RACIALIZED YOUTH, IDENTITY AND THE LABOUR MARKET

The Vietnamese Second Generation

ABSTRACT

Discussions of inequalities in the labour market in the Canadian context generally focus on the barriers faced by immigrants but pay less attention to the distinctive experience lived by their children (Rajiva 2005). This paper describes in general terms key issues and challenges faced by second and 1.5 generation Vietnamese youth in their school-to-work transitions, especially those in working class employment situations. Precarity of work condition, the non-linearity of the school-to-work transitions and how gendered and racialized processes shape schooling and employment trajectories are considered.

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Discussions of inequalities in the labour market in the Canadian context generally focus on the barriers faced by immigrants but pay less attention to the distinctive experience lived by their children (Rajiva 2005). The latter are assumed to have had the same chances and to be on an equal footing as other children born in Canada. This paper is based on my Masters thesis research in which I explored how race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other axes of identity are constructed by children of immigrants. I then studied how these constructions affected labour market participation of children of immigrants, in particular those occupying working class jobs. I conducted a series of interviews in 2006-2007 with 23 young adults who grew up in Canada, primarily in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood, with a family history of immigration from Vietnam, and half of whom were working in low-level manufacturing or service-sector jobs. The narratives of the participants in the study revealed the manner in which the production and performance of gendered, ethnic, racial and sexual identities are fluid, contingent and often contradictory. The complexities of the identities and employment trajectories of the participants are outside the scope of this paper. Here, I will describe in general terms key issues and challenges faced by second and 1.5 generation Vietnamese youth in their school-to-work transitions, especially those in working class employment situations.

Despite a national rhetoric of multiculturalism, racial and gender discrimination is a persistent problem in the Canadian labour market (Gupta 1996, Shields, Rahi et al. 2006). While it has always been historically more difficult for women and racialized people to obtain stable work for equal pay in comparison with White men in the Canadian labour market, there has been a general trend, since the 1970s, towards an increase in precarious work and a decrease in the overall availability of secure and well-paid employment (Cranford and Vosko 2006). Youth are a particularly vulnerable age group to marginalization in the current employment climate (James 1993, Marquardt 1998, Felstead, Krahn et al. 1999, Shields, Rahi et al. 2006). Young people struggle to land full-time permanent positions in Toronto in comparison with their predecessors, before the mid-1990s (de Wolff 2006). Youth aged 15 to 24 have particularly low rates of union membership (Marquardt 1998) and represent a large segment of those in short-term, temporary work situations (de Wolff 2006). Furthermore, studies reveal that racialized workers receive significantly less financial returns for their education (Lian and Matthews 1998, Marquardt 1998).

My research confirms the precarious work conditions faced by many racialized youth in Toronto. Most of the participants in the study in working class jobs often did not know their hours of work from week to week, obtained their work through temp agencies and frequently worked less than full-time hours. Few participants worked in unionized work and most of the participants in manufacturing and service sector work earned the minimum wage. Furthermore, most of the people who I spoke with came from households in which one or both parents worked in factories; for many, they are the result of the downward class mobility that they had experienced as refugees from war, immigrating into an essentially White settler society. For young men and especially young women, decisions relating to completing high school and pursuing or not pursuing post-secondary studies were constantly negotiated with parents, who pressured their children to continue their studies and validate white collar aspirations, which are also more valued in Canadian society as a whole. Many of the young people I spoke with shared their parents' hopes for themselves that they would eventually obtain better paid work in white collar

professions. In this way, they tended to consider their current employment situations as temporary. The research illustrates the complexity of the school-to-work transition of racialized youth in the current employment climate. Many participants held employment while attending school, or discontinued their schooling but had plans to re-enrol in formal education institutions at a later date. The transition from school-to-work for the young people I spoke with was frequently very complex and not final and uni-directional but rather, a dynamic one in which a multitude of trajectories were possible.

Most of the participants worked at worksites consisting mostly or entirely of racialized employees, often with management that was White. A handful of participants were in employment situations that might be considered as being directly related to their Vietnamese family background, in the sense that their employers and co-workers were predominantly Vietnamese or that they were hired, as in the case of one participant, to serve a Vietnamese client base.

Some participants identified current stereotypes about Vietnamese people or those racialized as "Asian" and discussed ways in which these stereotypes had created barriers to their academic and labour market success. These included negative portrayals of Vietnamese people as quick-tempered, violent and criminal, or assumptions that all Vietnamese people would be hard working, quiet and strong in math and science. One participant discussed the way in which she was able to take advantage of the assumptions made by teachers that she was naturally quiet to avoid participating in class discussions. Another discussed the lack of camaderie he felt with his peers in the Political Science program at university; he pointed to their insensitivity during discussions to questions of recognition of minority rights as well as their Anglo-Saxon family background that he believed put them at an advantage in interpreting the Eurocentric curriculum materials presented. Thus, participants were able to identify a number of ways in which racial discrimination has come into play in their schooling and employment experience.

