IMMIGRANT SURVIVORS OF INTIMATE PARTNER ABUSE

IMMIGRANT SURVIVORS OF INTIMATE PARTNER ABUSE:

THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore and ascertain the experiences and perceptions of immigrant survivors of abuse who use (or have used) domestic violence services. Scholars have posited that the experiences of immigrant survivors of abuse are best understood against the backdrop of the social contexts that frame their lives. It is against this argument that the study was designed to capture how the intersectionality of multiple marginalities and identities (race, class, gender, culture, service user, etc.) framed the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants. The study design was informed by concepts in feminist theory and phenomenology. The resulting data illuminates how identity politics not only shapes the particpants' perceptions and experiences of domestic violence services, but also contextualizes the relations of power that exists between service-providers and service-users.

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INTRODUCTION

Many strides have been made with the advancement of knowledge in the

area of domestic violence since it has been acknowledged as a widespread and

critical problem worldwide (Hague & Mullender, 2006; The United Nations,

1993). With consciousness-raising efforts of the feminist movement, research has

expanded to ascertain its prevalence, its consequences, and its costs. However,

more and more, the complexity of this issue becomes evident, illuminating the

need for the expansion of research to unravel the dynamics that create and

perpetuate the problem. Alongside this recognition, we see that the feminist

movement has evolved to incorporate intersections of different social identities

such as race and class (Chavis & Hill, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Richie, 2000;

Yuval-Davis, 2006). As a result, research in domestic violence has progressed to

explore these intersections (Bui & Morash, 1999; Donnelly, Cook, & Wilson,

1999; Grossman & Lundy, 2003), not only expanding knowledge in the area, but

also informing service providers about how best to help survivors of abuse.

For immigrant women who have survived intimate partner abuse[1] social

identities do not only cross race and class lines, but cultural lines as well. For

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[1] For this study, the terms intimate partner abuse and domestic abuse/violence will be used interchangeably when making reference to abuse experienced by immigrant women at the hands of partners with whom they have, or have had an intimate relationship. UNICEF defines 'domestic' violence as "violence by an intimate partner and by other family members, wherever this violence

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many who cross national borders, and especially for those who come from a non-western background, their experiences are made even more complex as they face varying degrees of difference in values, norms, and beliefs, and in Canada, these issues are unavoidable. For census year 2006, Statistics Canada reported that approximately 20% of the total population in Canada are immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2007). A breakdown of population statistics by gender shows that immigrant women account for 19% of women living in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). With the understanding that culture plays an integral role in shaping one's identity, maintaining and expressing certain traditional values after one has immigrated to another country can be quite challenging, especially when features of the culture of immersion (i.e., the dominant culture) makes the features and ways of other cultures subject to "minoritization" (Kernohan, 1998; Mullaly, 2002; Burman, Smailes, & Chantler, 2004; Dasgupta, 1998). Burman et al (2004) coined the term "minoritization" and used it and its derivatives to "highlight how groups and communities do not occupy the position of being a minority by virtue of some inherent property (of their culture or religion, for example) but acquire this position as the outcome of a socio-historical process" (p. 334). Kernohan (1998) identifies this as cultural oppression (other scholars, such as Dasgupta

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takes place and in whatever form" (UNICEF, 2000, p. 1), and both terms have been used in the literature, sometimes indiscriminately.

(1998), call it ethnocentrism), particularly expressed through stereotyping and

pathologizing other cultures. Given this definition, I posit that immigrant women

face the risk of minoritization based on their cultural background. A

comprehensive definition of culture around which this study was structured is

presented by O'Hagan (1999) as:

> *The distinctive way of life of the group, race, class, community, or nation to*
> *which the individual belongs. It is the product of the values, ideas,*
> *perceptions, and meanings which have evolved over time. These values,*
> *ideas, perceptions, and meanings constitute the individual's knowledge and*
> *understanding of the world in which he or she lives...* (p. 273).

As it relates to issues of domestic violence, there are immigrant women who

may still maintain strong cultural ties to their country of origin, and when they are

faced with situations of abuse, the choice to seek assistance does not come easily.

Many risk stigmatization and being disowned by their ethnic communities that

may very well be the only feature of support they are able to trust and rely on in

adjusting to life in a different country (Bui & Morash, 1999; Menjívar & Salcido,

2002; (Bui, 2003). Even for women who choose not to maintain strong cultural

ties with their culture of origin, accessing services may be equally challenging as

they try to negotiate the transition of their own cultural identity. Cultural identity

is the sense of belonging one has to her own culture (O'Hagan, 1999), and a

change in cultural context due to immigration changes and challenges that sense

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of belonging. As Sharma (2001) argues, "Immigrant and racially visible women,

for example, must also contend with the dominant cultural paradigm neglecting

and sometimes even denouncing their lived realities and belief systems" (p. 1405).

In light of issues such as these, it is imperative that services acknowledge the

cultural contexts that shape the experiences of immigrant women to mitigate

against the risk of contributing to their marginalisation. Some women who

maintain strong traditional ties to the culture of origin may not find some

interventions effective as they may be incongruent with their deep-seated values

(an issue which will be expanded upon in the literature review). For others, there

may be challenges to benefitting from services given the uniqueness of their needs

– both as victims of abuse and as immigrants – resulting from the process of

transition.

It is at this point that I am compelled to explore how immigrant women,

who access services for domestic violence, perceive and experience cultural

competence in service provision. Cultural competence is defined by Rorie, Paine

& Barger (1996) as the "acceptance of, and respect for, cultural norms, patterns,

beliefs, and differences... [with] self-assessment... and interplay between policy

and practice..." (quoted in Campbell & Campbell, 1996, p. 457). Doman Lum

(1999) also describes cultural competence as having four dimensions: "awareness;

understanding of cultural differences; development of culturally appropriate

intervention and strategies; and inductive learning" (Sakamoto, 2007, p. 107).

Sakamoto (2007) presents a model of cultural competence that I would argue is a

more active approach in tackling cultural oppression. She argues for an anti-

oppressive cultural competence, which compels us to "[decolonize] our

knowledge base" (p. 110). This involves a process of constant reflexivity, 'self-

assessing' the origins of our own perspectives and worldview. By doing this, we

allow for a reflection on how we may perpetuate oppression in any form by

examining our own positions of privilege *and* marginalization. Without such a

reflective approach, we risk taking for granted that our practice, which is more

than likely shaped by the dominant culture or worldview (Sakamoto, 2007), is

suitable to address the multiplicity and intersectionality of oppressive issues that

immigrant survivors of abuse face. An anti-oppressive approach to cultural

competence, therefore, enables us to become sensitive to these multiple and

intersecting forces of race, class, gender, heterosexism, culture, etc. Given, then,

that much of the literature argues for culturally competent services for minoritized

women, it would be useful to understand how this discourse is practically

interpreted and experienced in every-day life by service users who seek, and are

expected to, benefit from it. In other words, I wanted to explore the "taken-for-

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granted" space in domestic violence service provision, as it is experienced by immigrant women. It is this that forms the impetus of the study on which I embarked.

