

The ‘Flexible’ Immigrant? Human Capital Discourse, the Family Household and Labour Market Strategies

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Abstract As Canadian immigration policy increasingly selects ‘flexible’ immigrants based on their human capital, it correspondingly problematises immigrant families. In drawing on interviews, conducted over a 5-year period in two different neighbourhoods in the Greater Vancouver area, we followed the paths of family households that recently immigrated to Canada. We argue that households not only provide fundamental support in the migration process, but also enable immigrants to adopt flexible strategies to deal with precarious circumstances and thereby begin the process of integration. Rather than being a ‘problem’, immigrant households, and particularly women’s support roles within them, may be a critical lynchpin to successful integration.

Résumé En même temps que la politique canadienne en matière d’immigration vise de plus en plus des immigrants «souples» en fonction de leur capital humain, elle rend problématique la situation des familles immigrantes. Par le biais d’entrevues effectuées au cours d’une période de cinq ans dans deux quartiers différents de la région de Vancouver, nous avons suivi le cheminement de familles récemment immigrées au Canada. Nous alléguons qu’en plus de fournir un appui fondamental pendant le processus d’immigration, les familles permettent aux immigrants d’adopter des stratégies souples leur permettant d’affronter des circonstances précaires et donc d’entamer les démarches de l’intégration. Plutôt que de constituer

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un «problème», les familles immigrantes, et surtout le rôle d'appui que jouent les femmes, pourraient bien être un élément clé de l'intégration réussie.

Keywords Immigrant family households · Gender · Human capital · Labour market strategies

Mots clés Familles immigrantes · Genre · Capital humain · Stratégies du marché du travail

Introduction

In considering the impact of large-scale immigration on their societies, countries from the global north are concerned about social and economic integration. Debate on the contributions to or possible drain of immigrants and refugees on society are framed through a number of discourses that legitimize potential barriers to entry and/or citizenship. Prominent among these is a human capital discourse, which frames the education and skills of individuals in terms of their potential contribution to a nation's economic goals, and seeks immigrants who can hit the ground running and adapt flexibly to the labour market (Li 2003). As states compete in a global market, they privilege the entry of well-educated, highly qualified, and relatively young migrants and discourage others whose economic contribution is hampered by the low-skill job market or whose labour is largely confined to the domestic sphere. While uneven citizenship is highlighted in discussion of the operation of neoliberal economic principles (see, for example, Ong 2006), relatively little is known of skilled worker immigrants' strategies in finding work and establishing 'belonging' within what is considered a path to the more privileged citizenship positions. Literature suggests, in fact, that many immigrants are not able to transfer skills readily into local labour markets with, for example in the Canadian context, immigrants entering an increasingly polarized labour market since the 1990s (Creese 2007; Galabuzi 2006).

Drawing on Canadian material, this paper seeks to explore how the anticipated 'flexibility' of 'independent immigrants' plays out in the pursuit of employment. It focuses particularly on the labour market strategies of family households who enter Canada under the skilled worker program. In studies of economic integration in a climate of economic neoliberalism, family members remain shadowy or absent figures or as an assumed burden on the independent immigrant and the country (e.g. Baker and Benjamin 2002). Research has neglected to examine the family context of members who accompany the principal applicant in their entry to Canada and of members whom the principal applicant later sponsors to come to Canada in the family reunification program. If studies focus on immigrant families, they tend to problematise them, especially if they involve sponsored members (e.g. Collacott 2002). Immigration policy has defined family reunification as a problem for several reasons, including assumptions that 'dependent' family members lack skills and are unproductive, and that people of the 'wrong' origins make excessive use of the family reunification program (Satzewich 1993). In particular, immigration discourses and practices give legitimacy to demeaning stereotypes of extended family networks

associated with foreign cultures “contrary to Canadian family values” (Li 2004, p. 26). Canadian immigration policy creates a burdensome process of sponsorship through the separate immigration classification stream – family class – for the reunification of family members who do not accompany the principal applicant (Li 2003). In giving preference to the economic class (that includes the highly prized skilled worker category), immigration policy reflects and legitimates a discourse that immigrant families are a cost to Canadian society (Abu-Laban 1998). Immigrant families fall outside a human capital discourse that stresses self-sufficiency based on labour market participation, which underlies much of Canada’s immigration policies and practices, most notably in the point system for selecting skilled workers. This focus on human capital provides a rationale for the declining trend since the early 1990s in Canada’s admission of family class immigrants – especially parents and grandparents (McLaren and Black 2005). Human capital discourse also provides a more general rationale for maintaining the view that family members who accompany the skilled worker applicant are ‘dependents’ who contribute little to the integration process.

Many skilled workers come to Canada with a spouse and children.¹ In 2005, 52,266 skilled workers came to Canada as principal applicants; 77,976 dependants accompanied these permanent residents (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2006). We know very little, however, about the kinds of households that skilled workers form and how labour market strategies are constructed in the context of the family household. How, then, do family households organise as constituent members seek work or attempt to re-skill? How is ‘flexibility’ enhanced or constrained through intersections of household, local and wider processes and conditions? Equally important, how is gender implicated in household strategies and the construction of flexibility? As feminist scholars have demonstrated, migration is a gendered process with uneven, often contradictory, and frequently different implications for women and men living in the same households (Espiritu 2003; Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2005; Mahler and Pessar 2006; Menjivar 2003; Pessar 1999).

