Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and Racial Minorities:
Identities that Count

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ABSTRACT

What guarantees our access to the labour market? Is it education and skills alone, or do individual attributes such as race, gender and immigration status influence our chances? Jean Lock Kunz addresses these issues and suggests that identity markers and their intersections can negatively affect not only the likelihood of finding a job, but of remuneration, job quality, and the opportunity for further training. The author recommends that intersections in identity be examined in the broader social and economic context in order to establish policy program responses that will make a difference.

The economic engine of the 21st century feeds on the skills and knowledge of its workers. Those with the right skills and education are generally rewarded with a high level of economic security and well-being. Individuals who do not have the right skills and education risk being left behind in the knowledge-based economy. Education and skills alone, however, cannot always guarantee full labour market access. In addition to what you know, finding a job or getting a promotion depends on who you are, whom you know, and who knows you. As social beings, the characteristics or attributes with which we associate often define us. Some of these attributes change over time, such as age, health, and socioeconomic status. Others are more permanent, such as gender, race, and ethnicity.

Whether transitory or permanent, individual characteristics often have social and economic consequences. Hence, who you are matters. A good deal of literature has already demonstrated that being female, an immigrant, or a racial minority can lead to less favourable labour market outcomes. More importantly, studies have pointed to the link between employment and earnings inequality and the intersections of individual attributes such as immigration status, race, and gender. This paper highlights some of these intersections on labour market outcomes and access to training.

Identities that Matter

Gender and Immigration. Even with comparable levels of education, female immigrants are more likely than male immigrants to enter as spouses or dependents. Studies have demonstrated the double-negative experienced by immigrant women (Man and Preston, 1999; Miedema and Tastsoglou, 2001; Shamsuddin, 1998). For example, among those between the ages of 25 and 44 with a university-level education, immigrant women earn less than immigrant men, as well as Canadian-born men and women (Kunz and Thompson, 2002). Married immigrant women who migrate with their spouses are more likely to be under-employed than are others, partly because they live in places where suitable job opportunities are available to their spouses but not to them.

Immigration and Race. The economic value of a degree depends on the country of its granting institution as well as the social characteristics of its holder (e.g., Li, 2001). A degree earned outside Canada is found to yield less return on earnings than one granted by a Canadian institution (Li, 2000; Reitz, 2001). Even though the selection criteria in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) place a high premium on education, foreign-earned credentials are heavily discounted by the Canadian labour market. Consequently, immigrants are penalized by the human capital that was partially responsible for their entrance into Canada in the first place.

Visible minority immigrants pay a penalty in earnings for being foreign and non-white (Kunz, Milan, and Schetagne, 2001). Even among the Canadian-born, the vertical mosaic still exists where those with European origins have higher earnings than those with non-European origins (Pendakur and Pendakur, 1996; Lian and Mathews, 1998). In fact, according to Pendakur and Pendakur (2001), the earnings gap between Canadian-born visible minority and white male has widened from 5% to 15% between 1971 and 1996.

Socio-economic Status and Immigration. Access to job-related training is often associated with individual attributes such as education, occupation and immigration status. Professional jobs often require higher education and later career upgrading. Evidence suggests that training remains a privilege for the well-educated and well-paid (Xu, 2000), as well as for those in professional/managerial positions. Moreover, adult immigrants are less likely to receive training than

Canadian-born adults, or those who immigrated as children (Hum and Simpson, 2001).

Gender and Socio-economic Status. A key aspect of socio-economic status is job quality, which refers to whether a person works full-time or part-time, or is self-employed. Full-time employees are more likely to receive employer-sponsored training than those who are part-time or self-employed. Even though gender differences are not significant in adult education, women may be precluded from getting training from their employers because they are more likely to have part-time or non-standard employment (Critoph, 1999). Given the escalating costs of training, many may not even be able to afford training on their own.

Networks that Matter

Finding jobs and career mobility depend, to some extent, on one's networks and connections, i.e., social capital. Human capital-based research often overlooks the role of social capital in labour market outcomes. Newcomers often find their first jobs through kinship and ethnic networks. That being said, a strong ethnic network may also impede immigrants' integration into mainstream society. Research needs to identify social capital that fosters or deters immigrant inclusion.

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Also absent from the existing research are factors such as employer attitudes and workplace culture. Employer attitudes towards their employees or job applicants influence the individuals' odds of getting a promotion or getting a job in the first place. A study in the United States shows that, with credentials being equal, a job applicant with a white-sounding first name is more likely to receive a response from the employer than an applicant with a black-sounding name (*The Globe and Mail,* January 15, 2003). This suggests that degrees are often assessed formally as well as socially. Even with the right credentials, it is the employer that determines the worth of one degree relative to another. The social characteristics of the degree holder thus become part of the value of the credential.

According to the recent Ethnic Diversity Survey, one in four visible minorities in Canada felt uncomfortable because of their ethno-cultural characteristics at least some of the time. One in five visible minorities felt they were treated unfairly especially at work or when applying for a job (Statistics Canada, 2003). To understand the intersections of race and immigration status on employment, we need to go beyond multivariate analyses in order to come up with innovative ways to measure the various forms of discrimination and its association with inequality.

Compared to the Canadian-born, immigrants are more likely to participate in religious activities and, arguably, religious communities serve as a source of network. Yet, public display of one's religious belief may hinder one's access to jobs. According to a recent study among Muslim women in manufacturing, sales and service sectors, women who wear hijab experience discrimination when applying for jobs (Persad and Lukas, 2002). Often these individuals are visible minorities and/or immigrants, so the intersection between religion, immigration, and race/ethnicity is key.

Policy Program Responses that Matter

Equipping Immigrants. An increase in the recognition of foreign credentials would reduce barriers to labour market integration for foreign-trained professionals. Yet the discounting of foreign qualifications usually involves non-credential-related factors as well. Policies and programs should be aimed at equipping immigrants and visible minorities with the tools needed to succeed in the Canadian labour market on the one hand, and educating employers about the values of a diverse workforce, on the other. Citizenship education and legislative measures are necessary to reduce discriminatory behaviour.

Changing Employer Attitudes. Studies in Canada and other countries show that diversity is not always on the corporate agenda. Some employers may continue to see their workforce as homogeneous in spite of the multicultural make-up of their staff. Public education is therefore necessary to improve public and employer acceptance of diversity.

Learning from Existing Interventions. A number of programs are already in place to improve labour market access for certain disadvantaged groups. It would be useful to take stock of effective practices and learn from these, rather than inventing new ones. For instance, are there equity programs designed for one group, such as women, that could be applied to others, such as visible minorities and immigrants?

Social Marketing. Moreover, policies often have good intentions but unintended outcomes. It is therefore time to critically evaluate the effectiveness of current equity and access programs. For example, Employment Equity is often misunderstood or misinterpreted as a 'quota system'. What type of social marketing would be useful in dispelling the misunderstanding of these policies?

Conclusion

Identity markers – particularly, gender, immigration status, race, ethnicity and religion –have individual and multiple effects on access to labour market and training. These intersections should be examined in the broader social and economic context and in combination with other identity markers, such as ability, language and region, particularly in light of concerns over skills shortages, new

selection criteria for skilled immigrants, and discussions on regional dispersion of immigrants. To do so will require innovation from both researchers and policy-makers.

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