Purpose of Study

My decision to pursue this issue was framed by my own experience, both as an immigrant who has lived in three different countries over a seven-year period, and as a social worker who has worked with abused immigrant women in the court system and has helped raise community awareness about domestic violence. Approaching this study, I already had the lived experience of moving from one cultural context to another and facing the challenges that accompany the process of psychological acculturation – the psychological change that occurs as a result of constant first-hand contact between different cultures (Berry, 1997). Having met and worked with immigrant survivors of abuse who were trying to access services to secure their safety, I wanted to find out more about *their* experience of domestic violence services as they were not only facing barriers of gender oppression in the form of abuse, but were also facing the challenges of moving from one cultural context to another.

Therefore, besides fulfilling the requirements for a Master of Social Work, the purpose of this research was two-fold. The main goal was to find out how domestic violence services are experienced and perceived by immigrant survivors of abuse who are coming from a cultural context and lifestyle that is different from their culture of immersion (in this case, Canada). The second goal was to give immigrant women the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of services that are available to them. To achieve this dual purpose, I asked these three main questions:

1. How do immigrant women perceive the provision of services in meeting their needs?

2. Of the existing services, to what extent do immigrant women perceive them to be helpful?

3. What are the services that need improvement to meet their needs respectfully and sensitively?

Inevitably, this study placed the assessment and evaluation of cultural competence, as demonstrated by domestic violence service providers, into the hands of women who would have first-hand experience of its effect and impact.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was conducted within a feminist theoretical framework, giving a voice to women and allowing them the space to have a say in empowering and improving the status of women (Neuman, 1997; Neysmith, 1995). More specifically, feminist theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) and standpoint theory have been used to guide the research process. This is for the purposes of exploring and understanding how intersections of the identities of gender, immigration status and being a survivor of abuse shape a woman's experience of domestic violence services, given her unique point of view or standpoint.

The origins of the feminist theory of intersectionality was largely attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who asserts that the politics of feminist identity that has privileged gender in the discourse of oppression and violence against women has further marginalised women whose experiences are shaped by identities of race, class, sexual orientation, etc. (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1242). This theory has widely been adopted in feminist research as scholars further explore how the intersection of these identities shape the lives of women from education (see Alon, 2007) and labour (see Byrd, 2009; Rakovski & Price-Glynn, 2010; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), to media and popular culture (for example Gill's (2009) analysis on intersecting identities in creating definitions of sexuality

in advertising). Ludvig (2006) used the theory of intersectionality through

narrative methodology to explore self perceptions of difference and identity in the

life story of an Austrian immigrant named Dora. By recording the life story as

told by Dora, Ludvig was able to capture her subjective experience through her

use of language, and subsequently analysed Dora's experience through categories

of gender, ethnicity and other categorisations in order to explicate themes of

intersectionality. Byrd (2009) also used feminist theory of intersectionality to

analyse the experiences of Afrcian American women in leadership, challenging

the traditional leadership model of white male leaders. Similarly, Alon (2007)

uses the theory to examine educational inequality at the university level.

Feminist research is characterized by inter-subjectivity and full

acknowledgment of the historical and social contexts within which current issues

related to gender politics is situated (Finch, 1991; Neuman, 1997). It is a form of

critical research which, as defined by Kincheloe & Mclaren (1994), is that which

"is connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or

sphere within society" (p. 140). Feminist theory also acknowledges that the

marginalisation of women is further exacerbated along race, class, and cultural

lines, and therefore a blanket approach to addressing the pertinent issues of

women would perpetuate the oppression. The experiences of immigrant women

who are survivors of intimate partner abuse are not disconnected from the social,

historical, and political contexts in which these experiences are created. As

Wilson (2002) points out, "Whatever meaning we create has its roots in human

actions, and the totality of social artefacts and cultural objects is grounded in

human activity" (p. 2). Hence, the politically subjective nature of feminist

research only stands to enhance the quality of the research (Hawkesworth, 2006),

in this case by allowing the space to amplify the voices of women situated at the

intersection of multiple marginalities. It is along these lines that I posit that

feminist research framework shapes a researcher's epistemology in valuing

situated knowledge. Given the fact that women's lives are contextualized by the

intersectionality of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., an understanding

of the experiences of immigrant women should start by inquiring of those who

have such situated knowledge. It is with this in mind that, along with a feminist

approach, a phenomenological framework is also appropriate to guide the research

process.

Having its roots in philosophy, phenomenological research allows for an

understanding of the world from the subjective reality of those who experience it

– that is, the life world of participants. The approach rejects the assumptions

made by positivist inquiry that social phenomena is predictable and based on a

natural order of existence. In so doing, phenomenology acknowledges the

uniqueness of human social experiences as shaped by socio-historical and

political contexts. This also includes the experiences and perspectives of the

researcher, and therefore, methods in phenomenological analysis calls for

'bracketing' – a process which involves a researcher identifying and setting aside

her own taken-for-granted orientation and perspectives in order to clearly

understand the perspectives of those who engage in their own-day-to-day realities

(Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Garko, 1999; Wilson, 2002; Groenewald, 2004).

Garko (1999) highlights the compatibility of both approaches, and agrees

that "Existential phenomenology is well suited to satisfy the lived-experience

criterion of a feminist approach to researching women's lives" (p. 168). This

compatibility is evident in the extent to which the tenets of phenomenology are

supported by feminist standpoint theory. Standpoint theory has been developed

by writers such as Harding (1986), Collins (1986), and Smith (1987), and

proposes an examination of the world from the perspective and lived experience

(and social location) of the individual. This theory has been adopted by Latta &

Goodman (2005) as they explored barriers to domestic violence services as

experienced by Haitian immigrant women. Not only is the standpoint of

immigrant women given full consideration, but the researchers also assess their

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own standpoint and social positioning in analysing the complexities of survivors'

experiences. Stanley & Wise (1993) support this approach, arguing that an

understanding of women's experiences "...must come from our exploration of the

personal, the everyday, and what we experience – women's lived experiences"

(quoted in Garko, 1999, p. 168). In this vein, I argue that feminist research and

phenomenological inquiry are not only compatible, but they also agree

epistemologically – enhancing the voices of those who have experiential

knowledge by "[returning] to the concrete" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 4).

So then, in acknowledging and examining the intersection of oppressive

forces at work in the life of an immigrant survivor of abuse, I deem it most

appropriate to adopt and utilize the concepts of both approaches, allowing for

inquiry that explores these oppressive forces from the standpoint of the lived

experience of the subjects of the research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Service-User Involvement and Domestic Violence Services

For a clearer understanding of the experiences that women have as they access domestic violence services, it would be beneficial if we acknowledge, and make use of the knowledge shaped by, the lived experience of service-users themselves. Beresford (2000) points out the crucial importance of service users' knowledge as they "grow out of their personal and collective experience of policy, practice and services" (p. 493) and "[offer] a crucial new perspective on public policy and social care and make possible better-informed provision and discussion" (Beresford & Croft, 2001, p. 302). For this reason, it is valuable to capture the voices of survivors of abuse, especially those who are at the intersection of multiple marginalities and identities in order to give critical insight into issues that might otherwise be overlooked by professionals in the field. This is especially crucial when working with populations who are not only facing a multiplicity of systemic barriers, but are doing so from a culturally marginal position.

