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Elderly Women**

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**Family Class and Immigration in Canada: Implications for Sponsored
Elderly Women**

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Abstract

This paper explores the extent to which Canadian immigration policy allows families to bring parents and grandparents to join them in Canada. The analysis takes gender into account and focuses particularly on sponsored elderly women within the context of immigration policies and practices. We suggest that prevailing discourses that view family class immigrants, especially parents, as undesirable burdens on society contribute to the recent decline of sponsored parents' immigration. . These discourses, we argue, are legitimated by the growing influence of human capital theory on the immigration point system, which establishes criteria for selecting skilled workers. Rather than being neutral, the point system reinforces and produces social exclusions and inequalities. We suggest that it is worthwhile considering competing and shifting discourses that challenge officially-inscribed distinctions between desirable and undesirable immigrants and the resulting exclusionary policies. We conclude by raising questions for future research and for immigration policy.

Key Words: elderly immigrant women, gender analysis, immigration policy, family class immigration, sponsorship, deficiency discourses

Introduction

On April 2005, the government announced that it would permit more landed immigrants and citizens to sponsor parents and grandparents. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Joseph Volpe, stated: “Reuniting families is a key priority of Canada’s immigration program, and an issue to which the Liberal government is firmly committed” (2005). In allowing immigrants to sponsor parents and grandparents, the Minister noted, Canada needed to be culturally sensitive to different concepts of family: “For example, in many cultures, these parents and grandparents are essential child-care providers and supports, and their presence in the country will dramatically improve, for some immigrants, their situation in this country.” This announcement was a major reversal of the government’s previous year’s forecast that 6,000 parents and grandparents would immigrate to Canada in 2005. It is now expecting to land an additional 12,000 in 2005 and another 12,000 in 2006 (altogether 18,000 in each year). The government committed \$72 million over two years to increase the processing of applications and to cover integration costs once parents and grandparents arrive in Canada (Volpe 2005).

Despite the Minister’s emphasis on the government’s firm commitment to family reunification, these fluctuations in admission targets bring into question Canada’s past and current responses to immigrant parents and grandparents. What does research tell us about their opportunities to immigrate and about their experiences in Canada? What studies need to be done to further understand these issues? In this paper, we explore these questions by taking gender¹ into account. We aim to contribute to Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s commitment to gender-based analysis, which considers the different impacts of policies, programs, legislation and research on women and men (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2002a). In particular, we focus on elderly women² who make up the majority of parental sponsorships. Their experiences are central to key debates and questions about family reunification, including: the extent to which family class immigrants are a ‘burden’ on Canadian society; how they might contribute to their families; and the degree to which Canadian society welcomes and supports their immigration.

¹ See Strategic Workshop on Immigrant Women Making Place in Canadian Cities (2002) which shows how research and policy communities need a better understanding of the way that gender, and its intersections with other dimensions of difference, structures the dynamics of migration and settlement.

² Before 1978, to be sponsored parents had to be at least 60 years old (Collacott 2002). Immigration policy no longer uses age as a defining criterion for parental sponsorship. We use the terms ‘older’ and ‘elderly’ interchangeably to refer to parents who have adult offspring; we emphasize the term elderly to signify age as a differentiating social category that shapes migration identity, experience, and power. So too, we focus on gender as an organizing principle of migration that intersects with age and other social categories such as ‘race,’ ethnicity, and social class.

To begin our exploration of the implications of parental sponsorship for elderly women, we examine the immigration classification system and show the extent to which sponsored parents' opportunities to immigrate to Canada have diminished since the mid-1990s. We suggest that prevailing discourses that view family class immigrants, especially parents, as undesirable burdens on society contribute to this decline. These discourses, we argue, are legitimated by the growing influence of human capital theory on the immigration point system, which establishes criteria for selecting skilled workers. Rather than being neutral, the point system reinforces and produces social exclusions and inequalities. We suggest that it is worthwhile to consider competing and shifting discourses that challenge popular and officially-inscribed distinctions between desirable and undesirable immigrants and the resulting exclusionary policies (and their differentiated gendered effects). We conclude by raising questions for future research and for immigration policy.

Immigration admission trends and family class

Current Canadian immigration policy³ offers several major immigration classes of permanent residents: the independent or economic class, the family class, and the protected persons or refugee class. Many of the issues explored in this paper are relevant to the refugee class but, because of their complexity, require separate investigation and will not be discussed here. Those in the economic class are selected on the basis of the principal applicant's education, financial or investment capacity. This class includes skilled workers, business immigrants (self-employed, investors, and entrepreneurs), provincial/territorial nominees, and live-in caregivers (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004). This class also includes 'immediate family' members who accompany the principal applicant. In contrast, the family class is made up of a broader category of family members referred to as 'close' such as a spouse, common-law partner, child, sibling, niece or nephew, parent, or grandparent whom a citizen or a permanent resident has sponsored to immigrate to Canada.⁴

A brief look at admission rates during the past twenty-five years shows that, by the late 1980s, Canada's immigration policy increasingly shifted towards the selection of economic rather than family class immigrants and towards the restriction specifically of parents' and grandparents'

³ On 28 June 2002, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) and its Regulations replaced the Immigration Act of 1976 to pursue current goals of the immigration program.

