

DIFFERENCE, DEFICIENCY, AND DEVALUATION: TRACING THE ROOTS OF NON-RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN CREDENTIALS FOR IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS IN CANADA

Shibao Guo

University of Calgary

Abstract

Many immigrant professionals experience devaluation and denigration of their prior learning and work experience after arriving in Canada. The roots of non-recognition can be traced to the following. First, epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge lead to a belief that the knowledge of immigrant professionals, particularly those from Third World countries, is deficient, incompatible and inferior, 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 perpetuate oppression in Canada.

Résumé

Beaucoup de professionnels immigrants voient leurs expériences de travail et leurs connaissances professionnelles dévaluées et dénigrées lors de leur arrivée au Canada. L'origine de la non-reconnaissance peut être attribuée aux raisons suivantes. Tout d'abord, il existe de fausses perceptions épistémologiques sur la différence et la connaissance conduisant à la conviction que les connaissances des professionnels immigrants, en particulier celles des pays du tiers monde, sont déficientes, incompatibles et inférieures, et donc invalides. Deuxièmement, un engagement ontologique au positiviste et à la mesure universelle accentue la complexité de ce processus. La juxtaposition des idées fausses de la différence et de la connaissance avec le positivisme et l'universalisme libéral forme une nouvelle forme d'exclusion des «indésirables», perpétuant ainsi l'oppression au Canada.

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La Revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
22,1 November/novembre 2009 37-52*

ISSN 0835-4944 © Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education/
L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

Introduction

Immigration has played an important role in transforming Canada into a diverse and prosperous nation. When immigrants come, they bring their language, culture, values, educational background, and work experience to the new society. Although Canada has been extolled as an open and tolerant society, it has been criticized for failing to accept differences as valid and valuable expressions of the human experience. One manifestation of such criticism pertains to the non-recognition of immigrants' prior credentials and work experience, which is seen as the most outstanding social policy issue today. It is only after arriving in Canada that many highly educated immigrant professionals learn of the typical deskilling or decredentializing of their previous learning and work experience. While certain forms of knowledge are legitimized as valid, the learning and work experience of foreign-trained professionals are often treated with suspicion and as inferior.

Today, this has become an issue of enormous magnitude, as Canada transforms itself into a knowledge-based economy that requires people capable of high degrees of creativity and innovation. Notably, a large percentage of today's immigrants are adults with rich and cumulative knowledge and work experience (Statistics Canada, 2003a, 2007). The issue of the non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience of immigrant professionals in Canada is taken up in this article as a manifestation of the politics of difference and knowledge.

This article argues that the assessment and recognition of prior learning, or the lack thereof, is a political act. To do so, it draws on perspectives from critical theory and postmodernism to examine the relationship between knowledge and power. The article is organized into four parts. It begins with an examination of the contextual record, with a review of Canadian immigration policy, a focus on the social construction of the immigrant, and a mapping of the credentialing process. Second, it analyzes current studies of non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience in Canada. The third section traces the roots of the issue to the epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge, and to an ontological commitment to positivistic and universal measurement. Finally, the article concludes that the juxtaposed roots manifested today have formed a new head tax to exclude the undesirable and perpetuate oppression in Canada.

Examining the Contextual Record

At the centre of this analysis are Canada's immigration policies, the term *immigrant*, and the political process of foreign credential assessment. Each topic is examined below.

Immigration Past and Present

The driving forces behind immigration are social, political, economic, and demographic. Generally, from the Confederation of Canada in 1867 to the 1960s, the selection of immigrants in Canada was based on racial background, with the British and Western Europeans being deemed the most desirable citizens, while Asians and Africans were considered unassimilable and, therefore, undesirable. To illustrate, immigrants of European origin were brought in for what became a massive 19th-century migration as a strategy to

populate and develop Western Canada. Moreover, at the same time, based on superficial racial and cultural differences, the Canadian government brought in Chinese workers to build the railroad so fundamental to the expansion of the West, imposed a head tax in 1885 to keep out their families, and passed a restrictive *Chinese Immigration Act* in 1923 that virtually prohibited Chinese immigration into Canada until its repeal in 1947. Hence, since very early in the history of this country, immigration has served as a means of social, racial, and ideological control. In deciding who are the most desirable and admissible, the state sets the parameters for the social, cultural, and symbolic boundaries of the nation.

