challenges to familiar ways of understanding masculinity and femininity, and changed relationships between generations were talked about. These focus groups emphasized how generation and gender were important in the configuration of immigrant life (Creese, Dyck and McLaren, 1999).

In later interviews with households we learned more of families’ experiences of coming to Canada, their expectations, their successes and struggles. These were families from Poland, Hong Kong, Korea, Iran, Brazil and the former Yugoslavia. In the course of the interviews the notion of a seamless, bounded family unit was challenged. Within the same family, different members were encountering place quite differently. In some cases, while parents struggled with lack of employment and associated financial and personal stresses, their high-school-aged children embraced new freedoms, friendships and school experiences, and looked to a future of being ‘Canadian.’ In this paper, we begin to explore this gender and generational difference through a particular focus on mothers and daughters, who were interviewed in a linked study in the same geographical area.²

¹ One study is longitudinal and still in progress, following the settlement experiences of approximately 10 immigrant households in the study area (attrition from the study has meant that we started with more households, and the number of participating households in the last year of study is yet unknown). The second study, informed by the first, consisted of in-depth interviews with seventeen mother-daughter dyads in the study area. Both studies were preceded by focus groups and involved immigrants from a variety of source countries.

² This paper is exploratory only, raising issues that we will be examining more fully once the studies are complete. We wish to emphasize that we are not claiming that these girls’ experiences are representative, but provide an entry-point into processes that, in analysis, need to be contextually located – in power relations and local contingencies, for example.

We were interested in how these family members were actively constructing their lives in a new country. Our earlier household interviews with mother-daughter dyads provided intriguing glimpses into the renegotiation of femininity and control of the female body in the unfamiliar spaces through which the family was now being interpreted and lived. While our initial intent was to focus on the school as a site of integration, it became clear that it would be important not to separate out school, home and neighbourhood spaces in exploring issues around ‘becoming Canadian.’ What girls were being exposed to in the school was negotiated and reworked in the context of home and neighbourhood spaces. From our interviews, meanings around feminine identity appeared to be particularly at stake. The reproduction or contestation of familiar notions of femininity occurred through the (re)organization of the social and material practices of family life, and spoke further of the gendered experiences of dislocation and resettlement for immigrants. In the paper we focus on such negotiations of femininity, as these are constructed and performed in spaces shared by immigrants and non-immigrants.³

We begin by briefly sketching out some of the theoretical ideas we are finding useful in thinking through gender differences in immigration, following this with empirical examples through which we examine interconnections between the embodiment of cultural knowledge and negotiations of family and identity in the spaces of everyday life.

The gendered, embodied subject

There has been considerable interest in the embodiment of ‘difference’ in place, as geographers have explored the ways in which spaces and places are experienced in particular ways, including gender differences, a matter of interest to feminist geographers (see for example, McDowell, 1999). Insights from post-structural work – without neglecting that gender and its performance takes place in the specificities of material spaces – have brought attention to the implications for experience of the discursive inscription of bodies, for example, gender, ‘race,’ class, and normative heterosexuality. Being ‘marked’ through social and material practices associated with dominant discourses has effects on how one is inserted in relation to practices of power, and has consequences for access to resources. Roxana Ng (1988) has examined the social construction of the ‘immigrant woman,’ while the ways in which immigration policy positions women differently than men in official multiculturalism has also been discussed (Abu-Laban 1998).

³ In pursuing an interest in femininity, we note the work of Rezai-Rashti (1995) and Raissiguier (1995) whose studies examined the negotiation of girls’ femininity in relation to schooling.

Yet work exploring the effects of the body/space/power nexus has also produced nuanced understandings of both the reproduction of and instability of the coding of bodies and spaces, suggesting the ‘fixing’ of social categories and their meanings shifts over time and space. There is a diversity of ways and contexts in which identities come to have meaning and are used in ordering social interaction. For example, poststructural work suggests there are various interpretive schema available to women as they live ‘womanhood’ and perform identity, with subjectivity in flux as a result of material and discursive shifts that provide ways of interpreting experience.

