

Are Social Workers Ready to Work with Newcomers?

Miu Chung Yan • Sherman Chan

Abstract

Newcomers, who constitute a major driving force of Canadian population growth, face numerous challenges both before and after they reach this country¹. The unique status of “being new to Canada” that is reserved to immigrants and refugees has received insufficient attention in the social work profession; the racial and cultural backgrounds of those who arrive in the country have not been adequately explored. This article reports the findings of an exploratory survey conducted on a group of self-selected members of the British Columbia Association of Social Workers about their perception of their state of readiness to serve newcomers. The findings signal that the social work profession may be less than fully prepared to serve newcomers effectively. Observations related to social work education are outlined and suggestions are made about the practice of the profession.

Keywords: Immigrants • refugees • newcomers • competence

The 2006 Census (Statistics Canada, 2007b) confirms that the acceleration of Canada’s growth rate from 2001 to 2006 was largely a function of international immigration and that such immigration will remain the key force driving the country’s future population growth. By 2017, a projected 22% of the population will consist of immigrants, most of whom will reside in major urban centres—particularly Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2005).

In 1967, Canada’s history of immigration shifted when a new “points system” resulted in a diversification of the countries of origin from which immigrants came (Christensen, 2008; Fleras & Elliott, 2003). The new system changed the demographic profile of immigrants to Canada. At least since the late 1970s, non-European immigration has not only diversified Canada’s cultural mosaic but has also significantly increased the number of resident visible minorities. According to Statistics Canada (2005), in 2017, visible

minority groups will account for about 85% of overall population growth.

Studies show that the numerous challenges faced by newcomers result in a variety of personal and familial hardships (Ataca & Barry, 2002; Dunn & Dyck, 2000; George & Tsang, 2000; Khan & Watson, 2005; Noh & Avison, 1996). Once settled in a host country, most newcomers adapt to a new way of life, a new set of social values and, in many cases, a new language, while struggling with dismantled support systems and heightened feelings of anxiety and stress (van Ecke, 2005). This process is particularly challenging for refugees who depart their countries of origin as a result of adverse political conditions, religious oppression or natural disasters (Jordan, Matheson & Anisman, 2009) and then have to go through a long interrogative process (Showler, 2006).

These hardships are further exacerbated by the economic challenges faced by immigrants. Studies show that compared to the general population or to earlier waves of immigrants,

today's immigrant has a higher unemployment rate and lower income and job security, even though they have a higher level of education than the general population overall (Gilmore, 2008; Hum & Simpson, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2007a). Very often, discrimination against newcomers in the employment arena is disguised as a credential issue or in claims that they lack the so-called Canadian experience (Boyd & Thomas, 2001) or a Canadian accent (Creese & Kambere, 2003).

In the last few decades, the social work profession has taken the initiative in enhancing its members' ability to deal with culturally and racially diverse clients. This is reflected in the educational and accreditation policies of the Canadian Association of Social Work Education and in the code of ethics adopted by the Canadian Association of Social Workers. Nonetheless, immigrant and refugee issues are rarely included specifically in different levels of social work education and training. Surveying the information that is available online, we find that only a handful of social work programs offer courses devoted to working with immigrants and refugees. Implicitly, the challenges that newcomers face are explored within courses on cross-cultural and anti-racist and oppressive practices.

Recognizing that the rapid growth of the immigrant population in Canada will have important implications for the social work profession, the British Columbia Association of Social Workers (BCASW) felt it important to explore whether members considered themselves well equipped to serve newcomers and the kinds of preparation they had in school and in the workplace. These issues are particularly important to social workers in British Columbia—one of the three major provinces in which newcomers tend to settle—particularly in the Metropolitan Vancouver area. According to the 2006 Census (Statistics Canada, 2007b), almost 36.4% of BC residents are immigrants. From 2001 to 2006, 177,840 newcomers decided to reside in this province.

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Methodology

This exploratory study was organized by the BCASW. Authors of the article were volunteer researchers, and the study's intention was to provide a preliminary understanding among the members of BCASW rather than reach fully general conclusions. A survey method was adopted that could, in an economical and efficient way, generate a substantial amount of information covering a large constituency across the province (Fowler, 2002). We would like to thank BCASW for allowing us to publish the study's results.

