MUNICIPAL ‘DIVERSITY’ AND ‘IMMIGRATION’ POLICYMAKING IN CANADA: A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH AGENDA AND CALL FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF MUNICIPALITIES

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1 A recent book on theories of local immigration policymaking uses the term “local immigration policies” to capture policies that address various aspects of immigration policymaking including control, settlement and both short- and long-term integration policies and programs (Filomeno 2017: 1-2). I mention “diversity” policies in the title as well to further signal that longer term “diversity management” or “multiculturalism” policies are also included in the scope of this piece.

2 In Good (2019) I review the literature on local immigration policymaking in Canada more extensively, making similar points regarding fruitful areas of future research.
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Beginning in the early 1990s studies showing that some municipal governments had begun to take a role in ‘multiculturalism’ policymaking (a contested term at the local level) emerged first in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, Canada’s most significant immigrant destinations (Tate and Quesnel 1995; Wallace and Frisken 2000; Edgington and Hutton 2002). This literature establishes that municipalities vary in two major ways: in the extent of their role, including the extent to which it is institutionalized (see, for instance, Good 2009) and in the ideational paradigms or discourses that municipalities have employed in their policy efforts. For instance, Christian Poirier (2006) and Livianna Tosutti (2012) argue that municipal variation falls into three categories of immigrant integration paradigms: “civic universalism”, “multiculturalism” and “interculturalism.” Similarly, Fourot’s (2013) work traces Montreal’s adoption and consolidation of an “intercultural” policy trajectory in contrast to Laval’s initial flirtation with a “multicultural” approach before embarking upon its “republican” trajectory at a critical juncture in the city’s evolution. However, upon reviewing this work it becomes apparent that rather than employing a single approach to immigrant integration and ethnocultural relations, many municipalities tend to employ different discourses as well as adopt elements of various approaches in practice (Good 2019).

More comparative research is needed on the significance of these differences in municipal immigration policies in Canada. In particular, we need to know more about the consequences of these policy differences for their effectiveness in integrating immigrants and ‘managing’ ethnocultural relations; for their responsiveness to the needs/preferences of their diverse populations; to uncover patterns of inclusion and exclusion in cities; and as factors in the broader political development of the federation. In order to begin to understand these consequences we need to know more about precisely how municipalities vary by fleshing out each of the paradigms and their relation to municipalities’ policies, governance practices and politics and by further investigating the origins and consequences of municipal hybridity. The prevalence of hybridity in the models employed in Canadian municipalities suggests that they may simply be pragmatic in their policy efforts as some studies of Canadian (Germain and Alain 2009) and European cities (Poppelaar and Scholten, 2009; Schiller 2015) have argued. But what does this mean precisely? Maria Schiller’s (2015) work provides an account of specifically how municipalities are pragmatic comparing Leeds, Antwerp and Amsterdam’s shift toward “diversity” policies following backlash against multiculturalism. She argues that ‘diversity’ emerged as a new paradigm with “assimilation” and “multiculturalism”. Diversity officers combine elements of these paradigms under a diversity “frame” – they are “paradigmatically pragmatic” – creating some tensions and uncertainty about how to implement policies among municipal staff who must navigate these contradictions (Schiller 2015). One particularly interesting lesson from this literature is that in spite of a shift toward more “assimilationist” policies at the national level in some countries, including the Netherlands, local “pragmatism” appears to shift municipal practices toward a multicultural paradigm since they are seen as the most
practical way to achieve immigrant and ethnocultural community integration. Given that ideational hybridity also seems to characterize Canadian municipalities’ local immigration policy discourses, it would be worth exploring whether there are perceived or real tensions among different elements of the municipal “diversity” policy infrastructure as well as the origins of these differences in discourse.

Essentially, we need to know more about the local politics underlying municipal policy discourses within a multilevel context. Why were particular discourses and policies to address immigration and diversity adopted and whose interests are represented and excluded? In other words, we need to know more about the micropolitics and governance arrangements underpinning these policies. Local policy discourses are not only dependent variables that reflect policy choices but also independent variables that influence patterns of conflict and cooperation including a municipality’s ability to sustain cooperation around a local immigration policy agenda. There is a rich literature on urban governance that could contribute to our understanding of this crucial policy area. Attention to the political economy of cities is crucial since scholars link discourses like “diversity” and “multiculturalism” to neoliberal efforts to further capitalist global economic development (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 2002; Mitchell, 1993). Existing explanations of municipal immigration policymaking establish that both local factors including the community’s ethnic configuration (Good 2009) and the intergovernmental context influence the policy dynamics of local immigration policymaking (Good 2009; Fourrot 2013). Both subnational and cross-national research would be valuable in assessing how as well as the extent to which the national context is significant in this policy area. Comparative research suggests that nongovernmental organizations and coalitions of cities could be a source of idea-sharing as well (de Graauw, 2019) at the national and international scales. Probing the local politics of immigration policy discourses could shed light on examples of “progressive” and “good governance” of immigration at the local level and also assist in identifying the root or contributing causes of backlash to immigration as reflected in and influenced by both national discourses and international developments.

To the extent that local context matters, as more Canadian cities have begun to act in the area of municipal multiculturalism and immigration policies, the ideational paradigms that inform municipal policy efforts may proliferate and we may need to develop ways of capturing this variation in more nuanced ways asking both why municipalities chose to address immigration with particular discourses and organize their roles in distinct ways. For instance, municipal strategies may vary by immigration rate, city size or diversity profile. Recent concepts like “superdiversity” acknowledge that urban diversity has become more complex but focus on diversity that has resulted from immigration (Vertovec 2007; Scholten 2019). However, in a multinational federation such as Canada’s one must also consider possible intersections between what Will Kymlicka (1998) calls “polyethnic” and “multinational” diversity in cities. Examining how these various forms of diversity are governed in Canadian cities and how they intersect could
shed light not only on urban development but also on the future of identity and constitutional politics in the Canadian federation.

Finally, as municipalities become increasingly important policymakers and innovators in diversity policy, another important research agenda emerges, a normative one that questions Canadian municipalities’ subordinate place in the Canadian federation (Good 2009: 300-303). Municipalities are uniquely positioned to be attuned to changes in their communities and to act as bridges among local leaders in the community, ideally, in the pursuit of equitable and effective local governance. They also bring the democratic legitimacy of the electoral process to their role in governance and a venue in which to discuss how immigration and other forms of migration affect local communities.

References


