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Making critical sense of discriminatory practices in the Canadian workplace

A case study of Hong Kong Chinese professional immigrants' experiences, voice and reflection

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to report on a preliminary study of how professionally qualified immigrants from Hong Kong to Canada make sense of their experiences, particularly workplace opportunities.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is framed by a Critical Sensemaking approach, involving in-depth interviews with 12 informants from the Hong Kong Chinese community and discursive analysis (Foucault, 1979) of the local and formative contexts in which they are making sense of workplace opportunities.

Findings – The findings suggest that a dominant discourse of "integration" strongly influences the way that professionally qualified immigrants come to accept the unchallenged assumptions that the government is providing help for them to "get in"; and that ethnic service organizations are offering positive guidance to the immigrants' workplace goals and opportunities. Immigrants' identity and self-worth are measured by whether they "get in" – integrate – into so-called mainstream society. The effect of this hidden discourse has been to marginalize some immigrants in relation to workplace opportunities.

Research limitations/implications – The interplay of structural (i.e. formative contexts and organizational rules), socio-psychological (i.e. sensemaking properties) and discursive contexts (e.g. discourses of immigration) are difficult to detail over time. The interplay – although important – is difficult to document and trace over a relatively short period of time and may, more appropriately lend itself to more longitudinal research.

Practical implications – This paper strongly suggests that we need to move beyond structural accounts to capture the voice and agency of immigrants. In particular, as we have tried to show, the sensemaking and sensemaking contexts in which immigrants find themselves provide important insights to the immigrant experience.

Social implications – This paper suggests widespread policy implications, with a call for greater use of qualitative methods in the study of immigrant experience. It is suggested that policymakers need to move beyond uniform and structural approaches to immigration. How selected immigrants in context make sense of their experiences and how this can help to identify improved policies need to be understood.

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Originality/value – This paper is original in going beyond both structural and psychological accounts of immigration. Through the developing method of Critical Sensemaking, the study combines a focus on structure and social psychology and their interplay. Thus, providing insights not only to the broad discriminatory practices that so-called non-White immigrants face in Canada (and likely other industrial societies) but how these are made sense of. The study is also unique in attempting to fuse sensemaking and discourse analysis to show the interaction between individual sensemaking in the context of dominant discourses.

Keywords Canada, Immigration, Discourse, Discrimination, Critical sensemaking

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Drawing on Critical Sensemaking (CSM) (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010), this study sets out to understand the role of sensemaking in immigrants' – specifically Hong Kong Chinese professionals' – decision to stay in Canada in the face of discriminatory practices. We seek to explain why it is, in the face of large numbers of returnees (Statistics Canada, 2006), that some Hong Kong immigrants choose to stay in Canada, and what we can learn from this.

Research shows that highly skilled, highly educated *visible minority* (Abella, 1984) immigrants face difficulties when they seek to re-enter their professions in a new country (McCoy and Masuch, 2007). They often experience a drop in status (e.g. work identity) after immigration, as they find themselves unemployed or permanently stuck in low-skill, low-paid occupations (Bauder, 2003). Scholars have investigated, from a structural perspective, the reasons that immigrants return to their home countries; these reasons include having unrecognized or non-transferable credentials, lacking linguistic proficiency, not having access to a local network and lacking local experience (Grenier and Xue, 2011). However, we know little about how those who choose to stay face such obstacles and make sense of their situations – and we can learn much from their experiences. To that end, this study investigates why a selection of Hong Kong Chinese professional immigrants chose to stay in Canada (as opposed to leaving) despite the loss of job status and employment opportunities that their professional standing may have originally encouraged them to expect.

Following Weick (1995), we believe that human actions are not simply based on people's knowledge, but rather on how they make sense of "information" presented to them and of their subsequent experiences of that information. As we shall show, some immigrants come to make sense of certain discriminatory practices as "non-negotiable norms" because they are viewed as an acceptable part of a process that includes government and ethnic service agencies' attempts to, respectively, help immigrants to integrate and to offer positive workplace goals and opportunities. Other informants, however, contested the norms and sought different opportunities in a new society. As a result, they had to re-conceptualize not only their actions, but also their own identities (i.e. who they are and who they are not).

