

# SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO HOME?

## NEWCOMER EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES IN MID-SIZED CANADIAN CITIES

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*Abstract:* Despite changes to Canadian immigration policy to address declining labour market outcomes, many highly educated immigrants still face challenges when searching for career-related employment. Semi-structured interviews with 38 skilled newcomers in Edmonton, Alberta and Winnipeg, Manitoba illustrate significant obstacles, including a lack of credential recognition, racial discrimination, and a requirement for Canadian experience. Drawing from intersectional feminism and critical race theory, this study assesses the perspectives of newcomers during their employment search and explores the common desire for return-migration. Findings illustrate how the pre-arrival expectations of immigrants are incongruent with the realities of persistent labour market barriers. Newcomers consider if they should stay in Canada due to the lack of meaningful economic opportunities.

**Keywords:** secondary migration, return migration, labour market integration, critical race theory, intersectionality, transnational feminism

*Résumé:* Malgré les changements à la politique d'immigration canadienne pour remédier la baisse des résultats sur le marché du travail, de nombreux immigrants très instruits sont toujours confrontés à des difficultés lorsqu'ils cherchent un emploi lié à leur carrière. Des entretiens semi-structurés avec 38 nouveaux arrivants qualifiés à Edmonton, Alberta, et à Winnipeg, Manitoba, illustrent des obstacles importants, notamment le manque de reconnaissance des titres de compétences, la discrimination raciale et l'exigence d'une expérience canadienne. S'inspirant du féminisme intersectionnel et de la théorie critique de la race, cette étude évalue les perspectives des nouveaux arrivants pendant leur recherche d'emploi et explore le désir commun de retourner sur le marché du travail. Les résultats illustrent comment les attentes des immigrants avant leur arrivée sont incompatibles avec les réalités des obstacles persistants du marché du travail. Les nouveaux arrivants se demandent s'ils doivent rester au Canada en raison du manque d'opportunités économiques significatives.

**Mots-clés:** migration secondaire, migration de retour, intégration sur le marché du travail, théorie critique de la race, intersectionnalité, féminisme transnational.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Canadian immigration policy has increasingly prioritized “economic self-sufficiency” over cultural diversity and multiculturalism (Abu-Laban 1998; Chuong 2015). Current immigrant selection policy strives for optimal labour market outcomes, attempting to select the “right sorts” of immigrants to ensure their success in the labour market, while assuming that poor labour market outcomes are due to individual deficits. But research shows that even carefully selected newcomers face labour market exclusion because of persistent racial discrimination and other systemic challenges. This can lead to unmet expectations for internationally trained immigrants which, in turn, may influence desires for return migration.

Viewed through a transnational feminist lens, it is important to remember that “skilled immigrants” today represent people who originate from nearly 200 different countries, and that their experiences may vary significantly. Between 2016 and 2018, approximately 300,000 permanent residents arrived in Canada each year and in 2018 nearly sixty percent of permanent residents entered through the economic category compared to 25 percent family and 15 percent as protected persons, refugees and humanitarian categories respectively (IRCC 2020). Although skilled immigrants are the focus of this paper, across all categories, educational attainment remains high with over half of recent immigrants (arriving within the previous 5 years) have a university bachelor’s degree or higher (Statistics Canada 2017).

Canadian research on skilled immigrants has not examined the links between newcomers’ pre-arrival expectations, their experiences of labour market challenges, and their subsequent desire to leave their new country. Moreover, much of the previous research on immigration focuses on the largest three cities of Canada, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver (Creese 2011; Ku 2011; McDonald 2003). Recent immigration trends also include strategies such as provincial nominee programs to attract newcomers to mid-sized cities like Winnipeg. Settlement and employment outcomes also vary significantly depending on characteristics such as ethnocultural community support, settlement services and local industry labour needs. I address this research gap by reviewing and contributing to the relevant literature on these topics. Based on qualitative research I conducted in two mid-sized Canadian cities, I highlight why 38 internationally educated newcomers chose to migrate to Canada, and their widely held wish, or intention, to leave the country due to disappointed expectations. I situate theories of return migration within critical race theory and intersectional/transnational feminism to

link newcomer experiences to broader societal discrimination and labour market exclusion in Canada.

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

People often migrate to improve economic opportunities, and this is certainly the case for skilled workers (Cassarino 2004). In this paper, I illustrate a link between immigrants' disappointed expectations and their wishes (or plans) for return migration. Previous research with the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) indicated that three-quarters of immigrants who arrived between 2000-2001 "were satisfied or very satisfied with their life in Canada" and that the vast majority would make the same decision if they had the opportunity to do it again, though satisfaction rates were the lowest amongst skilled workers (Shields, Türegün and Lowe 2014: 12; Houle and Schellenberg 2010). Other research reveals more of a gap between pre-arrival expectations and life satisfaction post-migration, suggesting more research is necessary (Jedwab 2012). One-third reported they were worse off in material terms than prior to migration. Experiencing challenges related to employment, housing or social inclusion reduced satisfaction and made it more difficult to meet peoples' pre-arrival expectations (Guo 2013; Houle and Schellenberg 2010).

