Rebuilding Professional Lives: Immigrant Professionals Working in the Ontario Settlement Sector[*]

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This study looks at the reality of a particular group of foreign-born and -trained professionals in Ontario. These are the professionals who did not get to practise their respective professions after immigration but acquired a new profession in the form of settlement work. The study detects their pre-immigration education and work history, the reasons they left their countries of origin or permanent residence for Canada, the expectations they had, the choices they made about pursuing professional practice, the efforts they put towards that or some alternative goal, and their eventual professional reconstitution as settlement workers.

Following the Canadian trajectory of these dual professionals has three contributions to research into immigrant access to professions. First, their individual experiences reveal the social processes of inclusion in and exclusion from professional practice. Second, unlike those immigrants who are de-professionalized in the post-immigration period, our target population reinvent themselves as practitioners of a new profession – if not their primary professions – and thus provide a more nuanced immigrant experience. Third, their common practice as settlement workers gives us insight into the dynamics of an emerging profession that is settlement work. In all three aspects, our study can be seen as a special, immigrant-centred exercise in the sociology of professions.

Choices within Constraints

One area existing research has paid scant attention to are the choices that foreign-trained individuals make – and the strategies they use – under the given circumstances of receiving societies. Not all of these individuals would try to pursue professional practice in their original fields. If they try and fail to do so, what are the options available to them and how do they choose one option over the other? There is also fluidity between the options.

Three options await the foreign-trained when they do not get to practise their destined professions: *exit, de-professionalization, and professional rebuilding.* We define the exit option as one of withdrawal from the territory of contestation. If they are not refugees, immigrants may return to their countries of origin or move to a third country for professional pursuit. Especially in its move-to-a third-country variety, this is an option which has been used by many health professionals in Canada. De-professionalization may be considered an exit option, too, since it signifies departure from the professional field. However, we will classify it as a separate option because it is uniquely involuntary. Referring to a process defined by unemployment or work which does not require any professional skills set, de-professionalization is unfortunately an all-too-common experience among the foreign-trained. The third option, professional rebuilding or re-professionalization, is the "next best thing" to practice in the primary profession. In this scenario, an immigrant professional acquires a new profession which may or may not be related to his/her original field.

Individuals may and do choose the third option for a variety of reasons. They may just lose interest in their original fields and take another professional route. It may also be possible that, after calculating the cost of getting back to their fields, they will decide that it is not worth trying and thus opt for another profession which is less costly to pursue. The same conclusion may also be reached after failed attempts. It is quite conceivable that some people will see and practise the "second profession" as an interim solution or springboard to the original one. Conversely, they may use it as a strategy to avoid complete de-professionalization. They may even justify it as a continuation of their original practice. In any case, while it is socially bounded, professional rebuilding includes an element of "rational choice."

The employment of immigrants with various occupational backgrounds in the settlement sector is illustrative of both micro and macro processes which are at work in the field of professions. In addition to making a decision to pursue settlement work as a second profession, these immigrants are also engaged in identity maintenance or reconstruction. For them, one of the building blocks of self is identifying with a profession and a professional community. That identification has come to define who they are and where they are located in relation to others. However, the immigration process disrupts the continuity. Facing the prospect of identity loss and its possible

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destructive consequences, they turn to other avenues to find meaning again in their work lives. This is where the settlement sector emerges as a credible and familiar alternative because many of them have already been there, seeking help for their settlement and employment needs.

Immigrant employment in the settlement sector also reveals macro processes such as convergence of individual trajectories and professionalization of a line of work. By convergence of individual trajectories, we mean the process whereby people of vastly different professional backgrounds end up in the same but less prestigious profession. This brings back the whole issue of social closure on account of immigrant status, race, and sex but also calls for a focus on public policy choices in relation to immigration and settlement. As an emerging sector, the settlement sector lacks professional and organizational standards at the provincial level, let alone the national level. This allows a certain degree of permeability for immigrants to access settlement work. It is no coincidence that, regardless of their previous lines of work, immigrants came to the settlement sector "in droves." As the professionalization of settlement work deepens, however, we may expect a less permeable profession with, among other things, clear boundaries, entry rules, and performance measures.

Research Methodology

Conducted in collaboration with the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, this study is based on an online survey and in-depth interviews. The target population for the online survey were the professionals working in the Ontario settlement sector who are trained abroad in areas other than settlement work. From August to November 2009, a total of 228 responses were received to the questionnaire. Seventy-three of these were excluded from the analysis for various reasons. The instability of the evolving internet medium and the particular focus of the study account for the relatively high rate of exclusion. As a result, only 155 responses were included in the analysis.