⁴ Relatives eligible for sponsorship in the family class include: the sponsor's spouse, common-law or conjugal partner; dependent child, including a child adopted abroad; child under 18 years of age to be adopted in Canada; parent or grandparent; or brother, sister, niece, nephew or grandchild who has been orphaned, is under 18 years of age and is not a spouse or common-law partner (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2002b).

entry to Canada.⁵ As part of these shifts, by the mid-1990s, the majority of both men and women were coming as economic immigrants. Throughout this twenty-five year period, nevertheless, most women continued to enter Canada as family dependants or as family class immigrants, and the majority of parents and grandparents were women.

In 1980, Canada admitted over 143,000 immigrants; slightly more were family class (35.9%) than economic immigrants (34.9%).⁶ In 1983, over half (54.6%) entered as family class immigrants; only 27.4% came as economic immigrants. In 1987, when the number of immigrants admitted to Canada jumped from about 99,000 to 152,000, almost half were economic (48.7%); 35.4% were family class immigrants.⁷ For several years, the relative proportion of economic and family class fluctuated. Since 1994, however, Canada has consistently given preference to economic rather than family class immigrants. 2001 was a peak year for economic immigrants: 62.1% were economic immigrants; only 26.7% entered as family class immigrants. In 2003, Canada admitted over 221,000 immigrants; 54.7% were economic and 31.2% were family class immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003a).

As the proportion of family class admitted to Canada declined relative to the number of economic immigrants, so too did the proportion of parents and grandparents in relation to the other family class categories such as spouses, partners and children. In fact, the decline in admitting family class immigrants was borne by specifically restricting the intake of elderly parents and grandparents. In 1994, Canada admitted 41,477 parents or grandparents (44% of the family class) and 36,545 spouses and partners (39% of the family class).⁸ Throughout the rest of the 1990s, the number of parents and grandparents who immigrated continued to drop (a low of 14,201 in 1998). By 1996, spouses and partners had become the dominant category in the family class. For the past ten years, their numbers have remained above 30,000 annually. In 2003, Canada admitted 19,376 parents and grandparents (28% of the family class) and 42,490 spouses and partners (61% of the family class). The other family class categories consisted of: 936 fiancé(e)s, 3,621 sons and daughters, and 2,705 others (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003b). In its Annual Report to Parliament on

⁵ This analysis uses the baseline of 1980, made available by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2003a) trend data, which includes a useful gendered breakdown. In the 1970s, economic immigrants often outnumbered family class immigrants (see, for example, Reitz 2002).

⁶ 28.2% were refugees and 1.1% were 'other immigrants' (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003a).

⁷ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the proportion of refugees relative to other immigration categories admitted to Canada was generally under 20% and in the past decade was typically about 11% (see Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003a).

⁸ The other family class categories consisted of 5,278 fiancé(e)s, 8,573 sons and daughters, and 2,322 others (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003b).

Immigration, Citizenship and Immigration, Canada set target ranges of immigration levels for 2005: 46,000 – 50,000 spouses, partners and children; 5,500 – 6,800 parents and grandparents (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004). This target range only allowed for 12% - 14% of the family class to be parents or grandparents.

While spouses and partners have generally maintained an annual entry level of over 30,000 during the past ten years, and have become the dominant family class category, parents and grandparents' intake has dramatically declined. Their quota for 2005 was particularly low.⁹ Before discussing the possible implications of the restricted (but volatile) immigration levels of parents and grandparents, it is necessary to consider the gendered composition during the past twenty-five years of economic and family class admission categories.

Several trends can be noted. First, both men and women have increasingly entered Canada as economic immigrants. In 1980, 36.9% of men entered under the economic, whereas 30.7% came as family class immigrants. From 1986 to the mid-1990s, the numbers fluctuated, but men typically entered as economic immigrants; from 1995, the majority of male immigrants consistently came under the economic class. In 2003, 60.1% came as economic; only 25% came as family class immigrants.¹⁰ From 1980 to 1986, women typically came to Canada under family class; the pattern was mixed until 1995. From that year onward (until 2003), like men, the majority of women entered as economic immigrants, with a peak in 2001, when 57.6% of women entered through the economic class. In 2003, just under half (49.7%) of female immigrants entered as economic immigrants; only 37% came as family class (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003a).¹¹

Second, despite the fact that recently the majority of both men and women entered Canada as economic immigrants, this category is highly masculinized, though it might not appear so at first glance. Men make up slightly more of the economic class than women. In 2003, 52.8% of the economic class were men; 47.2% were women (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004). But the point is that far more men than women entering Canada in the economic class were principal applicants, selected according to the criteria of this class. Immigration policy and practices select principal applicants of the economic class “on the basis of criteria developed to maximize their integration into the labour market or business world” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004: 16).

⁹ Although Citizenship and Immigration Canada officially uses the term target instead of quota, we believe that our use of the latter term is justified, in that the targets that are set at the outset of each year become, in effect, quotas in the processing system.

¹⁰ 13% came as refugees, and 2% as ‘other immigrants.’

¹¹ 10.6% came as refugees, and 2.6% as ‘other immigrants.’

