

Exploring Early Cultural and Economic Adaptation Process of the Newcomers in Michener Park, Edmonton, Alberta

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During the summer of 2013, Mr. Ali served as the Edmonton Social Planning Council's Social Justice Intern. Our Social Justice Internship is a volunteer program which provides students at an Albertan post-secondary education institution the opportunity to complete a research project on a local social issue. This initiative was supported by Volunteer Alberta's Serving Communities Internship Program (SCIP). The following report is the result of his work in this position.

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Abstract: *Using ethnographic data, this study reports on the early sociocultural and economic experiences of the Bangladesh immigrant and non-immigrant families living in the Michener Park area in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Research findings show that newcomers experienced a wide range of social and economic constraints during their initial stage of sociocultural and economic adaptation to life in Edmonton. Lack of English language proficiency, Canadian job experience, or lack of Canadian education and training facilities, and nature of residency status in Canada led these newcomers to experience economic hardship in the earliest months of their new life in Canada. The aim of this research, therefore, was to examine: (a) why do these people come to Canada and what social and economic experiences have they had while living in Edmonton? (b) What barriers do they encounter that prevent them from obtaining their preferred job, how does this affect their household income and how do they manage to survive? This paper summarizes the responses of the newcomers who agreed to participate in this research project. The paper concludes with policy recommendations made by participants that could help newcomers overcome existing job barriers for the immigrant and non-immigrant families living in Edmonton.*

Key Words: Economic hardship, Newcomers, job barriers, language proficiency, job experiences, references

Introduction

Since the late 1950's, Canada has been one of the most desirable places to live. Consequently, people from around the world have chosen to immigrate to Canada. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) tends to select immigrants from countries who have a higher education and recognized skills. These individuals come to Canada with a range of expectations and dreams of a better life for themselves and their children. However, most newcomers find it difficult to survive because of multifaceted social, cultural and economic barriers to success that they experience when they arrive in Canada. Past research has shown that while the average education level of immigrants is higher than that of Canadian-born citizens, many immigrants struggle to find employment in their desired job sector (Richmond and Verma, 1978; Simich et. al., 2006). Country of origin, language, ethnic identity, social networks and educational or job experiences all influence the job prospects of newcomers. Despite having a post-secondary education, many newcomers struggle to obtain employment in their field of work, causing them to experience social, psychological and economic suffering.

Using both quantitative and qualitative data from a psychological analysis of the post-migration situation of Sudanese newcomers to Canada, Simich et. al. (2006) found that these immigrants were suffering from multiple forms of psychological stress, largely resulting from inappropriate and entry-level forms of employment. Social and psychological stress and economic hardships that newcomers faced were directly linked to their lack of employment and the low-paying survival jobs they needed to survive. Researchers also shows that like other newcomers, Sudanese newcomers encountered systematic barriers while searching for employment despite the fact that they had a higher education (Simich et al 2006:438).

Using survey data collected from Turkish immigrants who have settled in Montreal, Aycan and Berry (1996) argue that the psychological impact of unemployment on a population is enormous. This has been well-researched among the general population in Canada, but few studies draw comparisons between the psychological experiences faced

by those born in Canada and the immigrant population. Aycan and Berry (1996) found that the newcomers they studied encountered a number of challenges while attempting to find meaningful employment in their line of work. Barriers included poor language skills, little if any Canadian working experience, and the fact that their academic credentials are not being recognized in this country. In addition to psychological stress, limited employment opportunities and their inability to fully integrate into the Canadian labor force may also lead these new immigrants to experience challenges adapting to the mainstream way of life in their new country. However, the authors conclude that while these immigrants could overcome employment barriers such as poor language skills, and a lack of vocational training or job experience, job discrimination in higher levels of employment continue to exist between immigrants and Canadian-born citizens (Aycan and Berry, 1996).

While these findings are useful for understanding why new immigrants face challenges as they attempt to enter the labour force and the economic, social and psychological stress that they encounter as a result, there is no study that focuses on how newcomers, both immigrants and non-immigrants, in Edmonton, Alberta experience sociocultural and economic problems in the earliest period of adaptation to their new country.

To address this gap in the literature, this study focuses on immigrants and non-immigrant families living in Michener Park, which is the University of Alberta family students housing area. The key objective of this project is to explore the experiences of these students and their families' early cultural and economic adaptation. It is observed that these newcomers, including the international students and their non-student spouses, and immigrants and their family members often face challenges in many respects.

My research finding shows that newcomers might have difficulty finding employment because they lack Canadian work experience, work references, and an established network of family and friends that can help them find employment in their field of work. It takes time to build rapport or relationships with neighbors in this complex and impersonal urban society. The origin of the country, race, culture, language, ethnicity, and the proximity of academic background of the people determine the possibility of mutual cooperation, reciprocity, and support between individuals and families.

This research shows that people come to Canada with high expectations, but their bright dream begins to fade away when they fail to fulfill their basic economic needs. A lack of English language proficiency, Canadian job experience, Canadian education and training, and the nature of residency status in Canada lead these newcomers to experience significant economic uncertainty. In turn, economic hardship and silent poverty causes them to experience social and psychological stress. The aim of this research paper, therefore, is to examine: (a) why do people migrate to Canada and what social and economic experiences did they have after moving to Edmonton? (b) What barriers prevent them from obtaining employment in their desired field of work, how does this affect their household income and how do they manage to survive in Canada?

This paper has been divided into several sub-sections. The first section describes the community being researched, research methodology and the data analysis process for this project. This is followed by a summary of the major themes that arose from the discussions with participants and the project's key findings. Finally, the paper concludes

by recommending policies to address existing job barriers that immigrant and non-immigrant families living in Edmonton experience.

Terminology

Please note that I will use the term ‘immigrant’ to refer to research participants that are permanent residents in Canada. In this paper, I will use the terms ‘immigrant’ and ‘permanent resident’ interchangeably. The term ‘non-immigrants’ will be used to refer to people who migrated to Canada as temporary residents, including students, workers and visitors.