In this paper we consider these questions and explore something of the complexity of labour market strategies of immigrant households where the main applicant has entered Canada in the skilled worker category. We draw on case studies from a 5-year longitudinal study conducted in two neighbourhoods in Greater Vancouver, Canada. Using qualitative strategies we examined how immigrant family households from a variety of source countries found work, made friends and formed a sense of belonging. We focus on labour market strategies, but argue that these cannot be isolated from the social and citizenship goals of households, power relations within households, shifts in the formation of households, or conditions of economic restructuring. Furthermore we demonstrate the close interweaving of the domestic sphere and labour market activity and strategies. The ‘flexibility’ of an individual immigrant, we suggest, is underpinned by the ability of household members to construct social and material resources as they

¹ In recent years, Canada has admitted skilled workers more than any other category of permanent resident. For example, in 2005 almost half of all immigrants came as skilled workers (49.67%). In all, 60% of immigrants came under the economic class, 24% came as family class, and 16% came as protected persons.

negotiate precarious labour market conditions within an elasticity of social and economic relations stretched across space. We hope to go some way in deconstructing the ‘family’ of family migration – and in so doing critique further the notion of the autonomous ‘flexible’ immigrant of human capital discourse. The longitudinal nature of the study allows us to capture something of the processual nature of the households, embedded in sets of local and non-local relations that took on greater or lesser significance over the period of the study as household members worked to create a socially, economically and culturally satisfying life in Canada.

The paper begins with a brief discussion outlining the approach guiding our study, followed by a description of the methods used. The main sections of the paper first sketch out the labour market context within which the families were located and then detail three main themes emerging from their employment narratives: barriers to employment, re-skilling and job-seeking strategies; the centrality of social networks and kin links in supporting retraining and employment strategies; and the interweaving of employment decisions with a concern for children’s futures.

Human Capital Discourse, the Immigrant Household and Place: A Guiding Framework

Through its categories of entry of permanent residents (e.g. economic, family class, protected persons), the Canadian state recognizes immigrants and refugees to be diverse. But human capital discourse underpins Canadian immigration policy, particularly manifested in the point system for selecting skilled workers and business immigrants. It stresses the embodiment of skills and characteristics that are anticipated to equip the ‘independent’ immigrant with a certain flexibility in adapting to the demands of the labour market. Before 2001, the point system awarded a maximum of 31 points out of 70 to the possession of education credentials and to official language fluency (English or French). The new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act increased points for these two categories to 49 out of 75 to assess the suitability of an applicant for entry to Canada as a landed immigrant (Li 2003). The point system aims to select individuals with qualities promising successful economic and social integration, who are privileged over those entering Canada as dependants. But the focus of immigration policy on human capital, an individualistic concept, cannot adequately recognise the binding of a particular immigrant within complex household relationships and resources.

In particular, the family is difficult to accommodate in analyses based on concepts derived from individualistic, gender-blind measures. This lack fails to fully acknowledge the complex but undeniable links between economic and social life that carve out conditions under which immigrants and refugees come to participate in the labour force, make friends, raise children and ultimately become ‘Canadian’ in quite specific ways. The household is often at the heart of this life, which intertwines the economic, the social and the cultural in the workings of neoliberal economies (c.f. Rankin 2003). In our analysis, we are not conceptualising the household as a homogeneous, single decision-making unit, but a set of fluid kinship and/or other relations with particular sociocultural dynamics and intra-household inequalities. The household, made up of cohabiting members, can be understood as a process (c.f. Hardill 2002), shifting in its composition over time and space as members pursue closely intertwined economic and social strategies. Further, in unpacking the relations of

power at the household level, scholars show the deep connections between gender identities and the structuring of men's and women's employment, and the ability to negotiate uncertain labour market conditions (Espiritu 2003; Menjivar 2003). As Buzar et al. (2005, p. 424) comment, a "growing body of evidence suggests that the negotiation of gender roles in the household can affect the flexibilisation of family and employment patterns in the macroeconomy". They note a contemporary plurality and fluidity of household arrangements and claim "deep connections between household demography, on the one hand, and the social, spatial and cultural aspects of everyday life, on the other" (ibid, p. 422). While much of the literature focuses on the heterosexual, gendered dyad, and perhaps their children, in the discussion of the household, other family relations may also be at play, including those associated with extended family relations of adult siblings, in-laws, parents and grandparents. These extended relations take shape in a variety of ways that may shift over time and space.

Some people in the world are much more mobile than others (Hannam et al. 2006) and are situated in the power relations of particular places quite differently (Massey 1993). That is, individuals and groups enjoy varying access to the material and social resources that foster or support ways of 'belonging' in an adopted country; in like manner their ability to create resources will differ. In this understanding, places, as material, social and symbolic sites through which everyday lives are forged, are not simple backdrops to action but are actively implicated in how people orchestrate everyday routines and take up opportunities. Nor are places bounded, spatial entities – places are connected in various ways with other places at various scales – city, region, nation and global. We do not, therefore, suggest that immigrants' lives will be confined to the neighbourhood, but will be connected variably to other city and national spaces and ultimately to global markets (see, for example, Hiebert and Ley 2003; Ong 2006). Nevertheless, the specificities of the local are implicated in shaping the fortunes of those living there including, for example, how economic, social and cultural activities are constructed, facilitated or constrained by various dimensions of place experience. Our focus on the family household in this paper is consistent with this understanding of the fluidity of households and their intertwining with spatial and social processes and power relations and is matched methodologically in our study by an empirical focus on the household over time. In focusing on two neighbourhoods in a metropolitan area we are able to explore how places present different sets of resources and sets of meanings for immigrant households.