The criteria seek to attract immigrants who are most able to be economically self-sufficient. In 2003, 71.5% of the principal applicants were men. Only 28.5% were women (15% of whom entered as live-in caregivers).¹² While immigration policy recognizes the importance of admitting family members to attract economic immigrants, it assumes that the principal applicant will be financially responsible for them. Most women in the economic class come as ‘dependants’; they accompany the principal applicant as an ‘immediate’ family member, usually as a spouse or partner. In 2003, 51,686 economic immigrants came as principal applicants; 69,369 came as spouses and dependants (see Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004).

Third, women were the majority in the family class. In 2003, 69,138 immigrants entered as family class; 61.5% were women; 38.5% were men. Of the 19,376 parents and grandparents, 57.3% were women; 42.7% were men. In comparing the decline in the admission of women and men as parents and grandparents during the past ten years, one finds that in 1994, 22,780 women and 18,697 men entered Canada. In 2003, 11,093 women and 8,283 men came. In other words, less than half (49%) of elderly women immigrated in 2003 compared to 1994, and an even smaller proportion of men (44%) immigrated (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003b).

By and large, these trends show that both women and men have increasingly entered Canada as economic immigrants. Given the government’s current rule of thumb of selecting 60% economic and 40% non-economic (family class and refugees) immigrants, it is not surprising that the majority of both men and women who arrived recently in Canada were economic immigrants. Yet, an analysis that takes family and gender into account reveals several distinct patterns that otherwise can be overlooked. Women were considerably less likely than men to come as the principal applicant in the economic category. The majority of family members, including parents and grandparents, were women. The majority of immigrants were family members, who either accompanied the principal immigrant or came later. Many ‘immediate’ family members (e.g. spouses and partners) arrived as sponsored immigrants. Elderly parents or grandparents were only able to enter as sponsored family class, and the decline in their admission rates was borne particularly by men. These admission patterns suggest that the immigration classification system is likely to have a variety of different implications according to gender and generation.

¹² Relative to other economic class immigrants, live-in caregivers’ status as permanent residents is highly precarious. They are granted temporary resident status for at least 2 years, before they can apply for permanent resident status from within Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004).

Further, these patterns raise questions about what impact a family member's admission as an 'economic' or 'family class' immigrant may have on their immigration experiences. As Li (2003: 43) notes, the categories of 'economic' and 'family class' are arbitrary:

Under the current policy, members of a family who immigrate to Canada with the principal applicant processed as an independent-class immigrant are automatically classified as economic immigrants as well, but the same family members who apply to come to Canada after the principal applicant immigrates to Canada are processed as family class immigrants.

For example, a woman may be classified as an economic immigrant if she either enters as an independent immigrant based on her own qualifications and experiences or if she accompanies her husband who is an economic class immigrant. If, however, her husband sponsors her, she would be categorized as a family class immigrant.

In the case of elderly parents and grandparents, however, immigration policy only permits them to enter as 'close' family members, who are sponsored in the family class category. Moreover, as noted above, immigration policy has dramatically reduced their sponsorship during the past decade. Yet, very little research has addressed the question why the reduction occurred, why the numbers continue to fluctuate, and what the implications of sponsorship are for elderly parents and their families. In what follows, we examine existing research on immigration policies, practices and discourses and their implications for sponsored elderly women. We consider how prevailing discourses define the value of immigrants, the eligibility of immigrants, and the circumstances of their immigration. We also consider how alternative discourses challenge officially-inscribed distinctions between desirable and undesirable immigrants and the resulting exclusionary policies.

Immigration discourses and family class

Shifting policies

Historically, female immigrants came to Canada primarily as wives or dependants or to fill service occupations (e.g. servants, prostitutes) (Agnew 1996; Fleras and Elliott 1996; Foster 1998; Ng 1992; Simmons 1998; and Stasiulis 1997). If they came as family members they were admitted through immigration policy regulations that gave recognition to a particular form of the family unit and designated them as 'dependants' of the male 'head of the family.' The husband, as the presumed head of the family, became the guarantor of others "to ensure that these family members did not become a 'public charge'" (Côté et al. 2001: 20). Until the 1960s, however, provisions governing family unification that allowed entry to Canada primarily benefited Europeans. Women who were non-white

– from such countries as China, Japan, India, the Caribbean, Africa – were very rarely permitted entry (Côté et al. 2001; Agnew 1996).

The 1967 changes to the Immigration Act finally abolished in principle discrimination on the basis of national and ethnic origin and firmly established a point system that assessed immigrants on the basis of age, education and occupational demand (Li 2003).¹³ The 1976 Immigration Act was crucial in distinguishing between family members accompanying the principal applicant upon landing and individuals sponsored later as family class. The Act and its 1978 Regulations set conditions of entry for sponsorship in which the sponsoring citizen or landed immigrant was obliged to guarantee 10 years of support (Côté et al. 2001)¹⁴.

In the 1980s, debates arose about definitions of the ‘immediate’ family that distinguished between those who could accompany the principal applicant and those who could not. Critics charged that immigration regulations were ethnocentric and exclusionary, preoccupied with a Western model of the nuclear family of husband, wife and children (e.g. Das Gupta 1995). In the 1990s, immigration debates shifted to calls, especially by the conservative Reform Party, to abandon the policy of multiculturalism and to reduce the annual targets of immigration levels. In response to the debates, the Liberal government initiated in 1993 the Immigration Review Process (IRP), which involved extensive, though not inclusive, public consultations to determine future policy direction (Abu-Laban 1998; Thobani 2000).

