

Immigrants in House: Trajectories of leadership, work and belonging

Pilar Riaño-Alcalá

School Social Work

University of British Columbia



Research Questions Relevant to the Oral History Analysis

Primary Research Question:

- How do neighbourhood houses, as place-based, multi-service, community-governed, non-profit organizations, affect social equity, collective efficacy, and inclusion, based on the cases of Metro Vancouver?

DIMENSION 2 – PATHWAY FROM SERVICE TO SOCIAL INCLUSION

- How do NHs foster community capacities, social inclusion, volunteerism, and leadership among individual service users?

DIMENSION 3 – PLACE-BASED COLLECTIVE ACTION & ADVOCACY

- How do NHs connect people in the community and nurture collective efficacy?

Oral History Interviews

Total interviews conducted: 44 interviews

- 20 immigrants, 3 second generation immigrants:
 - 19 women, 4 men;
 - 14 different countries (Asia, Europe, Latin America and Africa);
 - Long term engagement with the NHs (from 4 to over 30 years);
 - Shifting/dynamic roles as users, participants, volunteers, leaders, part time and full time staff, board member;
 - Intergenerational and family engagement.

Oral history and Life stories

Oral history: The interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purpose of historical reconstruction (Grele, 1996) and the valorization of the voices of ignored and oppressed groups (Berger and Patai, 1991).

Life story: a story about the life of a person that is told to another; it recovers the identity of the person and their legacy to the future. It seeks to understand their life trajectory in relation to broader processes (Remembering and Narrating conflict, 2012; Portelli, 1991).

My story is part of the neighbourhood story because they all overlap to create the neighbourhood. Anna

Content

- Place based holistic model of community building
 - Placed based connecting and engagement
 - Intergenerational participation and leadership
 - NH as commons of knowledge, resource sharing and community
 - Place based and experiential learning
- Cycles of life and pathways
 - Capacity to aspire
 - Meaningful work/Meaningful lives
 - Diversity of pathways in a journey
 - Challenges

Argument

- Point of departure: Structural challenges (racism and inequity) and everyday obstacles related to lack of inclusion, discrimination and the social attitudes of dominant members of society have historically impacted on immigrant economic, social and political incorporation (Alba and Foner, 2015).
- NHs as place based organizations play a unique role in immigrants pathways towards incorporation. They can be seen as: a) places for meaningful personal, family and civic engagement; b) hubs for exchange and career path development and c) locus of social and political participation.
- Immigrants have played a central role in the envisioning and maintenance of NHs as places of social and racial inclusion, place based learning and leadership.

Placed based connecting, movement and engagement

Engaging community and connecting people are seen as central to the task of inclusion, civic mindedness and capacity building:

Patricia: But it's not only coming to eat, it's also *connecting* with other people. **Family support worker from Peru, over 7 years engagement**

Agatha: But I think the movement, for me, it's just that like Gordon House, it's part of the movement of getting out there and letting people know who we are and what we do. And I love the fact that we're moving away from providing services to fix a problem. [...] *It's about engaging a community, and making people in a big city feel like they're part of a community.* I think that's the biggest, and I tell Paul that all the time, that I've seen such a *huge shift from providing a service to engaging people in a community, and making them part of it.* **Program Director, over 4 years of engagement**

Intergenerational and family engagement and leadership

Maheen: “My family was very involved with the neighbourhood house. I became part of any community event that the neighbourhood house was involved in [...] Both of my kids were closely involved with the neighbourhood house. Both went to pre-school and summer camp, attended leadership programs, and volunteered with summer programs. They kind of grew up in MPNH - they were always there. If I didn't finish work on time, they would walk to the neighbourhood house from school and we would go home together. It was our second home. My mom also came to a lot of the family nights and multicultural nights. My husband came if he had time. My sister-in-law volunteered. My nieces and nephews got involved in the leadership program and they also volunteered. The neighbourhood house was part of our family.” **Family Program manager, program participant, over 18years involvement.**

NH as Commons

NHs have been experienced as a shared place, a commons of knowledge, resource sharing and community:

Lynn: Because some people have things to share and give too and somebody who's living in hard times have things to share with people who are doing really well and people who are doing really well have things to share with other people. I see neighbourhood house *as a commons place* where people come together so I hope more of that happens. Community Kitchen Coordinator, over 25 years engagement, 2nd generation:

Commons: controlled by a group of people, for the collective benefit of its members.