In consultation with members of the Multiculturalism and Antiracism Committee (MARC), a standing committee of the BCASW with a specific mandate to advise the BCASW on cultural and racial issues related to the social work profession, the authors conceptualized and organized the questionnaire into four major sections:

- Whether newcomers and their issues are included as a mandate or as routine concerns in respondents' program and/or employing organization;

- Respondents’ perception of readiness and how much they know about the basic immigration policies and barriers challenging newcomers;
- The kinds of training respondents received in school and at work for working with newcomers and their suggestions regarding the social work training needed to prepare social workers to deal with newcomers;

- Respondents’ demographic data

Members of MARC pilot-tested both the text and online versions of the survey.

The survey was conducted via Survey Monkey, an online program that the BCASW had used to conduct a few studies among its members in the past, and was administered in April 2006 for a period of four weeks. We invited all BCASW members to participate through two emails and a notice with a link to the survey on the home page of BCASW website. Of BCASW’s 1,150 members, 218 (19%) took part in the survey, though some chose to complete only a few sections. Table 1 shows the number of respondents for each survey section.

Table 1
Respondents of each survey section

Survey section	No. of respondents
1. Organization and service	218
2. Knowledge of newcomers	195
3. Training	187
4. Demographic profile	186

Findings

Since, as an exploratory study, the intention was to provide only a preliminary picture of how members of BCASW perceived their readiness to deal with newcomers, only a descriptive level of statistical analysis was conducted and is

Table 2
Demographic profile of the respondents

Gender	Female	154
	Male	32
Age	Average age	47 years
	Median age	45-49 years
	Mode age	50-54 years
Nationality/Ethnicity	Canadian	140
	Self-identified cultural minority	51
	Self-identified racial minority	22
Education	Bachelor of social work	61
	Master of social work	95
	Other	30*
Area of work	Health or mental health	84
	Family and child protection	42
	Immigrant settlement	5

* Thirty respondents held a master’s degree in a field other than social work or were in the process of completing a social-work related degree.

Table 3
Respondents’ self-perception of readiness (total 195 answered)

Answers	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I always pay close attention to news about newcomers.	21	96	74	4
I am quite familiar with policies that affect newcomers.	11	46	121	17
I am quite familiar with the difficulties that newcomers in Canada face.	36	110	41	8
I am well prepared to work with immigrants.	25	59	94	17
I am well prepared to work with refugees.	19	37	107	32

reported in this article. Of the 218 respondents who visited the survey, 186 completed the survey and supplied demographic information. Table 2 details the demographic breakdown of these 186 respondents.

In terms of gender, age group and nature of work, the profile resembles the general profile of the BCASW membership. Among the 218 respondents, only 5 reported they are worked in immigrant-settlement related services. In other words, at least as reflected in this group of respondents, social workers are not at the frontline of the immigrant settlement process.

Mandate of serving newcomers

A total of 217 responded to the questions regarding whether serving newcomers was included as a mandate in their employing organization or program. Most said that serving newcomers was not a specific mandate of the organization that employed them (66.4%, n=144) or the program in which they worked (74.2%, n=161). In their current job, only 43% (n=93) were notified of their clients’ newcomer status, while only 37% (n=79) were required to know their

clients’ newcomer status. Most respondents reported that the issues facing newcomers are seldom (34.6%, n=75) or never (28.1%, n=61) discussed in organizational meetings. These findings indicate that newcomer issues have not been a major concern of most respondents, at least in the organization and program that they serve.

Knowledge and readiness

In terms of how ready they feel to serve newcomers (see Table 3), out of the 195 respondents who answered this question, a large proportion agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- I always pay close attention to news about newcomers (60%, n=117).
- I am quite familiar with the difficulties that newcomers to Canada face (75%, n=146).

Meanwhile, a majority disagreed or strongly disagreed with the following statements:

- I am quite familiar with policies that affect newcomers (71%, n=138).