Recommendations from the consultations resulted in the implementation of a Right of Landing Fee (ROLF) of \$975 for all refugees and immigrants, increased restrictions on sponsorships, and lower immigration levels, which continued to decline overall in the late 1990s (reaching the lowest level over a ten-year period in 1998¹⁵). In addition, the federal government vowed to cooperate with provincial governments with the aim to prevent sponsored immigrants from collecting social assistance (Thobani 2000). Ottawa stated that it was “attracting those with the capacity to settle quickly and contribute to Canada” (cited in Abu-Laban 1998: 199), that is, skilled immigrants who might make less demands than family class immigrants on the welfare state (Abu-Laban 1998).

¹³ According to Hiebert et al. (2003: 8), the point system represented, above all, “a replacement of cultural preferences (for Europeans) with class preferences (for the well-educated), and irrevocably changed the basic characteristics of immigrants settling in Canada.”

¹⁴ ‘Nominated’ or ‘designated’ relatives (who were family members not defined as close or immediate) fell under the ‘assisted relative’ class as opposed to ‘family class’ (Côté et al. 2001).

¹⁵ In 1988, 161,529 immigrants entered Canada. The numbers began to decline from 1994 onwards until 1998. Since that time, the trend has reversed upwards. From the year 2000, over 200,000 immigrants entered Canada annually (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2003a).

Increasingly, immigration policy seeks economic immigrants who are highly educated and prepared for the labour market. “The system is designed to select working-age immigrants with substantial human capital” (Li 2003: 40), who are able to “enhance Canada’s advantage in the global competition for skilled workers” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2001: 1)¹⁶. The recent Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (effective June 28, 2002) increased the human capital criteria of the point system’s structure for selecting skilled workers by augmenting the maximum allowable points for education, possession of an official language, and job experience. While skilled workers are by far the largest category of independent/economic immigrants admitted to Canada, other programs seek business immigrants. As national economic policy has become increasingly aligned with immigrant policy, Ley (2003) suggests, Canada has attempted to lure the business class to sustain or jump-start economic growth. The Canadian state, he argues, “has sought to intervene in globalization processes and shape the composition of immigration by capturing *homo economicus* – the principal agent of the neoliberal global space of flows” (p. 428). As Canada commits itself to recruit this “elusive figure of classical and now neoliberal economic theory” (Ley 2003: 428), it has given priority to the economic over the family class.

Some commentators who give expression to the view that Canadian immigration policy must be framed by economic concerns have targeted the family class as a burden that must be curtailed. Martin Collacott (2002), a proponent of the reduction of overall immigration levels, argues that society has in the market system a natural mechanism that is most able to determine how to deal with problems such as the shortage of skilled workers. In emphasizing that immigration policy should be concerned with the *quality* of immigrants, not their *quantity*, he targets family class immigrants as the most harmful form of immigration, and states: “family class immigration may gain votes but does not help the country” (p. 19). Since the past two decades have witnessed a decrease in the economic performance of newcomers relative to earlier immigrants and Canadian-born individuals, he suggests, Canadian taxpayers are paying too high a price for immigration. He argues that “a major reason for this decline has been the priority given to family class immigrants, none of whom is required to bring with them either marketable skills or a knowledge of one of our official languages” (2002: 5). Collacott draws on the Auditor General’s 1982 claim that family class immigrants are ill prepared for the labour market; they often belong to occupational groups whose skills are in low demand in Canada and to age groups with high unemployment rates. The same report worries that family class immigrants may not be able to adapt to Canadian life and “that this could have repercussions on

¹⁶ In the independent class, Canada admitted in 2003 as principal applicants 45,370 skilled workers (73.8% men), 2,199 business immigrants (85.3% men), 1,418 provincial/territorial nominees (78.6% men), and 2,699 live-in caregivers (17.1% men) (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004).

social programs and on the labour market” (cited in Collacott 2002: 20). Collacott is also concerned that the arrival of a large numbers of elderly parents could have a significant impact on the Canadian health care system.

As Li (2004: 26) notes, such immigration critics as Collacott¹⁷ not only use selective evidence and fallacious arguments; they dwell on a “harsh utilitarian dictum: immigrants not obviously enriching Canada are useless to Canada.” Moreover, in drawing on powerful market-oriented discourses that distinguish between ‘desirable’ and ‘deficient’ immigrants, Collacott’s analysis obscures other discursive understandings about how, on the one hand, immigration policy already restricts elderly parents and grandparents’ immigration, and on the other, how central they may be to family relationships, how they may provide support to their families’ settlement in Canada, and how the sponsorship program itself may contribute to immigrant inequalities and marginalization.