Workplace inequality literature

Employment equity practice is regulated in Canada following a Royal Commission report (Abella, 1984) and a federal employment equity policy. This structural approach views inequities in the workplace as the outcomes of *systemic* discrimination and further encouraged structural analyses of the Canadian workplace (Agocs *et al.*, 2001). These

approaches, it can be argued, have ignored the role of agency and the socio-psychological lens through which people make sense of diversity. Psychological approaches (Omi and Winant, 1986), on the other hand, arguably downplay the role of structure and context and issues of power (Zanoni *et al.*, 2010). In response, this study attempts to move beyond structural and psychological accounts to capture the voice and agency of immigrants in context. Therefore, we use a CSM framework (Helms Mills and Mills, 2009; Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010), which focuses on the interplay between agency, structure and context.

The four elements of CSM as an analytical framework

CMS focuses on the interplay of the following four elements

Socio-psychological processes. Weick's (1995) seven properties of socio-psychological sensemaking provide an important but problematic theoretical lens for dealing with agency. To avoid embedded essentialized notions of self, we argue that social psychological properties need to be viewed more as a heuristic than a definite set of human characteristics (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010). Thus, we examine:

- *social context* (the actual, implied, or imagined presence of others);
- *identity construction* (the sense of self that is ionstantly in play);
- *retrospection* (understanding current events through past experiences);
- *ongoing sensemaking* (flows of events that constantly need to be understood);
- *enactment* (the relationship between acting and thinking about the action);
- *cues* (the "facts" that we focus on in creating a sense of something); and
- *plausibility* (those factors that make a story, or sense, acceptable).

Together, the seven properties of sense-making function to facilitate a fluid and dynamic self through the ongoing sense-making of an individual.

Discourse. We draw on Foucault's (1979) notion of discourse as *dominant ideas in practice* that are experienced as knowledge and, as such, have power over people's thinking (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). By exploring dominant ideas in practice (i.e. discourse), we can gain a sense of what influences immigrants' sensemaking. In Foucauldian thinking, power is everywhere and:

> […] discourse secures our assent (or compliance) not so much by the threat of punitive sanctions as by persuading us to internalize the norms and values that prevail within the social order (Linstead, 2010, p. 706).

Organizational rules. We argue that organizational rules – or combinations of informal/formal and normative, moralistic or legalistic prescriptions – constitute a framework of sedimented sensemaking outcomes (Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991). Rules can contribute to our understanding of what is an ideal and appropriate self in the workplace (e.g. how should one act), and thus rules allow us to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate selves. Here organizations, such as CORN[1], that play a central role in assisting immigrants in Canada, can arguably serve to make plausible particular practices and appropriate selves that, however intended, are experienced as discriminatory.

Formative context. Finally, we turn to Unger's (1987) notion of formative context of imaginative and institutionalized arrangements, within which organizations are

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located; such arrangements are usually by-products of the resolution of social conflicts. For example, when Hong Kong Chinese professional immigrants seek a job/career, some follow established institutional processes and routines, such as participating in credential assessments, having their qualifications and professions recognized, attending a local educational program to upgrade their skills and knowledge, networking and connecting with other experienced workers, volunteering in the community to gain Canadian "local" experience and so on.

In short, by examining the sensemaking processes between structural constraints (institutional templates, formative contexts and post-colonial effects) and the agents (the immigrants) in their response to the normative constructions of immigrant discourses in the Canadian workplace, we will gain a broader understanding of how racism is historically embedded (formative context), institutionally informed (rules), systemically maintained (discourses) and micro-politically resisted (agency) in our everyday lives.

Method and data

The data collection involved interviews by the lead author with 12 immigrants from Hong Kong. The participants were professional immigrants who:

- have been in Canada between 5 and 20 years;
- are the principal applicants under the Canadian federal skilled worker immigration program; and
- have a minimum of a bachelor university degree and proficiency in English (Appendix).

Data collection also involved textual analysis of:

- a provincial newcomer's guide;
- the government's Web site and associated documents concerning citizenship and immigration; and
- a series of CORN documents, including the organization's Web site, annual reports, flyers and pamphlets aimed at helping immigrants to find work in Canada.

A series of unstructured questions was asked about motivation to move to Canada; how long the informant had been in the country; experiences of finding a job and working in Canada; and experiences of finding a job as an immigrant.

