Re/Claiming Agency: Learning, Liminality and Immigrant Service Organizations

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Abstract

To facilitate the settlement of new immigrants, immigrant service organizations provide a range of services and opportunities for both formal and informal learning. These organizations, however, also act as liminal spaces in which the women who access their services may renegotiate identities, create new knowledge and forge new conceptions of community. The purpose of this article is to present an analysis of the data from two organizations which were sites for a larger research project designed to explore the formal and informal learning processes in immigrant service organizations. The data for this study was collected through client interviews and participant observation of formal and informal learning activities at two immigrant service organization that provide settlement, educational and support programs and services for immigrant women.

Introduction

Immigrant service organizations (ISOs) in Canada play a valuable role in the lives of new immigrants by facilitating the transition to their new home. These organizations position themselves as a bridge to the new land by providing culturally appropriate resources, formal programs for language training and employment preparation, social and cultural orientation to the new country and by facilitating access to mainstream services. Research on the formal and informal learning processes that occur in immigrant service organizations reveals that these organizations can also act as a liminal space in which to create new knowledge and negotiate individual and collective identities and for forging new conceptions of community. These negotiations are not straightforward but often include subversions and transgressions of expected beliefs and practices of dominant groups. These acts of resistance and creation give rise to a sense of agency, the conscious making of one's life as well as the narrative about one's life (Hartman, 1991), which is something that is often lost in the migration experience. ISOs can play an important role in the lives of immigrants, not only in the services they provide, but in providing space for immigrants who are "… coming-to-terms with [their] routes" (Hall, 1996, p. 4) with respect to their identities as workers, parents, partners and citizens. We draw upon postcolonial notions of liminality and identity to explore where learning takes place and what is (un)learned by women and men who have migrated to Canada.

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Background and Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to present an analysis of a subset of data from two ISOs out of four which were the sites of a larger research project which explored how immigrant service organizations facilitate settlement processes for new immigrants.[1] The particular research question guiding the focus of the study was: What are the formal and informal learning processes that occur in immigrant service organizations? The research design employed was a case study approach, which enabled the researchers to focus on the complexity and particularity of a single case to understand an activity, its context and its significance (Stake, 1995). The data for the larger study was collected through document analysis, client interviews, a survey and participant observation of formal and informal learning activities that provide settlement, educational and support programs and services for immigrant women. Interviews were audio taped, fully transcribed and transcripts sent to participants for validation. A case was developed for each site thus providing an analysis of the unique conditions, challenges, and learning opportunities present in each context.

This paper uses data collected from two ISOs whose focus is serving immigrant women. Both organizations were established in the early 1980s after research conducted by the local university found settlement support for immigrant women in the local area was needed. From that research, these two not-for-profit agencies evolved with the specific focus of assisting immigrant women in settlement related concerns. Our analysis has a focus on developing an understanding of the themes that surfaced at the two sites with a particular focus on immigrant women's issues. Comparison of the two case studies through researcher journals and critically reflective dialogues among the researchers yielded the themes of liminality, identity, agency, and fugitive knowledge. Analysis was guided by postcolonial theory of fluid identities (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1991, 1996) and feminist postcolonial theories of multiple oppressions through situated local analysis (Alexander & Mohanty, 1997; Mohanty, 2003).

In writing the paper, one of our primary concerns was to honour as best we could the expressions and thoughtful insights of the women we interviewed. At times, this was problematic as the syntax of those expressions could be considered "imperfect" or "non-standard" English. The notion of "non-standard English" has been conceptualized as a form of linguistic discrimination stemming from the colonial history of countries like Canada (Amin, 2006). We felt strongly that we should not "overwrite" what the women said, which would be to engage in linguistically marginalizing (Dei, 2006) the women with whom we spoke. As often as possible, we have quoted the women directly but we have struggled with how to make the meaning of what was said clear without erasing the nuances of how the women expressed themselves. This has been imperfectly resolved by quoting the women directly, but adding ellipses in some places to maintain the flow of meaning.