Research Community and Methodology

This study was conducted among Bangladeshi immigrant and non-immigrant community members living in the Michener Park area of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. People from more than 50 nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures are represented in this area. It is a well-developed residential community of the University of Alberta, which is located within a short distance from the university’s campus. The Bangladeshi community is one of the largest communities in Michener Park, consisting of more than 30 non-immigrant and immigrant families.

I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with participants, which is a standard anthropological data collection technique. An interview guide was used to conduct the interviews, which were recorded using a digital voice recorder. A purposeful sampling method (snowball or chain-referral sampling) was used to both select the research participants and to collect evidence to answer my research questions. A total of 8 research participants (five families, or households) were selected using this sampling method. The research group consisted of three immigrant families and two non-immigrant families (i.e. students and their spouses). The amount of time the participants have lived in Canada ranges from one year to four years.

The decision to research this particular community was influenced by my accessibility to research participants, their language, and the number of immigrant and non-immigrant families in the community. Pseudonyms were used in order to preserve the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants.

Data Analysis

While the data collection process took place, I translated and transcribed these interviews into English captured with a digital voice recorder in research participants’ spoken language, Bangla. This data, which included field notes (or observations that I recorded while conducting each interview), were transcribed daily and saved to my personal computer. I used the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti 6.2 to define codes, themes, and models to analyze the data (Brett, 2006: 9). Then, I used a code manager to derive all the quotations for selected code(s), which provided list names and references for each quotation and detailed quotations in the program’s quotation filter. Finally, the data was reviewed and key themes from the research were identified. The following section presents the key findings and data analysis.

Socioeconomic Status and Educational Level of the Household Members

Three of the five household heads came to Canada as students or as temporary residents (After arriving, one of these families received permanent resident status). The other two families came directly to Canada as landed immigrants (i.e. permanent residents). Initially, the spouses of the non-immigrants families acquired visitor visas and later they obtained work permits. All the research participants hailed from a strong social and economic background and possessed a high socioeconomic status in their home country. This is because both husbands and wives held positions in universities, police departments and multinational corporations in Bangladesh. Table 1 shows the socioeconomic and educational level of the participant households' members.

Table 1: Socioeconomic Status and Educational Level of the Participant Households' Members in their Home Country (Number of participants according to education and employment status)

Education Level	Previous occupation (back home)				Gender		Total number of household members
	Teaching state-run universities	Employment in formal sector	Self-employment	House -wife	Male	Female	
Master degree	3	4	1		5	3	8
Bachelor degree		1		1		2	2
							10

While conducting this research, it was discovered that six of the ten participants were enrolled in post-secondary education programs at different levels, such as doctoral study, English as Second Language (ESL), and vocational training in university and in other post-secondary education institutions in Edmonton. Three participants were employed, while only one of the participants was neither employed nor attending school. While the doctoral students are not so concerned with their future employment status, the other research participants were dissatisfied with their current employment and job prospects. These research participants felt that they had to take on lower-level employment positions in Canada than what they had in Bangladesh. During the interviews, the participants stated there is a significant difference between their career expectations in Canada and their present economic situation. Failing to obtain their desired job and government benefits that they need to obtain employment (e.g. provincial childcare subsidy) made them quite unhappy. However, people's experiences of employment, education, training and other economic opportunities vary and are dependent on the residential status of the individual. I will focus on these issues in the later part of this section. Now I will briefly describe why these immigrants came to Canada from Bangladesh.

Reasons for Coming to Canada

Research findings show that both the immigrants and non-immigrants came to Canada in order to have a better life, or to obtain a higher education and credentials in Canada. Obtaining a higher education and permanent residency status in Canada was the first priority for the student participants. The immigrant families emphasized that they wanted a better social and economic life in Canada for both themselves and their children. When

determining where they wanted to settle, this decision was influenced by the educational, health and economic opportunities available in Canada, especially Alberta. The male participants made the decision for their families to move to Canada; their spouses (wives) followed their husbands. The following two narratives explain the reasons behind their decision to immigrate to Canada:

I came to Canada with my daughter in March 2012. My husband came just one year before us. He was doing [his] PhD here at the University of Alberta. It was difficult [for both of us] to live alone. So, I came to Canada to live with my husband and my daughter together. I had been serving in [a] government office for the past several years. So, I had to take [a] study leave in order to come here. I [was] admitted to a management certificate course under the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta. So, I have been able to come here on study permit and my daughter on visitor visa from Bangladesh... My husband is an assistant professor at the University of Dhaka and I have a good position at the Police Department in Bangladesh. However, we may apply for permanent residency if we like [living here,] especially because the living environment, and education facility for children seems better here [Bina, interview 6, May 25, 2013].

I came to Canada to do my doctoral degree. I came here in September 2009. I came to Edmonton directly from Bangladesh. I am a teacher at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). [My area of expertise is] chemical engineering. In order to get further promotion in my position I must complete my doctoral study. I cannot be a full professor unless I have a PhD. There were some other reasons to choose Canada. I had also an offer from an USA university to do my PhD. But I was informed by my friends that [my] spouse can [find a job more easily] in Canada than in the USA. So, I decided to come to Canada with my family. Secondly, it is easy to become [a] permanent resident in Canada, which is really difficult in the USA. It takes [a] long time. Moreover, Canada provides better educational facilities for both immigrant and students' children. Access to health care [facilities are] also better here [Ryan, interview 4, May 16, 2013].

The first narrative implies that this woman moved to Canada because her husband was living in Edmonton. She came here on a study permit by taking a study leave from a government job in Bangladesh. She likes to stay here in Canada because she finds the living situation and educational facilities are better here than back home.

The second narrative indicates that this man came to Canada mainly for two purposes: studying and getting permanent residency status in Canada. According to this research participant, better educational [facilities] for his children in this country was also an influential factor in their decision to choose Canada as a long-term destination. However, both the immigrant and non-immigrant families do have different social and economic experiences in their earlier period of life in Edmonton. Both of these research participants are non-immigrants because they came to Canada on a study visa or a temporary resident visa. Similarly, all the immigrant families said that they came to Canada to lead a better social and economic life, to give their children a better education and a safe environment to live in. However, this study shows that both the immigrant and non-immigrant families face some social and economic challenges as they try to adapt to life in Edmonton.