Our sample is not random and thus has no claim to representativeness. We do not know the size and composition of the foreign-born population in Ontario's settlement sector workforce, which would be necessary to attempt at random sampling. Based on anecdotal evidence, we can only suggest that the foreign-born settlement workforce is a much larger population than the respondents to this survey.

From October 2009 to March 2010, we also had face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 19 of those respondents to the online questionnaire who expressed interest in an interview and who gave their contact information. The interviewees were selected in consideration of representation from both sexes, regions of origin, primary professions, and settlement work positions. As well, we interviewed six settlement agency representatives who are in a position of authority to make hiring decisions.

In the rest of this article, we present a summary of the findings mainly from the online survey.

A Summary of Findings

Demographic Profile

Like broader social services, immigrant and refugee settlement services are a female-dominated sector. Women constituted 79 percent – and men only 21 percent – of the 155 respondents to the survey. Our respondents are also a relatively young group with 58 percent being under the age of 45. Another 32 percent are in the 45-54 age group. Four-fifths of the sample come from non-traditional source regions – a ratio which is coincidentally similar to that of Canada's permanent resident intake in recent years from these regions.

Three quarters of the respondents belong to racial minority groups. Again, this ratio parallels recent trends in Canadian immigration. The sample represents all major religious groups but does not necessarily do so proportionally. It is also noteworthy that over 10 percent reported no religious affiliation.

Pre-Immigration Education and Work History

Eighty-eight percent of the respondents have a Bachelor's or higher degree: 43%, Bachelor's; 35%, Master's; and 10%, doctorate (including degree in medicine, dentistry, and veterinary medicine). The respondents show a great variation in field of education. The top 10 fields of education are presented in Table 1:

Table1. Top 10 Fields of Education

Field of Education	*Number (%)*
Business Administration and Management	21 (13.55)
Education	18 (11.61)
Arts, Language, and Literature	17 (10.97)
Science	14 (09.03)
Law	11 (07.10)
Engineering	9 (05.81)
Social Science	8 (05.16)
Social Work	8 (05.16)
Journalism and Communication	7 (04.52)
Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Medicine	6 (03.87)

Three quarters of the respondents earned their highest educational degrees in the country of origin and a further 17 percent, in a third country. Given the age composition of the sample, only 10 percent earned their highest educational degrees before 1980 and a great majority (71%), in the 20-year span from 1985 to 2004.

Four-fifths of the respondents reported having work experience in their fields of education before they had come to Canada. For this group, we asked in what capacity they worked. The responses vary widely but all indicate core professional responsibilities. A majority (55%) practised their professions before coming to Canada for a period of six to 15 years.

Immigration to Canada

A great majority (86%) of the respondents are relatively recent immigrants arriving in Canada since 1995. An even greater proportion (92%) arrived directly in Ontario. Forty-five percent reported coming under the economic class; 26 percent, under the family class; 15 percent, as protected persons; and 11 percent, under other categories. For those who came under a category other than economic and family classes (44 respondents in all), we also asked if they made a refugee claim in Canada. The group is split down the middle: 22 claimed refugee status, 21 did not, and one declined to answer. Sixty-four percent of the respondents have Canadian citizenship. We can infer that most of the remaining 36 percent were permanent residents at the time of the survey.

Pursuing Professional Practice in Canada

In the context of the core interests of the study, we asked the respondents if they actually came to Canada with the expectation to practise the professions that they were qualified for. Seventy percent had the expectation and 30 percent did not. When asked what led them to expect professional practice in Canada, the respondents answered in the way that reveals the contradictions of Canadian immigration policy and practices. Forty-four percent mentioned their educational and professional assets, 12 percent linguistic assets, and eight percent personal characteristics such as diligence and dedication to the profession. Thus, 64 percent emphasized individual, asset-based traits. Twenty-one percent were encouraged by systemic or situational factors such as the points system, Canadian equivalency of education and degree, and shortage of professionals in the field. Nearly one quarter of the respondents were led to believe by what we categorize as information agents, including Canadian officials in overseas visa offices, immigration consultants, and print and electronic media in countries of origin. For 14 percent, Canada's reputation as a land of opportunities was the source of optimism about professional prospects.[1]

It may be one thing to expect professional practice and quite another to actually do something about it. However, when asked if they actively tried to get back into professional practice once in Canada, the respondents answered in the positive at a level (72%) slightly higher than that of expectation.

Before probing types of active search, we asked those who were not involved in active search why they were not. More than half of the responses (32 of 60) concern individual, asset-related reasons (loss or change of interest;

[1] Because of the multiple responses, percentages exceed 100 in this and several other distributions to follow.

pursuance of further education; lack of English and accent in English; lack of information, network, and other support; personal or family need to survive; and lack of professional experience) and the rest, systemic and situational reasons (difference in professional system, registration/employment difficulties, and discrimination and other barriers). The latter group can be considered the responses of those who were discouraged by factors external to them.