The literature suggests that despite the advances made in terms of young women's participation in post-secondary education, the youth and young adult labour market remains structured by gender to the detriment of the economic well-being of women. While both young men and women now increasingly aspire to post-secondary education, the choices made in terms of areas to study are persistently gendered (Krahn and Andres 1999). Although young women tend to excel in their studies, on average, in comparison with men, they tend to have less confidence in their abilities and also to opt for career tracks into gendered occupational ghettos (Mandell and Crysdale 1993).

The employment and schooling trajectories of the participants in the study were indeed markedly gendered in a number of ways. The types of working-class occupations that were held by participants tended to be highly organized by gender. Young men were found to be working as mechanics, as construction workers, and as machinists in manufacturing, while young women often worked in the service sector. Some young men were also found in the service sector, but there were gendered conceptions of what type of work was appropriate for men. Electronics and sporting goods stores were preferred over clothing stores, and banking and bar tending were also deemed acceptable for men. Young women without post-secondary education tended to opt for employment in areas in which there were limited opportunities for advancement, while some of the young men I spoke with who had discontinued their studies had obtained, or were in the process of obtaining, certifications as mechanics or machinists through trade school or apprenticeship programs.

Most of the participants in the study in working class jobs often did not know their hours of work from week to week, obtained their work through temp agencies and frequently worked less than full-time hours. Few participants worked in unionized work and most of the participants in manufacturing and service sector work earned the minimum wage.

Overall, and with a few exceptions, for those participants without post-secondary qualifications, women's hourly wages tended to be closer to minimum wage than those of their male counterparts, who reported earning from a few dollars to ten dollars above the minimum. In addition to the current wage disparities between the young women and the young men who had discontinued their schooling, many of the young women's longer-term ambitions led them towards areas in the labour market which are constructed as feminine, such as caring work or teaching, and which are financially undervalued. Despite this, all of the young women I spoke with made it clear they did not expect to rely on a traditional (male) breadwinner but sought to develop their own financial independence. Furthermore, these young women rarely highlighted gender-based discrimination as a problem that affected their lives outside of their homes.

Gender identities also came into play in the experience of schooling of the participants. In studying the processes of class reproduction and youth, the work of Paul Willis (1977) on working class masculinities has been especially influential. Willis explored the cultural processes through which young working-class men opted for working-class jobs. In this way, Willis followed the young men's socialization into a working class "oppositional culture" which devalued academic success and, instead,

championed masculine physical strength and manual labour. More recent ethnographic research by Dance (2002) of racialized youth in the urban centres of Boston and Cambridge in the United States emphasizes the importance for young men in particular of adopting "gangsta"-like mannerisms, which she termed "tough fronts," in order to manage the dangers of everyday "streetlife" that they face in marginalized neighbourhoods. Dance argues that teachers and other adults working with youth must be sensitive to their needs to produce an image that allows them to maintain their safety in light of the violence and fighting that takes place on the streets. Through my interviews with young adults, I found some evidence that, for a number of individuals, the adherence to a sort of "oppositional culture" during their youth had led them to subscribe to a tough street culture and reject academic success. The adoption of an oppositional youth culture was particularly relevant for some of the young men I spoke with, although one woman also explained how it shaped her experience in high school. These participants often looked back at their rebellious youth with some regret and attributed their current employment in factory work settings to their rejection of schooling.

It should be noted that while for some of the young men, these tough fronts proved an impediment to their academic success, they did report that some of their peers were able to balance their "streetlife" and their school life and were currently completing college or university degrees. This observation ties in with Carter's (2003) argument that attention be paid to the multidimensionality of cultural capital as some young people are able to juggle successfully between dominant and non-dominant forms of cultural capital depending on their context.

Those I spoke to who had adhered at some point in their lives to a "protest masculinity" did not narrate their rebellious behaviour to be a performance of Vietnamese ethnic identity. In this group of young men, there were those whose friendship circles consisted primarily of people they referred to as "Asian," and others who described their friends as coming from a range of backgrounds, and therefore not exclusively "Asian" or Vietnamese. Thus, while in some discussions of oppositional youth cultures, certain tough fronts are viewed as signifiers of authenticity of ethnicity, this was not necessarily the case for the young people I spoke with (Carter 2003). In fact, the "gangsta"-like postures were understood by one participant in racialized terms as Vietnamese people who were "acting Black." Diawara (1998) discusses, in relation to cinema, how Black maleness in terms of "esthétique du cool" and male violence become a form of cultural capital that can be drawn upon by White actors. Diawara highlights that while White actors can play Blackness or not, Black actors have immanent Blackness, that is, it is a naturalized form of cultural capital. A question that my own research raises is how bodies that are not White *or* Black deploy "Black" cultural capital and, in such cases, to what extent does it becomes fixed, or naturalized, as it does on black bodies?

In conclusion, although the focus of my research was not policy making, certain trends emerge that could be of interest to policy-makers, not the least of which being that second generation racialized youth in working class employment face many obstacles over and above those experienced by their White male Canadian peers: I have discussed the precarity of the work conditions of the participants in the study, the complexity and non-linearity of the transition from school to work and how gendered and racialized processes shaped their experience. Second generation youth form a group apart from their immigrant parents and can not be assimilated to them. Ways in which to help them make their transitions or to remove obstacles, perceived or otherwise, need to be considered.

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