Research Approach and Methods

The paper is based on interviews with recent migrant families living in the Greater Vancouver area. Vancouver is second only to Toronto as a prime Canadian destination for new immigrants, with immigrants making up 37.5% of the total population of the Vancouver area in 2001 (Statistics Canada 2003a, p. 35). We consider families' experiences in an inner city neighbourhood that constitutes a traditional reception area for new immigrants – East Vancouver – and experiences in a suburban neighbourhood – the Tri Cities² – with a more recent, growing immigrant

² The Tri-Cities is composed of three adjacent municipalities: Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody.

population. In East Vancouver we interviewed members of 14 households from a number of countries, including Bolivia, El Salvador, Hong Kong, India, Peru, Philippines, Somalia, Uganda and Vietnam. In the Tri-Cities we interviewed members of 11 households from Brazil, Hong Kong, India, Iran, Korea, Japan, Poland, and the former Yugoslavia. Most families were interviewed multiple times over a 5-year period (1997–2002).³ All but three of these 25 households (one family from Hong Kong and two from Vietnam) were interviewed in English. Our intent was to interview all family members in a household from the age of 15 and up, but in practice not all were willing or able to take part. In some households family members were interviewed individually, but in others they wished to be interviewed together. A wide range of topics related to immigration settlement was covered; here we focus on narratives of employment, viewed from within the intra-household relations that frame the understanding and practices of economic participation. Such ‘subaltern’ accounts are important in revealing the effects of wider economic and social processes and spaces of agency where they are negotiated (Dossa 2004; Lawson 2000).

For the purposes of this paper, we selected four households (two in each neighbourhood) to highlight specific features of household composition (nuclear and extended families) and employment-related activities. Their accounts bear many similarities to other households in this study and in other research. These four households serve to illustrate our arguments particularly well because of a number of features: first, the data from these households were particularly rich over the period of study; second, they had been in Canada for a similar period of time; and third, they allowed us to compare across type of household (nuclear and extended), source country and neighbourhood. The four families were all recent immigrants to Canada and the principal applicant had come to Canada in the independent, skilled worker stream. All were interviewed in English, although one household had some difficulty with fluency in English, especially in the early interviews. We interviewed at least two members of each household and continued to interview one or more members four to five times over a 5-year period (1997–2002). During the 5-year period the composition of the four households and members’ activities shifted considerably (which we discuss later in more detail). Table 1 provides an overview of the four households.

Two of the households consisted of nuclear families, each with two children – the Marcos family, from the Philippines, in East Vancouver and the Khalili family, from

³ In the cases of the households in East Vancouver, the sequence of interviews were conducted by the one author, Creese, and a colleague, Dan Hiebert, in the first 2 years and the final year; in between research assistants conducted some of the interviews. The first year of interviewing of the households in the Tri Cities was carried out by the authors Dyck and McLaren, with subsequent interviews conducted by graduate students or community-based research assistants, with careful consultation and debriefing. Ethical guidelines of the two universities involved were followed, and the study approved by the respective ethical review boards. Not all families participated for the full 5 years; some could not be located at a later date, and others declined to continue to be involved in the project. Of the 14 families recruited in East Vancouver, four families were interviewed once; four were interviewed twice; and six were interviewed four times over 5 years. Of the 11 families recruited in the Tri Cities, one family was interviewed twice; six were interviewed three times; three were interviewed four times; and one was interviewed five times over 5 years.

Table 1 Profile of the four households^a

	Marcos Household (EV)	Khalili Household (TC)	Naidu Household (EV)	Lau Household (TC)
Country of origin	Philippines	Iran	India	Hong Kong
Arrival in Canada	1997	1997	1996 onward	1996
Highest educational level of adults	(J) Bach. Engineering; (M) High School Graduate	(M) Bach. Engineering; (M.) Bach. Arts	(L) Masters Commerce; (C) Bach. Commerce	(all 4 adults) Bach. Business Administration
Level of English spoken	Fluent	Fluent	Fluent	Some difficulties in everyday conversation
Household type	Nuclear family	Nuclear family	Extended family	Extended family
Number of household members during research period	4	4	2–7	7–8
Interview participants and previous occupation	Husband: Jose (Engineer) Wife: Margarete (Senior Clerical Worker)	Husband: Majid (Engineer) Wife: Mania (English Teacher) Daughter: Mehri (Student) Son: Amin (Student)	Older sister: Leena (Teacher) Younger Sister: Chandra (University Student)	Eldest son: Terence Daughter-in-law: Iris Daughter: Holly Son-in-law: Ron (Occupation of all 4: Business)
Accommodation	Rented apartment	Rented apartment By year 5: owned apartment in same neighbourhood	Rented basement suite	Home owned by parents By year 5: Terence and Iris owned house in another neighbourhood

^a All names are pseudonyms
EV/East Vancouver, *TC* Tri-Cities

Iran, in the Tri-Cities. The research team interviewed both adults in the East Vancouver household (the children were too young to interview) and interviewed the husband (1 year only), wife, daughter and son (who were teenagers) in the Tri-Cities household. The men in these two families were professional engineers. Margarete Marcos of the East Vancouver household came to Canada without post-secondary education, and with experience as a senior-level clerical worker, while Mania Khalili in the Tri-Cities household had a university degree and was a high school English teacher in Iran. All the adults came to Canada with fairly strong English-speaking skills. Both families had been in Canada only under a year at the time of the first interview and were living in rental accommodation.

