Immigration And Settlement Issues For Ethno-Racial People With Disabilities: An Exploratory Study

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1) OBJECTIVES AND FINDINGS

1(a) Project objectives

Studies on immigration and settlement most often ignore the issue of disability. There is the mistaken belief that, since current immigration policy is designed to largely exclude people with disabilities, this is not a significant issue. While it is virtually impossible to get any "hard" data on actual numbers, there is no doubt that there are many immigrants who are affected by disability. This includes: those who entered as refugees (who may have incurred a disability as a result of torture, war, or persecution); people with disabilities who are deemed not likely to be a burden on the service system; people admitted on a "minister’s permit" (who live in a kind of legal limbo, often denied access to services and employment); those disabled after acquiring immigrant status; and those who have a disabled child. If little is known of the actual numbers, even less is known about the impact of disability on the immigrant experience.

The overall goal of this research project was to increase awareness and understanding of the issues faced by ethno-racial immigrants with disabilities, with the hope and expectation that this would contribute to the development of policies and strategies to support and enhance participation in Canadian society. For a number of reasons, not least the almost complete absence of research literature in this area, this was very much an exploratory study. We wanted to speak to immigrants with disabilities and to learn from them the issues that most effected their lives in Canada. As well, we wanted to speak with representatives of organizations which have a mandate for supporting either people with disabilities or immigrants to Canada in terms of their perceived awareness of and responsiveness to the needs of ethno-racial immigrants with disabilities.

Using in depth qualitative interviews and focus groups, participants were encouraged to share with the researchers those aspects of the immigration experience that they felt were most significant, both positively and negatively. The study explored the barriers faced by immigrants with disabilities in terms of accessing needed services, the extent to which ethno-racial immigrants are aware of and able to exercise their rightful access to services, and the kinds of information and supports they feel would assist them. It examined how people felt they were faring in Canada and the perceived significance of their disability and their ethno-racial status in the settlement process. As well, we elicited views on current immigration policy as it relates to people with disabilities.
I(b) Research findings

In total we interviewed 14 ethno-racial people, of whom 11 were adults with disabilities and 3 parents of children with disabilities. Of the adults, four were people with psychiatric disabilities, five with physical disabilities, and four who were blind (two people were in more than one category). The adults ranged in age from the early 20s to well into their 40s. Of the children, one was blind, one was deaf/blind and one had a developmental disability. Study participants included people from Ethiopia, Sri Lanka (3), Afghanistan (2), Somalia, Kenya, Hong Kong, Guyana, India (2), China and the Caribbean. The group included people admitted as immigrants and refugees as well as several admitted on a Minister’s Permit.

Organizations represented at focus group meetings included: Goodwill Industries, Ministry of Health, Wheeltrans, Bloorview MacMillan Centre, Ontario March of Dimes, Canadian Hearing Society, Centre for Independent Living, CNIB, Women’s Health in Women’s Hands, Across Boundaries, Queen Street Mental Health Centre, Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Balance, ARCH, ERDCO, South Asian Family Support Services, Yee Hong Centre for Geriatric Care, St. Christopher House, Jamaican Canadian Association, and Woodgreen Neighbourhood Services.

While it is not possible in a report of this nature to include all our findings, a brief discussion of several of the major themes follows.

Theme: "I like this country very much"

The decision to leave one’s country of origin is most often borne of hardship. People decide to leave because of negative life circumstance, even (in the case of refugees) fear for one’s life. They leave in search of a better future for themselves and/or their families. Given this context, it is not surprising that, overall, the people we interviewed feel that they are much better off in Canada than they were in their country of origin, that Canada provides more opportunities, better health care, and more positive attitudes towards people with disabilities. They may be quite explicit in their gratitude towards their chosen country. While people shared many problems and concerns with the research team, a general sense of gratitude and optimism prevailed.

Theme: "The immigration process dehumanizes people."

The process of immigrating is probably stressful for most people, but it is particularly so for people with disabilities. Many people told stories of how long it took for them to be able to immigrate, of being refused initially and having to reapply, of still waiting for a disabled spouse to be able to enter, of family members being required to put up large sums of money to ensure that they would not be a burden. There was a very clear sense of
being discriminated on the basis of disability. Minister’s permits are perceived as especially problematic, denying people access to needed services and contributing to a sense of intense vulnerability. There was strong consensus amongst the people that we spoke to that changes are needed in Canada’s immigration policies.

Theme: "I want to work..."

Only two of the ethno-racial adults with disabilities whom we interviewed had permanent, full time employment; the majority were unemployed, the others underemployed. Even where people had a university education and/or had worked in their country of origin, they were likely to be unemployed in Toronto. For most people, this was the number one issue. People wanted to work and felt that existing employment services were largely ineffective. The inability to speak English certainly contributed to unemployment; however even those with good English language skills (including some whose first language was English) were likely to be unemployed. People tended to attribute their unemployment to discriminatory attitudes towards people with disabilities. Racist attitudes were sometimes also identified as a factor but were seen as secondary to the disability.

