Critical analysis of a social work practicum experience at the Regina Immigrant Women Centre

A Field Practicum Report
Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work
In Partial Fulfilment of Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Social Work
University of Regina

by
Arifun Nessa
Regina, Saskatchewan
September, 2013

Copyright 2013: Arifun Nessa
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

Abstract

This practicum report is a description and critical analysis of my practicum experience the Regina Immigrant Women Centre (RIWC) during my placement with the organization. The RIWC offers support and settlement services to women who are recent immigrants to Regina. I was able to examine the work of the Centre staff in accordance with the social work theories: strength-based approach, solution focused theory and feminist theory. My report includes a reflection on the integration of social work ethics, values, and ideology. It also includes the discussion about the way in which the RIWC staff members assess and work with their clients while fulfilling the Centre’s goals of empowering and educating women. Since this is a small organization that deals with women from diverse cultural backgrounds, it provides a unique opportunity to analyze the way that cultural competency is helpful in achieving the organizational goals. I also reflect on my own training and interest in the field of domestic violence abuse counseling. The report ends with some recommendations: having a full time social worker to provide domestic violence counseling, facilitating a process to allow staff members at the RIWC to access ongoing professional development opportunities including culturally competent practice, and exploring relocation to a larger physical space to better accommodate the volume of clients. Other recommendations include engaging in research to understand the attrition rate for participants in the job search training program and to improve volunteer recruitment and commitment.

Key words: strength-based, feminist, solution focused, culturally competent
Acknowledgements

This practicum would not have been possible without the guidance and help of several individuals who contributed their valuable assistance in the preparation and completion of my report. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Dr. Judy White for lending a helping hand whenever I was in need. Writing a practicum report entails a lot of details, which in my case would not be possible without the guidance of Dr. White.

I would also like to thank Dr. Dave Broad in helping me choose the place of my practicum and helping me to get the necessary contact information for the people concerned.

I would like to convey my sincere gratitude to Dr. Nuelle Novik for being the second member of my practicum committee. Dr. Novik freely gave me a lot of guidance and referred me to a key resource at a social work agency in the city.

I am grateful to Neelu Sachdev, the program director of Regina Immigrant Women Centre for kindly allowing me to be a part of the Centre. The staff members of Regina Immigrant Women Centre were very supportive and allowed me to participate in many of their working sessions.

I must acknowledge the Faculty of Social Work and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for allowing me the opportunity to pursue my Master of Social Work Degree at the University of Regina.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ..............................................................................................................i

Acknowledgement .........................................................................................ii

Table of contents ........................................................................................... iii

Introduction ......................................................................................................1

  Practicum goals ..............................................................................................3

  Overview of Regina Immigrant Women Centre .........................................4

Critical analysis of the placement experience ..............................................8

  Ideology ........................................................................................................8

  Theory .........................................................................................................12

  Values ..........................................................................................................19

  Ethics ..........................................................................................................23

  Relationship .................................................................................................27

  Strategy .......................................................................................................31

  Skills ............................................................................................................35

Overall experience and recommendations .................................................37

Vision .............................................................................................................43

Conclusion ....................................................................................................45

References .....................................................................................................46
Introduction

This practicum report is based on my experience as a social work practicum student at the Regina Immigrant Women Centre (RIWC). The RIWC is a community based organization which provides supports and services to immigrant and refugee women and their families in Regina. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) defines immigrants as people “who [choose] to settle permanently in another country” and refugees as those “who have fled their countries because of a well-founded fear of widespread persecution, and who are unable to return home.” Moving to another country is a decision an immigrant makes whereas moving to another county is an obligation for a refugee (CIC, 2012). Demographic studies showed that the population increase in Saskatchewan was mainly the result of higher immigration levels. Saskatchewan is one of the provinces where a growing number of immigrants have decided to settle. From 2006 to 2011 the province accepted 28,000 immigrants (CIC, 2012). About 10000 immigrants arrived in the city of Regina during the same period (City of Regina, 2011). According to the 2006 census, women constituted 53% of the total immigrant population of Regina (Sask Trends Monitor & DC Strategic Management, 2011, p. 16). Many of these immigrant women come from traditional backgrounds and face a lot of challenges adjusting to a new country. The common challenges immigrant women face are: social isolation, language barriers, lack of recognition of foreign credentials and experiences, underemployment, and burden of multiple roles within the family. Immigrant women also experience violence at home at increasing rate (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, 2013).

In my own life I have personally experienced many challenging issues as an international student, and therefore I could empathize with new immigrants and refugees to Canada who are
struggling to settle into a new environment. My undergraduate degree from Bangladesh had not given me any opportunities to learn about how to deal with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. My interest in understanding people from diverse backgrounds led me to select the RIWC as the ideal practicum placement. When I was choosing to do my practicum placement for my Master of Social Work degree, I had a particular interest in integrating the social work theories: feminist, strength-based, and solution focused theories that I had learned in my courses. I also wanted to do an analysis of how these theoretical constructs could apply to an agency that was involved in the delivery of social services in the community.

In order to achieve my goal to obtain direct social work experience at the graduate level and to enhance my social work skills, I began my practicum with the RIWC in November 2010 and finished it in May 2011. Within this specific period of time, I increased my knowledge of, and experience in working with people from different ethnic backgrounds. Once I began my practicum at the centre, I became very interested in learning more about the settlement experience and challenges faced by immigrants and refugees who come to Canada. I learned the ways in which strength-based approaches were helpful in providing immigrant and refugee clients with the tools they needed to succeed.

During my practicum, I worked primarily in the Settlement Services Program of the RIWC, which allowed me to develop knowledge of settlement work under the close supervision of the settlement staff member. I also had an opportunity to perform tasks in other programs within the organization and to observe several sessions of domestic violence counseling with the social worker. The experience I gained during my practicum greatly increased my understanding of the issues and needs of immigrant and refugee women who have recently arrived in Regina.
During the course of my practicum experience, I achieved the majority of my learning goals. The counseling sessions I was able to observe that helped me to refine my own theoretical knowledge and approaches for counseling with newly arrived immigrant women.

This practicum provided an opportunity for me to learn how to assist and support immigrant and refugee women’s empowerment needs and strategies. In this paper, I will explain the development of my deeper understanding of direct social work practice through reflection upon my practicum experience. I will also discuss the achievements and barriers I encountered in attempting to meet my learning goals.

**Practicum Goals**

The overarching goal of my practicum was to gain advanced knowledge and skills relevant to working with the immigrant and refugee women in Regina. My practicum learning goals and objectives are outlined below:

1. To engage effectively with the Settlement Services Program of the RIWC and conduct interviews to identify the issues affecting immigrant and refugee women.
2. To engage with the family support and safety services of the RIWC and learn domestic violence counseling.
3. To identify gaps in services provided by the RIWC and make recommendations to enhance service delivery

**Practicum learning objectives.**

- To gather knowledge about RIWC and the services they provide to immigrant and refugee women.
- To develop knowledge about the diverse needs of immigrant and refugee women in Regina.
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

• To develop knowledge about the interview procedure with immigrant and refugee women.
• To learn about counseling procedures for immigrant and refugee women who are experiencing domestic violence.
• To understand the problems of immigrant and refugee women who are trying to adjust to a new environment.

