The Credential and Certificate Regime in Canada:  
A Social Map from the Standpoint of Immigrant Women  

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Abstract: In this paper, I explicate the credential and certificate regime (CCR) that helps shape the re-training and re-education experiences of immigrant women in Canada. CCR is a conceptual framework that references the social processes producing credentials and certificates and rendering them objective ground to construct desirable workers. This paper is based on two qualitative research projects, both of which use life history style interviews, complemented by the analytical approach of institutional ethnography.

The Credential and Certificate Regime  

Since the 1970s when the economic expansion in the developed West began to wane, the traditional education sector has been blamed for not supplying qualified people to maintain the prosperity of the economy. Various governmental policies have been put in place to restructure education and training. There are however researchers who remain skeptical of the pragmatic utility of education. For instance, Collins (1979) states that education is ‘a competitive system for producing abstract cultural currency in the form of educational credentials’ and that education has been ‘the major new force shaping stratification in twentieth-century America (ibid, 94)’. In this view, education and credential is perceived as a social stratifier; together with other kinds of social differentiators, such as gender, race and class, it helps weave together a system of selection and exclusion, producing and perpetuating structural segregation (Brown, 1995).

I want to extend the credentialist conceptualization and propose a conception of credential and certificate regime (CCR), which is used to reference the social practices making credential and certificates an objectified ground to construct the desirability of job applicants. CCR exemplifies what Dorothy Smith calls the ruling regime (Smith, 1987) or the institutional processes and practices that objectify the individuals and individual experiences so that they become amenable to institutional administration and management. My proposition of CCR is against a background of marketization of education and training, and the rise of a documentary society particularly in the west.

Core to the restructuring of education and training is marketization, and privatization (Kwong, 2000). Education programs previously delivered by the government have been increasingly handed over to the market forces. Integral to the education marketization process, credentials and certificates are entered into a market-based valuation system. For example, Norton Grubb, a professor in the US who has studied the economic benefits of community college education commented on the pre-baccalaureate education this way:

The take-home message is: credential programs are better than non-credential programs; longer programs are better than shorter; and,
students need to worry if certificates have any established LOCAL market value (capitalized is original emphasis, National college transition, 2006)

The statement clearly shows that credentials and certificates have acquired market currency in the labour market. They label both the training programs and the learners. The value of credentials and certificates however depend on the extent of recognition of particular places.

That credentials and certificates carry with them certain kind of market values is the foundation of what I call CCR. The operation of CCR correlates with what Smith and Shryer (2007) calls the emergency of “the documentary society” (Smith and Schryer, 2007). With the notion of documentary society, Smith and Schryer identify a distinctive character of the contemporary world wherein written documents and texts participate in institutional control and social organization. The kind of documents and texts that prompt Smith and Shryer to name a documentary society are “replicable and replicated texts” that “are essential to the standardizing of work activities of all kinds across time and translocally” (Smith, 2005: 166). Credentials and certificates are important texts facilitating human resources (HR) practices across diverse social sites. With their reified market value, credentials and certificates constituted an objectified ground for labour administration.

The Research

My investigation of CCR is particular to the context of Canada, where skilled immigrants are systematically under employed (e.g. Basran and Zong, 1998; Man, 2004). The paper is based on two qualitative research projects. The first one is a small scale project entitled ‘learning to be good citizens – informal learning and the labour market experiences of professional Chinese immigrant women’¹. It was conducted between 2005 and 2006. In 2006, this study evolved into a larger project named “professional immigrant women navigating the Canadian labour market”². Both projects look at the social organization of immigrants’ labour market navigation experiences, except that the second one includes the experiences of both Chinese and Indian immigrant women. The first project has ten women participants and the second project is currently under way, with ten Chinese participants and ten Indian participants. All these women came to Canada after 1995 as skilled immigrants. Majority of them were below 40 years old at the time of immigration. Most of them are married with at least one child.

