

Articles

PRACTICES ON THE PERIPHERY: HIGHLY EDUCATED CHINESE IMMIGRANT WOMEN NEGOTIATING OCCUPATIONAL SETTLEMENT IN CANADA¹

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Abstract

Employing a situated learning framework, I examine how 10 Chinese immigrant women negotiated their occupational settlement in Canada. I argue for a mutually constitutive relationship between the women's employment strategies and Canadian workplace practices, the accessibility and receptivity of which are shaped by social relations such as gender, race, and perceived language differences. Specifically, I examine the women's practices in positioning themselves vis-à-vis the Canadian labour market and their "legitimate" peripheral practices in Canadian workplaces. I show that central to the women's labour market positioning practices is a process of identity construction that is in ongoing interplay with exclusionary labour market practices. Further, provided with little support at their new workplaces, the women often resorted to strategic tolerance, relied on prior knowledge and expertise, and became agents of change. The legitimate space presupposed in situated learning was an entitlement that the women had to earn in Canada.

Résumé

En partant d'un cadre conceptuel d'apprentissage contextualisé, j'étudie un groupe de 10 chinoises immigrantes qui négocient leur adaptation professionnelle au Canada. Je me base sur l'hypothèse d'une relation constitutive mutuelle entre les stratégies d'emploi des femmes et les pratiques d'emploi sur le marché canadien où les questions d'accessibilité et de réceptivité sont sujettes aux relations sociales telles que le sexe, la race et les différences langagières perçues. Spécifiquement,

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j'étudie la façon dont ces femmes se positionnent vis-à-vis le marché du travail canadien et leurs pratiques parallèles légitimes au sein de leurs lieux de travail. Je démontre qu'au centre des efforts d'adaptation professionnelle de ces femmes se déroule un processus de construction identitaire continu tributaire des pratiques d'exclusion du marché du travail. De plus, les immigrantes chinoises, laissées à elles-mêmes dans leur nouveau poste de travail, sans un réseau de soutien, ont développées des stratégies de tolérance. Elles ont dû se fier à leur bagage de connaissances et à leur expériences acquises antérieurement et sont devenu des agentes de changement. La place légitime présumée dans la situation d'apprentissage contextualisé est un droit que les femmes ont dû gagner d'elles-mêmes au Canada

Introduction

Canada, a nation dependent on immigrants, used to practise Eurocentric immigration policies to exclude people of colour in particular (Jakubowski, 1997). In the 1960s, Canada began to shift away from this overtly racist practice. To address the shrinking numbers of immigrants from its traditional immigrant source countries in Europe, and to maintain its competitive edge in the global economy, Canada implemented a point system to attract immigrants with desirable education and skills (Green & Green, 1996).

In recent years, skilled immigrants have accounted for nearly 50% of all immigrants to Canada, and a large percentage of the skilled immigrants are women from Asia (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). Despite the high level of their credentials, recent immigrants do not fare as well as the pre-1970s immigrant cohort (Baker & Benjamin, 1994). The economic achievements of Chinese immigrant women, for example, are not comparable to their male Chinese or female Canadian counterparts (Wang & Lo, 2005).

Some researchers attribute immigrants' positions in the labour market to their lack of human capital, such as education (e.g., Neuwirth, Jones, & Eyton, 1989), occupational training, work experience, and language proficiency (Morawska, 1990). Others argue that the structural conditions of the host society are not amenable to immigrants. According to Morawska, for example, capitalist economies are segmented into primary and secondary sectors; immigrants are disproportionately located in the secondary sector, which is characterized by unstable employment. Racialized and sexist social and institutional practices (Man, 2004; Ng, 1996), as well as devaluation of foreign credentials in Canada (Reitz, 2003; Shan, in press), certainly help produce and reproduce the segmented property of the Canadian labour market.

While the barriers recent immigrants face in the Canadian labour market are well documented, less attention is given to how immigrants negotiate their occupational settlement in the host society. In this paper, I address this gap in the literature and examine how, from the perspective of situated learning, highly educated Chinese immigrant women navigate and integrate into the Canadian labour market. In particular, I focus on the women's occupational repositioning experiences and their strategies to claim fuller membership in their new workplaces. I argue for a mutually constitutive relationship between immigrant

women's individual practices and Canadian workplace practices, the accessibility and receptivity of which are shaped by social relations such as gender, race, and perceived language differences.