Overview of Regina Immigrant Women Centre

The Regina Immigrant Women Centre (RIWC) is a non-profit organization. This organization was founded in the early 1980s and was formerly known as Immigrant Women of Saskatchewan (IWS), Regina Chapter. The organization focuses on the specific needs of immigrant and refugee women and families settling in Regina. Because of its commitment to serve the needs of women and their families, the RIWC also provides services to men in some of their programs. My practicum experience helped me to understand that immigrant women frequently have difficulties coping with English language communication and have trouble finding jobs. I came to this determination as a result of having several conversations with the clients and staff members of the Centre and by observing the interactions between the clients and the staff members. One of the objectives of RIWC is to train and guide immigrant and refugee women so that they can become competitive in the Canadian job market. In a small capacity, the centre is trying to meet their clients’ need for language training and job search skills. This grassroots organization aims to empower newcomer immigrant and refugee women by providing education, integration, enrichment, and empowerment. The RIWC receives funding from several government agencies as well as from non-profit organizations.
Services provided by Regina Immigrant Women Centre.

The RIWC offers a number of programs to meet the immediate needs of immigrant and refugee women who arrive in the city. RIWC supports the settlement and integration of recent immigrant and refugee women by providing job search training, driving lessons, computer training, and English language training. The centre is committed to offering free services to help newly arrived women build the necessary skills for their social integration. The RIWC primarily provides services to women; however, immigrant men can also take advantage of some of the services, such as the settlement assistance and English conversation classes.

Settlement Services Program.

The settlement services branch of the RIWC offers services to women who are recent newcomers to Canada to help them settle and adjust to life in Canadian society. This program of RIWC is funded by the Government of Saskatchewan and is provided free to all newcomers. Interested clients generally call and make an appointment with the settlement services advisor. The Centre also accepts walk-in clients. A formatted questionnaire and a registration form are used to collect information from the settlement services clients. This settlement advising program provides a range of supports and services to assist and guide new immigrant and refugee women in their settlement in Regina. These include professional educational workshops for newcomers, the community, and employers. The advisor helps the immigrant women to learn about community resources and services in order to help them settle more successfully into their new lives in Canada. As it is a government-funded program, a detailed monthly report is regularly submitted by the centre to the funding body.
**Job Finding Program.**

RIWC also offers various programs to support immigrant women’s integration into the Canadian labour market. The Job Finding Program of the RIWC is funded by CAN-SASK. This specialized women’s employment program is designed to provide comprehensive support both individually and within a group setting. This program recognizes and addresses unique barriers faced by immigrant and refugee women. It also empowers women to attain their employment goals while building a strong personal foundation. The employment counselors of RIWC are dedicated to linking immigrant and refugee women with job opportunities. Therefore, the employment counselors stay in contact with employers so they can be aware of current job opportunities.

RIWC provides a three week pre-employment preparation workshop for all the newcomers. This workshop is followed by extensive job development support for the immigrant and refugee women. The job search workshop provides job search training that is designed specifically for women who are newcomers to Canada. The workshop provides the newcomer with the tools needed to develop an individualized and effective action plan for a successful job hunt. The employment counselor offers personalized, confidential assistance to each woman in the program. The services of the Job Finding Program include resume and cover letter writing, interview preparation and practice, action planning, and on-going support.

**Driving program.**

RIWC offers free driving lessons to assist immigrant and refugee women in gaining greater independence. After completing the learner’s written test, any immigrant or refugee
woman is qualified to register for the driving lesson program. This program provides immigrant and refugee women with in-class instruction to facilitate Class 5 licensing.

*English language training.*

English language instruction is an essential element for many newcomers who aspire to settle successfully in Canada. The RIWC offers English language training starting with Stage One Classes in English. These classes are offered for free to the RIWC clients and include men and women as students at a different location. Stage-one offers Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) Levels 1-4, which covers basic functional language. This program is facilitated by a fully qualified instructor. All landed immigrants and refugees are eligible to take this language training after they have had an assessment of their proficiency in English. The program also includes child care services at no cost to the participant.

*English conversation.*

These free conversation classes are held daily during the work week. These classes are taught by a volunteer instructor and are open to all immigrant and refugee women and their families. These classes provide a way for those who are just beginning to learn English to have a chance to learn to make conversation and meet other immigrants.

*Computer training.*

RIWC offers basic to advanced computer training for immigrant women in Regina. These elementary computer training classes are facilitated by volunteers. These classes allow women to learn the basics of using a computer keyboard and searching for information on the Internet. The more advanced classes provide women with computer skills that would assist them in obtaining employment.
Critical Analysis of the Placement Experience

Social workers engage in professional practice in a variety of ways, including face to face direct practice in an organizational setting with individuals, couples, families and groups. A social worker improves and gathers experience by applying theoretical knowledge and values within a specific practice framework (Hepworth, Rooney, Gottfried, & Larsen, 2010, p. 25). My practicum at the RIWC introduced me to direct social work practice with immigrant and refugee women, as well as to the different approaches to social work and the skills involved. Meeting with many immigrant women and men, listening to their needs and problems, and talking with the women who came to the centre gave me an excellent opportunity to integrate my theoretical knowledge with social work practice. My experience and thoughts will be shared and illustrated in the subsequent sections showing how I incorporated my social work knowledge of ideology, theory, value, and ethics and integrated them with direct practice.

Ideology

The term ideology is defined in the Dictionary of Social Work as a collection of ideas and beliefs in terms of the political, social and cultural views of an individual or group (Pierson & Thomas, 2010, p. 261). Ideology is also explained as a way of looking at things and a comprehensive vision of thoughts (Bailey & Gayle, 2003, p. 28). The RIWC offers its programs and services mainly to women. At the time of my practicum in RIWC, I was able to analyze a wide range of ideologies of the organization through my observation and conversation with the clients and employees. I also had an opportunity to gain a wider perspective about different opinions and thoughts of the employees, clients and volunteers of the organization by observing their various interactions.
The stated mission of the RIWC is to empower and promote equity and diversity to the newly arrived immigrant and refugee women in Regina. The centre offers support services that have been identified as critical to fulfilling its goal of promoting equity and diversity. According to the Dictionary of Social Work (2010), ideology helps to create a framework for action (p. 261). The ideology of RIWC is indicated in their organizational goals and provides a guide for action. To achieve these goals, the centre follows these guidelines as it carries out the actions of educating, integrating, enriching and empowering immigrant and refugee women. These actions include training and guiding immigrant and refugee women so they can become competitive in the Canadian job market. The centre is dedicated to building a welcoming community for the newly arrived women in Canada, who often experience many challenges in a new environment.

In addition, ideology can serve to create social change (Pierson & Thomas, 2010, p. 261). The Centre promotes social change by helping immigrant and refugee women to navigate and live successfully within their new environments. In my practicum, I observed that the support provided by the organization helped to make the settlement experience in Regina less stressful and helped the women become integrated into Canadian society more quickly. The program Director of the RIWC explained that many of the immigrant women who arrive in Regina with their families come from multiple cultural backgrounds where women may have been restricted to rigidly defined roles for centuries, and they need help in adapting to the very different expectations of Canadian society. The agency helps its female clients to become more comfortable with a new way of life without giving up their traditional beliefs. For example, the clients who visited the Centre often continued to wear their ethnic clothing when they came to see the staff. I saw several instances when the centre staff gave suggestions to the clients about
how they should dress for job interviews with Canadian employers. The staff told the clients about the types of clothing choices that would be suitable for job interviews, but they never told the clients that they had to give up their ethnic clothing in order to conform to Canadian society. In addition, they would help immigrant women to understand what expectations Canadian employers will have of them when they join the workforce.

