

“We can’t be racist, we’re CANADIAN”! An Examination of Sense of Belonging and Marginalization Experiences of Recently Arrived Immigrants

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When we speak of marginalization in my discipline, most specialists and academics immediately think of economic marginalization. It’s true. Immigrants earn about 35% less than other similarly educated Canadians and the unemployment rate can be 5-23% higher than average depending on the entry class and province of residence (Statistics Canada ALF, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2014). There are also issues with recognition of internationally-attained credentials and work experience (Wilkinson et al, 2014), and even among those who immigrated to Canada as young children and who completed post-secondary education in Canada, labour market outcomes remain significantly lower than for those born in Canada (Buzdugan and Halli, 2009).

Maybe this lopsided interest in the economic outcomes of immigrants is warranted. Two-out of every three immigrants enter Canada under an economic class, a trend that has not changed in over 20 years (CIC, 2014). The largest percentage of settlement funding also goes towards labour market recruitment, economic integration and language for workplace training (VICE 2014). Researcher interest has followed this trend, with nearly 70% of all the published research in Canada on immigration focusing on economic outcomes. From a common sense perspective, integration cannot occur if there isn’t food on the table and a roof over one’s head. But there is much more to immigration than economic rewards and outcomes. Immigration, without consideration of the social, civic, and personal integration outcomes is hollow and bound to fail. This is why we need to talk about the social context of immigration and integration.

While the news story I’m about to share with you has nothing to do with racism and discrimination. I selected the story of the allegations of cross-plagiarism between an engineering professor and one of his master’s students because it is of intrinsic interest to everyone in this room. It is the comments afterwards that reveal the kind of racism that is alive and well in Canadian society. The allegations are that the professor plagiarized from the students’ master’s thesis and did not credit the student in a refereed article that was published this summer. The cross-allegations are that the professor wrote substantial portions of the students’ thesis and that the failure to cite the student or include him as a co-author was an unfortunate “mistake” on the part of the professor. How does this incident reveal racism? Here are two of the many comments on this news story (mention I only looked at the top 5...)

There are a lot of professors of Arab origin in the Faculty of Engineering. Now there are a lot of students from Middle Eastern countries coming over to study Engineering at the U of R (which is at best considered a poor Engineering school by national and international standards and many of the programs aren't recognized). These students seem to think they can receive marks by using the same methods as they do in the Arab countries. Guess the profs think the same way. (anonymous comments, CBC 2014)

Being a researcher, I think they both should be proud that the paper was published in the journal. The fact that the professor gave his student a chance to perform the research and have a career (and a life) in Canada should not be overlooked. (anonymous comment, CBC 2014)

Clearly, both comments are racist. The first commentator alleges that professors and students from the Middle East are trained to cheat the Canadian education system. In the second, the poster feels that the student who’s thesis was plagiarized should just feel grateful that he was given the ‘gift’ of studying in Canada, and this comment comes from someone who claims to be a ‘researcher’. Some might argue

that these are the rants and ravings of anonymous internet trolls and do not represent real life world views. Sadly, this is not true. Recent polls reveal that racism is alive and well in Canada. A sampling includes:

- *Canada "is a welcoming place for all ethnicities," according to 75 per cent of respondents to the CBC News survey*
- *A CBC/Probe Research Poll in October reveals that 75% of Winnipeggers believe that the city has a major problem regarding racial divide (CBC 2014b)*
 - *Another survey finds (CBC 2014d)*
 - *Across the country, 79 per cent of respondents said they would be comfortable both employing or working for someone of a different ethnic background.*
 - *"that 30 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "immigrants take jobs from Canadians." A much smaller group — 55 per cent — "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that immigrants are "very important to building a stable Canadian economic future."*
- *"81 per cent of British Columbians of Chinese and South Asian descent report they've experienced some type of discrimination as a result of their ethnicity. That includes everything from stereotyping and verbal harassment to poor customer service and workplace unfairness" (McCue2014)*
- *We also like to think that a happy side effect of university education is that students become more tolerant and understanding and appreciative of ethnic, religious and racial diversity. New research reveals this not to be true. The longer one spends in university, the less tolerant they are (Jaschik 2012)*

So we know there's a problem with racism in Canada among the Canadian-born, how do immigrants feel? Research I'm currently conducting finds that:

- *25% of males and 24% of females report experiencing discrimination sometimes or always. The rate is highest among those in Alberta (31% overall but 44% of refugees), though 21% of females and 25% of males in Manitoba report being discriminated against*
- *26% of immigrants have a weak sense of belonging to their neighbourhood, province and country*
- *Immigrants living in BC have the weakest sense of belonging in the country (34% are weak)*
- *Females and those living outside of major urban centres, particularly those living in BC and Manitoba, have a weak sense of belonging*

What do we make of all this? Clearly, there is a problem with racism in our society despite our smug belief that Canada is a tolerant nation. Clearly, we are not a welcoming society. Why might that be? It has to do with the underlying current we call 'new racism'. It is the belief that "human nature is such that it is natural to form a bounded community, a nation, aware of its differences from other nations. They are not better or worse. But feelings of antagonism will be aroused if outsiders are admitted" (Henry et al., 2001). Unlike the old, more familiar and in your face forms of racism, this new racism does not "refer to biological differences or inferiority of racial groups, rather, persons of the same culture should "prefer" to live together rather than live in multicultural societies" (Satzewich and Leodakis, 2003). In short, the verbal, physical assaults that we often think of when we think of racism still exist, but they are not the predominant form of discrimination. Instead, we have this unspoken, hidden agenda where we pay lip-service to diversity without really putting in an effort to eradicate discrimination. The result is two solitudes—one of white Canadian born persons and another of persons who don't fit in, who aren't considered (at least by some) "real Canadians". Often we can't clearly identify these experiences with examples of words or abuse, but *we feel them*. The feelings are real and have real consequences.

Let's return to my original observations about economic inequality. Even though the focus on immigration in this country tends to be on income and labour market outcomes, the real issue is fitting in. Once a good job is secured, once I find employment that fits my education and work experience, the rest of my life in Canada should be good, right? Sadly, if you and your family do not feel welcome, if prevailing attitudes are that you don't fit in because of your accent, skin colour, religion, sexuality, income etc. then all the money and acquisitions in the world will not make you happy. Feeling like an outsider in your adopted country is a catastrophe. You feel socially isolated, you are less likely to participate in voluntary associations/community groups etc. and your children won't feel welcome. In a country that likes to boast that one in five people was not born here, if we don't recognize and resolve to become a welcoming society, then the cohesion of our nation is very much at stake.

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