

# Immigrant Housewives in Canada: A Methodological Note<sup>1</sup>

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This paper presents some methodological questions which I encountered in conducting a study of immigrant housewives. The description I am going to make of this group of immigrant women comes from a study conducted for the Immigrant Women's Centre of Toronto. The Immigrant Women's Centre is an agency which serves immigrant women with health and health related problems. A brief history of the Centre and the impetus for the project are documented in the report of the study entitled, *Immigrant Housewives in Canada* (Ng & Ramirez, 1981a). My research was on immigrant women who came to Canada with their husbands, as housewives. The women that I talked with were mainly from rural backgrounds or industrially less developed countries, who spoke little or no English. They came to Canada as "sponsored immigrants" under the "family class" classification of the Immigration Act, and their entry was not subject to the standard economic requirements of "independent immigrants." They were considered "dependents" of the sponsor, usually the husband or a relative, who was legally responsible for their financial welfare for a period of ten years.

The research project began in 1976, when the staff of the Centre started to document the experiences and perceptions of the clients, using a questionnaire format. But due to the lack of time, funding and research skills, this body of materials was not analyzed until I started working with Judith Ramirez, at that time the coordinator of the Centre. After reviewing the questionnaires and many lengthy conversations with Judith Ramirez, I decided that in order to generate the qualitative descriptions of immigrant women's lives which the questionnaires intended, more in-depth interviews were necessary. The second stage of data collection was carried out between the summer of 1979 and the spring of 1980. During this time, we conducted "follow up" interviews with some of the women who talked to the staff before, and they in turn put us in touch with other women who wished to be interviewed.

Before I go on to describe the results of the study, I want to detail the method of thinking which underpinned the study, because it is crucial to our analysis of the data and by extension what I shall be reporting about immigrant women's situations. The development of the

conceptual framework underlying my analysis and method of work has been profoundly influenced by the work of Dorothy Smith and her explication of Marx's method of political economy.

Smith's work began as a critique of sociology which either totally omits women's experiences or treats women as the object of inquiry (Smith, 1972). In her more recent work, she attempted to develop a way of doing sociology which put women in the focus of inquiry (Smith, 1977; 1979). In seeking to do a sociology for women, rather than of women, Smith maintains that it is not enough to include women's perspectives in the analysis, though of course that is an important starting point. Beginning from the perspective of women and taking up the standpoint of women indeed calls into question how the sociological enterprise is put together, because it necessitates an investigation of how women's work has provided the material basis for sociology which at the same time accomplishes women's exclusion from it. The standpoint of women, then, allows us to see how sociology is brought into being as primarily a male enterprise located in the ruling apparatus (Smith, 1972). Women may, of course, participate in this enterprise, but only as individuals, and never as members of their sex (Smith, 1972).

Although concerned with quite a different group of people, Marx's method of political economy proceeds in a similar fashion by interrogating the problematical character of commodity production from the standpoint of labour. According to Marx, the standpoint of labour grounds production in the activities of individuals producing and reproducing their existence under definite material conditions (see Marx & Engels, 1971). Beginning from the standpoint of labour brings the process of capitalist production and reproduction into focus because it is the labour of the working class which provides the material substratum on which this mode of production is based; and therefore it is only from the

standpoint of labour that the entire process of capitalist production can become visible. At the same time, because labour does not own the means of production and must work for the capitalist for its own subsistence, the activities of production also accomplishes the subordination and oppression of labour (Marx, 1954).

The method of work recommended by Smith is one which shifts the sociological problematic from the discourse to the everyday world (Smith, 1975a). Thus, instead of starting with preconceived notions, hypotheses, or theories originating in the discourse and using the everyday world of experience as a resource for the sociological undertaking, the task of the sociologist is seen to be one which interrogates the problematical character of the everyday world (Smith, 1975a). What does this mean in terms of the current undertaking? It means that both the research process and the analysis proceeded on the understanding that:

(a) women's experience has by and large been subordinated to the concepts and theories, developed (primarily) by men, in the ruling apparatus, so that there is a disjuncture between women's experience and the forms in which that experience is socially expressed (see also Smith, 1975b); and

(b) people's subjective experience is not random. It is generated by an objective organization of social reality which is in turn determined by a particular mode of production (see also Ng & Ramirez, 1981b).