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[1] The study is entitled "The Effectiveness of Formal and Informal Processes of Learning Essential Skills: A Study of Immigrant Service Organizations," funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Campbell et al., 2006). The principal investigator was Dr. Shibao Guo, University of Calgary. Co-investigators were Dr. Katy Campbell, University of Alberta, Dr. Tara Fenwick, University of Alberta, currently with the University of British Columbia, and Dr. Yan Guo, University of Calgary. We wish to acknowledge their support.

Discussion

Our analysis of the data from the two women-centred ISOs focused on developing an understanding of how the women we interviewed and observed were using informal learning spaces to understand, negotiate and express identity and agency. We found the postcolonial concept of liminality was useful for this analysis and in the following section we review this concept as it specifically relates to identity and agency. In particular, we examine how this theoretical concept illuminates the potential and extant value of ISOs in supporting immigrant women as they navigate these liminal spaces.

Liminal Spaces

The concept of liminality was originally associated with the study of rites of passage and referred to the "initiand, novice, [or] neophyte" (Lugones, 2003, p. 61) and their temporary situatedness outside of the social and cultural structures of identity and belonging during rites of passage from one social stage to another. Bhabha (1994) used this concept in his work to talk about an interstitial or third space which constitutes a "… moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (p. 2). The liminal presents a temporal, spatial and psychological moment of possibility which is not to say that this is necessarily unaccompanied by suffering or loss. The process of settlement and adaptation for immigrants arriving in a new country is a complex one and although many immigrants arrive in Canada filled with hope and possibility, their settlement process is often one fraught with contradictions; thus it appears to reflect qualities of the liminal as described and discussed by Bhabha.

Immigrants must negotiate multiple challenges and barriers, both individual and systemic, in pursuing their goals of settlement in a new environment. The first challenge is to acquire sufficient language proficiency to be able to participate in educational and work opportunities but this process may be hindered by not having access to appropriate training programs or by limited funding (Hou & Beiser, 2000). In addition, Creese and Kambere (2003) suggest that a non-Canadian accent acts as a border that excludes immigrants from gaining access to employment, housing and other services. Access to suitable employment is a key factor in the process of settlement, but individual efforts can be constrained by structural and systemic barriers. Women face a lack of recognition for their premigration educational achievements, professional credentials and work experience (Creese, 2005). Professional associations often restrict entry for new immigrants, limiting their participation in the professions, and thus making better paying jobs inaccessible (Man, 2004). To demonstrate that they have Canadian work experience, women have to resort to unpaid work or low paying jobs to gain this experience. These practices result in the deskilling of immigrant women (Mojab, 1999; Man, 2004,) and subject women to "the multiple processes that reproduce immigrant workers in the lower echelons of a gendered and racialized labour market" (Creese, 2005, p. 3).

New immigrants may also face the loss of social networks of family and friends, the need to balance multiple priorities of work, education and family, feelings of alienation resulting from the effects of structural racism, confusion about attitudes and behaviours encountered in the new culture, and family conflict that arises from the

change in traditional roles. As a result, the process of settlement may be accompanied by a profound sense of loneliness and alienation from all that has been familiar. A disjuncture between the values of the old and new worlds can cause a sense of confusion and disorientation, resulting in feelings of incompetence in the new setting. Contributing to this sense of disorientation is a lack of state support to assist with the complex factors that impeded their transition to, among other things, work life in Canada. For example the women we interviewed commented on the challenges they faced locating the supports that they needed. In addition to this, learning is often perceived to be the responsibility of immigrants; recognition is not given to the fact that Canadian companies and organizations need to attend to equity issues (Man, 2004).