Using a snowball approach, two interviewees were referred by informants and ten were directly recruited through different offices of CORN. Age was never asked in the interviews but some informants indicated that they first arrived in Canada when they were somewhere in their mid-thirties to early forties, at the "peak" of their careers. All but one had at least one child. Based on the lead author's social and cultural understandings (she had herself immigrated to Canada from Hong Kong several years earlier), and some concrete or implied descriptions of the informants, we estimate their earnings (before and after immigration) and their associated occupation ranks (Appendix). This suggests a level of discrepancy or shock that the informants faced when coming to Canada. All informants, although fluent in English, spoke Cantonese in the interview. Follow-up questions were asked to ascertain the meaning of non-verbal cues.

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Specific focus is given to understanding how the four elements of CSM (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010) surface in the data and how discriminatory practices were produced, maintained and normalized in the lived experience of professional immigrants. Such analysis involves a close, line-by-line reading of the text (interview data and other relevant public available documents), and a noting of the thoughts, ideas, impressions, feelings and initial interpretation that the text evokes. We then develop and refine these interpretations, attempting to move away from descriptive to more conceptual and thematic levels of analysis.

The formative context of Chinese immigrants

When looking at the data related to formative context and its dominant social values, informants draw on three particular themes when expressing why they came and why they stay in Canada:

1. colonial influences from their home country;
2. the socio-economic and cultural conditions in Canada; and
3. the notion of family sacrifice.

Colonial influences

There were clearly strong push factors involved in interviewees' decisions to immigrate to Canada, in particular political events affecting the status of Hong Kong and relationships with the People's Republic of China:

> Teresa: I arrived in the summer of 1996. I came because of the events of June 4 [Tiananmen Square Massacre]. I thought about the event for quite a while and then decided to come. So I was considered a latecomer, much later than the early group in the 1980s […]. If there had been no violence [armies and tanks], I would not even have thought of this. I had never wanted to emigrate [it was not a desirable choice].

Most informants in our current study arrived in Canada before 1997. According to Wong (1992), one of the more recent waves of Chinese immigration to Canada was triggered around the time of the discussions about and signing of the 1984 Sino-British Agreement.

The socio-economic and cultural conditions in Canada

The perceived socio-economic opportunities in Canada were also clearly a pull factor for the interviewees, but they seemed to operate despite perceptions of racial discrimination against the Chinese in Canada both historically and contemporarily. Historically, it has been argued that Canada has a long history of racism and the Chinese are among the earliest racialized immigrant groups (Li, 1998). When conditions in China were difficult, settlers were willing to accept discriminatory workplace practices abroad. Dave, for example, thought he had all it would take to be hired by a mainstream organization[2]. In reflecting on his experiences, he suspected that racism still exists in the Canadian workplace and society at large:

> Dave: To be honest, I knew this was what I would face. I had graduated and worked here previously. I knew the mind-set of the mainstream was like this [racist]. I thought that, with the changed attitudes of Canadian foreign policy toward China, the broader Canadian society would have changed. However, I was surprised; there is no change at the industry level. For example, the recent policy allows overseas students to work in Canada. It shows that the

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> government cherishes their skills. So the government has changed. As I have said, I graduated in Canada, had worked here [for five years], and I thought that I would not face any problems [after I emigrate]; but I didn't have any responses to my job search […]. Perhaps due to my status as a skilled-worker immigrant, there is nothing available for me […]. Maybe it is because of my surname.

Paradoxically, some of the interviewees were drawn to Canada through acceptance of the privileged notion of Western supremacy, seeking, in part, to at least be associated with the Western project (Prasad, 2003). Nancy, for example, regardless of the difficult time she was experiencing in Canada, seemed to like being associated with a display of accumulated wealth and self-worth that demonstrated her potential ability to own and consume (Sennett and Cobb, 1973):

> Nancy: […] Eventually immigrating overseas seemed a good thing […] because at that time [before 1997], I realized that those [rich] people had started to immigrate overseas, different from what is happening now [very few Hong Kong immigrants]. It was a good thing [as only wealthy people were doing it]. Going overseas [to the west] […] it seemed to be something to be proud of, very prestigious. So I did not leave [Canada], even though making a living is tough here.