Because many women come from restrictive backgrounds and not aware of their rights, another issue the RIWC addresses is domestic abuse. On one occasion, I have observed that the Centre arranged awareness program about domestic violence. A short film was shown to raise awareness regarding the type of abuse and violence that women experience in their intimate relationship. An open discussion was facilitated after the film was shown. This kind of program helped immigrant women get information and education about domestic violence. The staff members respected the personal belief of every immigrant woman and never pressured to take particular course of action for domestic violence.

Heinonen and Spearman (2001) have stated that those who work in helping professions develop a shared ideology based on their educational and professional experiences (p. 34). The ideology of the staff at the RIWC is that all humans are equal in value and worthy of respect. The staff members’ shared ideology is based on their experiences working at the Centre and their own previous experiences as immigrants to Canada. Because the staff members share the ideology of equality, they work together to develop institutional goals that will allow the organization effectively to support their clients. The ideology of the RIWC staff leads them to identify immigrant women as a vulnerable population that needs education and assistance in order to take their place as equal and respected members of Canadian society.
Moreover, ideology offers a way for people to interpret and justify the social reality around them (Bailey & Gayle, 2003, p. 2). In my practicum, I was able to observe that some clients had come to the centre with expectations that were very different from the expectations of the staff. By speaking with clients directly and by examining the records, I saw that the current and former clients of the centre originated in over twenty different countries. The clients had varying educational backgrounds: some had medical and engineering degrees while others had only a high school education with no knowledge of English. By studying the registration records of the centre, I saw that a majority of the clients were listed for the job finding program and language training program. During my conversation with the clients, I noticed that some of them were hoping to find a job which matched their educational background. However, research shows that the foreign credentials are often not recognized. Most Canadian employers require an individual to have their credentials assessed and to take training or classes from a Canadian institution so they have equivalency in a professional field (Sask Trends Monitor & DC Strategic Management, 2011, p. 60). To help these particular clients, the staff member often referred them to another agency for credential assessment. During my interactions with clients at the Centre, several women told me how much they appreciated the basic language training and the welcoming attitude of the staff at the Centre. However, I also observed that there were immigrants who were disappointed because their assumption that attending the program would guarantee them a job, did not match the reality of the actual services provided by the staff.

The services of women-centered agencies are guided by ideologies and philosophy which basically help workers recognize the ways in which the needs of women are affected by their gender and by the attitudes of the larger society (Alston & Mckinnon, 2001, p. 12). One of the
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

core features of feminist social work is an acknowledgement and appreciation of the diverse needs, strengths, and experiences of women (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001, p. 283). Youder and Kahn (1992) wrote that feminist social work principles have influenced social workers to understand that empowerment is an important tool that can be used in assessments and interventions (as cited in Heinonen & Spearman, 2001, p. 284). Some of the principles of feminist social work can be applied to all kinds of social work practices (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001). It is apparent that the RIWC uses a feminist strength-based approach to the way in which it deals with its clients. Whether clients came for help with settlement services or for domestic violence counseling, the RIWC staff used both the feminist strength-based approach and cultural competency approach as a basis for determining the nature of the problem and helping their clients to find solutions. The feminist strength-based approach used by the centre is a reflection of their belief that women immigrants to Canada face special problems that are often different in nature than the problems faced by male immigrants. The centre staff sought to empower its female clients by giving them information and education so that they could make informed choices. In my own approach to practice, I also continued to look for ways to incorporate the feminist strength-based approach.

Theory

Social work theory offers social workers a way to identify the causes of particular problems while also providing a path of effective action. Social work professionals use their theoretical knowledge to assess and identify the types of interventions that are most likely to be successful (Heinonen & Spearman, 2001, p. 180). While observing the process of working with the immigrant and refugee women at the centre, I found that many of the actions of the staff were
consistent with strength-based theory. During the period of my practicum, I learned how to use the strength-based approach for the settlement of immigrant and refugee women in Regina. I observed the counseling sessions provided to the women who were experiencing domestic violence and saw how the social worker was applying the strength-based approach when working with the women who were being abused by their partners. I also increased my knowledge in feminist theory, solution focused theory and culturally competent social work practice. This section explains a brief description of strength-based approach, culturally competent social work practice, solution focused theory and feminist theory.

**Strength-based approach.**

The strength-based approach to social work focuses on finding and utilizing the strengths of a client in order to achieve the client’s goals rather than focusing on the client’s weaknesses. These existing strengths can include the client’s education history, financial assets, core skills, and community networks. Some of the techniques used by social workers employing the strength-based approach include the use of empathy, respect, and positive expectations. A strength-based approach can help the clients to counteract their negative assumptions about the type of progress that is possible for them. In this type of practice, clients are encouraged to value themselves, create goals that are achievable, and develop realistic action plans to achieve their goals (Saleebey, 2003, p. 155).

The immigrant and refugee women who come to the centre are attempting to adjust to a new society that may be very different from the one from which they came. It is common that these women will face confusion and a lack of confidence as they go through this adjustment period. The workers at the RIWC use an approach of empathy and respect in order to help each
woman gain confidence in making her own decisions about her life. This approach starts with the initial assessment and continues throughout the centre’s relationship with that client. During the intake assessment, the RIWC worker asks many questions of the client in order to understand not only her needs and her goals but also her existing resources. This includes asking the client about her education and skills and her family situation. On several occasions, I did the client intake myself and I had the opportunity to use the strength-based approach. During the intake interview, I asked the women to tell me about their backgrounds and helped to identify the personal resources they had that would enable them to gain more confidence in themselves as they integrated into Canadian society.

**Culturally competent social work practice.**

The National Association of Social Workers defines cultural competence as the process which allows individuals and organizations to provide effective services to clients of diverse backgrounds (diversity factors include ethnicity, language, social class, and religion). The culturally competent social worker recognizes and affirms the value and dignity of individual clients, families, and groups (NASW, 2001).

A social worker who is culturally competent will be able to provide services in an effective manner to clients who have different cultures and worldviews. Culturally competence encompasses the attitudes, training, and skills of a social worker. Culturally competent social work requires a deep understanding of the way that various cultures affect the sense of self and others in a multicultural society. It also requires a thorough understanding of the impact of ethnicity and racial diversity on those who belong to the dominant groups in society as well as those who are in the non-dominant groups. Culturally competent social work necessitates an
ability to interact in a respectful and therapeutic manner with clients from non-dominant parts of society. Finally, culturally competent social work practice helps to guide the organization to develop in a way that is respectful of multicultural values (Sue, 2006, p. 32).

The majority of the women who visited the centre for domestic abuse counseling came to Canada from countries that do not have adequate services or laws to protect women in this situation. During my time at the centre, I observed the social worker using a culturally competent practice with her clients. The social worker listened to the women’s stories without prejudging the situations in order to gather information. The social worker created trust by encouraging the women to communicate their emotions as well as facts. The women communicated their emotions by using facial expressions, vocal tone, and body language. The empathic approach used by the social worker validated the feelings of the women and showed her genuine concerns for the welfare of the women. The social worker acknowledged to me that her clients were often not familiar with the Canadian system. She explained the information about the Canadian laws and services that could help the woman while understanding that the woman might be too frightened to make use of Canadian services. One important step taken by the social worker was to help the woman create a follow up plan for her own safety. In a few cases the social worker was the first person in Canada to whom the client had revealed her situation, so the counselor was in a position of trust. The social worker helped the women explore their immediate needs and identified the resources that would be most helpful. If a woman needed to ensure her own safety, the social worker helped the woman assess what she had already done to stay safe and helped her enhance or create a safety plan. When necessary, the agency provided an interpreter or accompanied the client to a shelter.
Culturally competent social work practice can take the form of an educational strategy, perspective, or a social movement (Logan, 2003, p. 95). The centre staff used educational strategies as a tool of multicultural competence counseling. The staff went to great lengths to explain Canadian approaches and expectations to their clients so they would be prepared to function in Canadian society. I have already mentioned that the women who came to the centre had a wide variety of education and work backgrounds. Some had advanced degrees and were experienced professionals while others had only a secondary education and had never worked outside the home in their country of origin. In many cases, only the professional women were already familiar with using resumes when applying for jobs. The female clients who wished to apply for entry level positions in Canada were often unaware that they would require a resume in Canada. In their countries of origin, entry level positions were often discovered by word of mouth and not by sending out resumes. The RIWC offers a three week program that introduced immigrant women to the techniques required for effective job searching in Canada. During this employment readiness training, the centre staff explained to their clients how the expectations of the Canadian employers differed from the expectation of employers in their home countries. The centre staff explained the differences in the worldview of Canadian employers so the women would have a better understanding of how to apply for a job in Canada.

