PREJUDICE IN THE WORKPLACE

The Role of Bias Against Visible Minorities in the Devaluation of Immigrants' Foreign-Acquired Qualifications and Credentials

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we demonstrate that the ambiguity of foreign credentials allows prejudice to affect the evaluation of the qualifications held by visible minority immigrants. The implications of this work and strategies for more fully utilizing the skills that visible minority immigrants bring with them to Canada are presented.

Does prejudice against visible minorities play a role in the assessment of immigrants' qualifications and credentials in Canada? This question is important to address because of the high, and increasing, proportion of visible minority immigrants who are admitted into Canada each year on the basis of their qualifications, the evidence that visible minority immigrants are faring particularly badly in the Canadian labour market, and recent reports by visible minorities that they experience high levels of discrimination in Canada. In this article, we provide background information on the employment experiences of immigrants to Canada (and, in particular, on visible minority immigrants), explain why prejudice is especially likely to play a role in the assessment of the foreign-acquired qualifications of visible minority immigrants, and then describe the research we have conducted that specifically examines how visible minority status and prejudice affect the evaluation of immigrants' qualifications and credentials. We conclude by discussing the implications of our work, and suggest strategies for more fully utilizing the skills that visible minority immigrants bring to Canada.

The employment of immigrants in Canada

In recent years, the majority of immigrants to Canada have been admitted in the "economic class," for which skill-based selection criteria are employed (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2006). The Canadian economy increasingly relies on these immigrants in an effort to fill labour shortages that threaten its global competitiveness. Recently, immigrants have accounted for over 70% of labour force growth in Canada, and now comprise about 20% of the total work force (Statistics Canada, 2004). In turn, success in the labor market and perceptions of equal treatment are crucial for immigrants' economic and psychological well-being. The skill-based selection criteria that allowed them to immigrate to Canada create an expectation among immigrants that they will be able to use these skills once in Canada.

Despite the importance of immigrant participation in the Canadian labour force, the integration of immigrant employees is slow and suboptimal. Immigrants to Canada experience lower levels of earnings and labour force participation than do native-born individuals (e.g., Li, 2001; Reitz, 2001, 2003). Moreover, responses from the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) indicate that in 2001-2002, after two years in Canada, over half of immigrants who were admitted under the skilled worker category were not working in their desired occupations (Statistics Canada, 2005). One important factor contributing to the unemployment and underemployment of immigrants is "skill discounting," which refers to the devaluation and lack of recognition of foreign credentials, such as education (e.g., degrees and diplomas), professional training (e.g., apprenticeships), work experience, and other work-related skills that immigrants bring with them (see Li, 2001; Reitz, 2003, 2005). In the LSIC, one of the most common problems in finding employment reported by immigrants was the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications (Statistics Canada, 2005). Apparently, the skills that are so valued when immigrants are assessed for admission into Canada are devalued once they arrive and attempt to enter the labour market.

Of particular concern is that skill discounting is especially likely to affect visible minority immigrants to Canada (e.g., Metropolis Conversation Series, 2001; Reitz, 2003, 2005; Swidinsky & Swidinsky, 2002). For example, Alboim, Finnie, and Meng (2005) reported that a foreign university degree held by an immigrant had, on average, an earnings return of less than one-third that of a Canadian university degree held by a native-born employee, unless the immigrant was White, in

which case the foreign degree was comparable in value to a Canadian degree. The proportion of immigrants to Canada who are visible minorities is high (73% of those who came in the 1990s), and increasing. As a result, the negative effects of skill discounting can be expected to become more severe in the coming years (Jackson & Smith, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2003).

The fact that visible minorities are particularly likely to experience skill discounting has led to debate about its antecedents. Essentially, two positions have emerged. On the one hand, skill discounting could be attributed to the actual lower quality of the foreign skills held by visible minority immigrants while, on the other, skill discounting could be explained as an expression of racial prejudice. For example, it has been suggested that visible minority immigrants often come from countries in which educational standards and training are lower than in Canada, so that ascribing lower value to degrees from these countries would be appropriate (Sweetman, 2004). If this were to be the case, however, it would require a reassessment of the point system for selection of skilled workers that might include a country-specific allocation of points (e.g., a degree from one country would not receive the same points as a degree from another). It might also require additional programs for immigrants to improve their knowledge and skills. An alternative, or additional explanation, however, is that the heightened discounting of foreign skills held by visible minority immigrants is at least to some extent attributable to prejudice against visible minorities (e.g., Conference Board of Canada, 2004a; Reitz, 2005). This would mean that the responsibility for discounting the skills of visible minority immigrants lies in the biases held by employers and would suggest that remedies aimed at reducing these biases, or reducing the impact of these biases, are required.

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With the type of data available to date, the debate about the quality of foreign credentials versus prejudice against visible minorities cannot be resolved. Census and survey data do not directly measure prejudice, and often, visible minority status and country of origin are inextricably linked, so that either one may be driving skill discounting. Indeed, as we will argue shortly, because country of origin and visible minority status are so closely linked, it is especially easy to justify discrimination against visible minority immigrants as based not on prejudice, but on the supposed poorer quality of their qualifications. The ambiguity surrounding the quality of foreign credentials and qualifications also contributes to the ease with which this argument can be made.

