TRACING THE ROOTS OF NON-RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN CREDENTIALS

ABSTRACT

This article traces the roots of non-recognition of foreign credentials. First, epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge lead to a belief that the knowledge of immigrant professionals is deficient, inferior, and hence invalid. Second, an ontological commitment to positivistic and universal measurement exacerbates the complexity of this process. The juxtaposition of the misconceptions of difference and knowledge with positivism and liberal universalism forms a new head tax to exclude the 'undesirable' and to perpetuate oppression in Canada.

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Despite Canada's preference for highly skilled immigrants, and despite the fact that immigrant professionals bring significant human capital resources to the Canadian labour force, a number of studies have shown that many highly educated immigrant professionals experience deskilling and devaluation of their prior learning and work experience after immigrating to Canada (Basran & Zong, 1998; Krahn et al., 2000; Li, 2001; Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2001). In the time since the issue was first brought to light, the situation has not improved, even though some studies have pointed to causes leading to the denigration of foreign credentials. Drawing on perspectives from critical theory and postmodernism, this article attempts to trace the roots of this issue. First, it begins with an examination of current studies pertaining to devaluation of foreign credentials and prior work experience.

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% of their respondents worked as professionals (doctors, engineers, school/university teachers, and other professionals) after immigrating to Canada. Respondents indicated that the non-recognition or devaluation of their foreign credentials was the most important factor in their inability to access to professional occupations and the downward social mobility that may result. 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. Compared to Canadian-born individuals, refugee professionals are more likely to experience unemployment and underemployment (such as part-time and temporary employment). A lack of recognition of prior learning and work experience was identified as the top contributing factor to this downward mobility. The situation for immigrant women is even worse. In her research on 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 skilling and deskilling of the labour force. Highly skilled immigrant women are usually seen as a potential source of manual labour. They face unemployment or are pressured into non-skilled jobs. As a result, immigrants and Canadian society suffer severe economic impacts (Li, 2001; Reitz, 2001).

Tracing the roots: epistemological and ontological misperceptions

While some of the studies have suggested causes leading to the denigration of foreign credentials, many have failed to further question the root of this issue. At this stage, two critical questions remain:

- Why do such inequities occur in a society such as Canada's where democratic principles are upheld and where immigrants are 'welcome'?
- What prevents Canada from moving forward?

Drawing on perspectives from critical theory and postmodernism, this article traces the roots of this issue to the epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge and ontological commitment to positivistic and universal measurement.

Epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge

First, non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience can be attributed to a deficit model of difference. One of the basic tenets of Canadian society is its commitment to cultural pluralism. Nonetheless, a number of commentators argue that Canada endorses pluralism only in superficial ways (Dei, 1996; Fleras & Elliott, 2002; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). In reality, Canada tends 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 challenge hegemony and resist being co-opted are usually perceived by many Canadians as deficient, deviant, pathological, or otherwise divisive. Indeed, one of the hurdles that prevents the full recognition of immigrants' educational qualifications and professional experiences is the prevailing attitude toward difference. Negative attitudes and behaviours toward immigrants co-exist with Canada's commitments to democratic principles such as justice, equality, and fairness. The co-existence of these two conflicting ideologies can be referred to as "democratic racism" (Henry et al., 2006). Democratic racism prevents the government from fully embracing differences or making any changes in the existing social, economic, and political order. It also prevents the government from supporting policies and practices that might ameliorate the low status of immigrants because these policies are perceived to be in conflict with – and a threat to – liberal democracy.

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.

