Compromised careers: The occupational transition of immigration and resettlement

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Abstract. Background: Work is a significant occupational transition that occurs with immigration and resettlement. Problems finding work and regaining economic capital are multi-factorial, differentiated by gender and mediated by specific contexts. Surprisingly, past education and work experience are unreliable predictors of successful employment outcomes.

Approach: Critical theory and ethnographic concepts informed the methodological approach. Data were generated primarily through in-depth interviews, conducted in English, with 14 well-educated women who immigrated to Canada as adults and sought employment in their professions. The thematic findings were analyzed using Bourdieu’s [7] concepts of capital, field and habitus.

Findings: The theme Compromised Careers describes the downward occupational (work) mobility that occurs despite expectations that education, credentials and work experience are transferable to desirable employment. A devaluation of foreign qualifications and no relevant Canadian work experience function with gendered responsibilities, less social support, and time spent in resettlement activities to create negative work trajectories. The role that federal policies and professional organizations play is examined to reveal the tension between individuals’ efforts to find employment and institutional barriers that impede these actions.

Conclusion: A critical inquiry approach examined the ruling relations to show how power and privilege function in relation to migrants’ occupational transitions.

Keywords: Occupation, transition, work, immigrants, women

1. Background

Productivity in the form of paid work is a significant ‘occupation’ that most Canadian adults engage in, or strive for, to support themselves and their families. Although an occupation commonly refers to employment, in occupational science it encompasses “all that people need, want or are obliged to do; what it means to them; and its ever-present potential as an agent of change” [55, p. 343]. Occupational therapy theorists propose that occupational choice is influenced by the intersection of interests, personal causation and values [27]. The constraints and enabling features of environments, broadly defined, mediate the agency that people have to pursue their choices [29].

Immigration and resettlement prompt changes that affect individuals, their occupations and the environments in which they function. A situation may be extreme, as in ‘occupational deprivation’ where forces beyond an individual’s control constrain or prevent engagement in occupations [54]. Or the situation may reflect ‘occupational disruption,’ defined as a temporary condition of altered engagement that normalizes when adequate supports are provided. Migrant women often experience underemployment or unemploy-
ment when they do not meet criteria required by Canadian employers [39]. The transition from being employed in one’s home country, to having one’s work history questioned and devalued, can marginalize migrants and prompt acceptance of less desirable jobs to gain Canadian work experience. From a societal perspective, non-recognition of migrants’ foreign credentials and education costs the Canadian economy up to $15 billion annually, based on 1996 dollars [41]. Research offers differing conclusions about the extent to which immigrants achieve economic parity with people born in Canada [10]. What remains undisputed, however, is that 70% of immigrants report problems with entering the workforce related to their qualifications, their ability to make employment contacts, and language competency [46].

This report describes the work transitions of women who had professional careers in their countries of origin and then had their employment trajectory radically altered through resettlement. The findings are part of a larger study that examined how resettlement influenced women’s understanding of and participation in leisure occupations [47]. Here, women’s activities that affect work are described and critical perspectives explicate the social relations shaping their lives. This report contributes to theoretical knowledge in occupational science and offers a new perspective for people who are employed or volunteer in resettlement agencies, employment centres, or with related social services.

2. Literature review

Elements of the Canadian immigration system are presented to create a context for the literature review, which addresses the problems that women experience as they try to find paid employment. These problems include foreign credential recognition, work experience, and language expression, and influence outcomes of underemployment and unemployment. The literature review illustrates the role that institutional factors play in creating inequality of opportunity.

2.1. Overview of immigration and resettlement

Governments create immigration policies to address labor shortages, to develop greater human capital, and to facilitate “the circulation of the knowledge embodied in highly skilled workers and promote innovation” [38, p. 5]. Immigration creates an opportunity for people to improve their economic standing, contribute to a new society and take advantage of educational and other options to enhance their children’s future [17,23]. Immigration as a process ends upon ‘landing’ and approval as a permanent resident [12], although the ‘immigrant’ designation may last for years. Resettlement is the next stage and is defined as “a long-term, dynamic, two-way process through which, ideally, immigrants would achieve full equality and freedom of participation in society, and society would gain access to the full resource potential in its immigrant communities” [8]. Employment of immigrants is an important marker of resettlement because economic success increases the likelihood of social and cultural integration. The employment problems identified earlier can be traced to institutional policies and practices rather than attributed solely to the individual. To explore the intersection of macro features of the environment and individual immigrants’ lives, the immigration ‘point system’ is outlined.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) sets and implements policies arising from the 2002 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act [13]. A point system assesses the economic suitability of all applicants based on certain criteria and categorizes them as independent Skilled Worker or Business Class, or Family Class immigrants. Spouses of the Principal Applicant are also categorized as economic (independent) immigrants although they are not assessed under the point system. Potential immigrants in the Skilled Worker Class are assigned points for each of the six categories: education, work experience, ability in one of the official languages (French or English), age, arranged employment in Canada, adaptability to determine suitability for immigration [14]. For Principal Applicants, the likelihood of acceptance increases with higher points in the categories of education, work experience and language proficiency.

