

Stand Together or Fall Apart: Professionals Working With Immigrant Families

Written By: Judith K. Bernhard

Reviewed by: Lara di Tomasso

Lara di Tomasso received a BA in political science from McGill University in 2003 and completed her master's in child and youth care at the University of Victoria in 2012. Her work with immigrants and refugees both in Canada and the Middle East has fuelled her research interests, which include processes of racialization, ongoing colonialisms, migration, and the ways in which these forces impact the lives of children and families in Canada. Lara currently resides in Toronto; she works as a freelance report writer in the nonprofit sector and as a course writer and online instructor for the University of Victoria.

Human service professionals working with migrant children and families in Canada, the United States, and other immigrant-receiving countries face rapidly evolving practice contexts. An enduring economic recession and rightward shifting immigration policies and discourses are creating increasingly complex realities for migrant families in Western countries. These changes occur in the shadow of the impacts sustained by racialized and/or Muslim migrants, after the events of September 11, 2001. While human service professionals in training are often prompted to explore diversity issues in their college or university programs, they rarely have the opportunity to learn about the many issues surrounding immigration and the migratory process—issues that have a direct bearing on practice.

Stand Together or Fall Apart by Judith Bernhard serves as a timely and important introduction to the realities facing immigrants in countries such as Canada. It offers professionals working with migrant families alternative frameworks and examples of programs that can assist in “shifting the focus” (Bernhard, 2012, p. 72) toward approaches that foreground the strengths, resilience, and knowledge of newcomer families.

The first and longest section of the book discusses the contemporary realities of international immigration. Chapter 1 makes a compelling case for the book's relevance today, chapter 2 describes how immigration redefines societies in

immigrant-receiving countries, chapter 3 discusses some of the social and legal issues faced by immigrants, and chapter 4 provides an overview of the challenges experienced by immigrant families as they settle into their new lives. Chapter 4 ends by reminding readers that despite good intentions, human service professionals are often located within the dominant culture and may not approach their work with newcomers in a way that resonates with or benefits them. This is an extremely important point and one that absolutely needs to be emphasized in human service education and training programs. This first section does a good job of introducing readers to the myriad issues very often encountered during the processes of migration and settlement. However, the section's main strength is the urgency it conveys for human service professionals in immigrant-receiving countries to learn about these complex and interconnected issues and develop an ability to apply this knowledge in their work with newcomer families.

The book's second section sets out to provide readers with new paradigms through which to work with immigrant children and families. In chapter 5, Bernhard adeptly summarizes several alternative theoretical frameworks as part of her “call for a broader conceptual understanding of interventions with newcomers” (p. 54). Next, in chapter 6, she challenges notions of “normal” in education settings and describes the ways in which Western theories of development

delineate specific standards of success that can serve to marginalize immigrant children and parents. In this vital chapter, Bernhard importantly explores how “normal” is conceptualized and challenges the universal validity of mainstream assessment tools. She uses rich examples from her own research to emphasize how knowledge itself and the approaches that stem from dominant knowledge are rooted in particular values and norms that cannot always be applied universally across cultural lines. In Chapter 7, Bernhard advocates for shifting the focus to one that seeks out and works with potential and present strengths of newcomer families.

The book's third and final section focuses on research and practice with newcomer families. It introduces readers to typologies of effective interventions and to programs that the author herself was involved in designing and implementing. In chapter 8, Bernhard eloquently explains the difference between programs that involve parental input into design and delivery and those that place parents on the sidelines. In a section with particular relevance for researchers and program designers, Bernhard discusses “problems of evidence” (p. 86) in chapter 8. Here, she explores how efforts to centre the voices of immigrant families can be challenged by the exigencies of funders, who often want to see a list of measurable, predesignated objectives before funds are allocated. The subsequent sections of this chapter offer well-articulated rationales for learning how to recognize

when full parental involvement is needed; examples are presented of programs that successfully do this. Chapter 9 is one of the strongest chapters in the book, both for students in the human service professions and for researchers and readers who are interested in learning about successful approaches to building on newcomer families' strengths. Bernhard details her own initiatives with newcomer families, summarizes what she has learned from these experiences, and proposes future applications of this knowledge. Chapter 10 is a compelling conclusion to the book that calls for "all helping professionals in immigrant-receiving countries to commit to and build on this foundation of empowering practices" (p. 116).

Stand Together or Fall Apart addresses a large amount of complex subject matter. In addition to the many topics Bernhard addresses, several other considerations could serve to round out readers' understanding of the issues related to migration. Increasingly, migrant justice movements in Canada and elsewhere (e.g., No One Is Illegal, Solidarity Across Borders) are making important connections among many of the trends that Bernhard discusses and ongoing colonialism. In a growing number of social movements, justice for migrants is seen as necessarily tied to Indigenous self-determination (Walia, 2012). Settler states like Canada, the United States, and other immigrant-receiving countries were formed through colonization and are sustained through immigration. The history of colonization, as well as ongoing colonial processes in Canada, are therefore deeply tied to immigration and to discussions of national identity, integration, racism, and marginalization.

In the Canadian context, a significant amount of scholarship explores the connections among colonization, migration, race, racism, whiteness, and processes of racialization (e.g., Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 1998; Smolash, 2009; Thobani, 2007). This type of scholarship

offers a useful theoretical layer for understanding the complexity of issues tied to migration and settlement. Beyond learning about policy, laws, and events or conditions that trigger migration, service professionals could benefit from learning about the ways in which racism informs systems and policies, the impacts of systemic racism on immigrant children and families, and the global systems that produce refugees, mass migrations, poverty, Indigenous dispossession, and various forms of marginalization. These systems are directly implicated in producing the therefore an ability to understand them is a significant asset when working with migrant children and families.

Bernhard's book encourages greater understanding of issues related to migration and settlement, provides a theoretical framework for alternative and more effective approaches for working with immigrant families, and describes programs that are effective because they have succeeded in building bridges with newcomer parents. Universities, colleges, teachers, and students in the human services can use this book to start conversations about how to work with immigrant families in their communities to create and implement effective programs.

References

- Bernhard, J. K. (2012). *Stand together or fall apart: Professionals working with immigrant families*. Black Point, NS: Fernwood.
- Jiwani, Y. (2006). *Discourses of denial: Mediations of race, gender, and violence*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Razack, S. (1998). *Looking white people in the eye: Gender, race, and culture in courtrooms and classrooms*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Smolash, W. N. (2009). Mark of Cain(ada): Racialized security discourse in Canada's national newspapers. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 78(2), 745–763.
- Thobani, S. (2007). *Exalted subjects: Studies in the making of race and nation in Canada*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Walia, H. (2012, January). Decolonizing together: Working beyond a politics of solidarity toward a practice of decolonization. *Briarpatch Magazine*. Retrieved from: <http://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/decolonizing-together>