The history of immigration in Canada can be divided into four periods, each governed by a state policy defining who counts as desirable immigrants (Li, 2003). The first one, from 1867 to 1895, represents a period of open immigration, but only from England and the United States. The second period (1896–1914) covers the wheat boom at the beginning of the 20th century, which attracted a record number of immigrants from Europe to Canada. During the third period (1915–1945), Canada continued to accept European settlers for agricultural development. Immediately after the Second World War, Canadian immigration policy continued to be highly restrictive despite external and internal pressures for an open door policy (Knowles, 1997).

Yet the post-war period marked the beginning of a new era in Canada's immigration history. By the mid-1960s, Canada was experiencing "the greatest postwar boom" in Canadian history (Whitaker, 1991, p. 18). Skilled labour was required to help Canada build its expansionary economy, but Europe as the traditional source of immigrants was not able to meet the needs of Canada because of its own post-war economic recovery. Thus, the Canadian government turned its recruitment efforts to traditionally restricted areas: Third World countries. In 1967, a point system was introduced by the Liberal government that based the selection of immigrants on their education, skills, and resources rather than their racial and religious backgrounds. This new system represented "a historic watershed," and "did establish at the level of formal principle that Canadian immigration policy is 'colour blind'" (Whitaker, p. 19). However, the new selection method was criticized for excluding the impoverished, especially from Third World countries (Matas, 1996; Whitaker).

Despite the criticisms, the point system was successful in reversing the pattern of immigration from Europe in favour of Asia and other Third World countries. By the mid-1970s, more immigrants arrived from the Third World than from the developed world. The largest number came from Asia, followed by the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Between 1968 and 1992, Canada admitted 3.7 million immigrants, of which 35.7% came from Asia, 7.4% from the Caribbean, and 4.8% from Africa (Li, 2003). The population of visible minorities continued to grow throughout the 1990s. The 2006 Census reveals that of the 1.1 million immigrants who arrived between 2001 and 2006, 58% came from Asia, 11% from the Caribbean and Central and South America, and 11% from Africa (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Additional major shifts occurred in the last two decades of the 20th century. In the late 1980s, a business program was created to favour an entrepreneurial class of immigrants who would invest in the country's continuous development. Since the mid-1990s, immigrant selection practices have given more weight to education and skills while still favouring economic immigrants over family-class immigrants and refugees. Economic-

class immigrants made up more than half of all immigrants admitted throughout the late 1990s. Among them, a considerable number were highly educated immigrant professionals, particularly scientists and engineers. In 2000, of a total of 227,209 immigrants and refugees admitted, 23% (52,000 individuals) were admitted as skilled workers (Couton, 2002). This new shift was based on the assumption that economic immigrants brought more human capital with them than family-class immigrants and refugees, and, therefore, were more valuable and desirable (Li, 2003).

The Social Construction of Immigrants

Rooted in Canada's immigration policies of the past and present, the notion of *immigrant* is socially and politically constructed (Li, 2003; Ng, 1986). Descendants of early European settlers, now long-time Canadians, no longer think of themselves as immigrants. Today, the term *immigrant* has become a codified word for people of colour who come from different racial and cultural backgrounds, who do not speak fluent English, and who work in lower level jobs (Li, 2003). In other words, the social construction of immigrants uses skin colour as the basis for social marking. Real and alleged differences are claimed to be incompatible with the cultural and social fabric of the traditional Canada, and such immigrants are, therefore, assumed undesirable. Immigrants are also often blamed for creating urban social problems and racial tensions in the receiving society, rather than being acknowledged as part of the cultural flows and human threads in the Canadian fabric. The social construction of immigrants places uneven expectations on immigrants to conform over time to the norms, values, and traditions of the receiving society.

The term *immigrant woman* is constructed at the intersections of immigrant and gender. In addition, the social category, immigrant women, presupposes a labour market relation as special commodities; that is, "a special kind of labour, in the labour market" (Ng, 1986, p. 269). Hence, gender and race/ethnicity are essential constituents in the organization of class, and these notions must be located in particular social formations. In analyzing the process of non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience, it is important to recognize how race, class, and gender intersect to shape immigrants' experience.