The other two households were composed of extended families. The Lau household in the Tri-Cities consisted of retired parents, a son and his wife, a daughter and her husband, and a younger son (who later married). All had emigrated from Hong Kong to Canada. The research team interviewed four of the adults (son and his wife; daughter and her husband). They were in their 30s and 40s and had obtained bachelor degrees and worked in business before coming to Canada. The husbands entered as independent, skilled workers; one wife accompanied her husband; and the other came to Canada as a visitor and then married. One couple had been in Canada for a year and a half before the first interview, and the other couple for a year. The four people did not speak English easily and usually spoke Cantonese in the household. They lived in a large home, which the retired parents owned.

The Naidu household in East Vancouver began with two sisters in their mid-20s who both emigrated from India to Canada as independent immigrants. They had been in Canada for 2 years and were both single and childless at the time of the first interview. So unlike the other households, the Naidu household did not, initially, centre on conjugal relationships. The research team interviewed the two sisters who spoke English well. Leena, the older sister, had a Masters of Commerce and a Bachelor of Education before coming to Canada with prior experience as a teacher. The younger sister, Chandra, had a bachelor of Commerce plus a 2-year degree in computing, though with no work experience. During the 5 years of the study, the eldest sister married and had a child. As well, the sisters sponsored other family members to join them, including their mother, brother, brother's wife, Leena's husband, and her husband's brother. The family lived in a rented suite.

Immigrants and the Canadian Labour Market

Immigrants arriving in Canada in the late 1990s entered an increasingly polarized labour market. Economic restructuring saw the thinning of management ranks and the loss of many jobs in the manufacturing and resource sectors, cutbacks and privatization in the public sector, and a neo-liberal emphasis on labour market 'flexibility'. Restructuring produced more precarious 'non-standard' jobs (part-time, temporary, contracted-out, multiple-job holding, and self-employed) that undermined job security, career prospects, and decent wages for many Canadians. These economic changes disproportionately affected those already most marginal in the labour market. Women have long constituted the bulk of 'flexible' labour and the gendered division of labour shows no sign of disappearing. Women continue to be

concentrated in ‘traditional female’ jobs – with a majority in clerical, sales and service occupations⁴ – and on average earn only 70% of men’s earnings.⁵ However, the Canadian labour market is also clearly racialised; White native-born workers fare better than equivalently skilled and educated immigrants, workers of colour, and Aboriginal workers within the broader context of a gendered labour market (Creese 2007; Galabuzi 2006). Seventy-three percent of all immigrants who arrived during the 1990s were people of colour (Statistics Canada 2003a, p. 6 and 10)⁶; as a result, gendered and racialised processes intersect with immigrant status to shape experiences in the local labour market.

Immigrants constitute one fifth of all Canadian workers and during the 1990s accounted for 70% of all growth in the labour market (Statistics Canada 2003b, p. 12). But economic restructuring, with an emphasis on labour market ‘flexibility’, has produced an increasingly uncertain labour market and, as Galabuzi notes, “racialized groups, immigrants, refugees, and women have borne the brunt of economic restructuring and austerity” (2006, p.10). There is a large and growing wage gap between immigrants, especially recent immigrants, and non-immigrant workers in Canada (e.g. Chui and Zietsma 2003; Hiebert and Pendakur 2003; Li 2000, 2003; Picot and Sweetman 2005). Immigrant women of colour with foreign degrees experience the greatest labour market penalties, although a significant employment gap continues to exist for immigrants who earned their educational credentials within Canada (Li 2003, pp. 120–121). The combined ‘discounting’ of non-Canadian work experience and credentials – both of which occur “almost exclusively in non-traditional source countries” (Aydemir and Skuterud 2004, p. 3; Reitz 2003) – produces high levels of deskilling, precarious employment, downward social mobility, and poverty among highly skilled immigrants.

Barriers to Skill Recognition and the Process of Re-skilling

The twin processes of economic restructuring and local employers’ failure to recognize qualifications and work experience attained abroad were experienced by all the adult participants in our study, including members of the four households discussed in this paper. All but one adult (Margarete Marcos) in the four families profiled here had a university degree before migrating to Canada; and all but one (Chandra Naidu, who was still a university student) had prior work experience in the field in which each was trained. Although their qualifications were instrumental in each family qualifying for immigration through the point system, none found local Canadian employers willing to acknowledge the value of their degrees. This was so even for Majid, whose Engineering degree was attained in the United States. In

⁴ In 2004, 53.5% of all women worked in these occupations (Statistics Canada 2006:128).

⁵ In 2003, women employed full-time all year earned 70.5% of men’s earnings; all employed women (including part-time and part-year) earned only 63.6% of men’s earnings (ibid:152).

⁶ Visible Minority is the term used in government statistics to refer to those who are non-Aboriginal in origin and “non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Statistics Canada 2003a:10). The more common term used by academics – drawn from Canadian feminist and anti-racist movements – is people of colour.

addition, the years of experience each had in their respective fields in their countries of origin – and in the case of Majid also in Europe – was no help in finding work in Vancouver.

