

Caring for Others to Care for Myself: Exploring the Experiences of Racialized Young Sibling Caregivers in Alberta

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Abstract: This study examines how racialized youth in Alberta understand sibling caregiving through an intersectional lens. Using critical ethnography, this work draws on interviews with ten participants aged 18 to 29. Findings show caregiving extends from daily tasks to emotional and advocacy work shaped by culture, migration, and limited supports. These roles influence identity and future possibilities, highlighting the need for greater recognition, boundaries, and culturally responsive supports in social work and community practice.

Approximately one in four young Canadians between the ages of 15 and 29 provides care to a family member or friend with a health condition or disability (Statistics Canada, 2019). Research on young caregivers highlights how cultural expectations, migration histories, and inequitable access to formal supports shape caregiving responsibilities among racialized youth (Akkan, 2019; Brady et al., 2019; Lee & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2019). However, sibling caregiving remains underexamined, particularly within racialized and migrant families where care is often normalized as part of everyday life (Hafford, 2010). This study addresses this gap by centering how racialized young people understand and make meaning of sibling caregiving within their lived experiences in Alberta.

Guided by critical ethnography and informed by intersectionality, this study attends to how caregiving is shaped through power, context, and lived relations (Madison, 2011; Crenshaw, 1989). Critical ethnography allowed for an examination of both lived experience and the structural conditions that shape those experiences, particularly for racialized youth navigating migration, family responsibility, and institutional constraint. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews and field notes with ten participants aged 18 to 29, who provided care to a sibling. Reflexive thematic analysis was used (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021) with the recognition of knowledge as co-constructed through the researcher's engagement with participant narratives (Byrne, 2022).

Findings highlight that sibling caregiving is experienced over time and becomes embedded within everyday family life. Participants described “stepping into care” gradually, where helping shifted into ongoing responsibility without a clear transition. Care extended beyond sibling relationships into broader household and emotional labour, including managing routines and supporting family cohesion. Caregiving was shaped by cultural scripts related to birth order, gender, and migration, where expectations of responsibility were often assumed, rather than explicitly assigned. Across narratives, participants described caregiving as both relational and demanding. Many did not identify as “caregivers” initially but instead understood their roles through being an older sibling or doing what was needed. Caregiving involved a balance between what participants described as caring and giving, where emotional connection and obligation were not separate, but constantly negotiated. Participants also described becoming bridges between their families and broader systems, taking on roles in translation and advocacy within institutions that were not designed to support their family realities. Through these experiences, caregiving shaped how participants understood themselves as racialized young sibling caregivers, their relationships, and their futures.

This work contributes to the understanding of sibling caregiving for racialized youth in research and policy. It highlights the limitations of dominant caregiving policies that fail to account for the everyday and often invisible labour performed by racialized youth, as well as highlighting the need for greater recognition of racialized sibling caregiving across social systems and community contexts. Recognition includes increased awareness and supports that are responsive to the realities of racialized and migrant families for practitioners and educators. Supporting young sibling caregivers requires naming caregiving and creating space for connection and support, while attending to the conditions that shape how care is taken up in everyday life.

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