### RETURN MIGRATION

Return migration (as discussed in this study) describes immigrants who arrive in Canada and subsequently decide or wish to return to their country of origin, in contrast with secondary migration where immigrants arrive in Canada and move to a different destination either in or outside Canada (Bovenkerk 1974). Canadian researchers have examined the experiences of return migration for specific source countries such as Mainland China (Ho and Ley 2014; Ho 2013), Ghana (Wong 2013), India and Senegal (Sinatti 2015; Qin 2015). Other research has highlighted the beneficial aspects of return migration for source countries, receiving countries, and immigrants themselves (Sinatti 2015). Studies of return migration for Indian engineers focused on how human capital and socio-economic status impacted patterns of return migration (Qin 2015).

There is an important difference between cyclical and permanent migration, as mobility is often more dynamic than simply moving from a country of origin to one intended settlement destination (Gropas and Triandafyllidou 2014). Much of the international literature on return mi-

gration identifies social exclusion and racism as significant factors that contribute to immigrants' wishes to return home. Immigrant experiences are also not uniform. The "distinctness of immigrants relative to the native-born population" has a large impact on whether immigrants feel solidarity with their new host society (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993: 1329). If returning to their country of origin remains a viable option, the likelihood of immigrants feeling solidarity decreases. For example, within the United States, discrimination, social exclusion, and loss of status (including "patriarchal privilege") offers some insight into why male Mexican immigrants may wish to return to their country of origin (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1999: 351).

Social exclusion and discrimination are not the only reasons immigrants return home. Some immigrants may plan to return to their country of origin after obtaining enough financial resources from their labour as seasonal migrants (Kivisto 2001). In fact, some scholars illustrate how immigrants "build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1995: 1; Kivisto 2001). While this literature offers important insights on transnational and return migration, much of the research focuses on the United States and on immigrant populations with different lived experiences and motivations for their migration journey (Kivisto 2001; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999).

Nonetheless, this literature aims to disrupt the notion of the immigrant as someone experiencing permanent change (Basch, Schiller and Szanton-Blanc 2005; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999). Some immigrants may arrive in a host country with the intention of return migration, but the participants in this study reported that their decision to move to Canada was not a temporary plan; they intended to make Canada a permanent home. My study also goes beyond much existing immigration research by using feminist and critical race theories as frameworks to explain how disappointed expectations created a wish for return migration, as many participants feel stuck and regret their choice to move to Canada.

#### **THEORIZING RETURN MIGRATION FROM AN ANTI-RACIST FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

Cassarino (2004) conceptualizes return migration through a range of theories, including neoclassical, new economics of labour migration, structural, transnational and social network approaches. Neoclassical economic perspectives emphasize immigrants' expectations for higher

earnings in their destination country with return migration being the result of a “failed migration experience which did not yield the expected benefits” (Cassarino 2004: 255). New economics of labour migration suggest that return migration may be a part of the immigrant’s plan, a strategy to accumulate higher financial and social capital for their household. This understanding shares with transnational perspectives the view that migration is a cyclical or temporary process rather than a permanent decision. Limitations of these economic theories include an orientation to the individual level of decision-making while focusing only on financial or economic motives, giving less consideration to systemic and socio-political contexts both in the host nation and country of origin (Cassarino 2004; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999). Structural approaches better account for broader systemic factors such as opportunities (or lack thereof) in countries of origin as well as host countries. Finally, a social network theoretical orientation to return migration accentuates how immigrants participate in dynamic relationships of exchange that extend across borders in a process that links resources and social capital (Cassarino 2004). Building upon Cassarino’s understanding of return migration, critical race and feminist perspectives account for the impact of racial discrimination and intersectional experiences.

Critical race theory (CRT) conceptualizes and acknowledges the more “subtle” nature of racial inequality within socio-economic hierarchies, historical conditions, individual or group interactions and feelings or perceptions (Alyward 1999; Case 2012; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Solomos and Back 2000). CRT allows for a more nuanced examination of how governments, employers, communities, and even immigrant settlement agencies may subtly reinforce racial inequality. Similarly, transnational and intersectional feminism emphasizes how discrimination does not equally affect people within a racial or gender category; rather, discrimination is understood as entailing interaction of hierarchies based on statuses such as sex, race, class, sexuality, gender and disability (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; hooks 1982; Mohanty 1988). Feminist intersectionality is particularly valuable for how it ensures that analysts do not overlook one category of oppression when examining others (Crenshaw 1989: 154; hooks 1982: 7). Following Chandra Mohanty (1988, 2003), in this study I emphasize the heterogeneity of immigrants from the developing world, as participants were from diverse racial and national backgrounds with very different lived experiences. Despite such differences, as Mohanty argues, solidarity building is possible across varied status and experiences, something that both CRT and intersectional feminism help to foster.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper addresses two interrelated research questions:

- 1) Why do skilled newcomers come to Canada and how do their labour market expectations and intersectional experiences influence their future plans, including the potential for return migration?
- 2) For participants who expressed a wish or plan for return migration, where do they think of going and does the length of time they spent in Canada play a role in such considerations (i.e., do those residing in Canada for a short time desire to leave more than those who have been here longer)?