The paper is divided into six sections. In the first section, I introduce current literature on immigrants' learning experiences in the host labour market. In the second section, I present my conceptual framework: situated learning. In the third section, I introduce the research, research methods, and research participants. In the fourth and fifth sections, I examine the practices of 10 Chinese immigrant women on the periphery of the Canadian labour market. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of the research findings.

Immigrants' Learning in the Canadian Labour Market

Immigrants' learning experiences in their labour market participation process have recently received attention from both quantitative and qualitative researchers in Canada. A national survey conducted by the Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) research network in the winter of 2003–2004 documents the changing work conditions and adult learning practices in Canada. Nine thousand people across Canada participated in this study. Among other issues, the survey shows that recent immigrants are more likely to attend schools than the Canadian-born or the earlier immigrant cohorts (Ahmadi-Bidheni, 2006). This finding is corroborated by qualitative studies such as those undertaken by Beynon, Ilieva, and Dichupa (2004) and Ng, Man, Shan, and Liu (2006); both studies show that immigrants are often compelled to pursue recertification, retraining, and further education to improve their employment prospects in Canada.

In addition to schooling, immigrants also engage in volunteer work to optimize their employment prospects. According to the WALL survey, 57.9% of the immigrant respondents who have lived in Canada between six and ten years, and 44.7% of those who have lived in Canada for less than five years, have engaged in volunteer work, compared to 24.5% of Canadian-born respondents (Slade, Luo, & Schugurensky, 2005). However, does volunteer work benefit immigrants? Slade et al., in their study of 40 immigrants from 17 countries, find that while most of the research participants believed that what they learned through volunteer placements was valuable, only 13% of them found employment relevant to their education, skills, and professional experiences.

In addition to the studies that examine immigrants' strategies in accessing the Canadian job market, a few studies focus specifically on immigrants' engagement in workplace learning in Canada. Shragge et al. (2004), for example, show that immigrants working in nursing homes or doing domestic work exercise a range of strategies to secure social and labour rights. Similarly, Fenwick (2008) finds that immigrant garment workers engage in critical and collective learning for solidarity, resistance, and personal worth. Furthermore, Maitra and Shan (2007) point out that immigrants' work-related learning has dual potentials; immigrant women learn both to fit into their workplaces and to transgress oppressive working conditions.

While the above studies help uncover certain aspects of immigrants' labour market learning experiences, few of them explicate how they conceptualize learning per

se. In contrast, a number of studies undertaken in Europe are premised on an elaborate socio-cultural learning framework. Gustavsson (2004), in her master's thesis, studies how four immigrants succeed in accessing the Swedish labour market. Employing a socio-cultural learning framework, she finds that social networks and strengths of personality are significant in determining immigrants' employment outcomes. In addition, Gustavsson finds that although mastering the Swedish language is often discussed as an employability factor, language demands could actually be a means of discrimination.

Also within the socio-cultural framework is Rismark and Stenoien's (2003) study of a group of Polish health personnel in Sweden with regard to how they deal with new life and work situations. Rismark and Stenoien find that for these professionals, workplace participation means that they reflect upon language and cultural difference and bring new ways of doing things to the workplace. They also argue that the openness of communities of work plays a significant role in shaping the way immigrants integrate into their new life- and work-spaces. Rismark and Sitter's (2003) study of the interactive qualities among newcomers and workplace practices in Norway further substantiates that the "invitational qualities of workplaces" (Billett, 2002a, p. 37), the structuring of work activities, the recognition of newcomers, and interactive opportunities with other workers afford immigrants with differential access to communities of work.

The European studies above are the first to introduce a socio-cultural framework to the study of immigrants' learning experiences in the host labour market. It has to be pointed out, however, that these studies do not make full use of the analytical power of the socio-cultural framework—specifically, the situated learning approach. The biggest drawback of these studies is that they do not address who the learners are and whether learners' identities have any bearing on their access to and learning within communities of work.