This understanding meant that we could not rely on the theories developed in the academic discourse to inform us about immigrant women's experience. For example, the physical and psychological difficulties experienced by immigrant women are frequently relegated to "adjustment problems" and "value conflicts" arising from the transition of one culture to another. While people who work with immigrants on a daily

basis, such as community workers, organizers, and counsellors, may recognize that these difficulties arise as a result of their class location in Canada, they do not have the conceptual tools to express it. There exists no theory, as yet, which can articulate the concerns of people working with immigrant women, and concerns of immigrant women themselves.

Marx's work not only provides a theory which can account for the contradictory nature of capitalist production; it furthermore provides a method of work which shows how people's consciousness and experience (e.g., alienation felt by the labourer) is generated out of the contradictions of this particular mode of production. In *Das Kapital*, he systematically explicates the central relations of production on the one hand, and exposes the fallacy of economic theories on the other (see Marx, 1954).

It is this method of proceeding which we used to examine the experience of immigrant women. The study aimed at an analysis of how immigrant women's situation is located in and determined by the social organization of Canadian society. Our analysis did not start with a hypothesis; nor were we concerned about whether our "sample" of immigrant women was representative. Our premise is that each one of our experiences is part of the social and material organization of Canadian society, and therefore each one of our experiences can tell us something about that social organization.

Returning now to the study, what can be said very briefly about immigrant housewives' situation is that, as immigrant families come to Canada, the woman's work in the home undergoes a qualitative change. The result of this is that her work is intensified. Together with this work intensification is a concomitant increase in and enforcement of her dependence on her immediate family, most notably the husband.

Furthermore, we isolated two sets of processes which contribute to these phenomena. The first set of processes we called "organizational changes," referring to the actual changes in material organization of women's lives as a result of immigration. The second set of processes we called "institutionalized practices/processes" to point to those practices inherent in the legal, educational and service delivery systems which systematically recreate and deepen various kinds of inequalities in our society.<sup>2</sup> I will not describe this part of the analysis, but will briefly give an example to illustrate the issue. I mentioned previously that most immigrant housewives entered Canada as "sponsored" immigrants. This is a legal status originating in the Immigration Act prior to the changes implemented in 1978. Once named a "sponsored" immigrant, a woman is ineligible for government subsidies in most language, educational and skill training programs. As well, she will find that she is denied access to many social service programs, such as welfare, should she need to use these programs. Such policies very clearly lead to a woman's economic dependence on her family since opportunities for becoming independent are curtailed on the basis of her immigration status.

If we examine the first set of processes - organizational changes - we can see how the qualitative changes in these women's lives are brought about. In terms of the experience of immigrant women, these dynamics are revealed in exclamation about the difficulties in conducting their work (housework) properly in Canada. For some reason, housework seems more difficult; life seems more hectic; there are more worries, from husband's paid employment to the kinds of troubles that children can get themselves into.

Our work was not aimed at constructing a typology of the kinds of experiences women have in Canada. Rather, the enterprise was of a different kind. While beginning from what women told us of their experience gave us access

to the dimensions which we had not explored before, we did not stop at the level of perception and experience. We wanted to discover the social organization which gives rise to these experiences. The question became: What is it in Canada, as opposed to their homeland, which generates these kinds of experiences and perceptions for these women?