The point system implicitly sets up an expectation of future success for immigrants who are well-educated and have professional qualifications. The system defines work as paid work and thus privileges the types of jobs that are customary for men to do over the work that women are more likely to do such as childrearing, small-scale production and sales [11]. CIC recognizes that as Skilled Workers women have different employment outcomes due partly to their household and childrearing responsibilities and a gender-based analysis is used to evaluate the Skilled Worker program. The institutional barriers that women may face as they transition to employment are described in the next section.
2.2. Barriers to employment

The obstacles to seeking work typically involve a combination of credentialing, Canadian work experience, devalued foreign work experience, and language issues [25,36,39]. Hiebert’s [22] focus group study revealed that non-recognition of credentials was a common experience, along with visible minority migrants’ belief that education and training from the United States and European countries were deemed more valuable than that of other source countries. Using Statistics Canada data, Hiebert [24] found that for immigrant adults who had arrived less than a year earlier 76% held foreign credentials and of those, only 56% had been deemed equivalent to Canadian standards and 19% were given some recognition. An examination of employment outcomes for the group surveyed revealed that only 40% found work in their field of expertise. In a qualitative study of highly educated women from a variety of countries, Mojab [35] described a ‘de-skilling immigrant women’ phenomenon where the non-recognition of credentials directs them into manual work despite being admitted to Canada for their intellectual capacity and experiences. Tastsooglou and Miedema [49] also take a critical, anti-racist perspective and identify the credentialing issue as a gate-keeping strategy. They argue that it discriminates against women and prevents them from the kind of upward employment mobility that immigrants have if their qualifications are from the United States, Australia or the UK. Many argue that ‘race’ and ethnicity serve to diminish migrants’ chances of obtaining relevant employment, citing the work outcomes of visible minority migrants [4,30]. Research supports this position although non-recognition of credentials also occurs for European-educated immigrants, which suggests that other factors are involved [22,35,49].

The devaluation of relevant foreign work experience contributes to the credentialing barrier [20,24]. Researchers identify a ‘Catch 22’ situation of migrants who need Canadian experience in their chosen career to meet their employment potential but cannot access it [24,49]. This barrier arises from professional regulatory bodies that function outside of government jurisdiction and women try different solutions to overcome it. The women in Tastsooglou and Miedema’s [49] study chose to either volunteer or work at immigrant-serving agencies and minimum wage jobs to gain the coveted Canadian experience. The reasons for foreign work experience being “heavily discounted by Canadian employers” [24, p. 18] range from discrimination and racism based on country of origin, to ignorance about the value migrants’ experience could offer an organization.

An inability to speak English proficiently makes it difficult for many women to find work suited to their employment history, regardless of their country of origin [21,35]. Unemployment related to language ability affects income but also influences one’s sense of independence and identity. Migrant women who speak English well but with an accent, such as those educated in former British colonies, report labour market discrimination [18,49]. Based on a small study of women from African countries, Creese and Kambere [18] report that women’s overall competency as potential employees is brought into question, due to their accented English. These researchers contend that accents from some countries combine with visible minority status (in the Canadian context) to create boundaries that exclude women from work.

The literature reviewed includes researchers who analyze the conditions of immigrant women’s lives from anti-racist perspectives as Tastsooglou and Miedema [49] do and also from a less critical approach as Hiebert [22,24] does. Regardless of worldview, the empirical literature reveals that barriers to employment for immigrant women can be found in social, institutional and political structures and contribute to individuals’ occupational disruption.