Given the negative connotations of this socio-politically constructed notion, the term *immigrant* is used selectively in this paper when set in its policy and discursive context. Its use here is intended to provoke greater awareness of the non-recognition issue of racialized new Canadians.

Foreign Credentials Assessment: Mapping the Process

Deeply rooted in past policies, the contemporary issue of foreign credentialing bears all the negativity of the connotation of *immigrant*, which is mapped below in terms of processes and barriers. Foreign credentials can be defined as any formal education higher than a high school diploma, including professional or technical qualifications and any other degrees, diplomas, or certificates received outside Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003b). Canada's immigrant selection system awards points to applicants with advanced educational qualifications. Prior to landing in Canada, immigrants normally receive no reliable

information about the process of foreign credentials recognition. Upon arrival, they need to navigate through a complex and possibly lengthy, costly, and frustrating process on their own.

In Canada, there is no centralized office responsible for the evaluation of foreign credentials. Depending on the nature of the evaluation, immigrants may need to approach one or all of the following organizations: (1) provincial and territorial credential assessment services, (2) regulatory or professional bodies, (3) educational institutions, and (4) employers. The outcomes of the evaluation may serve one or more of the following purposes: general employment, studying in Canada, and professional certification or licensing in Canada.

More specifically, five provincial and territorial credential assessment agencies provide foreign credential assessment services to immigrants. These agencies are International Qualifications Assessment Service (Alberta), International Credential Evaluation Service (BC), Academic Credentials Assessment Service (Manitoba), World Education Services (Ontario), and Education Credential Evaluation (Quebec). The five agencies formed the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (ACESC), which facilitates the dissemination and exchange of information regarding international education. Small licensing bodies may need help from these organizations to determine the equivalency of an immigrant's foreign credentials. However, large professional associations (e.g., the College of Physicians and Surgeons) usually conduct their own assessments and determine whether the applicants need further training or tests in order to re-enter their professions in Canada. While professional and regulatory bodies determine the professional standing of the qualification, the assessment of foreign credentials for the purpose of academic study resides in the hands of education providers such as universities and colleges.

Furthermore, the process of recertification varies for each profession and each subspecialty. Based on licensing regulations, professions can be categorized as protected and unprotected (Salaff & Greve, 2003). Different occupational subgroups face different challenges depending on the degree of control by Canadian professions. Generally, the protected occupations require professional certification in addition to a bachelor or higher degree, including architectural designers, engineers, doctors, and teachers, just to name a few. To practise in the protected professions, however, immigrants must also pass Canadian courses and examinations and acquire a stint of supervised employment in Canada. For example, the medical profession requires foreign-trained professionals to take a certification examination in combination with language testing, and/or to undertake a period of internship or practicum in Canada. With multiple barriers in the protected professions, former professionals in these areas have the most trouble getting back to their original professions.

By comparison, the unprotected professions—such as computer programmers, delivery coordinators, sales persons, and construction site supervisors—may require a bachelor degree or diploma but do not require certification. The unprotected professions provide greater access and opportunities because their fields are less institutionalized. This comparison reveals the complexity involved in the process of devaluation of immigrants' credentials.

Very often, assessment of the same credentials by different institutions can be inconsistent. Since professional associations set their own standards of certification, no generalizations can be made regarding the national criteria for evaluating foreign qualifications. Reviewing the requirements of a number of assessment and licensing bodies in Canada, the evaluation of foreign credentials usually considers the following criteria: level and type of learning, duration of study program; status of issuing institutions; the education system of the country concerned; and authenticity, currency, relevance, trustworthiness, and transferability of the credential. Document verification does not guarantee that those who are found to have equivalent education will be licensed. Furthermore, successful immigrant professionals will obtain a certificate or license to practise their profession. Nonetheless, employment is not guaranteed, in spite of acute current shortages in the labour force, for each professional immigrant needs to find a willing employer—not an easy task.

To summarize, the process of foreign credential recognition is hampered by three major barriers: poor information on the accreditation process; lack of a responsible, coordinated approach for the evaluation of foreign credentials; and lack of agreed-upon national standards. These barriers mean that seeking accreditation in Canada requires undertaking a personal journey involving complex interactions with multiple players.