The experience of migration is, therefore, one of "crossing borders and boundaries both geographical and psychological" (Espin, 1997, p. 1) and, we would add, social. Through our experiences with/in the two ISOs, we began to see connections between notions of border crossing and liminality, which we understand to exist in/between various spaces including the social, the psychological and physical. For the purposes of this paper, we therefore understand liminality to include these all three aforementioned aspects.

These boundary crossings are often accompanied by a sense of displacement that comes from being distanced from the old home, both in space and time, and excluded from fully participating in the new one. The old home soon becomes an "imaginary homeland," (Rushdie, 1991), a fragmented and discontinuous memory of the past, and the new home a place fraught with unfamiliarity, exclusion and a sense of dislocation. Thus, the migrant is suspended in a liminal or an in-between space, belonging neither here nor there (Bhabha, 1994). This liminal space is one of ambiguity and ambivalence, where notions of a fixed home or a sense of being rooted in a specific geographical location or community is interrupted; where identity is in flux and where traditional systems of knowledge are challenged. This sense of dislocation, and a sense of exclusion in the new society, can be accompanied by a loss of a sense of self, of being disempowered and by a loss of agency. Faina's reflections upon her experience of migration reflect qualities of liminality:

> *I think every person, especially woman; she lost eighty percent of her personality when she became immigrant, eighty percent. But now I think I, I took back ten, ten percent … of my personality because you know, it's very important language, language, language, language. I can't express myself when even I know, even I understand the person who I have a conversation I use only very simple words. Very simple, you know, it's, that's me, I feel stupid. It's very, very hard.*

Faina's experience of the liminal reflects the suffering and agency that may be found there. At the beginning of this reflection, she notes that the transition from her homeland to Canada entailed a sense of having lost her identity or, as she describes it, her personality. In part, this is due to the loss of her ability to express complex ideas because she does not feel proficient in the language. However, elsewhere in her interview she describes also having lost a sense of how to perform various subjectivities such as that of parent, wife and professional. This loss, according to Thobani (2000), arises in part, out of the construction of "immigrant women as Other" (p. 282). Their "racialized bodies as

well as their languages and cultures" (p. 286) mark them as not-Canadian. Faina spoke elsewhere about her university education, her parenting values and her valuing of elders being undermined by Canadian familial norms and academic standards. Yet the immigrant women we interviewed, including Faina, find a sense of potency in spite of their being beyond the boundaries of their old home and outside the boundaries of Canadian society.

Instrumental programs for newcomers such as English as a second language classes, employment readiness programs, computer classes, and so forth, focus on the skilling of new Canadians for the workplace. However, as the women's stories reflect, the process of migration is fraught with barriers to social acceptance and good work. Acquiring language skills or learning how to compose an effective resume are only part of what is needed for the women to find their own way in Canada. Ideally ISOs have the potential to support these other types of learning if they have the

> *... ability to have somebody working here who can provide that counselling and support, long term support.... where women can sort out their lives ... Slowly.... At their own pace.... Not just get the information and get out.... It's long-term support, a place where they can be understood.... Where they can let their guard down.... and, and just get the support. Somebody will tell them they do deserve better.... You're a good person, you're doing great, you are just trying to survive in an awful situation, it is not your fault, nobody deserves to be like that, and just hearing that over and over and over again....*

Thus, the ISO, if it is able to honour the liminality of the migration experience, has the potential to interrupt the instrumental urgency of Canadian settlement processes. These liminal spaces can also provide a space of creativity and new possibilities, allowing immigrants to become "free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38) and to create new knowledge about self and community. The newcomer is in a position to see that all systems of knowledge are incomplete, opening up a space to envision new ways of seeing the world and revealing fresh perspectives. Rushdie (1991) posits that this new space is a valuable one because it allows the migrant to have a more plural view of the world and reveals "the provisional nature of all truths" (p. 12). This new knowledge can create a sense of agency, provide the space to rethink and recreate both the past and the present and give inherited knowledge and tradition new meaning. In particular, new knowledge and insights about personal and collective identities begin to surface in the liminal space.