3. Methodological approach

3.1. Critical theory

Critical theory and ethnographic concepts form a methodological framework for studying the problem of employment and migrant women. Critical theory is defined as: “A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” [28, p. 281]. Research from a critical theory perspective reveals how seemingly benign or natural institutions, social systems and policies that govern people’s lives are actually structured to maintain the dominance of some groups of people over others. Smith [45] uses the concept of ruling relations to identify how power is organized and she emphasizes the mediating role that ‘texts’ i.e., written or electronic communications, play in creating and per-
petuating such structures. A public education system is one place to uncover ruling relations. It is governed by a school act, from which policies are written that determine everything from student eligibility and behaviours to standardized curricula and criteria for student advancement. By examining these policies objectively, one could argue that the goal of education is to produce graduates who maintain the status quo vis-à-vis employment, rather than to encourage critical thinkers who may question the way that work is organized and accessed within society.

Bourdieu’s theory of domination is a critical approach used in this research that draws on the concepts of habitus, field and capital to explain how human actions are regulated [48]. This approach facilitates the recognition and analysis of the interaction between structures that influence employment and the agency that migrant women have. Bourdieu’s theory bridges the divide between determinist perspectives, that emphasize the dominance of structures in directing behaviours or agency, and subjective perspectives, that focus solely on agency and ignore its interplay with structures.

Swartz [48] defines habitus as “deeply internalized dispositions, schemas, and forms of know-how and competence, both mental and corporeal, first acquired by the individual through early childhood socialization” (p. 62S). Thus a person raised in a family where reading is valued may be disposed to join a book club, use the library or buy books based on the familiarity and ‘naturalness’ of this activity. Fields refer to social arenas where habitus occurs; these are the physical and social spaces in which lives are lived [31]. Immigration causes a change in fields and may elicit a reassessment and subsequent adaptation to the demands of different social contexts. Capital refers to resources that are conceptualized as having different values and different forms: economic, cultural and social. Economic capital is reflected through income, bank accounts, real estate, and purchasing power. Cultural capital comprises an individual’s qualifications and skills; it also refers to knowing implicitly how things work in society, having information and taking appropriate actions based on that information. Linguistic capital is part of cultural capital because the use of language skills is needed to take action in various fields; how people speak can locate them in social positions of more or less power, depending on the situation. Thompson [51] defines linguistic capital as “the capacity to produce expressions à propos, for a particular market” (p. 18). Social capital refers to the benefits arising from social networks whereby individuals and groups share information and cooperate, building relationships that meet each others’ needs. A neighbourhood ‘Block Parent’ program is one example of social capital in that it requires community cooperation to promote child safety. In addition to working with habitus, fields and capital to illuminate the problem of migrant women and employment, selected ethnographic concepts guided the methodological approach.

3.2. Ethnographic influences

The emphasis on the contexts of participants’ lives and a descriptive, interpretive account of a phenomenon about which little is known comes from ethnographic traditions and guides this study [2]. Highlighting context or field differentiates this research from phenomenological inquiry where people are assumed to have unmitigated choice in constructing their identities and social reality, and meaning-making is paramount. In this study, contexts are understood through detailed descriptions of migrant women’s experiences and interactions and the examination of policies rather than participant observation in the fields. The development of an interpretative account that is closely linked to relatively unstructured data is typical of studies influenced by ethnography.

3.3. Study participants

Fourteen women who were past the initial acclimatization process and actively pursuing integration into Canadian society were purposefully recruited for this study. The inclusion criteria were: between 20 to 55 years old, married with children living at home, having immigrated to Canada after age 19, and feeling comfortable speaking English. Employment was eliminated as a criterion after difficulty recruiting these participants. Table 1 provides demographic data of the study participants. The inclusion criteria were developed to be consistent with the profile of immigrants arriving within the past two decades; a high level of education was also typical [3,34]. Most participants were recruited through a non-profit community settlement agency; other participants were located through a refugee and immigrant services agency, and snowball sampling. The decision about sample size was taken after recognizing that data from the later interviews had not revealed much new but confirmed earlier information [44]. Participants gave written consent prior to data collection and pseudonyms were assigned to assure anonymity. This study was approved by the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Ethics Review Board.
### Table 1
Participants' demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Age at time of research</th>
<th>Arrival in Canada*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Former Yugoslavia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fereshteh</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ling</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svetlana</td>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin-sung</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mila</td>
<td>Former Yugoslavia</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuela</td>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


