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**NON/RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN CREDENTIALS  
FOR IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS IN CANADA AND  
SWEDEN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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# **NON/RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN CREDENTIALS FOR IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS IN CANADA AND SWEDEN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

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Many immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden have experienced devaluation and denigration of their prior learning and work experience after arriving in their new country. This comparative analysis reveals that the lack of recognition can be attributed to a number of causes. First and foremost, there are epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge. A deficit model of difference can lead to a belief that differences are deficiency, that the knowledge of immigrant professionals, particularly those from the Third World countries, is incompatible and inferior, hence invalid. Furthermore, ontological commitment to positivism and liberal universalism exacerbates the complexity of this process. This study demonstrates that by applying a one-size-fits-all criterion to measure immigrants' credentials and experience, liberal universalism denies immigrants opportunities to be successful in a new society. The juxtaposition of misconceptions of difference and knowledge with positivism and liberal universalism forms a new head tax to exclude the 'undesirable,' and to perpetuate oppression in Canada and Sweden.

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Keywords: Immigration and Integration; Canada; Sweden; Politics of Difference; Foreign Credentials Recognition.

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## **Introduction**

Canada and Sweden are immigrant countries. Immigration has played an important role in transforming both countries into ethno-culturally diverse and economically prosperous nations. The 2001 Census of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2003a) reveals that as of 15 May 2001, 18.4 per cent (or 5.4 million) of Canada's total population of 30 million were born outside the country, and that 13.4 per cent identified themselves as visible minorities. According to the Ethnic Diversity Survey (Statistics Canada, 2003b), almost one-quarter (23 per cent) of Canada's total population of 22.4 million aged 15 years and older were identified as first-generation Canadians who were born outside Canada. The latter number indicates that a large proportion of the new immigrants are adults with post-secondary education and rich work experience.

Sweden, on the other hand, has a total population of 9 million. In 2003, 12 per cent were born outside the country. Among those aged 16 years and older, 13.7 per cent were born outside Sweden. This means that a higher proportion of new immigrants in Sweden are adults, but the difference is not as great as in Canada (Integrationsverket, 2005). A main difference between the two countries is that Sweden does not have a long history of immigration. The 12 per cent born abroad today marks growth when compared with 1 per cent in 1940 and 7 per cent in 1970 (Ekberg & Rooth, 2000). The development of immigration has, among other things, resulted in a growing interest in the recognition of foreign vocational competence (Andersson *et al.*, 2004).

When immigrants come, they bring their language, culture, values, education background and work experience to the new society. Generally, Canada and Sweden have been extolled as open and tolerant societies. Their commitment to diversity and social justice has been admired by many nations in the world. On the other hand, both countries have been criticized for failing to move beyond 'tolerance' to fully embrace differences as valid and valuable expressions of human experience. With respect to the latter, one of the most outstanding issues pertains to the non-recognition of immigrants' foreign credentials and work experience. A number of studies have revealed that many highly educated immigrant professionals experience deskilling or decredentializing of their prior learning and work experience.

A central aspect of the Recognition of Prior Learning [RPL] is that it is often a matter of transfer. Learning from one context is to be recognized in another context.

Someone with knowledge from informal or non-formal learning in everyday or work life may want this to be recognized in the formal educational system, or in a new work place. It may also be the case that someone with formal education or training from one country wants recognition for this in a new country. Immigrant professionals may have formal credentials and prior work experience from their country of origin and seek recognition elsewhere. Yet, knowledge, experience and formal credentials are not necessarily accepted when transferred to a new context. This paper addresses this issue as an example of how the situatedness of experience, learning and credentials become a problematic issue in RPL. If there are calls for equivalency, this makes it even more difficult to secure recognition of experience and credentials in the new context.

This comparative analysis of non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience of immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden will be situated in a theoretical framework of the politics of difference. The paper draws on perspectives from critical theory and postmodernism. It examines the relationship between knowledge and power, as expressed in this problematic transfer of credentials and experience. It is proposed that the main problems are the epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge, and the ontological foundations of positivism and liberal universalism which dominate current recognition practices. Both Canada and Sweden have both similarities and differences, making it possible to deepen the analysis, as well as to advance broader aspects of the theme.

The paper is organized into four parts. It begins with a review of contextual information pertaining to immigration in the two countries. The second section examines studies pertinent to non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience in Canada and Sweden. Thirdly, the paper analyses current debates on differences and knowledge, in particular, those relating to how these factors are perceived and treated by mainstream Canadian and Swedish societies in the process of foreign credential recognition. Finally, we conclude that assessment and recognition of prior learning is a political act. While certain forms of knowledge are legitimised as valid, the learning and work experiences of foreign-trained professionals are often treated as suspicious or inferior.

