

Ethnic Migrants: Perspectives on Support Programs, Employability and Resettlement Challenges in Ottawa, Canada

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Abstract

This article discusses service gap in employment support and resettlement programs in the City of Ottawa from the ethnic minority migrants' perspectives. In this qualitative study, migrants discussed challenges of obtaining jobs, workplace culture, resettlement and social well-being. They shared their personal experiences with unemployment, employment services and consequences of complicated resettlement processes since they arrived at their city of resettlement. Participants' stories were gathered through intensive interviews lasting between one and two hours with 6 ethnic minority migrants and one focus group interview with 4 ethnic minority migrants, for a total of 10 participants. Using grounded theory method, interviews were transcribed, coded, categorized and analyzed. The outcome highlighted the lack of effective social programs and resettlement services tailored towards migrants needs as the cause of their inability to effectively integrate into mainstream society socially and economically.

Keywords: Migration, ethnicity, employment, services, program, social well-being

Background

The challenges that ethnic migrants face in their socio-economic integration, in the process of resettlement, employment and social well-being in Ottawa, has been well cited and documented by scholars and policy-makers. The purpose of this article however, is to explore service gaps as discussed by migrants from their own perspectives. In doing so, I have reviewed two reports by the Social Planning Council of Ottawa, a nonprofit community organization, and Statistics Canada reports, to provide a background illustration of ethnic minority participation in the City of Ottawa socio economic development and attainment. The mentioned reports were conducted between the years 2001 and 2006 to evaluate the success of economic integration of the ethnic minority immigrants in the local labor market. The study indicated that the ethnic minority population in Ottawa had experienced 22.3% growth, and immigrant contribution in the local labor market was about 79%. The report also indicated that 75.1% of recent immigrants are ethnic minorities and that 38.8% of the ethnic minority population in Ottawa are not immigrants. Further, 63.2% of ethnic minorities are youth 15-24 years old. Refugees comprised 17.9% of residents. According to the report, the labor force participation rate among the ethnic minority migrants is 67.6%, with an employment rate of 60.3% and an unemployment rate of 10.8%. Some 1,650 recent immigrants left Ottawa for another destination in the years 2001 to 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2006).

According to the study of the Social Planning Council of Ottawa cited above, the City of Ottawa was the recipient of the most highly educated migrants admitted to Canada in 2006. About 52% of its population aged 25 to 64 had university degrees. The study also revealed that about 66.4% of newly arrived migrants (2001 to 2006) to the City of Ottawa were holders of post-secondary graduate level education (Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2009).

These challenges of socio-economic integration and the high rate of unemployment and underemployment among ethnic minority immigrants were also discussed in a study written by Steward (2010). The author posited five major themes that revealed a "New Canadian" frustration with the labor market, anxiety about deep-rooted inequality, rejection, crushing personal and household debt, and the importance of government intervention. Even though this study was not conducted in the City of Ottawa, the conclusions are not far from the perceptions of the ethnic groups in the City of Ottawa, which will be discussed further in the discussion section of this article.

In this context, Statistics Canada indicated that among the 84% of the general population who have a post-secondary education in Ottawa, 53.8% were immigrants. Further, in the year 2006, about 46% of the total number of migrants received their education within Canada, and 84.4% of recent immigrants took their post-secondary qualification outside Canada, a group known as foreign trained professionals (Statistics Canada, 2006).

The Social Planning Council of Ottawa has also cited that the highest percentages of the recent ethnic minority migrants coming to Ottawa had post-secondary qualifications. Yet these high credentials are not reflected in the types of jobs applicants were able to obtain, despite their over-representation in the local labor force. As such, their group's unemployment rate remained high at 18%, especially among recent immigrants aged 15-24, and 13% among recent migrants aged 25-plus. This percentage is comparable to a typical unemployment rate during the 1933 collapse into the Great Depression (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Policymakers have tried to understand, discuss, and meet the challenges of unemployment among ethnic minority migrants in Canada by using statistical analyses and by presenting quantitative data on skills, levels of participation, and contributions made by these migrants in local cities of resettlements. These reports, produced annually, tend to state the obvious in terms of participation, qualification, and types of jobs ethnic minority migrants were able to obtain within the Canadian labor market in general and the local labor market in Ottawa. However, these reports have not addressed the concern of the majority of their members who strive for jobs that meet their needs, career aspirations, and social well-being.