The feminine body in such work is understood, following Grosz (1994), as both corporeally and discursively produced in culturally and historically specific sets of social relations. Bordo’s (1990) work, while taking a similar stance, emphasizes the importance of political economy and patriarchal relations in circumscribing women’s agency in the negotiation of femininity. Geographers have further pointed to the ways in which encodings of particular spaces are implicated in the constitution of subjectivity, through conveying messages of inclusion or exclusion related to people’s bodily inscriptions. Feminine identity thus needs to be understood as fluid and negotiable, but closely related to the material spaces of everyday life and the ‘audiences’ to whom a gendered identity is presented (see, for example, Dwyer, 1999). These everyday spaces, however, do not stand ‘free’ but are also closely linked to a layering of social relations that play out at different scales, from the global, through the national, regional and neighbourhood, to the body itself (Massey 1994; Price 1999). These ideas suggest that to be (inscribed as) an ‘immigrant woman’ (as a mother) or ‘newcomer’/ESL (English Second Language) student in the school (as a student) is the *effect* of pre-migration histories, immigration processes, and settlement service provision, for example, as well as *contributing to* subjectivity. Brah’s (1992) work also is useful in thinking through the spatiality of processes of identity constitution; the mutual constitution of ‘feminine’ bodies takes place in material spaces with multiple meanings – for example, the spaces of a Hong Kong Chinese diaspora are also spaces shared with people who are not part of a diaspora.

We have been interested in these ideas in interpreting the accounts of mothers and daughters in Canada. They suggest that accounts of experience need to be sensitive to the significance of context, local knowledge and the discursive construction of subjects. We are interested in how place might mediate the social relation of ‘difference’ – set against a normative ‘Canadianness’ and its implicit underpinning of ‘whiteness’ (Bannerji, 2000) – and influence the meanings given to everyday reality as the women and girls participating in our research negotiate the locality where they have come to live. Our focus here is on the interpretation and performance of gendered identities. Our study suggests that the interrogation and re-inscription of notions of femininity is a central concern

for mothers and daughters in the uncertain spaces within which they are reconstructing their day-to-day place – metaphorically and materially – following immigration.

Mothers, daughters and gendered identity

While mothers tended to be isolated and were having difficulty in making friends, daughters were thrown into the unfamiliar world of the Canadian school system, exposed to youth culture and, in most cases, engaging in Canadian society through friendships with other immigrant girls. We started thinking about girls' immigration experiences in terms of the mutual constitution of bodies and spaces after an interview with a Korean family who had been in Canada for about a year. The eldest daughter, speaking fluent English, told of her knowledge of Canada before coming, and of her strong desire to stay in Canada and to be a Canadian. Her images of Canada were heavily indebted to North American TV programmes and their portrayal of youth culture that she had seen in Korea. The contrast she made between the rigid school system in Korea and its separation of boys and girls and the openness between student and teacher, and among students, she was now encountering was vivid. She said one of the things she was looking forward to on immigrating was that she would be able to have a boyfriend. Her delight at this idea was evident. On first glance, her delighted anticipation may seem not unlike the desires of Canadian born girls of her age, but let us look further at other parts of our conversation with her and those with other girls.

At school, 'Kathy' who has adopted an English name, has been part of an ESL group. The school has many immigrant students among whom, although not exclusively, she has made her friends. She is pleased to know a few 'Canadian' girls, although she hasn't been in their homes. She speaks in English at school, although there are other Korean students there. Indeed, it is amongst these students that her desire to become Canadian is most challenged. The few instances of racism from Canadian students she dismisses as unimportant when we ask about this. But she selects to tell us of the response from her Korean peers, whom she describes as being a different type of person from herself. For her, becoming Canadian includes being fluent in English. But some of the Korean students are hostile to her when she speaks English, claiming she should speak her own language as a Korean. The other things she talks about are about her self-presentation as Canadian. She wants to have her ears pierced (but her father won't allow it) and is interested in clothes – shopping at the malls in downtown Vancouver is one thing she does with friends – and she mentions with some astonishment that people say she looks Korean, even though her clothes are all bought in Canada. While she studies hard, as she did in Korea, she also watches TV shows, her favourites being those that portray North American teen life and their particular renditions of femininity. She looks forward

to going to university and having a good job, values she shares with her parents. She seems to get on well with her parents, and apart from unsuccessful negotiation over having her ears pierced, appears to have few restrictions over what she does.

