

(In)visible Work: Confronting Neoliberalism in the Settlement Sector

Megan Gill | Jeff Halvorsen | Ajwang’ Warria | Vibha Kaushik
Faculty of Social Work



Background

- Immigration to Canada remains high despite reduction in government targets (Gov’t of Canada, 2023, 2024).
- The continued influx in newcomers highlights the need for prompt settlement service navigation and access support (Campana, 2019; Kaushik & Drolet, 2018).
- To increase efficiency, the “digital transformation” of the settlement sector was recommended (Ghebretacle, 2024, 2024; Kaushik et al., 2024).
- Immigrant Services of Calgary responded by spearheading Gateway – a first point of contact for newcomer settlement planning through the digitalization of client assessment, service access, and navigation (Loucif et al., 2024).

Literature Review

- There is scarcity of resources to meet settlement needs (Kaushik & Drolet, 2018).
- Advocacy and increasing efficiency with existing resources supports settlement needs (Atanackovic, 2014; Burstein & Esses, 2012).
- The quest for efficiency often results in devaluing the cultural and linguistic skills of settlement workers (Liu & Guo, 2023).
- Frontline acts of resistance are supported and encouraged (Parada et al., 2020).

Research Question

- *How do Gateway processes and Planners (staff) preserve client-centered approaches while working within neoliberal confines?*

Research Methodology/Study Process

Approach: Qualitative research

Lens of approach: Institutional ethnography (Dorothy Smith & Lisa DeVault)

Ethics approval:
This study was approved by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint [Health/Faculties] Research Ethics Board (CFREB) through the IRISS system, approval #REB23-0985

- **Phase 1:** Gateway Welcome Center Observations (5)- Understanding the physical space.
- **Phase 2:** Textual Analysis- How written word aligns with the reality of systems/work.
- **Phase 3:** Gateway Planner (staff) Interviews (10)- Knowledgeable insiders, guiding concepts/ discourses.
- **Phase 4:** Gateway Planning Session Observations and Client Interviews (10)- The Gateway process and experience.
- **Phase 5:** Policy and Management Interviews (3-5)- Policy and the guiding concepts/ discourses.

Emerging Finding: Planner's "Invisible" Work

- Support with practical activities e.g. filling out forms
- Offer both direct and indirect support for settlement challenges e.g. employment coaching
- Act as a case managers
- Rely on informal resources to support clients
- Offer follow-up unremunerated support to clients outside of scheduled work time
- Merge narrative and digitally assisted interviewing to the institutionalized assessment
- Utilize soft skills and cultural norms for relationship building

"People need real assistance... I still do caseworker job for my clients because they need it..."
Gateway Planner

Emerging Finding: Lack of Coordinated Supports for Newcomers

- Receive system access and navigation support from multiple settlement organizations

"they [another settlement agency] guide me how to register my child to the school... find a job and also... for... studies..."
Gateway Client

Recommendations

Policy:

- Shift to stable, sector wide coordinated, core funding
- Assess outcomes vs outputs
- Simplify reporting requirements

Practice:

- Create space and hold value for the (in)visible work of front-line staff
- Allow staff and clients to guide service delivery models
- Reclaim community-oriented services

Research:

- Explore community led settlement systems (national and international)
- Investigate trust rebuilding strategies for staff and clients impacted by neoliberal employment practices and service strategies

Conclusions

Valuing cultural knowledge and skills (Liu & Guo, 2023)

- Digitized systems can’t replace reflective practice, relational connections, creative problem solving, and practice-based expertise.

Frontline acts of resistance take place to preserve service quality (Parada et al. 2020)

- Staff led client-centered approaches persevere regardless of system support.

Calgary's settlement sector has been siloed, hindering service coordination (Phillips & Merlin, 2024)

- Full sector settlement service coordination for Calgary continues to be a work in progress.



References:

Atanackovic, J. (2014). The migration, working, living, and integration experiences of immigrant live-in caregivers in Ontario, Canada. [Doctoral Dissertation, McMaster University]. <http://hdl.handle.net/11375/16418>

Burstein, M., & Esses, V. M. (2012). Study of innovative and promising practices within the immigrant settlement sector. In Study of innovative and promising practices within the immigrant settlement sector. Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance.

Campana, M. (2019, August 26). Newcomers accessing services- The report behind the stats. Knowledge mobilization for settlement.<https://km4s.ca/2019/08/newcomers-accessing-services-the-reports-behind-the-stats/>

De Vault, M. (2013). Institutional Ethnography: A Feminist Sociology of Institutional Power. Contemporary Sociology, 42(3), 332–340. DOI: 10.1177/0094306113484700a

Ghebretacle, T. (2024). Digital transformation of the settlement sector: Findings from the 2023 settlement outcomes report. Pathways to Prosperity Canada. http://p2pcanada.ca/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2024/05/Terhas_Ghebretacle_Presentation.pdf

Government of Canada (2023). Notice – Supplementary information for the 2024-2026 Immigration Levels Plan. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2024-2026.html>

Government of Canada. (2024). Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada’s 2024–25 Departmental Plan at a glance. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/departmental-plans/departmental-plan-2024-2025/departmental-plan-2024-2025-glance.html>

Kaushik, V., & Drolet, J. (2018). Settlement and Integration Needs of Skilled Immigrants in Canada. DOI: 10.3390/socsci7050076

Kaushik, V., Gill, M., Pannenbecker, K., Asante, B. (2024). Navigating Integration Challenges In Canada’s Immigration Sector: Insights For Practitioners. Newcomer Research In Action, 01 (01), 3-8.

Liu, J., & Guo, S. (2024). Constructing workplace subjectivity: exploring workplace learning of immigrant settlement workers in Canada. Studies in continuing education, 46(2), 213–229. DOI: 10.1080/0158037X.2023.2222584

Loucif, S., Christine-Fletcher, C., Gill, M., Kennedy, C. (2024). From Counselling To Planning: Supporting Newcomers To Achieve Their Goals. Newcomer research in action, 01 (01), 14-17.

Parada, H., Limón Bravo, F., Loewen, R., & El-Lahib, Y. (2021). Exploring the practices of refugee settlement practitioners in Toronto: An institutional ethnography. Journal of immigrant & refugee studies, 19(4), 422–435. DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2020.1824053

Phillips, S. & Merlin, A. (2024). Practitioner view: The value of collaboration in the newcomer-serving sector: The CEO’s perspective. Newcomer Research In Action, 01 (01), 9-13.

Megan.Gill1@ucalgary.ca
Ajwang.Warria@ucalgary.ca