#### 3.4. Data collection and analysis

Each participant engaged in a semi-structured interview of one to two hours and the women usually chose their homes for the interview location. Three women completed a 1–2 day activity log; others provided similar data verbally during the interviews. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher or a professional transcriptionist. Each participant was offered her transcribed interview but few took up this option. The primary research question explored leisure participation but a large amount of data generated focused on work, which was evident after the first five interviews were coded. Subsequent to this realization, new interview questions such as “What’s it like to not work in your profession?” and “How is the combination of work and home life different in Canada?” were added. The data from these questions were significant enough to warrant thematic analysis; additional data were created through field notes from interviews. A research journal documented elements of the study, the researcher’s perceptions and offered a place to pose emerging questions and record hunches. These writings contributed to the reflexive process, in which the researcher’s role in the research was examined. Analytic memos were used to explore ways of explaining the data at a more abstract level.

Low-level coding reduced the data into meaningful chunks with codes such as household responsibilities, work, and finances reflecting what appeared in the text. Further abstraction of the data occurred through grouping topics, defined as issues or main points, returning to the literature, and finally working the data into themes that described participants’ perceptions and experiences. Bourdieu’s [7] concepts were used to analyze the themes in ways that allowed for some generalizability of the concepts. Decisions about how to make sense of the data were partly influenced by the researcher’s familiarity with occupational therapy and occupational science concepts. The researcher discussed the study findings with four participants who confirmed that the analysis reflected their experiences.

#### 4. Findings

Compromised Careers is the main theme that described the changed employment trajectories that these women experienced as they resettled in Canada. Three sub-themes, Pre-migration Work, Orchestrating the Day, and Working Below Capacity, are presented to illustrate women’s employment transitions. Table 2 summarizes the changes to participants’ work life post-migration and includes information about educational attainments and family composition.

#### 4.1. Pre-migration work

Most study participants completed post-secondary education that enabled them to enter and maintain professional careers in fields such as psychology, social work, and engineering. Completing post-secondary studies was a family expectation regardless of country of origin, rural or urban location or income. For example, Ling’s parents funded her university education despite the financial strain it caused.

When I was in childhood, I won’t call it middle class because the money my father earned was just enough, you know. So we had a little bit hard time. But later on my brothers and I, we graduate and we work and then economically it became better and better.

The Canadian equivalent of earned qualifications was unclear at times, due to differences in countries’ educational systems, however, there was a strong link between participants being highly educated and having well-paid jobs prior to immigrating. These advantages are reflected in Sonia’s comments about working in India.

I have done bachelor in law and I have one year diploma in industrial relations and personnel management. I was a kindergarten teacher over there for three years, while I was studying at law because the law courses are in evenings. I got a job because I have a lot of qualifications.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant pseudonym</th>
<th>Education/degree outside of Canada</th>
<th>Pre-migration work outside Canada</th>
<th>Post-migration work in Canada (PT/FT)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Systems analyst (FT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graciela</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Health educator (PT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Health educator (FT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>ESL teacher (PT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fereshteh</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher (PT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ling</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>1 year of university</td>
<td>Banking</td>
<td>Newspaper delivery (PT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Svetlana</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin-sung</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mila</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>Designer (PT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolores</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Personal development (PT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuela</td>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** PT = Part-time; FT = Full-time employment.

Work constituted a primary occupation for 12 of the 14 women before they had children, as indicated in Table 2. In their home countries, where both parents were employed and most had young children at home, the women took primary responsibility for child rearing and household work. Family and state support available to women positively affected their ability to maintain careers, care for children and manage a household. As a single parent, Alicia described being able to work full-time because her sister-in-law, sister and mother took turns caring for Alicia’s daughter.

I was by myself with my daughter. I was used to have all the responsibility and I needed to make the way of living. In Mexico I worked over the whole day in the bank... I lived with my brother and my sister-in-law, their apartment was beside mine so it was easy in that way for her to be with people that I trust.

Before her daughter was born, Graciela worked full-time as a psychologist. The family hired inexpensive household help and managed well solely on her husband’s income after their daughter was born. Graciela was disappointed to find that in the Vancouver area at least one and a half incomes were required to meet the high cost of living, despite renting in a small basement suite. Svetlana used state-run child care for 11 hours a day, explaining “Yes we paid some but it’s not big money, all families can afford it. It’s maybe 5% of your salary or 3%, it’s OK.” This government social policy allowed Svetlana and her husband to pursue engineering careers full-time. The differences between women’s pre-migration working life and their post-migration job seeking efforts are reflected in the second sub-theme below.