Both projects use life history style interviews (Cole and Knowles, 2001) complemented by the analytical approach of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005). Life history style interviews provide the women with ample space to reconstruct their experiences in relation to the social economic and political environments (Cole and Knowles, 2001). The interviews focus on the women’s encounters with the large social and institutional processes. The women are asked to relate their job search, training, learning and work experiences in Canada. Interviews are typically two hours and a half. Institutional ethnography (IE) is a sociological approach of inquiry that starts with the experiences of people on the ground, but aims to explicate the social relations extending extra-local, or the “extended courses of actions that take place across social settings” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002: 31) shaping people’s experiences on the ground. Such an investigation often entails locating and analyzing textual materials that
coordinate people’s experiences across setting (Smith, 2005). Throughout the research process, researchers take the standpoint of people on the ground and keep their interests at the centre of the project.

The Canadian Credential and Certificate Regime

More than half of the women in the projects attended university programs, or paid profession or occupation specific training in Canada. There are a range of personal reasons motivating the women to pursue particular credentials and certificates in Canada. What is clear is that participating in retraining and further education was a calculated move of the women to augment their marketability. In this paper, I argue that the women’s individual endeavors to negotiate a better labour market position helped articulate them to what I call a credential and certificate regime (CCR) in Canada, where ideological endorsement of education/training makes certain credentials objective ground to construct desirable workers. I focus in particular on the conditional dismissal and espousal of credentials produced at different places.

Conditional dismissal

For skilled immigrants, the first exposure to the qualifiers for their intended occupations has to be through the National Occupational Classification (NOC), to which all immigration applicants have to refer, to determine their eligibility for immigration. For each occupation, NOC (HRSDC, 2006) lays out its description, examples of titles, main duties, employment requirement and other information. Under employment requirement it usually states the diplomas, degrees and certificates that an ideal job applicant needs to hold. For example, for the position of administrative assistant, it says:

- Completion of secondary school is required.
- A bachelor's degree in public administration, political science or a related discipline is usually required.
- Experience in a related administrative occupation is usually required.

The employment requirement for many jobs as displayed in the NOC list does not specify where the credentials have to be obtained. What is obscured by the generic language is the hierarchical value attributed to degrees and certificates from different places. Risk-aversive employers often recognize the degrees and credentials from places where they have more information about. In this very administrative habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), as Guo (2007) identified, difference is constructed as deficiency. Such a deficit approach to foreign credentials has significant consequences for both immigrants and the host society. In the survey of Watt and Bloom (2001), disproportionate immigrant workers reported that they were not employed at a level commensurate with their skills. According to the estimation of Reitz (2001), underutilization of immigrants’ skills and discounting of immigrants’ credentials cost Canada $1.6 billion a year.

It is also proposed that not all immigrants’ credentials are discounted in the same way. Esses et al.’s study (2006) on the role of prejudice in the discounting of immigrant skills find that only when the job applicant was an immigrant from a non-Western country was skill and credential discounting evident. On the other side of the dismissal of credentials from
Canadian Centred Credentialization and Training Market Expansion.

My examination of the NOC list clearly shows that Canadian credentials and qualifications are important requirements for a good number of jobs in Canada, particularly those jobs in regulated professions. Regulated professions have long been known for their localized practices to exert control over their professions (Murphy, 1988). As shown in the forum of labour market ministers (2008), there are two major regulated occupations in Canada: regulated professions and apprenticeable trades. Across Canada, there are about 50 regulated professions and more than 100 apprenticeable trades. Together, the regulated occupations account for about 20% of the Canadian workforce. For immigrants to enter these occupations, they need to apprentice themselves to a licensed practitioner for a varying period of time before they can acquire their own licenses or certificates to practice independently. That is, the regulation of profession and occupations in Canada automatically rendered the credentials of immigrants dismissible or at least devalued. In the two studies, the women who practiced in regulated professions such as engineering and law, have all steered clear of their previous profession. Instead, many of them changed to fields that largely depend on women’s labour.