Given what I have said about the standpoint of women, then it becomes apparent that we have to look "elsewhere" for the answer. By elsewhere I mean that we cannot confine our analysis to the world of experience alone. I do not, however, mean that we have to look beyond the realm of the everyday world, for the determinations of our social formation are fully contained in the everyday world, although the social relations which generate them may not be immediately visible. Again, to quote Dorothy Smith, she puts it in the following way:

If you've located an individual experience in the social relations which determine it, then although that individual experience might be idiosyncratic, the social relations are not idiosyncratic. (All experiences) are generated out of, and are aspects of the social relations of our time, of corporate capitalism. These social relations are discernible, although not fully present or explicable in the experiences of people whose lives, by reason of their membership in a capitalist society, are organized by capitalism (quoted in Campbell, n.d.)

The task of the sociologist, then, is to explicate these social relations.

As regards the immediate task at hand, the experiences of immigrant women led us to ask the question of how their lives are organized in such a way that housework becomes more difficult. It is important to point out that this is more than a matter of "cultural difference." In fact, we found that the term "cultural difference" obscures

more than it makes visible women's lives. In the study, we recorded in detail the circumstances under which women must conduct their housework in Canada, and how these circumstances are different from their homeland.

One of the most crucial differences we found is that, when immigrant families come to Canada, they are totally immersed in a "money economy." I do not wish to attach a lot of theoretical status to this term. It is used here to underscore the fact that women's work in economically less developed parts of the world is not fully appropriated by modern industries, and therefore to a large extent women remain in control of the *pace* of work within the family unit. Housework in such a setting is also carried out cooperatively by women from different households.

By contrast, women's work in Canada now comes to be determined industrially by the husband's paid work outside the home. Money becomes the most important consideration in the economy of the family, and since the husband is usually the major wage earner in the family (because it is he who was recruited into the Canadian labour force), his needs and demands come to dictate and organize the schedule of immigrant women's work in the home. The woman's responsibility is to ensure his earning power, so that he can return daily to the paid labour force. Her work in the home must be oriented to this consideration. If there are other wage earners in the household, then she must cater to their needs and demands as well. In this connection children's activities in the educational system also impinge on housework, since the mother in Canada is seen to be responsible for how her child(ren) present themselves and perform in school (see Cassin & Griffith, 1981; Noble, 1979).

In addition, there are also changes of a material kind which shape and determine the woman's work. Housework in Canada is privatized in the sense that it is conducted within the confines

of the single family unit. The lay-out of houses and apartments does not permit the cooperation of housework among neighbours and friends. While the privatization of basic utilities, such as running hot and cold water and electricity, are meant to and do cut down the amount of labour spent on housework for the individual housewives, they also prevent and render irrelevant the cooperative network women have traditionally established in an industrially less advanced setting. The description by one informant is illuminating in this respect:

The structure of housework for the women in the peasant neighbourhood, whose husbands have already migrated away to earn a family wage, was far more communal than it could ever be here, if only because of the physical feature of the neighbourhood. When I was growing up, we all lived on a block. And inside the block it was hollow. There was a yard. So there was a yard culture. And everyday, you would do certain things, wash or iron, whatever. Ways were devised for things to be shared. It also had a built-in daycare system. The children had to play in the yard, not on the street. The women would kind of look after the children, informally, you know. You didn't appoint anyone. It just happened. It was a matter of course because that was the place where they would go to do their laundry....

Another area of Canadian social organization which affects the women's work profoundly is the commercialization of household products. Women in a farming economy (and in Canada this pattern was common up to the turn of the century) traditionally produce many of the products and produce necessary for family consumption. With the advent of industrialization, this process is taken out of the home and comes to be concentrated in and appropriated by large business enterprises. Women's household labour in this setting is not deemed as indispensable or as necessary as it once was. (This is of course an

illusion but nevertheless it is commonly held.) In Canada, especially in urban industrial centres, there is a preponderance of services, from fast food outlets to laundry facilities, which render the woman's work in the home less indispensable.

Paradoxically, of course, working class immigrant men are usually brought into Canada to fill gaps in the labour market and they tend to concentrate at the bottom rungs of the occupational hierarchy, earning low wages. In this instance, the wife's domestic labour is indeed indispensable in sustaining the family economy, because the husband's wage does not permit the indiscriminate purchase of foodstuffs and services available in the city.