Now I will focus on the participants' sociocultural and economic adaptation to life in Canada.

Presentation of the Research Findings: Sociocultural and Economic Adaptation in the Earliest Period of Living in Edmonton

A. Lack of Language Proficiency as a Barrier of Sociocultural Adaptation

Newcomers' social and cultural adaption process in a new place is influenced by various factors. Geographic region, ethno cultural identity, language, food practices, religious or societal values may prevent a group of people from immersing themselves in another culture. Using quantitative data collected from 100 Turkish immigrant married couples in Toronto, Bilge and Berry (2002) show that psychological, sociocultural and marital adaptation to Canadian culture depends on multiple factors such as language proficiency, cultural distance (e.g. religious, food or family values), social support (e.g. social network), contact with the mainstream Canadian society, or the acculturation attitudes of the immigrants. Bilge and Berry (2002) show that immigrants, irrespective of gender identities, do have better psychological and sociocultural adaptive capacity if they have a strong English language proficiency, regular contact with the wider society- mainly through economic and social interactions- than those who do not. This research finding is also consistent with the results of my research, which shows that most of the Bangladeshi immigrant and non-immigrants encounter challenges to adapt to the mainstream Canadian society mainly because of language barriers, a different ethnic and religious identity, food practices and different familial and societal values.

Now I will present the key finding regarding people's experience of social and cultural adaptation, especially how they encountered problems interacting with the English-speaking people in Edmonton.

I didn't face any problems in interacting with my neighbors because they are mainly from my own community and we speak in the same language, Bangla. But when I had to talk to local people sometimes I couldn't understand them especially because of their different accent. Initially, I couldn't understand the oral language especially some short terms, words or phrases. For example, if I ask a question, they would answer like this: "no, I am good." By this response, I couldn't understand if she/he wants it or not. I couldn't understand what this means. In our country, we used to ask someone "how are you?" and the response was like: "I am fine." Here the response is: "I am good." Moreover, the same response may also be used if I offer something or I want to help other people. So, there is difference of greeting people. In this sense, there was [a] little bit [of a] language problem for me in the initial stage of my living in Canada. It takes time to adjust with this situation [Bina, interview 6, May 25, 2013].

This narrative shows that newcomers have difficulty interacting with the English-speaking people from the area because of their lack of proficiency, deeper knowledge, or familiarity with the context and the use of the English language. However, they can overcome this language barrier to some extent as they spend more time communicating with other local native English speakers. Similarly, another research participant explains his experience with language barriers in the following way:

As English is my second language; it was usual that I also faced problems in communicating in English when I first came here. Sometimes the Canadian people use local language, which I couldn't understand easily, or sometimes people speak so fast. Sometimes it happened that I answered without understanding fully. Sometimes I [was] confused with

the local people's use of the word 'sir'. In our culture, we use this word to address our teacher, professor or someone having a very respectable position. But here 'sir' is used to address almost everybody, known or unknown. Interestingly, here professors are called by their last or first name, which is quite different from our own culture. So, I couldn't call my professor by his name because in back home we were used to address our professors by 'sir'. Sometimes I also felt uneasy or uncomfortable in communicating with people by telephone. Even it was difficult for me to understand in face-to-face interaction, so it was more difficult to [participate in a] telephone conversation. It happened that I had to request the people on the other side of phone to repeat something if I couldn't understand [the] first or second time [Ryan, interview 4, May 16, 2013].

This statement suggests that newcomers face problems in communicating with the English-speaking people here because of colloquialisms that they use while communicating in English, their unique accent, cultural norms, values, and the context of the use of certain greetings or salutations. The way in which Canadian-born citizens communicate with others is much different than how they communicate in their home country. So, sometimes people may respond to others without fully understanding, or only partially understanding what the other person is saying to them. This does more harm than good for the newcomers because other people may end up having a negative impression of them, which may have a detrimental impact on their social and economic life. For example, one of the immigrant families faced a serious problem when communicating with the immigration office here in Edmonton in English regarding the status of their permanent resident cards.

When I first came to Edmonton in June 2010, I had a great problem [getting] our permanent resident cards (PR). When we completed our immigration formalities at the Edmonton International Airport after landing, the immigration officer told us that we should receive our PR cards within 4-6 weeks. Unfortunately, we didn't receive our PR cards even after three months. I contacted [the] immigration office, but they said that there was nothing about us in their system [record]. Then, my wife, kid and I went to Service Canada, downtown Edmonton, to reapply for our PR cards. We got my wife and daughter's PR cards, but not mine because it was sent to a wrong address. It created a lot of suffering for us. I faced a challenge in communicating in English language with the official of the immigration office especially [on the] telephone. Sometimes I could not catch or understand them and they could not understand what I said. We had a plan to get back to Bangladesh within a few months, but due to the delay of getting our PR cards forced us to pay more than one thousand dollars to change our air tickets [Habib, interview 1, April 21, 2013].

According to this statement from the research participant, a poor understanding of the English language led him to experience a lot of stress and social, psychological and economic barriers. Failing to communicate with the immigration office in English results in delaying the process of receiving their permanent resident cards, which creates social and psychological stress. Without their PR cards, this family had difficulty obtaining their social insurance numbers and Alberta Health cards. Moreover, this family planned to travel back home after receiving their PR cards, but the delay to receive them forced the family to spend extra money to change their air tickets. These things happened simply because of their poor knowledge of the English language.

In addition to language barriers, poor self-confidence and physical health may prevent them from interacting with other community members. It may also affect people's ability

to expand their social network within the community. A female research participant describes her experience when she first began to live in Michener Park in Edmonton.