Convinced of the market’s ability to define the quality of immigrants and Canada’s need for skilled workers, Collacott sees no legitimate reason for admitting family class immigrants. In permitting and even “firmly committing” itself to family class immigration, the Canadian government distances itself from such a position. Yet, arguably, as Li (2004) suggests, immigration policy and discourse rests on ideological premises not far from such critics. Li contends that immigration policy has created a *de facto* dual system that *selects* economic immigrants based on human capital measures and that *restricts* and manages the sponsorship of family members and asylum seekers. He states: “The official discourse consistently attributes a greater value to economic immigrants and blames the so-called self-selected immigrants – family class and refugees – for squeezing out the economic stream” (2004:26). As a result, immigration policy recently allotted a greater proportion of landed immigrants to the economic class (Li 2004), at the expense, in particular, of elderly parents or grandparents. In what follows, we examine the point system as a defining mechanism of the ‘quality’ of immigrants, its reliance on human capital theory, and its creation of deficiency discourses that result in exclusionary immigration categories.

The point system, human capital theory and deficiency discourses: Are elderly parents a burden?

Rather than providing a neutral measurement of immigrant eligibility, the point system’s reliance on human capital theory, arguably, brings into play a definition of immigrant ‘value’ that results in troubling exclusions. Human capital theory is the mainstream and theoretically dominant approach to the analysis of labour markets in global capitalism (McBride 2000). The core of human capital theory

¹⁷ Besides Martin Collacott, Li (2004) refers to immigration critics Diane Francis and Daniel Stoffman.

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). It is a seductive and common sense theory that simplistically equates ‘skills’ with ‘productivity’ (Callewaert 1999). Firmly rooted in the neoliberal paradigm, human capital theory rests on value-laden, market definitions of workers’ skills and credentials as formally obtained, institutionally recognized, and instrumental to the goal of economic self-sufficiency.

Neoliberalism, which promotes market economy principles that emphasize fiscal restraint, smaller government, reduced social spending, and increased privatization, increasingly shapes Canadian policies and practices (Brodie 1996). In emphasizing the primacy of the market, neoliberalism represents a move away from post-war liberal principles and discourses of the welfare state that underscore the rights of citizens to a basic standard of living and the responsibility of society for the well-being of individual members (Brodie 1996). These principles support a potentially inclusive social citizenship. In contrast, market-oriented conceptualizations of citizenship intensify the notion of the “self-sufficient citizen,” complementing other tendencies including neo-conservative’s growing challenge to a “rights discourse” and emphasis on a “duties discourse,” in particular the obligation to undertake paid employment (Lister 1997). Changes in immigration “are parallel with and part of the general undermining of social citizenship in Canada” that encourages Canadians to expect less from the state and instead become better equipped (through participation in the labour market) to meet their own needs (Arat-Koc 1999a: 31).

By exercising human capital criteria, the point system puts into play these neoliberal ideological premises. It implies that skilled, market-based workers drive the economy, and represent ‘ideal’ immigrants who are the most likely to become economically self-sufficient (McLaren and Dyck 2004), and that others should be excluded, or if they do enter Canada, they should be restricted and managed to ensure that they are not ‘drains’ on the system. It exacerbates the gender inequalities worldwide in which women generally have fewer opportunities than men to meet education, linguistic and marketable skills criteria (Arat-Koc 1999b), which limit the possibility of women entering Canada as principal applicants in the economic class. It implies that those who enter Canada as family class or refugees, who work in poorly-paid jobs, who have difficulties in finding employment, who lack employment, who are poor, or who may be ‘merely’ elderly parents are unlikely to contribute adequately to society.

Further, the point system 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, categorized as dependants,

and only later that of husbands as well (Ng 1992). Many who occupy low-wage jobs that fill important niches of the labour market are immigrant women (Spitzer et al. 2003), many of whom have come to Canada under the family class (Satzewich and Wong 2003). Arat-Koc (1999a: 38) argues that elderly parents are most likely to be perceived as being non-contributors and yet “directly contribute their labour in the care of children in the home or in family businesses.”

The neoliberal contention that the only proper citizen is one with a skilled job in the labour force – that *prima facie* ensures self-sufficiency – overlooks and demeans essential, but poorly paid or unpaid labour and care in the home and community. Despite the fact that family members provide much of the sustenance and development of human, social and cultural capital of immigrants (McLaren and Dyck 2004; Ong 1999), immigration policy ironically has set up obstacles for family class entry to Canada. By contributing to the ongoing problematization of immigrant families (especially the family class) in official and popular discourse, and reducing the immigration levels of sponsored parents, the policy adversely, and perversely, targets women. They are the ones most likely to be responsible for the forging of family ties and undertaking the multiple dimensions of family caregiving (McDaniel 2002).

Yet, in informing the point system, human capital theory may be particularly powerful because, on the surface at least, it appears to resolve longstanding racial tensions in immigration policy. The point system includes a popular and official discursive understanding that Canada must eradicate institutional racism in its immigration policy. It aims to select immigrants on the basis of their human capital – regardless of their ‘race’ and countries of origin. As a result, the immigration system seems to endorse 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). Despite its scientific aura, however, human capital theory is laden with normative content. It reduces human beings to factors of production and to mere economic actors, and it assumes that the distribution of work (e.g. level of pay, degree of employment) is simply the result of human capital not of social inequalities such as class, gender and race (McBride 2000).