## **Contextual Information**

### *Immigration Past and Present in Canada and Sweden*

Immigration has always played a central role in the nation building of receiving countries. The economic and demographic interests of the receiving nation are usually the driving forces behind immigration. For example, in the nineteenth century massive immigration was used as a strategy to populate and develop Western Canada. Worker-class immigrants played an important role in the development of the Swedish economy after the Second World War until the beginning of the 1970s. In addition, immigration has also served as a means of social and ideological control. In deciding which groups are the most desirable and admissible, the state sets the parameters for the social, cultural and symbolic boundaries of the nation, as manifested in historically racist Canadian immigration policies. From the Confederation of Canada in 1867 to the 1960s, the selection of immigrants to Canada was based on racial background, with British and Western Europeans being deemed the most 'desirable' citizens, while Asians and Africans were considered 'unassimilable' and therefore 'undesirable'. After the Second World War, Canadian immigration policy continued to be highly restrictive despite external and internal pressures for an open-door policy (Knowles, 1997). Sweden has had an open-door policy as regards Nordic neighbour countries (Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland) and has been a member of the European Union since the mid-1990s. A policy of allowing worker-class immigrants has been transformed to a restrictive policy towards migrants themselves, with a relatively open policy concerning refugees since the mid-1970s.

In the mid-1960s, Canada was experiencing 'the greatest postwar boom' in its history (Whitaker, 1991, p. 18). Skilled labour was required to help build this expansionary economy, but Europe, as the traditional source of immigrants, was not able to meet these needs owing to the labour demands of its own economic recovery. Thus the Canadian government turned its recruitment efforts to traditionally restricted areas – Third World countries. In 1967 a 'point system' was introduced by the Liberal Government, which based the selection of immigrants on their 'education, skills and resources' rather than on their racial and religious backgrounds (*ibid.*, p. 19). According to Whitaker, this new system represented 'an historic watershed,' and 'did establish at

the level of formal principle that Canadian immigration policy is “colour blind” (*ibid.*).

Whitaker points out that the ‘point system’ was generally successful in reversing the pattern of immigration to Canada away from Europe and towards Asia and other Third World countries. By the mid-1970s, there were more immigrants arriving from the Third World than from the developed world. The largest number came from Asia, followed by the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. Between 1968 and 1992, 35.7 per cent of 3.7 million immigrants admitted came from Asia; and 58 per cent of 1.8 million immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1991 and 2001 were also from the same region (Li, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2003a).

Immigrant selection practices since the mid-1990s have given more weight to education and skills, favouring economic immigrants over family-class immigrants and refugees. As Li (2003) notes, this new shift was based on the assumption that economic immigrants brought more human capital than family-class immigrants and refugees, and therefore were more valuable and desirable. According to Li, economic-class immigrants made up more than half of all immigrants admitted throughout the late 1990s. Among them, a considerable number are highly educated professionals, particularly scientists and engineers. In the year 2000, of the total 227,209 immigrants and refugees admitted, 23 per cent (52,000 individuals) were admitted as skilled workers (Couton, 2002). Despite Canada’s preference for highly skilled immigrants, and despite the fact that these professionals bring significant human capital resources to the Canadian labour force, a number of studies have shown that many of these highly educated immigrant professionals experience barriers to having their foreign credentials and work experience recognized after they arrive in Canada (Basran & Zong, 1998; Henry *et al.*, 2000; Krahn *et al.*, 2000; Li, 2001; Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2001).

Swedish history is different, characterized mainly by emigration. Beginning in the seventeenth century and with a peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Swedish emigration patterns are similar to those of other Western European countries. During the period 1851-1930, almost 1.2 million Swedes left for North America. 97 per cent of them went to the USA, and 1.6 per cent went to Canada. The number of Swedish immigrants in Canada is actually higher, as people went on from the USA to Canada (NE, 1991). Drawn from a total Swedish population of about 6 million in 1930, this out-migration was enormous. Even taking account of the refugees who came during the Second World War, until at least the middle of the twentieth century Sweden

was rather a mono-cultural country. Since the 1930s there have been more immigrants than emigrants, but the numbers of the former were low during the 1930s and 1940s.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Sweden was a step ahead of many other European countries in terms of conditions for economic development. Sweden was not involved in the Second World War, thus nothing was destroyed. Economic development grew significantly, but there was a lack of qualified labour. There was discussion of a 'reserve of talent' or a 'reserve of ability' (Härnquist, 2003) and how this reserve could be educated and made use of. Still there was an immediate need for competent workers, and as a result of this need many skilled worker-class immigrants came to Sweden at the end of the 1940s and into the 1950s.