**Solution focused theory.**

Solution focused theory is a type of strength-based theory that helps clients and social workers focus on finding solutions to problems rather than focusing on the historical roots of the problems. This type of therapy is rooted in the assumptions that the clients understand their problems better than anyone else and that the therapist can help them recognize examples in their
lives when they coped successfully with their difficulties. Clients are encouraged to envision a future life when the problem has been solved. This approach encourages clients to have hope and motivation. With this type of approach, even small changes can lead to improved outcomes as the clients become more confident that they can handle the situation successfully (Corcoran, 2005, p. 6).

In solution focused therapy, the role of the therapist is to collaborate with the clients in helping them to discover their own strengths. This can be done by helping the clients remember examples in their own lives when they either did not have the problem or when they coped with the problems effectively (Corcoran, 2005, p. 12). During my time at the centre, I used the solution focused approach in working with clients. For example, during my interviews with clients, I was very focussed on helping clients to solve their problems rather than focusing on the roots of their problems. Once I was able to understand the client’s problem, I worked with the client to try to explore some possible solutions. I assessed each client by asking questions in order to discover their strengths that would help them deal with the problem successfully. When I found an approach that the client wanted to use to solve the problem, we would create a plan of action that the client would implement. While the RIWC staff members were already applying aspects of solution based techniques, I believe the staff would benefit more from having formal training in how to use solution focused therapy when working with their clients. Some examples of solution focused therapy techniques that could be useful at the RIWC include exploring possible solutions, asking miracle questions, setting goals, making an action plan, and setting it into motion.
Feminist theory.

Feminist theory in social work practice places the experiences of women at the centre of any analysis of society rather than using a gender-blind approach to understanding the experiences of human beings. Feminist social work theory acknowledges that the experiences of women will be affected by prevailing social norms and structural inequalities. In the feminist approach, the social relations of men, women, and children are viewed as interdependent. Dominelli states that feminist social work theory explores the systematic ways in which women are oppressed socially by the society in which they live (Dominelli, 2002, p. 7). A broad variety of feminist theories were developed over the years to comprehend gender oppression. At the core of all feminist theories there are certain principles (Dominelli, 2002, p. 23). Feminist theory does not offer a specific approach to social work but it does offer a way for social workers to analyze the situations of the women they are counseling (Corcoran, 2005, p. 229). Feminist theory emphasizes an egalitarian relationship between the client and the social worker. The social worker helps to educate and empower the female client in a therapeutic relationship where the social worker is also educated by the encounter (A. Ivey, D'Andrea, M. Ivey & Morgan, 2002, p. 331).

The fact that the RIWC chose to offer its services primarily to women is an indication the agency perceived that immigrant and refugee women have special needs in addition to those needs and concerns that result from the immigration experience. This reflects a belief by the RIWC that a gender-blind approach does not adequately address all the needs of women who are immigrants to Canada. I would recommend that the centre staff who deal with victims of domestic violence include feminist theory as part of their approach. I observed that women who
came for counseling to the RIWC were often from cultures that are very male dominant and many of these women were not always used to taking any actions on their own. The use of feminist theory would help the female clients to expand their understanding of their own social context and would give them additional, alternative ways to create their own world view.

The theory section above explains my observations and critical reflection about the potential for integrating feminist strength-based approach and culturally competent social work into the work of the RIWC. In addition, I had an opportunity to explore other social work theories: solution focused theory and feminist theory that could be appropriate in the situation of settlement needs and domestic violence abuse of immigrant and refugee women.

In my next section I will examine the professional values of the RIWC.

Values

The values of any social services organization help to create its unique culture and influence the behaviour of those individuals who work within it. Values affect the way that individuals behave and interact with each other, as well as with others outside the group. Although organizational values are not always explicitly stated by smaller organizations, there are always implicit values that guide the behaviour and decisions of staff as they do their work (Dubois & Miley, 1999, p. 119). The underlying beliefs and values of RIWC have served as a guide for individual staff members to decide what behaviour is appropriate and ethical in the workplace when working with clients and co workers.

Values are also helpful in providing useful information to individuals outside the organization who are looking for insight into the services and beliefs of a particular organization (Clifton & Dahms, 1993, p. 42). The staff members working at the centre come from a variety of
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

ethnic backgrounds, including Asian, African, Latin American, and European. By hiring immigrants to work as staff members, the Centre is consistent in demonstrating its values of promoting equality and the principle of human dignity. This allows immigrant women who come to the centre to trust that the staff working there will have first-hand experience of some of the issues faced by newcomers to the country. The presence of staff who are members of visible minorities helps to create an atmosphere of acceptance and equality for all immigrants.

The inherent dignity of each individual must always be respected by social workers within their profession (CASW, 2005). I observed many instances during my practicum that demonstrated that the staff members were extremely respectful of the dignity of their clients at all times. I attended several celebrations and special events at the centre. The clients who attended these events were from many different religious and cultural backgrounds. For these occasions, the staff at the centre prepared a wide variety of foods for the guests who came. Many of the dishes offered at these celebrations were vegetarian. Vegetarian meals were provided out of consideration for the religious beliefs of many women in attendance. For example, those who belonged to the Muslim faith could only eat meat that was halal, and some of those who belonged to the Hindu or Sikh religion might prefer to eat vegetarian foods. By offering vegetarian foods that would not conflict with anyone’s religious beliefs, the staff members honoured the dignity of each individual in attendance. The staff members at the centre view their mission as helping immigrant women to adjust to Canadian society without giving up their original identities and values. This respect for the cultures and religions of the women who come to the city is a strong part of the RIWC’s values. Many of the women who come to the centre would arrive wearing their traditional ethnic clothing. These women are welcomed by the staff at
the centre, who are very respectful of the women’s maintaining their own cultural values and
determining their own choices. The social work profession has a strong core belief in the
principle that people should have a right to make their own decisions and have access to
opportunities (CASW, 2005). The services provided by the centre are offered strictly on a
voluntary basis, and the women make their own decisions about which services they wish to
utilize. This aligns with CASW values that clients must be supported to make choices based on
informed consent.

The CASW Code of Ethics maintains that social workers must always strive to benefit
humanity in the work they do. In some cases, this will require the social worker to subordinate
his or her own personal goals for the betterment of society (CASW, 2005). I found the workers at
the centre adhered to the CASW principle of service to humanity. In spite of not having
sufficient funding, the centre was offering counseling services with a part-time social worker,
since the centre had identified domestic violence against immigrant women as a significant
problem. Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable in Canadian society when they have little
knowledge of English and have few employment opportunities. The centre also provided
informal voluntary translation services to immigrant women in shelter houses in Regina.

