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LANAUDIÈRE HEAVEN FOR COLOMBIAN REFUGEES: THE REALITY OF WHAT IS AND THE DREAM OF WHAT COULD BE

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Abstract

Considering the steady increase in the arrival of refugee families, it seems essential to point out the challenges this new reality raises and to explore avenues that would result in a positive experience for families. The authors suggest challenging our perceptions of the refugees' experience by giving a voice to these families and daring to consider them as experts in their own experience. Appreciative inquiry was used to explore not only the challenges faced by refugee families, but also to uncover the successes and shed light on new solutions. The importance of including families in the research process and in discussions related to the

development of services stands out, as well as the empowering effect of recognizing the family wisdom.

Keywords

Appreciative Inquiry, Families, Parents and Partners, Refugees

1. Introduction

The last twenty years have been marked by numerous conflicts and natural disasters, and the number of families found outside their country or region of origin is growing. Given this steady increase and the fact that the majority of refugees and displaced persons are in developing countries, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) urge developed countries to maintain and increase their efforts to receive them (UNHCR, 2010, 2015).

In 1978, new protections for refugees were built into Canada's immigration policy, thereby opening the door to families seeking asylum. Between 2004 and 2008, 14.4% of immigrants to the province of Quebec were refugees (MICC, 2009). Of the 16 regions in Quebec, the Lanaudière region ranks sixth in the number of refugees hosted (MICC, 2009). According to data available in 2009, the region hosted more than 2,000 immigrants of all categories (MICC, 2009). These newcomers come from many different places, although 22.6% of the immigrants to Lanaudière between 2003 and 2007 were refugees and 76% of these were from Colombia (MICC, 2009).

To assist families in the arrival and integration process in Lanaudière, several programs and various resources have been developed. Education, health and other institutions have reviewed their service offerings to include a component on cultural diversity that would meet the needs of immigrant families. However, despite the avowed intention to consider the needs of immigrant families, the families themselves are rarely involved in the process of program development; the same applies to research that focuses on their situation (Flores al., 2002; Gozdzia, 2004; Stein et al., 2002; Usita & Blieszner, 2002).

According to Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung (1998) and Alvarez, Vasquez, Mayorga, Feaster, and Mitrani (2006), there are significant barriers to the participation of immigrant families in research, particularly socio-economic. Language is also an important barrier to their participation, particularly for women, who as mothers, often experience delays in their progress

as a result of repeated absences from language classes (Robichaud, 2004; P. Bohmer, personal communication, January, 2002). This may explain why Hispanic women are particularly difficult to recruit (Alvarez et al., 2006); they occupy a central role within the family, which also has an impact on their ability to engage in activities outside the home. Furthermore, according to Benoit, Jansson, Millard, and Phillips (2005), representatives of ethnic minorities may have difficulty perceiving how research will have an impact on their daily lives and be concerned about how the information will be used. In most studies, the researcher controls the process, and it may be difficult for participants to fully understand each step, as well as the delays that are sometimes part of such a process.

These factors may partly explain the limited data we have on the lives of such families and the process of reception and integration. Add to this a context for training clinicians and researchers based on the problem solving process and expertise; the researcher and professional are often positioned as experts where they provide analysis and solutions for the situation (Carter, 2006a, 2006b, B. Carter, personal communication, June, 2006; Gozdzia, 2004; Summerfield, 1999). The usual *modus operandi* introduces a bias from the outset: the perspective of the observer whose training and culture will have an impact on the analysis of the situation. This impact begins from the point of view of problematization, which has been the subject of numerous studies (Breslau, Davis, Andreski, & Peterson, 1991; De Jong et al. 2001; Mooren, 2001; Redwood-Campbell et al., 2003). Furthermore, Collins (1993) denounces the voyeuristic aspect of some studies or concerns: “From the perspective of the privileged, the lives of people of color, of the poor, and of women are interesting for their entertainment value” (Collins, 1993, p. 37).