These immigrants came mainly from the Nordic countries and southern Europe (Italy, Greece etc.). In addition, a number of refugees came from Eastern European countries, for example Hungarians fleeing the 1956 uprising. In the 1960s there were still a high number of worker-class immigrants, mainly from the Nordic countries and Yugoslavia, and refugees from Eastern Europe and Greece (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2004). The difference in the 1960s was that the immigrants had lower qualifications, as they were needed for less-qualified positions in industry (Bevelander, 2000). Lower labour demand led to a more restricted immigration policy, and the number of immigrants from outside the Nordic countries declined (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2004). Since the 1970s there has been a change in the Swedish immigration. The number of worker-class immigrants has been reduced, and the number of refugees and family-class immigrants has increased significantly. Refugees mainly came from Chile in the 1970s, the Middle East in the 1980s, and the former Yugoslavia and the Middle East in the 1990s (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2004). The shifts in the origins of immigrants are shown in the following figures: In 1970 more than 90 per cent of those born abroad came from Europe (60 per cent from the Nordic countries). By the end of the 1990s, 30 per cent were born in the Nordic countries, 35 per cent in other European countries, and 35 per cent in countries outside of Europe (Ekberg & Rooth, 2000).

#### *The Social Construction of 'Immigrant'*

At the centre of this analysis are immigrants themselves. It is important to review what this term means. According to Li (2003), the notion of 'immigrant' is socially constructed. He argues that it is often associated with people of non-white origin.



In the context of Canada, early settlers came mainly from Europe. It was not until the 'immigrant point system' was introduced in 1967 that Canada has attracted an increasing number of immigrants from Third World countries, notably Asia and Africa. Descendants of early European settlers, now long-established Canadians, do not think of themselves as immigrants. As Li puts it, the term 'immigrant' becomes a codified word for people of colour who come from a different racial and cultural backgrounds, who do not speak fluent English, and who work in lower position jobs. Li maintains that the social construction of 'immigrant' uses skin colour as the basis for social marking. These individuals' real and alleged differences are claimed to be incompatible with the cultural and social fabric of 'traditional' Canada, and they are therefore deemed undesirable. Immigrants are also often blamed for creating urban social problems and racial and cultural tensions in the receiving society. The social construction of immigrant places uneven expectations on immigrants to conform over time to the norms, values, and traditions of the receiving society.

In Sweden, 'immigrant' is used as a broad concept including worker-class immigrants, family-class immigrants, and often also refugees. The main signifier in the social construction of an 'immigrant' is language – whether or not one speaks fluent Swedish (Broomé *et al.*, 1996). Swedish is a very 'small language' compared to Canada's official languages of English and French, i.e. the Swedish-speaking area is limited to Sweden and localised parts of Finland. Finns constitute a large proportion of the worker-class immigrants in Sweden, but Finland-Swedish is still a dialect that differs significantly from mainstream Swedish. This makes it difficult and time-consuming for most immigrants to join Swedish contexts, where language competence, i.e. Swedish, is an important prerequisite (unless the society embraces multilingualism!). As in Canada, there is also a process identified as 'othering the other', a socially constructed division between 'we' and 'the others', but in this case 'culture' and language are used as the main 'explanations' of difference (Osman, 1999).

#### *The Assessment of Foreign Credentials: Mapping the Process*

Foreign credentials can be defined as any formal education higher than a high-school diploma, including professional or technical qualifications and any degrees, diplomas or certificates received outside Canada (or Sweden) (Statistics Canada, 2003c). Canada's immigrant selection system awards points to applicants with

advanced educational qualifications. Prior to arriving in Canada, immigrants do not normally receive any reliable information about the recognition of foreign credentials. Upon arrival, they need to navigate through a complex and possibly lengthy, costly and frustrating process on their own. There is no central or national place where they can go to have their credentials evaluated. Depending on the purpose of the evaluation, immigrants may need to approach one or all of the following organizations: 1) provincial and territorial credential assessment services; 2) regulatory or professional bodies; 3) educational institutions; and 4) employers. The outcomes of the evaluation may serve one of the following purposes: general employment; studying in Canada; and professional certification or licensing in Canada.

