Difference, Deficiency, and Devaluation: Non-recognition of Foreign Credentials for Immigrant Professionals in Canada

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Canada is an immigrant country. Immigration played an important role in transforming Canada into an ethnoculturally diverse and economically prosperous nation. When immigrants come, they bring their language, culture, values, education background, and work experience to the new society. Generally, Canada has been extolled as an open and tolerant society. Its commitment to diversity has been admired by many nations in the world. On the other hand, it has, in many instances, been criticized for failing to move beyond tolerance and accept differences as valid and valuable expressions of the human experience. With respect to the latter criticism, one of the most outstanding issues pertains to the non-recognition of immigrants’ foreign credentials and work experience. A number of studies have revealed that many highly educated immigrant professionals experience deskilling or decredentializing of their prior learning and work experience.

This paper examines the politics of difference as manifested in non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience of immigrant professionals in Canada. It is organized into four parts. It begins with a review of contextual information pertaining to immigration in Canada. The second section examines studies pertinent to non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience in Canada. Third, the paper analyzes the current debate on differences and knowledge, in particular relating to how these factors are perceived and treated by mainstream Canadian society in the process of foreign credential recognition. Finally, this paper concludes that assessment and recognition of prior learning is a political act. While certain forms of knowledge are legitimized as valid, the learning and work experience of foreign-trained professionals are often treated as suspicious or inferior.

Contextual Information: Immigration Past and Present

Immigration has always played a central role in Canada’s nation building. The economic and demographic interests of Canada are usually the driving force behind immigration. In addition, immigration has also served as a means of social and ideological control. In deciding who are the most desirable and admissible, the state sets the parameters for the social, cultural and symbolic boundaries of the nation, as manifested in historically racist Canadian immigration policies. From the Confederation of Canada in 1867 to the 1960s, the selection of immigrants in Canada was based on racial background, with the British and Western Europeans being deemed the most “desirable” citizens, while Asians and Africans were considered “unassimilable” and, therefore “undesirable.” The introduction of the “point immigration system” in 1967 represented ‘an historic watershed’ (Whitaker, 1991, p.19). For the first time in Canadian
history the selection of immigrants was based on their ‘education, skills and resources’ rather than their racial and religious backgrounds (*ibid.*, p. 19). This new system established ‘at the level of formal principle that Canadian immigration policy is “colour blind”’ (*ibid.*, p. 19).

Whitaker also points out that the ‘point system’ was generally successful in reversing the pattern of immigration to Canada away from Europe and towards Asia and other Third World countries. By the mid-1970s, there were more immigrants arriving from the Third World than from the developed world. The largest number came from Asia, followed by the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Between 1968 and 1992, 35.7 per cent of 3.7 million immigrants admitted came from Asia; and 58 per cent of 1.8 million immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1991 and 2001 were also from the same region (Li, 2003).

Immigrant selection practices since the mid-1990s have given more weight to education and skills, favouring economic immigrants over family-class immigrants and refugees. According to Li (2003), economic-class immigrants made up more than half of all immigrants admitted throughout the late 1990s. Among them, a considerable number are highly educated professionals, particularly scientists and engineers. In the year 2000, of the total 227,209 immigrants and refugees admitted, 23 per cent (52,000 individuals) were admitted as skilled workers (Couton, 2002). Despite Canada’s preference for highly skilled immigrants, and despite the fact that these professionals bring significant human capital resources to the Canadian labour force, a number of studies have shown that many of these highly educated immigrant professionals experience barriers to having their foreign credentials and work experience recognized after they arrive in Canada (Basran & Zong, 1998; Henry *et al.*, 2000; Krahn *et al.*, 2000; Li, 2001; Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2001).

**Foreign Credentials and Prior Work Experience: Deskilling and Discounting**

In a study with 404 Indo- and Chinese-Canadian immigrant professionals in Vancouver, Basran and Zong (1998) report that only 18.8 per cent of their respondents worked as professionals (doctors, engineers, school/university teachers, and other professionals) after immigrating to Canada. They also discovered that the most important factor for their inaccessibility to professional occupations and resulting downward social mobility was the non-recognition or devaluation of their foreign credentials. Basran and Zong further point out that immigrant professionals are usually caught up in a “double jeopardy.” In the first place, non-recognition of foreign credentials prevents them from accessing professional jobs in Canada and acquiring Canadian work experience, which subsequently makes it difficult for them to be qualified for professional jobs. Highly educated refugees also encounter similar barriers in Canada. In a study with 525 refugees, Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, and Wilkinson (2000) demonstrate that refugees with high educational and occupational qualifications experienced downward occupational mobility after arriving in Canada. A lack of recognition of prior learning and work experience was identified as the top contributing factor to this downward mobility. Other factors include: a shortage of Canadian references and work experience, English language difficulties, and employer discrimination. Krahn *et al.* particularly emphasize that in the process of
recognizing foreign credentials, professional associations often function as labour market shelter. By retaining strict control over the adjudication of foreign credentials, these associations restrict competition for well-paying professional jobs.