According to the CASW Code of Ethics, one of the guiding values of any social worker
is a commitment to professionalism, and to help in a professional manner towards its clients. The
needs of the client are to be placed before the needs of the staff (CASW, 2005). The centre is
staffed by very dedicated workers who work long hours to meet the needs of immigrant and
refugee women. I often saw staff members volunteer to help one another to provide the best
possible services to their clients.
The staff members always gave priority to the needs of their clients, even helping walk-in clients over their lunch break. The centre workers were careful to maintain professional behaviour when working with clients (CASW, 2005). In my time at the centre, I observed that the staff treated clients with sincerity but, were always careful not to violate any professional boundaries. Although the staff related to the clients in a very friendly manner, they did not cultivate personal relationships outside the professional relationship.

The principle of confidentiality is one of the most important pillars of social work practice. Clients need to have the expectation that anything they tell the social worker will be held in complete confidence. Otherwise the client will not trust the social worker with sensitive, private information. Social work professionals and organizations have strict rules they follow when sharing information from clients with third parties (CASW, 2005). The centre values confidentiality very highly. During my practicum, I learned that there had been an incident during which one of the staff from the centre had shared confidential information with an outside person. The Director had a meeting with that staff person in order to discuss what had happened since this was a breach of confidentiality. As a practicum student, I also had to honour the requirement to maintain confidentiality about the records of the clients. This included all the client information and documents that were kept at the centre as well as the counseling and intake sessions I observed.

Finally, CASW principles require social work agencies to provide competent social services to their clients. Agencies and individual social workers must have the skills required to analyze the needs of clients and provide adequate options (CASW, 2005). The RIWC is a fairly small community-based organization that faces the challenge of providing services to an
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

extremely varied clientele. In many cases, these clients do not speak English well. The staff at the centre strive to provide services to these immigrant women by first conducting needs assessments of the women and then determining how best to meet those needs.

Value statements also help define the principles and ethics by which an organization operates and can act as a guide to action. Therefore, an ethical practice is important to define what is right and wrong as well as the behaviors and perspectives that are valued within the organization. At the RIWC, staff members’ actions were often more expressive than their words to show ethical practice. I will explore the ethical practice of the RIWC in the following section.

Ethics

Every profession uses ethical guidelines to direct the behavior of those who work in that occupation; however, having guidelines does not guarantee that ethical standards will always be met (CASW, 2005). Social workers in Canada are guided by the CASW Code of Ethics. The intent of the guidelines is to ensure that the social worker will always act in good faith and with sound judgment. Any individual social worker will ultimately be acting in accordance with his or her inner understanding of what constitutes ethical behavior. However, the presence of the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics does provide some direction when social workers face an ethical dilemma.

According to the CASW Code of Ethics (2005), social workers work in collaboration with other professionals and honestly acknowledge the work of others. Social workers seek to understand the difference in viewpoints and practice of their colleagues from the social work discipline or from any other discipline (CASW, 2005). During my practicum with RIWC, I did not receive any written instructions or guidelines stating that a code of ethics was in effect at the
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

centre. However, I did notice on several occasions that Centre staff took ethical considerations into account when trying to decide on the best course of behavior. In particular, I noted the manner in which the part-time social worker dealt with her ethical responsibility towards her client and to another social work colleague from a different social service agency in the city. For example, on one occasion a client was seeking help for domestic violence counseling from the part-time social worker at the RIWC and was also receiving domestic violence counseling from another social services agency in the city. The social worker at the Centre did not wish to interfere with the goals of another social worker unless she contacted with the social worker with the consent of the client. Therefore, the social worker at the Centre applied her professional ethical judgment by telling the client that in a necessary situation she can work in collaboration with another social work professional.

While I was participating in the practicum, I personally faced the ethical challenge of maintaining confidentiality of client records when I moved from one part of the organization to another. For example, a client may have come to see one staff member at the centre in order to receive counseling for domestic violence and later would visit another staff member to get help with finding employment. I had to maintain client confidentiality when dealing with members of the staff who worked in a different part of the organization and not share information irrelevant to the service provided by that staff member. This reinforced my classroom learning about ethical considerations in performing social work.

Another potential ethical dilemma for me occurred when I encountered several clients who were from my own country at the centre. When I was conducting intake interviews with new women who came to the centre, on several occasions I discovered that the person I was
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

interviewing was from my home country of Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi community in Regina is very small and some of the clients expressed to me that they were concerned that I would share their private information with others in the community. In order to alleviate their concerns, I assured them that everything they disclosed to me or anyone else at the centre would remain completely confidential.

**Ethical responsibilities to clients.**

According to CASW (2005) ethical guidelines, the social worker must always put the needs of the clients first. In the case of clients who are new immigrants to Canada, the ethical social worker must constantly show respect for clients who are from a great variety of diverse backgrounds. While showing the clients how they can become successfully integrated into Canadian society, the workers at the centre also need to behave towards the client in a way that is not coercive or disrespectful of the client’s values. In all cases, the ethics of the social work profession demand that the social worker not impose his or her own values on the client (CASW, 2005). The staff members at the centre frequently showed their commitment to promoting client self-determination. This was made explicit in conversations that staff would have when they were explaining to clients the various options that were available to them. At no time were the clients pressured or coerced into accepting programs or training they did not wish to take. The staff members would always explain the advantages and purpose of the various programs while letting the client know that she could decide to take the training or turn it down.

**Ethical responsibilities in professional relationships.**

The CASW (2005) ethical guidelines stipulate that social workers must clearly establish the tenor of the relationship between worker and client. Establishing the relationship rules is
most necessary during the initial contact between the client and the organization. On many occasions, I had a chance to watch the initial contact of immigrant women when they first met with the settlement advisor. I was able to see the manner in which the advisor would outline the nature of the professional service the centre would provide. On these occasions, the clients would be informed by the centre staff of the professional relationship and boundaries that would be in effect during future visits to the Centre. The advisor asked the client to explain her needs in order to assess which programs would be most helpful. An assessment form was filled out by the client and the settlement advisor would then provide an explanation of the services that were available for the woman. These procedures are in accordance with CASW (2005) principles that the social worker must protect the rights and dignity of the client since a woman always made her decisions based upon information and not because of coercion.

**Ethical responsibilities to colleagues.**

Within the practice of the social work profession, it is of utmost importance that social workers treat each other with respect, particularly when other workers have different perspectives on a particular issue. This attitude of respect must also extend to workers from other disciplines since there will be many instances when social workers must collaborate with other professionals (CASW, 2005). The staff members of the RIWC consist of only six workers and a part-time social worker. At the Centre I haven’t notice any negative criticism of colleagues in communications with clients or with other professionals. I have seen the RIWC staff members showed respect for each other’s professional level of competence. Besides, the staff members would often assist each other in order to accomplish their tasks in a more effective manner. For example, when a Chinese client was not able to communicate and explain her needs properly to
the settlement advisor because of language barrier, I saw that a staff member from another
department helped to provide translation services to help her colleague perform her duties
properly.

**Ethical responsibilities in work place.**

The CASW (2005) guidelines state that social workers must maintain the goals of their
organization in an ethical way. In my experience at the RIWC I found that the centre staff
members were highly dedicated to accomplishing the goals of the workplace in an ethical
manner. However, part of the ethical responsibilities identified in CASW (2005) guidelines
includes providing opportunities for staff to receive additional training to help them carry out
their professional duties in an improved manner. In my observation I did not notice the staff
members were sent to any professional training. To maintain ethical responsibilities at work
place the staff members should receive more training in dealing with clients who are in critical
situations. This would enable the staff members of the centre to provide a higher level of
professional service to meet the needs of their clients. Upgrading the knowledge of the staff
would be consistent with the core values of the CASW (2005) to maintain professional
standards. In my recommendation section I explain further needs for staff training at the RIWC.

