Integration and Communication in the Diaspora: Intersectionality and Community Facilitation through ICTs

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ABSTRACT

There has been increasing interest in the dynamic characteristics of diaspora communities within the global community. In some cases, as with the Caribbean region, the diaspora community is larger than the Caribbean resident population. The process of transition and integration from national to host countries is one which can be supported by community organizations in the host country. Community access points, in particular, play a role in the development and integration of diasporic linkages. In this paper, we examine these interactions through interviews and observation of activities of members of the diaspora at community organizations in a host city. An important perspective of intersectionality arises as a platform for analysis given the varied approaches to integration and communication through ICTs that have to be considered based on the characteristics of the diaspora community.

Keywords

Diaspora, intersectionality, community, ICT, information and communication technologies

INTRODUCTION

There is much interest in the Diaspora in global and national contexts. Many definitions have been put forward, and one finds some common elements interwoven among the definitions. As identified by Lahneman (2005, p. i), using these common threads, a diaspora can be defined as “a group that recognizes its separateness based on common ethnicity/nationality, lives in a host country, and maintains some kind of attachment to its home country or homeland.” There are varying characteristics of diaspora communities ranging from their development to their organization and influence, their demographics, and the level of interaction and participation among members of the community. These dynamic characteristics suggest the challenges that may be involved in coordinating activities within a diaspora community, facilitating integration within a host society, and supporting interactions and identifications with the homeland. The size of the diaspora communities can also reflect the challenges presented in these efforts, as for example, in the case of the Caribbean region, the diaspora community is larger than the Caribbean resident population.

The process of transition and integration of members of the diaspora as they move from their homeland to host countries is one which can be supported by community organizations in the host country. Diaspora studies have investigated various aspects of these movements – from the perspective of the country of origin or host country, from the perspective of relatives remaining in the country of origin, and those who have migrated, to their role in their new contexts, and their return visits (Duval, 2003; Girvan, 1997; Mullings, 2012). Further, there have been calls for further research on the creation and maintenance of linkages between the new and old contexts, given the potential social and economic benefits which can be derived by all stakeholders. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are expected to play a major role in diaspora development initiatives (Duval, 2005; Greenidge, Jean-Baptiste and Ospina, 2005), and there tends to be an assumption that members of the diaspora will have access to and be familiar with these technologies, as they may be more available in the host country. However, members of the diaspora may face similar issues with ICT access and usage in their new context as experienced in their homeland context, depending on a number of factors. Community access points, in particular, play a role in the development and integration of diasporic linkages. These community access points provide a venue where access is provided to information and communication technologies and services, with support from other members of the diaspora. In the context of research and practice in the field of community access, this role is an interesting one for investigation, as there has been limited research in this area, particularly looking at the impact on development from this perspective.
In this paper, we examine these interactions through interviews and observation of activities of members of the Caribbean diaspora at community organizations in a host city, Toronto, Canada. An important perspective of intersectionality arises as a platform for analysis given the varied approaches to integration and communication through ICTs that have to be considered based on the characteristics of the diaspora community. The community access points are providing services to community members with varying characteristics that should be taken into consideration such as different age groups, different generations in relation to the generation of the family that arrived in the host country, level of identification with the particular culture, and competencies in information and communication technologies.

The paper is organized as follows: in the next section we discuss the literature related to diasporic communities, intersectionality and community support, followed by a section outlining the research context and method. The findings of our empirical work are then presented, followed by a discussion and development of a framework resulting from an analysis of the findings. A concluding section articulates implications for research and practice.

RELATED LITERATURE – CARIBBEAN DIASPORA, ICTS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The facilitation of connections among members of the Caribbean diaspora and between the diaspora and their home countries has been viewed as integral to social and economic development. For example, linkages with the diaspora have been viewed as a major factor in the economy of the Caribbean region (Girvan, 1997; Nurse, 2004) in areas such as remittances, export markets (including cultural and niche market exports) and investments. Linked to this are possibilities for increased tourism through visits from friends and relatives (Duval, 2003; Mullings, 2012). Further the building of social ties, and exchange of ideas and skills have been emphasized. These possibilities can all benefit from the infusion of information and communication technologies to support these endeavours and the development of transnational connections. As Duval (2005, p. 245) states “Deserving more exploration, however, is the means and mechanisms by which such connections and networks are forged, consolidated and maintained.” An analysis of how this may be facilitated through community access points will assist in further development of diasporic linkages.

