

Is it enough to have a job?: Work-Life challenges for secondary migrants and temporary foreign workers in Fort McMurray

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Outline of Presentation

- **Contextual Issues:**
 - 1) The Hope-Reality Gap
 - 2) Fort McMurray-Specific Factors

- **Work-Life gaps experienced by TFWs and secondary migrants**
 - 1) Gap between actual and exercisable skills
 - 2) Gap between the multicultural workplace and the resource economy
 - 3) Gap between needs and supports/services

- **Current and potential solutions**

Important to acknowledge

- Huge variety in lived experiences among and between these two populations
- BUT also overlaps in work-life experience

Background Information

- Fort McMurray is increasingly diverse
- Conceptual Clarification:

A temporary foreign worker (TFW) is a foreign worker who has a legal work permit to work in Fort McMurray temporarily (usually between 6mths to 2yrs)

A secondary migrant is an immigrant or refugee who has come to another destination in Canada and then moved at a later date to Fort McMurray

Background Information

Secondary Migrants

- No official numbers
- Focus here is on secondary migrants who were:
 - working in service and retail fields
 - originally refugees to Canada
 - and/or women who 'follow' (economic class) spouses from first destination

Background Information

Temporary Foreign Workers

- Difficult to assess actual numbers
- TFWs using YMCA services (from 25 different countries)
- Nannies as a 'special' category of TFW's : number of visas issued under Live-in Caregiver Program in 2008 in Alberta is 5,894

Contextual Issues

1) The Hope-Reality Gap

Between the mythology of big money and plentiful jobs in Fort McMurray

2) Fort McMurray-specific factors as challenges

Particular social/physical facets of place complicate the newcomer experience

The Hope-Reality Gap

- *HOPE*

The promise of the good life- availability of good jobs: 'We can get a job in the oil sands, especially with giants like Suncor and Syncrude'

- *REALITY*

These kinds of jobs are not as readily available as is imagined

AND

Many 'newcomers' end up in retail/service sector

The Hope-Reality Gap

Secondary migrant from Toronto:

“We heard of Fort McMurray as the place of oil and a person have a very good salaries. . . We don’t know that rent or home is very expensive for us.”

A retail sector employer:

Q: How are most of your employees coping when the cost of housing is so high? If they are working \$30 an hour on site, fine, but you can’t offer that so...

A: There’s a lot of them that their husbands work out [at site] and that’s how they can afford to work in [retail]. A lot of our immigrants...there’s a number of them who live in the same houses or same apartment right? So they’ll have six to eight people in their apartment to afford it.

The Hope-Reality Gap

Somalian woman working in a cleaning company:

Q: What do you hope for in the future?

A: Future? Better life.

Q: Here in Fort McMurray? Do you see yourself staying longer in Fort McMurray?

A: If I have a life yes. If they treat me good and I have a good job.

Q: Here, or else would you consider going back to Ontario?

A: If I have a good job. Ontario they have a shortage of work right now. They don't have work at all.

Fort McMurray-Specific Factors

- Particular social/physical aspects of Fort McMurray compound the newcomer experience

Example A: Physical and social isolation

“...when I left my country it was 28 degrees, and here my first time was minus 20. It was very cold and there are not many people outside but my country is warm. You can go to next house close to your house and eat and something. Here you can stay in your own house. You can live close to one person for one years, and you don't say hi. [I]n the job, now last Tuesday I got my first job here, dishwasher. But it's not the job I want to do.”

Fort McMurray-Specific Factors

Example B: “Small town” thinking and “frontier” culture

“Toronto is a big city and so many people from another country. The country is very quiet here [in Fort McMurray], I think first memory is small town compared to Toronto. In Toronto I ask speak slowly please and they speak slowly, hear what I understand. The people here say speedily and next step if they don't know they don't try to give some information to me. I am confused what have to do for next step.[But] My husband is happy working his company. We think we will get better with this company and the community.”