Five provincial and territorial credential assessment agencies provide credential assessment services to immigrants: the International Qualifications Assessment Service (Alberta); International Credential Evaluation Service (British Columbia); Academic Credentials Assessment Service (Manitoba); World Education Services (Ontario); and the Education Credential Evaluation (Quebec). These five agencies have formed the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada [ACESC] to facilitate the dissemination and exchange of information regarding international education. Small licensing bodies may need help from these organizations to determine the equivalency of foreign credentials. However, large professional associations (for example, the College of Physicians and Surgeons) usually conduct their own assessments and determine whether applicants need further training or tests in order to re-enter their professions in Canada. While professional and regulatory bodies determine the professional standing of the qualification, the assessment of foreign credentials for the purpose of academic study resides firmly in the hands of education providers (such as universities and colleges).

In Sweden, there is a system for the recognition of foreign examinations, which are assessed in terms of their equivalence to Swedish counterparts (HSV, 2005). The National Agency for Higher Education evaluates higher education programs leading to the recognition of a qualification for at least two years. This evaluation does not mean that a Swedish qualification is awarded, but it is intended to provide guidance for employers. It can also be used in an application for Swedish higher education, which is necessary in order to secure a Swedish qualification. A right to the recognition of 'real competence' in relation to admission requirements has been

introduced, and RPL for credit in higher education is also possible (and developing).

This system for recognition in Sweden is not open for all professions. When it comes to 'regulated professions' where authorization, certification etc. are required, like physicians, attorneys-at-law and accountants, foreign qualifications are subject to the review of the responsible authorities. For example, the qualifications of physicians and other professions in the health care sector are assessed by the National Board of Health and Welfare. There are also various systems for language tests, language courses and complementary training.

Given the diversity of assessment and licensing bodies, no generalizations can be made regarding national criteria for evaluating foreign qualifications. Reviewing the requirements of a number of such bodies in Canada, processes usually deploy the following criteria: level and type of learning; duration of study program; status of issuing institutions; the education system of the country concerned and the authenticity, currency, relevance, trustworthiness and transferability of the credential. In evaluations made by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, attested or certified copies of certificates are required as part of the application and criteria are applied. The most important are the length of the program; the level at which subjects have been studied; theses or papers required and the objectives of the program.

Document verification offers no guarantee of license to those found to have equivalent education. Some accreditation processes require foreign-trained professionals (for example, in medicine) to take a certification examination in combination with language testing and/or to undertake a period of internship or practicum in the licensing country. Although successful immigrant professionals will obtain a certificate or license to practise their profession, they then need to find an employer who is willing to offer them a job. Moreover, assessments of the same credentials by different institutions are often inconsistent.

Mata (1999) maintains that immigrant professionals may encounter a number of barriers in the process of having their foreign credentials recognized. First, they get poor information on accreditation procedures. Second, there is no national body responsible for the evaluation of foreign credentials. Third, there is no agreed-upon national standard. Educational and professional standards vary by province. In Sweden there are a number of national bodies responsible for different professions and the standards vary, especially between regulated professions.

## **Foreign Credentials and Prior Work Experience: Deskilling and Discounting**

Wanner (2001) claims that non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience is the 'central immigration issue of the new century not only in Canada, but in all postindustrial societies receiving immigrants' (p. 417). In a study of 404 Indo- and Chinese-Canadian immigrant professionals in Vancouver, Basran and Zong (1998) report that only 18.8 per cent of their respondents worked as professionals (doctors, engineers, school/university teachers, and other professionals) after immigrating to Canada. The authors determined that the most important factor for lack of admission to professional occupations, and resulting downward social mobility, was the non-recognition or devaluation of foreign credentials. Basran and Zong further point out that immigrant professionals are usually caught in a 'double jeopardy.' In the first place, non-recognition of foreign credentials prevents them from accessing professional jobs in Canada and acquiring Canadian work experience, which subsequently makes it difficult for them to become qualified for other professional jobs.

Highly educated refugees also encounter similar barriers. In a study of 525 refugees, Krahn, Derwing, Mulder, and Wilkinson (2000) demonstrate how those with high educational and occupational qualifications experienced downward occupational mobility after arriving in Canada. In comparison with Canadian-born individuals, refugee professionals are more likely to experience unemployment and under-employment (such as part-time and temporary employment). A lack of recognition of prior learning and work experience was identified as the top-contributing factor to this downward mobility. Other factors included a shortage of Canadian references and work experience, English language difficulties, and employer discrimination. Krahn *et al.* emphasise that in the process of recognising foreign credentials, professional associations often function as labour market shelters. By retaining strict control over the adjudication of foreign credentials, these associations restrict competition for well-paying professional jobs.