Foreign Credentials and Prior Work Experience: Deskilling and Discounting

Despite Canada’s preference for highly skilled immigrants and the fact that immigrant professionals bring significant human capital resources to the Canadian labour force, the non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience is the “central immigration issue of the new century not only in Canada, but in all post-industrial societies receiving immigrants” (Wanner, 2001, p. 417). The scope and impact of issues flowing from the barriers previously identified continue to haunt the lives of many highly educated immigrant professionals. The inaccessibility to professional occupation for which current immigrants have prior learning and work experience leads to downward social mobility, unemployment and underemployment, vulnerability and commodification, and reduced earnings.

Downward Social Mobility

Very often immigrant professionals are caught in a double jeopardy. In the first place, non-recognition of foreign credentials prevents them from accessing professional jobs in Canada and acquiring Canadian work experience, which subsequently makes it difficult for them to be qualified for professional jobs. For example, among Indo- and Chinese-Canadian immigrant professionals in Vancouver, only 18.8% of the surveyed worked as professionals (doctors, engineers, school/university teachers, and other professionals) after immigrating to Canada (Basran & Zong, 1998). Another Vancouver-based study with immigrants from the People’s Republic of China reveals that most recent immigrants came to Canada with post-secondary education. Despite the fact that some of them came with master’s and doctoral degrees, many faced serious barriers in their transition to the Canadian labour market. They could not find jobs in their original professions because their Chinese qualifications and work experiences were not recognized. Their inability to access

professional occupations resulted in downward social mobility, and some of them lived in poverty (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006).

At the national level, 60% of new immigrants did not work in the same occupational field as they had before arriving in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003b). Many immigrant professionals experienced major shifts from prior occupations in natural and applied sciences and management (for men) and business, finance, and administration (for women) to occupations in sales, services, and processing and manufacturing. Lack of Canadian experience and transferability of foreign credentials were reported as the most critical hurdles to employment. Lack of skills in either official language was another important contributing factor to this occupation shift. Furthermore, the possibility to find a job within the same field occupied prior to arriving in Canada was connected with the immigrant's place of birth. Notably, more than 60% of immigrants of American origins and 68% of immigrants of Australian and New Zealand origins were successful in finding employment in their occupational groups. When compared with examples given in the previous paragraph, these figures reveal that while foreign credentials and work experience can be transferred beyond national borders, benefits are enjoyed only by immigrants from a small number of countries of the former British Empire.

Unemployment and Underemployment

Unemployment and underemployment are common issues facing recent immigrant professionals in Canada. In a prairie-based study with skilled immigrants from Asia and Africa, Grant and Nadin (2007) found high levels of underemployment as participants took casual and part-time work for which they felt overqualified. Although almost all participants (97.5%) held post-secondary degrees from their country of origin, they were surprised by their inability to find suitable Canadian employment. They were forced to take jobs that underutilized their skills, which consequently resulted in a considerable waste of valuable human capital and triggered a myriad of strong emotions among immigrant professionals, including disappointment, sadness, and anger. The authors claimed that Canadian employers and professional bodies are making it unnecessarily difficult for racialized immigrants to access professional jobs through the institutionalized sanctioning of their foreign credentials and work experience.

Highly educated refugees also encounter similar barriers in Canada. In comparison with Canadian-born individuals, refugee professionals are more likely to experience unemployment and underemployment, such as part-time and temporary employment (Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, & Wilkinson, 2000). A lack of recognition of prior learning and work experience was identified as the top contributing factor to this phenomenon. Other factors include a shortage of Canadian references and work experience, English language difficulties, and employer discrimination. In another study that examined the differential economic integration of selected refugees (landed refugees) versus refugee claimants (asylum seekers), it was found that refugee claimants usually took longer to find their first job and were less likely to be employed than landed refugees selected abroad (Renaud, Piche, & Godin, 2003). With respect to the process of recognizing foreign credentials, it is important to note that professional associations often function as labour market shelter. By retaining strict control over the adjudication of foreign credentials, these associations

restrict competition for well-paying professional jobs to assure their lucrative nature (Krahn et al., 2000).