I conducted 38 in-depth semi-structured interviews with immigrants in the cities of Edmonton, Alberta and Winnipeg, Manitoba. I focused on these cities because the prairie provinces are increasingly popular settlement destinations, but few studies have examined immigration to mid-sized Canadian cities (Ferrer, Picot and Riddell 2014). Snowball, theoretical, and opportunity sampling procedures ensured participants represented a broad age range, varied occupations, balanced gender distribution, and wide-ranging national origins. The University of Alberta Research Ethics Board approved this study, and I conducted interviews between February and December 2013. I asked for pseudonyms or nicknames that I would use to protect individuals' privacy, but some participants insisted that I use their real names. I also omit the names of immigrant-serving organizations and places of employment to protect confidentiality.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim as quickly as possible after they had taken place. Immediately after the interviews, I reflected on these discussions and my detailed field notes. Preliminary analyses occurred during transcription when possible, and subsequent interviews were often refined due to insights from previous interviews. Discussions began with a broad introductory statement that asked participants to tell me about themselves, their previous occupations, educational credentials, and why they decided to come to Canada. The focus of analysis was initially on the employment and settlement experiences but expanded to link how employment expectations shaped participants' goals and plans for settlement or potentially for future migration. Analysis was an iterative process whereby I reviewed transcripts, field notes and other supplemental materials to identify common themes and contradictions contained in the findings. Common themes were identified by a

thorough process of iterative reading (and in some cases selected listening) of participant responses to identify frequently mentioned ideas, experiences, motivations, and plans that recurred across interviews, while also highlighting less frequent or contrary experiences that did not align with the majority of themes shared by interviewees. I used NVivo 10 for data coding and analysis.

### **PARTICIPANTS' CHARACTERISTICS**

Participants' countries of origin varied considerably but common nations included India, the Philippines, China, Iran and Egypt. Over three-quarters of participants obtained education and work experience in their country of origin (which they perceived as the "developing" world). Interestingly, participants who obtained credentials and experience in the United Kingdom, Japan, and the United States also faced challenges with credential recognition, but not necessarily to the same degree as those with education from "developing" nations. Eighty-four percent ( $n=32$ ) of participants self-identified as people of colour and the average age was 36 years. Slightly more men (60 percent,  $n=23$ ) than women participated in this study and just over fifty percent were employed at the time of the interviews. The average length of time spent in Canada was 2.5 years, with forty-two percent ( $n=16$ ) having only been in the country for less than a year.

I conceptualize employment on a continuum between survival, transitional, and meaningful opportunities. Survival employment includes jobs that are completely unrelated to individuals' credentials and experience such as unskilled labour, retail, and lower level service jobs (McCoy and Masuch 2007; Meraj 2015; Thomas 2015). Transitional employment relates to someone's previous career and credentials, but is usually at an entry level, or is not quite equivalent to the job status they left behind in their country of origin. Meaningful employment includes jobs that are roughly equivalent to previous positions held in their country of origin, but also includes an assessment of how immigrants feel about their occupation. Obtaining stable, meaningful employment during early settlement is crucial because it ensures better inclusion into Canadian society (Danso 2002: 12).

Considering that a significant proportion of immigrant participants had only been in the country for under a year (three participants arrived only three months prior to the interviews), it is understandable that many were still in the early stages of seeking employment. In fact, over forty percent were currently unemployed. Of those employed, thirty-six per-

cent (n=8) were working in survival jobs, twenty percent (n=4) were working in transitional jobs, and forty-five percent (n=10) held jobs that were roughly equivalent to their previous careers (see Table 1).

Table 1: Immigrant Demographics (N=38)		
	Mean (s.d.)	n (%)
Age	36.13 (6.4)	-
Years in Canada	2.52 (3.3)	-
Sex		
	Male	15 (39.5)
	Female	23 (60.5)
Race		
	White	6 (15.8)
	Person of colour	32 (84.2)
Education		
	Trades	3 (7.9)
	Bachelors	12 (31.6)
	Masters	9 (23.7)
	Medical Doctor	6 (15.8)
	PhD	8 (21.1)
National Origin of Education		
	"Western" country	9 (23.7)
	"Non-western" country	29 (76.3)
Immigrant Class		
	Skilled Worker	19 (50.0)
	Family Sponsor	8 (21.1)
	Provincial Nominee (MB)	9 (23.7)
	Other	2 (5.3)
Employment		
	Unemployed	16 (42.1)
	Survival	8 (21.1)
	Transitional	4 (10.5)
	Career-related	10 (26.3)
Migration Intentions (Leave Canada?)		
	Yes	20 (52.6)
	No	13 (34.2)
	Uncertain	5 (13.2)