Among all of the major cities in Canada, Ottawa remained a first choice home for the highly skilled and educated ethnic minority migrants due to the concentration of governments and diplomatic missions in this city. Ottawa is home to three levels of municipal, provincial and federal governments, which are considered major local employers. As noted above, through the Statistics Canada report, the demographics of the migrants have changed with the new point system, which gives more points to the highly educated migrants than to vocationally trained ones like nurses, truck drivers, plumbers and the like. Since the increased number of highly educated ethnic minority immigrant workers was not properly utilized (as mentioned earlier), the practice was perceived by these migrants as an indication of systematic discrimination with a serious negative impact on the potential for socio-economic development in Canada given that major human resource capabilities of ethnic minority were not being used for the benefit of the country.

For these reasons, the ethnic minority group has found its case to be unique and not well understood by policymakers, employment, and Social Work professionals. Thus, there is a need to explore the issues of integration and resettlement among these groups in Ottawa from their own perspectives. That way, what is being said can stand alongside what is not being said and can help in understanding the basis of perceptions of the ethnic migrants and the factors that aided in the development of such perceptions among them.

Methodology

The research participants were interviewed to discuss their experiences with support programs and challenges of economic attainment, resettlement, and social well-being. The interviews explored viewpoints of the participating migrants on how they have perceived employment services, resettlement programs and how they resolved these challenges. Interviews included written field notes, observations, and one-on-one conversations with the participants. This process also included sound-recording tapes and field notes, as discussed by Ellen (1984). The information collected was written up afterward, classified, coded, and interpreted in conjunction with grounded theory. This study uses the qualitative design of grounded theory, which was historically developed and successfully used in sociology by Glaser and Strauss. Their first work, leading to the development of this method, was their research on dying hospital patients—research that used the constant comparative method, which became a key element in what has become known as grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1998).

Grounded theory is defined as an inductive reasoning process emanating from a corpus of information that facilitates development of theory (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Participants in this study were identified as ethnic minorities using the definition of the Employment Equity Act of 1986. In this process, ten ethnic minority professionals/migrants were interviewed. These participants have lived in Ottawa between three and thirty years. Participants have met the following screening criteria to participate in the study: (1) self-identified as a member of the groups targeted by the Employment Equity Act under the cluster of ethnic minority migrant, (2) unemployed or underemployed, and (3) living in Ottawa, Canada for the last three years.

Coding and Analysis

My role, therefore, was to facilitate the conversation and record the experiences that represented the voices of the participants from their stories. The challenges were how to carefully access others' perceptions, observe their actions and place meaning to their language in terms of cultural affiliation. As Grills (1998) discussed, social objects, such as ideas, language, actions, symbols, physical objects and identities, do not provide intrinsic meaning. As such, researchers need to understand people's perceptions of their own world. This idea was further supported by Denzin (2007) in his discussion of grounded theory and the politics of interpretation, which gives researchers wide latitude in utilizing grounded theory as a research method. The interview materials were labeled, and categories begin to emerge and develop, along with their properties and dimensions. The second phase was the axial coding, in which connections are made between categories to identify conditions that led to the development of these categories and in which circumstances they appear. The third phase of the analysis involved selective coding, in which the main category to be used was identified.