Vulnerability and Commodification

The situation for immigrant women is even worse. Advanced capitalism simultaneously creates and destroys jobs, and requires both the skilling and deskilling of the labour force (Mojab, 1999). The category of immigrant women has served to commodify these workers, reinforcing their class position in providing cheap, docile labour to their employers under the watchful eyes of the state and under exploitive conditions that are often permeated with racism and sexism (Gannage, 1999; Ng, 1999). Furthermore, systemic racist and ethnic discrimination practices affect immigrants differently (Khan & Watson, 2005). In terms of foreign credential recognition, women from advanced countries (such as the United States, Australia, Britain, or New Zealand) are treated differently from those originating in Third World countries. Only those with financial resources at their disposal can afford the Canadianization of their experience (Mojab, 1999). This is a binary dichotomy that excludes immigrant women who do not belong to either of these camps.

Female immigrant professionals experience more difficulties in continuing with their former careers because their education and credentials in the labour market are valued differently from those of men (Salaff & Greve, 2003). After immigrating to Canada, many immigrant women professionals are unemployed or working part-time in jobs for which they are overqualified. The change of employment situations is caused mainly by employers' demands for Canadian work experience and the reluctance of professional organizations to accredit foreign professionals, both racist forms of filtering from well-paying jobs. Furthermore, their vulnerability is heightened by "the conflicting demands of domestic responsibilities and paid work that limit their employment options" (Preston & Man, 1999, p. 120). This review of studies relating the treatment afforded to immigrant women has demonstrated clearly how gender, race, ethnicity, and class intersect in complex ways to marginalize and exclude immigrant women (Ng, 1986).

Reduced Earnings

The non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience seriously affects immigrants' earnings (Li, 2001, 2008; Reitz, 2001). In comparing the earnings of four groups—native-born Canadian degree-holders, immigrant Canadian degree-holders, immigrant mixed education degree-holders, and immigrant free degree-holders—Li (2001) found that immigrants' credentials carry a penalty compared to those of native-born Canadians. In a recent study on the value of human capital transfer to Canada as a result of immigration from the People's Republic of China, Li (2008) argues that the potential value of human capital transferred via immigration is often not fully recognized because of features of the Canadian market that differentially reward credentials based on gender, race, and foreign status of potential workers. Li estimates that between 1991 and 2000, 53,480 university-educated immigrants from China moved to Canada, bringing with them a saving in educational cost of \$1.8 billion for Canada. Unfortunately, only about 59% of these highly educated immigrants participated in Canada's labour market in 2001. Among

those who did participate, Li continues, they earned much less than Canada-born university graduates.

The annual immigrant earnings deficit caused by skill underutilization for Canada is assessed at \$2.4 billion (Reitz, 2001). Immigrants receive a much smaller earnings premium for their education—on average, half that of native-born Canadians. In other words, they receive about half to two-thirds as much benefit from work experience as do the native-born of the same gender. Meanwhile, according to Reitz, there are wide variations in earnings among immigrant origin groups. In general, immigrant men from origin groups outside Europe earn anywhere between 15 and 25% less than most of the European origin groups. However, origin-group earnings differences for immigrant women are much less than for men (Reitz). Furthermore, if foreign education explains part of the origin-group earnings differences, this means that Canadian employers treat schooling in certain countries of origin, mostly in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, differently from the way they treat schooling in other, mostly European, countries of origin. This finding alerts us again that “the issue is particularly acute for immigrants with qualifications from anywhere other than Europe or North America” (Mansour, 1996, p. 2).

Two Cases

In addition to the empirical studies discussed above, the issue of foreign credentials has often surfaced in Canadian media in the past few years. Newspapers have regularly reported barriers facing immigrants in having their credentials and work experiences recognized (Jimenez, 2003; Keung, 2006; Scott, 2007; Thompson, 2008). One such report that appeared in *The Globe and Mail* is reviewed here to help us better understand the situation (Jimenez, 2003). These illuminating cases highlight the credential issue facing many immigrant professionals in Canada.