Identity: Roots and Routes

The process of migration challenges preconceived understandings of personal and collective identities, particularly notions surrounding the conception that identity is relatively fixed. Although there have been extensive discussions around the significant theoretical and conceptual developments to illustrate that identity is, in fact, not static, but fluid (Hall, 1991, 1996; Bhabha, 1994), some of the participants we interviewed found comfort in recalling their personal or collective identity, prior to immigration, as being stable. In our initial interview with Azmina, a former student in one of the agencies'

computer classes currently volunteering at the centre, she stated that during her thirty-seven years in India, she had an identity. Her identity was constructed in relation to those around her. She explained that so many people in India loved her and hated her. She felt she knew where she was positioned in relation to others. Azmina perceived that her identity "back home" was clearly defined, and on several occasions, she expressed a longing to return home to India. The diasporic imagination of "home" becomes a mythic place of desire (McLeod, 2000). Attempting to (re)possess the lost or ruptured identity in the new land also, as in Azmina's case, becomes an object of desire.

In the process of migration, however, the personal and collective stabilizers of identity, such as class, race, gender and nation, are ruptured by social and political developments (Hall, 1991). The lines along which these ruptures occur are never clearly demarcated boundaries but are dependent on context and contain paradoxes and struggles. In the same interview with Azmina, she commented,

> *We don't have any identity. We know the people. [In Canada] we don't know the people. We have no recognition. Everybody said that you are an Indian, you are Asian. It is so depressing ...*

In Canada, she feels she does not have an identity; because she knows so few people, she feels she receives no recognition for who she is. She also expressed frustration in being labeled Indian or Asian. The cause of this frustration became clearer later in the interview.

> *I will not name that store. I went there, I went in there and I asked for that, just give me the application. I want to just fill it in, fill for my job. He said, oh, we don't hire Asians ... I said, OK then, put the notice there [in the window], we are hiring and must mention there that you are not hiring Asians. Legally, he can't do that, so that's why I was so mad on him.... We have full right to be here.... We are also Canadian.*

Azmina questioned why she is labeled "Asian" when she is also a Canadian and is allowed to be here. Depending on the context and the perceptions of others, Azmina's subjectivities were continually shifting. In this moment, Azmina became racialized; a set of characteristics and limitations became ascribed and imposed on her (Dei, 1996). Bhabha (1994) explains that the negotiation of identity is, in fact, "the process of symbolic interaction" of subjects intersecting with one another. Identities are constructed through, not outside, difference (Hall, 1996).

In a subsequent interview two months later, Azmina's identity had become a site for resistance to the dominant culture as well as a place of comfort from assimilation and racist discourses. She did not passively accept the representations ascribed to her. In relaying an encounter with an employment settlement counselor who told Azmina she could not wear a sari if she wanted to get a job in Canada, Azmina explained,

> *[My identity] is not changing at all and I'm very happy.... If the people continue talking to me like ... either you change yourself, just because ... I'm in the Canada, I'm not in the India, I will not change myself. I have myself, I have my*

> *own identity. If you don't like me, don't talk to me.... I'm what I am. If you accept me like that, you are most welcome. If you do not, you are most welcome. That's what I am ... I don't know, maybe I'm not 100 percent correct.*

Azmina was trying to construct her identity as a stable site of resistance to the homogenizing settlement discourses. Although she seemed to want to construct her identity as unchanging, she also questioned and doubted her understandings of identity by stating that she wasn't sure if she was 100 per cent correct and she also doubts whether this is possible. She was conscious of the disruption that migration processes were causing to her identity, but she actively wanted to resist it, perhaps for the reasons Hall (1991) suggests:

> Identities are a kind of guarantee that the world isn't falling apart quite as rapidly as it sometimes seems to be. It's a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action, a still point in the turning world. That's the kind of ultimate guarantee that identity seems to provide us with.... I think most of us do recognize that our identities have changed over time, but we have the hope or nostalgia that they change at the rate of a glacier (p. 10).