For the non-regulated professions, there has also observed an increasing control over the entrance criteria. The NOC list shows that a number of non-regulated occupations also specify sector specific certificates as possible job requirements. For example, for the position of personnel and recruitment officers, the following are required:

- A university degree or college diploma …in management such as business administration, industrial relations,…or Completion of a professional development program in personnel administration…
- Certification as a Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP) may be required. …

The CHRP designation is the highest level of qualification in HR management in Canada. It is granted by the Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario (HRPAO). While HRPAO had a long history, the administration of CHRP is less than 20 years old. What is also noted is that it was between 2002 and 2003 that CHRP acquired national recognition within Canada. Currently, there are a number of requirements for people to get certified as CHRP. For example, each applicant needs to complete nine core courses in HR. In addition, in 2011, each applicant needs to have a bachelor degree or higher (HRPAO, 2008) to be eligible for CHRP. Observably, sectors like HR have been trying to get a better grip over the HR market by forging criteria and demanding new and higher credentials.

The increasing demands put on individual applicants also help create a training market, which has been expanding in an accelerated rate. In the expansive training market, immigrants are certainly a large consumer group. In the studies, quite a number of women attended social services and early child education programs in community colleges. They reported that an
increasing number of immigrant women have entered such programs. Some women interviewees also reported that there have emerged a number of certificate programs designed specifically for immigrants. Such programs could be offered at ethnic specific immigrant training schools, such as in immigrant employment counseling. They are also offered at community centers, community colleges as well as universities.

Trans-border Credentialization and the Internationalized Training Market

What is also noted in the NOC list is that some international certificates are also endorsed in Canada. Such certificates are often field-based, or product specific and issued by an international organization or a company based in a Western country. For example, to be a Financial and investment analyst, a person may have to have the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) designation, available through a program conducted by the Institute of Chartered Financial Analysts in the United States, may be required by some employers. (HRSDC, 2006). Yet another example, to work in computer network, one may need to have certification or training provided by software vendors may be required by some employers. (HRSDC, 2006). What is special about such qualifications is not only that they are issued by entities residing in the western countries other than Canada. They can be virtually acquired in many other countries where testing centres are set up or where people have access to computers. Du is the woman who got the most certificates among the interviewees. She has obtained certificates of different levels in C language, C++, Cisco network, Novell network, Unix administration, etc. Most of these certificates are administered by Microsoft in the US. What made such certificates particularly appealing is that they also make promises about salary returns. Du told us that if she got the highest level certificate in Cisco route operation, “$100,000 yearly salary is no problem”.

Tests for the above certificates are administrated in many countries such as China and Canada. In addition, training services are often provided where the tests are offered. Since Du was so good at getting these certificates, she was once hired in Toronto as an instructor teaching others how to write the tests in order to get these certificates. Things however took a dramatic turn, when she, after getting so many certificates, decided to work part time so that she could better take care of her kids. She then attended some certificate training program offered by a local tax return company. At the time of the interview, she was hired as a part-time tax return specialist at the very company where she was trained because she was one of the top students.

Discussion

The proposition of the credential and certificate regime (CCR) elevates the discussion of the role of education and training to a new stage. CCR is not a theory itself. Rather it is used to highlight the phenomenon today where credentials and certificates have been objectified as the basis to construct desirable workers. Guided by the perspective of CCR, this paper explicates the Canadian CCR that shapes the re-training and re-education experiences of Chinese immigrant women. It shows that dismissal of credentials from developing countries helped make immigrants of color a necessary clientele group for the training market in Canada. It also pins down the two pulling forces constructing the training market in Canada. One is Canadian centered credentialization where various sectors grow anxious about controlling the entrance to
their respective fields through demanding higher and new credentials. The other is the trans-border credentialization practices initiated through influential international associations and corporations. Through heightening the social practices legitimizing credentials contingent on their production place, I point out that there is a deficit construction of “the others”. I propose that to avoid wastage of knowledge and skills, Canadian employers need to start adopting a complementary mode of thinking where foreign credentials are concerned.

References


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ii It is funded by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Canada (SSHRC). Dr. Roxana Ng is the principle investigator; Dr. Tania Das Gupta, Guida Man, Kiran Mirchandani are the co-investigators; Dr. Hijin Park and Doctor Candidate Hongxia Shan are the research assistants on the project.