Fort McMurray-Specific Factors

“I was an instructor for six years for Class One driving and just came here thinking there’s a lot of people saying to me that there’s a lot of money to be made as well. ...[But] when you come to a little small town, everything is upside down and everybody tells you that you can’t expect everything just take it as it is you know? And I look around for jobs in my field everybody says oh you’re qualified oh you’re overqualified and you’re qualified to get, [so] how come you’re not getting any job? I’m asking how do I get a job in my field? It’s difficult.”

Work Gap #1: Between Actual and Exercisable Skills

- The puzzle of underemployment in Fort McMurray
- 'TFWs' 'immobility':

A restaurant owner describing TFW waitresses and busboys from the Philippines that work in her restaurant:

“One who is out there, she has three years at the Grey Business College ...Another girl who didn't come here, she went to another one she's got a government scholarship...Another one bachelor of science, business admin., major in computer management, graduated without failing marks.”

Work Gap #1: Between Actual and Exercisable Skills

- Employment gap is exacerbated in retail/service sector jobs
- Newcomer vs. Canadian experience:

Manager at a big box store:

“What we have is a lot of short term people that are just going to work until they can get that job back in the oil because they came here for oil and they might be laid off or working reduced hours and they are looking for a part time job just to sustain. But as soon as they have an opportunity to go back to their primary source, they are out of here. We are sort of like a stepping stone and a band-aid.”

Work Gap #1: Between Actual and Exercisable Skills

Manager of a retail store:

“I couldn’t get people to stay consistently and our turnover rates were still pretty high. So then I’ve gone through the foreign worker [TFW] route because we couldn’t find Canadians that wanted to stay in the service business for any length of time in Fort McMurray and if you notice around town, you’ll see many establishments that employ foreign workers because we can’t get other people to stay.”

Social/Cultural Capital: It is who you know

A secondary migrant:

“Fort McMurray I compare it like back home. Back home it’s like...when you find a job back home it’s connection. You have to know somebody to find a job. Exactly that’s the way it works here. Exactly. If you don’t have anybody here, if you don’t have anybody you know, you can’t find a job. I see some people even they are not even qualified for the job, they get a job. I have a Class One driving, I come two months I’m looking for driving job. Nobody even responds to my resumes but I see those guys who don’t have even driving license, they train them to find a job you see. That kind of...it’s very amazing I don’t know what to say.”

Social/Cultural Capital: Being able to know and exercise rights

A Temporary Foreign Worker:

“Actually you know sometimes people are taking advantage on the side of the temporary foreign workers. Even you could say sometimes that they are abused by those employers like sometimes maybe the employer should give some consideration, especially here in Fort Mac. It’s very expensive and everything... you know sometimes those hours and everything...but since we don’t have any choice we just kept on, just kept silent you know, because we’re afraid and we have to obey our employers because we have to wait for our term of contract...And sometimes it can affect us ...emotionally and mentally.”

Social/Cultural Capital: Being able to know and exercise rights

- TFWs as 'stable/manageable workforce'

Employer in a service company:

“I think it’s very rewarding working with the people that we work with because a lot of them come with nothing or very little and they are so thankful and they can bring tears to your eyes pretty quick....they really appreciate the opportunities that they are given and I don’t get that a lot with Alberta type people or BC type people you know [for them] it’s a job, “it’s my given right.” But I find that you can talk and reason [with foreign-born workers].”

Social/Cultural Capital: Cultural, Linguistic, and Racialized Barriers

A secondary migrant:

“I’m from China. I’ve been here eight months. Before I live in Calgary five years...Before, in my country, I did accountant. My English not well. In Calgary...have good experience as a [lab technician] and I have a high salary. I like that job but I follow my husband up here. Up here no lab [like that] so I lose the job. So I worry my...what do I do the future? My English is not well...I think difficult for me to find accounting and the job at the bank need to speak well with the customers. So I find labor job. I think year by year I’m older it’s not good health for the labor job. I don’t know what I do in the future. I’m worried.”

