POVERTY EXPERIENCES OF IMMIGRANTS:

Some Reflections

ABSTRACT

Canadians hold competing images of immigrants; each image might be correct, but it is also incomplete and flawed. A sound and more realistic approach to studying immigrants is to take all views into account, and to treat them separately, and not as a part of a supposedly homogeneous group that is out there for everyone to see.

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Interested readers can find a more comprehensive examination of immigrants' experience of different facets of poverty, such as economic and neighbourhood poverty, in Kazemipur and Halli (2000), The New Poverty in Canada: Ethnic Groups and Ghetto Neighbourhoods, and also in Kazemipur (2003-forthcoming), An Economic Sociology of Immigrant Life in Canada, to be published by Nova Science Publishers.

When it comes to the discussion of immigrants at dinner tables or in coffee shops, it is not hard to see the conflicting images of immigrants that different people have in mind. Some consider immigrants a group of rich folks who, by virtue of their wealth, 'buy' their entrance into Canada. Yet, others see them as a group of poor people, who have fled their misery in their home countries and are now struggling to make ends meet in every way possible, including working in low-pay jobs, relying on government assistance, and, if neither available, getting involved in illegal activities. Some scholars have tried to portray a third image by looking at immigrants as a whole, and examining whether this huge group, which constitutes about one-sixth of the Canadian population, is an asset or a burden for the society; and often, they have found the former to be the case. Given these conflicting images, a fair-minded person, with a light flavor of critical thinking, may find him/herself at unease with each of them, and feel a need for more. It is this kind of mind that we try to converse with in this brief paper, and hope to be able to give them some food for thought.

Let us straighten things out right from the outset! We believe that all the above images are *simultaneously* correct, and, yet, there is something wrong with each and every one of them. The first image accurately reflects the situation of one group of immigrants, *business-class* ones, who are, well, 'a little' wealthier than other Canadians. But, that is exactly why the Canadian government wanted them here in the first place. The second image corresponds, with a bit of oversimplification, with the refugee and family class immigrants. These immigrants are more likely to be found in various government buildings and in dead-end jobs, because they lack the competitive marketable skills to function otherwise. But, here again, possession of such skills was not part of why Canadian government had admitted them in the first place. The third image is even more problematic, because it immediately raises the obvious question of 'who are these average or typical immigrants?'. Are they the third group, that is, the so-called 'independent immigrants'? That may be a justified answer, because close to half of immigrants admitted every year belong to this group. But, that is exactly where this image becomes problematic, because it takes this half as the core immigrant population, and allows the other two groups to cancel each other out and 'become' a part of the average. As every student of basic statistics would testify, the 'average' becomes a misleading indicator when one is dealing with a highly bipolar group, and immigrants have, almost always, been such a group. The moral of the story, we think, is that a sound and more realistic approach to studying immigrants is to take all these three groups into account, and to treat them separately, and not as a part of a supposedly homogeneous group that is out there for everyone to see. Which segment of immigrant population the researchers choose to zoom in on depends on their research interests. Ours was in poor or low-income immigrants, or, to be more accurate, in the dynamics of poverty-generation forces among immigrants, as compared with native-born Canadians.

But, first things first! How do immigrants fare, compared to non-immigrants, when it come to experiencing poverty? A quick look at the three cities with high concentrations of immigrant population indicates: 'not that good'. Figures 1 through 3 show that, almost consistently, immigrants experience higher rates of poverty compared to non-immigrants, and regardless of whether they live in Toronto, Vancouver, or Montreal. The ones that do not follow this trend are those ethnic groups whose non-immigrant members have such high poverty rates that, one may say, being an immigrant cannot add much to it.

Figure 1: Poverty Rates of Immigrants and Non-Immigrants Living in Toronto, 1996

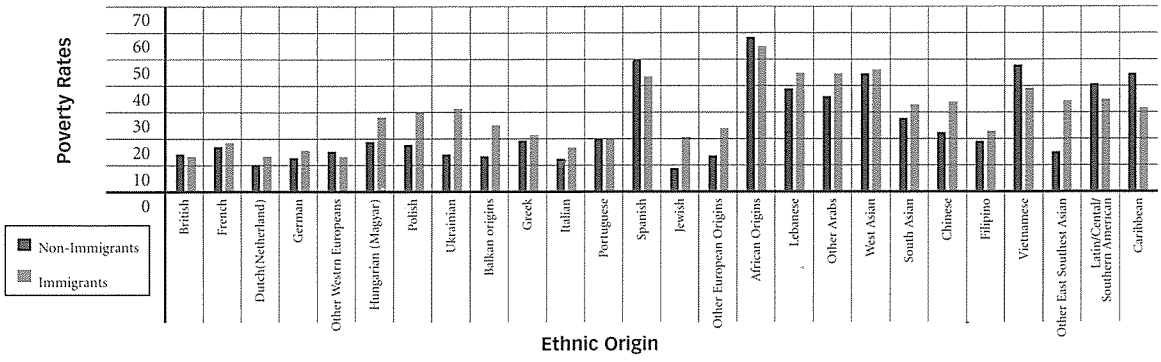


Figure 2: Poverty Rates of Immigrants and Non-Immigrants Living in Vancouver, 1996