Other participants also acknowledged the challenges they encountered to their pre/post-migration identities and this caused struggle and pain. Faina commented that she could try to keep her rules, language and religion, but she was not an island. She would have to change something to be successful and comfortable. She also mentioned that she didn't have a choice if she wanted to maintain a good relationship with her daughter, who had adjusted to Canadian life very quickly. Another participant, Ayako, explained that she was told she would have to "make changes," but at first she didn't understand what that meant. At the time of the interview, however, she understood [or felt] that she would have to choose between being Japanese and becoming a member of the majority. She expressed the belief that her Japanese values and Canadian values are mutually exclusive. To live in Canada, she said, means to renounce her Japanese values.

By coming to Canada, the women encountered representations of their identities that contradicted previous understandings of themselves as women, parents, spouses, workers, and citizens. In trying to make sense of these contradictions, tensions and struggles surfaced from which the women began the process of reconstructing a sense of identity. McLeod (2000) contends that our understandings of identity need to move beyond static notions of being rooted in particular geographical locations to seeing liminal spaces as creative sites where a migrant can "act as an agent of change" (p. 219). The liminal spaces created in immigrant serving organizations are one context in which the identity work begins. The reworking of identity, however, is not a process of moving from a premigration fixed identity to a new post migration stable identity, but an understanding of "what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves" (Hall, 1996, p. 4). In other words, in this in between space, the women have an opportunity to interrogate their own and other's claims to identity and all that it entails. In the following section, we discuss the way women engage their observations and analysis of settlement policy and how these analyses constitute a form of resistant knowledge.

Agency and Fugitive Knowledge

ISOs are, to some extent, able to interrupt the time-bound and instrumental characteristics of formal learning programs that form the basis of institutionalized settlement processes and policies (Fenwick et al, 2006). Although English language instruction, computer classes, parenting classes and pre-employment or employment readiness programs provide the *raison d'etre* for these organizations, organizational leadership is nonetheless, able to circumvent the time and curriculum bound nature of these programs by offering some access to unstructured spaces. These spaces provide opportunities within and outside of formal learning programs for immigrants to congregate, form relationships and share both their positive and negative experiences of being new Canadians. By providing these opportunities, ISOs offer tacit recognition that the journey from homeland to the new land cannot and does not conform to immigration policies and settlement practices. For example, the women we interviewed were acutely aware that their 'newcomer status' only officially lasts for three years. This creates a set of urgent expectations—to master English, get a job, fit in, leave the old world behind and to surface a set of subjectivities compatible with 'Western' values and culture. There is no room in such an environment for being neither here nor there. Faina's comments illustrate this sense of urgency: "… I didn't sleep, I didn't eat … I wasn't woman … I just … study, study … very, very hard to improve my English, to improve my style of life, to improve myself, to feel more comfortable on the street." One must be fully *here*, engaged and productive. Contributing to that sense of being rushed, at least for some, is the instrumental formality of education programs which implicitly, by virtue of their being time bounded, suggest that integration can be accomplished within a particular time frame and through individual effort alone.

However, these women-led organizations within which we conducted our research, appeared to emphasize the need for their clients to have the opportunity to make some sense out of their experiences and to have an opportunity to engage in an analytic way with them. Some of the women we interviewed were able to critique dominant settlement discourses, including those that suggest immigrants arrive in Canada with deficits that require remediation through education Their narratives suggest that the ruptured social and interior spaces which are the by-product of migration are not empty spaces waiting to be filled by the norms and values of the new country. These spaces have the potential to become "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood, singular or communal, that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation …" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1-2). In our research, we observed ISOs making a concerted effort to actively value and provide validation for immigrant experiences of dislocation or, as described by Faina, the sense of being "alone and uncomfortable." Within this context, there exists the possibility for immigrants to share their experiences of liminality and multiplicity (Lugones, 2003) and for these experiences, which are often paradoxical, to be perceived as valid, valuable and necessary aspects of migration.