Household members followed multiple strategies, often simultaneously, to get qualifications and experience recognized and, when that failed, to re-skill in the local context, but none re-skilled to the levels attained before migration. The cost of local university education, the length of time required, and the immediate demands of putting food on the table made local university education prohibitive, and led to strategies in which work and further education could be more readily and affordably combined. Moreover, the precise timing of when further education could be pursued was worked out as a household strategy in relation to the job situation of other members, collective financial security, childcare needs, and short- and long-term career goals. Like members of other households in this study, most pursued one or more main educational avenues at different points in time including: (1) job clubs, orientation courses, and bridging courses designed to introduce immigrants to local labour expectations and practices; (2) English-as-Second-Language (ESL) courses; and (3) occupationally specific courses and diploma programs designed for the broader Canadian market, and offered by publicly funded colleges⁷ and/or private for-profit educational institutions.

Of these options, taking occupationally specific courses and programs designed for the broader public (and not just for immigrants) proved the most useful route to improving one's position in the labour market. Both Jose Marcos and Majid Khalili, for example, sought to upgrade their engineering skills by taking Autocad; Jose also took a British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) diploma program to become a civil engineer technologist. Leena Naidu took night courses over several years to become a Chartered General Accountant; and Chandra completed a BCIT program in computer science. Iris and Terence in the Lau household both completed a 2-year accounting management program at a local college; their co-op placements with Revenue Canada were a result of this program, and provided an entrée to the public sector jobs they so desired.

However, such strategies were not without difficulties. Mania Khalili was unable to follow-up her goal to re-train as a teacher, or, as she later wished, to pursue a new career as a social worker, because she could not produce her high school transcript (even though she had documentation pertaining to her B.A. degree), which a local educational institution required. Moreover, those who completed Canadian qualifications did not necessarily find jobs in their field or greater job security. Chandra Naidu attained a computer science diploma just as the IT sector crashed, and was never able to find work in that field; instead, she returned to low-level clerical work while pursuing a Canadian Bachelor of Commerce through distance education. Iris and Terence Lau found work with Revenue Canada, but were confined to precarious, short-term contracts and subject to persistent and intensive monitoring of job performance. After 4 years and an Autocad program, Majid Khalili finally got a job related to his field of mechanical-engineering, though at a much lower level, and

⁷ British Columbia has a system of publicly funded colleges and universities. Tuition fees at colleges are considerably lower than at universities. Along with providing university-level transfer courses, colleges offer many shorter (usually 1 or 2 year) occupationally specific diploma programs. In addition, many private for-profit educational institutions also offer work-related training.

only after he removed his Engineering degree from his resume to avoid further rejection as ‘over qualified’. Meanwhile, Jose Marcos and his family eventually left Vancouver when their newly-acquired Canadian citizenship provided access to a TN 1 Visa to work in the United States. In California he found work in his field of civil engineering, and attained a salary “double” what he managed to find in Vancouver.

In most cases, households and individual members alternated work and continuing education. Some family members were gainfully employed while others pursued further education. For example, Chandra Naidu remained in her low-wage entry-level job for 3 years and deferred further education until her sister had more secure employment. Among married couples, strategies to re-establish husbands’ careers were prioritized while wives’ career aspiration was secondary. Mania Khalili attained part-time work and put her own aspirations for re-skilling on hold while her husband upgraded his qualifications; and Margarete Marcos worked a series of temporary data entry jobs well below her clerical training while her husband pursued further education. Where financial resources were more plentiful, for example in the Lau household (where they lived in a home owned by their parents), couples could pursue education at the same time. To make ends meet while studying, individuals often combined part-time work with full-time programs, or full-time work with evening courses, and, in at least one case, pursued full-time studies while receiving Employment Insurance benefits. The continued financial viability of the household was always a prerequisite for any individual household member to pursue further education. Individual strategies of re-skilling were always intertwined with broader household goals, and decisions about how best to use scarce resources were shaped by gendered expectations that prioritized men’s work.

While this interweaving of individual household member’s work and re-skilling strategies with household goals was common to all the families, enacting re-skilling strategies was made more difficult by the precarious nature of the employment available to immigrants. In a story far from unique to the households in our study, economic security was imperiled by the short-term and unstable nature of work as much as by the generally low wages, making it more difficult to find the resources necessary for re-skilling. Most households and individual members found it difficult to envision undertaking the extensive retraining needed to attain a place in the labour market equivalent to what was left behind.

The Significance of Familial and Other Social Networks, Gender and Place

Kin, ethnic and local community networks were important to all households in work-finding strategies, but their significance varied over time as families ‘settled,’ re-skilled and weathered the insecurities of the labour market. Much attention has been paid to transnational networks and the strength of ‘weak ties’ (those outside a person’s immediate social circle) in providing informational, instrumental and emotional support to migrants (Granovetter 2002), but less has considered how local, post-migration networks are created and accessed (Wierzbicki 2004). The working together of these networks – both transnational and local – in constructing supportive conditions for combining the demands of wage labour and reproductive labour has garnered even less attention, although work is beginning to show their

interdependence (e.g. Ryan 2007). In the cases of the family households discussed here, this interweaving of local and geographically distant social links is also evident as families adopted strategies to enhance labour participation, while also addressing caring responsibilities. The social and economic dimensions of support through networks are not readily separated out, and are dealt with together here. The significance of networks for all households in providing emotional, material and informational support lay not only in the realms of early settlement and job-seeking strategies, but also to a growing sense of ‘belonging in place’.