Note: percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding

RESULTS

*Why Canada?*

[T]his September is gonna make me a year in Canada, I came here as a landed immigrant. I chose Canada because friends have come here before and they told me, ya know, it's a good place to be, lots of opportunities. And the friends, they are really making it. They are working in their field and they are working in their areas of specialization, and I thought okay, this could be something for me, because I had dreams that Canada can accommodate. – Smash 38 M, PhD Public Administration, Edmonton

I asked participants to talk about their migration journey, previous employment, and educational experiences, focusing on why they chose Canada. Participants indicated that they did so for multiple reasons (Table 2). Most frequently they spoke about opportunities for themselves or their children, including the opportunity to obtain further educational credentials and better schooling for their children. Most of the people I spoke to, however, emphasized that career-related employment opportunities were a key aspect of their goals and expectations for their Canadian settlement experience. Participants also mentioned family reunification, a relatively open immigration program, economic and political stability, and better prospects for themselves or their children to achieve their dreams. Although the challenges and barriers newcomers face play a significant role in their wish to stay or leave the country, one important insight involved whether their pre-migration expectations matched their settlement experiences.

### *Is Canada What You Expected?*

[B]efore I came I researched a lot. I researched everything from schools to everything, so by now – initially I would have thought I would be in school, maybe doing my master's. I would be employed, maybe in a part time job or something to help me with my livelihood. So, I'm... disappointed in that, I don't have either now. – Emad 29 M, MA Degree, Winnipeg

In parallel interviews I conducted with service providers, many of these participants stated that a major turning point for internationally educated immigrants occurs when they “adjust their expectations” and make plans that are more realistic (Thomas 2015). Although it is possible that some newcomers arrive in Canada with unrealistic expectations, it also seems unlikely that most newcomers would have exaggerated hopes for employment related to their previous careers. Immigrants expect to have “fulfilling and productive lives” in Canada (Danso 2002: 6). Participants stated that they “just want to contribute” to Canada and felt that they have not been given a chance to prove themselves. Despite some awareness of what to expect in Canada, many were surprised with the magnitude of the barriers they faced for entry into their professions:

[R]egarding Canada, everything is like what I was expecting. So, the companies, uh, culture – work culture and those things, exactly what I expected. But I was not expecting to have this trouble to find a job. So, without certification you don't exist. – Alfred 45 M, MSc Degree, Winnipeg

Table 2: Why Did You Come to Canada?

Theme	Examples
Better prospects for self and/or children	<p>"Canada provides a better future, more stable and safe for children."</p> <p>"I came in Canada first of all because I wanted to give my children a better chance to do what they are dreaming to do, because I have three children. 16, 14 and 10, and they're having big dreams."</p> <p>"If you asked me why did I come to Canada, like, it is basically, you know, maybe for the first fair answer, for a prosperous life."</p> <p>"[My] friends ... are working in their field and they are working in their areas of specialization, and I thought okay, this could be something for me, because I had dreams that Canada can accommodate"</p>
Family reunification	<p>"I met my wife and she told me that her siblings are here in Winnipeg and she wants to come here."</p> <p>"I came here to live with my wife. Yeah, she's been here for seven years before me. So that's why I'm here actually."</p>
Political and economic stability	<p>"The current situation in the country we came from, both economic and political, is not stable at all. People are extremely poor ... the human rights are neglected, uh, people are put into prison just for expressing their opinion."</p>
Better immigration program	<p>"The only two countries, English speaking countries that have welcome for immigrants is Australia and Canada. And to compare those two countries, it's easier to get to Canada. It's not easy at all, but in comparison, it's easier."</p> <p>"Major point, the main reason why I chose Winnipeg, even over Toronto or Vancouver – or a bigger town – is because immigration in Manitoba, compared to even other provinces, is relatively very easy."</p>

Alfred, a safety auditor from Argentina with a master's degree in environmental sciences, expected that he would be able to continue his career upon arrival to Canada. Although he obtained an internship in collaboration with a Winnipeg settlement services provider, he felt that the internship did not provide him with adequate training or a referral to assist him in integrating into his profession in Canada. After the three-month program, he worked in a call centre, a bakery, and another call centre before he obtained a position as a safety technician (a position that he defined as meaningful employment). Alfred was eventually able to find work related to his previous profession, but his pathway to that position was not ideal despite interacting with multiple settlement and employment agencies. Moreover, although Alfred said he speaks more comfortably in Spanish, he is also a white male and does not necessarily experience some of the difficulties faced by the people of colour who participated in my study, a topic discussed further below.