The types of active search tried by the majority of the respondents were searching for a job (96%), seeking help from institutions and individuals (92%), taking job search workshops (71%), volunteering (65%), and taking courses to upgrade skills (56%).

Those who sought help from institutions and individuals were given a number of choices to mark. The majority of the respondents sought help from settlement service agencies (70%), individuals practising (or trying to practise) one's profession (59%), and employers in the profession (58%).

Forty-seven of the 106 respondents searching for a job related to their professions were successful. When asked about their post-immigration job titles in the professional field, 12 of the 47 respondents mentioned titles which are directly related to settlement work. These respondents form part of a larger group who see in settlement work a connection to their primary professions on account of their education and work in the pre-immigration period. It is no coincidence that, when asked why they left their post-immigration jobs in the professional field, a large number (19) responded in the negative to say that they still keep their jobs. This is yet another indication of a group who relate settlement work to the line of work they had prior to immigration.

We were curious to hear from those who were involved in some type of active search for, but could not achieve, professional practice in Canada. We thus asked them what they thought prevented them from getting back to professional practice particularly in Ontario. Fifty-two of the 78 possible responses put the blame squarely on systemic and situational factors (professional registration process, Canadian experience requirement, institutional/systemic barriers, and various forms of discrimination) while 19 responses held the individual and the family/community accountable (lack of preparedness, resources, and support).

It was also important to know what other types of jobs our respondents had in the Canadian labour market before turning to settlement work. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents said yes and 29 percent, no to the question "Did you have any job(s) in Canada not related to your qualification before your employment in the settlement sector?" When we look at where the former worked, we see a concentration in the low end of the service sector. Forty-three respondents mentioned sales, marketing, and customer services; 20 respondents, what is generally called the hospitality industry; and 13 respondents, janitorial, maintenance, and housekeeping services. Thus, 76 respondents worked in the most exposed segments of the service sector at some point in their Canadian labour market participation. Another 12 toiled in goods processing and circulation.

This picture becomes even clearer when the nature of the jobs is factored in. Seventy-seven of the respondents held "survival jobs" as sales/service assistants, representatives, or associates (51) and as manual workers (26). Only 15 of the respondents had jobs with administrative, coordinating, supervisory, or managerial content.

Yet it is also important to note that the majority of the respondents stayed in the non-professional and non-settlement field for a relatively short period of time, three years or less. This is testimony to their success in getting out of the cycle of "survival jobs" and in eventually reinventing themselves as professionals in the settlement sector.

When asked why they left these jobs, the respondents overwhelmingly cited dissatisfaction with job content and a desire to practise their primary professions or a new profession such as settlement work. Only 23 respondents left such jobs out of necessity (business downsizing or closure, end of contract, and insufficient pay or hours).

Shifting to Settlement Work

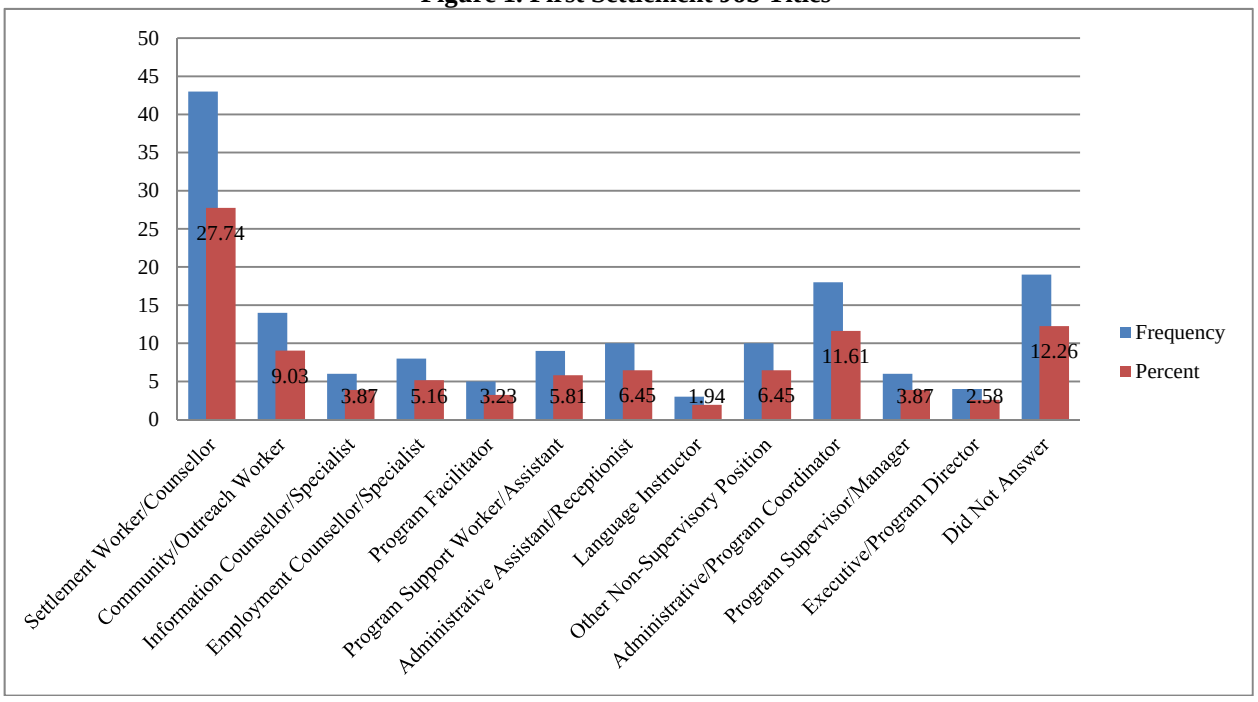
For 35 percent of the respondents, the single most important reason for contacting a settlement agency for the first time in Ontario or another province was – ironically – to seek help for employment in the primary profession. This was followed by volunteering (18%), looking for work at the agency (15%), and seeking help for initial settlement needs (15%).