Prior to moving to Canada, Tina Ureten was a physician from Turkey, a specialist in nuclear medicine, a hi-tech field that uses radioactive materials for diagnosis. Almost every province in Canada had a shortage in nuclear medicine. Ms. Ureten noted she was willing to serve anywhere in Canada. Expecting difficulties to get her license here, she never realized it would be such a “bureaucratic, disheartening and ultimately fruitless journey” (Jimenez, 2003, p. F9). First, it took her two and a half years to hear back from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons after sending in her application. Then it took two years to write three of the Medical Council of Canada’s evaluation exams, each with a six-month gap in between. She passed all three tests but was not accepted in the medical residency program because she was competing with 150 people. Eventually she gave up her true love and dream and became an ultrasound technician, for which she felt overqualified. She also noted that many of her friends were leaving for the United States, where foreign doctors can more easily be integrated into the system.

A refugee who came to Calgary in 1992 to escape the ravages of war in Sarajevo, Milica Cerovsek served as a nurse in a military hospital in Sarajevo for more than 17 years. Upon arriving in Calgary, Ms. Cerovsek put her career on hold in order to help her husband go back to school to retrain as an engineer. In 1997 she finally entered the work

force as a massage therapist to pay for the "long, arduous process of becoming a Canadian nurse" (Jimenez, 2003, p. F9). In 2001 she sent her application to the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses. The association asked her to upgrade her English and spend one year in a refresher program in nursing at a community college, which cost her \$2,000. She did both. Then she was told she needed credits in obstetrical and psychiatric nursing. Ms. Cerovsek said she had thousands of hours of experience delivering babies, giving injections, and assisting doctors in surgery. She could not understand why she still needed 35 hours of obstetrical nursing training. At that point she thought about giving up because it was so bureaucratic. Her perseverance eventually helped her through this marathon quest to become a nurse in a province that needed them. The whole process took her four years and cost about \$6,000.

Jimenez (2003) interviewed the executive directors of the Association of International Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario and the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses. When she asked what caused the complex situations in these cases, she was told that the professional associations had to maintain Canadian standards, whatever that means.

The above discussion demonstrates that many organizations in Canadian society, including government agencies, professional associations, employers, and educational institutions, play a role in the devaluation of foreign credentials and prior work experience. As a consequence, immigrant individuals and families, along with Canadian society as a whole, have suffered severe impacts.

Tracing the Roots: Epistemological and Ontological Misperceptions

While numerous studies have reported on this issue, the situation has not improved, even though some of the studies have suggested causes leading to the denigration of foreign credentials. Two critical questions remain:

- Why do such inequities occur in a democratic society like Canada where democratic principles are upheld and where immigrants are said to be welcome?
- What prevents Canada from moving forward?

Drawing on perspectives from critical theory and postmodernism, this section attempts to trace the root of this issue. Considered first are epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge, and second, the ontological foundations in the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials under the auspices of positivism and liberal universalism.

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 articulations of Canadian society lies in its commitment to cultural pluralism; however, a number of commentators argue that Canada endorses pluralism only in superficial ways (Cummins, 2003; Dei, 1996; Fleras & Elliott, 2002; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Moodley, 1995). In reality, Canada tends to prefer "pretend

pluralism,” which means that we “tolerate rather than embrace differences” (Fleras & Elliott, 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. Clearly, one of the hurdles preventing us from fully recognizing immigrants’ educational qualifications and professional experiences is the prevailing attitude toward difference. In fact, the negative attitudes and behaviours toward immigrants coexist with Canada’s commitments to democratic principles such as justice, equality, and fairness. The coexistence of these two conflicting ideologies can be referred to as “democratic racism” (Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 2006). Democratic racism prevents the government from fully embracing differences or making any changes in the existing social, economic, and political order, and 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.

Furthermore, knowledge is used as power to keep out the undesirable. Critical theorists and postmodern scholars maintain that knowledge is power; knowledge is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated; and knowledge is never neutral nor objective (Cunningham, 2000; 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 does knowledge get constructed the way it does? Whose knowledge is considered valuable? Whose knowledge is silenced? Is knowledge racialized? The numerous studies cited in this article have clearly shown that, while immigrants from Third World countries 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, 2003b). 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 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 the most desirable and those from 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 to move 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 selection 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 suffer from positivistic measuring. Positivists believe that an objective world exists out there, external to the individual. Positivists also believe that if something exists, it can be measured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The two cases and the studies cited here have shown that this objectivist ontology has been the driving force behind the current practice in foreign credentials assessment and recognition (Jimenez, 2003; Krahn et al., 2000; Ng, 1999). The existing scheme searches for Canadian equivalency and an absolute truth regarding knowledge and experience. It adopts a set of value-free criteria that discount the social, political, historical, and cultural context within which such knowledge is produced. Moreover, the measuring criteria and homogenizing rules have been not only those of the receiving society but 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 it 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 implementing such standards is to restrict competition and to sustain the interests of the dominant groups (Krahn et al.).