Place based and intergenerational learning and skill development “through osmosis”

My social skills were really heightened by watching the social workers and my mother ... interact with community members. Quite a number of people who came in had mental health issues, so I learned to navigate around their stresses and coping mechanisms. [...] A lot of learning happened just from being around, and it also gave me a really strong appreciation of community and interpersonal relationships later in life.”

I’ve always had a curiosity and desire to understand the causes and meanings of poverty, and I think that came from growing up in the neighbourhood house where those conversations were always happening. I don’t believe it was innate in me; I think the nurture piece was most prevalent. I followed my mother’s trade because that’s the environment I was in.” **Julio, Director of Youth Search, contract youth worker, volunteer. Over 20 years of engagement.**

A place based holistic approach to community building and work...

Participants see that neighbourhood houses build community outside or beyond a service delivery or needs based frameworks: it is the working of social networking and place based engagement that opens space to create “a movement” for developing a sense of community and collective efficacy. These are the core elements that participants see as central to building an inclusive community, civic mindedness and capacity to address larger issues and envision collective horizons in a localized manner. These elements are also core in providing participants with a sense of satisfaction and commitment with their work.

CYCLES OF LIFE AND PATHWAYS

Capacity to aspire in place

NH open space and strengthen capacity to aspire of their users, volunteers and workers:

Maheen: I wanted to do something for them because they are isolated here. It's not like Iran where they can go out. [...] So I asked Sharon if I could use one of the small rooms upstairs to run a program for Persian seniors. And she said, 'Sure, I'll pay you to do it.' Another amazing moment! What?! She said, 'We have a tiny budget to run a multicultural seniors program and we haven't found anybody who wants to do it.' It was three or five hours a week. I would have done it voluntarily! So that was my first job at the neighbourhood house, and I created it myself. [...] The program was really successful and I had about twenty Persian seniors coming from all over Metro Vancouver." **Family Program manager, over 18 years of engagement.**

Strengthening the capacity to have voice

Maheen “It was through my involvement with the neighbourhood house that I started becoming strong and able to stand up and have a voice and be able to look for things that I wanted. The first five or six years in a new country, you don’t even know who you are. *It’s like being a singer without a voice.* That’s all you are because you were ripped out of what you knew and thrown somewhere. [...] The neighbourhood house saved me because being a part of anything at the neighbourhood house gives you some sense of how the world works, how Canada works. You can’t put a value on that.” **Family Program manager, program participant, 20 years engagement**

Capacity to aspire

- Aspirations (if they're repatriated to the terrain of culture) form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think), they are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life. [...] *Capacity to aspire* is not evenly distributed in any society. It is a navigational capacity, it allows to explore the future more frequently.
 - Arjun Appadurai

Meaningful work and lives: making choices

Anna: I changed a lot because of my work with the neighbourhood house. Back home I was a very career-driven person, and I had a lot of success. I won two awards for my films and I was well-known [...]. I had everything that a journalist could want but I didn't feel complete. I was kind of stuck. [...] Here, it's totally different. I feel so happy with what I am doing and I feel it has meaning. I feel in touch with people in a way that I couldn't be as a journalist; now I am part of the people, part of the life that I am looking at; I'm on the inside rather than looking in from the outside. I changed my life and the path of my job. The neighbourhood house was the place where I discovered where my career is going and, having established that, my career is guiding my personal life. **Project coordinator, Arts program, 4 years engagement**