Forty-seven percent of the respondents had their first settlement job in the same agency which they contacted for the first time in the settlement sector. In giving their reasons for seeking employment in the settlement sector, the respondents placed heavy emphasis on altruism as well as on continuity with pre-immigration professional activity. Fifty-two mentioned that they wanted to help newcomers by using, among other things, their personal experiences in coming to and settling in Canada. Similarly, 12 respondents wanted to give back to the ethno-cultural or broader community. Another group, comparable in size to the one emphasizing altruism, made a connection between settlement work and main line of work in the country of origin: Thirty-two reported having either education, experience, or interest in the settlement sector while 30 saw their primary professions as relevant to settlement work. Only 20 respondents sought employment in the sector out of necessity.

In parallel to their young demographic profile and recent immigrant status, the respondents are relative newcomers to the settlement sector as employees. Seventy-four percent began working in the sector in 2000 or later and 54 percent, in 2005 or later.

Expectedly, in their first sectoral employment, a large majority (70%) of the respondents had a non-supervisory, "frontline" position such as settlement worker/counsellor, community/outreach worker, administrative assistant/receptionist, program support worker/assistant, and employment counsellor/specialist. As can be seen in Figure 1, only 18 percent held a position which entailed coordinating, supervisory, managerial, or directorial responsibilities:

Figure 1. First Settlement Job Titles



When asked if they still held the same position, 39 percent responded in the positive (no change in job title) and 47 percent in the negative (change in job title), which indicates a considerable degree of positional mobility. When we look at the current settlement job titles of those who experienced positional mobility, we can see a clear shift towards positions involving coordination, supervision, management, or direction. The number of respondents holding such positions is 37, which is almost equal to the number of respondents still holding non-supervisory positions (38).

An interesting question for us was whether those who experienced positional mobility also experienced organizational mobility, that is, changed employer in the sector. Of the 91 respondents the question applied to, 38 stayed with the same employer, 31 had a different employer, and 22 did not answer.

Another interesting finding related to professional development is that two-thirds (or 104) of the respondents have received some form of professional training since joining the sectoral labour force. This may speak well of the future of the Ontario settlement sector.

In order to gauge the respondents' satisfaction with settlement work, we asked them if they had ever wished to go back to practice in primary profession since joining the sector. The sample is split right down the middle: 58 said "yes," 58 said "no," and as many as 39 did not answer – which can also be taken as a sign of vacillation. When we asked this question by adding the proviso "given the opportunity," the number of those who wished to go back to primary professional practice increased only slightly, to 64, with no change in the number of respondents choosing not to answer.

Concluding Remarks

Based on a series of cross-tabulations, we have found pre-immigration work experience in the field of education as the single most significant factor in post-immigration pursuit and practice of the primary profession as well as in longing for it. This has important implications for immigrant access to professions and for immigrant selection policy.

Respondents still have the primary profession in the back of their minds when they do settlement work. In their work with and for newcomers, they find a connection in different forms and varying degrees to their primary professions. By establishing this connection, they make sense of the multitude of investments that they have made for and in their previous careers.

As for settlement work per se, a preliminary analysis of responses to open-ended survey questions and in-person interviews reveals that respondents place heavy emphasis on the personal, inner satisfaction they get from, and the social obligation they feel towards, settlement work. For many, settlement work is a "calling." This bodes well for the professionalization of settlement work since vocational dedication is one of the hallmarks of any profession.