In this paper, I adopt the situated learning framework to study immigrant women's experiences of navigating and settling in Canadian workplaces. In particular, I address women's meaning-making processes, which directly influence their employment strategies and workplace practices in Canada. Furthermore, I examine how the women make sense of their identities and their social encounters in Canada, which helps elucidate the interactive dynamic among individuals and social practices in the segmented Canadian labour market.

Conceptual Framework: Situated Learning

Traditionally, learning is perceived as a cerebral process of individual learners. Situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) goes beyond the individualistic construction of learning. It conceives learning as an integral aspect of social practices through which our personal agency and the lived-in social world come into play. The social world, perceived through situated learning, is composed of a constellation of communities of practices organized around a common membership and a shared repertoire of knowledge and practices (Wenger, 1998). Situated learning focuses primarily on the process through which newcomers become fully participating members in established communities of practice, which Lave and Wenger call "legitimate peripheral participation" (LPP).

Situated learning, with its focus on LPP, is significant for the analysis of immigrants' labour market learning experiences for two reasons. First, it directs attention to the issue of identity construction, which is an inalienable aspect of learning and development. Second, it highlights the political significance of peripherality, or the peripheral space, which is both debilitating and empowering at the same time.

Identity Construction

Situated learning brings together the notion of identity construction and individual development within a particular social context (Handley, Clark, Fincham, & Sturdy, 2007). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), "learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are two aspects of the same phenomenon" (p. 115). Wenger (1998) defines identity as "a layering of events of participation and reification by which our experience and its social interpretation inform each other" (p. 151). Similarly, Holland and Lave (2001) view identity as arising from the interplay between subjective formation and local practices. Informed by Bakhtin's work, Holland and Lave highlight the dialogical relationship between "I" and "other" as a social mechanism that contributes to the ongoing construction of identity.

Negotiation of identity should not be understood solely as a meaning-making process. Although identity construction is not explicitly defined as such in the conception of situated learning, I suggest that it includes a performative aspect as well. People can choose to identify or dis-identify with particular identity discourses attributed to them (Päecheux, 1982). In other words, participation in communities of practices is shaped not only by who learners are or who they are perceived to be, but also by the way they operate or perform their socially attributed identities.

The open-ended conception of identity makes it possible to discuss social differences, not as essential personal or social characteristics, but as materialist relations produced in our daily interactions and productive activities. Learning, as such, is a relational process where newcomers' personal practices are informed by and inform social practices. On the one hand, the receptivity, affordability, and constraints of communities of practices have bearing on how people learn, what they learn (Billett, 2002a, 2002b), and, most importantly, how their identities are formed and reformed as part of the learning process. On the other hand, as newcomers begin to claim their membership and to establish their own identities in new communities, they become a potential force of change (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Peripherality

The second distinct contribution of the situated learning approach is that it highlights the political importance of peripherality as a dynamic social space. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), peripherality, or the peripheral space, is of dual potentials. On the one hand, peripherality always suggests a lack of negotiating power as well as a lack of membership on the part of newcomers. Newcomers in general do not play a central role in the established community of work, and they need opportunities or social spaces to become part of the joint enterprise (Cope, Cuthbertson, & Stoddart, 2000). On the other hand, given that, throughout our lives, we necessarily belong to different communities of practice,

we become a nexus among communities of practices, which is, in itself, empowering in nature.

A central issue that Lave and Wenger (1991) do not address, however, is the question of accessibility of communities of practices (see also Case & Jawitz, 2004). It is important to understand that communities of practices serve to exclude and include at the same time, and that different communities of practices may as well demonstrate different accessibility and receptivity for different social groups. Accordingly, what Lave and Wenger construct as peripherality should not be considered a naturalized space of tolerance granted to all newcomers. Rather, it is important to understand peripherality as a space of power struggle.