Indeed, it can be argued that the bifurcated admission policy, which distinguishes between ‘economic’ and ‘family class’ immigrants, sustains a racialized ideological framework to Canada’s immigration system. This framework, Li (2004) suggests, continues to shape Canada’s nation building and its romanticized social and territorial space that determines who deserves to become permanent citizens. The shift in immigration policy during the past decade towards favouring economic principal applicants may, in fact, give legitimacy to demeaning stereotypes of extended family networks associated with foreign cultures “contrary to Canadian family values” (Li 2004: 26).

Dominant immigration discourse includes the connotation that the family reunification program needs to be based on the Canadian nuclear family, not the extended Asian or African family (Li 2004). In excluding parents and grandparents from the 'immediate' family, immigration policy has targeted them as not only less important, but also possibly threatening.

The growing prevalence of human capital theory in immigration discourses and practices makes groups, already vulnerable due to their gender, age, 'race,' and class, even more marginalized and precariously situated. It contributes to a deficiency discourse that informs the socially constructed category of an immigrant, refugee or Third World woman: "she does not speak English; she is passive, oppressed, and homebound; she is usually found in the lower echelons of the workforce; and if labeled a refugee, she is a drain on the system" (Dossa 2002: 343-44). This discourse perpetuates early nation-building practices: "imbued with Eurocentric, gendered, and class standards about what constituted 'civilization,' against which every potential group of immigrants was measured and ranked" (Stasiulis 1997: 144; see also Strong-Boag et al. 1998).

Arguably, as immigration policies align with neoliberalism, 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' or gender, but they share in the deficiency discourse associated with racialized immigrants and immigrant families. As Abu-Laban (1998) argues, the policy choice that gives priority to economic over family immigrants and refugees reflects an increasing emphasis on economic self-sufficiency as a measure of an immigrant's worth, reduced notions of citizenship and citizens' rights, and a corresponding 'problematization of immigrant families.' Neoliberalism provides "legitimacy for the idea that immigrants are a social/welfare/economic cost to Canadians and Canadian society" (Abu-Laban 1998: 205), especially family 'dependants' and sponsored parents.

Recent studies that address the question of the cost of immigrants to Canada have looked specifically at elderly immigrants. A study that asks whether or not elderly immigrants are a burden concludes that, indeed, they are (Baker and Benjamin 2002). The sponsorship program for family immigrants, the authors suggest, provides "an explicit expression of the fear that some entrants might become a burden, either on the sponsoring family, the taxpayer, or both" (p. 1)18. The authors found that sponsored elderly immigrants make considerable use of government pension and social assistance programs, which represents a serious burden to taxpayers, and that elderly immigrants may

¹⁸ Besides sponsorship provisions, Baker and Benjamin (2002) single out other barriers that inhibit older immigrants' entry to Canada: the point system for skilled workers that only applies to individuals aged 17 to 53; and income security programs that link benefits to the length of residency in Canada.

divert resources away from children and therefore may represent a burden to families. In defining the worth of sponsored elderly immigrants in narrow economic terms, the authors fail to examine how elderly immigrants may contribute to their families and the rest of society and how an unwelcoming environment that constructs them as burdens may be a cost to elderly immigrants themselves. As well, their data analysis does not include women.

Another recent study (Dempsey 2004) shows that parents and grandparents who had landed when they were 60 years or older relied the most on non-contributory retirement income such as Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement. In contrast, elders who had landed as ‘skilled principal applicants’ and had spent considerable time in Canada relied most heavily on private market income such as employment earnings and investment. An implication of this research brief is that skilled principal applicants are the ‘ideal immigrant’ and that, because sponsored parents may not be economically self-sufficient, they are likely to be a problem. The study does not investigate the obstacles elderly immigrants may face that make it difficult to be economically self-sufficient; it does not look at other ways of considering the value of elderly immigrants; and it does not examine the gender of the elderly immigrants.

Inclusionary discourses

Despite the significance of human capital theory in the point system – and neoliberal principles more generally that operate in various policy realms, including immigration – not all immigration discourse narrowly defines the ‘ideal immigrant’ in economic terms, nor problematizes immigrant families or sponsored parents. Immigration policy, itself, provides a discursive space in which the meanings of sponsored parents are contested. Competing discourses co-exist that are more socially inclusive, that stress social justice concerns and allow for broader notions of worth, citizenship, the family, and so on, and/or stress principles of liberal governance. These subordinated discourses range widely and include the need for immigration policy: to be socially inclusive in admitting immigrants; to protect all landed immigrants and citizens equally from harm; to provide for their security, health and well-being; to recognize their varied cultures, ‘skills’ and resources; to treat them equally and with dignity, regardless of their countries of origin, ethnicity or ‘race,’ gender, age and generation; and to address underlying power relations associated with gender, ‘race,’ class, age, and so on.¹⁹ The disparate and interacting discourses that challenge the economic and market-based notion of ‘human capital’ in immigration policy are informed by various theoretical perspectives – including classical liberalism,

¹⁹ See Anthias (2002), who discusses some of the complexities in the politics of difference.

feminism, anti-racism, gerontology, poststructuralism and/or political economy. They open up research questions, highlight complexities, and help to clarify what is at stake in immigration debates about the ‘burdens’ of parental sponsorship.