Hague & Mullender (2006) highlighted that generally, service users are hardly included in policy and programming discussions that have direct impact on

service provision in domestic violence services. They identified that the input of service-users are highly valuable as it leads to improved services that are better suited to the needs of those who actually utilize the services (p. 571). Madoc-Jones & Roscoe (2010) conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with women survivors of abuse who accessed services while their perpetrators attended an Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme (IDAP) run by probation services in the U.K. In this study, respondents had favourable feedback about the women's safety service. This information helped to highlight for the service what it is doing well – what works. The study also had implications on how to build on their current services to make them even more effective for survivors. For example, areas of improvement included better communication between women's safety service staff and the IDAP to reduce the risk of jeopardising survivors' safety.

Illustrating the importance of an analysis of intersectionality in service provision, Bent-Goodley (2004) conducted a study involving 14 African-American women service-users in a focus group to determine their perceptions of the services they received. Though not an evaluation of a particular service or agency, the study was able to provide valuable data about the experiences of African-American survivors, and how improvements could be made to the

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services for them to sufficiently address the unique needs of this population. Similarly, Gillum (2008), in exploring the differences between mainstream domestic violence services and culturally specific domestic violence services, interviewed 14 African-American women who had received services from a culturally specific agency. Using the data of only 6 women (who had experience with both types of services), Gillum (2008) was able to identify what was important to women in terms of service delivery and cultural sensitivity. Though the design of the research made for a comparative analysis of two different types of services, the data gathered is useful in informing mainstream services about what is necessary to better serve African-American service-users (p. 75). These studies, along with those conducted by Bui & Morash (1999) and Weil & Lee (2004) (for example) have been useful in allowing us to see the perspectives of survivors in their assessment of domestic violence services, and have called for the need for culturally accessible services.

Though immigration and culture is being increasingly identified in the literature as a point of identity that has implications for intersecting oppressions, there is still room to integrate the voices of those who are culturally minoritized in gaining insight into the effectiveness and cultural sensitivity of domestic violence services. Latta & Goodman (2005) in their research assessed for the effectiveness

of domestic violence services to Haitian immigrant survivors of abuse. Jones

(2008) also looked at how services could be improved for Native American

survivors of domestic violence. The drawback with both studies is that neither of

them include the voice of participants, as the studies made recommendations

based on the perceptions of service providers (Latta & Goodman, 2005),

community elders and other professionals that work closely with the specific

ethnic population (Jones, 2008; Latta & Goodman, 2005).

The research that I will be conducting will attempt to address these gaps in

the literature, by both capturing the voice of service-users as they evaluate

services, and identifying how the intersection of identities – gender, immigration

status, and surviving abuse – shape survivors' experiences and perceptions of

services.

Immigrant Women and Domestic Violence

Increasingly, research has shown how the overlap of identities of culture,

immigration, and gender shape women's experiences of domestic violence (Bui &

Morash, 1999; Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2009; Menjívar & Salcido, 2002;

Shirwadkar, 2004; Weil & Lee, 2004, Latta & Goodman, 2005). Social

movements that have arisen in response to domestic violence have highlighted the

fact that domestic violence is an issue that affects women indiscriminately

(Crenshaw, 1991; Richie, 2000). However, such a view of this form of

oppression could prove harmful to many women whose experiences are shaped by

the overlap of their social identities. Sharma (2001) highlights that feminist

frameworks have generally identified domestic violence as a problem of power

imbalances, which "are primarily based on gender inequalities and, consequently,

fail to consider other forms of oppression abused women experience" (p. 1405).

Other scholars have raised the concern that the discourse around domestic

violence has somewhat alienated the needs of women, ignoring the fact that the

intersection of their social identities create unique needs (Donnelly, Cook &

Wilson, 1999; Richie, 2000; Sharma, 2001; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). In their

study on battered women's services in three 'Deep South' States, Donnelly, Cook

& Wilson (1999) found that the most underserved group was that of women of

colour. Through interviews with shelter directors, the authors found that some of

them (shelter directors) exhibited racial stereotypes in their assessment as to why

women of colour do not use their services. Others simply did not understand the

complexities surrounding ethnic or cultural diversity. Bent-Goodley (2007)

asserts that systemic barriers such as immigration status (documented or

undocumented) affect the extent to which immigrant survivors of abuse seek and

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receive help. Without careful consideration of such intersectionality, policies and

programs developed to serve abused women risk overlooking and even excluding

many women who are in need of these services.

Menjívar & Salcido (2002), as well as Raj & Silverman (2002) assert that a

woman's status as an immigrant makes her especially vulnerable to abuse given

her legal status and cultural contexts. They also point out that further research

into the impact of immigration and culture on a woman's experience of violence

is necessary to inform policy and frame programs for practice and intervention.

Ahmad, Driver, McNally, & Stewart (2009) found implications for domestic

violence service programming after focus groups gave insight into the barriers

faced by South Asian immigrants to accessing domestic violence services. They

also found that fear of stigmatisation, as well as their adherence to traditional

gender roles influence the extent to which South Asian women seek help while

going through abuse. The authors also highlight that these factors are further

exacerbated by emigration from one country to another with subsequent loss of

familiar social supports. To illustrate this, Ahmad et al (2009) quoted one of their

participants:

> *Back home if something like this happens, all village people go with sticks*
> *to tell the man that it should not happen, but here, we do not have anyone...*
> *(p. 617).*

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The perception that they "do not have anyone" could be as a result of how the definition of help is mediated by their cultural background, as well as the loss of support systems as a result of immigration. From their analysis, Ahmad et al (2009) found that greater and more focused knowledge about services and supports for abused women need to be enhanced and more widely disseminated. However, if such information about services should have any practical effect, it has to be culturally accessible.

Immigration and acculturation also played a role in how Ethiopian immigrants in Washington State, U.S., experienced domestic violence and domestic abuse services (Sullivan, Senturia, Negash, Shiu-Thornton, & Giday, 2005). Their views were varied, and illustrate quite clearly that although the conceptualization of their experiences is shaped by their cultural background and socialization, the extent to which they maintain those values differs from individual to individual depending on their acculturation. For example, one participant in their study informed them that when it comes to a woman exposing abuse, "It is better back home... The old people get the solutions for our problems" (p. 928). However, Sullivan et al (2005) points out that another participant articulated that she turns to non-Ethiopians for assistance as "she did not feel that the Ethiopian community here would understand her plight" (p. 928).

Despite their difference in perception though, it is evident that there is some understanding among the Ethiopian women who were interviewed that abuse is something that is not tolerated – neither in their country of origin, nor in their country of immigration. It appears that the difference is in how immigration and acculturation affect their perception and responses when they are being abused.