The complex issues associated with studies of the diaspora are highlighted by Boxill (2010). For example, the process of defining and identifying ‘the diaspora’ itself is complex, and is an important aspect to be aware of (Allahar, 2010). In his study on the Caribbean diaspora in relation to the Canadian capitalist economy, Allahar (2010) distinguishes between the Caribbean-Canadian population and members of the Caribbean diaspora, noting that not all members of the Caribbean-Canadian community would automatically be members of the Caribbean diaspora. In discussing the possible distinction, Cohen (1997, p. 13) states that “a diasporic consciousness, moreover, has to be mobilized (socially constructed). A significant number of social actors need to accept their collective self-definition as a transnational community, organize to spread this perception, and persuade others to participate in actions designed to cement their diasporic character and status.”

The need for the use of information and communication technologies to support transnational linkages, and the development of ties to support economic initiatives in the diaspora has been recognized, with further analysis needed to support research and practice (Duggan and Virtue, 2004; Duval, 2005; Jamaica Diaspora Connect, 2009; Minto-Coy, 2011; Nurse, 2003). The potential for this increased usage of ICTs to benefit the region through possible return migration has also been identified (Conway, Potter and Phillips, 2007). As Thomas-Hope (1998) notes, the culture of Caribbean migration entails the maintenance of ties to the family in the homeland, and sometimes long-distance involvement in decision-making processes. This would also benefit from the support of ICTs.

It has been recognized that some diaspora studies involve investigation through an intersection of diasporic characteristics (Boxill, 2010). Intersectionality has been defined as both a “normative theoretical argument and an approach….that emphasizes categories of differences” (Hancock, 2007, pp. 63 – 64). These categories include race, gender, and class, and extend to interactions among other categories, which can be seen as ‘organizing structures of society’ that have an impact on equality (Hancock, 2007, p. 64). Choo and Ferree (2010, p. 129) explicate three methodological approaches to analysis through intersectionality, focusing on group, process or system, through ‘comparative, contextual, or complex dimensions of analysis’.

The concept of intersectionality and its influence on the Caribbean diaspora has been mentioned (Crawford, 2004; Reynolds, 2008). Intersectional identities, in the context of increasing use of information and communication technologies, to facilitate transnationalism, have become dynamic (Tastsogou, 2001). In the area of information technologies, Kvasny, Trauth and Morgan (2009) examine participation of women in the information technology field as another dimension of analysis using intersectionality. In their study, Kvasny et al. (2009) examine variations in educational experiences, including a group of women who use the facilities at a community technology centre. Intersectionality can therefore be seen as a useful approach...
to the analysis of the interactions among the Caribbean diaspora in Canada in the usage of community access points for support with ICTs and other services, and the complexities which face the service providers in the provision of these services.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHOD
The size of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada is over 500,000 persons (Statistics Canada, 2007) with most residing in the city of Toronto. The provision of community access to information and communication technologies is useful and supported through various initiatives in the city. For this study, we identified, through snowball sampling, community organizations which support members of the Caribbean diaspora, and in some cases, other immigrant communities in addition to the Caribbean community. The four selected organizations were the Jamaican Canadian Association, Learning Enrichment Foundation, Tropicana Community Services and Wireless Neighbourhood Network.

The Jamaican Canadian Association was established in 1962, and currently serves members throughout Canada, not only from the Jamaican and Caribbean communities, but other nationalities as well. The association has established many linkages with other associations in the Canadian context. Several services are offered, in the areas of health, settlement assistance, activities for seniors and young people, training, employment search assistance, and hosting of events of interest to the diaspora.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation is a community hub located in northwest Toronto, which has been providing community services since 1978. It started out as a theatre project and community access point and has expanded to provide a range of services and activities for members of the variety of immigrant communities in the surrounding areas. Housed in a large building, they have transformed the interior to accommodate a ‘town square’, child care centre, catering school, bicycle repair shop, counseling and classroom areas, in addition to offices and a community technology centre.