There is, however, another lesser-known approach to research which starts from the perspectives of families themselves. According Gozdzia (2004) and Summerfield (2005, 2008), an accurate understanding from the perspective of people who have experienced the situation is essential. Using such an approach, this study aims to identify the best practices and strengths of refugee families arriving in rural areas of Quebec. More particularly, it aims to:

- Provide a different perspective on the experience of immigrant families, specifically refugees, using appreciative inquiry to give voice to those families and their partners.

- Highlight the value of the successes and the paths to solutions (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, & Yaeger, 2000; Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1995).

The research questions we would like to answer are:

- What strengths identified by refugee families and partners facilitate integration and family life in communities in northern Lanaudière?
- Which best practices are identified by the families and partners?
- How can the establishment or maintenance of these practices be promoted?

2. Method

2.1. Overview of the Method

This study was based on appreciative inquiry (AI), which begins by recognizing the experience of its participants. Meetings are planned to move through four-phases. The first phase is *Discovery*. This phase explores, evaluates, and describes the group or organization and what is working well (Cooperrider & al., 2000). The second, *Dreaming*, explores what the organization, group or service could be. This phase has three elements: a vision of a better world, a powerful goal, and strategic findings (Cooperrider & al., 2000). The *Design* phase involves the operationalization of the project, that is, the creation of the ideal organization, during which it becomes necessary to prioritize, to make choices. The last phase, *Destiny*, is the creation of the network that will allow the project to be achieved and to facilitate connections.

2.2. Setting

The area encompassed by this study is northern Lanaudière. The Lanaudière region of Quebec is among those targeted by a provincial program for the location of refugees since 1996. In the region targeted by the study, refugees have settled mainly around Joliette because of the proximity to services, so researchers for this study have focused primarily on these services. Refugee origins vary from year to year, depending on conflict situations. Therefore, to provide a portrait of the situation in the Joliette regional municipal county (RMC) for the clientele of health, social and education services, the researchers invited participants from diverse backgrounds. However, only families of Colombian origin indicated an interest in taking part in the study. Limitations related to this situation are addressed in the discussion of results.

2.3. Participants

In all, 38 individuals were interviewed—28 adults, as well as 10 teenagers, who are identified as *partners* (as defined below). Of the adults, 12 are parents who live with their spouses, 3 are single parents, and 13 are adult partners, of whom some are parents. The parents have at least one child and they arrived in the Lanaudière region under refugee status in the four years prior to the beginning of the study.

2.4. Partners

Partners are people who have been involved in the reception, integration, or support provided to refugee families in the Lanaudière region. A previous study (Robichaud, 2004) found that several partners become involved when a refugee family arrives and settles in a community. Those partners, identified by families, come from various organizations—schools, health centers and social services, refugee shelters, volunteers, church services, and community policing—as well as host families.

To be considered as partners, they had to have interacted, either in their workplace or volunteer work, with refugee families, or to have participated in planning/programming services. Partners may also be caregivers, refugees, or people of Quebec origin (Quebeckers) who offer their assistance to families or individuals.

2.5. Procedure for Data Acquisition

To promote a consistent flow and rhythm during meetings, the Discovery and Dreaming phases were discussed over two meetings. These meetings were held in people's homes or in their workplace, while the Design phase was developed at meetings attended by participants in a room specifically booked for this purpose. The Destiny phase is reserved for the final meeting to which all participants as well as various guests are invited. The four phases often overlap throughout the research—AI is a continuous, not a linear process (Whitney & Trösten-Bloom, 2010). Given the variety of partners, the principal investigator chose a strategy used by Carter (Carter, personal communication, June 2006) to perform the first meetings in “interviews targeting the situation of a family”—by undertaking interviews individually, in pairs, or with one parent and one or more partners, depending on preferences and the particular situation of each family.

The subsequent meetings were held mostly in the form of groups. Special attention was given to the balance of the groups formed to ensure the sharing of power. In addition, the principal investigator reserved the right to meet individually with anyone who might have been uncomfortable contributing to group exchanges. At any time, participants could join or leave the group meetings. This openness was part of a process that promotes the empowerment of the families. To facilitate exchanges, parents and partners were free to use the language of their choice during meetings. With an interpreter present, everyone could express themselves and understanding of the contributions was more likely because exchanges were translated in the two languages used—Spanish and French.