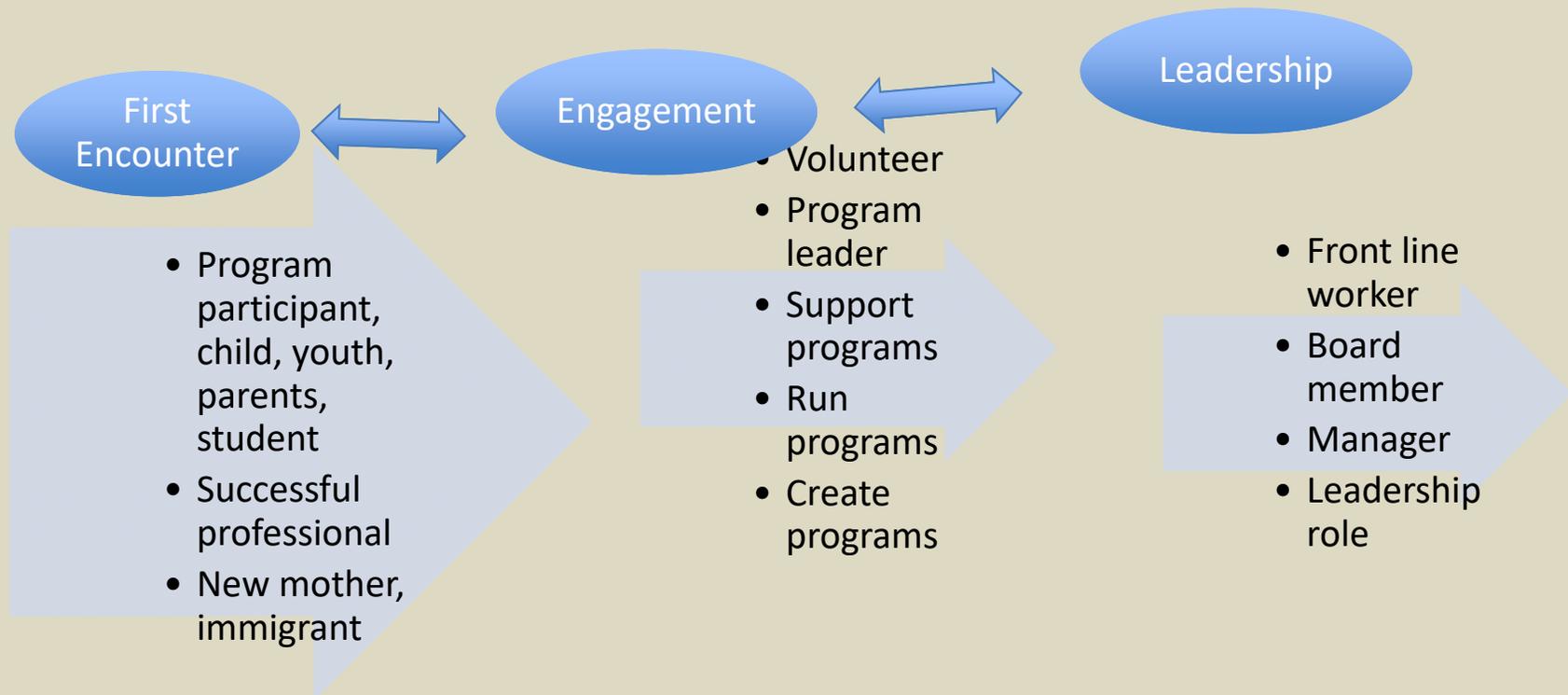
Meaningful work and lives: relationships matter

Jessy: “Every single moment of my life here at Gordon House is a small achievement in a certain way. I try bring a smile to someone’s face at least a couple of times a day. [...] I don’t have any major achievements in my life, but I have these small things that I carry on. People say, ‘work is to get money.’ I say, ‘my work feeds my soul.’ It really does. I really enjoy the small moments.” **Office administration, reception, 13 years engagement**

Meaningful work and lives : the difference in NH

Patricia: But neighbourhood houses are different. I think that's why I love working here. Because it's not only the way you are treated as a staff, as an employee, but also how they are responding to your needs. There's always, as I told you, a positive answer. They are very supportive, very, very supportive. They also enjoy when you are having successes. They enjoy with you together. And when you are going through hard times, they are also there for you. That's what I really like. **Family support worker, 9 years engagement**

Immigrant Pathways



Challenges

- Personal and work related challenges (loss of funding, jobs, programs) as challenges to efficacy and success of NH as a place based holistic approach:
 - Loosing people / the very essence of being a NH
 - Uncertainty of funding.
- Focus on community building and support with a weak presence of collective action and advocacy focus.

THANKS