**Relationships**

**Worker-client.**

The relationship between the worker and client is very important in any social work
agency. To build a successful relationship between social worker and client, the worker must
always show respect for the dignity of the client by maintaining confidentiality, by being
respectful, and honest, and by handling any conflict in a professional manner. At the RIWC I
saw the professional staff constantly treating each client with respect for their individuality. The clients were always told that anything they said to the worker would be completely confidential.

A social worker also uses communication skills as an essential part of developing a helpful relationship with the client. Effective communication skills build rapport with the client to allow the client to trust that the social worker will be able to help them (Hepworth et al., 2010, p. 44). The social worker establishes rapport by creating an atmosphere of warmth and acceptance for the client. When the client arrived for the initial interview, the social worker greeted the client by introducing himself or herself and explaining what they did in the organization. The social worker would show a sincere interest in knowing how the client was doing. I personally saw many such interactions take place between the centre staff and clients. In order for social workers to create a good rapport with clients, a social worker must treat them with respect and courtesy (Hepworth et al., 2010, p. 44). While I was at the centre I noticed that the centre staff always maintained a respectful attitude towards clients while maintaining professional boundaries. Respect towards clients is shown at the centre by maintaining confidentiality, courtesy, and a willingness to affirm that the client had a right to their own opinions and values. I did not observe any instances of conflict between the staff and clients. In my conversations with clients I always found that the clients were extremely happy with the relationship they had with the staff members of the centre. This is an indication that the centre has a good manner of implementing worker-client relationships.

**Worker-agency.**

The RIWC organized a monthly meeting of the staff and Director to discuss any problems and concerns that arose during the month. This allowed all staff members to communicate their
concerns to each other and encouraged a sense of common purpose. On some occasions the monthly meetings was attended by one or more members of the centre’s board of directors. These meetings enhanced the close relationships that the staff, director, and members of the board had with each other and helped to ensure their ability to meet the centre’s objectives.

I saw that ex-employees of the centre continued to visit the staff of the centre and even worked as volunteers for special events. This is an indication that the relationships of many of the previous employees to the centre were positive ones and they continue to be positive even when those individuals are no longer employed there.

Worker-worker.

In the time I spent at the centre I took note of the relationship of the staff members towards one another. I found that the relationship appeared to be very friendly and co-operative since members would frequently go out of their way to help each other. I did not observe any instances of friction or lack of co-operation. On the contrary, staff members very freely offered their help to each other to ensure that clients would obtain the maximum benefit from the centre. While I was doing my practicum I saw that each day the staff spent at least one hour together talking to one another informally during their lunch time. I frequently joined them in their socializing during their lunch break. The conversation at these times was very relaxed and informal and helped them to strengthen the social bonds they had with each other.

Client-client relationship.

During my practicum experience I noticed that centre clients frequently participated in social interactions with one another. For example, the staff frequently organized celebrations to which all clients were invited. The clients enjoyed coming to these parties because they gave
them an opportunity to socialize with each other. They participated in many conversations during which they would update each other about various events that had been taking place in their lives.

Another opportunity provided at the centre which allowed newcomers to socialize was during the popular daily conversational English language sessions offered by the RIWC during the work week. During these English language classes, I frequently saw immigrant clients helping others in the class who were having difficulty in understanding a particular English phrase. The clients were very willing to help each other in any way that they could. This type of interaction of clients allowed them to develop deeper relationships. I witnessed that in these sessions, people from entirely different cultures would talk eagerly with one another to share their experiences and to practice their English language skills at the same time. In many cases, these were very recent immigrants who often arrived at the classes wearing their traditional ethnic clothing. It was not unusual to see women from Pakistan making friends with recent arrivals from Ukraine, Somalia or Brazil. Clients reported to me that they really enjoyed having the opportunity to talk to other immigrants they met at the centre.

**Worker-profession.**

The staff members of the centre are extremely dedicated to their profession. They showed in their attitudes towards clients that they believed in the centre’s value of honoring diversity. This was evident because they treated each immigrant with respect regardless of their ethnic origin, religion, gender, education, or previous occupation.
Worker-self.

While I was at the centre, the workers of the RIWC treated me very respectfully. The centre staff members were very helpful and accommodating in ensuring that I received all the information I needed to complete my practicum successfully. I was very grateful for the patience and openness they showed towards me and they were careful to maintain their professional boundaries.

Strategy

At the RIWC the immigrant and refugee women often bring various complicated issues related to the settlement needs and domestic violence. It is essential to develop proper work strategies in order to serve the clients effectively within a systematic plan. Appropriate work strategies should be chosen according to the needs of the clients in any given situation (Dubois & Miley, 1999, p. 241). The Centre staff members apply different working strategies in a flexible manner to serve immigrant and refugee women at RIWC. The strategies utilized by the RIWC include working with individual woman, working with women in a group, educational programs, and referrals to other agencies, workshops, and the organization of community events. These strategies help the centre to fulfill its goals of helping immigrant women obtain the tools they need to become empowered. I will discuss the strategies that have been applied in the staff members’ daily work based on my observations and conversations with the staff.

Working with individual women.

While I was at the centre, I saw many examples of individual needs assessment of the clients. The staff always helped the women identify their skills and abilities rather than focusing on their perceived shortcomings. This helped the immigrant women to become more confident about making their own decisions. The staff helped women to determine their needs and
suggested possible solutions. The centre staff creates an individual action plan for each woman based on the information received during the initial intake interview. Following the assessment, the women were placed in programs offered by the centre. In some situations, this internal placement into centre programs might be supplemented by referrals to outside agencies such as the Regina Open Door Society, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, SIAST, and Can-Sask Career & Employment Services. The eventual placement of the women into internal centre programs and external community programs is a result of the needs and priorities that are identified during the assessment interview.

In addition to offering settlement services, the centre also offers counseling for immigrant women who are in abusive domestic situations. I saw that the immigrant women who came to the centre sometimes required assistance because they were experiencing domestic violence in the home. Referrals are another strategy used by the centre to achieve its goals of education and empowerment. For example, at the time I was a practicum student at the RIWC, in extreme cases, the centre used referral to a women’s shelter to help these women find a safe haven. Sometimes referrals to other service providers are necessary when clients’ needs extend beyond the scope of the agency’s programs or the expertise of the social worker or require resources in addition to what the initial agency can supply. Social service agencies often use referrals to other organizations in the community when the needs of the client are beyond the capabilities of the social worker or the agency (Dubois & Miley, 1999, p. 220).

One important strategy of the center is to provide all their services free to their clients. This ensures that the immigrant women have access to these services regardless of their ability to pay. Another way in which the centre makes it easier for women to participate in their programs
is by providing a free child-care service for the women who are clients. This enables the women to feel comfortable speaking with the centre staff because they know their children are being taken care of.