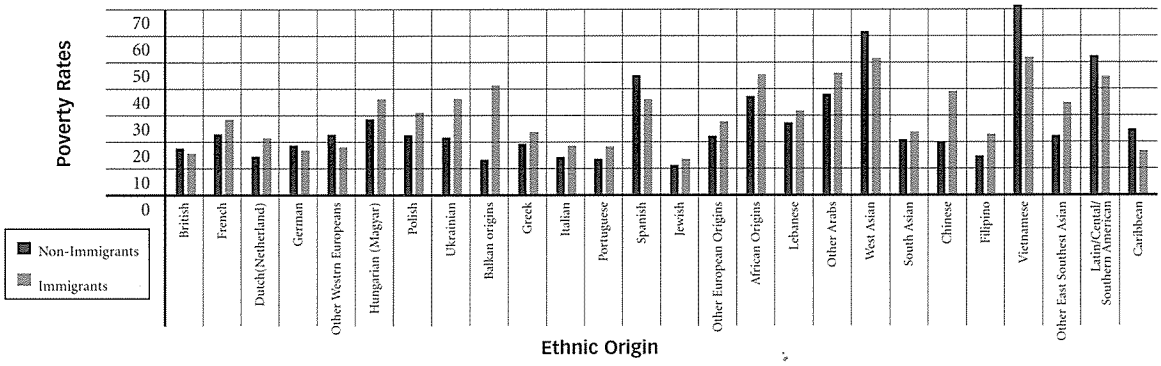
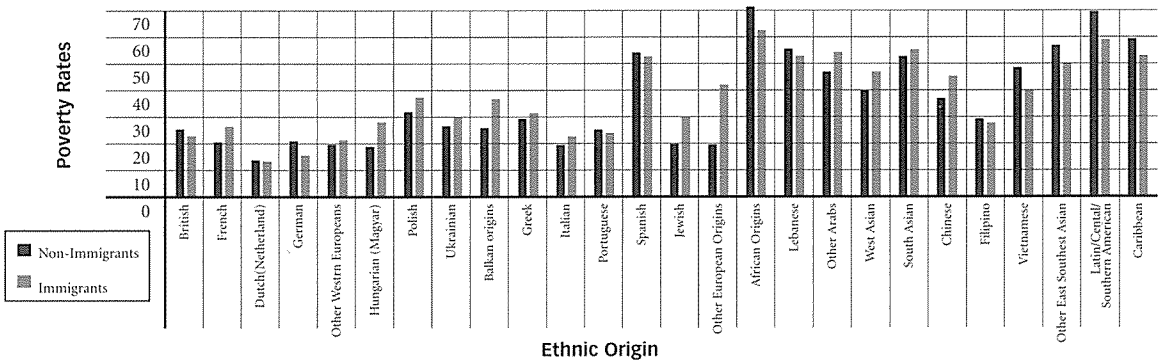


Figure 3: Poverty Rates of Immigrants and Non-Immigrants Living in Montreal, 1996



A follow-up question involves the factors behind such trends, in order to both understand why such trends exist and see how they can be fixed. In this regard, one can imagine a whole array of factors: Are the higher rates of poverty among immigrants related to their immigration adventure, that is, their newness in Canada? Are they less educated? Is there any discrimination against them out there in the job market? What about their cultures? How about their community traits? These are all relevant questions, but the existing data falls way behind our fine imagination. Therefore, at the moment, we can have only tentative answers for these questions, and that only for some of them. Figures 4 through 9 provide as sketch of our main findings.

Let us start with the most expected ones. Figure 4 shows that the younger the immigrants are when they arrive in Canada, the lower their chances of living in poverty. This is not a surprise to immigration researchers, who know the phenomenon as 'assimilation effect'. Next comes the timing of their arrival. Figure 5 shows that the lucky immigrants who came here when the economy was booming, that is, during the 1950s and 1960s, have the lowest likelihood of living in poverty, compared to those who arrived before or after them. These are the features that apply only to immigrants, while the following ones allow for a comparison of immigrants and native-born.