The Research, Research Method, and Research Participants

This paper is based on a research project entitled *Learning to be Good Citizens—Informal Learning and the Labour Market Experiences of Professional Chinese Immigrant Women*.² The project was initiated by the Professional Chinese Immigrant Women's Reference Group³—a team of professors and graduate students of Chinese origin who were genuinely concerned with the overall underemployment of immigrants in Canada, and of professional Chinese immigrant women in particular. Part of this group formed the research team who carried out this research project. The central question of the study is: How do Chinese immigrant women refashion themselves to participate in the segmented labour market in Canada?

Research Method

We conducted life history interviews with 10 Chinese immigrant women. We reached out to the women through postings in Chinese community centres and by word of mouth. All the women arrived in Canada in or after 1998, the year China became the number one immigrant source country for Canada (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). They all had university degrees and professional experience prior to immigration. The interviews were open-ended and in-depth in nature. The women were asked to relate their labour market experiences in China and in Canada. The interviewers probed, in particular, for transitional events and significant social encounters in the women's lives. The interviews were between two hours, and four and a half hours in length. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in the language of the interview, Mandarin Chinese and/or English. We also translated part of the Chinese interviews during the analysis process.

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- 2 The project was funded by the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement (CERIS), between 2005 and 2006. The research team included Dr. Roxana Ng (principal investigator), Dr. Guida Man (co-investigator), doctoral candidates Hongxia Shan (coordinator) and Willa Liu (research assistant), and Liping Peng. The Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter was the community partner for this project.
 - 3 The Professional Chinese Immigrant Women's Reference Group existed between 2004 and 2006.

Life histories and narrative approaches to research defy the traditional research criteria for validity, including objectivity, generalizability, and replicability. The personal biases and interests of the researchers and research participants, as well as the interactive dynamics among them, shape the research process (Plummer, 2001). Life history research is valid not because it produces truthful or objective representations of individual experiences. It is valid because it presents subjective realities that reveal features of people's consciousness and those of the social contexts that shape them.

Furthermore, as Plummer (2001) suggests, researchers are endowed with great power as we bring in the theoretical lens to work up the data. Being aware of such power dynamics, our research team conducted a "validity check" (p. 157). The team held a community forum in which we presented our preliminary findings to, and collected feedback from research participants as well as researchers, community activists, and staff at immigrant training centres who were interested in our study. The research team further refined our research findings based on this feedback.

Research Participants

Ten Chinese immigrant women were interviewed for this study. The youngest interviewee, Jie (all names are pseudonyms), was 28 years old; the oldest, Lan, was 45 years old. Most of the women were between the ages of 30 and 40. Eight of the research participants were married; one, Ming, was single and one, Yi, was divorced. Seven of the interviewees had at least one child. Prior to immigration, all of the participants had professional experiences: Hua and Ling had work experience in engineering; Fei and Lan in medical sciences; Jie, Mei and Yanin English and higher education; Ming in applied physics; Yang in library information; and Yi in law. Table 1 summarizes the educational and occupational backgrounds of the research participants.

Table 1: Research Participants' Educational and Professional Backgrounds and Current Status

Name*	Educational Background in China	Professional Status Prior to Immigration	Occupational Status at Time of Interview
Fei	Medicine	Pediatrician	Lab technician
Hua	Computer engineering	Chief senior engineer	Daycare assistant
Jie	English	University lecturer	Graduate student
Lan	Medicine	Senior doctor	ESL student
Ling	Chemical engineering	Researcher/teacher	Bakery clerk
Mei	English	University lecturer	Co-superintendent
Ming	Applied physics	Computer engineer	Resource centre coordinator and indexer
Yan	English	University lecturer	College instructor

Yang	Library information	Department head	Garment quality control
Yi	Law	Lawyer	Community worker

* All names are pseudonyms

Shortly after their arrival in Canada, six of the women took on labour-intensive service or manufacturing jobs. At the time of the interviews, two of the women were still trapped in these sectors (Ling and Yang); Yang was planning to go back to school once her family financial situation permitted. The remaining women had managed to move on. Lan was studying English while preparing to return to China. Yan worked as a part-time college instructor. Fei worked as a lab technician and changed her specialization from pediatrics to diabetes. Jie was studying in a postgraduate program, trying to transfer from English to education. All other women entered occupations that are different from their training backgrounds in China.