Spaces that facilitate informal connection among newcomers and reflection upon their individual and collective experiences of the liminality of the migration experience increase the likelihood that immigrants will generate frameworks for understanding and articulating their affective response to being neither at home in Canada nor able to go 'back home.' In this transitional space where neither here nor there serves as a context for

articulating and performing a self, having a community of people to share this discomfort makes possible the creation of their own unique analysis of what constitutes barriers and supports to migration, integration and the re-emergence of the agentic self. Faina articulated a common theme about ISOs when she said that she felt "very alone very uncomfortable but after [I] came here, I speak about me. I feel here very, very comfortable. And I change myself … I, my vision, my points of view … are changing." In the Frierian tradition of problem posing education for the conscientization of adult learners (see Freire, 2000), ISO's enable the presence of spaces in which the immigrant women we interviewed were able to ask the questions of import to their lives. The posing of problems for collective engagement are mentioned, by Nadia, who said,

> *Some people don't know is, is that discrimination and racism exist. Why? Because they don't know ah, that it's something wrong with the system. They think … it's their mistake, or they're still new to, ah, to the system. You know, there's lots of people who were isolated for long time and they don't know.*

In this quote, Nadia observed that on their own, the immigrant women she has worked with tend to accept the dominant discourse which produces immigrant identity as alien and problematic and, therefore, requiring remediation. In isolation and without benefit of collective engagement with the problems that immigrant women face, individual immigrants accept, as unproblematic, the presence of structural racism and the everyday acts of discrimination that flow from it.

In another instance, we observed three women use unstructured break-times during a pre-employment course to share their experiences of ESL instruction and testing protocols. At the beginning of their conversation, they all expressed frustration with their own limitations in the face of systemic expectations which are represented to them as being fair and impartial. This representation engendered feelings of inadequacy. However, by the end of their conversations which spanned the course of a day during breaks in a program, they began to surface a picture of these programs as unnecessarily expensive, as having flaws, with respect to both the nature of the testing and the standards being set and the questionable value of certain English programs to meet the needs of professional workers. Thus, this sharing of experiences in the informal spaces available in the ISO led to their analysis of the system as flawed and to an affirmation of their capacity to understand and critique systems of assessment and instruction.

Within the unstructured spaces of the ISO, some women are able to construct a shared analysis of what immigration has cost them (and provided them), and these insights and understandings often challenged and resisted dominant discourses of integration in which the individual immigrant bears the responsibility for adaptation to the dominant culture. The creation of this fugitive knowledge (Hill, 2004) suggests that there exists, within the context of ISOs, a possibility for informal learning, particularly in unstructured spaces, to create an "insurgent act of cultural translation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 7) and resistance which may enable the immigrant to (re)lay claim to agency.

Contested Spaces

Liminal spaces have the potential to be sites for reworking and rethinking identity, creating fugitive knowledge and resisting dominant discourses. However, liminal spaces are neither uncontested nor unproblematic. As Faina has pointed out and as Bannerji (2000) argues, there are powerful social and structural forces at work on immigrant identity. Both the immigrant and agencies that aim to support their settlement process are constrained by problematic settlement structures that reinscribe hegemonic discourses of assimilation and cause confusion and frustration. Although ISOs provided Azmina with the emotional support she needed when she felt lonely and, in her words, "depressed," she was also critical of employment programs, in particular, in assisting she and her husband with finding employment in their fields.

> *[The government] have just maintained this immigrant centre. It is just a show off.... I don't know whether I should say or not, but they can't help us. There again, we'll listen from the government. These counsellors, again, said these same thing, 'You have to write down papers, you have to do something like that. You have to just upgrade yourself.' What is this? These thing that we know, so what [they] are doing?*

Azmina went on to explain, "[T]hese counsellors are also bound" by a system in which they have limited knowledge, and by the complexities of the employment and credential recognition processes. In addition, employment counsellors are constrained by mandates set out by various levels of provincial and federal bureaucracy.