As Kathy traverses the spaces of home, school and neighbourhood she is absorbing dominant and local narratives about Canadianness, about femininity, about being Korean in Canada; she negotiates and redefines her identity through her body. And while she values much about her Korean culture, she works hard in presenting herself as Canadian, with a Canadian name, Canadian clothes, and speaking English. But she cannot erase her bodily inscription as ‘other,’ often coded as ‘ESL,’ which remains potentially a boundary marker. As Andersson (2000) argues, the attribution of otherness in terms of colour/religion/ethnicity has inescapable, inherent power upon immigrant youths’ identity work.

Clothes and language, and other markers of boundaries between youth groups, such as smoking, emerge in other girls’ accounts of their experiences in Canada. A fourteen-year-old girl from the former Yugoslavia talks of how she completely changed her clothes style so that she would fit in at school, noting the importance of clothing as markers of group identity. She also commented on her facility with English in terms of admittance to friendships, saying, “First I didn’t know the English, then I wasn’t very cool.” Now she speaks English well and has learnt the nuances of language use, correcting her father’s use of a colloquial word in the interview with us. She speaks on behalf and in support of her mother, whom she says understands quite a bit of English, but speaks little and is isolated. While enjoying Canada, there are some tensions in her family life. She, with her family, are committed to maintaining familiar routines of family life which do not match those of the Canadians she observes at school, for example the scheduling of family meal times, which may interfere with participation in out-of-school activities. One area of contestation with her father is over her desire to take a job out of school, something many of her peers do. She, like Kathy, is learning “what’s cool.” Unlike Kathy she does not have the bodily codings of a non-white ‘other,’ and is negotiating her femininity among her school peers, learning to be culturally ‘Canadian’ without a marking of an ‘ESL’ identity.

Also unlike Kathy, a Brazilian girl, ‘Maria,’ who had been in Canada for two years, had no bodily coding as ‘raced’. The only Brazilian in the school she first attended, and with ‘model’ good looks and, as she put it, a “pale skin,” she talked of what happened at school when she was walking in the corridors with her new, also good-looking Spanish friend.

Like it was so cool. I’m like, “oh my god” First day of my school, everybody knew, everybody knew that Brazilian chick, whatever, you know what I mean? It was

so funny, it was so funny, I would walk in the hallway, all these people would keep running back and walk behind me and I was like, “oh my god, what’s going on” right, the whole school is walking behind me and her. ...

Maria is good at sports, had done volunteer work, worked in a book store and now was anticipating a restaurant job. She seemed to have many friends. She mentioned her early frustrations at not being able to talk to other people because of her lack of English fluency, but now commented that “everything is just perfect.” She has not just learned English, at which she worked hard, but as the quote above shows, her conversation is peppered with teen idiom. Her good looks, vivacity and engagement in activities valued in Canadian schools and society (sports and working while at school) appear to act as a passport to teen networks and social life. Her parents supported her activities, and found little dissonance between young people’s engagement in school and community activities from those of the country they had left.