I didn't feel good when I came here in 2009. Mainly I was physically sick [pregnant]. I didn't like anything. Secondly, I had little chance to go outside [because I was unfamiliar with my new home and because I was pregnant]. Language was really a big matter then. I was not so good at [communicating in the] English language. So, it was a little bit problematic for me to interact with other community member[s]. Sometimes it happened that I could understand what other community members [who speak in English and live in Michener Park] said, but I couldn't express my feelings accordingly. I couldn't respond in English fluently. I had to pass early few months by using "yes" and "no" (laughing!!!). I could understand what other people did say, but couldn't respond accordingly/couldn't speak well. But now I feel good because I can go outside. I have [a] circle [of friends] and I often interact with them. My children can play with other kids outside. Moreover, I am physically sound now [Syma, interview 5, May 16, 2013].

Therefore, language was the main barrier for both the immigrants and non-immigrants to interacting with English-speaking residents of Edmonton. Some gender specific factors such as the physiological condition of female members, and staying at home to take care of children or not working outside of the home may become a barrier for women who want to improve their English communication skills or expand their social and community networks, which could help them find employment in the future. Moreover, the local socio-cultural context of maintaining an impersonal relationship with their neighbors also discourage newcomers from approaching and interacting with their neighbors or other community members. Therefore, social interactions between such people are mainly confined to their own community, who speak their own language. The following ethnographic narratives illustrate this problem:

Our social interaction is just limited to our own Bangladeshi community. Back home, we were used to [interacting] with our neighbor very intimately. We had access to each other's family now and then. This is not possible here. We have access to our Bangladesh community or friends' family house, but not in the people of other communities. Sometimes we have some greeting outside. At best, we can talk with people standing in front of the door, but may not [be able to go inside their homes], as we were used to do[ing] in Bangladesh. Although there developed a good relationship with neighbors because our kids interact with our neighbors' kids, we are not used to going into each other house. So, family or social interactions with other communities is not intimate here. Yes, we can visit them only if my husband's colleague or my colleague invites us formally to their house [Bina, interview 6, May 25, 2013].

If I want to go to my neighbor's house I have to [notify them before I pay them a visit]. We hardly interact with the mainstream society here. Our social interaction is mainly with our own ethnic community [Bangladeshi]. Whether we have a get together or social occasion, we are used to [going] to a Bangladeshi community program, but I [choose not to] because I am living in a rented house and there is no guarantee that I will be here for [a] long time. Malmo Community League, for example, arranges a regular monthly social program for its community members. If I could go there I can establish rapport and [build] friendly relationships with some new people. So, my relationship to the mainstream society is limited to my work place/colleagues. There is no scope for me to build relationship outside of this [Zaman, interview 3, May 14, 2013].

In Bangladesh, we always [had an intimate relationship with our neighbors, but here is totally different. We don't know even who our neighbors [are]. But it is important to have a good relationship with the neighbors. As we live in the same place/community, we may need each other's help in [a] time of danger. Any of us may face a sudden crisis or difficulty; a trusted relationship might [be] a great asset during a time of need. Moreover, an intimate relationship with neighbors may [be an important source of] mental support. Maintaining a regular interaction with neighbors or other families in the community may mitigate mental depressions, or people's loneliness. We have come here leaving everything back home. We are living almost a lonely life. So, mental support is really [important] for us. If we get someone's support we may feel good, get encouraged or [feel inspired] that we can do something. We are new here. We don't know anybody [Mira, interview 2, April 21, 2013].

In summary, the newcomers' social and community interaction is limited to their own ethnic community. A number of factors such as different language, personal or professional relationships, ethnic identity, origin of country, local societal values for the interaction between families within a community determines how much a newcomer can interact with his or her neighbor. This type of community relationship may affect the newcomers both socially and economically because a lack of interactions becomes a barrier to expanding their social networks and communicating with people of various offices, or with the people in work places or schools to meet their every day. Consequently, this affects their social, personal and economic life. The inability to communicate with the employers or with important offices and people may prevent these people from accessing beneficial social and economic opportunities. Language proficiency and capacity to interact with people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds can help them build larger personal and social networks (i.e. building social capital). I will discuss this point further in the later part of this section with specific ethnographic details. Now I will briefly describe what economic hardship participants experienced in their earliest period of living in Edmonton and how they adapted to these challenges.

B. Early Economic Hardship and Coping Strategies of the Immigrants and Non-immigrants Families

Research findings show that all of the families who participated in this study suffered from economic hardship during their first several months of life in Canada. Some of these families experienced hardship for more than a year. Limited, or paltry and sometimes no income forced some families to reduce their budget on food, clothes and on other needs. Some families were forced to bring money from back home to manage their households. In this context, the economic sufferings and financial crisis were very severe for the non-immigrant families because they were not eligible for Canadian child tax benefits until they became a parent for 18 months in Canada. Though these parents tried to get a job, only a few of them were able to obtain employment within the first few months of arriving in Canada because of a lack of proper job references. However, most of them have been able to find work after several months of living in Edmonton. In this sub-section, I will reflect on people's economic experiences during their early period of living in Edmonton:

Initially, I [faced] a serious economic problem, since I had no work permit when I came here and I couldn't earn anything. We had to depend on my husband's income, which was not enough to meet our household needs. My husband is a PhD student and he received TA and

RA from the University of Alberta. The amount is insufficient (about \$1800 a month) to manage house rent and our other needs. I had to manage our household need with this limited budget. I had no driving license and no car. So, I also had to face difficulty in moving around here. Actually, it is very difficult to manage a family with the incomes of one person. Both husband and wife must earn [money] to meet the household need. So, I encountered a serious economic problem after coming here first [Bina, interview 6, May 25, 2013].

This is a non-immigrant family and the household head was the only income-earner for the first few months. Bina had to wait more than six months for her work permit. So, this family faced serious economic problems during their earliest stage of living in Edmonton. When I asked how they managed their household, Bina said:

I told you that my husband came one year before us and he had been able to save some money for us. We could manage our needs by this money for some time. But when this money had run out, we began to experience financial crisis and this severe economic hardship. After 6 month of my arrival here in Edmonton I got a work permit and I was compelled to [take] a job to manage our livelihood. Otherwise, it would have been very difficult for us to survive here. I was here on temporary resident visa [study permit] and so I had to bear the cost for my course. Overall, it was impossible for me to survive without getting a survival job [Bina, interview 6, May 25, 2013].