The research participants who succeeded in entering their targeted fields continued to struggle to become full members in their respective workplaces. In the next section, I discuss the women’s occupational repositioning practices in Canada. I then examine women’s “legitimate” peripheral participation practices in their new workplaces.

Occupational Repositioning

I define occupational repositioning as the process through which immigrant women learn of their employment possibilities in Canada and adjust their employment targets and strategies. At the core of the women’s (re)positioning practices, I argue, are the construction and performance of their socially attributed identities, which are an integral aspect of learning. The women’s perception of self, in terms of age, gender, race, language facility, etc., helped direct their positioning practices in various ways. It is important to point out that the research participants’ invocation of certain aspects of their identities was invariably in response to exclusionary social practices.

An example of this occupational (re)positioning is demonstrated in Lan’s experience. Lan was a senior doctor in China. She immigrated to Canada with her husband, who was studying here. At the time of the interview, she was due to follow her husband back to China to take care of her elderly parents. She was calm but bitter during the interview. She continually reiterated that it was her “duty” to accompany her husband. While she used immigration to fulfill her duty as a woman, the immigration process turned out to be costly. She said:

When you immigrate, you are asked to sign something, to put a signature on a form. For example, if you are a doctor [you are asked to declare that] you are not to practise if you do not go through training and get licensed. . . . Some people willingly give up [their profession]. Well, at that time, my thought was that I could still find a job. (January 2006)

With the unwelcoming stance of her profession at the time of immigration, Lan never even tried to enter the medical profession in Canada. After her arrival, a friend introduced her to a job repackaging merchandise. It was not until five years later that she

found and joined a suitable English training program. However, this discovery was too late for her. She said:

It is not deniable that I am very good in my field of practice I wanted to practise my profession. However, it was impossible My language is a huge barrier I think in order to integrate . . . in order to know more about the Canadian society, you have to get the language barrier cleared After I [joined the English program], probably as I was improving my English, I got to know more about the society. I think when I first came I should have started schooling. At that time, I was still young, still energetic. I may have entered my field of practice very quickly. I may feel better now. (January 2006)

No matter how good Lan was in her field in her home country, she, like other immigrants in regulated professions, was denied the right to practise her profession in Canada. Further, these professional immigrants are left on their own should they wish to enter their profession after immigration. Lan was not only discouraged by the Canadian licensure practices, but also held back by her English language facility at the time of her arrival. To fulfill her duty as a woman, she missed the opportunity to make up for the language gap. Lan was observably unhappy during the interview; she lived in a world where she had to reconcile her pride in and attachment to her field of practice, her gendered obligation, the aging self, and the devaluation of her professional background in Canada.

In Ling's case, she learned she would not be allowed to practise as an engineer in Canada well before she arrived. By studying information on the Internet, she also learned that accounting was the top profession for Chinese women in Canada. Accordingly, she decided to retrain as an accountant. Soon after her arrival, Ling started a two-year college accounting program in a Canadian college. At the time of the interview, Ling had already given up her search for accounting jobs and was working as a bakery clerk. During the interview she admitted she had made a big mistake when she dropped engineering altogether.

It is important to note that identifying "jobs for the Chinese" was not always detrimental for these women. Yi, for example, was a lawyer in China. One of the positions she applied for in Canada was an "abused women's counselor", a position that had no counterpart in China. She said:

It was a position of abused women's counsellor. I knew that. I also knew that they wanted a Mandarin speaker. I thought that . . . it was 1998 or 1999. There were not many Mandarin-speaking people around. I thought that I could speak Mandarin, and I was a lawyer in China. At that time, I felt that this job belonged to me [laugh]. I thought that I should not let go of that opportunity. (March 2006)

When mainstream society lacks the capacities that immigrants can offer, the resources of minority communities will be tapped into. Yi identified such an opportunity and sensed that this job was explicitly addressed to the labour pool within the Chinese community. With her background as a lawyer dealing with divorce cases, she knew she

could meet the challenge. Indeed, she made her way into social/community services through this particular job.