Similarly, in assessing foreign credentials, positivism is juxtaposed with liberal universalism and 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 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 Canadian-equivalent? Sometimes the rejection of immigrants' qualifications may be simply 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

This article argues that the recognition of prior learning and work experience 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 after arriving in Canada. As a result, they have experienced significant demoralizing and disempowering downward social mobility, unemployment and underemployment, vulnerability and commodification, and reduced earnings. In the process of prior learning assessment and recognition for immigrant professionals, recognition is obviously missing. The lack of recognition 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 for those from 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 perpetuate oppression in Canada.

This discussion has important implications for adult education. As our population is growing more diverse, it is imperative for adult educators to be more inclusive and accept differences as valid and valuable expressions of the human experience. In light of this, this study urges adult educators to revitalize the progressive role of adult education in bringing about democracy and social change (Cunningham, 2000; Freire, 1970; Welton, 2001) by re-examining the practice of adult education. For example, prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) has been heralded by adult educators as "potentially the most radical innovation" since the introduction of mass formal education during the 19th century (Thomas, 1998, p. 330). With respect to the non-recognition and devaluation of immigrants' foreign credentials in the 21st century, we need to re-assess the practice of PLAR by asking whether PLAR has lost its radical roots and become a serious barrier to adult learning rather than a facilitator. To develop a critical awareness of this issue, it seems important to first overcome the "discourse of righteousness," because any critique of PLAR practice has been taken as "a critique of the principles of social justice underpinning that practice" (Harris, 2006, p. 8). Furthermore, it is morally and economically urgent for government organizations, professional associations, educational institutions, and prior learning assessment agencies to dismantle barriers and adopt an inclusive framework that fully embraces all human knowledge and experiences, no matter which ethnic and cultural backgrounds they emerge from. Otherwise, immigrants will be further alienated from becoming fully fledged and productive citizens of the receiving societies, regardless of the particularities of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

To achieve this 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 exercise their legislative roles to introduce new bills that will make regulatory bodies accountable for how they treat immigrants and ensure their admission procedures are transparent and equitable to all. It is also imperative for government agencies to work with employers to create 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 so they are well-informed. 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. Only by applying an integrated approach can the issue be tackled more holistically.

Acknowledgment

The author wishes to thank Dr. Yvonne Hébert at the University of Calgary and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

References

- Basran, G., & Zong, L. (1998). Devaluation of foreign credentials as perceived by visible minority professional immigrants. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 30(3), 6–18.
- Couton, P. (2002). Highly skilled immigrants: Recent trends and issues. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 3(2), 114–123.
- Cummins, J. (2003). Challenging the construction of difference as deficit: Where are identity, intellect, imagination, and power in the new regime of truth? In P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Pedagogies of difference: Rethinking education for social change* (pp. 41–60). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Cunningham, P. (2000). The sociology of adult education. In A. Wilson & E. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education* (pp. 573–591). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dei, G. J. S. (1996). *Anti-racism education: Theory and practice*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 933–958). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Fleras, A., & Elliott, J. (2002). *Engaging diversity: Multiculturalism in Canada*. Toronto: Nelson Thomson Learning.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gannage, C. (1999). The health and safety concerns of immigrant women workers in the Toronto sportswear industry. *International Journal of Health Services*, 29(2), 409–429.
- Ghosh, R., & Abdi, A. A. (2004). *Education and the politics of difference: Canadian perspectives*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.
- Grant, P., & Nadin, S. (2007). The credentialing problems of foreign trained personnel from Asia and Africa intending to make their home in Canada: A social psychological perspective. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 8(2), 141–162.
- Guo, S., & DeVoretz, D. (2006). Chinese immigrants in Vancouver: Quo vadis? *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 7(4), 425–447.
- Harris, J. (2006). Introduction and overview of chapters. In P. Andersson & J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 1–29). Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Henry, F., Tator, C., Mattis, W., & Rees, T. (2006). *The colour of democracy: Racism in Canadian society*. Toronto: Thompson Nelson.
- Jimenez, M. (2003, October 25). We are capable people. *The Globe and Mail*, p. F9.

