"Adding rungs to the bottom of the ladder"? Transparency and communication with Family Class applicants

1. Background

Immigration and Refugee Protection Act
Goal 3.1(d): 'To see that families are reunited in Canada'
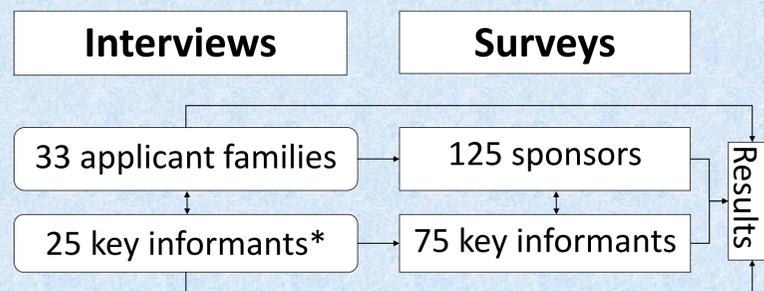
Family Class programs
Spouse or partner (inland processing); spouse, partner or dependent children (overseas processing); parents and grandparents

Gap in the literature on experiences of family reunification policy

2. Research question

What are the lived experiences of Family Class policy and programs for Canadian citizens and permanent residents attempting to (re)unite with family members in Canada?

3. Methods

Interviews	Surveys

33 applicant families — 125 sponsors

25 key informants* — 75 key informants

Results

*Key informants (KI): immigration lawyers and consultants, settlement workers, constituency office caseworkers
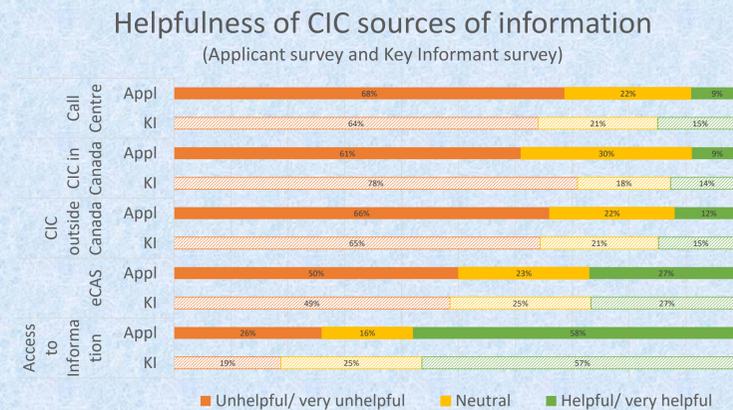
Approach: Critical policy studies
- Closing the gap between theory and practice[1]
- Speaking truths to power[2]
- Making visible that which has been rendered invisible in traditional policy studies[3]
- Exposing differences between formal equality and substantive equality in policy and implementation[4]

1. Furlong, P. & Marsh, D. (2010). A skin, not a sweater: ontology and epistemology in political science. In D. Marsh & G. Stoker (Eds.), *Theory and methods in political science*, 3rd ed. (pp.184-211). New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2. Radin, B. A. (2000). *Beyond Machiavelli: Policy analysis comes of age*. Washington: Georgetown University Press; 3. Phillips, S. (1996). Discourse, identity and voice: Feminist contributions to policy studies. In L. Dobuzinskis, M. Howlett & D. H. Laycock (Eds.), *Policy analysis in Canada: The state of the art* (pp.242-265). Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press; 4. Hankivsky, O. (2007). Gender mainstreaming in the Canadian context: "One step forward and two steps back." In M. Orsini & M. Smith (Eds.), *Critical policy studies*. (pp.111-135) Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

4. Findings
i. Transparency and communication

Helpfulness of CIC sources of information
(Applicant survey and Key Informant survey)

On the Call Centre:

"He was very helpful, he sent me emails with all the links"
(Carla, sponsored applicant)

"Horrible, you call four times, you get four completely different answers" (Navaratnam, applicant sponsor)

On communication with CIC:

"Everything is shrouded in secrecy as if it's not your case files you're inquiring about" (applicant survey respondent)

"Simply getting somebody's change of address right would be amazing"
(Vanjelis, MP caseworker)

On eCAS:

"Good in the sense that now you get basic information"
(Ivan, applicant sponsor)

"'Status received' and 'rejected/approved'. How is this useful?"
(Caroline, sponsored applicant)

General impressions:
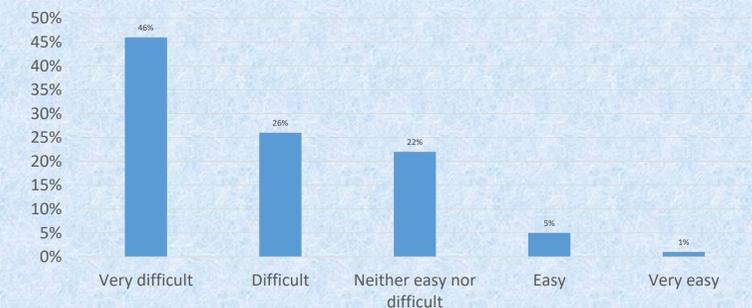
"A siege mentality"
(Dieudonné, applicant sponsor)

"It felt like talking to a wall"
(Applicant survey respondent)

"There is currently no more dismal or pathetic aspect of the immigration system than its attempts at client service. *They continue to add rungs to the bottom of the ladder.* There is little evidence that they are even trying to create effective accessibility - it really looks more like an attempt to merely create the appearance of access, like a false front in a movie set."

(Key informant survey respondent)

ii. Implications for applicants

How easy was it to understand what was happening? (Applicant survey)

"The information that was provided was, well for one it was false. [..] a month later they sent all the forms back."
(Rajendra, applicant sponsor)

"nervousness, a lot of nervousness"
(Bruce, applicant sponsor)

"They are like playing God with us, so we can't do anything about it, even if they keep extending the processing time I can't contact them before that because they say it's the processing time"
(Andrea, sponsored applicant)

"That's causing anger probably on both sides"
(Chiara, lawyer)

iii. Overcoming barriers

Submitting an ATI: "You can make out what was the problem, what was the mistake in the application" (Mahmez, settlement worker)

Going to the MP: "Probably the number one type of immigration casework we do here" (Branka, MP caseworker)

Helping each other: "Forum is my bible" (Rajiv, applicant, sponsor)

5. Recommendations

To reduce mistakes in applications, stress for applicants, time spent on ATI requests and pressure on constituency offices:

- Put more resources into staffing and training call centre agents and/or reintroduce a counter service that can advise people on a case-by-case basis
- Improve data entry of postal and email addresses, and updates thereof and/or communicate through eCAS
- Post more detailed information on the status of applications in eCAS

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