**Working with women in groups.**

Group work is a strategy that aims to enhance the social competence of individual clients. (Skidmore, Thackeraypage & Farley, 1994, p. 75). Group work can be used as a vehicle for the therapeutic growth and change of the individuals who participate. The RIWC uses group approaches in several ways to help immigrant women become empowered and educated. One example of how the centre uses the strategy of women in groups is found in the English Language Conversation classes that are offered on a daily basis. These conversation classes are open to men and women immigrants and help them to become familiar with the English language. The classes are usually led by volunteers and they are very popular. The classes provide an excellent socializing opportunity for those who attend. The men and women who come to the classes are eager to speak with each other and share their experiences. Many of them end up becoming friends. These group classes help new immigrants to quickly meet others who are in a similar situation and help them to overcome their feelings of isolation, in addition to improving their basic English language skills. The fact that these classes are so popular is an indication that this particular strategy used by the centre is very effective at achieving the goal of helping to empower immigrants.

**Working with women in community.**

In order to help their immigrant clients become better integrated into Canadian society, it is important for the centre to nurture and maintain strong bonds with outside organizations and
individuals in the community. This community interaction assists the centre staff to provide referrals to help their clients improve their physical and mental health, their employment prospects, and their social networks. For example, the centre frequently arranges opportunities for their clients to meet with potential employers so the clients can be exposed to job opportunities. These networking events also help the clients to better understand the expectations of Canadian employers. Additional examples of community involvement by centre staff include the annual women’s day program and the Christmas open house program. These special social events are open to the clients of the centre as well as to other members of the community. Any existing community will include many social resources that can be accessed by social work agencies to expand their offerings to their client base. Social service agencies may replace or complement existing community resources that can benefit their clients (Hepworth et al., 2010, p. 425). It is particularly important for the RIWC staff to locate and use community resources to help their immigrant clients because these women have come to a new country where they are lacking in the support systems that were previously provided by family and friends in their countries of origin. The staff of the RIWC is very small but they are able to function more effectively by outsourcing specific functions to existing organizations in the city of Regina. For example, the centre refers new immigrants to the Regina Open Door Society for language testing and instruction. Women who wish to become more independent by learning to drive a motor vehicle are referred to local driving schools for training. If clients require special assistance due to problems such as a need for housing, the centre staff will find an appropriate agency in the community to help them. Creating a supportive atmosphere in which the women who are new to Canadian society will feel welcome and comfortable is also part of the centre’s strategic actions.
The centre strives to create an atmosphere that is very homelike and welcoming, and uses the strategy of hiring staff members who are immigrants themselves. This helps to create an organizational atmosphere that is non-intimidating to the immigrant women who come here.

**Skills**

Excellent interpersonal skills are essential for social workers interacting with clients. While I was doing my practicum at the RIWC, I had the goal of improving my own interpersonal skills by assisting the RIWC staff members when they were working with the immigrant and refugee women who came to the centre for help. In this present section I will be focusing on the skills: communication and interview skills, cultural sensitivity skill and administrative skills that I have achieved during my practicum.

**Communication and interview skills.**

Clients and social workers use both verbal and non-verbal means of communication when they interact with one another (Hepworth et al., 2010, p.155). Social workers need to be aware of the non-verbal messages that are being transmitted in addition to the verbal messages that are communicated so they can be sure the messages are being communicated and interpreted accurately (Hepworth et al., 2010, p. 157). During my practicum experience I paid special attention to my voice, spoken language, body language, and facial expressions in order to convey a sense of warmth and welcome to the clients. One of the biggest challenges for me occurred to communicate with clients who had little or no ability to speak English. In some cases I was able to use my own knowledge of the Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu languages to communicate with women who were from India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In other cases, I needed to read the facial expressions and body gestures of clients in order to understand what they were trying to
say. I also used body gestures and facial expressions when communicating with women who did not speak English very well. In this way I was able to develop and improve my ability to communicate non-verbally. On the occasions when I led the English language conversation classes, I also used body language and facial gestures to help the students understand some basic words and phrases in English. A practical example of communication through non-verbal means occurred when a woman from China who spoke no English came to me carrying a bowl of food. She made a lot of gestures and spoke to me in her own language. By interpreting her gestures, I was able to understand that she wanted me to warm her food in the microwave.

Interviews in social work are a key tool used to determine the best course of action to help a client (Hepworth et al., 2010, p. 43). The intake interviews at the RIWC were highly structured in order to assess client needs accurately and quickly. During these interviews, I asked the clients questions in order to determine the best way to help them.

**Cultural sensitivity.**

Working at the RIWC gave me an opportunity to watch the staff interact with the clients who came from many cultural backgrounds. It also gave me an opportunity to develop and enhance my own cultural sensitivity when dealing with people who have cultural backgrounds that are very different from my own upbringing in Bangladesh. In my practicum, I gained the opportunity to put into effect some of the theoretical skills such as acceptance of cultural differences between people, empathy, warmth, and a capacity to respond flexibly to a range of possible situations regarding settlement needs. I learned to be very respectful of each person’s culture because of the examples that were set by the RIWC staff. I was able to directly observe
that the clients were appreciative of the efforts that were made to treat their culture in a sensitive and respectful manner.

Because of my own upbringing in Bangladesh, I was already aware of cultural expectations of people who come from different backgrounds. When I encountered clients at the centre who appeared to be from India or Pakistan, I would address them in a way that I knew they would find to be very respectful.

**Administrative skills.**

There are many administrative tasks carried out by centre staff as part of their daily routines. During my time at the centre, I worked in all areas of the agency which gave me familiarity and understanding of how the RIWC provides its services. This allowed me to improve my administrative skills. For example, I spent time working on the switchboard taking incoming calls. I would then decide how to forward the call to the appropriate person in the organization. I also participated actively in the intake interviews conducted by the settlement advisor. For example, I took notes of the proceedings and did some administrative work such as making photocopies of various documents. I also designed and printed a poster for advertising volunteer recruitment at the RIWC. I travelled some places in the city including the Regina public library and the University of Regina to set up the posters of the RIWC volunteer recruitment.

**Overall experience and recommendations**

My practicum placement proved to be a learning experience for the staff as well as for myself. When I came to the Centre to do my practicum, I was the first Master’s level student who had come to work at the Centre. As a result, there was some confusion from staff members
about what my duties would be. The initial confusion was resolved when I met with the Director of the Centre to discuss my program goals. I also gave her a copy of my practicum plan.

During the first few days of my practicum, I spent my time observing the operations of the various programs. The centre had arranged for me to work with the settlement advisor to learn settlement counseling as I wished to improve my knowledge of counseling techniques. I did at times participate in doing the intake process with newcomers to the centre and I helped in the conversational English language classes by making conversation with the class members. The tasks I did at the centre included interviewing newcomers at the centre and helping them to fill out the needs assessment form. I then referred the clients to the appropriate person within the agency or in the community. I checked their documentation to ensure they were eligible for the services they were requesting. Once the documents were verified, I made copies and filed them in the appropriate location. On one occasion, I helped the settlement advisor write her monthly report which was sent to the funding agencies. During the practicum period I also led several of the immigrant English language classes. One of my most important goals for my practicum was to learn how to deal with people from many different cultures. In this, I felt I was very successful since I had the opportunity to interact professionally with clients of varying backgrounds. I spent a lot of time learning more about the organization by speaking with all staff members in depth and by reading the RIWC website. This helped me to understand the goals of the RIWC and the way in which the staff achieve the organizational goals. In this manner, I was able to achieve my own practicum goal of understanding how the RIWC operates to help immigrant and refugee women.
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

I found my practicum experience at the RIWC to be extremely rewarding and meaningful. Immigrants who arrive in Canada come here with a great variety of expectations and varied past histories. The transition period can trigger a lot of stress in all family members as they try to become adjusted to Canadian society. The RIWC is committed to providing assistance that is particularly directed towards immigrant women who play an important role in the emotional health of the family.