Similarly, another non-immigrant research participant described how their family faced economic challenge during the first months of living in Edmonton:

When I brought my family [here] I was not getting any childcare benefits for my kids, [two kids born in Bangladesh and the eldest one in Canada. Note that non-immigrant's family/children are not eligible for childcare benefits until 18 months of living in Canada]. It was not sufficient to manage my household's economic situation with whatever I used to get from [the] University of Alberta. I had to pay more than 50% of my total income for house rent. I had a four-member family. I was the only income earner and it was really difficult for me to meet our family needs. I faced difficulty [managing] our survival needs. You know, we are [a] low-income family and it is really difficult to manage the food cost with the left over money after paying the house rent. That is why we have to cut off our budget on food, clothes and other essentials. We can spend money on food to survive, but we cannot spend money on clothing and other needs, as we aspire to. We use the clothes here [that] we bring from [Bangladesh]. That is why we cannot adjust [to] the life style here. Even we cannot meet our children's needs. For example, my two kids are going to school and sometimes teachers ask us to give a special type of costume to [our children so they can] attend different programs/to celebrate special occasion/days at school (e.g. Halloween, Mother's Day, Thanksgiving Day). As we cannot buy these costumes our children cannot attend those programs. Even sometimes it happens that we are confined to home and we cannot attend social programs in our community, especially if we do not have good dresses. We cannot fulfill the requirements to attend those programs [if] we do not feel good participating with other people having these abilities. For example, sometimes we are invited from our children's school to attend various programs, but we cannot attend those. We cannot give gifts to our children on special days (e.g. Mother's Day, Father's Day) so that they can take them to school and to exchange with their classmates. It affects our children psychologically [Ryan, interview 4, May 16, 2013].

This statement vividly shows what economic hardship the non-immigrant families experienced during the first time in Edmonton. This family had two children who were not eligible for childcare /Canadian tax benefits during their first 18 months in Canada. Since this family was not eligible for childcare benefits, the wife couldn't look for work

to earn an income. What the household head could earn was not enough to meet all of their household needs. Although this family used to bring some money from back home to cover their household needs, it was not sufficient. So, they were forced to reduce spending on food, clothes, children's school supplies and many other daily necessities. Failing to meet the needs of their children increased their economic, social and psychological stress. Even the immigrant families faced economic challenges, though many of them brought money to Canada from back home. In order to manage their household they had to take survival jobs. However, while doing the survival jobs to manage their household needs, they also faced other problems that prevented them from finding jobs in their desired field of work. The following statement from one of the immigrant participants describes this dire situation that they face:

No doubt, our economic situation was not good because we had no earnings then. Even when we started to earn [money, our combined salary] was not sufficient for meeting our needs. So, we had a hard time [during our early days] in Edmonton. During the first several months, managing money for [our] house rent was very tough because house rent was [and still is] very costly here. Newcomers have to spend at least 60% of their total incomes for house rent. A newcomer family can hardly earn more than \$1800 per month, but they may have to pay at least \$1200 for house rent. How will they manage their other needs? So, it is really difficult for them. Truly speaking, my wife and I had to work part-time. I came here in April 2008 and I took [a] course until January 2009. I used to get [funding] from federal government. There was a little relief for us because we had a fixed income. We could cover at least 80% with this fund and [the] rest of spending we covered from our part-time job. Actually, the first few months are usually [a] hard time for most of the new immigrants. According to the government's immigration policies, every immigrant is advised to bring living cost for at least 6 months. There is no guarantee that people will get jobs in the first month of their arrival in Canada. So, people usually bring some money so that they can live [for the] first months and they can prepare themselves for the job market. Yet it is difficult for the new comers to [live] life by doing survival jobs. If you plan to live by survival jobs, either you have to work full time, [or] more than 40 hours a week. You cannot look for [jobs related to your skill set]. Conversely, if you reduce your working hours to less than 40 a week, you cannot manage your household needs. This is really stressful. I mean, if you concentrate on seeking [a job related to your skill set], you cannot earn money, and again if you concentrate on earning money to manage your household you cannot find a good job [Zaman, interview 3, May 14, 2013].

This statement indicates that newcomers have to struggle to adapt to life in their country. Being immigrants, this family was eligible to receive government funding in exchange for taking a training course in a technical or vocational training institute here in Edmonton. Both the household head and the wife used to work part-time to earn an income. This was a bit of a relief for this family to address its household needs. But when the government funding ended after the completion of this training program, the family began to face economic challenges again. While it was possible to manage their living needs by working full-time or part-time, their circumstances prevented them from finding employment in their desired field of work.

The immigrant families who have no incomes, and only have government subsidies also faced critical economic problems in the earliest months of their new life in Edmonton. Mira, an immigrant who came to Canada in 2012, is now taking an English as a Second Language (ESL) course. Her husband is currently enrolled in a course called Engineers'

and Technologists' Integration Program (ETIP), which is offered by the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. While I was conducting this research, government funding [\$1,800 a month] was this family's only source of income. When I asked how she felt about her economic situation when she first arrived in Canada, Mira said:

Oh my God! It was terrible! We had to pass our lives with whatever we brought from back home. Living cost is very expensive. We had to pay \$1,100 as rent per month. It was very hard for maintaining other costs without a job. You know, when we were spending our savings and it was running short and we were passing our days with a great anxiety. You can say that this was [the] biggest mental and economic stress we ever faced in our lives. We had no government support because we did not enroll to any educational institute then. We can now manage our household 60% from government support and rest of the money we have to spend from our savings [back home money]. Sometime we have to cut our budget. For example, this month I bought an item to eat, but on next month we will have to cut that one (e.g. fish, meat). We may have to do it every week or month in order to adjust our budget as well as fulfill our needs [Mira, interview 2, April 21, 2013].

