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# The Interlocking Oppressions of Employment-related Discrimination for Internationally Trained Engineers in Canada

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## THE INTERLOCKING OPPRESSIONS OF EMPLOYMENT- RELATED DISCRIMINATION FOR INTERNATIONALLY TRAINED ENGINEERS IN CANADA

*Ferzana Chaze*  
*Usha George*

**Abstract:** Social work has a long history of engagement with immigrants and refugees. However, the demographic profile of immigrants to Canada and their needs are changing. The past few decades have seen an increase in the numbers of highly educated professional immigrants from non-traditional countries of immigration. Though not typically thought of in the social work profession as a vulnerable population, this group faces multiple oppressions in Canada. This article reports on the findings of 20 in-depth interviews with internationally trained engineers and their experiences of discrimination either while searching for work, or in the workplace after employment was secured. Two key findings that emerge from this paper have important insights for social work practice. The first indicates internationally trained engineers experience discrimination on multiple axes pertaining to their social identities. The second reveals that a few participants did not view themselves as victims of discrimination, even though they acknowledged discrimination to be at play when others like them were unable to secure jobs as engineers. The findings challenge traditional views of who constitute vulnerable populations and disrupt notions of immigrant populations needing social work intervention only at the point when they are unable to cope with their cultural and social adaptations. The findings highlight the need for social work education to train students in the areas of advocacy, anti-racism, and anti-oppressive practice in order to better meet the needs of these groups.

**Keywords:** Interlocking oppression, intersectionality, employment discrimination, internationally trained immigrants

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**Abstré :** Depuis longtemps le service social a eu un engagement envers les immigrants et réfugiés. Toutefois, le profil démographique des immigrants au Canada, ainsi que leurs besoins, sont en train de changer. Au cours des dernières décennies il y a eu augmentation du nombre d'immigrants professionnels hautement éduqués venant de pays non traditionnels. Bien que, du point de vue de la profession du service social on ne les considère pas comme population vulnérable, ce groupe fait face à de multiples oppressions au Canada. Cet article rapporte les résultats de vingt entrevues détaillées avec des ingénieurs formés à l'étranger portant sur leurs expériences par rapport à la discrimination, soit pendant la recherche d'emploi, soit à leur lieu de travail une fois un emploi trouvé. Deux constatations majeures issues de cette étude fournissent des révélations précieuses pour la pratique du travail social. La première constatation indique que les ingénieurs formés à l'étranger ressentent la discrimination sur différents axes par rapport à leur identité sociale. La deuxième constatation révèle que certains participants ne s'estiment pas victimes de discrimination bien qu'ils admettent que la discrimination était peut-être un facteur lorsque d'autres, parmi leurs semblables, ne pouvaient se trouver un emploi en tant qu'ingénieurs. Ces résultats remettent en question les vues traditionnelles sur les critères qui définissent les populations vulnérables et, perturbent la notion que les populations immigrantes n'ont besoin d'intervention en service social qu'au moment où elles sont incapables d'assumer leur adaptation culturelle et sociale. Les résultats soulignent le besoin d'ajouter aux programmes d'études en service social une formation plus poussée en matière de défense des droits, de lutte contre le racisme et de pratique antioppression afin de mieux répondre aux besoins de ces groupes.

**Mots-clés :** oppression interreliée, intersectionnalité, discrimination dans l'emploi, immigrants formés à l'étranger

### Introduction

*SOCIAL WORK HAS A LONG HISTORY* of engagement with immigrants and refugees. In Canada, social workers come into contact with immigrants through immigrant settlement services as well as through other health and human services. The demographic profile of immigrants to Canada and their needs are changing. The past few decades have seen an increase in the numbers of highly educated professional immigrants from non-traditional countries of immigration. Though not typically identified as a vulnerable population, this group faces multiple oppressions in Canada. Immigrants to the country are likely to be the victims of racial/cultural prejudice and suffer employment disparities in comparison to the native-born population (Smith & Jackson, 2002). Many of the labour market barriers for immigrants have to do with credential recognition and Canadian work experience (Basran & Zong, 1998), which some authors have attributed to racism (Henry & Tator, 2006). The barriers to economic integration contribute to new immigrants being one of the five

main groups to experience poverty in Canada (Fleury, 2007), which in turn make these groups vulnerable to a host of other problems, including poor health.