> *They don't know how to help actually. They are there, but they don't know how to help us. They are just to do the formalities, just to fill the papers, make the files, make the files 1, 2, 3, up to hundred, that's it. 'I have 100 lines, I have so many clients ... today I got the ten clients, today I got the twelve clients.' This is just a race in them.... And by that, they got a grant from the government and that they got promotions or whatever.*

Azmina wasn't clear about how she came to know this process and we were not able to confirm that there was a system of promotions by fulfilling quotas. However, our interviews with organization staff confirmed that some counsellors have monthly quotas they are expected to fill. ISOs are also expected to work collaboratively and in partnership with other ISOs to provide services as efficiently as possible, but time-bounded and limited funding result in ISOs competing with one another for limited resources.

Another critique we heard relates to the immigrant services emphasizing programming for independent class immigrants or those women who have professional degrees. Ayako, who had come to Canada with her Canadian husband, offered, "I see that they tend to help those who have academic background in home country ... like doctors, lawyers ... Professional people.…" Like Azmina, Ayako also believed the need for funding and

credibility in the eyes of government played a role in how immigrant-serving agencies operate.

> *They [ISOs] probably get funding from government … there, of course they say that they're helping immigrants but they're doing the, mmm, the bottom line if they want to expand their organization. They want to have success … They want to achieve, so they get more funding … so what it comes down to, so they of course want to help someone with more experience or academic background…. Mmm, a professional background…. which is understandable.*

Yet the programs that do exist can play a fundamental role in enabling immigrant women to come together to learn in formal and informal contexts. For example, the beginner and intermediate computer classes that we observed provided women with an opportunity to learn about technology in a safe, understanding, and cost-accessible environment that was virtually impossible to find at larger mainstream educational institutions that are not always aware of the language requirements of newcomers. These formal spaces also enable ISOs to create the informal spaces which allow women to come together to collectively critique the migration process.

Conclusion

Our research shows that many women value and make use of the unstructured and informal spaces within ISOs to support their individual and collective engagements with identity, agency and employment issues. The women we spoke with described their experiences within the liminal (temporal, geographic and psychological spaces that are neither the old world nor wholly the new) as struggles for identity and agency. We conclude that the value of the dialogic encounters that occur in these liminal spaces resides in their capacity to challenge dominant discourses relating to migration which, according to Bloom (1998), "… is to change reality: to change reality is to participate in making a history different from the one the status quo would produce. The belief that this sort of change is possible is grounded in the assumption that individuals have the capacity to overcome the limitations imposed upon them by social, economic, racial and historical factors" (p. 64).

The narratives of the women we interviewed speak to the value they place on unstructured spaces, which allow them to validate, for one another, the totality of their migrant experiences. Since current settlement policies and practices emphasize instrumental learning through time bound programs such as language and employment programs, and as it appears that immigrant women benefit from opportunities to engage *informally* with the social, psychological and political aspects of migration, one of the questions that arises out of this work is how ISOs can continue to create and protect informal spaces which allow for liminality as well as the critique of oppressive structures. It is important to note that while recognizing the current value of these spaces, researchers and the women within the agencies continue to challenge structural and systemic racism and sexism that normalize current immigrant experiences. Psychological and social struggles, and anguish, are not the natural consequences of migration but are the by-product of problematic policies and social structures, such as racism. Continuing

to view barriers as commonplace and inevitable merely maintains the status quo and renders systemic oppression invisible. What makes the women's agency remarkable is that they are naming, negotiating and resisting the barriers within a system that is overtly and covertly racist yet, in denial of it. This question is particularly crucial given the commodification of immigration policies in which immigration criteria is increasingly based on labour market principles (Arat-Koc, 1999) and one that appears to require further investigation.

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