Subtle prejudice and the evaluation of visible minority immigrants' skills

Subtle prejudice against visible minorities in Canada

Unfavorable attitudes and beliefs about visible minorities and immigrants persist in Canadian society today, though they are typically less blatant than in the past and operate in subtle ways so that those who harbour these biases are often unaware of their effects. For example, research has shown that White Canadians are particularly likely to feel "uncomfortable" around visible minority immigrants and to show a preference for members of their own group (e.g., Berry & Kalin, 1995; Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2003). A recent poll found that many Canadians see immigrants from Europe as making a bigger and better contribution to Canada than immigrants from Asia, India, or the Caribbean (Curry & Jimenez, 2005). In addition, immigrants are at times seen as competing with native-born Canadians for economic resources and for cultural dominance (e.g., Esses, Hodson, & Dovidio, 2003; Esses, Jackson, & Armstong, 1998). Beliefs about national identity, such as beliefs that to be a Canadian one must have been born in Canada, be part of the dominant culture, and be White, can also lead to the exclusion of immigrants and visible minorities (e.g., Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Semenya, 2005).

It is also the case that if visible minorities are asked about their experiences in Canada, many say they are indeed targets of discrimination because of their minority status. Recent analyses of the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey by Reitz and Banerjee (in press) show that a substantial proportion of visible minorities, particularly Blacks, Chinese, and South Asians, report having experienced discrimination in the last five years and of feeling vulnerable to future discrimination. Survey research also suggests that visible minorities tend to believe that prejudice affects their opportunities in areas such as employment. Although Whites acknowledge that racism exists in Canada, they are less likely than visible minorities to believe that it takes the form of reduced opportunities for visible minorities (Centre for Research and Information on Canada, 2003).

The ambiguity of foreign credentials and qualifications

The evaluation of foreign credentials differs in several ways from that of domestic credentials. First, often those who make hiring decisions need to invest more effort in evaluating foreign credentials. Second, even with additional effort, the evaluation of foreign credentials is associated with greater ambiguity than the evaluation of Canadian

credentials. Decision-makers may believe they do not have, or they may actually not have, sufficient information about foreign skills to make informed decisions, leading them to feel that they have to make judgment calls (Environics, 2004). Third, even if they have sufficient information, decision-makers may still feel less confident in their decisions about foreign-trained employees than about Canadian-trained employees. As we will discuss shortly, the ambiguity of foreign skills assessment is important for understanding the potential role of subtle prejudice against visible minorities in this assessment.

Linking subtle prejudice with the evaluation of foreign credentials and qualifications

Research on modern forms of prejudice indicates that blatant discrimination is now often suppressed by societal and personal norms and values. As a result, discrimination will not usually occur unless it can be explained away as being based on something other than prejudice (e.g., Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Contexts in which this is facilitated are those where the norms and rules for appropriate behavior are ambiguous or where justifications for the discrimination — other than prejudice — are readily available. In these contexts, individuals can continue to believe they are not prejudiced, and that visible minorities are being treated fairly.

The discounting of the skills of foreign-trained visible minority immigrants fits into this framework. Although individuals who make hiring decisions and assess the quality of applicants may consciously try to avoid bias and discrimination in decision-making, subtle prejudice may influence their behaviour nonetheless. As discussed earlier, in many cases the rules and norms for assessing foreign credentials are unclear, creating ambiguity about the true value of these credentials. As a result, the expression of prejudice against visible minorities may no longer be suppressed, leading to discriminatory behavior. Moreover, the "foreignness" of qualifications can be used as a seemingly legitimate justification for failing to take into account the full value of the qualifications of visible minority immigrants. Thus, discounting the skills of visible minority immigrants may appear as legitimate rather than as a manifestation of prejudice. Overall, then, discrimination against visible minorities may occur without being recognized as such by individual decision makers or by other individuals within or outside of organizations.

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As mentioned earlier, visible minority status and country of origin are often confounded in census and survey data so that it is not possible to test their differential effects on the discounting of the skills of visible minority immigrants. Thus, in our research, we have used experimental procedures to control the factors of interest and directly examine the effects of prejudice and visible minority status per se.