4.2. Orchestrating the day

Efforts to obtain post-migration employment were influenced by the time participants took to fulfill a gendered division of home and family responsibilities; a role not uncommon to Canadian-born women. Orchestrating the Day [40] conjures up the image of a conductor with her baton, combining individual musical notes to create a melodic symphony. Study participants gave detailed descriptions of day-to-day activities and occupations showing that women were the family organizers or conductors. Isabelle’s description of her role in the family aptly reflected the experiences of other migrant women. Isabelle explains:

It’s like we have a parallel computer, doing things, everything is trying to be scheduled in the background, and trying to keep things synchronized... You have to synchronize activities of five people, whereas my husband is just, he can barely keep up his own.

Women’s accounts of their days varied based on factors such as employment status and the ages of their children. Although some husbands took on cooking or helping children with homework, the wives completed the majority of domestic and familial tasks. Fereshteh spoke of rushing all the time and described the activities she does to maintain family life in this way:

Everyday I get up 6:30 and I do something, go school or volunteer or shopping. Because shopping is a big, big job too. The rest of the day I come back home, make dinner and lunch. When the children come back home they want some snack or small lunch, so I prepare for them. Actually the whole of
the day I give service to them. I arrange everything and it takes until, oh, 7:00 or 8:00 o’clock. Then I can sit down, look at TV and do my homework.

Research participants described their orchestration of the day as challenging because there was no extended family to help them. Women also felt the pressure to succeed in resettlement programs that could facilitate finding employment commensurate with their skills and experiences.

4.3. Working below capacity

Twelve of the 14 research participants were employed prior to resettlement in Canada; now only Isabelle and Rosa work full-time. Interestingly they were the women who were students and thus unemployed before moving to Canada. The collective work history of the participants contrasts with their present situations where only two women work in professions for which they were educated. The under-utilization of women’s skills has negative implications for the Canadian economy as well as for individual women, as Alicia explains.

In Mexico I worked in the bank. I was working in the security department, I was coordinator and needed to control all the security systems. Sometimes I miss that because there I had good money, I had big responsibility and I enjoyed that part of my job.

Beyond enjoyment and income, women recognized the absence of the benefits associated with work. Reflecting on the role she had teaching bank staff Alicia said, “I really enjoyed that part, to teach people. So when I came here I felt so like nothing. I’m not doing anything.”

Fourteen highly educated women with good work experiences immigrated to Canada. Eight of those women are now either unemployed or work part-time and not out of choice. Maira teaches ESL on-call at an immigrant services agency, Dolores conducts monthly personal development seminars for Spanish-speaking women, and Alicia delivers newspapers. The experiences described here exemplify the downward career mobility of many skilled professionals, especially those in regulated professions. English language ability and, to some extent, employment with people who speak one’s native language have strongly influenced the women’s work trajectories in Canada. Isabelle spent a number of years in an English-speaking country, earning post-graduate degrees. One degree prepared Isabelle for the web design job that she started shortly after arriving in Canada. Isabelle had not worked in this area before nor did she have any Canadian work experience so it is likely that the English skills she honed in graduate school helped her find this job. The length of time that women have been in Canada also influences their employability as they are likely to acquire more English over time. Rosa has been in Canada for several years, speaks English well and works full-time offering services in Spanish and English. Fereshteh and Svetlana arrived within the past three years and are still unemployed but working to improve their English skills.

Svetlana’s story showed how different factors function together to limit employment opportunities. Despite Svetlana’s engineering degree, long work history and recent completion of a Canadian Electrical Code course at a local college, she requires more preparation to obtain an engineering license. Svetlana needs advanced English skills in order to pass a competency exam and then supervision by a professional engineer for a number of months. Recognizing the immediate barriers, Svetlana has decided to work as a computer draftsperson. Although it represents work that is below her capacity, Svetlana has assessed her employment options to be more favorable in this area. But there are still other obstacles to overcome, as she explains here.

But if you study my usual things, it’s no time to find job here very seriously. So I must leave my English classes and find job all 8 hours every day or study English. Something’s wrong. So in this period I tried to combine these things but it’s not very successful. Yes, some days I try more closely to find job but I spend two or three hours at the computer, only check at list of vacancies. I don’t do my homework. If I come to class without my homework, I can’t see teacher because I feel very bad and I understand that if I lie and I don’t study anything and nobody will win in this. So I choose to study English.