2.6. Observation During Group Meetings and Field Notes

Before and after each interview, the principal investigator recorded thoughts about expectations, feelings, perceptions, barriers, questions, and any themes or adjustments for future meetings. A separate set of notes was also taken by an observer at group meetings regarding nonverbal behavior, any evidence of power games, the quality of people's participation, the impact of the interpreters, the meeting proceedings, group dynamics, and other pertinent elements. These were shared with the researcher who added them in the form of verbal notes to her reflections and the group work was adjusted and adapted based on the observer's comments.

2.7. Analytical Framework

The analysis process was based on AI, and therefore on the desire to preserve the essence of the participants' messages so the results reflected their experience, their concerns, and possible solutions. Given a "natural" tendency to recount problematic issues, the principal investigator used the theme of success stories to deepen the participants' reflections on what works well. From the beginning of the study, participants were seen and acknowledged as experts on their own experience. To maintain this status throughout the study, participants were equally involved in the various stages and in the first- and second-level analysis.

The first-level analysis was done in two ways: at the end of the first interviews, participants were invited to make a synthesis of discussions that occurred; then the principal investigator confirmed all perceptions with them and any information that seemed significant. Participants then took part in the second-level of analysis; they were asked to clarify, discuss, adjust and summarize the issues that they believed were representative of their collective

experience and of individual participants. During meetings, consensus was the goal, although according to AI, in the event of any disagreement, the researcher should ensure that the all messages are represented in the final report on the exchanges and mentions the presence of, and respect for, differences among participants. In a third series of interviews, participants went deeper into the second-level analysis. Working from syntheses developed in the preceding series, were asked to develop a summary of the elements essential to creating success stories. Thus they not only determined the elements that directly resulted from the study, but also those for which the principal investigator could make connections with current knowledge.

Participants also took part in planning meetings and their content. For instance, at participants' request, meetings were added to deepen the exchange and the analysis of certain themes or to discuss an emerging issue from recent meetings, but also to ensure the presence of some partners in discussions. The contribution of the principal investigator was to the third level of analysis, which is here presented in the discussion, and is related to the connections made between the elements identified in the study and current knowledge.

2.8. Ethical Considerations

This project was submitted for ethical approval to the ethics committees of the Université du Québec en Outaouais, the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières and the region's public social and health services centre (Centre de services sociaux et de santé du nord de Lanaudière). This type of study, with group meetings and the presence of an interpreter, does not allow for the preservation of participant anonymity. Participants were informed of this and are asked not to mention the names of participants and their discussions outside the group meetings. Only the principal investigator had access to the audio material, which is stored in an encrypted file on a password protected device.

3. Results and Discussion

For the AI analysis process, the principal investigator conducted meetings and discussions that aimed to map out an optimal path to follow when arriving in a new community. The goal was to reach consensus on elements that stakeholders, families, and policymakers would do well to invest their time, resources and energy, to promote the integration experience and see positive results. Participants identified nine key elements: recognition, commitment,

communication, respect, a proper support network, autonomy, family identity, time for relaxation and recreation, and hope.

3.1. Recognition

It is interesting to note that this aspect was put forward both by the families who refer to their experience and by the stakeholders involved with immigrant families. For participants, this was a founding element in the relationships between the family and service providers, volunteers and the society in which they operate. It is as much about acknowledging what a person is as what progress they have made, challenges overcome, and work accomplished.

According to the participants, there should be a review of the mechanisms for recognizing qualifications and relevant experience. Moreover, they find it stimulating and satisfying to know that they are useful to the host society. This was reported as having a direct impact on mental health and well-being. When asked who should be involved in implementing solutions, the participants mentioned first the families themselves, which, again, seems to underscore the importance of family support or empowerment in their experience. In addition, participants identified it as their responsibility to promote themselves as a cultural group and as individuals in the community as a way of countering prejudice.