Bui (2003) explored how social identities of gender, class, culture and immigration impacted upon Vietnamese women's experience of domestic violence, and the likelihood of them seeking help. She points out that in Asian communities, bringing family problems outside of the family is frowned upon, and because of their strong family values, interventions that include separating a woman from her family and community may not be readily embraced by Vietnamese abuse survivors. Additionally, she argues that "Asian cultural traditions that emphasize the superior position of men as the father and the husband, as well as fear of divorce, can force many women to cover up or deny abuse" (p. 211). Bui (2003) also made reference to the adaptation and interpretation of Confucian teachings into the everyday lifestyle of many Asian cultures, highlighting the Three Obediences which state:

1. "Before marriage, a woman follows and obeys her father;

2. After marriage, she follows her husband;

3. And after the death of her husband, she follows and obeys her son"

(Weil and Lee, 2004, p. 221).

Bui found, however, that not all women embraced this traditional teaching

as "Many women were not in favour of the Three Obedience rule and became

more assertive" (p. 233). In her assessment, Bui (2003) recommended that more

research be done with additional immigrant groups to "improve knowledge of

women's diverse experiences" based on the fact that "each immigrant group

possesses different types of human capital and resources and has different

adaptation experiences" (p. 209).

What Bui's (2003), along with the aforementioned examples illustrate for us

is that discussions about abuse and the impact of immigration are to be "situated

firmly within the context of structural inequalities based on racism, sexism and

class oppression" (Burman et al, p. 335). Sokoloff (2008) agrees, stating that,

"women's voices must be situated within the social structures of women's lives"

(p. 232). A dialogical relationship that involves decolonizing our knowledge base

(Stoetzler and Yuval Davis, 2002; Sakamoto, 2007) would be able to reveal to us

the structural inequities that exist in individual cultures, and help us take a more

progressive approach toward culturally competent service. Bui (2003) articulates

this cogently: "Help-seeking behavior among abused immigrant women needs to

be understood within the social contexts of gender, race, and class relations *as*

well as cultural continuity and change..." (p. 212, emphasis mine). This

dialogical relationship is what formed the backdrop of the research design and

methods outlined in the following sections.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study was designed to be reflective of the methodological concepts of

feminist research supported by a phenomenological approach. For the most part,

it is modeled from the research framework illustrated by Groenwald (2004) for his

study on co-operative education in South Africa, and many of the steps of data

analysis is informed by Hycner's (1985) guidelines to phenomenological analysis

of research data (expanded on in the "Data Analysis" section).

Sampling

This study was reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB),

subsequent to which recruitment of participants began. Fliers and brochures were

distributed to a wide cross-section of agencies and shelters that offer services to

victims of intimate partner abuse across Southern Ontario. The fliers highlighted

the purpose of the study, criteria for participation, the approximate length of the

interview, as well a brief indication of the questions participants should expect in

the interview. Brochures gave more details about the study and the researcher, as

well as more information on what would take place during the interview.

Sampling was done using a sampling frame that was limited to immigrant

survivors of abuse (physical, verbal, sexual, psychological, financial, etc.) who

have accessed and utilized (or are still utilizing) services for intimate partner

violence in Southern Ontario. The sample was also limited to a maximum of five

participants, giving consideration to constraints on time and resources to fulfill the

requirements for a successful completion of the Master of Social Work Thesis.

Domestic violence service agencies and shelters were first contacted via

telephone, email, or in person, in order to inform them about the study and to

obtain clearance to post recruitment fliers and brochures at the locations. This

was done with the consideration that some agencies and shelters have

organisational policies that prohibit the solicitation of participants for research.

Of the persons who expressed an interest in participating in the study, two were

confirmed after being assessed for their eligibility to participate. The sample size

of two participants is still considered acceptable in phenomenological research as

the aim is not to make generalisations, but to reveal the phenomenon – the

experiences and perception of the participating women – for what they really are

(Hycner, 1985; Groenwald, 2004).

The participants immigrated to Canada within the last 10 years, and, since

landing, have returned to their home countries on several occasions due to

challenges related to acculturation. Both participants are mothers – their children

ranging in age from four (4) to twenty-one (21) years. The nature of abuse they

experienced differed between them – one participant spoke of emotional abuse after her husband repeatedly blamed her for not being able to successfully adjust to life in Canada and once threatened to kill her. The other spoke of being physically abused and held hostage in her home. Both participants were assisted by agencies which offer services to assist victims of abuse; both were shelter residents.

Data collection

Data collection was in the form of semi-structured qualitative interviews. This was selected as the most appropriate means to gather information from participants as, it is not only consistent with methods used in feminist and phenomenological research, but it also allows for participants to freely express their thoughts and ideas. It also allowed me to seek clarification, as well as be transparent with my own perceptions and experiences. The dialogue that resulted provided the data from which the units of relevant meaning were drawn. By actively engaging in the dialogue, I was able to clearly identify the meanings and perceptions of the participants, and distinguish them from my own perceptions and constructions.

I scheduled both interviews with the participants for a time and venue

deemed safest and most convenient for them. Scheduling was done via telephone

with both participants after confirming with them the best time for me to call.

This was done to maximise the safety of each participant in case she happened to

be in a situation where they were still being harassed by their abuser (Langford,

2000). Participants were provided with a letter of information which told them

about what to expect in the interview, the possible benefits and risks to

participating, as well as limits to confidentiality (in cases of child abuse, self-harm

or risk to others). After I obtained their informed written consent, I conducted a

single, one-on-one interview lasting approximately fifty minutes to an hour with

each participant. I used an interview guide I developed based on a review of the

literature on immigration and cultural identity, and cultural competence in service

provision to assist me in the interview. There was variation in the questions asked

in both interviews, as follow-up questions were asked based on the dialogue and

interaction between myself and participants. The questions were not asked in any

particular order, and interviews were primarily 'participant-driven'. This means

that questions were only asked based on the issues brought up by the participant,

and I made reference to the interview guide only as it related to the issue at hand.

Such an approach is integral in capturing the participants' lived reality and how

they chose to present it, without being persuaded by my own perspectives and

experiences as the researcher (Garko, 1999; Wilson, 2002; Groenewald, 2004).

At the end of each interview, I engaged the participants in a debriefing

process by asking them how they felt about what they shared, if there was

anything they would like to change, or if there was anything they would prefer to

be erased. This, along with the process of member checking (expounded on in the

following section) allowed the participants to have some control over the

knowledge they shared and how it was presented.

Data Analysis

A core component of analysing the data in phenomenological research is

bracketing, which entails the researcher setting aside her thoughts, perceptions,

and ideas in order to see the data for what it really is from the perspective of the

participant (Wilson, 2002; Groenewald, 2004). Therefore, prior to each interview,

I wrote brief memos about my own thoughts, feelings, experiences and

expectations. After each interview, I wrote another brief memo about how my

thoughts and suppositions were affected by what was said from my dialogue with

the participant. These were necessary steps to assist in the analysis of the

interview transcripts so that the perspectives of the participants would emerge

clearly. After each interview, I reviewed the tape recording to become more

familiar with the story and context that the participant had shared, and to get a

sense of their reality and the meanings they constructed from it. I then transcribed

each interview verbatim, after which each transcript was reviewed to explicate the

meanings of what each participant said. Transcription of the audio-taped

interview, as Halcomb & Davidson (2006) point out, is an important aspect of

phenomenological and feminist research as it makes room for inter-subjectivity by

allowing the researcher to get closer to the data. Each transcript was analysed

based on Hycner's (1985) guidelines for phenomenological analysis. After

transcribing the interviews, the transcripts were reviewed to ascertain the units of

general meaning (Hycner, p. 282). This entails reading through the interview with

a purpose to explicate the distinct meanings that may emerge from each word,

phrase, or sentence. This was followed by the process of reviewing each unit of

meaning to ascertain that which was relevant to the major research questions:

1. How do immigrant women perceive the provision of services in meeting
   their needs?

2. Of the existing services, to what extent do immigrant women perceive
   them to be helpful?

3. What are the services that need improvement to meet their needs

   respectfully and sensitively?