- I am well prepared to work with immigrants (57%, n=111).
- I am well prepared to work with refugees (71%, n=139).

Respondents' knowledge of newcomers' difficulties was also reflected in their answers to questions about the challenges newcomers face within the labour market. Lack of recognition of foreign credentials or qualifications and language proficiency were identified by 83% (n=161) and 63% (n=122) of respondents, respectively, as major challenges to newcomers.

Regarding policy issues, respondents' familiarity with immigration policies was examined. In terms of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, the major piece of legislation governing Canada's immigration policy, 22% (n=43) of respondents had never heard of it, while 52% (n=101) had heard of it but knew nothing of its details. The situation is even worse with respect to the Canada–U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement, which was formulated after 9/11 and highly criticized by refugee advocates for blocking legitimate refugees coming across the U.S. border. Fifty-five percent (n=107) of respondents had never heard of this Agreement. These results indicate that although the respondents have taken the initiative to understand the issues facing newcomers, they lack understanding of the

policies and their possible impacts. Also, a high proportion feels that they are not adequately prepared to work with newcomers, and in particular refugees.

The survey then turns to the question, "In what respects do respondents feel prepared or unprepared?" Respondents were asked to name three issues of newcomers that they a) frequently come across, b) feel require urgent social work intervention and c) feel least prepared to intervene in. Table 4 summarizes the results. The responses indicate that most respondents, when taking into consideration what the respondents frequently come across and what they believe requires urgent social work intervention, feel relatively well prepared to help newcomers in terms of economic security and emotional and mental health issues but least prepared in terms of language (33%, n=65), cultural adaptation (37%, n=73) and immigration matters (44%, n=86).

Training received and suggested

When it comes to training, out of the 187 respondents who answered questions in this section, only 19% (n=36) had taken courses specific to working with newcomers, while a relatively greater percentage had taken courses on working with cultural sensitivity (65.8%, n=124) and anti-racist practices

Table 4
Perceived issues of newcomers (n=195)

Answers	Frequent %	Imminent %	Least prepared %
Economic security	34.9	34.4	19.0
Emotional and mental health issues	35.4	39.0	18.0
Cultural adaptation	28.2	44.6	36.9
Immigration matters such as immigrant status and sponsorship	25.1	20.5	44.0
Language	38.5	16.4	32.8

* Respondents could choose up to three issues in each column.

(39.8%, n=75). Similarly, many of the organizations employing the respondents had offered training in working with culturally different clients (64.7%, n=121) and visible minority clients (43.3%, n=81). However, only 21% (n=40) and 12% (n=23) of respondents' employing organizations provided in-service training specifically focused on working with immigrants and refugees, respectively. During their academic studies, just 27% (n=50) of respondents took a course related to newcomer issues, 10% (n=19) said none of their courses covered any such material and 47% (n=88) and 24% (n=45), respectively, reported the topic of immigrants was rarely covered in any courses or only in a small number of courses.

We also wanted to ascertain whether respondents felt that cross-cultural and anti-oppressive training was sufficient preparation for them to work with newcomers. A surprisingly high percentage of respondents thought that a general cross-cultural (76.5%, n=144) and/or anti-oppressive (73.8%, n=139) class was necessary but not sufficient preparation and overwhelmingly noted in their comments that these courses lack specificity in terms of explaining the policies, programs, difficulties, needs and issues unique to newcomers. These are topics that they wanted to see included in both formal social work and in-service training courses.

When asked if courses on working with newcomers are needed, most respondents indicated that a required or elective course is needed at both the BSW (95%, n=178) and MSW level (90%, n=169). While 55% (n=103) agreed that such a course should be required at the BSW level, only 44% (n=83) thought the same when it came to MSW studies. Respondents also indicated that the professional association, in this case the BCASW, has a role to play in providing workshops (81%, n=152), a continuing education certificate (57%, n=107) or an online course (51%, n=96) on how to work with newcomers.