These three girls talked of the hard work they have put in as they learn to perform what they perceive and experience as codings of Canadian femininity. Another type of narrative is presented by a seventeen-year-old girl from Iran. Like Kathy she enjoyed the more relaxed atmosphere of the classroom as compared with her experience in Iran. She liked having male teachers, a new experience for her, but had difficulty with the mixed student body, talking of how the “boys bother the girls,” something she didn’t like. She had no Canadian-born friends, only other girls who were immigrants from Asia and Iran. Her mother, also at the interview, mentioned one overture of friendship to ‘Sohila’ from a Canadian girl who made smoking cigarettes a condition of any friendship, one that was unacceptable. A bigger issue and marker of difference, though, was that of the headscarf that Sohila wore at school. She remarked that students, and even a teacher, asked her why she wore it “but they don’t understand [that it is part of her religion]” One other girl in the school also wore a scarf, of whom Sohila says, “she’s a good help.” Sohila talked of how she would like to learn more about Canadian culture, although she found mores around dating and some dimensions of family relations unacceptable. Dating, her mother explained, is only acceptable when there is serious intent to marry; it is usual for children to stay in the family home until marriage.

Sohila spent most of her time at school, at home or in the library and did not take part in extracurricular activities. She appeared to accept the values around family and sexuality that she had grown up with. She wanted to stay in Canada, however, enjoying life here, although she commented it was easier for her brother. She talked of his many friends, and participation in sports out of school.

For the Iranian girls there were particular tensions around the new freedoms and different relationships with teachers and students at school. The presence of a large group of Iranian students at the high school from whom there was support for traditional cultural patterns, combined with studying hard and spending most free time at home, meant that behaviour boundaries were not frequently challenged. One girl remarked, “I always go out with my mother.” This home and family orientation, however, was not confined to Iranian students, and was also common for girls from Asian countries, such as Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Korea.

Clothes were commonly discussed. A Korean mother and her daughter, for example, commented that the clothes in Canada are “very sexy,” something the mother didn’t like. Relationships between young men and women were a further topic common in interviews, with uneasiness expressed about young men and women living together rather than marrying and the high rate of divorce in Canada. While some mothers talked of renegotiating freedoms and control concerning activities in and outside the home (e.g. participation in household labour or recreation with friends), or rework ideas about parental authority, issues around sexuality were of deep concern for mothers and less negotiable (see Valentine [1997] for a discussion of mothers’ primary role in managing children’s use of space and time). And while Kathy expressed a strong desire for a boyfriend, other girls were less comfortable with a (re)sexualized feminine identity as expressed in the school setting, and reaffirmed as a dominant discursive construction of femininity through TV and magazines. There was, at the same time, acknowledgement that there were other less sexualized representations of feminine comportment and behaviour, that mothers (and daughters) found more acceptable.

All the Asian girls cited an instance of racism at school, but in general stated that students and teachers were friendly. However, most of the girls’ friends were made through their common positioning in the school as ‘ESL students’ and entering a non-immigrant Canadian home was unknown for these girls and their mothers. They had little first-hand knowledge of how ‘Canadian’ families live their day-to-day life. Pre-immigration images of Canada were sometimes confirmed, such as the big houses, long distances and “cute guys’ of one girl’s impressions, but their experiences did not always match. For example, the common status of parental unemployment meant living in low cost apartments for several, and the anticipation of “cute guys” translated for some in exclusions, as boundaries around ‘raced’ and sexual bodies were drawn in the course of everyday school interactions.

In the two linked studies, there are common themes. Mothers tended to be isolated, while their daughters became fluent in English and were doing well academically at school. In some interviews the daughters acted as translators for their mothers, reflecting shifts in relationships as girls became the interpreters and conveyers of cultural information. Most fathers were unemployed, so that difficult economic adjustments accompanied social changes. Most of the girls' friends were other immigrant girls attending the same ESL classes. Language was a constant in how girls explained their access or otherwise to 'Canadian friends' and groups in school. School demographics made a difference, with some schools having large immigrant populations and others not. ESL classes appear to provide a forum for students to make friends with others with common experiences, but might also 'mark' student groups as 'other.' One girl from Taiwan noted that she was the only Asian in the regular classroom outside the ESL program in her first, smaller school. Now at a larger school she finds there are many Asian students, and she feels more comfortable. She is also beginning to make white friends.