Theme: The service system: available but hard to find.

There was considerable variation both in the extent to which the people in our study accessed the service system and their satisfaction with it. Factors that seemed to relate to service usage included cultural attitudes and the extent to which the individual was supported informally. However, it may also be that those for whom the immigration process was most stressful experience a sense of vulnerability that discourages them from seeking access to services.

Certainly people reported many positive experiences. They were grateful for the improved health care and the assistive devices that they were able to obtain. Reported experiences with community colleges were more frequent and more positive than experiences with universities. Nevertheless, a number of people experienced the service system as complex, hard to access, and not always very helpful. Comments included: "it is difficult to get information"...."there are long waiting lists"...."you need to be aggressive to get any services". Much dissatisfaction was expressed with employment support services.

The input of the focus groups was particularly relevant to this issue. Organizations for people with disabilities expressed sensitivity to the issues of ethno-racial people and provided examples of efforts to make their services culturally sensitive. It was their perception that people with disabilities often did not access needed services because of cultural barriers or fear of being a "burden". Some of the organizations which served immigrants seemed to have had relatively little exposure to people with disabilities. All expressed the need for added knowledge and support in this area.
2) ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE

Certainly, we have collected some poignant stories that we feel will have an impact when our study results are published. Our study illustrates the diversity of experiences that immigrants with disabilities encounter as well as enormous variations in their responses. While in some respects we did not discover anything "new", we feel that this project could contribute to increased understanding and more adaptive responses to supporting immigrants with disabilities.

Beyond this, the study has significant theoretical implications. The theoretical perspective which informs this research project sees disability within a socio-political context. Such a perspective contends that the major source of disadvantage for people who are defined as having a disability is the way their disabilities are perceived and responded to within the larger society. Or put another way, within our society people with disabilities are an oppressed group and it is the oppression, rather than the condition which confers a disabled status, which is the principle source of disadvantage.

Of course, it is not only people with disabilities who are oppressed, devalued, or disadvantaged. Other groups in this category include visible minorities and immigrants. Examining the concept, process, and impact of oppression as it relates to various groups is instructive in helping to elucidate the extent to which disadvantage relates to oppression rather than to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups. This socio-political perspective has provided a framework for interpreting the responses of immigrants with disabilities under a variety of circumstances and hence makes a contribution to oppression theory.

3) RESEARCH TRAINING

The project employed two research assistants throughout its duration. The community researcher was an ethno-racial person with a disability. The other research assistant was an ethno-racial person who had worked on other research projects which focussed on disability and was a doctoral student. Both research assistants were involved in all aspects of the project and took major responsibility for the qualitative interviews. The community researcher took major responsibility for organizing the focus groups, while the doctoral student was more involved in data analysis and the literature. Several undergraduate students were involved on a more short term basis, transcribing interview tapes and taking notes at focus group meetings.

4) THE RESEARCH TEAM

A fundamental principle of this research project was that it be grounded in the needs of the community. The research team was comprised primarily of representatives of key
organizations of and for ethno-racial people with disabilities. It played a pivotal role in determining the "shape" of the project. The research team helped to identify issues to be explored in the qualitative interviews and was of major assistance in connecting us to potential research participants. Several members of the research team attended a focus group meeting.

5) INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

This study had an international "flavour" in that we interviewed and met with people from many different countries. However the focus of the study was on the experiences of these individuals in Canada and no comparative studies of disabled immigrants in other countries was carried out. We did have an opportunity to present our findings to a group of students at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Australia and to meet with an organization for immigrants and refugees in that city. While this discussion did indicate that some of the issues encountered were consistent across countries, it did not lead to any collaborative research ventures.

6) PRESERVATION OF DATA

The findings of this study will be available to all interested parties. Since no prior consent was obtained to make the transcripts of the qualitative interviews or focus groups available to other researchers, it is not possible to do so now. Further, we would question the appropriateness of doing so for this kind of data. If there is an expectation that primary data will be available to other researchers, this must be clearly articulated in the RFP and must be explicitly addressed in the ethics review process.

7) ISSUES OR PROBLEMS (see 6 above)

8) DISSEMINATION OF STUDY RESULTS

(a) Informal presentations

Presentation to the Board of Directors of ERDCO, February 1998

Presentation to students at Edith Cowan University, Perth Australia, October 1997
(b) Conference presentations

Presentation at GREET/SRC Conference, Ryerson Polytechnic University, May 1998

Presentation at the SDS Conference, June 1998

(c) Articles

(Forthcoming) Proceedings of the Conference for the Society for Disability Studies

(At least one article will be submitted to a refereed journal within the next six months.)

(d) Reports

A report on the projects findings is to be distributed to the organizations involved in this study, to the study participants and to the organizations which participated in the focus groups. The research team will be meeting to discuss the broader distribution of this report.

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