The process of identifying this main category involved development of the theory through an analytical description of the potential main category. The main category is then compared and related to the other categories and validates the story line against the data. A series of memos then form the story line. Any gap in the story will be rewritten by returning to the participants for additional information. I have used MS Word 2007 to code key words in participants' transcribed interviews and subsequently color-coded the initial codes in clients' stories and distributed words along developed concepts of what they stand for as categories. Triangulations, constant comparisons, interrelation of concepts, categories and memos have led in the case of this study to seven key themes—This process has helped in providing a sequence of steps of data analysis throughout the research analysis and in keeping the information flow and line of thoughts focused, as it was a considerable undertaking framing the entire process from initial coding to the development of the storyline.

Results

Three themes have emerged from participants' perceptions on lack of support programs and resettlement services which consisted of 1) *programs and services*, 2) *disappointment and frustration* and 3) *social well-being*.

Theme.1. Support Services and Programs

This theme has emerged from participants' experiences concerning access to support programs, policies and requirements set by local institutions. Such requirements are prerequisites that immigrants must meet before being recognized as desirable candidates to participate in support programs.

Juana stated:

In Canada, there are no institutionalized programs in place for immigrants to work in their fields. I know some doctors who are working as personal support workers, or driving taxis--what a waste of experience. I think government has a power to change this situation of foreign doctors, but why they don't do it, I don't know.

Adam puts it this way:

Ottawa and, Canada in general, lack a program that integrates migrants into their profession, a program that would start with assessment when a person is still fresh with their knowledge and experience when they first arrive in Canada. We need programs such as job placement and customized training to work in fields of profession. I think such an opportunity would give us an exposure to the system and maximize our chances to pass interviews and employment tests.

To the contrary, participants thought that experience gaps were often perceived by employers as personal deficits when, in fact, these gaps were a matter of previous work experience obtained in country-of-origin and educational background being inappropriately assessed and recognized. Nonetheless, it is difficult to find programs that help with placement opportunities or mentorship in mainstream Canadian institutions, allowing participants to gain relevant workplace culture and communication skills.

As **Samsam** commented:

to have a residency, I was asked for three references from previous teachers/professors at universities overseas. I finished my school five years before coming to Canada and lived in Canada for 10 years; it means that I will have about 15-20 years from school. So how would I find a teacher who taught me? I think they might not be there...also, immigrants write an additional screening test that cost \$1000 and a language test, both oral and written. In addition, the provincial regulation demands additional residency and specialization, even if I had one already.

Further, there is a problem of securing residency even if I passed the tests, because they have quotas of 100 positions for Canadians who finish here and only 25 for immigrants. I think they are mainly protecting Canadian graduates who normally have 125 positions. This number has recently changed, but I don't know how much it reflected the actual number of foreign-trained doctors who have secure jobs in their field after completing work placement.

Participants who have been in Ottawa for more than 30 years have discussed lack of information on policies concerning labor relations, human rights, ageism, gender biases, and workplace harassment.

Joseph's comment

After 30 years of living in Canada, I started to feel that my age become a barrier to employment because some employers preferred young people, not a guy like me. I have also noticed gender biases in hiring practices in Ottawa, as some employers preferred hiring women than men to attract customers....of course color of skin is the obvious, even though employers are trying to be polite about stating it... also, nationality is another tool of discrimination employers used.

Theme.2. Disappointments and Frustrations

This theme emerged from participants' concerns and emotional reactions to the complicated process of social and economic reintegration while living in the City of Ottawa/Canada.

As **Morgan** stated

The method of social and support services have been developed to create a lot of barriers to migrants in the City of Ottawa, as it has been designed for the mainstream in terms of accessibility, eligibility and delivery of the programs and services. This kind of practice in services provision or support created a systemic barrier to tools and support services required to help me integrate into mainstream society. Canada's social and employment services have not been responsive to my needs; therefore, I felt marginalized and underserved. For me, one of the most important priorities is a need to develop more accessible and appropriate social and employment services that address specific needs of migrants, and in particular the ethnic minority migrants.