The situation for immigrant women is even worse. Gannage (1999) and Ng (1996) argue that the classification of 'immigrant women' has served to commodify them in employers' eyes, and in the labour force more generally, thereby reinforcing their class position as providers of cheap, docile labour to the state under exploitive conditions that are often permeated by racism and sexism. In her research with immigrant women, Mojab (1999) finds that skilled women faced de-skilling in

Canada. She maintains that developed capitalism simultaneously creates and destroys jobs, and requires both the skilling and de-skilling of the labour force. Highly skilled immigrant women are usually seen as potential source of manual labour. They face unemployment or are pressured into non-skilled jobs. Mojab argues that access to the job market is not determined by education alone, but is constrained by other factors such as gender, national origin, race, and ethnicity. Finally, she points out that systemic racism and ethnicism affect immigrants differently. Women from developed countries (such as the USA, Australia, Britain or New Zealand) are treated differently from those originating in Third World countries. Only those with financial resources at their disposal can afford the 'Canadianization' of their experience.

In Sweden, the proportion of Swedes aged 25-64 with higher education (18.4 per cent) is about the same as those born outside the country (18.7 per cent in 2003) (Integrationsverket, 2004, p. 240). An analysis of the 26-45 age cohort of non-European immigrant professionals (with at least three years' higher education) arriving in Sweden between 1991 and 1997, shows the same problem of non-recognition as in Canada (Berggren and Omarsson, 2001). 65 per cent in this group have a job, compared with 90 per cent of those born in Sweden (the rest are unemployed, studying or in labour market programs.) It is also less likely that working immigrants have a job that corresponds to their formal qualifications. 39 per cent of those born outside Western Europe have a qualified job (i.e. corresponding to their formal qualification), compared with 85 per cent of those born in Sweden. Notably, even among those with a formal qualification from Swedish institutes of higher education, only 64 per cent of those born outside Western Europe have a qualified job. About one third of those from Africa and Asia can expect to get a qualified job, half of those from Latin America and the rest of Europe, and two thirds of those from North America (*ibid.*). Thus, there is a problem with the recognition of foreign credentials, but the problem varies depending on one's origin. Even with a Swedish education a citizen is much less likely to have a qualified job if s/he was not born in Sweden.

As mentioned, Sweden has a formal system for recognition of foreign academic credentials. If the foreign qualification is recognized as equivalent to a Swedish qualification, an individual is more likely to secure a qualified job. The difference between qualifications recognized as equivalent or non-equivalent is most significant in the health care sector, where a number of professions are regulated,

and require formal authorization or certification. Here 80 per cent of those with an equivalent qualification have a qualified job, compared with only 20 per cent of those with non-equivalent qualifications. In the technical/scientific area, the corresponding figures are 56 per cent and 36 per cent. Further, many working immigrants are employed within the area of their qualification, but at a lower level. This means that employers have employees with relevant qualifications, which are not being fully used or remunerated. Thus there is considerable existing competence that could be recognized and utilised (Berggren & Omarsson, 2001).

A comparison of employment rates among all Swedish immigrants aged 16-64 (including refugees) and a corresponding group of native Swedes shows significant differences depending on immigrant's national origin. In 1969, the employment rate of immigrants from Finland and Yugoslavia was 120 per cent of that for natives, and the corresponding rate for immigrants from Germany was 103 per cent. A comparison with 1999 figures shows another picture – then the rate for Finland was 93 per cent, for Germany 89 per cent, and for the former Yugoslavia 71 per cent (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2004). Thus, the situation has worsened for worker-class immigrants, as illustrated by the decreasing employment rate for immigrants from Finland and Germany. An increasing number of refugees has contributed to a significantly lower employment rate in the (former) Yugoslavian group, compared with the Finnish and German groups. Finally, other immigrants who have come as refugees have problems getting a job – the average employment rate in 1999 among people from Africa and Asia was 62 per cent of that for natives (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2004).

The aforementioned research findings have been validated by government sources of data. Comparing unemployment between native-born and foreign-born populations in Sweden and Canada, differences emerge. The average unemployment in 2003 among 15-64 year old Swedish-born citizens was 4.8 per cent (5.2 per cent for men and 4.4 per cent for women), compared with 11.1 per cent for immigrants (12.7 per cent for men and 9.5 per cent for women). The corresponding figures for Canada (2002 data) were 6.0 per cent for Canadian-born citizens (6.2 per cent for men and 5.8 per cent for women) and 8.0 per cent for immigrants (7.3 per cent for men and 8.8 per cent for women) (OECD, 2005, p. 88-90). Thus, the employment gap between native-born and foreign-born populations in Sweden is greater than in Canada. This could be understood in terms of a higher proportion

of refugees in Sweden, and of labour migrants/worker-class immigrants in Canada.

The Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada [LSIC] (Statistics Canada, 2003c), a comprehensive survey conducted by Statistics Canada and Citizenship and Immigration Canada, aims to study the process by which new immigrants adapt to Canadian society. Findings from the first wave of interviews with 12,000 immigrants aged 15 and over who arrived in Canada between October 2000 and September 2001 reveal that finding employment was the area with most reported difficulties. Among those who were employed at the time of the survey, 60 per cent did not work in the same occupational field as before arriving in the country. This number seems to be lower than that reported in other studies, but is still significant. The survey also reveals that many immigrant professionals experience major shifts from prior occupations in natural and applied sciences and management (for men) and business, finance and administration (for women) to occupations in sales, services, processing and manufacturing. Lack of Canadian experience and lack of transferability of foreign credentials were reported as the most critical hurdles to employment. A low level of skill in either official language was another important contributing factor to this occupation shift. One important finding was the connection between place of birth and the possibility of finding a job within the same field as before arriving in Canada. The survey reports that while 60 per cent of newcomers did not find jobs in the same occupational field, more than 60 per cent of immigrants who were born in the United States (63 per cent), Australia (68 per cent), and New Zealand (68 per cent) *were* successful in finding employment in the same occupational field. These figures suggest that while foreign credentials and work experience can be transferred beyond national borders; those benefits are enjoyed by immigrants from only a small number of countries.

How does the non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience affect immigrants? Using data from the 1996 Canadian census micro-data, both Li (2001) and Reitz (2001) found out that one important impact it has is on immigrants' earnings. Li (2001) compared the earnings for four groups: native-born Canadian degree-holders; immigrant Canadian degree-holders, immigrant mixed education degree-holders; and immigrant free degree-holders. He maintains that immigrants' credentials carry a penalty compared to those of native-born Canadians. Meanwhile, Reitz (2001) assessed the annual immigrant earnings deficit caused by skill underutilization to be \$2.4 billion. According to Reitz, immigrants receive a much

smaller earnings premium for their education: on average half that of native-born Canadians. He maintains also that immigrant men and women receive about one-half to two-thirds as much benefit from work experience as do native-born workers of the same gender. Another important finding is that there are wide variations in earnings among immigrants from different origins. In general, immigrant men from origins outside Europe earn anywhere between 15 and 25 per cent less than most of those from European origins. However, origin-group earnings differences for immigrant women are much less than for men. Reitz further notes that if foreign education explains part of the origin-group earnings differences, it means that Canadian employers treat schooling in certain countries of origin, mostly Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, differently from schooling in other (mostly European) countries. This finding supports Mansour's (1996, p. 2) observation that 'the issue is particularly acute for immigrants with qualifications from anywhere other than Europe or North America'.

In Sweden the average earnings of immigrants are lower than those of Swedish birth, which reflects both the lower employment rate and the often part-time nature of the work. In 1999, the average earnings of men born outside Sweden were 61 per cent of those born in the country, and the corresponding figure for women was 69 per cent. As shown above, there are also big differences in Canada depending on country of origin. Immigrants from the Nordic countries, Western Europe and North America (mainly worker-class immigrants) have slightly lower earnings, and immigrants from countries outside Europe (mainly refugees) have much lower earnings. Eastern and Southern Europe are somewhere in between but there are also differences, depending on when different groups came to Sweden. For example, in 1999, men from Finland earned 82 per cent of the earnings of Swedish-born men, and women from Finland 101 per cent of native women. The corresponding figures for people from the USA was 96 per cent for men and 80 per cent for women; for Hungary 71 and 87 per cent; for Chile 55 and 68 per cent; for Bosnia 43 and 44 per cent; for Iraq 21 and 16 per cent; and for Somalia 16 and 17 per cent (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2004). This shows clearly the differences between countries of origin, arrival times and reasons for migration in terms of position in the labour market. In addition, the fact that immigrants who have studied mainly in Sweden earn about the same as natives (and more than those who have studied abroad) (le Grande *et al.*, 2004) indicates that a recurring problem is the non/recognition of foreign credentials and work experience.



If not corrected, this becomes increasingly costly, especially at the national level.