This is the process of identifying units of relevant meaning (Hycner, 1985,

p. 284). After identifying the units of relevant meaning, I conducted a thematic

analysis of the units of meaning relevant to the research question, organising each

unit of meaning into emerging themes. From these units of meaning and

emerging themes I wrote a summary of the interviews. To ensure that the

meanings and themes which emerged from the interview represent the reality of

the participants, I checked the validity of the summaries by asking the participants

to review the data and make corrections if there is any data that was

misrepresented. This process is known as validity checking and, as Hycner

(1985) agrees, is necessary so that the participants can confirm that "the findings

are valid for them" (p. 297).

FINDINGS

The interviews with the participants revealed some of their own perceptions about the provision of services in meeting their needs. Generally speaking, they pointed out that as it relates to services that are required of the agency given the scope of their responsibilities, service providers met those needs. For example, they were accommodated by the shelter and received assistance with health and settlement issues. Participants also agreed that staff at these agencies appeared to make an effort to try to assist them. However, though they did not suggest specific services that may warrant improvement, the participants submitted that staff should be more relatable and accessible for them to have a better experience in adjusting to their new social context. In this section, I highlight the participants' experiences as categorised into different themes based on the units of relevant meaning that emerged in the interviews.

Between both participants, there were common themes about their experiences of adjusting to life in a new country, and the services provided by the agencies from which they sought help. In illustrating these experiences, actual statements from the transcripts of both tape-recorded interviews were included, and were written to represent the tone and voice of the participants as closely as

possible. The participants in the study are referred to by the pseudonyms Rose and Stella.

Experience of Acculturation

The participants shared similar sentiments regarding their experiences of adjusting to a new life and culture after immigrating to Canada, and making that adjustment while accessing services as survivors of abuse.

Being "In Between".

Both participants shared their experience of having to make adjustments between cultures and lifestyles in order to satisfy the values and expectations of one or both. They alluded to being "in between" cultures figuratively, or sometimes represented by travelling back and forth between their country of origin and Canada:

> *So, I couldn't manage the type of person he was – violent person. I got so sick over there, I got pregnant. So, after 2 months of marriage, I got pregnant. He left me. I came back here at that time. Stayed here for 2 years, almost. But I think the, you know, my parents only want this marriage to work – was a part of our culture.*

> – Rose

> *Every time he left I purchased his ticket and, bought him souvenirs to take home, you know – 2 big baggage. And – because I paid for his ticket, right? [Eventually] When I was seeing the social worker they would say, "Listen*

you should be angry. This is not the real – this is not fair. You should..."
you know. Mixed feelings. Always guilty – always guilty.

– Stella

Cause we people have two cultures – one here, one there. We have to
accommodate both sometimes.

If my parents are treating me like an obedient or something you can say,
like – what should I say? For daughters especially, you can say just like
slaves...because they want you to study what they like. They want you to
wear what they like. They want you to marry the person they want you to
marry. This is the thing – why should I like that? I can't undo that, it was
my past. But I feel secure now, that's why I say this is the best culture right
now...

– Rose

Not knowing.

Both participants, as they spoke of their experiences of acculturation,

spoke about not knowing, or not being aware of their rights and duties, or

services. This, they suggested, made it difficult for them to both adjust to their

new culture, and their new status as survivors of abuse:

You know, when you come to Canada, you don't know the, you know,
services for abused people. You know what I mean?

I didn't even know that there is a shelter here, you know. These kinds of
services are available – I didn't know.

I dunno what is the rules in different shelters. But, um, when you don't
know – I didn't know anything.

...Social workers in shelter they are there if somebody need emotional support, but then I didn't know. I didn't know. We don't have these kinds of things in our culture.

– Stella

I don't know my rights, I don't know my duties.

...if you are lost like this, you have nothing to do, and you don't know anybody – sometimes you don't know your duties, sometimes you don't know your rights. It's all new things to me.
You want to get in but you don't know the ways. You don't know how to solve your problems...

– Rose

They contrasted this with their perception that Canadian born women who

may have gone through abuse and access services already know their rights and

what to do:

...for me to say they are born here, they have everything, you know.
...if somebody lived whole life here, then you think everything you know in natural way.

– Rose

'Cause in Canada, everybody knows. You see newspaper – there is – everybody knows there are shelters, there are, you know, family services, there are supports, there are social workers.

– Stella

Uncertainty About Expectations.

It appears that the feeling of not knowing about what was available gave

rise to uncertainty about what was expected of them as service users. Their

sentiments suggested that they perceived staff had certain expectations of them; that they had certain responsibilities of which they knew very little; that staff took for granted that they (service users) knew what to do. One participant even stated that staff "...think I should know..."

> *I wasn't aware of it [the services offered]... 'Cause maybe it's my responsibility to ask.*
>
> *Again, when you don't know there is something available, if I don't know you have apple, how can I ask?*
> — Stella

> *They're expecting something from you and you don't know about that.*
>
> *They treat you like normal people ·· you're not normal! I am not normal. I would say that.*
> — Rose

Mixed Sentiments About Staff

In both interviews, the participants had mixed sentiments about the staff where they were assisted. There were aspects where they commended and appreciated the efforts made by staff to assist them, but added that more could have been done to meet other pressing needs, including their emotional needs.

Favourable Sentiments.

Though one participant appeared more inclined to be more specific in her comments than the other, the participants showed appreciation for the efforts

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made by the staff in helping them either by acknowledging the work they did or

by praising them explicitly:

> *...the kids had program, they provided us food, they provided me doctors and nurses. They registered the kids for school...they were going to a special school for newcomers...*

> *In terms of, you know, the responsibility they have, you know, like, I ask for housing and they showed me options... Whatever services were available, they provided for me...*
>   – Stella

> *Staff over there is so gentle to understand your problems.*

> *They are so co-operative in their own ways.*

> *They are so good.*

> *They try to help me a lot.*

> *It wasn't bad. I would say 90% okay.*

>   – Rose

Unfavourable Sentiments.

During both interviews, participants shared comments that were not so

favourable toward the staff and service. It is important to point out that they

tended to shy away from making negative or unfavourable comments. However,

during the debriefing process at the end of the interview, they confirmed that they

were comfortable with what they had shared and agreed for it to be part of the

data. The comments make reference to various contexts about their experience,

ranging from the suitability of the staff to address their concerns, to the lack of

emotional support that they needed to feel comfortable.