These narratives reflect the lived experiences of newcomers, many of whom face economic hardship during the period of their adaptation in Edmonton. While the immigrant families can manage their economic situation with the financial support from the Government of Canada, the non-immigrant families struggle more severely because of their lack of access to government funding. The government's financial support, either federal or provincial, especially the Canada tax benefits and childcare benefits, are very important for the newcomers because adult household members can take training courses free of cost and work outside by leaving their children in daycare. This is not possible for the non-immigrants families because they do not qualify for those benefits. So, the non-immigrant families face more challenges for both adapting socially and economically.

The section below deals with the challenges newcomers face in finding work during the earliest period of their life in Edmonton.

C. Job Barriers for the Immigrant and Non-immigrant Families

There is evidence suggesting that employment in the Canadian labour force is determined by many social, cultural and economic factors. Language proficiency, lack of Canadian working experience, and recognition of academic credentials, lack of proper references, ethnic identity and country or citizenship are some of the key factors identified as job barriers for new immigrants to Canada (Richmond and Verma, 1978; Simich et. Al., 2006; Aycan and Berry, 1996). During interviews for this research project, it was obvious that these issues also impact immigrants and non-immigrants living in Edmonton. Lack of interaction with the wider community is one of the main barriers for the newcomers to both develop language proficiency and take advantage of possible social networks for accessing economic opportunities. This research shows that most of the newcomers lacked such capacity, which is considered to be one of the main challenges that prevents them from getting a job during their earliest period of living in Edmonton.

Research findings show that all the job seekers from both the immigrant and non-immigrant families encountered challenges to finding employment opportunities, regardless of whether or not they are survival jobs or better-paying positions. Out of ten household members, four members were able to find jobs after several months of their

arrival in Canada. One household member was unemployed while conducting this research. Students who were studying at the University of Alberta didn't try to get a job outside of their academic institution yet. Multiple factors such as lack of English language proficiency, Canadian job experiences and proper references, residential status in Canada, and availability of the job seekers concurrently determine how likely it is that they will find employment. It is possible to exemplify this using the following personal experience of a research participant:

Firstly, knowing where to apply for a job matters. Even if I try to browse the Internet to apply for a job and if I apply online I usually do not get response. This is because if there are no known people in a particular office it is difficult to get a job. [The people I know told me that] without having a good reference it is difficult [to get] a job. That is, I cannot apply for a job without a proper reference. Yes, getting odd jobs/survival jobs is little bit easy. I applied to Tim Hortons and I got [a job] easily, but I [needed to provide them with a work] reference as well. I had some friends working there... But getting a related or desired job is not easy. You must have the Canadian working experience for that and you have to wait until you have a particular kind of experience for a particular kind of job. So far, I have attended five job interviews and for every case I encountered some questions from new angles and context, which I never experienced before or I never [thought of] before. For example, I applied to Paladin Security as a patient watcher, but I didn't get that job. I had to give a written exam where I had to describe a crime scene and later I had to appear in [an] oral interview. Later, they informed me that I was not qualified for this position, but I was not sure why I was disqualified. Was there any problem in preparing my crime scene report? I [had difficulty] writing this report because I was not familiar [with] the context of a crime scene, and I was not sure how to write this kind of report. This was different from what I was used to doing in Bangladesh. For example, police or emergency medical service team appeared at the crime scene immediately after calling, which is not usual in Bangladeshi context. I was not sure whom should I call first and how I should prepare the reports. I had no practice experience regarding this. The interviewers asked me some technical/strategic questions, which I was not familiar with in my past working experiences. I think I didn't get this job because I had no Canadian experience in this sector of health security... I also applied to Statistics Canada as an interviewer. I [successfully passed] the written exam. But I had some problems during the oral interview while demonstrating how I would conduct a real interview with research participants. Since I was not so fluent in English and I was not so skillful in controlling the interviewees in actual situation here. In other words, I was not so familiar with the actual social situation or handling the situation [that] arises while conducting an interview. So, I think I could know that situation better, or overcome the constraints for controlling the interviewing situation if I live here for a long time. Secondly, I would have more possibility to get a job if I give full time availability. But I am a part-time student here and I have a kid [so] I couldn't get some other jobs. If I want to keep my kid at day home/daycare I am not eligible for government childcare subsidy because I am not permanent resident /citizen here. So, if I do odd job I have to spend at least 50% of my total earnings for childcare payments. This does not benefit me. This is one of the main reasons I cannot apply for many jobs. I applied only for those jobs that match to my availability. Thirdly, my back home educational certificate is not recognized here. I have master degree in Chemistry, but this is not recognized here. Here people get job just after completion of their secondary school, but I am not getting the same job even with my master degree. I don't know how the employers consider my qualification when I mention it in my resume. Do they think me as over-qualified or less qualified? [Bina, interview 6, May 25, 2013].

It is clear that this research participant fails to get her expected job mainly because she had no Canadian job experience, her education from Bangladesh was not recognized, or perhaps she couldn't effectively demonstrate to the employers that she was capable of doing those jobs. In this regard, her lack of knowledge about the Canadian social and cultural system might work as an important factor. Moreover, language proficiency or capacity to convince the interviewers might also be a problem. Temporary resident status in Canada and hence ineligibility for the childcare subsidy, and inability to provide full-time availability because of her school simultaneously may act as a job barrier for her. A lack of full time availability because of time constraints is also a factor that prevents her from applying for a full-time job.