Work Gap #2: Between the Multicultural Workplace and the Resource Economy

A retail employer:

“We talk about [respect and diversity] every day...[and] it does apply to, you know, our folks of the different cultures; it applies to our own people too because they have a hard time with it as well...We did have a manager here that was a Muslim Canadian and he taught me a lot ...he initiated a lot of the stuff that we did in the company.”

An employer in a service company:

“My biggest beef is that you know they come into the country with very little training in terms of the cultural difference they are going to face here and specifically in the workplace. Okay it’s not okay to come in in the morning and not greet your fellow workers and be indifferent to everybody and insular in your thinking”.

Particularities of work culture that challenge multicultural ideals

- The pace of growth: stresses of employee turnover, training, experience etc. take precedence

A service employer:

Q: Have you actually adjusted your training because you have a multicultural workforce, or have you tried to do so?

A: I've tried to do that; however, it's not working...The problem is that we don't have enough training days right? And we don't have enough training days because they have to learn all the [shift routines], right, so before you've even got you know they've got X amount of days classroom time and then they've got to do [job] training and it's just too much. It's overload right?

Particularities of work culture that challenge multicultural ideals

○ **Emphases on safety and shift work**

An employer whose workers are on tight schedules tied to shift work:

“We’ve had [Muslim workers] who decide that half way through [a job], they need to pray okay [so they will stop everything and pray right there in front of customers]....We have schedules that we can’t – you know, part of the employment is they have to work the schedule that they are given right? ...It’s difficult because you’re trying to be empathetic to their needs but at the same time, you’re saying well if you want the job which we are paying you to do, you need to work your schedule around you know when you are supposed to be at work working.”

Particularities of work culture that challenge multicultural ideals

- Boom/bust cycles of employment have varying effects on diversity practices

A Somali woman who got laid off:

“The Islamic way, they say woman has to cover her hair and body but [the company] they start a new rule, they say because of the safety you cannot take long skirts. You only have to have what’s it called...pants...And now the demand...at that time, the demand for employees was [high] and they need [employees] right? Right now they have maybe enough workers so now they start to, you know, implement that rule.”

An employer in a retail business compares the downturn of late 2008 to boom times:

A: Now we have the time to actually screen the applications and then go through the actual process of the interviewing before hiring...Now we can look for the right person for the right job.

Q: When you couldn't be as choosy what were the kind of bottom line things [you looked for in an employee]?

A: Well they had to be able to communicate because we had a lot of immigrants come in that couldn't even speak English. So in a retail atmosphere that's not the best place for them right?...

Q: So [now] in these economic times...what has changed in that time for you...?

A: Who is applying has changed. We are seeing a lot...well we're still getting the immigrants like a lot of immigrants still but we are also getting a lot more locals so that has changed which is kind of nice to see. We are pretty much fully staffed right now. First time in 10 years.

Work Gap # 3: Between Needs and Support Services

- This gap is found in any newcomer-receiving center in Canada (Stewart et. al, 2004, 2006 and 2009)
- Fort McMurray-specific issues:
 - Rapid growth of Fort McMurray and shortage of available services

Work Gap # 3: Between Needs and Support Services

- Fort McMurray-specific issues:

- Difficulty of planning services for a rapidly-changing client-base

- Population stability/predictability as critical to planning for services

Current and Potential Solutions (Needs and Services Gap)

- Affordable housing while newcomers get established
- Contractors to have 'a plan' for supporting TFW's
- Using 'bust'/'down' time to do training and preparation for a cross-cultural workplace (some examples exist)
- Education for employers (e.g., workshops done for employers by AEI and newcomer network)

Current and Potential Solutions (Needs and Services Gap)

- Support for ESL
- Career counseling
- Training (computer skills, soft skills and Canadian workplace culture)
- Community life (good efforts exist but can this be sustained when boom comes?)

Thank you!