Svetlana’s example reflects the experiences of three other migrant women who sought work in regulated professions. For all the research participants, working below their capacity was associated with the practice of Canadian employers requiring Canadian work experience and the policies that professions have enacted to ensure that foreign-educated practitioners are competent. These issues, along with the gendered division of labour at home, contribute to the Compromised Careers theme that captures the phenomenon that the majority of the women in this study experienced.
5. Interpretation of the findings

Working with Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, fields and capital offers a way to explore how the findings, encapsulated in the theme Compromised Careers, may apply to other women who are making post-migration employment transitions. Pre-migration Work reflects habitus through the women’s strong disposition towards work as an occupation that they want to resume. Their education and work experiences constitute competencies that they expect will enable them to obtain relevant employment. Prior to migration, most women lived in big cities and thus have tacit knowledge of how metropolitan environments operate, which is also part of habitus. The activities that Orchestrating the Day refer to and the outcomes described in Working Below Capacity reflect the changed fields, the physical and social spaces, in which migrant women live. As the fields change, different strategies are required to address issues such as childcare needs and the lack of extended family to provide social support. The different fields that migrant women are negotiating have a profound impact on their current employment outcomes. Among these institutional fields are professional regulatory bodies and associations, settlement services, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada policies that fund programs such as the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada [13]. Compromised Careers reflects the unexpected downward occupational mobility and loss of economic capital most women in this study experienced. They arrived in Canada under the impression that their education and work experience would be an invaluable resource for reconstructing their lives.

The limited economic capital that migrant women now have is explained by three intersecting phenomena in Fig. 1.

5.1. Requirements of regulated professions

People seeking work in regulated professions must prove their eligibility to practice. An agency evaluates foreign credentials and provides reports for immigrants to use with applications to their profession’s regulatory agency [26]. A long-standing frustration for immigrants trying to meet regulatory standards has been “no national body responsible for the recognition of foreign degrees, professional accreditation and licensing... [and] discrimination related to gender and race and speaking with a non-Canadian accent” [9]. Hiebert [22,24] identifies a disjuncture between the de facto social contract that the Canadian government forms with immigrants and outcomes of job searches that reflect their skills and education. The point system rewards work experience, post-secondary education and credentials [14]. Thus many migrants find themselves in the peculiar position of having proved their worth, only to be thwarted in their job search by non-recognition of credentials, an expectation of Canadian work experience and a high level of English required for the jobs that they seek. Skilled migrants experience delays and sometimes insurmountable obstacles in the process of finding work in their fields [4, 5].
5.2. English language skills

Language ability is seen as the most critical form of cultural capital influencing long-term work outcomes for skilled migrants [24]. It is not, however, a simple issue of obtaining language skills. Discrimination based on the way one speaks English was identified as an employment barrier, implicating “the lens of color” in the negative responses women received from others [22, p. 23]. Migrant women need to draw upon other forms of cultural capital to understand the labour market, develop networks to identify potential work, and deal with interview situations. Personal efforts to negotiate cultural capital, however, may meet forms of discrimination beyond language. Preston and Man [39] reported that women in job interviews were questioned about the legitimacy of their letters of reference, which points to employer discrimination based on beliefs about ‘race’ and/or country of origin. Thus women may use existing and newly-obtained cultural capital, such as speaking English well, but be blocked from employment opportunities by discrimination or racist attitudes.

5.3. Demands of family responsibilities with less support

Meeting family responsibilities with less support than in their home countries contributes to the difficulties that women experience finding work in their professions. Man [32] identifies an extended family structure that exists for some Hong Kong families as one that supports the home and child care work that women do. In nuclear family situations, this in-house support may be unavailable but comparable social support is easily accessible in Hong Kong. Compared to Hong Kong and China, the high costs of day-care and domestic help in Canada are obstacles to women finding work [39]. In a study of Latin American women living in Nova Scotia, researchers also identified the loss of extended family support and the need to care for children at home as impediments to employment and mobility [43]. The lack of childcare prevented some women from attending English classes which, along with inclement weather there, increased their social isolation. These factors lessened their chances of obtaining the kinds of higher paying jobs that demand good English language skills. Because of gendered responsibilities, migrant women in Canada face different barriers to obtaining economic capital than men do. There is now a federal gender-based analysis initiative that aims to evaluate forms of capital broadly and assess how gender differences affect the outcome of immigrants’ applications [11]. The three phenomena result in limited economic capital but also affect each other. The requirements of regulated professions include advanced English skills and higher costs for credential assessment than for Canadian-born applicants. The increased time needed in Canada to fulfill household and family responsibilities leaves less time to attend English classes, and the cost of child care also forms a barrier. Continued exclusion from one’s profession can make it appear ‘natural’ for women to be positioned primarily as homemakers rather than workers engaged in competitive employment.