The situation for immigrant women is even worse. Many (Gannage, 1999; Ng, 1996) argue that in the labour force, the category of “immigrant women” has served to commodify them to employers, reinforcing their class position in providing cheap, docile labour to the state under exploitive conditions that are often permeated with racism and sexism. In her research with immigrant women, Mojab (1999) finds that skilled immigrant women faced de-skilling in Canada. She maintains that advanced capitalism simultaneously creates and destroys jobs, and requires both the skilling and deskilling of the labour force. Highly skilled immigrant women are usually seen as potential source of manual labour. They face unemployment or are pressured into non-skilled jobs. Mojab also argues that access to the job market is not determined by education alone, but is constrained by other factors such as gender, national origin, race, and ethnicity. Finally, she points out that systemic racism and ethnicism affects immigrants differently. Women from advanced countries (such as the US, Australia, Britain, or New Zealand) are treated differently from those originating in the Third World countries. Only those with financial resources at their disposal can afford the Canadianization of their experience.

How does the non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience affect immigrants? Reitz (2001) points out that one important impact it has is on immigrants’ earnings. Using data from the 1996 Canadian census micro-data, Reitz assessed the annual immigrant earnings deficit caused by skill underutilization to be $2.4 billion. According to Reitz, immigrants receive a much smaller earnings premium for their education: on average half—that of native-born Canadians. He also maintains that immigrant men and women receive about one-half to two-thirds as much benefit from work experience as do the native-born of the same gender. Another important finding from this analysis is that there are wide variations in earnings among immigrant origins groups. In general, immigrant men from origin groups outside Europe earn anywhere between 15 and 25 per cent less than most of the European origin groups. However, origin-group earnings differences for immigrant women are much less than for men. Reitz further notes that if foreign education explains part of the origin-group earnings differences, it means that Canadian employers treat schooling in certain countries of origin, mostly in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, differently from the way they treat schooling in other, mostly European, countries of origin. This finding reveals that the issue is more severe for immigrants with qualifications from developing countries.

The Politics of Difference and Recognition: Epistemological & Ontological Misperceptions

The above discussion demonstrates that many organizations in Canadian society, including government agencies, professional associations, employers, and educational institutions, play a role in the devaluation of foreign credentials and prior work experience. As a consequence, immigrant individuals and families, along with Canadian society as a whole, have suffered severe impacts. While some of the studies have
suggested causes leading to the denigration of foreign credentials, many have failed to take us further to question the root of this issue. At this stage, many critical questions still remain. We still need to find out: Why do such inequities occur in a democratic society like Canada where democratic principles are upheld and where immigrants are “welcome”? Furthermore, since numerous studies reported this issue a number of years ago, the situation has not improved much. Another question is: What prevents us from moving forward? Drawing on perspectives from critical theory and postmodernism, the authors offer the following observations in an attempt to provide a more in-depth understanding of this issue. The first two considerations pertain to our epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge; the last two relate to ontological foundations in the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials under the auspices of positivism and liberal universalism.

**Epistemological Misperceptions of Difference and Knowledge**

First, non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience can be attributed to the deficit model of difference. In a multicultural society like Canada, one of the articulations of such a society lies in its commitment to cultural pluralism. However, a number of commentators (Dei, 1996; Fleras & Elliott, 2002; and Ghosh & Abdi, 2004) argue that Canada only endorses pluralism in superficial ways. In reality, we tend to prefer “pretend pluralism,” which means that we “tolerate rather than embrace differences” (Fleras & Elliott, 2002, p.2). In practice, differences have been exoticized and trivialized. While minor differences may be gently affirmed in depoliticized and decontextualized forms such as food, dance, and festivities, substantive differences that tend to challenge hegemony and resist being co-opted are usually perceived by many as deficient, deviant, pathological, or otherwise divisive. It seems clear that one of the hurdles that prevents us from fully recognizing immigrants’ educational qualifications and professional experiences is the prevailing attitude toward difference. In fact, our negative attitude and behaviours toward immigrants co-exist with our commitments to democratic principles such as justice, equality, and fairness. Henry et al. (2000) refer the co-existence of these two conflicting ideologies as “democratic racism.” According to the authors, democratic racism prevents the government from making any changes in the existing social, economic, and political order, and from supporting policies and practices that might ameliorate the low status of people of colour because these policies are perceived to be in conflict with and a threat to liberal democracy.