While the immigrants do not face problems such as lack of access to childcare subsidies, Canada child benefits, or other government sponsored training and educational funding, both the immigrants and non-immigrants encounter some common challenges getting jobs in Canada. One of the research participants said:

I tried to get a job here but I failed. It is hard to get a job here without a good reference and Canadian working experiences. I think there is a problem here regarding the evaluation of our back home educational background, language proficiency, and working experiences. When applied for permanent residency, the Canadian federal government has examined all of our educational certificates and working experiences and based on this they granted our immigration. Unfortunately, after coming here, we faced a different reality because employers did not count our previous back home working experiences. While the federal government recognized our educational qualification, the local employers or recruiting companies are not accepting our back home education and experiences. There is an educational and professional certificates evaluation organization called International Qualification Assessment Service (IQAS) in Canada, and this organization assessed all of educational and professional certificates in 2006. Then, I applied for immigration based on this assessment. They certified my educational and professional certificates as international standard equivalent. But after coming here, this does not work because the employers do not recognize these certificates. In order to get a job here the local employers ask either Canadian education or working experiences. In order to have Canadian education, people have to enroll to educational or training institutes. It is a lengthy process to be prepared for the job market. So, people have to suffer a lot to get back their stable economic situation. It takes several years. For example, I have [work] experiences [in] civil engineering, but I couldn't apply for related jobs here. There are some steps to complete in order to be eligible for this kind of job. First, I needed to be a member of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Alberta (APEGA) and needed a two years of Canadian job experiences to apply for this membership. How will I get the Professional Engineering and Geoscientist certificate? Again, you will not get the job if you do not have the PENG. This is contradictory. Moreover, work references are a factor. If you are new in Canadian, it will be hard for you to get a reference if [you do not have relatives or friends that can help you] [Habib, interview 1, April 21, 2013].

According to this statement, Mr. Habib failed to find work in Edmonton. There were at least four factors that prevented him from doing so. They were: (1) lack of Canadian education, (2) lack of Canadian job experience, (3) employers not recognizing his education and work experience from Bangladesh, and (4) lack of appropriate workplace references. In this statement, it is also reflected that there is inconsistency standards for evaluating the educational certificates and back home working experiences of the immigrants by the federal government and local employers. While the government

approves immigration based on their evaluation of applicants' educational qualifications and work experience in their home country, immigrants' education and employment background are hardly ever considered by local employers when they [immigrants] apply for jobs.

Conclusion: Summary and Policy Recommendations

The research findings presented in this report show that both immigrant and non-immigrant participants in this study faced significant social and economic challenges when they first arrived in Canada. These people came to this country with bright dreams after leaving their established social and economic positions behind in their home country. However, most of them encountered a different reality after landing in Canada, facing multiple challenges. Many have to start their career from the beginning. This is painful for many newcomers who enjoyed a better social and economic position in their native country. Language was one of the biggest challenges for them because newcomers' poor knowledge of the English language led them to experience a wide range of social and economic problems. Their inability to communicate properly in English prevents them from growing their social and community relationships beyond their own ethnic group, and finding meaningful employment in their desired field. Some newcomers mentioned that they suffered a lot when they struggled to carry on a conversation in English with various service providers, including government and private organizations (e.g. immigration office, telephone service providers, etc.). Consequently, these people were not able to access services that they needed in a timely fashion.

According to the personal narratives of the research participants, all the newcomers' households were suffering from economic crises during their initial phase of life in Edmonton. A lack of income, job opportunities, or government subsidies forced many households to cut off money from their everyday budgets. From this perspective, the non-immigrant families' early economic challenges were more significant than those of the immigrant families. Since the non-immigrant families were not eligible for the childcare benefits and other government subsidies, these families had to start their life in Canada experiencing economic hardship and silent poverty. However, the situation began to change as soon as the household members were able to find survival jobs to save money needed to meet their everyday needs.

Getting jobs, either survival or related to their desired field of work, was a challenging experience for these newcomers. Several factors such as a lack of Canadian job experience, education, vocational training and proper references appeared to be the main barriers for newcomers. This research project showed that there were inconsistencies between the federal government's evaluations of immigrants' educational certificates and the high value that local employers place on having Canadian work. In fact, employers did not recognize immigrants' educational certificates or their work experiences in Bangladesh. So, every newcomer had to wait at least two years to upgrade their education so they can meet the job requirements. In the meantime, most of these families experienced harsh social and economic circumstances, which led them further to experience psychological stress. In this regard, this research attempted to collect these people's opinions about how future newcomers can avoid facing the same challenges that the participants in this study faced and what could be done to improve the newcomers'

social and economic wellbeing. While most of the research participants were happy about their social security, health benefits and working environment, the job recruitment process (especially references or the level of experience demanded by the employers) made them unhappy. During our discussions, participants made the following policy recommendations:

The first recommendation is that steps should be undertaken by a concerned partner organization of the Canadian Immigrant and Integration Program (CIIP)¹ in Edmonton to disseminate information about various educational, training and employment opportunities that immigrants can take advantage of. This can be accomplished through an orientation program for newcomers that would be designed by a partner organization. There are a number of Edmonton-based organizations such as Alberta Association of Immigrant Settlement Agencies (AAISA), ASSIST Community Service Centre, Catholic Social Services, Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN), and Welcome Centre for Immigrants (WCI) in Edmonton that are working to serve newcomers and immigrants². Most of these agencies offer free educational and training courses including language and vocational training for the immigrants. Another organization named the Immigrant Access Fund (IAF) provides immigrants with micro loans to undertake a skill development program or a training course. Note that IAF does not provide any loan to temporary residents (i.e., non-immigrants)³. This research shows that few research participants are aware of these organizations. As a result, there is a disconnection between immigrants and the services that are designed for them. So, this study suggests that steps should be taken to introduce newcomers to these organizations as soon as they arrive in Canada. Newcomers' access to these organizations may help them more effectively integrate into the Canadian society. In this context, any partner organization of CIIP can take initiative to address this issue.

Secondly, partner organizations of CIIP should provide effective skill training for newcomers so that they can find relevant employment after the completion of their courses. Research participants found that some of the partner agencies of CIIP only had a small role in integrating newcomers into the job market in Edmonton. So, these research participants suggest that vocational training courses should be designed to directly integrate them into the local job market. Education and training courses should ensure newcomers' access to the job market, should help them find meaningful employment opportunities that are tied to their qualifications and skills and pay them enough to support their family. EMCN provide educational and vocational training courses for newcomers, but some research participants report that they could not utilize the training to find an appropriate job. One research participant has this to say:

I completed a course called Engineers' and Technologists' Integration Program (ETIP) offered by the Edmonton Mennonite Centre Newcomers. But I didn't find this useful for obtaining work because it does not cover those procedures and requirements considered essential for being an engineer.