The ongoing effects of colonialism had led some to accept uneven power relations as they were exposed to them in Hong Kong (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008). Amanda noted, "When we were in Hong Kong, we obeyed the British. Now I am in Canada, aren't we supposed to obey the practices here?" The idea of Western supremacy is not limited to the economy; the effects of colonialism also mediate how informants accept other aspects of ideology. When asked why she came to Canada, Kate, proudly stated that her "kids will have a better education than those in Hong Kong". Amanda also expressed a similar view:

> Amanda: I thought this place would be where I could enjoy a simple life. I wanted to raise my kids here. I have to be a full-time mom and I had to get away from Hong Kong because it is so expensive to do this [the western style of living] over there […] because of this, I have started my full-time mom career.

Amanda chose to become a full-time mother after she could not find an appropriate professional job in her first year in Canada.

The notion of sacrifice for family

Maggie used to be a senior administrator in Hong Kong but was unable to re-enter her profession in Canada. She makes sense of her situation through the idea of sacrifice for family and association with the western project:

> Maggie: We have a daughter with a disability. He [her husband] thought the western system was better. Our daughter's future would be better as there is comparatively less discrimination against disabled people here. Looking back, this was the right decision. But back then, when I could not see or sort this out, it was very harsh on me. We had given up a lot. For example, I used to live in a big house, but now I had to downgrade our living standards, so that we could put aside some money for our future. We used to have Filipino (sic) maids to help around the house, but now we have to handle the household chaos ourselves. We had to give up a luxurious lifestyle. The change was huge. It was rather difficult to handle these changes if we had less capacity.

Many of the narratives in this study (e.g. by Kate, Mike, Amanda, Maggie, Edward, and Susan) portray this same idea when engaging in unfulfilling work. They made sense of

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the difficulties through the idea of sacrifices that they had made, often for their children. Mike for example:

> Interviewer: Have you ever regretted coming to Canada?
>
> Mike: I did regret coming in the first two years […] but now I am used to it [the racism]. My two daughters have become very successful. My efforts have never been wasted. They both have received many scholarships and awards for all these years […]. This has comforted my soul […]. This has paid off for what I have suffered.

It is somewhat ironic that a number of participants position their sacrifices against a backdrop of a decline in their lifestyle in Hong Kong. A lifestyle that, in some cases, was of a professional elite with a "luxurious lifestyle" and maids from the Philippines.

Normalized self

The institutional field

CORN, like the other 137 ethnic (non-governmental) service organizations in Canada, provides services that include employment referral, mentoring, training and counseling for immigrants (Simich *et al.*, 2005). They often work independently of one another because Canada does not have a unified approach to providing services and programs for new immigrants (Makarenko, 2010). Within this institutional field, organizations often compete with, rather than complement each other, and there is little effort at cooperation (Simich *et al.*, 2005). In fact, ethnic organizations are usually low on resources and understaffed, and function from inadequate physical locations (Guo, 2007). The short-term nature of funding has also contributed to a sense of insecurity and inflexibility in organizational development. Ng (1996) argues that funding is a form of social control where funding requirements and accountability procedures prevent such community organizations from coming together as a united voice to combat racism.

Throughout the annual reports of CORN, it is apparent that funding issues indeed shaped its development. The organization has to comply with the immigration policy of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and its current advice on finding a permanent job in Canada – a Canadian workplace template for immigrants-to-be:

Finding a job in Canada may be different from finding a job in your home country. New immigrants face some significant challenges when trying to get jobs in Canada:

- Your credentials may not be recognized.
- Your language skills may not be sufficient.
- You might need Canadian work experience.
- You may also need to learn new job search skills, create a new group of contacts and find out what Canadian employers want. (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2012).

On the one hand, this advice serves as an institutional rule for ethnic organizations to enact. On the other hand, it implies that the knowledge possessed by immigrants may be deemed inferior. The institutional rules serve as a formative process in creating a deficient self. This is arguably how the notion of a deficient self is therefore understood and normalized institutionally among immigrants. Some informants in this study, like Amanda, seemed to accept the notion of a deficient self to survive in Canada:

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> Amanda: I am willing […] because this is about overcoming myself. In a new environment, there are many who cannot overcome the self, especially men. I think women are awesome. They think about reality. We really cannot compare [life in Canada to the past], or we would just die. Once we think back to how great we were, we cannot lower our ego; we would never survive. Here is another life – another totally different life.