A recent submission, for example, to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration on family reunification issues calls for a review of the government’s current 60/40 rule (i.e. annually selecting 60% economic and 40% non-economic (family class and refugees) immigrants) (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) 2005). This document 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. In its submission to the Standing Committee, the Canadian Bar Association questions the decline of parental sponsorship target levels and demands more public consultation. The submission states, “In view of the 75% reduction in quotas (“targets”) over the past two years, it appears that the government is deliberately trying to kill the longstanding program for sponsorship of parents and grandparents” (2005:4). The document continues:

The issue of parental sponsorships is a policy decision; a question of values. The government may decide that Canadian values dictate that parents are not integrally part of the family unit and that there is no sufficient policy justification for admitting sponsored parents to Canada. This appears to have been already decided. We believe this is a fundamental issue deserving of public debate.

The organization Sponsor Your Parents (2005), which is concerned about “families that want to reunite in Canada and the obstacles that face sponsors,” indicates on its website that 110,000 parental sponsorship cases are waiting to be processed. Despite the fact that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Joseph Volpe, raised the target level of 6,000 to 18,000 parents and grandparents in both 2005 and 2006, this organization points out, the new quotas still cut parental sponsorship back substantially from earlier historical levels: “Even after the ‘increase,’ the quotas will be less than in 2002-2003 and it will take about 6 years to clear the current backlog” (Sponsor Your Parents 2005).

Nevertheless, the Minister’s acknowledgement that parents and grandparents are essential child care providers and integral to many cultures, and his increase in their target levels, suggests that the government itself has kept a distance from whole-heartedly embracing human capital discourse in its admission of immigrants. In an interview with journalist Carol Goar, the Minister reflected critically on the government’s admission criteria that focuses so much on university degrees and English or French fluency. He also noted that, as part of his five-point plan, he would want to make it easier for immigrants to rebuild their family networks in Canada: “if we want skilled workers, we

have to offer them a psychologically healthy environment” (Goar 2005). In supporting family class immigration, he nonetheless stresses skilled workers as the primary immigrants to consider.

Research on parental sponsorship

No matter the unresolved debates and competing discourses about parental sponsorship, very little research has investigated its significance, particularly with respect to elderly women’s experiences. Khoo (2003), who is concerned about the global competition for skilled migrants and its implications for Australia, examined the extent to which family members may be central in the migration and settlement decisions of economic migrants. The author found that skilled migrants who sponsored parents and siblings were much more likely to settle permanently than those who did not, and concluded that family reunion promotes permanent settlement among skilled immigrants. The research, however, does not challenge the notion that the skilled worker is the primary immigrant to consider and does not take gender into account.

In a study of older Mexican immigrants in the U.S., Angel et al. (1999) also stress that family reunification is important to immigrants, but argues as well that it is a core element of U.S. immigration policy. The authors suggest, however, that current anti-welfare and anti-immigrant public sentiment – which focuses on the potential welfare burden that new immigrants might represent rather than on their potential contribution to society – make it difficult for families to sponsor older members. In particular, recent tightening of social welfare eligibility criteria excludes immigrants from participation in all federal means-tested benefit programs for a period of 5 years. As a result, older immigrants, especially women, who arrive with few resources and have limited opportunities, are heavily dependent on their families for support and are likely to remain permanently dependent. Even if an older immigrant gives valuable domestic services that allow other members to enter the labour force, their families may be vulnerable to devastating economic reversals. New means of ensuring the welfare of older immigrants, the authors argue, must be found to prevent families who seek to reunite with older parents from being overburdened. This research refers in passing to elderly women, their valuable help to their families, and their dependency on their families for support, but does not examine their experiences in depth.

Though few studies focus on the sponsorship of older immigrant women, research shows that they may contribute substantially to their families (Lowenstein 2002). In their research on the perspectives of both female caregivers and receivers in three-generational, Chinese-Canadian households, Leung and McDonald (2001) show that the elderly women – who were usually sponsored by their families – helped their adult children in the home. Especially in dual career families, they

took care of children. They made meals, did household chores, and comforted the adult children. The caregiving between adult children and aging parents was likely to be reciprocal unless the latter were frail and ill.

Such research helps to give substance to comments that sponsored “parents and grandparents are essential child-care providers and supports” (Volpe 2005), but more studies are needed that focus specifically on such experiences and what they mean in the everyday lives of the older parents and their families. Since elderly women are dependent on their sponsors, and often lack alternative supports, it is also important to examine the degree to which they could be vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Recent studies of farm workers in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, who include sponsored elderly immigrants, explore some of these issues. One study suggests that their financial dependency may make them continue to work under exploitative conditions. Their employment is characterized by below-minimum wages, fraudulent contractors and unsanitary and chemically toxic conditions. Labourers are primarily South Asian immigrants; the majority are likely to be women (Binning 1986)²⁰ and the majority are elderly (Black 2003). Black found that the workers were unwilling to risk fighting for improved working conditions. Because “many are recent immigrants sponsored by their families, they feel indebted to pay their immigration fees and do not want to be a financial burden to their children or relatives” (p. 76). Another study of BC Fraser Valley farm workers, which focused on the issue of childcare, found that many workers thought that it was a natural, reciprocal arrangement for sponsored grandparents to provide childcare: “In explaining his role in caring for their grandchild, one older male farmworker stated, ‘we care for our grandchild – that’s why we were sponsored...’. For many within this community, providing childcare is explicitly understood as a condition of their ability to move and remain in Canada” (Abbotsford Community Services Seasonal Workers Project 2000: 32).