Smash was an important participant in my study. Although he signed up to the project as a newcomer, he was also an employment counselor in an immigrant-serving organization. He highlighted the importance of providing accurate information and credential assessment. Such information would help newcomers better understand the challenges they may face in the labor market before they decide to migrate:

The Canadian government and provincial government say we want to recruit a category of professionals, internationally trained. In some cases, they assess your diplomas out of Canada and they tell you "you're qualified, we need you in Canada". And you come to Canada with that same diploma, I have seen it, I have heard it, and you send it to [International Qualifications Assessment Service] (IQAS) and they tell you it is not recognized. For the assessment they give you is a different one. So, there is that disparity between the moment when you are applying to move to relocate to Canada, and when you're really in Canada. It's why you find some people are so frustrated. They are told one thing at the point of entry, and inside they are told another one.

International credentials are not treated equally. Many participants found that their education was assessed differently depending upon the organization with which they were interacting. For example, the Universities of Alberta, Manitoba, and Winnipeg were usually much better at recognizing credentials, as universities have a well-established system for interpreting international education due to the prevalence of (and increased priority placed on attracting) international students (Choudaha and Chang 2012). Unfortunately, participants indicated that other governmental systems for credential assessment, such as the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS), provided through the Gov-

ernment of Alberta may not recognize some credentials. Many previous studies have pointed to credential recognition as a primary issue facing internationally educated immigrants (Buzdugan and Halli 2009; Bauder 2003; Guo and Shan 2013; Owusu and Sweetman 2015). This remained a problem for all study participants, including those who were educated in the United States and Europe.

To summarize, some participants (18 percent,  $n=7$ ) were happy about their experiences in Canada and did not express any disappointment. For the most part, these individuals had been able to continue their careers in Canada. A large majority of participants, however, stated that Canada did not meet their expectations (74 percent,  $n=28$ ), and fifty percent ( $n=19$ ) also said their unmet expectations resulted in major feelings of disappointment. Such disappointment and mismatched expectations were clearly linked to the challenges that newcomers are experiencing in the labour market.

### *The Importance of Intersectionality*

I don't have Canadian experience, so maybe my résumé was first to the garbage. I know the realities. I have many frustrations about that. I just want the chance to contribute. – Wing 38 F, BSc Engineering, Edmonton

Extensive research highlights that immigrants are likely to face complex challenges related to unrecognized credentials, lack of Canadian experience, and devalued international experience. Participants in my study highlighted how newcomers may also face challenges related to a range of other factors, including race, sex, real or perceived lack of English language skills, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

Although sexual orientation should not affect employment opportunities, for one of the study participants who had a same-sex partner, this made the work environment uncomfortable at times as she was also navigating the experience of “being a foreigner”:

[T]hey just look at me as a foreigner, I'm not young anymore, so... don't tell a lot about my personal life in the job environment. Like about my family... people ask ... I tell, but I always talk about my partner. I've never had any situation that I had to tell that it's a woman. Because partner, people think is a partner. In the end I talk not. – Em 32 F, MA Sociology, Edmonton

The impact of being associated with multiple statuses is evident in Em's response about her experience working in a restaurant's kitchen. Not only does her immigrant status reduce her sense of “fitting in,” but she

simultaneously contends with being a woman, a member of a sexual and linguistic minority, and being older than most of her co-workers. Although Em identified as white, her experience as a linguistic minority certainly shaped her ability to find professional employment, and her experience cannot be fully understood without assessing the impact of each of these statuses from an intersectional perspective.

Wing, a Chinese woman with a speech impairment, exemplifies how there are complex intersectional relationships between personal characteristics and the structural environment (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; hooks 1982). Wing had obtained a transitional job in an engineering firm, but not as a registered engineer, despite her qualifications and experience. Moreover, her job was precarious, and she was laid off as economic conditions worsened in Alberta. Although she enthusiastically shared her story, Wing was uncomfortable with audio recording due to her vocal impairment. She stated that she knew this impairment influenced her job opportunities as potential employers might judge her communication abilities negatively, not only due to her accent, but also as a result of her disability. Omda, a thirty-eight-year-old lawyer originally from Egypt, shared with me that he had a prosthetic leg, and as a result, he could not work in various occupational sectors such as construction and other physically demanding jobs. Upon arrival in Canada, he had to retrain into the legal profession, but the range of survival employment positions available to him were limited due to his physical disability. Wing and Omda may have also experienced challenges due to being people of colour. As intersectional analyses have stressed, any singular status alone can only capture a partial component of someone's personal and political identities.

The majority (84 percent) of my study participants self-identified as people of colour. Although many participants indicated that Canada was "better than they expected" or "much better than Europe or the United Kingdom," many also experienced challenges due to their race or ethnicity. Although critical race theory illustrates the subtle nature of racism, some participants experienced blatant discrimination. Originally from the Philippines, Pnay, for example, left a successful career in human resources with international companies in the United Arab Emirates. After undergoing significant educational "upgrading," she obtained a position as a human resource associate and worked for several years in a very uncomfortable environment. Despite her multilingual talents, her employer bullied her and demanded that she go through "accent reduction" training. Clearly, due to her "foreigner" status, her employer did not value her abilities, preferring to hire "native-born" employees without accents. Pnay eventually resigned due to the discriminatory and toxic work en-

vironment and retrained in a different field. She plans to move back to the Philippines when her children complete university.