Since Canada is rapidly becoming an increasingly multi-cultural society, the new immigrants must not only learn to adjust to mainstream Canadian society, they must also learn how to keep their own values, cultures, and traditions while they explore new ways of creating a life for their own families. Since I came to Canada from a culture that was very homogenous, it was very interesting and challenging for me to encounter immigrant women from many other backgrounds and cultures. I had the opportunity to improve my own ability to deal with multicultural clients. I was able to make many observations and I have prepared some recommendations below that I believe would help the organization become more effective.

**Larger Accommodation.**

The RIWC currently operates out of a two story home on a residential street in Regina. This home offers several advantages for the centre since it creates a very comfortable and non-intimidating environment for the immigrant women who come here. The disadvantage of its current location is that the house is quite small for the number of clients it services. I observed that there are frequently social occasions where there is simply not enough room to accommodate all the women who wish to participate. This results in overcrowding and creates a less desirable atmosphere.
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

I believe that the volume of immigrant women who come to the centre would be better served if the centre could offer the women more space. One of my recommendations for the RIWC is that it should move to a larger location that will still provide a warm and inviting environment while it also provides more room to accommodate all its clients.

**Full time Social Worker**

Immigrant and refugee women were regularly coming to the RIWC for help with domestic violence in the home. However, the social worker was only available on a part-time basis to assist these women. During a recent visit to the RIWC, I was told the centre now has a social worker on staff three-quarters of the time. I believe that there is enough need for a full time social worker to provide domestic violence counseling at the centre.

I saw that women were coming to the centre for help with abuse they were experiencing in the home, but there was not always a trained social worker available to help them. These women then had to come back on a different day in order to receive the help they needed.

Having a social worker available to help immigrant women experiencing domestic violence would be an important way to help these women in a timely fashion instead of asking them to wait for days to receive counseling while they are in an unsafe situation. These immigrant women often feel especially powerless because they may not speak English very well and they may be completely dependent on their spouses for their financial survival. When they come to Canada, they may feel particularly isolated since they are cut off from the support of family and friends and they do not know how Canadian laws work for domestic violence cases. At the time of my practicum placement, the centre did not have enough funding to pay for a full-time social worker to help these women who were experiencing domestic abuse. I believe that the centre
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

should receive enough additional funding to make it possible to hire a social worker on a full time basis.

Staff Training for Cultural Competency Practice

The staff members of the RIWC are doing an admirable job addressing many of the needs of immigrant women in a culturally sensitive manner. One reason that they are able to assist these immigrant women is because each employee of the centre has also had the experience of immigrating to Canada from another country. That means the staff have personal awareness of the difficulties and confusion faced by immigrants to Canada.

It is very important for agencies that deal with multicultural clients to make every effort to improve their own cultural competency. Educating staff members who deal with a very diverse population is an effective way to help an agency become more culturally competent (Dubois & Miley, p. 89). At the time of my practicum placement, the staff of the centre originated from five different countries. Obtaining additional professional training specifically related to cultural competency would enable the staff members to apply their own existing skills in a more professional manner.

Improve Retention Rate for Job Search Training Program

One of the most important services provided by the RIWC is the job search training it offers to immigrant and refugee women. This is a three day program to orient newcomers to Canada to learn how to search for jobs in the Canadian market. When I was at the RIWC, this job search training program had a high dropout rate. When I enquired about the reasons for the high dropout rate, the staff told me they believed that those who registered had assumed the program would guarantee them a job upon completion. The staff suspected that attendees
The centre tried to provide basic English language classes for immigrants and refugees on a regular basis. These conversation classes were usually led by volunteers. On several occasions, the classes were delayed because the volunteer did not arrive on time while the clients were waiting for the class to begin. On these occasions, other staff members would have to wait to see if the volunteer showed up. If necessary, the staff members would reschedule their own commitments on short notice to instruct the English language conversation classes. I personally led several conversational classes when the scheduled volunteer instructor did not arrive. In these cases, the volunteers did not demonstrate a sincere commitment to carrying out their roles, suggesting that they did not value the clients’ time as much as their own. When the conversation classes had to be cut short because the volunteer was late or did not arrive, it created a
disappointment in the minds of the centre clients who had shown up with the expectation that the classes would be delivered at the scheduled time. The volunteers were representing the agency even though they were not paid. Because this particular conversation class is highly valued by the clients, it reflected badly upon the centre when the volunteers did not show up to deliver the program.

I would recommend that the centre look for ways to reduce the chances that a class might be late in starting or that a staff member would be required to take on the responsibility of leading the classes. One way to ensure that the classes take place on time would be to pay the volunteers an honorarium for leading the class. A financial incentive would make it more likely that the volunteer would show up. However, the centre would need to have this honorarium built into its yearly budget and it may not be feasible at this time. Another way to deal with the problem could be to schedule to volunteers to work in pairs to lead the classes. If one volunteer does not show up, the class can still go ahead. This method would also require a larger pool of volunteers to call upon to lead classes. The staff can also request that volunteers inform them sooner that they are not able to attend on a particular day. A substitute volunteer could then be contacted to come in to take over a scheduled class. I recommend that the centre experiment with trying to schedule two volunteers for each conversation class in order to increase the likelihood that the class can go ahead.
Vision

I chose to have my practicum experience at the RIWC because I had a strong interest in learning how to work effectively with immigrant and refugee women. During the practicum I benefitted from the opportunity to meet and interact with immigrant and refugee women from many countries and from many different religious, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. The experience intensified my interest in learning more about other cultures and learning how to improve my multicultural competency.

While I was doing my practicum, I was able to achieve the great majority of the goals I had set for myself. I had the opportunity to observe and participate in the settlement services by helping the staff person with assessing and counseling immigrant and refugee women who came for settlement services. However, I was not able to fully meet my goal of learning more about counseling women who were experiencing domestic abuse. This was due mainly to scheduling conflicts between myself and the part time social worker at the time of my placement. Although I did have the opportunity to observe several domestic violence counseling sessions, as a practicum student, I was not allowed to counsel any of the clients.

I continue to have a strong desire to learn more about helping women who are victims of domestic abuse through further observation of the counseling process. In the future, I want to learn more about how women become victims of domestic violence, and how they can be helped to overcome their problems with their self image and their roles in the relationship. Since I did not have the opportunity to learn in depth about domestic violence abuse counseling during my practicum, I hope to improve my skill in other ways such as by doing volunteer work with women who are experiencing domestic violence.
I believe that it would be very advantageous for me to learn more about strength-based counseling as it has particular usefulness and relevance in helping women who are victims of domestic violence. I want to have more opportunities to improve my clinical skills to become an effective social worker.

**Conclusion**

I am especially pleased that I chose to do my practicum at the RIWC because I had the opportunity to meet and interact with many immigrants and refugees who had recently arrived in Regina. I was able to directly experience the immigrants’ accounts of the difficulties and challenges they were facing as a result of moving to a different country. I could also see how beneficial it was for them to have the types of services that were provided by the RIWC. Besides helping the immigrant women with their initial settlement problems, the agency is also doing its best to address the issues of domestic violence. However, I believe that the Centre needs to continue to explore better ways of addressing domestic violence issues against immigrant women. Through this practicum, I have discovered that I would also like to continue working to support immigrant and refugee women in my future social work practice. I would like to continue to expand my knowledge of domestic violence counseling using the feminist strength-based approach.
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE

References


City of Regina. (2011). *Regina's immigrant population rapidly growing: New design Regina*
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE


CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A SOCIAL WORK PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT THE REGINA IMMIGRANT WOMEN CENTRE


National Association of Social Workers


