

Understanding migrant labour in Canada

October 9 2014, by Sara Daniels



Catherine Bryan, researching in the Phillippines.

Though it's not quite the hot-button issue it is in the United States, Canada has been wrestling with migrant labour since well before Confederation. The country has seen wave after wave of immigration, with some people staying for a short time and others putting down roots that are still strong multiple generations later. National, regional and private agendas have come together to shape the policies that dictate how migration works, which in turn profoundly affects the nation's culture, identity and economy.

To better understand the current landscape of migrant labour in Canada,

Catherine Bryan, a PhD candidate in Dalhousie's Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, is working on a case study of a small town in Manitoba. (The town can't be named to keep the anonymity of the participants in her study.)

Bryan selected Manitoba not only because she's originally from there but also because it has the oldest provincial nominee program. The program was started in 1996 to correct what the province saw as uneven distribution of new immigrants.

"My project is one of several that are underway in the Manitoba context that are slowly beginning to help us understand the experience of newcomers in rural settings," she explains. "This is new avenue of inquiry, on towns that may not have seen a large influx of people since the early 1900s and have been struggling with the demographic deterioration of their communities since the post-world war two period."

Shifting roles, changing identities

As of 2009, the town of 1,600 had not had a new significant influx of new residents for several generations. Today, a steady stream of Filipino workers who arrived in the town as temporary foreign workers and then settled there with their families has increased the population to about 1,750. Of those that arrived before 2012, all but a few have become permanent residents.

Describing the growth of immigration in the town, Bryan explains: "Migration tends to engender more migration. People often, although not exclusively, travel along well-worn paths—paths that have been travelled along by family and friends. So the hotel where these people work has been very successful with capitalizing on the family and social networks of their existing labour force."

To conduct her fieldwork, Bryan spent time with a number of workers at an inn in the town. She then went to Philippines to interview their families. She spent three months travelling the archipelago. There, she interviewed over 120 people in order to understand not only the experience of the people who had moved to Canada but also those they had left behind.

"What I've been able to do by going to the Philippines is really understand the consequences of Canadian policy on people we don't see—the consequences on those people, those lives, those countries."

In some cases, she observed a shift in [traditional gender roles](#). "What was interesting was that many men in the Philippines took up the role of doing the more conventionally female work around the caring, the cooking, the cleaning. There were a number of men who took that on as their parental identity, whereas previously they had been following more conventional divisions of labour within the household."

Understanding relationships

In addition to talking to new migrants in the town, she interviewed descendants of settlers from the 1870s whose presence there was due partially to public policy and partially to private industry. "I wanted to tease out the longevity of this relationship between the federal state and private interests and the arrival of particular kinds of migrants who would fill particular kinds of demographic or labour market-based needs."

Bryan's work is revealing the next chapter in a long and complex history of a nation—and a world—shaped by migration. Many of the themes in her work show up in Migration and Identity (SOSA3125), a course she currently teaches. This month she'll return to Manitoba for an interdisciplinary conference panel she's organized focused on the

complicated issues facing temporary foreign workers in that province.

Following the completion of her PhD, Bryan hopes to continue researching and teaching in the area of [migration](#), labour, and transnationalism, focusing on the rapidly shifting terrain of temporary foreign worker recruitment in conjunction with issues surrounding migrant retention.

Provided by Dalhousie University

Citation: Understanding migrant labour in Canada (2014, October 9) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-migrant-labour-canada.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--