3.2. Commitment

For participants, commitment and involvement are evident mainly through actions and are more than the expression of a wish. Some conditions were identified by stakeholders as exciting or as inspiring them to become more involved with the families. These conditions for encouraging involvement included people making efforts despite language barriers; people showing they wanted to help improve conditions, the families taking part and making efforts themselves; and sensing interest and a mutual commitment. It is interesting that the partners identified certain conditions that are more in the realm of perception, while the conditions revealed by the families seem to focus more on actions.

3.3. Communication

Communication is cited as presenting many challenges. The ultimate goal is for families to acquire the ability to share their experience, needs, and opinions in the language of the host community. According to participants, there should be different kinds of groups with different teaching methods tailored to individuals and their situations. This is key for smooth integration

and access to services. Despite the high cost of such support, participants are in favor of the presence of support for translation and/or interpretation and for guidance during training at work or parent meetings at school to optimize their participation in society. To this end, they proposed specifically that partnerships with students from language schools or translation training courses be explored in addition to the use of current volunteers.

3.4. Respect

It is interesting to note that participants dwelt for quite a while on the ways in which respect presents itself, especially in connection with their arrival; the partners also raised concerns with regard to their own culture and judgments that they sometimes perceive are made by the newcomers. Participants agreed on the fact that nobody likes to be labelled and that they expect to be considered and treated as unique. They noted that there were differences within their group just as within the Colombian and Quebec communities and that respect for these differences is essential. Aroian and Norris (2000) and Desmet, Ortuño-Ortín, and Wacziarg (2015) have noted the importance of diversity within a cultural group and identified the impact of diversity on needs. A sensitive issue concerns the housing provided to newly arrived families, who believe that the type of accommodation offered is an indication of the respect accorded to their situation, needs, and concerns. One proposal the group puts forward to promote respect through accommodations is to set up an association of immigrants that would come to the aid of families looking for housing, offering choices to them when they arrive, informing them of the laws that pertain to renting accommodations, homeowners interested in renting housing could tender offers to a government body that would follow this up with quality assurance measures to ensure housing meets the minimum standards they would establish.

3.5. An Adequate Support Network

The arrival experience is intense and unsettling, and participants expressed that the need for personalized services that help one feel safe and welcome. An adequate support network was identified as another success determinant.

One such network is the organizational/professional support network. A pivotal element regarding this network is the information transmitted. Participants say this should focus on job opportunities, recognizing the professional bodies to which they have belonged, the training they have had, and any related matters—all this while they are still in Colombia. Information on

education and qualification recognition must also be transmitted quickly since these are long processes that have a direct impact on the family's integration. Participants say it is also important to maintain a link with newly arrived families and to be proactive in offering support.

Equally important is the social support network, which is developed more informally in the community through job shadowing and immigrant families helping their own or other families. Bérubé's (2004) work follows a similar path, maintaining that the support offered for housing, access to information, improved living conditions, or access to employment helps a parent reconcile multiple roles, set expectations, and better steer the way to integration.

3.6. Autonomy

Autonomy is a determinant that quickly obtained the group's consensus. For participants it was essential and the ultimate goal of families and partners. Among the paths identified, exercising autonomy and taking autonomous actions falls on families and individuals. Nonetheless, partners should give free rein to the expression of this autonomy and, again, provide the necessary support without falling into the trap of offering unwanted care measures.

3.7. Family Identity

According to Camileri (1992) and Vatz-Laaroussi (2008), the family identity is remodeled in the integration process. Nevertheless, it remains the social and emotional benchmark for youths and adults alike (Vatz-Laaroussi, 2008). This element was evident in the meetings for this study. All in all, throughout the process of integration into a new community and despite the obstacles and doubts they encountered, participants affirm the importance they attach to the family unit and clarify the type of support needed to preserve this particular aspect with reference to role transitioning. Another issue discussed at the meetings was the negative impact their culture shock has on the family. To counteract this, in the opinion of participants, families and partners must be involved at all levels of prevention, detection, and response. These approaches are similar to the conclusions of Vatz-Laaroussi (2008) and Bérubé (2004) in which the family must guide the analysis and be at the heart of programming interventions for immigrants.