While Ling and Yi explicitly applied for "jobs for the Chinese," others chose to go in the opposite direction. Mei, for example, challenged the notion that being Chinese was a relevant factor in determining what jobs she could or should access. Mei was a university teacher in China and became a building superintendent in Canada. The researchers were curious as to how she entered that field. Mei said that it was not easy. Indeed, at one job interview, she and her husband were explicitly told that "no Chinese [work] as superintendents." They sensed the same sentiment in their interview with another company. In the face of overt exclusion, however, Mei did not give up.

[After the first job interview] I found they [were] still [looking for] a super I wrote a letter to the manager, the same manager. I said, "You [have not found] the right person. We are the right person you are looking for Just give us [an opportunity] to try." After the manager got my letter . . . she called me She said she [could] give me the opportunity to have a second interview. Then she asked all the people in the house, more than 10 people to come to talk with us. She said, "If anything you can't understand, no job for you." We said that's okay. Then after that, she said, "No, you can't talk, just your husband can speak." I said, "Okay." Maybe they know I know English. They just let my husband talk to them. My husband talked to them. They said, "Okay, I can understand what he was saying." The manager said, "Okay, sign, sign the job offer." That's how we got the job. (Mei, February 2006)

Apparently, Mei caught the employers by surprise with her petition letter. After the second interview, Mei and her husband became assistant superintendents. A year later, they became superintendents. In the face of exclusion based on perceived racial and language differences, Mei treated "no" as the grounds for negotiation. The couple did not avoid the superintendent field as they were expected to as Chinese. Mei's experience, to a certain extent, disrupted employers' practices of excluding Chinese people from traditionally non-Chinese occupations; her actions changed the racialized labour market locations of the Chinese, albeit in minute ways.

"Legitimate" Practices on the Periphery

Obtaining a job did not mean that the women in this study gained a firm foothold in the Canadian workplace. What Lave and Wenger (1991) identified as a "legitimate space" or a "zone of tolerance" for newcomers did not apply to all of the women. When the research participants started their new jobs, they were provided with little support and minimal training in the workplace, yet they were expected to be immediately productive. Given that the majority of the women changed their occupations or specializations, some of them reported undergoing a distinct transitional process. During the transitional period they were often faced with an indifferent or, worse still, hostile work environment. To survive in such work environments the women displayed strategic tolerance, mobilized their prior knowledge and expertise, and, at times, became agents of change.

Exercising Strategic Tolerance

Three of the women in this study specifically related that when they started their new jobs, they had problems with workplace English and had less than sufficient knowledge of the practices in their fields of work. They reported that they were often mistreated and yelled at by their bosses and colleagues. Faced with such dehumanizing work conditions, the women tried to be emotionally detached from their surroundings. Often, they manipulated their meaning-making schemes in order to make the most out of their depressing social encounters. For example, Yi related the following when she started working in a women's shelter:

When I joined the shelter, I did the kind of work with heavy physical demand. As my language was not good enough . . . I was given a hard time . . . I knew that they were bullying me because of my language . . . I was sorry that I had to put up with that . . . but I thought to myself, just because I was not good at English, I needed to [learn] it. It was like they paid me to [learn] English in an English environment . . . In any case, I treated it as a learning opportunity. (March 2006)

In this case, Yi was acutely aware of the discriminatory treatment she received. However, she suspended this interpretation of her experience in order to relieve herself of the grievance she felt. Instead, she viewed the situation as a learning opportunity. Hua, a computer engineer who became a daycare worker, had a similar experience:

Initially, my English was not good. My supervisor often lost her temper with me. Sometimes, I did not understand her well and did the wrong thing. [When such things happened], she would throw a fit. When that happened, I would show tolerance. If I had not been tolerant, I would have lost my job. Now, I am familiar with her language . . . I had no experience with daycare in China, and could not express myself well at work. Now, I know and I have also learned . . . English songs . . . The supervisor is very nice to me now . . . But during the initial period of work, I felt like crying whenever I went home. I had never been treated like that before in China. (February 2006)

When Mei started her job, she was not verbally abused but was badly taken advantage of because, as she said, she was not familiar with the work. She said, "My super's wife . . . sometimes, she called me up . . . 'You do this, you do that.' I said, 'I don't know how to do this.' She said, 'I'll show you.' After she showed me, I know. I do [things] correctly" (February 2006). Through tolerating her supervisors, Mei said that she was able to practise her English and learn all of the tasks required of a superintendent.