- Keung, N. (2006, February 11). A fast flight to China: Some expats have become disillusioned about their prospects in Canada. *Toronto Star*.
- Khan, S., & Watson, J. (2005). The Canadian immigration experiences of Pakistani women: Dreams confront reality. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 18(4), 307–317.
- Knowles, V. (1997). *Strangers at our gates: Canadian immigration and immigration policy, 1540–1997*. Toronto: Dundurn Press.
- Krahn, H., Derwing, T., Mulder, M., & Wilkinson, L. (2000). Educated and underemployed: Refugee integration into the Canadian labour market. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 1(1), 59–84.
- Li, P. S. (2001). The market worth of immigrants' educational credentials. *Canadian Public Policy*, 27(1), 23–38.
- Li, P. S. (2003). *Destination Canada: Immigration debates and issues*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Li, P. S. (2008). Immigration from China to Canada in the age of globalization: Issues of brain gain and brain loss. *Pacific Affairs*, 81(2), 217–239.
- Mansour, M. (1996). Qualifications alone will not get you the job you want: Integrating into the Quebec labour market with foreign credentials. Unpublished master's thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec.
- Matas, D. (1996). Racism in Canadian immigration policy. In C. E. James (Ed.), *Perspectives on racism and the human services sector: A case for change* (pp. 93–102). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- McLaren, P. (2003). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Mojab, S. (1999). De-skilling immigrant women. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19(3), 123–128.
- Moodley, K. A. (1995). Multicultural education in Canada: Historical development and current states. In J. A. Banks & C. A. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 801–820). New York: Macmillan.
- Ng, R. (1986). The social construction of 'immigrant women' in Canada. In R. Hamilton & M. Barrett (Eds.), *The politics of diversity: Feminism, Marxism and nationalism* (pp. 269–286). London: Verso.
- Ng, R. (1999). Homeworking: Dream realized or freedom constrained? The globalized reality of immigrant garment workers. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19(3), 110–114.
- Preston, V., & Man, G. (1999). Employment experiences of Chinese immigrant women: An exploration of diversity. *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19(3), 115–122.
- Reitz, J. G. (2001). Immigrant skill utilization in the Canadian labour market: Implications of human capital research. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 2(3), 347–378.
- Renaud, J., Piche, V., & Godin, J. (2003). One's bad and the other one's worse: Differences in economic integration between asylum seekers and refugees selected abroad. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 35(2), 86–99.
- Salaff, J., & Greve, A. (2003). Gendered structural barriers to job attainment for skilled Chinese emigrants in Canada. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 9, 443–456.

- Scott, M. (2007, January 31). Landing that elusive job in B.C.: Canadian roles and regulations make it very difficult for foreign-trained professionals to become accredited here. *Vancouver Sun*.
- Statistics Canada. (2003a). *Ethnic diversity survey*. Ottawa: Author.
- Statistics Canada. (2003b). *Longitudinal survey of immigrants to Canada: Process, progress and prospects*. Ottawa: Author.
- Statistics Canada. (2007). *Immigration in Canada: A portrait of the foreign-born population, 2006 Census*. Ottawa: Author.
- Thomas, A. M. (1998). The tolerable contradictions of prior learning assessment. In S. Scott, B. Spencer, & A. M. Thomas (Eds.), *Learning for life: Canadian readings in adult education* (pp. 330–342). Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Thompson, E. (2008, May 5). Immigrants with degrees losing ground, study says. *Montreal Gazette*.
- Wanner, R. A. (2001). Diagnosing and preventing "brain waste" in Canada's immigrant population: A synthesis of comments on Reitz. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 2(3), 417–428.
- Welton, M. (2001). *Little Mosie from the Margaree: A biography of Moses Michael Coady*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Whitaker, R. (1991). *Canadian immigration policy since confederation*. Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association.
- Young, I. M. (1995). Polity and group difference: A critique of the ideal of universal citizenship. In R. Beiner (Ed.), *Theorizing citizenship* (pp. 175–207). Albany: State University of New York.