Amanda admitted that accepting personal change was essential to survival. She accepted any lower-ranking job. However, in contrast, Mike did not give up the search for a full-time job in his profession and had persisted for five years. He believed the institutional rules (e.g. attend employment assessment sessions; take extra classes to upgrade his skills/credentials; and take part in the networking groups) would improve his situation. When nothing happened, he settled down into a low-skilled position. On reflection, he realizes that racial discrimination was likely the cause rather than his professional skills and qualifications (Appendix) not being recognized:

> Mike: […] I did try everything to go back to my own profession [as an educator], but it was extremely difficult. I was a culinary art instructor/lecturer [in western cuisine] in a community college in Hong Kong. I cannot teach other courses. Here, most colleges only trust Caucasians to teach western cooking. This is a fact and reality. I think the idea that the mainstream colleges do not trust me probably makes sense. I taught [French cuisine] at a school for troubled young adults where my Caucasian students did not trust me either, although only briefly at the beginning. It's like a Caucasian instructor who teaches Chinese Dim Sum cooking. At that time, I had to teach them culture [French cooking] and techniques; it was hard for my students to accept this [from a Chinese teacher]. If you say there is no racial discrimination; that's a lie. We have to face it; no matter what […]. I have tried everything [from the government advice and CORN's template]. They are excuses, and nothing works.

Like Mike, Maggie felt that her ethnic background was a factor in how she was perceived. Maggie had worked with a British team for a number of years when she was in Hong Kong. Through social interactions, and endorsing the institutional rules (i.e. government advice), she insisted that her English skills were not good enough for Canada. In addition, her university degrees were obtained in Hong Kong and England rather than Canada, so she subjectively thought it was reasonable to accept low-paid, entry-level jobs:

> Maggie: I sorted it out after I had depression […]. I had no local qualifications so I chose to look for jobs at the lower entry levels. The first job I applied for was an administrative assistant position […]. My wages were not too bad, at least slightly above minimum wage […]. I knew I needed time to search for jobs and expected that I would not find a job that was the same as I had had in Hong Kong […]. I expected that I would not find work at that level. Although my English is okay in the workplace of Hong Kong, how could I manage native [Canadian English] speakers here, given that I have an accent? I would not think they would listen to me, so I thought I had to work at a lower level position […]. Although my English is probably good, I am not like the locals who speak flawless English […]. You can still hear the difference.

Maggie's comments draw heavily on government advice to adjust to the local context. She accepted a low-paying job, even while she recognized that her education and English skills were probably sufficient. Her assumption is that only locals who speak flawless English with Canadian accents can be placed in senior management positions. While accepting an entry-level position that implies a lower social status, she simultaneously accepts the notion of a deficient self-constructed through institutional rules.

In her interview, Susan expressed the necessity to "lower her pride". For her, this was an important step to deal with her depression. Weick (1995) explains that when the shock (the discrepancy between the expectation and the reality) is large, the need to update the ongoing sense that is made is more urgent. By accepting the deficient self as normal, the immigrant can cope with their workplace experiences in Canada better. This process helps to de-intensify the sensemaking process. Edward, Dave, Mike, Amanda, Winnie, Susan, and Maggie, have either defined themselves as deficient or they have accepted the identity of a deficient self imposed upon them by others. The next section investigates how these discriminatory practices are enacted and interpreted at CORN.

Discourse of integration: the insider–outsider device

CORN's founding mission was to help immigrants to integrate into Canadian society. The processes involved in helping integration are articulated throughout many of CORN's publicly available documents, such as annual reports, newsletters, program brochures and web pages. The discourse of integration acts as a master discourse mediating the entire field of multi-ethnic services organizations, not merely CORN (Jenkins, 1988; Guo, 2007). The dominant discourse of integration serves as an insider–outsider device defining the boundaries of acceptance. Immigrants are tacitly measured in terms of how integrated they are into society and the workplace. Such measurements include:

- being employed by a White employer rather than an ethnic employer (compare Appendix);
- being engaged in activities of the Caucasian culture, such as networking and volunteering;
- being a contributing citizen; and
- having education from local institutions.

The following examples illustrate how these tacit rules of integration are produced and understood among CORN's staff and ex-staff.

Employed by a "White" employer

When asked about his perception of his career achievement at CORN, Edward explained, "I am not mainstreamed yet. Many of our clients are really successful and have entered into the mainstream workplace". To Edward, a successful career was related specifically to working within mainstream organizations.