Feelings of discouragement and frustration were also expressed in the feelings of demotion when working in lower entry levels under professionals who hold the same qualifications with less work experience. This was the case both among professionals who worked in lower entry jobs in their own profession and among those who worked in a different profession unrelated to their qualifications and work experience.

Cynthia added

A person will notice that there is no hope in this country after it is too late. People always try their best to accomplish their goal here in Canada, but it usually takes years before they understand that they have wasted their time.

Hassan recalls

After I had acquired Canadian education and experience, I still had challenge to develop a network and contacts for employment leads, a simple task which I found very difficult to accomplish as an ethnic minority in Ottawa, Canada. I was also competing for jobs with people born in Canada and having experience, network and understand social contacts.

James muses

My hope is on the new generation in Canada who are known as color-blind generation; this young generation don't care where people come from, which makes me feel that my grandkids would live in a racist-free Canada. But right now ...forget it; there will be no change. I also feel that as a parent...I started to pass my frustrations to children because I think that I have failed, and that children should do well instead, because they were born here...I think that was an additional burden that children take on from parents.

Chuo stated

I always feel like a loser for being here without a job and unable to raise a family. I am thinking of moving back to Thailand to follow my friends who have left Canada to settle there. I heard they are doing well, helping people, and are not willing to come back to Canada.

Theme.3. Personal and Social Well-being

The discussion under this theme was based on the participants' perceptions on how their new society had impacted their personal growth, health, social relations, and social well-being.

Simon's comment:

I moved from Quebec to Ottawa because of the school system policies of forcing kids to study in French instead of English. As unilingual English, I have failed to obtain a meaningful job and am unable to help my children with their homework. I decided to move to Ottawa, where my kids have access to English schools...My employability situation didn't change, but at least I was able to help my kids and followed their progress in school. Moving to a new city was just like migrating to a new country.

In this case, individuals who possessed advanced skills and qualifications from Canada or back home preferred work overseas, where their training, education and skills were recognized and applied. These have created cycles of secondary migration and instability.

Xin stated:

I still believe that Canada has great values I liked; however, I do not want to live here poor forever...I have a Master's degree from Canada and learned to speak French; I think my skills would be competitive in China. I am also planning to complete another certificate at Algonquin College for one year if granted funding. After I finish, I hope to find a job here in Canada. If not, I will continue to look for jobs in China.

Adam also commented:

... I applied for a Ph.D. at the University of Guelph, but found Social Services jobs were by employers who were receptive to work with ethnic minority migrants. Later, I found that it was difficult to reach all of my potential in Ottawa with my given skills and education. I then applied to international organizations and found a job overseas with the UNDP.

Ricko remarked:

Many of Latinos are moving back to their country of origin after they receive their citizenships, as they no longer tolerate discrimination, which led to high unemployment among Latinos in Ottawa. I think they discriminate against us more than other ethnic minority groups...When I meet with the MP, I will give him more information on Latino Canadians who are leaving Ottawa to go back home. He also needs to know the number of eligible voters among the Latino community who isolated themselves from participation in voting exercises in Ottawa because they knew it would not change their situation.

Discussion

The social and economic integrations barriers and the onerous requirements placed upon the ethnic minority migrants were perceived as the main causes of frustration with self, system and society. Lack of self-esteem tended to become yet another barrier to fair economic attainment, as well as depression leading to lack of motivation and permanent unemployment, feeling of demotion - in which a person starts to underestimate his/her ability, or feeling unfairly treated by the society. With this emotional baggage, any social, community or professional employment programs were perceived as dysfunctional and designed to serve only the interests of the mainstream communities.

This cynicism and sense of futility is not surprising, since most of those who have been in Canada for more than 30 years have participated in these programs over and over without success. Further, participants also discussed concerns with the lack of early intervention through assessment and referrals to appropriate programs and trainings geared toward facilitating transition into the labor force or retrain for new skills. Participant felt that the lack of customized employment and social programs has let them flounder until they figured it out for themselves.