In this perspective, participants of this research suggest that there should be some agencies (e.g. EMCN, WCI, or others) and they should focus on educational and vocational training that will help them obtain employment. Such an agency should maintain contact with the potential employers and help connect them to different jobs in the community. Lack of proficiency in English language is one of the main job barriers

for many newcomers. They cannot obtain employment because of their inability to properly communicate in English. While there are agencies to provide language-training courses, such as English as Second Language (ESL), this takes a long time and only the immigrant families have free access to this program. There should be something more effective that will give both language, cultural and professional training so people can have quick access to employment. For example, ASSIST Community Service Centre provides a free English language training course (e.g. link class) for immigrants. Non-immigrant families have no access to this opportunity. In this regard, if ASSIST Community Service Center offers language training for the non-immigrant families they can overcome their language barrier in the job market. Consequently, this may help minimize the social, psychological and economic stress that they experience during their transitional period.

Thirdly, employers may reconsider their policies with respect to the requirement of Canadian job experiences and work place references for newcomers. Employers often look for the actual Canadian working experiences and work place references. But it is unrealistic for the newcomers to provide them with a work reference within a few months of their arrival in Canada, where they are ineligible to get even a survival job without reference. A female research participant expressed her frustration about the employment system in Edmonton in the following way:

Finding [a] job without knowing people is very difficult here. Without [a] job reference or Canadian job experience, it is not possible to find a job here. I think it is irrelevant to impose this kind of condition on newcomers. I am new here. How will I [know] people who can help [me get] a job? If they would consider my back home experience [it] would be useful for me. The [demand that immigrants provide potential employers with information about] references and job experiences should be eliminated at least from survival job [competitions] so that people can manage their livelihood. Otherwise, our economic situation will be the same as in our home country. Then, what will be the benefit for us [in] this developed country? [Mira, interview 2, April 21, 2013].

Unless people have jobs in Canada, it is not possible to achieve Canadian work experience and obtain work place references. Initially, newcomers may be offered a job on a temporary basis considering their educational qualification and previous back home working experiences. All people have some education and skills that help them qualify for work opportunities and to earn his or her livelihood. Whatever the situation, people's level of education or capability cannot be zero. Employers might provide some capacity building training in collaboration with the respective government social service office and then they can offer some employment opportunities for these newcomers to demonstrate their capacities on a temporary basis. If they do well, the employers can recruit them. Employers can also check the job seekers criminal record before offering them any position. If a person does have a job, they will have an opportunity to demonstrate their capacity and to build their relationship with the employer. If this works in the first few months, he/she will also have a chance to build relationships with people that they meet in his/her work place. When they apply for another job, at least they will have some individuals who can serve as a favorable reference for them.

Fourthly, there is a gap between the policy of the federal government and the practices of local employers, that is, the government recognizes the immigrants' credentials, but the

local employers do not accept them. Both employers and government should consistently recognize or dismiss an immigrant's credentials. If immigrants' formal education, training or job experience from their home country is considered irrelevant to Canadian employers, government should not encourage these people to apply for permanent residency. Newcomers who are over 40 years of age find themselves in a vulnerable situation both socially and economically after they arrive. Obtaining an education, training or job experience in Canada is time dependent. People who are under 30 years of age are able to manage time to receive formal education and training, but the older individuals cannot do this. Thus, this issue deserves critical attention from the concerned government office, or policy-makers.

Finally, unlike the immigrant families, the non-immigrant families (especially the international student families) face some challenges after coming to Canada. Immigrant families can easily meet certain requirements to live in Canada immediately after their landing. This research shows that none of the immigrant families faced problems when finding a home. They can show their landing documents, or permanent residency card to rent a house, to get health cards, or a social insurance card. The non-immigrant people can also do this by showing their student or work visa. But they are required to show authorities that they have a valid residential address to have these important things, including a bank account. A research participant and an international student said:

Actually, getting [rental housing] is difficult here if you do not have your own credit card. For example, I couldn't [rent a house] in my name when I first came to Canada. I had to [ask another] person (my friend) to use his card for me to get a house. I had my friends, but if I didn't have any I would have [had difficulty renting a place]. Secondly, if I don't have [my] own address I cannot get health insurance. I didn't get my health insurance until I got the house transferred to my name. So, I would suggest the system should be changed. If I have valid documents such as [a] visa, passport, university admission documents, salary statements or funding the landowner should transfer the house to my name immediately [Ryan, interview 4, May 16, 2013].

Therefore, temporary residents of Canada may face a range of social and economic problems. It is important for an immigrant to have their house under their own name because failing to get a house on time might cause a delay of access to many other social services, including getting an Alberta health card and a social insurance number. Instead of relying on a person's line of credit, or credit card, the landlord can accept the newcomer tenants by considering their temporary resident visa, passports, and by keeping some money as a security deposit. This will help the newcomers proceed with collecting their necessary documents (e.g. health cards) by showing that they have a valid home address to the respective government offices.

Therefore, it can be concluded that because of their different residential statuses (i.e., permanent and temporary residential status), the newcomers had different social, cultural and economic experiences in their earliest period of living in Edmonton. Yet, both categories of people also experience some common challenges such as language and employment barriers. Social and psychological stresses emanate from their frustration with being unable to access the job market and for failing to meet social and economic expectations. Most of the research participants say that the employers in Edmonton are interested in hiring applicants with Canadian job references. This even applies to survival

jobs. Some participants could find employment with the help of their friends, though they didn't have any prior working experiences in Canada. Job barriers for the newcomers can be removed if the local employers change their recruitment criteria and adopt more flexible hiring practices by considering newcomers' previous work experiences and references. Respective government agencies also have an important role to play in coordinating between the newcomers and the local employers to make their social and economic transition period easier.

Notes

1. Canadian Immigration Integration Program (CIIP). Please look at this link for more details: <http://www.newcomersuccess.ca/index.php/partners/immigrant-serving-organizations?lang=en-GB>
2. Please see the following link for immigrant serving organization list in Edmonton region: <http://eriec.ca/settlement-integration/>
3. <http://www.iafcanada.org/>

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