

Exploring the Settlement Experiences and Information Practices of Afghan Newcomer Youth in Toronto

Abstract: This study examines the settlement experiences and information practices of recently-arrived Afghan immigrant and refugee youth in Toronto. As part of this ethnographic study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Afghan youth between the ages of 18 and 28 who had lived in Canada for less than 10 years.

Résumé : Cette étude examine l'expérience d'emménagement et les pratiques informationnelles de jeunes immigrants et réfugiés afghans nouvellement établis à Toronto. Dans le cadre de cette étude ethnographique, des entrevues semi-structurées ont été effectuées auprès de sept jeunes afghans de 18 à 28 ans, établis au Canada depuis moins de 10 ans.

1. Introduction

In this study, I examine the settlement experiences of Afghan immigrant and refugee youth in Toronto. Specifically, the research focuses on the settlement experiences and information practices of recently-arrived Afghan youth. Studies of this group's lived experiences and information practices are scarce, and studies on Afghan youth virtually non-existent. Appropriate services and programs designed to meet the settlement needs of Afghan youth in Toronto cannot be created in the absence of literature on this group's experiences, preferences and needs.

In exploring the settlement experiences and information practices of my study population, my project answers the following research questions:

- 1) What challenges and unmet settlement needs do Afghan youth in Toronto experience?
- 2) What are the settlement-related information practices of Afghan newcomer youth in Toronto?
- 3) What do the leisure activities of Afghan youth reveal about their settlement experiences and information practices?

2. Background and Context

Information practices refer to the seeking, sharing and use of information (Savolainen, 2008), a concept that is helpful in exploring a framework for the behaviours of recent immigrants and refugees following migration (Caidi, Allard, and Quirke, 2010).

Settlement is the process by which newcomers to a country, including both immigrants and refugees, orient themselves to their new homelands. Though this process consists of the search for immediate needs, such as housing and employment, it may refer to the experiences of the first few weeks, months or years in a new country, depending on the context in which it is used. The most prominent definition or model of settlement in

Canadian immigration literature outlines three stages of adjustment following migration in terms of the needs for services that occur at each stage (Mwarigha, 2002). In the initial settlement stage, immediately following arrival, newcomers may need translation and interpretation services, language instruction, and reception and orientation services (Mwarigha, 2002). In the intermediate stage, access to institutions and programs is needed to develop employment-related skills, bridge cultural differences and facilitate labour-market integration. Other features of this stage include health services, housing, employment-related language training and legal assistance (Mwarigha, 2002, 9). The final stage of settlement is the long-term struggle for equal participation in all realms of life: politically, socially, economically and culturally.

The definitions that Mwarigha (2002) provides for the intermediate and long-term settlement phases are strikingly similar to two additional concepts discussed by researchers in Immigration Studies and Sociology: integration and social inclusion. Integration is a term that refers to the process by which, over time, immigrants become a part of the host society. It is a normative concept (Castles et al, 2002), and therefore one whose meaning can vary between immigrant-receiving societies. Though originally conceived of as a one-way adaptation by which immigrants assimilated into the mainstream of receiving societies (Park and Burgess, 1921), integration has come to mean the two-way shift through which both the immigrant and the institutions of the host society adapt as a result of their exposure to one another across generations following migration (Gordon, 1964).

If settlement and integration represented the first two stages along a continuum of immigrant incorporation into a receiving society, social inclusion could be considered the third and final stage. Social inclusion represents both a goal and process of striving toward full and equal participation for newcomers in all areas of life, such as social, political and economic realms (Omidvar and Richmond, 2003). This definition matches Mwarigha's final stage of long-term settlement, in which the struggle for equal participation in political, social, economic and cultural life is achieved. In this way, settlement, the initial adjustment faced by newcomers immediately following migration, and integration, the longer-term process of mutual change prompted by ongoing contact between immigrants and the host society, can be seen as steps along a single continuum, and precursors to the final step, the fight for social inclusion. This final stage would involve the eventual dismantling of all systemic barriers to participation of an immigrant group and their descendents within society, and is a process that could take multiple generations or even centuries to achieve.

Over a quarter of a million immigrants and refugees are permanently resettled in Canada each year, and a growing number have been Afghans (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2009). Challenges facing Afghan newcomers in Canada include prejudice (Khanlou, Koh, and Mill, 2008) and disproportionately high rates of poverty and unemployment (Ornstein, 2006). Though Toronto settlement agencies serving Afghan youth point to isolation, depression and suicide as major issues and highlight gaps in service provision for mental health, recreation and employment (Soroor and Popal, 2005), studies on Afghan settlement remain scarce.

Restarting one's life in a new country requires access to resources, one of the most important of which is accurate, timely information. Information is vital to recently-arrived immigrants and refugees, as it can facilitate access to health care, employment,

education, and newcomers' subsequent inclusion into the social and political fabric of Canadian life (Caidi and Allard, 2005). Though refugees' experiences of trauma and forced migration make their information and settlement needs even more crucial than those of immigrants, research on the information practices of refugees is extremely rare.

3. Approach

In order to explore the lived experiences of immigrant and refugee youth from Afghanistan, semi-structured, ethnographic interviews were conducted with youth. A total of six participants were recruited through local Afghan youth organizations, settlement agencies, Afghan student associations at the University of Toronto, Ryerson, and York University, as well as through snowball sampling. Participants were Afghan youth between the ages of 18 and 28 who had lived in Canada for less than 10 years. Some participants were quite recently arrived, having lived in Canada for less than 18 months. Two in-depth interviews were held with each participant to discuss their experiences since coming to Canada, challenges they faced during settlement, sources of support, and the ways in which they sought, used and shared information during this process.

Interviews with youth were complemented by participant observation at settlement programs and other events held by and for Afghan youth in Toronto, as well as key informant interviews with members of Afghan settlement agencies, cultural organizations and other local service providers familiar with the challenges of Afghan youth settlement.

Data collection is in the final stages, as initial interviews have been conducted with all six youth participants, follow-up interviews have been completed with three. The three final interviews have been scheduled for late January and early February 2011. Preliminary findings indicate that Afghan youth in Toronto are an extremely heterogeneous group, varying in terms of educational background, language, and pattern of migration as many Afghan newcomers arriving in Canada have spent years in a third country of asylum, such as Pakistan, Iran, India or Russia. Initial findings point to various settlement challenges, including family separation and difficulties learning English, while information sources primarily used during settlement were family and friends. Other helpful sources mentioned by some participants include English-as-a-Second-Language teachers, and classmates.

Participants noted the importance of technology in their lives, in particular highlighting their use of Facebook, and online resources about Afghanistan and Islam. Facebook is a way in which youth both keep in touch with Afghan friends and relatives living around the world as well as socialize with classmates and friends in Toronto. Youth also noted their searching, sharing and use of information on current events in Afghanistan, as well as the quest by some youth to learn more about the history and practice of Islam.

4. Implications

This study identifies the challenges and unmet settlement needs of Afghan youth in Toronto, and enhances our understanding of the information practices used by recent immigrant and refugee youth to make the transition of settlement. As such, it enhances our understanding of the context in which newcomer youth seek use and share information for settlement, and therefore has implications for the design and implementation of outreach strategies appropriate to reach these groups and deliver settlement information through trusted sources. By offering an in-depth portrait of the lives and information practices of Afghan youth during their settlement in Toronto, this study offers Afghan newcomer youth the opportunity to share their unique perspectives on their experiences since migration.

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