They thought that employment and resettlement programs did not provide a clear understanding of the expectations of the Canadian social norms and mainstream culture. Participants felt that current support programs in Ottawa are mainly geared toward understanding the process of entering the Canadian labor market and understanding requirements for obtaining jobs in Canada. They felt inadequate to comprehend the complicated process and the endless hurdles and barriers to success in Canadian society.

The socio-cultural realities of the Canadian labor market and the many and ambiguous requirements placed on ethnic minority professionals have created a perception that having a Canadian education may reduce prejudices when competing for jobs with people having the same Canadian qualification. As explained, it is relatively true that recognition of the Canadian education and abandonment of foreign credentials has improved the minority migrants' chances to gain jobs through work placement and internships. According to the participants, it did not mean an equal status with Canadian-born candidates when competing for a job, as employers would still prefer a Canadian-born candidate with the same qualifications because of such factors as cultural familiarity, gender, business experience, and age differences. In this context, participants discussed the inadequacies of provincial and municipal support programs designed to help migrants effectively integrate into the Canadian society. One notable shortcoming was the lack of customized support programs geared toward the social and economic needs of ethnic minority migrants. In addition, programs lack resources such as staff competent to deal with barriers to employment specific to ethnic minority migrant professionals and cultural variations. Participants thought, these programs should have more integrity, professional expertise, and the real world knowledge needed to maximize migrants' abilities to secure jobs in their fields of professions.

These services and programs gaps consisted of lack of programs specifically geared toward ethnic minority migrants, lack of early interventions in areas such as information, customized trainings, economic resources and support, protectionism as evident in the practices of unions, regulatory bodies and professional associations, discrimination apparent in the unwillingness of federal, provincial and municipal institutions to welcome ethnic migrants to practice, supported and mentored by a mainstream professionals, a licensing process that was characterized as costly and time-consuming, involving multiple exams and a residency requirement made nearly impossible to fulfill that still did not guarantee access to employment at the end of placement, biased credentials assessments and accreditation, credential assessments required to provide proof of equivalency to local degrees and unfamiliar and unexpected workplace culture and social norms.

For example, those who were not successful in securing jobs in their field of specialization had to accept entry level, low paying jobs not normally accepted by their Canadian-born counterparts with the same skills and qualifications. These have created cycles of relocation among disadvantaged ethnic minority migrants groups between municipalities and provinces. The reason for movements was not on to secure specific job, field, or profession; rather, the focus was on alleviating poverty and temporarily re-establishing personal or family finances (reducing debt).

As well, changes in socioeconomic development and the political environment in regional countries or in the countries of origin attracted some professionals to go to work in these countries, or to go back home. The phenomenon of working overseas or returning back home attracted men more than women. As a result, women can suddenly find themselves single mothers and having to cope with parenting, work and discipline of dependent(s), especially young adults, alone.

Consequently, some other unorganized ethnic minority migrants and groups have given up pursuing their rights due to cultural and religious stigma. These groups have preferred to engage in smaller community businesses such as restaurants and convenience stores, or in technical and labor-related jobs. These job areas include computers, construction, security guard work, and driving. Giving up hope in this way simply means isolation from the mainstream community socially, culturally and economically. At this stage, any future plans for employment in Canada are suspended, alternate employment options were explored and the attachment to country (Canada) becomes unjustifiable. Subsequently, people begin to look for jobs regionally and abroad.

Towards Improved Policies

1. Effective integration of ethnic minority migrants into the Canadian society socially and economically, will therefore require an early exposure to workplace culture and the way the labor market works. Such intervention would save many wasted dollars, wasted hours and enormous turmoil.