Feelings of Discomfort.

The participants talked about circumstances related to staff which made

them feel uncomfortable, while being shelter residents and accessing services.

> *And it got so damn stressful, you know, in terms – 'cause I don't feel*
> *comfortable. Sometimes they don't try to understand kids... That's why I*
> *say they're too young to understand situation. If I am cooking something or*
> *washing dishes...there is no one to look after your kid at that time – not all*
> *the time.*

> *I don't feel comfortable sometimes. They're expecting something from you*
> *and you don't know about that. If you don't know what is in the kitchen,*
> *you don't know their food...I'm not going into the office to ask what is in the*
> *kitchen...their room is always locked – the staff room.*
> <div align="right">– Rose</div>

> *I thought they just – I shouldn't say that, but they were taking advantage of*
> *I'm not knowing about services...*

> *...Interestingly, whatever was available, whatever service was offered, I feel*
> *guilty to use them because you didn't have it, right? And I felt little or – I*
> *dunno if it's pride or whatever. But I didn't feel right about it. I didn't, um*
> *– it was shame... I should be grateful, you know. There are some help out*
> *there and enjoy it, you know. Be thankful and humble, use it.*

–Stella

Professional vs. Emotional Relationship.

In both interviews, the participants emphasised that the staff related to them in a more professional manner, rather than being more personable and giving them emotional support. They indicated that they believed that such emotional support and personal connection is necessary in a setting such as the ones they were in.

> *Their room is always locked – staff room. You have to knock it, you have to ask them... Why are they all locked inside? Only few time they open door, and every time they close door, the door is locked. I had to wait [laughing]... you're not – you are people like us* [laughing]. *We are not scary that you need to lock the doors* [laughing]. *It was very funny anyway.*

> *I feel it's more professional than having the emotional part... If I am going through some kind of abuse and you do not have the emotional part...I'm going to come office, you gonna fill my form or [does hand gestures imitating writing].*

> *There is some difference between your emotions and between your professional behaviour...that's why they call it shelter. It is just like some office attitude – it's not shelter. It's different, I think.*
> > – Rose

> *Whatever is not a requirement, they weren't even there for me.*
> *Social workers could have made themselves available to talk to me, you know...approach me – "How do you feel? How is everything going?" You know what I mean? Emotionally. They met other needs.*

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– Stella

Helpfulness of Service

The comment made by Stella that "Whatever is not a requirement, they

weren't even there for me," also suggests the extent to which services actually

met her needs. She submitted that she was provided the assistance of doctors and

nurses, but did not receive counselling from social workers:

> *Well, many times I said I need counselling, talking to somebody. So they*
> *would provide a nurse, a doctor... But I would talk about my emotions with*
> *the nurse, or doctor, so they would give medication for that anxiety, stress,*
> *depression...*

> [Interviewer] So in terms of counselling, do you get that?

> *No, no... The workers there, they were themselves, a counsellor – I could*
> *talk to them, right? It was interesting.*

Rose related a somewhat similar experience. She pointed out that though

she was referred by shelter staff to a newcomer settlement agency to get

assistance in finding and attending ESL courses, the referral turned out to be

pointless. This was because she was no longer able to utilize services as a landed

immigrant because she had obtained her Canadian citizenship. She continued by

making her point that had someone who has experienced the immigration process

been at the shelter, perhaps she would have been given more helpful advice:

But, if they have more diversity then it would be much better... This is the problem. If I don't know...ok I call them, I needed to improve my English, so she gave me [newcomer settlement agency's] number... "Go to [newcomer settlement agency]". I call [newcomer settlement agency], they told me, "you can't come in". Where should I go? It's so funny.

Representation of Diversity in Staff

The participants had divergent views as it relates to the importance of cultural diversity being reflected in the staff. Rose maintained that it was important for staff to reflect the diversity of residents, because only then will they be able to better understand her own experiences.

Yeah, because sometimes, you know if I was born here and I would live my whole life here, how can I understand other people, who are coming from different countries? Who are facing different situations? I don't know anything about this place right now because my family never let me do that. Yeah, I don't know my rights, I don't know my duties. But if somebody lived whole life here, then you think everything you know in natural way. It is so different, because I don't think they would understand our situation. 'Cause we people have two cultures – one here, one there. We have to accommodate both sometimes.

Staff doesn't reflect [the diversity of residents]. This is the problem, you know... Because if there is no diversity, they can't understand stuff.... There is diversity in shelter residents but no diversity in staff.

Some [residents] speak, you know, different language I don't know, and they're in trouble. That's because there is no interpreter... If somebody can't understand your language...how you gonna do? You're gonna tell like this? [Does hand gestures imitating handwashing]. *You're rubbing you're hands?*

Stella, however, does not believe that the representation of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds in staff would have made a significant difference in her experience, since some workers there were immigrants themselves, even from her own home country.

> *Many people from my country were working there... We never connect... Never talked, never talked, you know. Just...how do I say... "Hello", in my language "hello" and if it was breakfast time, you know, they would talk in [our home language], "Okay this juice for you..." They could say "Listen, if you want..." You know, in my language they could say "Listen, you can talk to us" or... They could, but they never said that, you know.*

As Stella related an incident about how some of her (and her children's) personal belongings were stolen by another resident, she emphasised that there really was no emotional support throughout the entire ordeal:

> *Nowhere, again, emotional support... You can tell, "Oh, you know what – language problem..." People from my country [could] come say "Listen, do this" – support, you know.*

Reconciling/Balancing the Positive and Negative Experiences

Throughout both interviews, the participants tried to reconcile the positive and negative aspects of their experiences with positive or neutral sentiments that assuaged the impact of the negative experiences:

> *The personality and temperament I have was so adjustable...*

(When asked about possible reasons for her not being recommended for group counselling or therapy) *Probably they didn't [pause]...remember... At least there was somewhere to go...*

<div align="center">–Stella</div>

Sometimes everyone can't understand situations...

They did their best, I think. I won't say anything bad.

They don't know everything. Everybody knows nobody is perfect, you know. But they did their best anyways. They did try to. It wasn't like they were not trying. They were trying in their own way.

<div align="center">– Rose</div>

In addition to trying to balance the representation of their feelings and experiences, the participants also demonstrated empathy with staff, suggesting that they understood the situation within which staff worked, that might have made their own experiences less satisfying:

Of course they have to do their office work, of course they have – they can't be, oh you know, all the time have room for your emotions.

<div align="center">– Rose</div>

(Giving a reason why shelter workers did not interact more closely with her) *This is my perception – you don't put yourself out there for, you know, headache...so, if somebody doesn't know, and doesn't come to you, you don't make yourself available because it's headache. It's more work.*

Probably they were just busy...and overwhelmed, and you know, rules and regulations...who knows?