Most experiences of racial discrimination were not as overt or abusive as Pnay's. Giju lived in England for twelve years where he earned a doctorate and worked for the Ministry of Health. He lamented that although Canada was much better than England, he felt that discrimination existed in Canada, although it was much less obvious than it was in the United Kingdom (UK):

[In the UK] they tell you up front. But that's nice, you know where you stand. But in Canada, so, you know the joke I tell my friends "what's in the UK, it was much better. You know your ground, they tell you to your face." But here, no one – everyone's trying to be more politically correct, you know they don't want to say things ... I feel that's really wrong.

Our discussion lingered on the fact that in England, people were candid about how being a foreigner prevented Giju from accessing a permanent career. Not only was there a clear and obvious segmented labour market, but the preference for non-immigrants was also overt (Bauder 2003). Although the barriers in the labour market in Canada are similarly structured, preventing immigrants from obtaining the best "core" job opportunities, racism is subtler in Canada (Breton 2000).

For example, Robin originally arrived in Canada to attend university. His trajectory was very successful, but despite his positive experiences, as a Punjabi male he faced significant discrimination:

Robin – If your last name has Singh in it, forget it. I'll share something personal with you. I used to have a turban and a full-grown beard before this. I recently cut my hair, it was a personal decision ... I did that. But back then, I had a full-grown turban and beard. So, this lady looks at me, and she just (throws up his hands) – I could've been born in Canada, she has no way of knowing it, except looks. So, she says, first question to me, "How long have you been in Canada?" I'm like, how can you just assume I wasn't born here, by the way I'm looking.

JT – Now this is a personal question, you don't need to answer, but why did you decide to shave?

Robin – Honestly, I always wanted to do it ... Then six months back, something like this happened and I said okay, I just had it. Something like this happened at my workplace, and someone said "I don't need to show ID to you because you're not born here" and I just had it at that point. I was disgusted.

Assumptions about Robin's foreignness illustrates how perceptions of race reinforce the structure of racial inequality (Bannerji 2000). Even so, Robin wanted to stay in Canada and was happy with his employment situation. He shared with me that after four years of education and spending a significant amount of money on tuition, if he returned to India he felt like he would have to start all over again. Not all participants, however, were so certain of their future in Canada, and many were starting to lose hope and wished to leave the country.

### *Leaving Canada*

I lost almost everything ... when you convert our money into Canadian dollars, it is nothing, and it goes just like that. So, it's like a trap. I felt, I can't go back to India because I have so much debts now, and uh, at the same time I don't want to continue here. So ... if I go back, another thing, people will view it as a failure in your life.— M.J. 38 F, PhD, Edmonton

You know, if I knew this, all the things when I was in my back home, I would not be here. Yeah. Here, I don't have any other family members here. All of my family members are in my country, my home country, I lost all of them. And here, I have to go for the survival job. Ama 41 M, MA, Edmonton

Although I did not initially ask participants if they wanted to leave Canada, this prospect spontaneously arose in many of the interviews I conducted. As this became a more prominent theme, I started to ask about interviewees' future plans. Over half of the newcomers I interviewed ( $n = 20$ ) expressed deep regret for their choice to migrate to Canada and discussed how they were planning or wished to leave the country. Another thirteen percent ( $n = 5$ ) were unsure about their intentions to stay. Motivations for originally migrating and expectations for employment in Canada were closely linked to regret and plans or desires to leave.

Some participants indicated that they initially wanted to leave the country, but then after some time they were able to better integrate into their community. Sherriff, a thirty-seven-year-old teacher and aspiring civil servant from Senegal, stayed because he moved to Canada to be with his wife. The early days of settlement were challenging for him, and he wanted to leave:

[W]hen I came here, it was a little bit hard for me. I wanted to go back, I really wanted to go back, because I got depression that I will have to start

everything, everything again. – Sherriff 37 M, MEd, Edmonton

Having been in Canada for three years, Sherriff was now more comfortable, although he realized that he will likely not find full-time employment as a teacher. He enjoyed working part-time in an after-school program and was well-settled with his wife and her family in Edmonton. Another teacher named Al came to Canada from Cameroon to provide better opportunities for his children. Although Al had worked for the government to train and supervise teachers in Cameroon, he had to take a nighttime warehouse position in Canada. Due to the physical and emotional strain, he quit that job. Although he now plans to obtain a PhD (a prospect he could not pursue in his country of origin), he has mixed feelings about staying in Canada:

[F]eeling like, why am I coming here and working in such situation if it's only this that I have come here to do in Canada? Then I'm going back because my work is waiting for me, I can go back soon. That is not a good idea, because I didn't come here to go back, but I came here because I wanted to get (pauses)... to get into the system.