Practically, this could be achieved through work placement, internships, mentorship and job shadowing. It would be added value if Canadian institutions were willing to accept ethnic minority migrants to join their institutions to practice and be mentored by Canadian professionals. It does not make sense to give potential immigrants priority admission to Canada and tell them their skills are needed and then abandon them to a complicated process in which they endure systemic racism and protectionism and wherein jobs and access to economic opportunities are reserved for mainstream Canadian-born professionals.

2. Protectionism was one of integration barriers discussed by the participants in the context of the additional requirements and hurdles, the detrimental wording of foreign credential assessments, and, in the case of the medical professions, complicated testing and additional residencies that are also subject to protectionist rationing in favor of the mainstream Canadian. These hurdles were ubiquitous, including the requirements of regulatory bodies, professional colleges, and even union affiliation. These also included, rejections associated with biased assessment of migrants' experience and qualifications. Inasmuch as employers and trainers were from the mainstream society, the participants suspected that professional judgments and decisions were influenced by racial, ethnic and cultural biases. The policymakers depended heavily on the regulatory bodies for credential assessment and interpreted this as an accurate indication of the candidates' ability to function in their field of profession. Participants felt that this sort of evaluation and its letter of assessments were meaningless and worthless, except for the minimal confirmation of the authenticity of degrees and the degree-granting institution. Other professions such as medicine, engineering and teaching required further accreditation, licensing, regulatory body registration, and union affiliations. Participants' disparities were discussed in form of difficulties with licensing, accreditation and evaluations, which they thought took an unduly long time to assess, were costly and were not recognized by employers. The pattern of requiring minority foreign-trained doctors to take additional tests and training not required of their Canadian-born counterparts in the same field, with the same qualifications, was also a barrier.
3. Further, after passing the prescribed test, ethnic foreign-trained doctors in the field of medicine were required to secure residency in the rural areas to practice under the supervision of a practicing Canadian doctor. Participants discussed this requirement as challenging due to the unwillingness of many hospitals to allow ethnic minority foreign-trained medical residents to practice in hospitals under the supervision of a practicing Canadian doctor. Minority migrants who had passed the required exams were given a fraction of the residency spaces available annually—in fact, less than a quarter of the total number allocated to the Canadian born who graduated from Canadian medical institutions.
4. Isolation was acknowledged by some members of the ethnic minority migrant group as a byproduct of chronic unemployment, settling for dead-end jobs and cycling through employment, social services and skills development programs until retirement. Further, isolation was discussed in relation to unemployment as well as to the process of finding employment and the complicated requirements to re-enter the local labor market. Moreover, research on each of these implications separately will provide additional information on effective psycho-social integration of the ethnic minority migrants.
5. Frustration was discussed as a result of years invested in trainings, job seeking and job retention. Participants who managed to complete training in Canada capitalized on their Canadian education and experience to look for jobs in field of profession, or related occupations. In addition, frustration was discussed as the cause of permanent unemployment among participants with more than 30 years without permanent jobs since their arrival in Canada. At this stage the sense of mistrust, isolation and disappointment with the system and employment programs was highly developed. Hence, dealing with personal issues overtakes the focus on a resettlement process. As well, ongoing feelings of disappointment and betrayal gradually led to frustration and mistrust in the system and support programs.
6. Participants considered the immigration system and its bureaucracy to be the main obstacles to individual progress, as professionals and policymakers believed that they understood migrants' problems better than the migrants did. Therefore, migrants questioned professionals' knowledge, judgment, and competence and subsequently discounted or ignored their advice. Interestingly, some participants felt they developed a stronger sense of determination to help them withstand the complicated process of obtaining jobs make Ottawa a home of resettlement. This sense of determination in the face of adversity kept their spirits up while seeking meaningful employment or completing training in a society where they felt they were treated differently.

7. Finally, hardships, poverty and all of these social conditions discussed above, were perceived as elements that forced them to consider an alternative approach, such as taking retraining, accepting survival jobs, quitting jobs, relocating to other municipalities, giving up their profession, finding jobs overseas or returning to their countries-of-origin.

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