<div align="center">– Stella</div>

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Lived Experiences Producing Situated Knowledge

The participants spoke candidly about their doing things better; being of better help to others who may find themselves in similar circumstances by virtue of the fact that they had these experiences. For one of them in particular, she informed that she eventually decided to become a residential worker and has used her experiences as a recipient of shelter services to guide how she relates to her own residents:

> *But now, myself, I put myself out there... So, you know, if they wanna talk, I say "Come, I'm here. Anytime you wanna talk I'm in the office you can come and talk to me", you know.*

> *They would be great if the worker in a shelter would come to me to say "How's everything working for you here? How are the kids adjusting?" You know, new country, new school, new area, new... So "Is everything okay?" Like, myself – I'm working in a shelter, you know. Sometimes, the residents are not pleased with other staff. "Are they treating you well? Everything working for you? Do you need anything?" So none of this I didn't get.*
>
> *– Stella*

> *Unless they face something like that, they can't realise what others are facing.*

> *...You know if I was born here and I would live my whole life here, how can I understand other people, who are coming from different countries? Who are facing different situations?*

> *Honestly, if I would say for myself, If I am going to some place, I don't know issue here I would go for - But if I would go to social worker for something like that, you know, I feel like I would be so helpful for them because I know of it. I have everything in my heart. I have seen everything.*

I know how people face all these situations. But if I didn't face anything then I can't believe it. It's just like these stories, you know? "Oh poor lady, oh you have these issues..."

— Rose

Here, it is apparent that the participants have reframed how they believe

things should be by using their own experiences and the meanings made from

those experiences as a guide.

DISCUSSION

Status, Role, and Power

From what the participants conveyed, it is apparent that they are experiencing the process of acculturation, (as presented by Berry, 1997). There is constant first hand contact between the two cultures. For example, for both Rose and Stella, that they are socialized not to expect services for victims of abuse is juxtaposed with the perception that such an expectation is normal in Canada. What is not clear, however, is the directionality of the impact of this process. Is it the process of acculturation that shapes their experiences and perception of the services they encountered? Or did their experiences with domestic violence services magnify the realities, both positive and negative, associated with the process of transition and acculturation? This study did not set out to identify the cause of their experiences and how they understood their realities. It did inevitably illuminate that the co-existence of their status as immigrants and as survivors of abuse (the intersectionality of their social identities) impacted their experiences, and eventually perception and knowledge about their lived reality.

As they spoke of being "in-between", it suggests a state of instability – instability that comes with not knowing "the ways"; uncertainty about social

expectations. This instability is further amplified by their experiences of periods

of emotional and/or physical abuse. Upon accessing services, therefore, they do

not do so exclusively as immigrants, or exclusively as abuse survivors, but as

immigrant abuse survivors occupying several other points of identity such as

being a mother, a student or worker, etc. This illuminates the arguments put

forward by scholars such as Burman et al (2004) Bui (2003), and Sokoloff

(2008) – that an understanding of the experiences of women from minoritized

backgrounds would have to be based on the social context of their lives. If this

does not happen, services set up to help them risk perpetuating their instability.

For example, for Rose, diversity should be a key component of services set up to

assist abused women, and there should be a greater representation of workers

from different countries. According to her, this is necessary for there to be greater

understanding about her own experiences and the contexts within which she

accesses services. In her case, in the absence of sufficient and appropriate help

from agencies and services, familial support that could have otherwise assisted

her to adjust to living in Canada was adamant for her to return to her abusive

husband because they "want this marriage to work". For Stella, however,

diversity may not make such a significant difference, based on her own

experiences. However, she reiterated that more emphasis should be placed on a

more human or personal connection from staff toward residents who go through such traumatic and emotional ordeals. For her, without sufficient counselling and therapy to process her experience of abuse, she could be made vulnerable to the risk of returning to an abusive relationship. The message conveyed in the participants' interviews is that there may not be sufficient understanding about their intersecting identities by staff whom they have encountered. We see here, then, that no single aspect of a person's identity should be taken in isolation, and therefore services should be developed with consideration for the impact of the intersectionality of identities.

From the information the participants submitted in their interviews, it can be argued that their identities as immigrants, women and survivors of abuse have been subjected to minoritization (Burman, Smailes, & Chantler, 2004). This invisible barrier between client and worker appears to be one that renders service users as "the other" against the skills, knowledge and professional experience of service workers. As she recounted the incident in which another immigrant resident (who was not able to speak English) was trying to ask the staff for soap, Rose, by her tone of voice and facial expressions, conveyed feelings of frustration, humiliation and subordination, suggesting that a woman quite proficient in her native language, had been 'reduced' to using hand gestures.

Given the context of the incident, it may be that the frustration and humiliation

she expressed may not only be attributed to what she recounted as a lack of

interpreters, but also the physical demarcation of relations of power by the staff

keeping the office door closed when they are inside. This further exacerbates the

already vulnerable position she occupies being made a victim of domestic abuse.

In the same way, Stella's perception of the advantage of power that staff has is

illustrated in her comment, "I shouldn't say that, but they were taking advantage

of I'm not knowing about services..." This "not knowing" comes from the

transition from one culture to another, and so based on her opinion, staff did not

engage her in order to "avoid headache."

Though they have given different viewpoints on the necessity of having a

diverse staff, the insight into the relations of power, as perceived by the

participants, highlights the importance of an anti-oppressive approach to cultural

competence (Sakamoto, 2007). The emphasis they placed on this issue as they

spoke suggests that it is an integral part of analysing and understanding the

context of their experiences. Though we cannot definitely conclude that Rose's

suggestion for greater diversity is related to the differential relationship with staff,

we can consider that engaging in reflective dialogue – addressing the standpoint,

perspectives and biases of both client and worker – could help fill the void of not

having staff with similar experiences of acculturation. However, such reflective

dialogue did not appear to have taken place as Rose spoke of staff being

disconnected from residents – a disconnection symbolised by a closed office door.

In the same way Stella spoke of not having cordial relations with staff, and

surmised that perhaps they did not want the added "headache" and "more work"

that apparently come with making contact with clients.

The analysis of the relations of power can also be extended to other

comments made by the participants. In both interviews, the participants seemed

to convey feelings of obligation to make good comments about services and staff,

especially right after they have made an unfavourable one. Some of the

comments they made also seem to come as an act of assuaging the impact of their

negative experiences. This is not to say that they were not genuinely appreciative

of the benefits they received from services, but Stella's comment is quite telling:

> ...*Interestingly, whatever was available, whatever service was offered, I feel guilty to use them because you didn't have it, right? And I felt little or – I dunno if it's pride or whatever. But I didn't feel right about it. I didn't, um – it was shame... I should be grateful, you know. There are some help out there and enjoy it, you know. Be thankful and humble, use it.*

This comment sheds light on why she may have said, "I shouldn't say that,

but...", with reference to the possibility that staff may be taking advantage of her

unawareness of services. Why would she feel hesitant in giving a critique that is

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based on her own lived experiences of services she encountered? Mullender &

Hague (2005), in making their argument for amplifying the voices of abused

women who utilize services, submits that "...abused women's views and

perspectives... [were] found to be typically absent from service user and policy

literature" and that "Abused women have never been seen as entitled to a service

in their own right from the statutory sector of welfare" (pp. 1322-1323). If

Mullender & Hague (2005) are correct in their analysis, then perhaps it is this

perception of a lack of entitlement that has contributed to their hesitation to make

comments that place services and staff in an unfavourable light.