Many participants arrived in Canada with spouses and some also had children. For those who wanted to leave the country, the situation was often complicated by disagreements within the family about future plans:

After my son gets graduated or once he became independent, then I can plan for it. My husband won't come back, he may live here. But I have the dream that I want to go back to India. – M.J.

I can do anything, you know, but for my husband, you know, I want him to be happy because I don't want him to go back to Saudi Arabia, he still has his contract ... [My children], they're telling me daddy told us if we run out of money he would go back to Saudi Arabia, we want to stay here. – Aya 35 F, BA English, Edmonton

When I came here, first I was really shocked. ... I thought that Canada would recognize my education, my experience. When I landed in Toronto, I met some of my friends, and they advised me to go for work as a labourer or in the restaurant. At that moment I decided to go back, but my son did not want to go back. For my son, I have to, I have to sacrifice. You know, in my back home I had a very good job, I had my very good reputation, all my friends, all my family members were there. Even they are not supporting me to go here. And finally, I have to sacrifice. – Ama

Such gendered power dynamics and familial disagreements could play an important role in decisions about staying in Canada. No male participants felt pressured by their female partners to stay in the country, although in Aya's case she hoped to convince her husband to remain. Some of my female participants, however, felt trapped despite their wishes to leave. M.J., quoted above, stated that she was still in the country because her husband did not want to leave. She decided to wait until their children were finished post-secondary education before she would return to her country of origin. Similarly, participants of all genders felt pressure from their children to stay in the country. Ama tried unsuccessfully to convince his son to go back to Nepal, but feels he had to sacrifice for his son. This echoes the motives for why many immigrants with children decided to come to Canada in the first place. Evidence from other studies also shows that many immigrants sacrifice for their children, believing that if they cannot continue their careers and feel valued to their full potential, perhaps their children will have that opportunity (Taylor and Krahn 2013).

To restate an important point, not all participants wished to leave the country. Many often referred to their international experience as a reason why they wished to stay in Canada despite having such a difficult time finding career-related employment. Smash stated this explicitly:

When I tell people I want to live the rest of my life in Canada, Canadians are like, "what are you talking about?" You know? But I tell them, you don't know where I am coming from, I have seen other things, I have been to other places, and its far better over here than ... say in Europe.

Even though many study participants stated that Canada is much better than other countries, if Canada truly wishes to be an "immigrant friendly" nation, it needs to do a far better job in facilitating immigrants' re-entry into the labour market by fully recognizing international credentials and experience.

#### **DISCUSSION: "THEY COME WITH SMILES AND LEAVE WITH TEARS"**

Canada is full of immigrants who are highly educated and trained. Those are a treasure for Canada, and Canada should benefit from their skills. Twenty percent of them going back in the first year is not good. They leave, they come with smiles to Canada, they leave with tears. This is not fair, Canada, Government of Alberta, please do your best to help us. Thank you very much. – Mahmoud 36 M, BSc Engineering, Edmonton

Immigrant-receiving nations such as Canada are competing for highly educated and skilled newcomers. The proportion of immigrants facing labour market barriers after arrival in Canada represents, at best, an enormous waste of potential for the Canadian economy (Caidi and Allard 2005; McKenna 2012: 3-4; Reitz, Curtis and Elrick 2014). At worst, these patterns of devaluation and deskilling represent widespread employer preferences for Canadian born employees that must be recognized as a human rights violation (Caidi and Allard 2005; OHRC 2013). In addition to credential recognition, participants linked their experiences to complex processes that intersect with race, sex, class, gender, sexuality, language, mental health, and physical ability. Critical race theory and intersectionality frame an understanding of how discrimination and exclusion resulted in disappointed expectations that pushed participants to consider leaving Canada entirely.

*Why Canada:* Newcomer participants expressed various motives for coming to Canada related to personal goals of obtaining a better lifestyle or societal pressures such as political instability. As highly skilled individuals, most left behind well-paid, high-status and stable careers with the intention of obtaining similar positions upon arrival. They had the financial and social means to choose to leave their country of origin to pursue a better life in Canada. These motivations illustrate that the “traditional” understanding of immigration as a permanent phenomenon remains significant in Canada for this study population.