Second, knowledge is used as power to keep out the undesirable. Critical theorists and postmodern scholars (Cunningham, 2000; Foucault, 1980; McLaren, 2003) maintain that: knowledge is power; knowledge is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated; and knowledge is never neutral or objective. The nature of knowledge as social relations prompts us to ask the following questions: What counts as legitimate knowledge? How and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does? Whose knowledge is considered valuable? Whose knowledge is silenced? Is knowledge racialized? Studies have clearly shown that, while immigrants from Third World countries encountered difficulties with their foreign credentials and work experience, those from advanced countries (such as the US, Australia, Britain, or New Zealand) have
relatively successful experiences. It can be speculated that knowledge has been racialized in Canada. As Li (2003) rightly points out, the term “immigrant” becomes a codified word for people of colour who come from a different racial and cultural background, and who do not speak fluent English. The knowledge possessed by immigrants is deemed inferior because their real and alleged differences are claimed to be incompatible with the cultural and social fabric of the “traditional” Canada. It seems clear that the power relations are embedded in social relations of difference (Dei, 1996, p.63). In fact, this hierarchy of knowledge and power is rooted in Canada’s ethnocentric past, where immigrants from Europe and the US were viewed the most desirable, and those from the third world countries as undesirable. Canada’s commitment to the point immigration policy does not permit us to recruit immigrants on the basis of racial and national origins. Hence, we argue that the devaluation and denigration of immigrants’ knowledge and experience becomes the new head tax to keep “undesirables” out. It has also been used as a new strategy to maintain the subordination of immigrants, and to reinforce the extant power relations in Canada.

**Ontological Foundations: Positivism and Liberal Universalism**

Third, foreign credentials assessment and recognition in Canada suffers from positivistic measuring. Positivists believe that an objective world exists “out there,” external to the individual (Boshier, 1994. Positivists also believe that if something exists, it can be measured (Young & Arrigo, 1999). Studies cited here have shown that this objectivist ontology has been the driving force behind the current practice in foreign credentials assessment and recognition. The existing scheme searches for an absolute truth regarding knowledge and experience. It adopts a set of “value-free” criteria, which discount the social, political, historical, and cultural context within which such knowledge is produced. The claimed “neutral” assessment and measuring usually disguises itself under the cloak of professional standard, quality, and excellence without questioning whose standard is put in place, and whose interests it represents. Although immigrants are allowed into the country, professional standards deny them access to employment in their professions. As Krahn et al. (2000) rightly point out, the real purpose of implementing such standard is to restrict competition, and to sustain the interests of the dominant groups.

Fourth, in assessing foreign credentials, positivism is juxtaposed with liberal universalism and in turn exacerbates the complexity of foreign credentials recognition. As Young (1995) notes, liberal universalism posits that universality transcends particularity and difference. She also maintains that universality promotes assimilation while a politics of difference makes space for multiple voices and perspectives. In applying a one-size-fits-all criterion to measure immigrants’ credentials and experience, liberal universalism fails to answer the following questions: Who establishes criteria? Whose interests are represented and served by these standards? What constitutes valid prior learning? What should we do with knowledge that is valid but different? What forms of knowledge become Canadian “equivalent”? Sometimes the rejection of immigrants’ qualification may be simply seen by practitioners as an effort to reduce risk arising from ignorance of the credential in question (Reitz, 2001). It seems clear that by
refusing to recognize immigrants’ qualifications and experience as legitimate knowledge, liberal universalism privileges a regime of truth that perpetuates oppression and disadvantage of immigrants.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this article argues that the Recognition of Prior Learning is a political act. The findings reveal that many immigrant professionals in Canada have experienced devaluation and denigration of their prior learning and work experience after arriving in Canada. As a result, they have experienced significant, demoralizing and disempowering downward social mobility. In the process of prior learning assessment and recognition for immigrant professionals, there is obviously a missing “R” – Recognition. The lack of recognition can be attributed to a number of causes. First and foremost, our epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge can be blamed. The deficit model of difference led us to believe that differences are deficiency, that the knowledge of immigrant professionals, particularly for those from the Third World countries, is incompatible and inferior, and hence that this knowledge is invalid. It appears safe to claim that knowledge has been racialized and materialized on the basis of ethnic and national origins. Furthermore, our ontological commitment to positivism and liberal universalism exacerbates the complexity of this process. This study demonstrates that by applying a one-size-fits-all criterion to measure immigrants’ credentials and experience, liberal universalism denies immigrants opportunities to be successful in a new society. It also reveals that professional standard and excellence has been used as a cloak to restrict competition and legitimize existing power relations. The juxtaposition of the misperceptions of difference and knowledge with positivism and liberal universalism forms a new head tax to exclude the “undesirable,” and to perpetuate oppression in Canada.

It becomes evident that the current approach to recognition of prior learning for immigrant professionals is a serious barrier rather than a facilitator. This study urges government organizations, professional associations, educational institutions, and prior learning assessment agencies to dismantle barriers by adopting an inclusive framework which fully embraces all human knowledge and experiences, no matter which ethnic and cultural backgrounds they emerge from. Otherwise, immigrants will be further alienated from becoming fully-fledged citizens of Canada.

**References**