Nuclear Families and Place-based Networks

The familial and ethnically based friendship networks of both the Marcos and Khalili households were prominent in initial settlement experience and subsequent strategies for finding work. The relative ‘thinness’ of an Iranian social network in the Tri-Cities at the time of the first interviews contrasted with some institutional depth of a Filipino community in East Vancouver, but nevertheless was central to the Khalili family’s initial settlement and subsequent work experiences.

The Khalili family found rental accommodation through a relative of Majid’s in an apartment block where other Iranians also lived. They were similarly professionals (engineers and architects) who had not found work in their fields. They provided a fledgling social network for the family, which provided a route to Majid’s first job. In the face of continuing barriers to getting engineering work, he took a job as a cashier at a gas station, working with other Iranian engineers.

On the other hand, a pre-existing clustering of immigrants from the Philippines in East Vancouver enabled the Marcos family to readily forge links to a familiar community: As Margarete said, “The first thing we looked for when we came was a [Filipino] church, because without them, we don’t have family”. A Filipino network, layered through institutions such as the church and local services and shops, was a significant source of information and Jose’s early jobs. For example, he found his first job through a friend and later work through notices in Filipino stores.

For both men, local ties and local knowledge were insufficient for getting jobs other than in the low-skill, low-wage sector, and other non-local familial and friendship networks became significant in later job-seeking attempts. Both had contacts in the US that came into play after their failure to find jobs commensurate with their educational and experience levels in the Vancouver area. For Jose, the lure of the US was constant, with relatives in California encouraging him to move there. Two years after the last interview, we found that Jose had in fact found a job in California with better pay and prospects than he had enjoyed in Canada and the family had moved there. In like manner, Majid’s two brothers and friends from his Texas degree class, who were all living and working in California, encouraged him to look for work in the US. Three years after arriving in Canada he pursued an engineering job in California. However, he was unsuccessful due to problems in getting a visa in time. He continued to have difficulty in finding a good job in the Vancouver area, although his Autocad training led to a job related to his skills but at a much lower skill level.

The two men’s employment needs to be juxtaposed with that of their wives, Margarete and Mania, both of whom entered the waged and voluntary labour

sectors. Their gendered social networks linked them into the community in different ways than their husbands (see Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2005). Both had made friends and found work through participation in settlement service NGOs, local community centres and their children's schools. For Mania, the presence of other Iranian immigrants in the area and her community participation enabled her to use her English language skills to advantage – doing translation work and teaching English as a second language. However, the part-time status of the work and, in both households' cases, the greater push to pursue the career-oriented work of their husbands meant that the two women's relationship to their communities was defined primarily in relation to their work as mothers. The development of local friendships and the 'weak ties' of community over time had become significant to the women's attachment to place (see also Rose et al. 1998). Both had been reluctant to go to the US when their husbands considered job opportunities there, because of their perception of congenial neighbourhoods, good for raising children and where they had developed friendships. Social networks had taken on a different meaning over the time of the interviews, now more interwoven into everyday life routines rather than focused on addressing their particular needs as they attempted to establish a stable material base in Canada. Both women had become attached to their neighbourhoods, finding them safe and convenient, and they enjoyed the presence of other people from their home countries (over the study period there had been a growth in immigrants from Iran in the Tri-Cities).

Extended Households and Familial Networks

Turning to the Naidu and Lau families, the extended family was the primary source of support and base from which to pursue career possibilities. While the Vancouver area, and to some extent both neighbourhoods, has dense ethnic clusterings of South Asian and Asian immigrants, ethnic and friendship networks played a relatively modest part in the unfolding of these two households' work strategies. Instead, kin networks provided a prominent form of support. Indeed, the Naidu and Lau households developed an explicit strategy of family network support that took the forms of knowledge to pass on and of providing a flexible and stable material base as family members re-skilled and set on career paths.

The Naidu household enjoyed considerable support from other family members, as a sequence of job training and job finding took place. The Naidu sisters provided mutual support as they obtained Canadian qualifications, with Chandra waiting until Leena had a secure job before leaving low-paid work to take a computer science course. They then sponsored other family members' immigration. All their immediate family had settled in Vancouver, with the latest additions being Leena's husband's brother, to be followed by their brother's wife. Before other family members immigrated, the sisters were able to advise them about taking specific courses that would be useful in the Canadian labour market. As these other family members arrived in Vancouver, they not only had this informational support but also became part of an extended household sharing accommodation and pooling funds. They all lived together in a two-bedroom basement suite. Leena and her husband later established their own household when they had a baby, moving to another suite nearby.