In all cases, the language problem the women identified was not simply about language. Practical language competence, as Bourdieu (1977) states, "is learned in *situations*, in practice" (p. 647). The appropriateness of language is always defined in relation to the context of its use. "Learning to become a legitimate participant in a community involves learning how to talk (and be silent) in the manner of full participants" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 105). Newcomers require opportunities to be immersed in actual work situations in order to learn the language or the discursive practices particular to their field of practice.

In the case of the research participants, however, rarely did the women receive training or support at work to help them make the transition into their new workplaces. Their employers and co-workers expected them to be immediately productive. The employers' pursuit of profit and productivity helped obscure the fact that the women were new to the workplace and needed time and orientation toward their job.

While the legitimacy presupposed in situated learning theory implies a tolerance zone where a learning curve is allowed for, the peripheral positions the women occupied sent out a different message. The women constantly had to prove themselves to be worthy of their new communities in order to be received better and, eventually, to be accepted.

Mobilizing Prior Knowledge

If being tolerant is a means for the women to retain their legitimate peripheral participation position, drawing on their previous knowledge and expertise helps them claim fuller membership in their workplaces. Fei, for example, was a pediatrician in China. She worked for the United Nations and in an institute of higher education in the United States prior to immigration. In Canada, she found a job as a lab technician conducting research. When Fei started this job, her colleagues from other labs told her that no Chinese stayed in her lab for long. Fei received no orientation, training, or assistance for this job. When she started work, she asked her colleagues for a work protocol. It was only after intervention from her boss that she received an old version protocol. If we consider workplace protocol or work standards as an artifact where knowledge and practices of workplaces are congealed (Wenger, 1998), Fei was deliberately prevented from accessing the resources and hampered from reaching her full potential as a participating member.

Fei soon learned that this particular workplace endorsed territorialized practices and did not encourage collaboration or peer consultation. Like many of the women interviewees, Fei refrained from interpreting these encounters as racial discrimination. She did not allow herself to moan over the negative dynamic she experienced at work. Instead, she redirected her energy to her job. She resorted to the set of practices she employed in her previous work as a pediatrician. She consulted her husband, who was also a clinical doctor in China, and fellow colleagues from China, and explored research materials on the Internet. Fei also worked from home using her own facilities.

A month after she started her job, Fei accomplished a task that a previous colleague had not been able to complete in two years. She instantly won respect from her colleagues. Fei attributed her success to her years of research and clinical experiences prior to immigration. What she did not highlight was the intense effort that she had put into her work. Commenting on this period in her life, Fei mentioned that her boss not only gave her a promotion, but also expressed interest in hiring more Chinese professionals. Although Fei promoted the image of Chinese people in her workplace, racialization remained an active process—except that in this particular case it might work in favour of the Chinese.

Fei was not the only research participant who introduced her previous occupational practices into her job in Canada. Hua, for example, reported that initially she had difficulty learning how to work with children without guidance or support from her co-workers. Her

background in computers helped her. When she created activities for the children, she went online and searched for relevant information. She said:

I used to be a computer engineer, and I am very much connected to the Internet. I use the Internet with ease I did not know how to draw a bear or chicken, but I can find samples online. [I then print and cut them out]. (February 2006)

There is little doubt that the women's previous training, practices, and ways of learning played major roles in the process of establishing themselves in their new workplaces. This was especially true in the absence of assistance offered at work.

Becoming Agents of Change

Some of the women in this study managed to go beyond establishing themselves in their new workplaces. At times they also became driving forces for change. For example, when Yan joined a language-learning centre as a tutor in a college, she recognized that the teaching practices in the conversation workshops did not cater to the learning styles of Chinese students. When the centre adopted her suggestions for change, the workshops became a popular learning venue for Chinese students.