Part of the Caucasian culture

Amanda, also a staff member at CORN, embraced the ideology of integration not simply in her workplace but also in her personal life. Moving away from the ethnic community is for her a reflection of integration:

> Amanda: I intended to move into this area, so that we could be away from the ethnic community. I really want my kids to integrate and they should integrate to the Canadian society in the future. To do that, one must get away from the Chinese community. As those [who] stayed within the Chinese community grew up, they spoke the language, and they probably did not need to speak any English. This would also affect their integration. After they grew up, if they wanted to work in Canada […] you know you have to be a Canadian and be a

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> part of the culture […]. I really wanted my kids to take part in cultural artistic creativities […]. We need to learn communication with English-speaking people; we have to be in a group.

In her mind, there is a clear social division between those who have integrated and those who have not done so.

Contributing citizen

The idea of being a useful citizen is also identifiable in some interviews, such as Winnie's:

> At the start, I felt that it could seem useless if someone were not working. I thought I'm not a useless person who has nothing to give. Lack of contribution could apply in two ways: financial contribution and societal contribution. This could be due to my previous profession in social services. Servicing and helping people are very important. After I had travelled around [Canada] […]. I thought finding a job might be a pretty good idea to integrate. I thought I should not waste some of my working experience in my profession.

Education from local institutions

When asked why a local degree is important, Maggie states:

> If they [immigrants] are truly highly qualified people, they should have obtained a local degree […]. I also know people work in the mainstream. Most of them get a local degree. Some get it after they've landed, and some were obtained from other provinces. Others may still be unqualified [to work in the mainstream] or they may prefer to stay in their comfort zones [within the Chinese community].

To Maggie, a Canadian qualification is important as a factor in organizational integration. To her, entry into the Canadian workplace requires a local education.

Ideas about "getting on" in Canada, of progressing, transitioning or achieving the social status of mainstream and whiteness are demonstrated in some narratives and public documents. The integration template that CORN's staff has embraced is strong and the rules of the game are well established.

Agency: resistance at individual levels

Even though context itself is crucial in constructing and shaping subject positions, immigrants neither simply step into pre-packaged selves nor are they simply put into them by others (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008); agency is also implicated in the process of becoming. A focus on agency illustrates how discriminatory practices can be activated or deactivated by the changing sense of the self. For example, Nancy and Barbara were very sensitive to the identity label of immigrant. When I asked, "How is it like for you, as an immigrant finding a job?" they responded as follows:

> Nancy: Immigrant? I have always considered myself Canadian, a resident. I am part of this society. I was educated here for all my high school and university years.

> Barbara: I Got used to this place very easily. I Did not think of myself as an immigrant to Canada.

Nancy's answer to the question reveals some of the repertoire that people draw on to position self. She resists the label "immigrant" and prefers Canadian. While Nancy and Barbara preferred to "be" Canadian, Dave and Edward who were also, like Nancy,

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educated in Canada (Appendix), chose to identify themselves more closely with the identity label of immigrant.

Refuse to play the game

There were examples of participants that were more aware of the structural (e.g. institutional rules) and discursive constraints (e.g. attitudes to immigrant behaviours). They engaged in various forms of resistance and rejection of the rules and discourse of integration; such as:

- challenging the norm;
- ceasing to pursue a career; or
- returning to their place of origin.

In the following examples, this involved immigrants who worked for organizations owned by other immigrants. For example, to maintain a positive self, Linda challenged the norms:

> Linda: […] the employees at my first job seemed to be very afraid of the Chinese employer.
>
> For example, I was asked to open a file to keep a record of a customer's information. I asked for a piece of paper. My co-worker, who had worked there for many years, said that she would bring some for me tomorrow. I wondered if there was no paper in the employer's office. But she said she would rather take the paper from her own home. I was surprised that my co-worker was so afraid to ask for paper. Why did they have to be so afraid of the boss?

In this example, Linda is challenging a norm associated with working in a non-mainstream (non-Western) owned business.