The research evidence

In our first study, participants were asked to evaluate an applicant for a marketing position in a Canadian firm on the basis of the information provided in his résumé (see Dietz, Esses, Bhardwaj, & Joshi, 2005). Each participant was presented with one of four résumés with equivalent qualifications. However, the applicant was presented as either an immigrant who had received his education and training in South Africa, or as a native-born Canadian who had received his education and training in Canada. In addition, through the applicant's name and his described participation in local clubs, we were able to imply that he was either White or Black. As we expected, when applicants were educated and trained in Canada, they were evaluated equivalently irrespective of visible minority status. In this case, there was little doubt about qualifications and no ready justification for discrimination. When the applicants were immigrants with foreign qualifications, however, we found that the Black immigrant applicant was evaluated significantly less favorably than the White immigrant applicant and than the Canadian applicants. In this case, the fact that the individual had foreign qualifications made the situation more ambiguous and provided an excuse for devaluing them. As a result, it was easy to judge the Black applicant as unsuitable for the position without appearing to prejudiced. Thus, even when there were no actual differences between the qualifications of the White immigrants and those of the Black immigrants, the Black immigrant with foreign skills was especially likely to have his skills discounted. Importantly, if there were true concerns about the foreign (i.e., South African) qualifications, the White applicant with these qualifications should also have been evaluated as unsuitable for the position. This did not occur. Of interest, one rationale commonly provided for discounting the Black South African applicant's credentials was a need for "Canadian" experience, which has been described as the Catch-22 for immigrants (Canadian experience is needed in order to obtain a job to gain Canadian experience; Reitz, 2005).

In a second study, we examined the effects of prejudice more directly (see Esses, Dietz, & Bhardwaj, 2006). First, in an independent context, we assessed participants'

subtle prejudices. Several weeks later, we asked them to evaluate an applicant for a position at a health services clinic on the basis of information provided in her résumé. In this study, the applicant was of Asian Indian descent in all cases. We varied, however, whether she was born and had received her qualifications in Canada, in the United Kingdom, or in India. As in the previous study, the qualifications held by the applicants were equivalent. Nonetheless, we found that the application of an immigrant from India with Indian qualifications was evaluated less favorably than the other two applications. Importantly, this unfavorable evaluation was provided only by individuals who had earlier been found to hold subtle prejudicial attitudes. In this case, the foreign qualifications from India were seen as particularly ambiguous, and provided an excuse for those who held prejudicial attitudes to discriminate against the applicant. As in the previous study, if there were true concerns about the Indian qualifications, then the less prejudiced participants should have evaluated the applicant trained in India less favorably as well. Once again, this did not occur.

Two additional studies have shown that under some conditions, foreign credentials can serve as an asset, but only if one is *not* a member of a visible or religious minority. In particular, in a study examining perceptions of foreign-trained physicians in which all applicants were licensed to practice in Canada, foreign training and experience (obtained in Singapore) led to higher evaluations for a White individual, but this did not extend to Chinese and East Indian applicants with identical qualifications (Esses, Dietz, & Dixit, 2006). In a study examining perceptions of foreign-trained individuals applying for a position in the health domain, we manipulated the applicant's religious affiliation through the use of a pendant worn by the applicant during a videotaped job interview (Bennett-Abu Ayyash, Esses, & Dietz, 2007). Again, foreign training (obtained in Cyprus) was considered an asset, but only for the "Christian" applicant; the "Muslim" applicant with identical qualifications did not receive this benefit. Thus, foreign training and experience can be perceived as value-added benefits (see also Arthur, 2004), but, as shown in the current research, only if one is a member of the mainstream in terms of race and religion.

Implications

Our research supports the assertion that visible minority immigrants are especially likely to experience discrimination in employment and that this discrimination is specifically attributable to their visible minority status. Our participants were likely unaware of the influence that their biases had on the evaluations they provided. Nonetheless, the very subtlety of these biases may allow them to operate unchecked, and allow those who discriminate on the basis of their biases to confidently believe they are deciding objectively.

Our assertion that the ambiguity of foreign qualifications makes it easier to discriminate against visible minority immigrants is important for policy makers, organizations, and immigrants to Canada. As indicated earlier, Canada needs immigrants in order to maintain a strong and globally competitive economy, and in recent years, the majority of immigrants have been visible minorities. Discounting the skills of visible minority immigrants hurts their ability to contribute to the economy (e.g., Metropolis Conversation Series, 2001; Reitz, 2005), and means that Canadian companies may have greater difficulty attracting and retaining skilled workers in the future (Conference Board of Canada, 2004b; Human Resources Development Canada, 2002). Furthermore, knowledge that they are victims of discrimination has significant negative effects on the integration and well-being of visible minority immigrants (e.g., Aycan & Berry, 1996; Reitz & Banerjee, in press). Therefore, discrimination against visible minority immigrants must be eliminated in order to foster and promote a truly inclusive society.

A first step toward eliminating discrimination is identifying and understanding its antecedents. Our work suggests that the ambiguity surrounding the foreign qualifications of visible minority immigrants allows prejudice to play a role in their evaluation. As a result, interventions must be designed to delegitimize the use of foreign credentials as a reason for not hiring visible minority immigrants. When decision-makers have specific information on the quality of an applicant's foreign credentials, there is less informational ambiguity and, as a result, prejudice is less likely to lead to discrimination (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Thus, effective interventions could include awareness training for organizational decision-makers, more widespread use of credential evaluation services (such as World Education Services) providing information on the equivalency of foreign-acquired qualifications, and standardized and enforceable organizational policies on the evaluation of foreign skills. In our future research, we plan to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies for reducing discrimination against visible minority immigrants. As the need for skilled labour in Canada continues to increase, it seems likely that not only will government agencies have an interest in promoting the integration of visible minority immigrants into the workforce, but employers will as well.

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