The well-established Sikh community in Vancouver was not significant in the sisters' settlement and job-finding strategies. Following Canadian training, they acquired jobs through the newspaper and a job agency specialising in accountancy-related jobs. Indeed, they had no clear ties to the broader South Asian community, which they saw as laden with "too much politics", conservative, and old fashioned compared to their modern, urban life in New Delhi. It should be noted, however, that they were daughters of a mixed Hindu–Sikh marriage, which may have influenced their lack of strong identification with the predominantly Sikh community making up the South Asian population of the Vancouver region. Their friendships, developed largely through work, were multiethnic in character, with most of their friends being immigrants too. Both sisters liked the multicultural neighbourhood in which they lived, considering it safe, convenient, and close to shopping, transportation and city centre services. They hoped to remain in the area, perhaps eventually buy a house. Since the birth of her baby, Leena has been attending a mother-and-baby programme for Punjabi speakers, suggesting a new strategic move to develop the potential of a supportive ethnically based social network as she raises her child.

Like the Naidu household, the strategies of the two couples in the Lau household were embedded in family, rather than ethnic network support. Since Holly and Terence's parents owned the house, the couples were able to take up temporary jobs, enrol in various courses, and plan around long-term goals, which included careers and children. One or two people in the household were usually employed and each couple shared a car – which was necessary in their suburban neighbourhood – to help run the household, transport their parents, and get to work or training classes. Both couples sought work outside the local Chinese ethnic enclave, which they saw as holding back their English language proficiency and being a potential dead-end in finding well-paid jobs. As Terence put it, he wanted "to get into society" with a stable and well-paying job "in the mainstream". But their search for work was much more difficult and took far longer than they had anticipated. It was only through the use of friendship and family networks that Ron and Holly found their first jobs: Ron as a salesman through one of his brother-in-law's friends, and Holly as a secretary through a classmate at an NGO's job-hunting club. After several months, Ron and Holly quit their jobs, however, to take ESL at a local college, where Terence and Iris were enrolled.

Social and material support through the home base supplied by their parents meant that the couples had experienced a high standard of living in a potentially amenable neighbourhood, a relatively recent subdivision of spacious houses with large gardens whose location and good local schools has attracted immigrants from Hong Kong. However, its distance from Vancouver, combined with not having made significant friendships in the neighbourhood, led Terence and Iris to choose Richmond – an inner suburb of Vancouver closer to the city centre with an established Asian community – to set up their own household. Their move suggests something of a paradox in their quest to integrate economically and culturally in Canada, with ethnic services and the familiarity of Asian culture embedded in this 'new' Chinatown of Vancouver important to Terence and Iris as they became 'Canadians'. Holly and Ron intended to follow them, together with the parents.

As with the Naidu household, the Lau extended family may have given them the material and emotional resilience to face ongoing economic challenges in Canada.

For the Marcos and Khalili households, extended family networks, while still playing a significant part in the pursuit of economic participation, were less available to provide routine, local support. In this absence, these nuclear households relied more on friendship and other ethnic-based networks, and with fewer economic resources, gendered strategies resulted in the wives being more constrained in following career paths.

The Intertwining of Desires for Children's Educational Achievements and Work Decisions

This gender difference becomes further evident in the intertwining of economic goals and desires for children's achievements in Canada. The four households we discuss in this paper covered a spectrum of experiences with regard to dependent children. The Marcos family came with pre-school children and the Khalili family with teenage children; during the course of the study, Leena in the Naidu household gave birth to a child; in the Lau household, Iris had a miscarriage and was planning to have a child in the future as was Holly.

The Khalili and Marcos families illustrate ways in which migration may be primarily a strategy for bettering children's futures, a theme central to all families with children in our study. Both families were concerned about growing political and economic insecurities in their respective countries, Iran and the Philippines, and thought that Canada could offer a better life for their children, including educational opportunities. Migration for Margarete was "for our children's future". And, as their experiences unfolded, it became increasingly clear to the parents that the better life they sought in Canada may have to rest on the opportunities of the children. In the second year interview, Majid stated that, "we feel that if we sacrifice for the children that is worth it. Don't you think?" Yet, he was struck by the contrast of his children's opportunities and his: "everything happens for them but nothing happens for me. I am just looking for a job; no job, so it's the biggest problem. That's very hard, really".

Unlike situations in which migration produced an improvement in women's status (Mahler and Pessar 2006; Menjivar 2003; Pessar 1999), the women in these households, like the men, experienced downward mobility. Due to their uphill battles in finding secure employment, the parents in both families were compelled to forgo opportunities in Canada for themselves to provide for their children. It was difficult, for example, for the parents to retrain or upgrade their credentials when they needed income to pay housing and living costs, with children in childcare or school. The mothers in particular bore the brunt of diminished opportunities, both in the household and outside it. They were generally more responsible for raising the children, were accommodating to their husband's employment strategies, and were unable to move out of occupational 'ghettos' organized around feminized employment. Throughout the interviews with the Khalili family, Mania's career was side-lined in conversation, although it transpired when given the opportunity that she was bored and being at home was difficult after having a career in Iran. She took on almost completely the household labour and when, in the last year's interview, the interviewer asked the children, "over your stay here, who would you say has been the biggest source of information and support to all of you?" both said, "My mom". In holding things together in the

household, the mother seemed to be the lynch-pin in constructing conditions under which the household as a unit could survive economically and engage socially in the local community. Yet from a human capital perspective her contributions (through irregular part-time work and taking primary responsibility for reproductive labour) are considered marginal. In a pattern also seen in other households, strategies were enacted in gendered ways that often further marginalized immigrant women.