6. Discussion

A critical theory perspective examines institutions, attitudes and expectations of what is normal or natural, and analyzes how this sustains existing power relations. This discussion addresses what is known about forms of human capital and employment outcomes for migrants and explores why these outcomes occur, drawing on Bourdieu’s theory. Specifically, the impact of devalued foreign education is presented as a systemic issue where prejudice, discrimination and the practices of professional bodies intersect and create inequitable employment opportunities. Explanations for this phenomenon are offered that demonstrate the complexity of the problem, including the impact of a changed Canadian economy and education level of its workforce. The discussion concludes with suggestions for changes that could be made at organizational and political levels to hasten transition to employment for migrants.

6.1. Foreign credentials devalued

Recognizing that employment outcomes are lower for migrants than for Canadian-born workers, Thompson [50] sought to identify the kinds of capital that were most likely to enable migrants to obtain high-level employment in Canada. Using a logistic regression model, Thompson’s findings demonstrated strong support for the hypothesis that foreign education received in certain countries is not deemed equivalent to Canadian education. Education as cultural capital correlated at the baccalaureate and master’s level with lower than expected employment outcomes when it was obtained from countries in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and South-
ern and Eastern Europe. These findings raise issues of prejudice (attitudes) and hiring discrimination (practices) based on 'race,' ethnicity and beliefs about the rigor of education obtained in countries within these regions. Many countries within these regions are viewed as non-western and/or 'developing' and therefore are perceived negatively when compared to Canada’s two historic colonizing groups, the French and the English. Compared to when “Europeans comprised over 90 percent of all immigrants to Canada prior to 1960” (p. 7), Thompson [50] notes that in 1996 this number dropped to 20% at which time more immigrants began arriving from Asian, African and Latin American countries.

6.2. Human capital wasted

Bauder [5,6] takes the position that the de-valuing of foreign-educated credentials constitutes a systematic exclusion of certain immigrants from high-level jobs within Canadian society. This process marginalizes these groups, and in doing so, reproduces a Canadian professional class with particular characteristics. He places responsibility for this situation squarely on professional bodies that create accreditation and licensing criteria. Bauder [5] argues that this exclusion through de-skilling is more apparent in professional organizations than labour unions and results in a flexible, low-wage labour force. He contends that the professional organizations maintain their boundaries and membership through exclusion whereas labour groups build strength and numbers through inclusion. While well-educated and skilled labour is a bonus to employers, because they receive more than they pay for, this phenomenon wastes valuable human capital which, paradoxically, is necessary for acceptance into Canada. Bauder challenges the expectation that it is natural for immigrants’ income to take many years to catch up to that of Canadian-born workers. His analysis is aimed at the institutional level, specifically professions that accredit themselves and have the power to populate and reproduce their professional class with selected members.

Reitz [42] also implicates institutional factors in the surprisingly low economic return of newly-arrived, well-educated immigrants at a time when the knowledge economy prevails and government immigration policy ranks post-secondary education highly. On the issue of racial discrimination in hiring, Reitz acknowledges that it occurs but proposes that it is an insufficient explanation because individuals who are typically identified as ‘white’ also experience differential treatment. One explanation Reitz gives for the continued discounting of migrant education is that newcomers are competing with Canadian-born workers whose educational attainments have increased markedly in the past three decades. Thus employers can hire individuals whose educational background is familiar to them, have Canadian work experience of some sort and references that are more easily accessed than foreign ones. Reitz suggests that fundamental institutional changes must be made to lessen the disparity between Canadian-born workers and migrants’ earnings and that further adjustment to selection criteria for immigrants is unlikely to be useful. To identify these changes, Reitz calls for further analysis of the current knowledge-based economy and how skilled migrants can contribute to its success, and for an understanding of how the labour market will be structured in the future.