Tropicana Community Services has been in existence for 32 years and offers a variety of services to the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto, through ‘culturally appropriate’ programmes including educational and employment services, youth development, child care and counseling. Tropicana also offers these services through partnerships with other community-based organizations. A community access point (ProTech Media Centre) at the Toronto Public Library’s Kennedy & Eglinton Branch, and Employment Services at the Jamaican Canadian Association are two examples. The community access point has become involved in activities hosted by the Library, and has an active youth association.

The Wireless Neighbourhood Network is an initiative which is part of the Industry Canada’s network of Community Access Points. It focuses on providing computer and internet access to community residents, and tenants of Toronto Community Housing, and on providing free wireless access to residents of St James Town. They are also in the process of lobbying for free wireless access throughout Toronto to enable benefits to the community through increased access and usage of technologies.

The data gathering phase of the research included visits to the community access point sites, where semi-structured interviews were conducted with the management, staff and clients of these organizations and services offered. Direct observations of the activities and interactions were also utilized as a data collection method. We further identified through these organizations, community organizers who are very involved in the process of connecting and providing services to the diaspora communities. Interviews were also conducted with the community organizers to provide their perspective on the role of the community access points and ICTs in facilitating diasporic linkages.

A thematic analysis of the data using an intersectionality approach was conducted to explore the issues involved in serving the various needs of the diaspora community through community organizations.

FINDINGS
The findings based on the analysis of the interviews, and direct observation, are presented here according to the themes which emerged during the analysis.

Newcomer/Settlement Services
One of the key roles of some of the community organizations was newcomer/settlement services. One of the directors explained that his organization previously had a booth at the airport where counselors were on hand to provide counseling services and assistance with regards to applications, immigrant status and housing. These services were now offered at the organization’s location. It was noted that many immigrants were unable to use a computer, particularly for tasks such as applying for passports online, so the community access point assisted with those activities.
Social Services

Several social services were provided by the organizations. Skills training and employment services were offered by the community access points or community organizations. It was noted that there had been a change in the age profile of community members who utilized the employment services, reflecting the changing demographic in the workforce due to economic challenges. Some training programmes were specifically geared towards members of the diaspora who would no longer be beneficiaries of social assistance. The demographic of the communities also required the provision of child care assistance while participants undertook training. This led also to training in child care for some community members. The child care staff, themselves members of the diasporic communities, knew needs of other community members and would refer them for specific activities or training at the community access points.

Interactions among the community members and observations of their needs generated ideas, created or sustained initiatives. For example, it was observed that highly skilled members of diasporic communities would benefit from a support network to study for equivalency exams, and this was established by one of the community organizations supported by online network and access to the computers at the community access point.

The provision of services was also dependent on funding and volunteers. One of the programmes at an organization was at risk of being discontinued as the funding was provided by a US agency, and their focus had shifted to funding programmes for war veterans. At another organization, they have been able to obtain funding to host health expos, with a specific focus on issues such as diabetes among blacks. They also have workout equipment available, which was intended for use by the seniors, but volunteers are needed to demonstrate the use of the equipment to the elderly.

Location and Transformation of Space

Location emerged as a central theme for all the organizations as this was critical to support the needs of the members of the diaspora who participated in their activities or relied on them for support services. Organizations tried to be accessible to all modes of transportation, particularly from pedestrian traffic from nearby communities or public transit options. In some cases, these community access points were not readily accessible by public transit, but served large diaspora communities in walking distance.

The organizations noted the key role of space and layout in their operations and the impact of transformations they had undergone. Open concept layouts and central activity spaces provided opportunities for interaction among the diverse group of users of the community facilities. One of the programme managers emphasized the importance of community members trusting the location.

Communication and Culture

Community access point staff noted that even as access to computers and communication devices increases, some families cannot afford them. In some cases, families can afford the computer, but still ask for assistance at the community access point in specific skills or services such as printing. Several community access points have established youth programmes where the youth quickly learn various skills. Some seniors also participate in sessions, assisted by the youth. There has also been a focus on developing websites to support community activities. Community organizers indicate that not everyone has an email address, so circulation of information via mailing lists sometimes excludes some of the members of the diaspora and other ways have to be found to share information on activities and plans.