Figure 6 shows the impact of education in lowering the chances of poverty. Something to note here, however, is that while a better education is a good thing for all, the degree of its goodness will be higher if you are not an immigrant. In other words, immigrants do not get to enjoy the benefits of their educational attainment to the extent that their native-born counterparts do. Is this because immigrants' credentials are likely to have come from non-Canadian institutions? It might; but, our data is silent about this. Education is viewed as a kind of human capital investment, another example of which is learning a new language. Figure 7 shows that learning the official lan-

guages in Canada is a good strategy to lower your chances of living in poverty. There are, however, two minor problems here; knowledge of 'only French', for native-born Canadians, is not as beneficial as knowing 'only English' is; for immigrants, it involves a penalty.

Last, but not least, is the impact of race on odds of poverty. Compared to Whites (or, Non-Visible Minorities, to be politically correct), Blacks, whether immigrant or native-born, have a much higher likelihood of living in poverty, even after controlling for their education, age, and full/part-time nature of the job. South-Asian and the Chinese experience the same thing, although at a much lower level, but only if they are immigrants. This effect of race, given that it appears even after controlling for all immigration-related factors such as age at arrival and period of migration, calls for further attention. What are the possible factors behind this effect? One factor that immediately pops up in everyone's mind is racial discrimination. Many other studies have shown the existence of racism, particularly in the economic domain. However, there exist other possibilities as well. For example, one may ask, is it not possible that the higher rates of poverty among certain groups be related to their cultural orientations? Or, is it not possible to attribute at least part of the problem to the differences among such groups in terms of the extensity and richness of their social networks? Most likely, the impact of race is a compound effect of all these factors. To determine the relative share of each, however, we need further research in this area.

Figure 6: Full-Time / Part-Time Nature of Employment and Odds of Living in Poverty, 1996

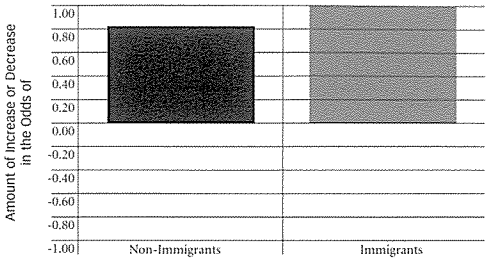


Figure 7: The Period of Immigration and Immigrants' Odds of Living in Poverty, 1996

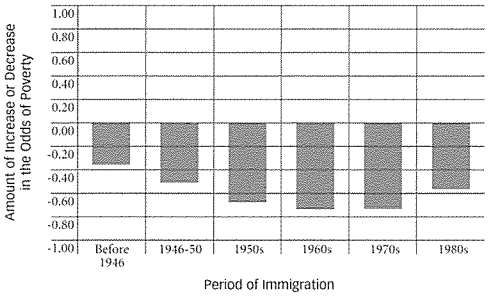


Figure 4: Education and the Odds of Living in Poverty, 1996

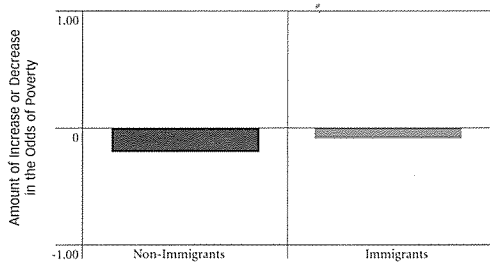


Figure 8: Age at Immigration and Odds of Living in Poverty, 1996

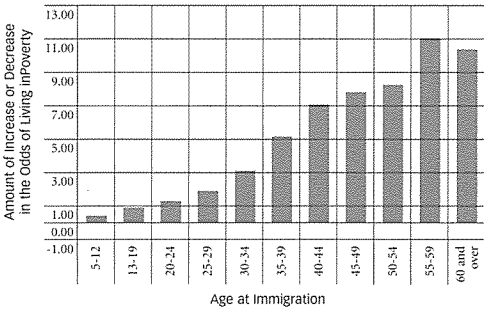


Figure 5: Knowledge of Official Languages and the Odds of Living in Poverty, 1996

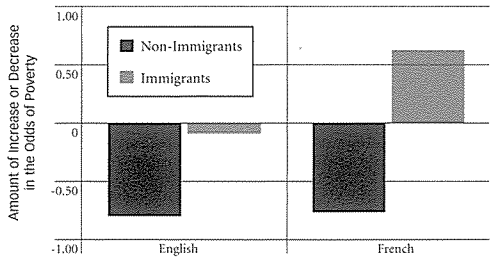


Figure 9: Racial Origin and Odds of Living in Poverty, 1996