Kate and Linda refused to play the game and they stopped pursuing a "career" at the individual level:

> Kate: I had only worked there for six months. In the beginning, I had some money.
>
> Moreover, the working pride that I previously had made this [job] feel insulting. What they [the Chinese employers] had told me initially was quite different from the work I actually did […] I even had to plunge the clogged toilet […] It was unbearable! I was a one "man" band.
>
> Linda: […] I had attended the second interview [for a different job], but even though he decided to hire me, I probably would not work there. He is Chinese as well […]. Each interview took over an hour, with many nonsense questions about my job skills […] but he said those skills were not required. He kept interrogating me, "What else do you know?" […]. So at one point, I was fed up. I told him that I could even replace him because I used to own a company in Hong Kong. I can handle almost every aspect of a business […]. My husband said the job did not offer much money [minimum wage]. It would be better to focus my attention on our child.

When they could not find desirable work, both Kate and Linda chose to stop following the rules of the game of working in low-skilled, low-paid occupations. To maintain a positive sense of self, they both refused to associate with the normalized image of a deficient immigrant. They came to realize that they could not find the opportunities that they felt reflected their skill levels. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising why a substantial number of Hong Kong immigrants leave in their first year in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Barbara, made somewhat different sense of her experience of job search. When Barbara arrived, she did not approach any job agencies or ethnic service organizations:

> Barbara: Since I did not bring a lot of money, work was necessary to make a living […]. The new job was also in the field of accounting because I had rich experience in this field. I had worked over 10 years in accounting in Hong Kong. I included all of these in my resume. This time, I worked in a sizable [Caucasian] organization. They had over 50 branches selling auto parts. I was in charge of all account payables.

She thinks her overseas experience was one of the reasons that she was hired. She did not think overseas experience was devalued by employers. Her experience suggests some immigrants were able to integrate into an organization. However, this did not mean that she did not face difficulties in the Canadian workplace. She spoke at length of the office politics she faced in a later job because, she believed, she is a Chinese person in charge of all accounting books of a small Caucasian law firm.

Critical implications

To understand why immigrants stay rather than leave Canada when facing problems acquiring work and opportunities at an appropriate professional level, we argue that we need to consider elements of an Orientalist discourse which shapes the perception of both the formerly colonized and the colonizers. A number of Hong Kong immigrants in this study accept the Western project and of the "West" being a better place to work, to live and to get children educated.

The federal government in Canada, we argue, has also legitimized and institutionalized certain standards in their official immigration Web sites. The pre-packaged template offered seems to universalize the immigrant job search experience and expectations. It establishes standards that require immigrant mimicry. The structural barriers, such as, credential assessment have become normalized and a requirement plausible for the immigrant to act upon (Foucault, 1988). Some participants believe these are the non-negotiable requirements – a ready-made path to so called success – if one wants to find a decent job.

When immigrants are granted the status of right of abode, they have qualified according to rigorous immigration requirements that include good work experience, good education and good language skills. Nevertheless, the points system, which allows immigrants into Canada, neither aligns with workplace requirements nor matches societal expectations (i.e. integration). This creates a gap between the promise of citizenship and the reality of exclusion. Even though many of the informants in this study had obtained the so-called required criteria (such as good education), they have remained outside the boundaries of acceptance. This can be partially explained by the identity labels that they adopted over time and the societal discourse of integration that they were engaged with. A hierarchical device within the discourse of integration classifies who is desirable and who is deviant (Foucault, 1982). The discourse of integration signifies the divide between inclusions and exclusions which is often racially based. In this exploratory study, professional immigrants from Hong Kong are, in general, excluded from participating as a globalized professional in Canada through structural and institutional constraints that become normalized and part of the mind sets of immigrants themselves. Although the discourses are powerful they can be resisted. Discriminatory practices are perceived and made sense of such that

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immigrants can maintain a strong sense of self in the face of structural and institutional limits.

Sennett and Cobb (1973) argued that they had uncovered a new form of class conflict in America – an internal conflict in the heart and mind of the person who measures his or her own worth in terms of occupational achievement and accumulated wealth. Many professional immigrants to Canada in this study face similar internal identity conflicts. They define their failures as resulting from their own inadequacies when measured against the template provided by the federal government of Canada. When engaging in undesirable work, immigrants begin to see their labor as meaningless and irrelevant, influencing their self-concept negatively because this work is neither what they were trained for nor genuinely utilizing their capability and work skill/experience. Instead, they define their work and the choice of immigration overall as a noble act of sacrifice they make for their families.

