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

Une exploration des expériences d'établissement et des pratiques informationnelles de jeunes Afghans récemment arrivés à Toronto

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Abstract: This study examines the settlement experiences and information practices of recently arrived Afghan immigrant and refugee youth in Toronto. As part of this exploratory 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.

Keywords: youth, information practices, ethnography, immigration, Afghan

Résumé : Cette étude examine les expériences d'établissement à Toronto et les pratiques informationnelles de jeunes immigrants et de réfugiés afghans récemment arrivés. Une partie de cette étude ethnographique exploratoire a consisté à mener des entrevues semi-structurées avec sept jeunes Afghans âgés de 18 à 28 ans ayant vécu au Canada depuis moins de dix ans.

Mots-clés : jeunes, pratiques informationnelles, ethnographie, immigration, Afghans

Introduction

In this study, I examine the settlement experiences and information practices of Afghan immigrant and refugee youth in Toronto. Studies on Afghan youth are scarce, leading to a dearth of information on their lived experiences, information practices, and the context of their settlement in Canada. Appropriate programs and services 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.

To document the context of settlement and information practices of Afghan newcomer youth in Toronto, this exploratory ethnographic study answers the following research questions:

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

Background and context

Information practices refers 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). Information-behaviour research has explored many concepts that are relevant to the study of newcomers, including information gatekeepers (Metoyer-Duran 1991), information poverty (Chatman 1996), culturally alien information environments (Mehra and Papajohn 2007), diasporic information environments (Srinivasan and Pyati 2007), information grounds (Fisher, Durrance, and Bouch Hinton 2004), and the role that children can play as cultural and linguistic mediators within immigrant families (Chu 1999). As refugee youth remain an understudied group in the field of information behaviour, these concepts may need to be re-explored and reinterpreted as future studies reveal more about the information context of young newcomers' lives. Frameworks that focus on contextual factors in the lives of users and explore their practices outside of work-related environments, such as ELIS (McKenzie 2003; Savolainen 1995), are most useful in examining the experiences of newcomers following migration. The importance of context is clear, as the transition facing newly-arrived immigrants and refugees during settlement may prompt vital shifts in their information practices as newcomers re-shape information-seeking habits that worked well in their countries of origin and adapt them to suit their new circumstances.

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 to meet immediate needs, such as housing and employment, settlement 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 needs during 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 among immigrant-

receiving societies. Though originally conceived 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 the 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 involves the eventual dismantling of all systemic barriers to participation of an immigrant group and their descendants within society, and is a process that can 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 proportion of that number has been made up of Afghans (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2009). Afghans in Toronto are young and more recently arrived than other immigrant groups: almost 70% of Toronto's Afghans have been in the country for less than 10 years, and over half of the community is under the age of 25 (Ornstein 2006). Challenges facing Afghan newcomers in Canada include prejudice (Khanlou, Koh, and Mill 2008) and disproportionately high rates of poverty and unemployment (Ornstein 2006). Although 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.

Though the settlement needs of youth in Canada are often overlooked by immigration research, which focuses instead on the economic integration of adults, the few existing studies on adolescents indicate important settlement challenges facing this group (Anisef and Kilbride 2003). The challenges are significant, as young immigrants and refugees arriving in Canada must learn English or French, navigate a new school system, deal with separation from family members and friends left behind in their country of origin, cope with the stress of adapting to different roles shaped by shifting family dynamics, balance the sometimes conflicting values of family and peers, and grapple with issues of identity formation and the pressures of adolescence (Janzen and Ochocka 2003).

Restarting one's life in a new country requires access to resources, one of the most important being accurate, timely information. Information is vital to

recently arrived immigrants and refugees, as it can facilitate access to housing, health care, education, and employment, and facilitate 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.

Leisure is an additional aspect of life that offers a window into the settlement experiences and information practices of immigrants and refugees. Leisure can be defined as pleasurable or beneficial activities freely chosen and undertaken in time away from work and other obligations. Studies of leisure in the lives of immigrants (Stodolska, Marcinkowski, and Yi-Kook 2007; Yu and Berryman 1996; Juniu 2000; Tsai and Coleman 1999) and refugees (Rublee and Shaw 1991; Hall and Huyskens 2002) reveal significant barriers to leisure encountered by newcomers, including stress and social isolation.

The role of information practices in the leisure of immigrants and refugees is an area that warrants future research. Leisure settings can play an important role in the facilitation of information for newcomers, for instance through the sharing of information during leisure pursuits with others (Stodolska, Marcinkowski, and Yi-Kook 2007). Lack of information about available leisure opportunities, such as free public recreation programs, has been found to be an important barrier to newcomer participation (Vengris 2006).

Approach

In light of the absence of literature on Afghan newcomer youth's experiences and information practices, an exploratory research design was selected. Exploratory research is appropriate when researchers "have little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, activity, or situation they want to examine but nevertheless have reason to believe it contains elements worth discovering" (Stebbins 2001, 6).

To explore the context of settlement and information among Afghan newcomers in Toronto, I conducted an ethnographic study consisting of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. In considering various possible research designs for this study, I determined that characteristics of Afghan newcomer youth in Toronto made written surveys and other large-scale methods inappropriate. Afghan youth, depending on their past access to schooling, may not have written fluency in their first language, and, depending on how long they have lived in Canada, may also have difficulty reading and writing in English. In addition, key informants familiar with Afghan youth (including Afghan settlement workers and Afghan youth working as peer-researchers for a local health agency) advised that Afghan newcomer youth would not respond to posters, flyers, or other general invitations to take part in a study. I was advised that personal introductions or referrals through trusted, known intermediaries would be the only successful recruitment strategies for this group, a finding reflected in the literature (Omidian 1996; Zulfacar 1998).