They have noticed that youth are interested in the internet, sports, music and websites such as YouTube. It was also noted that youth tended to be interested primarily in the local culture and events of their current space. Seniors are interested in sharing photos and in some cases are interested in Facebook to keep in touch with friends and family in the Caribbean. Cultural events at the community organizations attract several members of the Caribbean diaspora.

Intergenerational interactions

The community access points tended to have great participation in youth activities. In terms of membership in the parent organization, staff noted that the membership was an aging one. Intergenerational interactions were observed at all the sites, with youth and seniors interacting in a variety of activities planned either by the youth, seniors or community organization. At one organization, members of the youth group were paired with seniors in a series of workshops in social networking. Organizers were happy with the excitement and positive response from all participants.

In the seniors groups, a gender difference was noticed in approach to some activities, as for example at one site the women lamented that the men were outside playing dominoes while the women were inside doing all the organizing of activities.
DISCUSSION AND FRAMEWORK

Through exploration of the empirical observations using an intersectionality approach, we analyze the influences of the intersections of characteristics of the diasporic community members utilizing the community access points. As shown in Figure 1, we identify the dimensions of age, gender, generation of family migration, proximity to community access point and comfort with usage of information and communication technologies as key categories representing differences among community members.

First generation migrants refer to those who arrive in the host country, and are not born in the host country to older members of the diaspora. Younger, first generation migrants were more familiar with technology with possible linkages to friends and family in the Caribbean, whereas younger members of the diaspora who were born to parents already living in Canada were more familiar with technology with possible interest in the Caribbean entertainment culture, but with not as many linkages to friends in the Caribbean.

Older first generation migrants were very interested in maintaining connections to family and friends in the Caribbean, however in general were not as familiar with the supporting information and communication technologies. As noted in the empirical observations, older males and females looked forward to the social interaction opportunities provided by the community organizations, however older males focused less on the organizing needs perceived by the older females. There was interest in possibilities for communicating with family and friends in the Caribbean, however the onsite social activities were equally as important.

Younger members of the diaspora who lived in close proximity to the community access points would regularly use the facilities. Older members of the diaspora were quite attached through social ties and would make the journey to the community organization from their homes, whether near or far. Older members of the diaspora who were comfortable with the use of ICTs and had access to them at home, would sometimes use that medium to keep track of activities and venture to the community centre for particular activities.

In addition to the location and proximity of the community access points, the layout of the space played a role in the interactions. Open concept environments provided opportunities for interactions among diverse groups, as well as the opportunity to create configurations for specific interaction among young persons, or elderly men or women, depending on the planned activities.

These intersections also formed the basis for issues such as involvement in the diaspora community and connections within the community in the host country and to the Caribbean region. The recency of arrival and the generation of the family’s arrival combined with age and gender tended to explain level of involvement in the diaspora community. Older persons tended to be focused on cultural heritage, while younger persons were interested in social activities not necessarily as part of the diaspora, but as part of their local community.
CONCLUSION

With the increasing recognition of the role of information and communication technologies in creating and enhancing linkages among members of the Caribbean diaspora, our findings are relevant for research and practice. Community access points can provide a means to integrate and connect members of the diaspora through the provision of computer and internet access, support services, and opportunities for interaction through participation in activities. These in turn can build support for further linkages and translate into opportunities for social and economic development in the Caribbean region. With an awareness of the influences on usage of ICTs and the needs and interest in the supporting role of the community access points, further initiatives can be developed to promote the interactions in sharing skills and ideas, and building support and knowledge networks, and social and economic capital.

The analysis reveals that the intersectionality of age, gender, comfort with usage of information and communication technologies, proximity to community access point and generation of arrival are among the characteristics that influence the structure of the interventions and service offerings.

Future research will continue to explore the dynamics and intersections within the diaspora community and the ways in which information and communication technologies can facilitate development that is mutually beneficial to members of the diaspora and the Caribbean societies.

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