The isolation of most mothers denies them entry into the informal 'chat' that constitutes an important part of 'mothering work' where local knowledge and dominant discourses about parenting may be negotiated and local norms constituted (Dyck 1990; Holloway 1998). The girls, with their exposure to popular and youth culture through the school that mediates their embodiment as 'newcomer' or 'ESL,' begin to be in a position to be cultural translators for their mothers. But their's is a generational view that also has to be negotiated within family relations. In most cases, the girls appeared to be closely attached to the family and the reproduction of family practices in the context of the home, while learning to 'become Canadian' in the public space of the school.

Concluding remarks

Grosz (1998:47) comments that cities and bodies are mutually exclusive but "the structure and particularity of ... the family" is of significant influence in the social construction of the body, although the family itself "is to some extent a function of the social geography of the city." From our preliminary analysis we are finding that social geography does make a difference, even at the fine scale of the local level. The mothers and daughters' experiences have a place specificity. Different schools, in different income areas, in this outer suburban area provide variations in the fabric of 'Canadian society'. Some parents actively seek to live in a particular neighbourhood to gain access for their children to a high school with a strong academic reputation and where there is a clustering of other Asian families; others moved to the area stating they wanted to be apart from their own ethnocultural enclave in another part of the Greater Vancouver area. Both strategies were talked of in

terms of ways of integrating more readily into Canadian society – through education or cultural ‘exposure.’ The suburban neighbourhoods of the study area are beginning to demonstrate a clustering of particular immigrant groups, with immigrants from Hong Kong, Korea, Iran and Taiwan being most predominant. All the area schools have ESL groups, but some have few immigrant children whereas others have high concentrations of Asian and Iranian children.

The girls’ lives are located within such a multicultural milieu, although this was not an image of Canada they held before immigration. In Canada, they negotiate a body and identity different from that of their home country. For Asian girls and those like Sohila, their bodies are re-inscribed as ‘raced,’ reaffirmed by racist remarks and behaviour. The meanings attached to their gendered body are contested as their femininity is (re)sexualized and marked as ‘other.’ As TV and magazine readers, the girls are exposed to representations of femininity that may challenge previous mores (for discussions about the significance of popular culture in informing girls’ identities, see Kelly [1997], and Currie [1999]). Most of the girls experience tensions around this perceived new morality, while recognizing the existence of different group identities within the nuances of youth culture. They discover different interpretations and ways of living femininity and begin to learn the codings of the body with which to negotiate friendships with both Canadian-born girls and other immigrants.

Yet, at the same time their sexualized femininity sits uncomfortably for most of the girls. None of the girls had a boyfriend, and apart from Maria, spent much of their time in the library or studying at home outside school hours. Their home space, as a site where notions of ‘family life’ are reworked, continued to provide the moral guidance for maintaining values around sexuality but the home’s boundaries are seen to be permeable as ‘dangerous’ ideas intrude through the media, and ideas and talk from school are brought in. Most girls appeared to spend little time away from the home, and there was little evidence of contestation within the family over the girls’ participation in activities with friends in the neighbourhood or city.

At school, language was an important sorting mechanism. While some girls actively sought participation in Canadian society by working hard to speak only English, others appreciated the support of students from their own country and spoke their first language in those situations. Choosing between these two routes may be costly, as Kathy recounted in her story of other Korean students’ hostility towards her as she chose to speak English at school. Another girl from Taiwan, Lily, also tried to speak English in order to make new friends, commenting that she avoided mixing with groups who tend to speak their own languages in school but then is considered rude by other Taiwanese students.

'Becoming Canadian' is full of tension, struggle and excitement according to these girls' accounts; most look forward to being 'Canadian' while retaining valued parts of their own cultural repertoire. There is an ongoing and complex identity negotiation as girls use and interpret the various encoded spaces of their everyday life through which notions of performing femininity are mediated. This suggests that 'becoming Canadian' is not well represented by models of assimilation or multiculturalism that focus on a one-way direction of 'acculturation.' More accurate is an interpretation that gives space to an alternate account; one that emphasizes fluidity, nuances, and the conditioning effects of local, material conditions and social relations on what, in effect, are gendered stories of settlement.

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