In addition, while the centralization of market places, in the form of super markets, may cut down on work for middle class and professional Canadian women and cut down costs for businesses, it only serves to create more work for the immigrant women. This kind of shopping pattern requires and assumes a certain mode of transportation and adequate storage facilities such as large refrigerators and freezers. As we wrote in the report,

(Large scale shopping expeditions) are certainly not attractive ventures for immigrant women, who do not know the language or the geography of the city, and who have to subject their lives to the whims of the public transportation system, sometimes under intolerable climatic conditions (Ng & Ramirez, 1981a:39).

In this regard, we can also come to appreciate how the possession of modern household appliances such as vacuum cleaner and washer/dryer also organize the pace of women's work in determinate ways. All in all, immigrant women's work comes to be organized by the physical set-up of houses, distances to the market and laundry facilities, as well as, and most impor-

tantly, by their husbands' wage work outside the home. The autonomy which they enjoyed previously is seriously undermined. In this setting, they have to become more dependent on the husband, both economically and practically.

Of course, this is not an exhaustive list. But it gives some indication of how immigrant women's experiences are part of and determined by larger social and economic processes over which they have little control. And yet these processes are inextricably tied to their lives in fundamental ways. As my work shows, these processes are embodied in very ordinary features of our lives, which we have come to take for granted.

The method of work which I propose here is aimed at focusing our inquiry on these ordinary and mundane features of the everyday world and interrogating how they shape our experiences and the alternatives opened to us, as women and as immigrant women, in profound ways. It is in this social organization that immigrant women's experiences are located.

I have not dealt with the institutionalized practices and processes which I mentioned earlier, but the same kinds of questions can be raised. For example, women's legal status as dependents can lead to questions about the role of immigration in Canada's economy. It could lead us to an examination of the gaps and uneven development of the Canadian economy and how immigrants are brought in to fill these gaps. It would also allow us to see the reasons why it is necessary to keep women in a separate legal category subordinate to her sponsor, because her role is not to fill the gap in the labour market *per se*, but to maintain the male worker. It would lead us to an examination of the political economy of immigration generally, and Canada's role in it specifically. And so on.

Finally, by way of a conclusion, I want to draw attention to the implications of the work presented here (both the description and the method)

for the recent and continuing debate on sex, ethnicity (or race) and class. In this debate, there has been a tendency to rank order these categories and attempt to determine which is the most crucial determinant in people's experience (See Ng, 1981). Although Marxist feminists such as Dalla Costa and Benston, have tried to locate women's domestic labour within the framework of a Marxist analysis, their work still tends to remain within the realm of theory rather than returning to the experience of women (although of course they begin from this concern).

The description and analysis provided here suggest that women's work in the household in relation to economic processes does not have to be derived from theoretic categories. If we could only abandon our commitment to a theoretical framework and simply focus on what women actually do, then we can *see* how women's work is an integral part of a determinate social organization. The study provided here, though not complete in itself as representing what immigrant women actually do, nevertheless shows exactly how their work in the home is an integral part of the organization of Canadian society, and it is an organization based on the capitalist mode of production. The issue then is not to "fit" women's work into an existing conceptual schema. The issue is that if the description and analysis is "right," then it will show us the features which constitute the class location of immigrant women in Canadian society.

It is not a question of whether sex, ethnicity, or class is a determinate factor in organizing the experiences of immigrant women. It is that their experience takes on a determinate form because it is determined by their relation to a particular form of capitalist development as women and as immigrant women. This is not a matter which can be worked out merely conceptually. It can only be determined as an empirical matter in our strife, as social scientists, to understand the processes which shape people's experiences in our society.

## NOTES

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 11th annual meeting of the Sociologists for Women in Society, Toronto, August 1981.
2. Although we have isolated these processes for the purpose of presentation, in real life, they are inseparable. They are also not independent of human activities and intentions. It is indeed the activities of people which accomplish these things which come to be consequential for immigrant women.

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