### **The Politics of Difference: Epistemological and Ontological Misconceptions**

The above discussion demonstrates that many organizations in Canadian and Swedish societies, including government agencies, professional associations, employers and educational institutions, play a role in the valuing (or not) of foreign credentials and prior work experience. As a consequence, immigrant individuals and families, along with their receiving societies as a whole, suffer severe impacts. Explanations are advanced that focus on the supply and/or demand of competence. The supply discussion highlights the question of whether the professional competence of immigrants is the 'right' competence, or whether something is deficient in this source of 'human capital'. An interest in the development of the labour market puts the focus on the demand side. Bevelander (2000) (and others) have shown that structural changes in the labour market in a developed country generate demands for new skills and competencies. For example, manual labour employment is gradually disappearing as a result of efficiency improvements and companies moving their manufacturing plants to low-wages countries. On the increase are demands for teamwork and interpersonal skills, information and communication technology skills, and (native) language proficiency. This shift has made it more difficult for professional immigrants in the labour market, as many lack the native language fluency, cultural capital and 'soft' skills that are increasingly in demand. In other instances, they are assumed not to have these skills, which leads to an increasing 'statistical' discrimination by employers (Bevelander, 2000).

While some studies have suggested causes for the under-valuing of foreign credentials, many have failed to question the root cause. Given the impact of under-valuation on individual identities (Gottskalksdottir, 2000), an understanding of the problem in terms of the economy is not enough. Many critical questions remain. We need to find out: Why do such inequities occur in democratic societies like Canada and Sweden, where democratic principles are upheld and where immigrants are, at least in policy, 'welcome'? Furthermore, as this issue has been identified in numerous studies over a number of years, we must ask why the situation has not improved. Thus a key question is: What prevents us from moving forward? Drawing on perspectives from

critical theory and postmodernism, the following observations are offered in an attempt to provide more in-depth answers to this question. The first two considerations pertain to epistemological misconceptions of difference and knowledge; the second two relate to the ontological foundations of the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials.

### *Epistemological Misconceptions of Difference and Knowledge*

First, non-recognition of foreign credentials and prior work experience can be attributed to a deficit model of difference. One of the articulations of multicultural societies like Canada and Sweden is a commitment to cultural pluralism. However, a number of commentators (Cummins, 2003; Dei, 1996; Fleras & Elliott, 2002; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Moodley, 1995) argue that pluralism is only endorsed in superficial ways. The tendency is to prefer 'pretend pluralism,' which means to 'tolerate rather than embrace differences' (Fleras & Elliott, 2002, p. 2). In practice, differences are exoticized and trivialised. Minor differences may be gently affirmed in depoliticised and decontextualized forms such as food, dance, and festivities. Substantive differences, however, tend to challenge hegemony and resist co-option. As a result, these are perceived by many as deficient, deviant, pathological, or otherwise divisive. It could be argued that one of the hurdles preventing the full recognition of immigrants' educational qualifications and professional experience is the prevailing attitude toward difference. In fact, negative attitudes and behaviours toward immigrants co-exist with commitments to democratic principles such as justice, equality, and fairness. Henry *et al.* (2000) refer to the co-existence of these two conflicting ideologies as 'democratic racism.' According to these authors, democratic racism prevents governments from changing the existing social, economic, and political order, and from supporting policies and practices that might ameliorate the low status of people of colour, because such policies would be perceived as in conflict with, and a threat to, liberal democracy.

Second, knowledge is used as power to keep out the 'undesirable'. Critical theorists and postmodern scholars (Cunningham, 2000; Foucault, 1980; McLaren, 2003) maintain that: knowledge is power; knowledge is socially constructed, culturally mediated and historically situated; and knowledge is never neutral or objective. The nature of knowledge as it pertains to social relations prompts us to ask the following questions: What counts as legitimate knowledge? How and why does knowledge get constructed in the way it does? Whose knowledge is considered

valuable? Whose knowledge is silenced? Is knowledge racialized? Studies (Mojab, 1999; Reitz, 2001) have clearly shown that, while immigrants from Third World countries encounter difficulties with their foreign credentials and work experience, those from developed countries (in Canada countries such as the USA, Australia, Britain or New Zealand; in Sweden the Nordic countries, Germany or the USA) have relatively successful experiences. It can therefore be speculated that knowledge *has* been racialized. As Li (2003) rightly points out, the term 'immigrant' becomes a codified word for people of colour who come from a different racial and cultural background, and who do not speak the language of the receiving country fluently.