3.8. Time for Relaxation and Recreation

Many mentioned the physical and mental benefits of sporting activities, as well as associated effects such as being in contact with others in an informal context, pushing one's

limits, and letting off some steam. Others are attracted more to cultural or social activities: group dancing, going to see a movie, reading a good book, walking in a park. It is interesting to note that the children interviewed previously mentioned this need in themselves as much as in their parents, acknowledging everyone's need to escape from a rather heavy daily routine. In addition to providing a sense of balance and recovery, recreation promotes community integration (Pauzé & Gagné, 2005), thus contributing indirectly to maintaining and developing the social network.

3.9. Hope

Although this aspect was less discussed, the group is unanimous about this aspect, yet it is undoubtedly the most surprising aspect for the principal investigator. In fact, although distinct from the other determinants, hope is closely related to several of them. For families, it not only refers to the concept of spirituality, but also to the confidence they bring to their efforts and their ability and desire to improve their living conditions. This last aspect, desire, is the basis of their motivation as much for change as for cultural learning (Campinha-Bacote, 2007). Discussions to this effect brought partners together in groups: Quebeckers, referring to the saying "Help yourself and Heaven will help you, too," highlighted the similarity between the two cultures.

For Colombians involved in this study, representation often seems to connote action. While some participants were still in an exploratory mode, others decided to take action and proudly shared the results of their efforts and actions. For instance, one participant decided to give a seminar on refugees' experience to future police officers, another prepared herself to explain why she was qualified to do a specific training because of her education and experience.

3.10. Limitation of the Study

This last aspect of the discussion illustrates one of the difficulties of action research: the resulting messages represent the reality at a given time, but this is something that is likely to change. For example, in the case that concerns us, when approaches to solutions are discussed at meetings, participants begin discussing how to implement some of them as they leave the venue.

Another aspect that makes sharing and analyzing results difficult originates with the method itself, which is designed to develop and promote social change and not *a priori* to do research. Various authors have adapted AI—the true purists among them present the results in the form of participant reports.

Finally, some challenges related to the philosophy behind the method are also noteworthy. First, the method calls for a sharing of power between participants in both the conduct and content of meetings. This shared responsibility and the notion of equality of votes of the participants was sometimes difficult to enforce, especially when one participant decides that his or her views should be heard and should prevail. This same difficulty is noted in action research conducted with immigrant women by Ruppenthal, Tuck, and Gagnon (2005) who remark the presence of “dominant” participants. Hummelvoll and Severinsson (2005) note that continued collaboration in the context of an action research approach is indeed demanding and complex, and few studies have addressed this complexity.

4. Conclusion

The present study promotes the empowerment of individual participants while contributing to the advancement of knowledge of the experience of integration and support for immigrant families in a new community. The discussion on change that is inherent in the AI process and the discourse around it lead to the establishment of conditions that encourage participants to get involved in co-creating group measures that are closely related to practice (Carter, 2006a). Participants, as witnesses to change over the course of the study, realize that they can have some control over their situation. The contributions noted during the study seem to support Barrett (1995), for whom the underlying experience of AI is itself a source of empowerment for participants.

Through the AI process, nine elements were identified as keys to improve the immigration experience: recognition, commitment, communication, respect, an adequate support network, autonomy, family identity, time for relaxation and recreation, and hope. The study also showcases the successes and strengths of participants, including their abilities with regard to facing their experience and identifying possible solutions. Moreover, according to several contemporary authors, the recognition of community and family strengths is essential for identifying priority areas in intervention, research, and the development of health policy (Rousseau, Hassan, Morneau & Thombs, 2011; Summerfield, 2005; Usita & Blieszner, 2002). In research as in clinical assessment, focusing on problems when developing services or teaching and training professionals, does not take into account a global vision of the experience and needs

of families. The ownership of the research process demonstrated by the families of this study shows that they have the ability to analyze their experiences and identify possible solutions.

In all the success determinants identified by participants, it is interesting to note the pervasiveness of the concept of personal responsibility or action. This concept imbues the descriptions of the determinants, the phraseology, the themes chosen—all reflect a concern for action. According to AI researchers, adopting a statement on a change to be made is a harbinger of change, just as, according to AI, the very discussion of change is already a change in itself (Bushe, 2011).

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