In Yi's case, she used her position in a community centre to create a special program for Chinese immigrants with mental health issues. Understanding that mental health is considered a social stigma among the Chinese, which prevented people from accessing help, Yi proposed a special program. Instead of offering people help for their mental problems, the program asked for volunteers who were interested in learning about mental health issues so they could teach and help others. The program not only attracted people who were troubled with mental issues, but also turned the volunteers into health ambassadors who disseminated mental health information at different community venues.

Other women changed the practices at their workplaces in small yet significant ways. After becoming a superintendent, Mei was required to deal with housing agents. She found this to be a difficult task:

The rental agent is very boss[y]; she wants to control me. I said, "No, I work for my manager, not for you." . . . For example, my manager wanted me [to] rent [an] apartment. After I rented [the apartment the rental agent] was very angry with me. She came to my office, and said some very unpleasant words to me This was the first time. The second time I rented [an] apartment, she said, "You can't rent that apartment." I asked, "Why?" [She said], "I keep [it] for certain people." I asked, "Which people?" [She] said, "For Canadian people." I said, "All the people . . . here are Canadian." . . . After [what happened], I talk[ed] to the manager After these two things . . . she changed her mind. She is very, very polite to me. She gave me something . . . to eat, she gave me some plant to put in my lobby, in the building. She treats me very nicely She comes to me . . . "[Mei,] please save this apartment for me." (February 2006)

In order to create an equitable workplace, Mei contradicted her colleague's essentialist notion of Canadians as worthy tenants. Mei revealed later that in addition to her colleague's ideological and attitudinal constructs of worthy tenants, the issue of commission was a root cause of problems between her and the agent. The agent lost her commission whenever Mei directly rented out apartments. Mei's experience highlights the ways in which race relations and class relations are necessarily articulated through each other to shape the women's encounters in Canada (see also Hall, 1980; Ng, 1998). It is important to point out that the women in this study were also active participants in these relations of race and class, and at times brought change to them.

Discussion

Situated learning is a particularly useful framework in understanding learning as a process of social participation whereby newcomers learn to become full participants in various communities of practice. It offers analytical power to the experiences of newcomers in two ways. First, it emphasizes the significance of identity construction as an integral aspect of practice and development. This focus on identity construction and performance brings social practices into a meaningful analysis of learning processes. Second, situated learning highlights peripherality as a marginalized yet potentially dynamic social space where newcomers do not simply replace veterans, but have the potential to reshape the communities of practice in which they are involved.

From a situated learning perspective, this paper examines the stories of Chinese immigrant women, as they create occupational niches for themselves in Canada. The study demonstrates that immigrants, particularly those specialized in regulated professions, are automatically denied membership in their previous fields of practice. The women in this study had to position or reposition themselves in the host labour market, which meant career changes for some of them. In their career positioning process, the women's perceptions and performances of self, often in response to exclusionary social practices, significantly informed their employment strategies and practices. Furthermore, entering Canadian workplaces did not mean that the women overcame their peripheral positions in Canada. It only offered the women an arguably legitimate participating membership. The women were required to prove themselves. To earn fuller membership in the various workplaces, the women had to exercise strategic tolerance, mobilize their previous knowledge and expertise, and become agents of change.

The research findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the paper problematizes the naturalized legitimate space presupposed in situated learning. The difficulties the women faced in entering the Canadian workplace and the negative reception they received during their initial period of work clearly show that peripheral spaces are not an equitable entitlement for all people. The segmented labour market constructed through social relations, such as race and perceived language differences, afford people differential access to various sectors and workplaces.

In practical terms, the research findings contribute to our knowledge of the struggles and strategies of immigrant women in Canada. Although the Chinese women in this study refused to name their negative experiences as racial discrimination, it cannot be denied that their employment struggles were deeply influenced by the segmented

property of the Canadian labour market, which inscribes and reinscribes the women as “different” and renders them as “other.” The women’s hardship calls for systematic measures to facilitate newcomers’ integration into the Canadian labour market. In addition, while Canadian workplaces often put the burden of proof on the shoulders of immigrants, the accessibility and receptivity of Canadian workplaces delimit and, at times, limit the integration potential and process of immigrants. Canadian workplaces need to examine their existent communities of practice to clear the way for immigrants to become valued members at their full potentials.

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