The knowledge possessed by immigrants is deemed inferior because their real and alleged differences are claimed to be incompatible with the 'traditional' cultural and social fabric. It seems clear that power relations are embedded in social relations of difference (Dei, 1996, p. 63). In Canada, this hierarchy of knowledge and power is rooted in an ethnocentric past, where immigrants from Europe and the USA were viewed as the most desirable, and those from Third World countries as undesirable. Sweden has a rather mono-cultural history and most immigrants until the middle of the 1970s were worker-class immigrants. Labour migration has, to a large extent, been followed by the arrival of refugees. This helps us understand the problems refugee immigrants meet in Sweden – their credentials and prior work experiences are not asked for in the Swedish labour market. Canada's commitment to the point immigration policy, and Sweden's present policy of admitting refugees and asylum seekers, do not permit the countries to recruit immigrants on the basis of racial and national origins. We argue that in lieu of stated policies, the devaluation and denigration of immigrants' knowledge and experience becomes the new head tax to keep out 'undesirables'. It seems as if this has been used as a new strategy to maintain the subordination of immigrants, and to reinforce the extant power relations in Canada and Sweden.

#### *Ontological Foundations: Positivism and Liberal Universalism*

Third, the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials in Canada and Sweden are characterized by positivism. Positivists believe that an objective world exists 'out there,' external to the individual (Boshier, 1994), and that if something exists, it can be measured (Young & Arrigo, 1999). Studies cited here have shown that this objectivist ontology has been the driving force behind the current practice of assessment and

recognition of foreign credentials. Existing schemes of recognition search for an absolute truth regarding knowledge and experience. They adopt a set of 'value-free' criteria, which discount the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts within which such knowledge has been produced. They claim that 'neutral' assessment and measurement occur under the auspices of professional standards, quality and excellence without any question of whose standards are in place, and whose interests they serve. Although immigrants are allowed into the country, professional standards deny them access to employment in their professions. Krahn *et al.* (2000) argue that the real purpose of such standards is to restrict competition and to sustain the interests of the dominant groups. Criteria-based, convergent assessments make it more difficult to accept differences and equivalencies in competence, as compared with a more divergent system.

Fourth, in assessing foreign credentials, positivism is juxtaposed with liberal universalism, which exacerbates the complexity of the recognition process. As Young (1995) notes, liberal universalism posits that universality transcends particularity and difference; universality promotes assimilation while a politics of difference makes space for multiple voices and perspectives. In applying a one-size-fits-all criterion to measure immigrants' credentials and experience, liberal universalism fails to address the following questions: Who establishes criteria? Whose interests are represented and served by these standards? What constitutes valid prior learning? What should we do with knowledge that is valid but different? What forms of knowledge become Canadian or Swedish 'equivalent'? Sometimes the rejection of immigrants' qualifications may be simply seen by practitioners as an effort to reduce risks, but these risks may be wrongly perceived as a result of ignorance about the credential in question (Reitz, 2001). It seems clear that by refusing to recognize immigrants' qualifications and experience as legitimate knowledge, liberal universalism privileges a regime of truth that perpetuates oppression and disadvantage.

## **Conclusion**

We conclude that the Recognition of Prior Learning is a political act. Our findings reveal that many immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden have experienced devaluation and denigration of their prior learning and work experience after arriving in their new country. As a result, many of them have experienced significant,

demoralizing and disempowering downward social mobility. In the process of assessment and recognition of prior learning for immigrant professionals, there is obviously a missing 'R' (recognition). The lack of recognition can be attributed to a number of causes. First and foremost, there are epistemological misperceptions of difference and knowledge. A deficit model of difference can lead to a belief that differences are deficiency, that the knowledge of immigrant professionals, particularly those from the Third World countries, is incompatible and inferior, hence invalid. It appears safe to claim that knowledge has been racialized and materialised on the basis of ethnic and national origins. Furthermore, ontological commitment to positivism and liberal universalism exacerbates the complexity of this process. This study demonstrates that by applying a one-size-fits-all criterion to measure immigrants' credentials and experience, liberal universalism denies immigrants opportunities to be successful in a new society. It also reveals that professional standards and excellence have been used as a cloak to restrict competition and legitimise existing power relations. The juxtaposition of misconceptions of difference and knowledge with positivism and liberal universalism forms a new head tax to exclude the 'undesirable,' and to perpetuate oppression in Canada, Sweden and undoubtedly in other countries as well.

It is evident that current approaches to Recognition of Prior Learning for immigrant professionals are serious barriers rather than facilitators of this process. This study urges the development and adoption of more inclusive frameworks which fully embrace all human knowledge and experience, no matter which ethnic and cultural backgrounds they emerge from. Failing that, immigrants will continue to be alienated and barred from exercising the full range of their skills, citizenship and potential in their receiving societies.

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