Discussion and implications

As an exploratory study without a probability sampling process, this survey does not provide results leading to generalizations on the Canadian social work profession. Still, these findings may shed light on the basic question that the study poses: Are social workers ready to serve newcomers? Apparently, the answer from at least a portion of BCASW members is, "No, we are not ready—not yet."

We are keenly aware that social workers need to have knowledge not only of the relevant policies and laws that tell us what to do and not to do but also of the rights of our clients and the challenges that they confront. Canadian policies and laws on immigration certainly impact newcomers, who will become a major component of the Canadian population.

The survey's findings lead to at least three observations. First, both organizationally and in terms of programs, newcomer issues have not been included in routine social work practice and settings. As Herberg (1993) has long stated, the migration process is a continuous process cutting through multiple temporal as well as geographical horizons. In each specific horizon, migrants have to deal with the different challenges caused by uprooting, settling and re-rooting. Accumulated through this process is a psycho-social history that is critical to social work intervention

(van Ecke, 2005). The program and organizational lapses in dealing with newcomer issues put professional competence in doubt. As such, how can we ensure our profession is competent in servicing newcomers?

Second, according to the respondents, their own knowledge of newcomers, particularly in terms of immigration policies and processes, is limited. Very often, what they know is based on the digested and slanted information presented in the public media, information that tends to conflate the varying challenges facing a multi-million dollar entrepreneur, a highly skilled engineer, a housewife, a live-in caregiver and a traumatized refugee. We are keenly aware that social workers need to have knowledge not only of the relevant policies and laws that tell us what to do and not to do but also of the rights of our clients and the challenges that they confront. Canadian policies and laws on immigration certainly impact newcomers, who will become a major component of the Canadian population. Should understanding of these policies and laws not then be part of the knowledge of a competent social worker?

Third, newcomers to Canada have multiple identities. An intersectional analysis must take into consideration the salience of different identities in different contexts (Berry, 2007; Dei, 1999). We argue that in the early phase of settling in Canada, newcomer status is itself the most salient identity with which most newcomers have to struggle. The findings of this survey certainly reflect the fact that respondents also feel a pressing need to understand each of the following: the unique situation of newcomers in terms of Canadian immigration policy, the migration process of individuals, the personal and structural challenges and conditions of migrants as well as the existing settlement programs and services along with their limitations. In our commitment to continually examine the quality of both social work education and social work practice, we must ask ourselves, "How can this pressing need be met?"

Taking these three observations into consideration, we draw attention to the existing focus of Canadian social work education. To judge from the survey input, newcomer issues are inadequately covered in existing social work curricula. Although a handful of courses on working with immigrants and/or refugees are offered in social work programs across Canada, almost all of them are elective rather than required courses. The CASWE accreditation standard has not directly pinpointed the necessity of covering relevant information and materials related to newcomers. Given the demographic changes in Canada, the increasing numbers of newcomers and the unique challenges they face, should newcomer issues not be a major component of the courses of study?

Conclusion

Findings of this exploratory study are tentative. The questions raised here are, however, critical to the social work profession. To answer these questions, more research is needed to ascertain whether this is a phenomenon exclusive to BC. Nonetheless, we hope that these preliminary findings can at least prompt us to consider whether social work practitioners are effectively equipped to work with newcomers at different levels and to think about what should be done in social work education and training, as well as our daily practice, to ensure that our profession is competently serving this growing population of newcomers, who are part of our Canadian society.

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Biographical notes

Miu Chung Yan is an associate professor at the University of British Columbia. His major research areas include place-based multiservice organizations, immigrant settlement and integration, youth from immigrant family as well as cross-cultural and antiracist social work practice.

Sherman Chan, director of Settlement Services at MOSAIC, has 28 years of experience in social service in Canada, Hong Kong, USA and Britain. He is a registered social worker with an MSc in applied social studies from the United Kingdom.

Note

- ¹ “Newcomer” is commonly used in government policy and in discussions in the literature as an inclusive term for both immigrants and refugees. Recognizing the diversity among newcomers and the different life prospects of immigrants and refugees, we employ the term only as convenient shorthand. In cases where the term is in our judgment apt to blur important differences, we use “immigrant” and “refugee” for the sake of precision.