

Smart Ideas: Q&A

This series sponsored by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences features notable humanities and social sciences researchers with smart ideas for a better tomorrow. This month we speak to **Yoko Yoshida**, associate professor in Dalhousie University's Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology.



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Yoko Yoshida looks at the faces behind immigrant numbers

How did you end up an academic in Canada?

While I was an undergraduate in Tokyo, I was part of a group of students who came to Montreal for a month to learn English. It was 1994, just before the referendum on Quebec separation, and as a 20-year-old girl from Japan – which is really ethnically homogeneous – I got fascinated with this society very quickly. I began studying international sociology with an emphasis on Canadian studies and I wrote my thesis on Canadian multiculturalism. I returned to Montreal in 1997 to start graduate work at McGill University and eventually became a professor at Dalhousie. Now my role is as educator to the new generation of social researchers who can produce solid evidence for good social policy.

What data sources do you use in your work?

One of the best-known and most complete sources of information is Statistics Canada's Longitudinal Immigrant Database (IMDB), which contains details about the categories under which immigrants are admitted and what they do after landing here. Access to the IMDB is very restricted, which is understandable because it contains personal and private data about individuals. However, I was able to gain access to it through participation in Pathways to Prosperity, a national partnership among academics, government and NGOs that looks at immigration and immigrant integration. The IMDB finally enabled me to gather enough information about immigrants to the Atlantic region to examine questions about how immigrants are living. However, most of this information was collected from other sources, such as tax records, rather than direct interviews. I had to think clearly about who would be included in my analysis of Atlantic Canada, since people move around and then file their taxes from somewhere else.

Are there other sources you will be consulting?

I am proposing to work with another statistical source called the Temporary Residents (TR) file, which captures data about individuals who came to Canada and then left, such as students or foreign workers. Since a lack of experience in the Canadian labour market is one of the greatest barriers to immigrant success, these individuals could have an advantage if they later immigrate. By linking the TR database with the IMDB, we might be able to identify those who

arrived here with that kind of experience and then take stock of their success.

How does your particular emphasis on statistics shape this kind of analysis?

I tend to pick a certain concept or a topic which is causing some controversy or stirring up debate. For example, I used administrative data collected by the federal and provincial government to study the socioeconomic profile of Nova Scotia immigrants with various immigration categories. The popularly held image is that the province is struggling to integrate and retain this population. Also, family-class immigrants' economic contributions are often not expected to be as significant as for those who come here specifically under economic streams. But that doesn't mean these people are just going to sit around. What I found is that family-class immigrants are actually doing better in Nova Scotia than in the rest of Canada. In fact, up until 2009, immigrants who came to Nova Scotia as spouses were more likely to be employed than those who came here as economic migrants.

What do your findings reveal about the way Canadian immigration works?

Canada is not like the United States, where employers directly sponsor the process, although it has changed rapidly over the last few years. Here, at least traditionally, immigration is not solely based on market principles, which is something that enables people to work together after they arrive. The most recent immigrants may be having trouble in terms of economic success. But, even then, for the most part there is an underlying spirit of helping each other and not attacking each other. It is uniquely Canadian to think of immigration as a resource of social development, rather than a source of social problems. In the past, even some Europeans were seen as "outsiders" and the first generation struggled; but the next generation could blend right into the Canadian mosaic. In a sense, integration is a long-term process, so we might find problems if we focus only on recent immigrants' performance now. While we need research to assess short-term well-being and provide necessary services settlement, the leaders of the society also need a longer term vision of how immigrants will contribute to the future.

Learn how smart ideas are helping improve outcomes for newcomers to Canada

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