Furthermore, knowledge is used as power to keep out the undesirable. Critical theorists and postmodern scholars maintain that knowledge is power, that it is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated, and that it is never neutral or objective (Foucault, 1980; McLaren, 2003). The nature of knowledge as social relations prompts us to ask the following questions: What counts as legitimate knowledge? How and why is knowledge constructed? Whose knowledge is considered valuable? Whose knowledge is silenced? Is knowledge racialized? The studies cited here suggest that while immigrants from Third World countries have encountered difficulties with their foreign credentials and work experience, those from developed countries (such as the United States, Australia, Britain, or New Zealand) have relatively successful experiences (Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2003). It can be argued that knowledge has been racialized in Canada. 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). In fact, this hierarchy of knowledge and power is rooted in Canada's ethnocentric past, where immigrants from Europe and the United States were viewed as most desirable and those from the Third World countries as undesirable. Although Canada's commitment to the point system as immigration policy does not permit the recruitment of immigrants on the basis of racial and national origins, it is insufficient for moving Canadian society beyond diffuse racial and national preferences.

It can be concluded that the devaluation and denigration of immigrants' knowledge and experience becomes the new head tax to keep 'undesirables' out. Just as the head tax was raised every time the criteria were met, so too the obstacles to professional accreditation multiply. As such, the accreditation issue is used as the new strategy to maintain the subordination of immigrants and to reinforce the extant power relations in Canada.

Ontological foundations: positivism and liberal universalism

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). The studies cited here argue that this objectivist ontology has been the driving force behind the current practice in foreign credentials assessment and recognition (Krahn et al., 2000; Ng, 1999). 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. Moreover, the measuring criteria and homogenizing rules have not only been those of the receiving society, but are also androcentric and man-made. 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 the standard represents. Although immigrants are allowed into the country, professional standards deny them access to employment in their professions. Let us not be fooled: the real purpose of such standards is to restrict competition and to sustain the interests of the dominant groups (Krahn et al., 2000).

Similarly, in assessing foreign credentials, positivism is juxtaposed with liberal universalism and this, 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 the 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 the Canadian 'equivalent'? Sometimes the rejection of immigrants' qualifications may simply be seen by practitioners as an effort to reduce risk arising from ignorance of the credential in question (Reitz, 2001). It also serves to control access to a profession so as to preserve hegemony and its lucrative nature. Thus, 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 analysis reveals that many immigrant professionals in Canada have experienced devaluation and denigration of their prior learning and work experience once they arrive in Canada. As a result, they have experienced significant, demoralizing and disempowering downward social mobility, unemployment and underemployment, vulnerability and commodification, and reduced earnings. There is a lack of recognition of the prior learning and credentials of immigrant professionals, and this can be traced 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 of those from the Third World countries, is incompatible and inferior, and hence invalid. Thus, knowledge has been racialized and materialized on the basis of ethnic and national origins. Furthermore, a fundamental ontological commitment to positivism and liberal universalism exacerbates the complexity of this process. 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. Moreover, professional standards and excellence have 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, more subtle – but powerful – head tax to exclude the undesirable, and to perpetuate oppression in Canada.

The current approach to recognition of prior learning for immigrant professionals has been shown to be a serious barrier rather than a facilitator of integration and participation in Canadian society. It is morally and economically urgent for government organizations, professional associations, educational institutions, and prior learning assessment agencies to dismantle barriers and to adopt an inclusive framework that fully embraces all human knowledge and experiences, no matter their ethnic and cultural origin. Otherwise, immigrants will be further alienated from becoming full-fledged and productive members of receiving societies.

To achieve that goal in policy and practice, first and foremost, a strong political will must be in place. It is the responsibility of federal and provincial governments to promote legislation that will make regulatory bodies accountable for their treatment of immigrants and ensure that admission procedures are transparent and equitable. It is also imperative for government agencies to work with employers to create additional internship or co-op opportunities to help immigrants acquire Canadian work experience. Furthermore, it is important to provide immigrants with adequate information about the accreditation process, not after, but prior to immigrants' landing in Canada. More importantly, it is time to launch a campaign to educate the Canadian public about the politics of difference and knowledge and about the contributions of immigrants to Canadian society, the reciprocal respect they deserve from Canadian society, and the rights they are entitled to as new citizens to this country.

Notes

[1] The author wishes to acknowledge funding from the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration (PCERII) for this study.

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