To better understand the context of settlement among Afghan youth in Toronto, I was a participant observer over a period of two years at events organized by and for Afghan youth. These events included the following: weekly English-language conversation groups taking place at settlement agencies in which I took part as a volunteer conversation partner; large community celebrations and fundraisers held in both public settings and within Afghan community organizations at which I was an audience member; and research meetings, information sessions, and debate groups organized by local Afghan student associations in which I was an observer. Both before and after each event, I informally introduced myself to participants, identifying myself as a doctoral student researching the settlement experiences of Afghan youth in Toronto.

Through informal contact with settlement organizations as well as organizers of community events and individuals in attendance at these events, key informants were identified. These informants included representatives from settlement agencies serving Afghan youth and Afghan student associations at local high schools, colleges and universities, as well as individual Afghan youth. Key informants proved to be vital resources for facilitating recruitment for individual semi-structured interviews with Afghan newcomer youth.

A total of seven Afghan youth participants were recruited with the assistance of key informants. Participants included two youth referred by local Afghan student groups, one referred by a settlement agency, three referred by an Afghan youth peer-researcher working for a local multicultural health agency, and one referred by an Afghan youth who had heard about my project through my attendance at community events. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 and had all lived in Canada for less than 10 years, though some participants were more recently arrived, having lived in Canada for less than 18 months. Two in-depth interviews were held with each participant to allow sufficient time for them to discuss their experiences without making each interview too long; single interviews ranged in length from 45 to 90 minutes. Participants were asked 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. Participants were also asked about their leisure pursuits and their seeking, sharing, and use of information during these activities. Interviews with six of the seven youth participants were audio-recorded, while in one case audio-recording was declined by the participant and detailed handwritten notes were taken instead.

Interviews with youth were supplemented by interviews with five settlement workers serving Afghan youth. This was done to include these workers' perspectives on the settlement challenges facing youth as well as to gather their thoughts on gaps in existing programming and outreach strategies appropriate to Afghan youth. The data collected in these five interviews relate to both the first and second research questions, as settlement workers were asked to reflect on the challenges and unmet needs experienced by Afghan newcomer youth, as well as the settlement-related information practices youth use following migration.

I transcribed all audio-recorded interviews using NVivo 8. Analysis of interview transcripts and extensive handwritten field notes is currently underway. Qualitative, ethnographic data analysis strategies are being used, starting with open coding and initial memo writing, followed by focused coding and the writing of integrative memos (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). Member checking will be used to ensure that the findings match the perspectives of interview participants.

With respect to the first research question (regarding the challenges and settlement needs of youth), preliminary findings indicate that Afghan youth in Toronto are an extremely heterogeneous group, varying in terms of educational background, language, and pattern of migration. Most youth participants did not arrive in Canada directly from Afghanistan, but instead had lived—in some cases for many years—in intermediate countries, such as Pakistan, Iran, India, or Uzbekistan. This finding reflects the varying migration patterns of Afghan refugees worldwide due to decades of conflict in Afghanistan. Initial findings point to various settlement challenges, including family separation and difficulties learning English. Two youth participants noted numerous settlement challenges as a result of their arrival in Canada alone at age 16 as refugee claimants, including their search for housing and a lawyer, as well as navigating the refugee claim process.

Regarding the second research question, which relates to the settlement information practices of youth, preliminary findings indicate that family and friends are primary information sources. Other helpful sources mentioned by some participants include English-as-a-second-language teachers, classmates, and settlement workers. Settlement workers are employees of agencies that receive government funding to provide information, referral, counselling, and other services to newcomers to Canada. Settlement workers are fluent in the languages of the communities they serve and, in the case of more recently arrived newcomer groups such as Afghans, settlement workers are often immigrants and refugees themselves. Some youth participants and settlement workers in this study noted that the ethnicity of Afghan settlement workers may influence their perceived helpfulness or trustworthiness among newcomers. Participants noted that historical inequalities and conflict between ethnic groups in Afghanistan influenced settlement information-seeking in Canada by causing some newcomers to mistrust or avoid settlement workers based on ethnicity.

The third research question explored the leisure activities of Afghan youth and possible effects of these activities on settlement and information practices. Preliminary findings indicate the pervasiveness of information technologies in the leisure of Afghan youth, 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 and 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. YouTube was also popular among youth participants, who noted it as

a useful resource with which to learn new skills ranging from hairstyles and make-up techniques to home renovations.

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. The findings of this study enrich information-behaviour research relevant to newcomers by adding a unique look at the experiences of youth. By exploring the information practices and settlement of a group of young people in Toronto, this study contributes to the growing bodies of literature in the fields of information studies, immigration studies, and leisure studies. By focusing on information and settlement within a Canadian context, this study also offers a possible point of comparison to existing studies of immigrant information practices, the majority of which have been conducted in the United States.

The findings of this study enhance our understanding of the context in which newcomer youth seek, use, and share information for settlement, and therefore have implications for the design and implementation of outreach strategies appropriate to reaching these groups and delivering settlement information through trusted sources. This study offers Afghan newcomer youth the opportunity to share their unique perspectives on their experiences since migration.

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