6.3. Current initiatives and suggested policy changes

The Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) office offers recent evidence of labour integration progress in its effort to bring together provincial and territorial stakeholders (employers, post-secondary institutions, regulatory bodies and the like) and develop projects to expedite "assessment and recognition of qualifications acquired in other countries" [15]. Transparency is one of the FCR program objectives and is exemplified by informing migrants about how to have their credentials assessed prior to immigration and ensuring that they understand how to remediate any obstacles to approval. The FCR has recently expanded credential assessment services within three of the top immigration source countries: India, China and the Philippines [16]. Another program objective, consistency, guides new processes that enable recognition of credentials across Canada after they have been approved in any one Canadian jurisdiction. Many of the FCR initiatives address policy changes called for in a report by the National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada [37]. One example is the FCR program’s development of a database of non-Canadian engineering degree programs to facilitate assessment of migrants’ credentials. As proof of their success, the FCR reports that in 2005 Ontario’s certification of foreign-educated engineers outnumbered that of Canadian-educated graduates [15]. A recent CIC announcement described plans to expand the kinds of services noted above to skilled workers who are not members of regulated professions. There are other ideas for policy changes that could change the transition to work
for migrant women and significantly reduce the Compromised Careers phenomenon raised in this research. Included among these are the:

- Creation of a federally-funded child care strategy that would provide low-cost care for newcomers to Canada as well as all residents and citizens,
- Incorporation of prior learning assessment as a way to assess, acknowledge and ‘package’ for Canadian employers the work experiences of women whose career experience is in non-regulated professions,
- Creation of post-secondary programs that are funded to assist migrants with upgrading their skills and education, to facilitate credential and/or professional recognition and licensure,
- Continued research using the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) that gathers data on where migrants received their education, pre- and post-migration [50], which could further examine forms of human capital and their relationship to employment outcomes,
- Development of initiatives to reduce racism in employment settings by addressing systemic barriers rather than initiating cultural sensitivity programs.

The progress made by CIC initiatives is encouraging and addresses the underutilization of migrant work potential which has resulted in a “brain waste” phenomenon that benefits no one [37]. It is in everyone’s best interest – migrants, employers and the Canadian economy – to develop and maintain equitable policies that enable newcomers to make the transition to work smoothly and expeditiously.

7. Limitations of the research

The participant sample, data collection methods, and involvement of participants in the data analysis comprise the limitations of the research design. A criticism of a participant sample of 14 is relevant when combined with single interviews, rather than the use of multiple points of data generation. The well-educated participant sample limits the variation among participants that could elicit different experiences, and therefore influence the themes that were formed. Variation could have occurred in geographic location, education, and employment status.

Attempts to triangulate data sources, using activity logs, were less successful than anticipated. Conducting focus groups might have addressed the issue of limited data collection methods and sources. As a form of reciprocity, there was a plan to involve many participants in the data analysis phase and in doing so, incorporate their voices into the findings more fully. Four participants did confirm the final analysis and this enhances the credibility of the findings.

Future research about the process of resettlement could incorporate a longer and more reciprocal research relationship with participants. A participatory action research design could incorporate the principles of critical theory in practical ways, thus facilitating empowerment through research. Meadows, Thurston and Melton [33] suggest that although most immigrants arrive to Canada in good health, the process of immigration and resettlement puts their health at risk due to stresses resulting from changes in employment and income, as well as social isolation. It would be worthwhile to determine the extent to which employment could have a positive impact on migrants’ health and lessen the negative effects of resettlement.

8. Conclusion

The occupational transitions that women experience subsequent to resettlement in a new country are revealed through the intersection of individuals’ stories and institutional environments. Excerpts of stories communicate the activities and responsibilities of everyday life for migrant women who are negotiating multiple roles, speaking English in new contexts, and seeking employment. Whereas the storied accounts offer a nuanced perspective of human agency, the critical theory approach directs attention to the ‘ruling relations’ that shape individual efforts and desires. The power exerted over people’s lives by institutional processes related to resettlement, can trump an individual’s motivation and efforts to re-engage in meaningful occupations such as work.

These findings arose within a specific historic time and place; when highly educated migrants were arriving Canada; in this instance to the metropolitan Vancouver area. Policies and practices that affect immigration and integration are changing as a result of gender-based analysis, census data, Canada’s economic needs, shifts in political power, and global migration. The use of Bourdieu’s [7] theory of human capital to analyze the thematic findings reveals inequitable treatment of a specific group of migrants and also facilitates the transferability of the research findings beyond this participant sample. Insights arising from analytic concepts
References