In families with young children, organizing the daily practice of their care can be exceedingly complex and exhausting, especially when economic and other circumstances are in constant flux. In the Marcos family, the intertwining of jobs, training and children necessitated the adoption of flexible childcare arrangements. Soon after their arrival, Jose's low wages precipitated Margarete to find a job. They were able to obtain subsidized childcare, which made it possible for both parents to work at minimum wage jobs; as their incomes increased, however, the subsidy disappeared. Their insecure jobs led to frequent periods of unemployment, but usually only for a short time. While on Employment Insurance (EI), Margarete was able to stay at home for a year with their children and Jose attended school full-time. When both were employed again, they used a babysitter, until their parents visited, and altogether provided childcare for a year. However, the constant juggling and haphazard support around childcare left Margarete and Jose with the impression that raising children was more frustrating and stressful in Canada than in the Philippines.

Only after having been in Canada for several years did anyone in the Naidu or Lau household consider having children. Finding secure jobs was paramount and essential before taking on the responsibility of children. Without dependent children, members of the households had greater flexibility and resources for pursuing training and educational options than did the Khalili and Marcos parents. Not until Leena had married (year 3 of the study) and found a secure job did she become pregnant. By our last interview Leena had attained her CGA, had moved into a better and more secure job in the accounting field, and was on maternity leave.

In like manner, only after several years in Canada, when some job security appeared to be possible, did the couples in the Lau household contemplate having children. Because of their age, however, both Holly and Iris were worried about the delay. If they could not find stable jobs in Canada, they thought about returning to Hong Kong. As Iris said, "I don't want to start my family in my old age!" By 2002, because both Terence and Iris had "more secure" jobs at Canada Revenue Agency, they had moved out of the household into their own house and had a mortgage. Although Iris subsequently had a miscarriage, they felt more able to plan their future including having a baby and staying in Canada. While Holly and Ron had less job security, they hoped that their opportunities would improve to allow them, as well, to plan in the near future to have a child and to make Canada their home.

Conclusions

In examining the four families – from different source countries, living in two different Greater Vancouver neighbourhoods (urban and suburban) – and considering their circumstances over time, we found strong commonalities between these and other households in this study in their encounters with the Canadian labour market.

Despite the fact that they were ‘ideal, skilled immigrants’, most of whom were fluent in English, the adults we interviewed faced a precarious economy that primarily offered only short-term and/or low-wage jobs to new immigrants. Their ability to survive economically and to develop workable strategies depended a great deal on their households, families and social networks, which differed considerably – configured by family forms, gender and generation, and access to resources – and which shifted over time. These household strategies were enacted in gendered ways that often reproduced women’s subordinate positions within household dynamics.

The two nuclear families (Khalili and Marcos) mainly came to Canada for the sake of their children’s future, and the mothers, in particular, participated in the children’s care and in developing connections that oriented the family to the local neighbourhood and community. The parents’ transnational family and friendship networks, nevertheless, kept open the option of moving to the US for better opportunities for the husbands who had professional engineering training and experience. The two extended households (Naidu and Lau) developed other extensive, multiple strategies that also shifted over time. Due to the flexibility of household support, members were able to pursue long-term plans that included extensive training and re-skilling; they could enter and exit workplaces and training programs with some assurance that their daily livelihood was somewhat secure. In short, the anticipated ‘flexibility’ of the skilled worker – that is built into Canadian immigration policy – is bound up with the ability of the household as a whole to adopt a variety of mutually supporting strategies that link to both social and economic dimensions of settlement. Although their economic integration was uneven, the family household members provided a large base of support allowing them to plan their future, including the possibility of having children and remaining in Canada.

The failure to understand the importance of such household strategies of migration has important policy implications. As the immigration system has increasingly sought to select immigrants on the basis of their human capital ‘skills’ (Li 2003, 2004; McLaren and Dyck 2004), it has correspondingly problematised immigrant families. The problematisation of immigrant families neglects to acknowledge the fact that the ‘autonomous immigrant’ is a fiction (Walton-Roberts 2003), that family relations are central in decisions to immigrate and whether or not to settle permanently (Khoo 2003), and that families provide much of the sustenance and development of human, social and cultural capital of immigrants (Ong 1999). For these reasons alone, immigration policy needs to reconsider its criteria of selection based on human capital theory that privileges the ‘flexible’ skilled worker and devalues family ‘dependents’, especially those associated with the extended family. The immigration system needs to consider a more generous definition of family that allows for a greater variety of households to help sustain the process of integration. Immigration policy also needs to acknowledge, and develop strategies to address, how its focus on the flexible immigrant workforce rests on gender inequalities.

Households may provide not only fundamental support in the migration process. They may enable immigrants who are seeking to find their way in new circumstances with multiple barriers and precarious conditions to adopt responsive strategies to changing circumstances over time. It is precisely the flexibility of households as a unit that may enable immigrants to survive and possibly to begin the process of integration in an ambivalent environment that both ‘welcomes’

immigrants and tells them to ‘stay out’ (Abu-Laban 1998). Rather than being a ‘burden’, households may be the lynchpin to successful integration. Such ‘success’, however, is contingent on intra-household dynamics as well as local and global barriers and opportunities. Households differ in their ability to access material and social resources that vary with changes in government programs and supports as well as the labour market. Our longitudinal study suggests that it is important to observe the household as process in place, linked in complex ways with various material conditions and social relations of power. Hence we should be cautious about uncritically celebrating household ‘flexibility’ without considering how unequal power relations empower some households – and family members within – more than others.

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