*Expectations and Disappointment:* Unfortunately, many newcomers experience significant downward social and occupational mobility after arrival in Canada (Basran and Zong 1998; Guo 2015; Meraj 2015; Zong 2004). This downward mobility was also evident amongst the participants in this study, many of whom were unemployed or under-employed in jobs unrelated to their previous careers. There was a significant mismatch between my study participants’ pre-migration expectations and current feelings about their new home country. Although many immigrant-serving practitioners state that immigrants need to “revise their expectations” or have more “realistic” goals (Thomas 2015), I question the assumption that highly skilled newcomers should expect downward social mobility, rejection of their credentials and labour market exclusion. These discriminatory experiences should not be part of “realistic” expectations because it is understandable that immigrants to come to Canada expecting that they will be able to continue their careers. Moreover, segmenting highly skilled immigrants into precarious work, or into roles that exploit their skills in lower status “transitional” jobs, illustrates a preference for employees that conform to white-Canadian norms and culture (Bauder 2003; Guo 2015). This preference is made explicit when

employers reject applicants based on a lack of Canadian experience or discriminate against those with excellent, but accented English or those with a different appearance.

*Canadian Experience and Intersectionality:* Increasingly, policy makers recognize the requirement for “Canadian experience” as code for discriminatory preferences, whereby employers reject newcomer applicants in favour of white-settler Canadian-born candidates (Bauder 2003: 699-700; Guo 2015; OHRC 2013). Moreover, immigrants’ skills are perceived as insufficient, requiring multiple stages of upgrading or the acquisition of new credentials from Canadian institutions (Guo 2015). Critical race theory identifies how deeply embedded and persistent discrimination informs employers of the “skills deficits” of those racialized as people of colour (Alyward 1999; Case 2012; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Guo 2015). In fact, many newcomers volunteer for Canadian experience or obtain redundant Canadian education to remedy their presumed “skills deficit.” Put simply, immigrants face barriers to inclusion based on race, gender, sex, disability, class, language and sexual orientation and challenges remain in dealing with the intersectional nature of oppression and exclusion from the labour market (Crenshaw 1989; hooks 1982). While not all participants faced these complex barriers, and not all expressed disappointment about coming to Canada, a significant proportion shared that they wished or planned to leave the country.

*Leaving Canada:* Canada promotes an image of being an immigrant-welcoming and multicultural society (Chuong 2015; IRCC 2020). Although many study participants expressed happiness or, at least, ambivalence with their decision to migrate to Canada, a significant proportion voiced their regret and a desire for return migration. This wish to leave the country was often based upon a mismatch between pre- and post-arrival expectations related to exclusion from career-related employment opportunities. Immigrants experience significant downward social mobility when they are forced to search for jobs unrelated to their profession or accept transitional positions well below their skill level (Meraj 2015). To return to the quote from Mahmoud, it is not fair that newcomers “come to Canada with smiles and leave with tears.” Even if we put aside the social justice issues involved, the economic loss for both Canadian society and the immigrants themselves related to the underuse of their skills and potential is too great to ignore (Li 2003; Reitz, Curtis and Elrick 2014).

Findings from this study extend the return migration literature within Canada to focus on a broader population of immigrants, the situation in mid-sized cities, and the impact of pre- and post-arrival expectations, particularly when considering how labour market exclusion inhibits the

successful inclusion of newcomers to the country. In sum, we should not be surprised when people want to leave the country when our society does not adapt to provide inclusion, respect and fair labour market opportunity to them from the beginning.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting upon common themes from the thirty-eight participants, it is important to acknowledge dissimilarity, as disappointment with employment outcomes was not universal. Moreover, participants were sometimes ambivalent about different aspects of their lives, such as being happy to be in a safe, economically stable nation, along with frustrations that they could not even find a survival job. Nonetheless, despite these nuances, many individuals shared their fundamental disillusionment regarding Canada due to a mismatch between pre- and post-arrival expectations regarding employment outcomes. Most participants were very surprised to experience such rigid and persistent labour market barriers and were unsure how to overcome them. These factors often resulted in participants stating that they wished they had not come to Canada and with some planning to leave the country.

Three policy approaches could possibly improve the opportunities for skilled newcomers to obtain career-related employment. First, the assessment of international credentials and employment experiences could be a more equitable and systematic process that begins before people arrive in Canada. This should also entail a recognition that Canadian experience and education are not inherently superior to the experience and education that new immigrants bring to the country.

Second, potential immigrants need to receive better and more accurate information about what to expect professionally upon their arrival in Canada. This might involve information shared by people in their field who have experienced the process (both good and bad). This may result in some immigrants choosing not to come to Canada once they are better informed about the process of credential recognition or accreditation. Future research should examine the true magnitude of the return migration phenomenon to see how many newcomers are leaving the country and how many want to leave but cannot.

Third, policy must meaningfully address the preference for Canadian-born employees and/or those with Canadian education by funding and developing anti-racist programs and educational campaigns. The onus should not be on individual immigrants to “work harder” to succeed in a system that is stacked against them. Future research can

address how to best approach this situation by including the perspectives of employers, regulatory bodies, and immigrants in the process. Such findings point to the need to study how to support employers to move beyond simply hiring immigrants and to work effectively to promote meaningful workplace diversity. In other words, employers also need to improve immigrant retention and ensure there are pathways to further training and advancement in order to truly represent diversity at all levels of the workplace.

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