Defining a job as a sacrifice resolves the problem of powerlessness: to counter workplace frustration, immigrant parents gain a position of power within their families and a positive sense of self among their peers. Framing the undesirable job as sacrifice allows immigrants to slip the bond of the present and orient their lives toward the future that will be won through deferred gratification (e.g. if they cannot "get in" now, they have laid the foundation for their children to "get in"). The hope for a better future for children gives parents a sense of control. This does, of course, assume that the second-generation immigrant will "get in". Immigrants' workplace struggles give them no glory or pride unless defined as family-oriented or future-oriented sacrifice. However, in making this sacrifice, other painful wounds are opened up, including resentment, hostility and shame.

The professional immigrants in this case study once belonged to a dominant class (in Hong Kong) that displayed its worth in specific ways. Through analysis of their sensemaking, this study reveals that these immigrants' identity is shifting and shifted as a consequence of their experience of immigration. Even though after all these years, some have finally realized coming to Canada was not as good a choice as they had thought, admitting "failure" and returning to the country of origin also carries the stigma of failure, implying the inability to "conquer" a foreign land. Elite status in one part of the world is no guarantee for some of elite status elsewhere.

Conclusion

In addition to the contribution to the inequality literature, this study opens a new path to study complex topics such as immigration discourse and workplace inequality. Most importantly this study is about the immigrant experience and how it is confronted. It bridges our understanding of how power emerges historically and reveals how micro-level analysis (the sensemaker) emerges and is affected by the macro-level elements (the structure and societal discourse) in a more critical sense. Through the use of a CSM approach, we have attempted to provide an understanding of how 12 Hong Kong immigrants to Canada make sense of their experience as professional immigrants. This enhances our understanding of what makes discriminatory practices normal and effective. The CSM framework is a multi-layered approach that fuses the divide between structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of power, resistance and agency (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010). It shows how power emerges through people's sensemaking in context.

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Notes

1. CORN is a fictitious name for a multi-ethnic service organization in Canada.
2. The term mainstream has been used repeatedly among the informants. To them, it means non-racial organizations that are managed by so-called White-face people.

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Appendix

Table AI. Summary of informants

Pseudonym/no. of children	Highest education	Position/profession previously held in Hong Kong	Past income[b]	Current position in Canada	Current income[b]	Years in Canada
Nancy/2	Master's degree (Canada) in Legal Administration	Office manager in a UK legal firm	$$$$$	Casual clerical support at a Canadian university	$$	14
Kate/2	Master's degree (Hong Kong) in Banking	Commercial trust funds administrator in bank	$$$$	Unemployed, volunteer[a]	0	15
Mike/2	2 Master's degrees (Hong Kong, UK), in Education	Senior faculty member in community college	$$$$	Executive chef and kitchen manager[a]	$$	15
Barbara/0	Bachelor degree (Hong Kong)	Senior executive in accounting Firm	$$$$	Salesperson in an US-owned firm	$$$	15
Amanda/2	Master's degree (unknown) in Human Resources	Personal manager in a public organization	$$$$$	Administrative assistant[a]	$	16
Winnie/2	Master's degree (UK) in Social work	Manager in the field of social work	$$$$$	Counsellor[a]	$$$	15
Linda/1	Bachelor degree (Hong Kong) in Clothing	Clothing manufacturing entrepreneur	$$$$$	Unemployed, volunteer[a]	0	10
Edward/1	Bachelor degree (Canada) in Telecom	Senior marketing manager in Telecom	$$$$$	Program coordinator[a]	$$	7
Susan/1	Bachelor degree (Hong Kong), Banking	IT project management in bank (business analyst)	$$$$	Program coordinator[a]	$$	15
Teresa/2	Bachelor degree (Hong Kong) Social worker	Social worker	$$$$	Manager[a]	$$$	16
Dave/2	Bachelor degree (Canada) in Engineering	Engineer	$$$$$	Unemployed, volunteer[a]	0	15
Maggie/2	Bachelor (UK) and Master's degree (HK) in Human Resources	Senior executive officer in public organization	$$$$$	Unemployed, causal work[a]	0	17

Notes: [a] Working at Chinese-owned and/or operated organization; [b] income estimation; scale: $$$$$ = over 150,000; $$$$ = 90,000-150,000; $$$ = 50,000-90,000; $$ = 25,000-50,000; $ = below 25,000 (annually in CAD)

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