More attention needs to be paid to the possible costs of the sponsorship program to elderly parents and their families. Sponsored parents may feel obligated to provide income to their families or in-kind services that could lead to exploitation, indebtedness, isolation, abuse or marginality, which may have differentiated gendered effects. Since they lack the usual entitlements of social assistance and social security (Boyd 1989), sponsored, elderly immigrant women are likely to have few support systems apart from their families. Without adequate health care, social services, settlement services and transit support, their ability to help their families and to provide for themselves may be undermined. In addition, little is known about the problems families face if they cannot afford the obligations of sponsorship and avail themselves of parents’ or grandparents’ support. In the case of

²⁰ Binning found that 70% of farmworkers were women.

sponsorship breakdown, research indicates that, due to their location in the labour market and responsibility as primary caregivers, women with children are more likely to default in their sponsorships than men (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2002a). It is possible that reduced immigration quotas of sponsored parents and grandparents may place even more immigrant families in tenuous positions as they struggle to settle in Canada. In its inaccessibility to families with low-income, the sponsorship program may be the least available to those who are in the most need of family support. With so little research examining these questions, it is not surprising that immigration discourse and policy may turn a blind eye to the needs and circumstances of parents and their families.

Concluding remarks

To address questions about parental sponsorship, it is necessary to take gender into account. Citizenship and Immigration Canada's framework for gender-based analysis (2002a) highlights a concern for parents' vulnerability in relation to sponsorship, the difficulties of low-income families (especially female sponsors with children) to sustain sponsorships, and an appreciation of the possibility that parents' presence may increase women's access to the labour market.

In addition, Citizenship and Immigration Canada's commitment to gender-based analysis acknowledges that human capital selection criteria have different impacts on women and men. It recognizes 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" (2002a: 6). We suggest that to address the conundrum of human capital definitions of skill, a gender-based analysis needs to examine multi-layered questions that open up for investigation some of the intricate relations between discursive and material practices.

In this paper, we have explored how official, theoretical and popular discourses set immigrant parents up as antagonistic to taxpayer interests, to society as a whole, and to their own families. By virtue of their embeddedness in routine practices, prevailing immigration discourses provide powerful 'common sense' – which is not easy to identify, and which limits theoretical understanding and research questions. We suggest that the point system is a strategic set of practices defining the worth of immigrants that is framed by value-laden discourses of human capital. Such discourses, which make visible the 'immigrant family problem,' at the same time, make invisible the

formative influences of neoliberalism, sponsorship, and institutionalized patterns of injustice related to age, 'race,' class, and gender on immigrant families. Deficiency discourses, that produce and reinforce the marginalized status of older, immigrant women in Canada, have sweeping and subtle effects in shaping immigration policy and practices, health provision, social and settlement services. Discourses and practices that 'other' women by their skin colour, cultural and linguistic characteristics, age, and lack of 'human capital' leave them to struggle largely unsupported and unrecognized.

Alternative discourses, nonetheless, exist that challenge officially-inscribed distinctions between desirable and undesirable immigrants and the resulting exclusionary policies. Immigration policy itself provides a discursive space in which the meanings of sponsored parents are contested. It would, therefore, be timely to conduct research and to engage in public debates about sponsored parents and grandparents that include such questions as: why does immigration policy not consider parents and grandparents to be 'immediate' family; why does the policy require them to be sponsored; why does it maintain low target levels; and what are the costs of these measures on families and on elderly parents and grandparents? These questions potentially have wide-ranging implications. They raise moral, political, social and cultural as well as economic issues about who defines the 'worth' of immigrants, how immigration admission policy reflects such definitions, and how immigrants should be understood and supported once in Canada. More also needs to be learned about the heterogeneity of elderly immigrants (e.g. when they arrived in Canada, at what age, with what 'capital,' and from what source countries), not just amongst women, but also amongst men. The lens should be opened to consider how the diasporic connections of immigrants, including the sponsored elderly, shapes relations in Canada. How might, for example, these networks contribute to the human, social and cultural capital (officially mandated or not) of immigrants in Canada?

To address such questions, it will be necessary to place the perspectives and experiences of sponsored parents and their sponsors at the centre. Rather than being objects of evaluation, they need to be "subjects whose values, aspirations and wishes are to be taken into account" (Li 2004: 28). In her study of older immigrant women, Dossa (1999; 269) indicates that they are "global subjects engaged in (re)imagining their lives." Yet, they "have not emerged as actors in the body of literature on gender within diasporic communities: they continue to remain on the backstage with their scripts unwritten" (p. 246). As researchers who draw from feminism, political economy, post-colonialism, anti-racism, poststructuralism, and/or critical gerontology insist, it is essential to capture gender, not in isolation but in its interplay with 'race,' social class, sexuality, 'disablement,' and age. This intersecting analysis requires a full explication of the social context, and the narration of sponsored

elderly women's lived experiences located in the sites where they live, work, learn, move around, and socially interact. It is crucial that such lives are meaningfully understood and situated in their social contexts (Becker 2003) and that their 'voices' are heard and represented to safeguard against violations and exclusions (Anthias 2002).

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