Situating Knowledge

The participants, from statements they have made, suggest that "all

knowledge reflects the social position of the knower" (Latta and Goodman, p.

2005), and as "situated knowers" are in a position as "holders and creators of

specialized knowledge" (Byrd, 2009, p. 602). The comment made by Rose

speaks to this: "I feel like I would be so helpful for them because I know of it. I

have everything in my heart." Burr (1995) in applying a Foucauldian analysis to

power, argues that:

> *...knowledge, the particular common-sense view of the world prevailing*
> *culture at any one time, is intimately bound up with power... Therefore the*

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power to act in particular ways, to claim resources, to control or be controlled depends upon 'knowledges' currently prevailing in a society (p. 64).

If knowledge is "intimately bound up with power", then I argue that based on the participants' comments, their validation of their own situated knowledge is a step toward overcoming the feelings of powerlessness, subordination and oppression they have experienced as a result of being made victims of abuse, as well as the lines of demarcation and distance between staff and service users.

In light of the fact that clients, too, based on their own situated knowledge, possess power to some degree, if we are going to adopt the definitions of cultural competence as outlined earlier in this paper, then such a skill relies very heavily on "inductive learning" (Lum, 1999), and "self assessment" (Campbell & Campbell, 1996). It is not that awareness, acknowledgement and understanding of other cultures are not important, but all of that will require that workers engage in reflective practice and deconstruct their own culture and worldview, and engage clients in that "open-ended dialogue" (Noble, 2004). As Noble (2004) writes:

> *Partnership requires the transcendence of professional boundaries and the recognition that knowledge possessed by service users is valid, insightful and critical for reducing the social control and social manipulation of social work activity* (p. 296).

Cultural competence is not only determined by the extent to which one is simply aware of the customs and cultures of their clients, but also by the extent to which one is willing to deconstruct and reframe the knowledge one has in order to accommodate the new meanings that will be formed through the mutual creation of knowledge with the clients. As Haraway (1988) so poignantly states:

> *The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and **therefore** able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another* (p. 586, emphasis in original).

LIMITATIONS

Although the information gathered in this study is quite useful for the advancement of knowledge in this field, it does have its drawbacks. One factor that could generally be seen as a limitation to this study is the sample size. As outlined earlier, the objectives of the study did not include being able to make generalizations about the experiences of immigrant women who access domestic violence services, but to explore, reveal and present phenomena for what they really are. However, I believe that our existing knowledge could benefit from the voices of additional women who have gone through similar experiences to illuminate other issues that may not have been addressed by the two participants in this study.

This study was also limited to women who were able to speak English – mainly due to a lack of sufficient resources for independent translation. I acknowledge that by doing this, it is likely that I have excluded the perspectives of so many other women who may have been able to give more insight into the issues emerging in the study. This somewhat contradicts the spirit of the study – trying to challenge oppression and marginalization in their various forms, including cultural oppression. Any form of exclusion of the voices of those who

are not able to speak English does not help the cause. I hope that future research will sufficiently address this issue in a positive way.

Additionally, although the study was open to survivors who utilized other forms of domestic violence services (e.g. group counselling, referral services), the data collected was primarily referring to shelter services as the women in this study were former residents of shelters. It is possible that the data, as well as themes emerging from the data would have been different had there been references to other forms of domestic violence services.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

What the data from this study has done is shed light on some of the experiences and perceptions of immigrant women about domestic violence services, which may have been overlooked in the day-to-day application of cultural competence. One implication arising out of this study for social work practice is the necessity for continuing the practical and reflective application of relevant research pertaining to immigrant survivors of abuse. Additionally, in light of the differing and changing contexts that situate the experiences of survivors of abuse, service-providers are encouraged to continue engaging in constant review of organizational policies and practices that directly affect service-users. Also, though service-providers generally adopt organizational policies and general practice that set out to address issues of marginalization and oppression, they could benefit from further exploration of how the day-to-day activities that underline practitioners' roles and duties demonstrate an understanding and application of cultural sensitivity.

Additionally, this study draws our attention to more specific ways in which we can try to ensure that service workers engage with clients in the least oppressive way as possible. For example, a seemingly simple gesture such as keeping the staff office door open not only gives the impression of a more

welcoming staff, but also figuratively opens doors by removing the barriers that

would otherwise prevent immigrant abused women from asking for help. Also,

practitioners could reassess the way their work is interpreted by clients; to get past

the perception that their impact is substantiated by "filling out forms" workers

could perhaps engage clients in casual dialogue more by (for example) asking

them about their well-being, how they are adjusting, etc. This study also

highlighted how significant language interpretation is in anti-oppressive practice

with immigrant, non-English speaking clients. Agencies that open their doors to

immigrants would find it to be of great service to their clients if they place

significant effort in making communication between worker and service-user

easier – mitigating against oppression arising from who has access to the

dominant language. Finally, for agencies and organizations that have not yet done

so, it would be beneficial for them to structure in the time and space for staff to

process and reflect on experiences in which they had to struggle with the tensions

and conflicts that come with working with clients from different cultures and

worldviews – discussing the resolution of those tensions and ways to move

forward in a progressive relationship with service-users.

One of the strengths of this study is that it helps to continue the dialogue

and change in the field, as they relate to improving the services for abused

women. This project focused on immigrant women, and explored the "taken-for-granted" space in the discourse of cultural competence. It is in no way meant to imply that how immigrant women perceive and experience services is *the* way things really are. There are many areas that are still in need of further inquiry that this study could not cover. In addition to including the voices of women who do not speak English, future research could look at how Canadian-born women experience services, in order to find out whether there are any shared concerns between them and immigrant women. I believe we would also benefit from research that enquires about the experience of social workers/social service workers, who work with the immigrant women population in domestic violence services to get a sense of how *they* perceive cultural competence and how it is played out in their day-to-day work lives. This would allow us to see a bigger picture of the perceptions and experiences of different groups of women at different levels of power, and how their realities are shaped by their own experiences of privilege and marginalization.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to ascertain how immigrant survivors of

abuse perceive and experience domestic violence services, what are the services

that helped, and which services needed improvement in meeting their needs

sensitively and respectfully. From the participants' account, their perception of

the services is shaped not only by their experiences of abuse, but also the

experience of immigration and acculturation. The extent to which they perceive

that services have been helpful has also been shaped by the intersectionality of

their identities, and also has a bearing on the dynamics of the relations of power

that exist between practitioners and service-users. The interplay of identity,

intersectionality, and power warrants a model of culturally competent practice that

not only emphasises awareness and understanding about different cultural groups,

but also a deconstruction of our own ethnocentric view point. This skill and

practice will take a commitment to going beyond the professional in order to

maintain an ongoing dialogue between worker and individual in order to

constantly negotiate the knowledge and meanings we create and construct from

our lived experiences. In so doing, we will be able to challenge oppression not

only by recognising the broader influences of racialization, classism, sexuality,

culture, etc., but by also making the challenge meaningful for each individual in a synthesis of the personal and the political.

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