This article reports on the findings of 20 in-depth interviews with internationally trained engineers and their experiences of discrimination either while looking for work, or in the workplace. The two key findings that emerge from this paper—that internationally trained engineers experience multiple interlocking oppressions based on their social identities and, that a few participants did not view themselves as victims of discrimination, even though they acknowledged discrimination to be at work when others like them were unable to secure jobs as engineers—have important insights for social work practice. This paper is divided into five sections. The first introduces the study and its significance, the second section reviews the literature on discrimination and interlocking oppressions. The third section details the methodology and describes the profile of the respondents from this study. The fourth describes the key findings. The fifth section discusses the findings and discusses the implications for the social work profession.

### **Discrimination and Interlocking Oppressions**

Discrimination in employment has been defined as “negative employment decisions based on status such as birthplace or origin, rather than based solely on credentials and qualifications directly related to the potential productivity of the employee” (Reitz, 2001, p. 4). Pager and Sheperd (2008) note that discrimination is seen as a practice or behaviour that is different from prejudice, stereotypes, and racism, though these can well be viewed as the underlying motivations behind the discrimination. Discrimination can take the form of verbal harassment, exclusion, bullying, and incivility (Raver & Nishii, 2010) and can be seen as comprising of two components. First, the person receives differential treatment based on his/her race. Second, though the treatment might be equal for all individuals, systems are set up in such a manner that there are disparate impacts (Pager & Sheperd, 2008). Henry & Tator (2006) view employment discrimination as a form of systemic racism; while established hiring practices are not necessarily discriminatory in themselves, they serve to exclude disadvantaged groups, which in turn reinforce the belief that these groups are not suitable for the work.

An analysis of the national *Ethnic Diversity Study* data by Banerjee (2006) informs us that “fairly widespread” perceptions of workplace discrimination exist among visible minorities in Canada. The perception of discrimination was more often reported by visible minorities who were immigrants rather than those who were native-born. Immigrants who had spent a longer period of time in Canada, and those who were university educated but unable to find managerial/professional employment,

were more likely to perceive workplace discrimination. Gender differences were found to be related to income discrimination and perceived workplace discrimination. Income differences were positively related to perceived workplace discrimination for visible minority men but not for women from these groups (Banerjee, 2006).

The literature highlighted discrimination faced by individuals in hiring practices and on the job. Discrimination was based on race or ethnicity (Krings & Olivares, 2007; Pager & Sheperd, 2008; Al-Waqfi & Jain, 2008), gender (Adam, 1981), age (Bendick, Jackson & Romero, 1996), ability (Ravaud, Madiot & Ville, 1992), sexual orientation (Poulin, Gouliquer, & Moore, 2009), language ability or accent (Lindley, 2002; Creese & Wiebe, 2009; Henry, & Ginsberg, 1985), religion (Lindley, 2002), and foreign credentials (Henry & Tator, 2006). Often it is a complex interaction between the characteristics of the job-seeker, the person rating the applicant, and the job itself, that determine discrimination in hiring practices (Krings & Olivares, 2007). Lindley's (2002) research demonstrates the interrelationship that exists between applicant characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, language proficiency, gender, and employment. She analyzed data from the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities in England and Wales and found religion to be an important determinant of employment for both genders.

Many sociological or economic explanations exist for the discrimination of certain groups in society (Reskin, 2000; Phelps, 1972; Arrow, 1998). The notion of interlocking oppressions, or intersectionality as provided by multiracial feminists and anti-racist theorists, (Hill Collins, 2000; Calliste & Dei, 2000) is a useful one to understand the multiplicity of factors that might be causing immigrants to be discriminated against in the job market. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as "the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' lived experiences" (in Nash, 2008, p. 1). Intersectionality (or interlocking oppressions) posits that identity categories such as race, gender, and ethnicity are socially created, fluid, shifting, site and context specific, (George & Tsang, 1999) and are mutually constituted (Rothenberg in Murphy et al., 2009). These categories are sustained through a range of "interlocking inequalities" that constitutes a "matrix of domination" (Hill Collins, 2000). Systems of oppression are interlocked with each other and come to exist "in and through one another" (Fellows & Razack, 1998). Intersectional theorists reject hierarchical and additive approaches to understanding discrimination. Oppressions are viewed as multiple, simultaneous, and interrelated (Baca Zinn & Dill, 1996) and more than just the sum of their parts.

The concept of social location is an important one in intersectional analysis. The unique identities of each person—race, class, gender, and ethnicity, intersect to situate each person on different points of a matrix of privilege and oppression. While much intersectional thinking has focused on race, gender, and class as the axis of oppression, there

is an acknowledgment that there can be other oppressions expressed simultaneously and equally by different groups (George & Ramkissoon, 1998) such as age, ability, sexual orientation (Shields, 2008), ethnicity, colonialism, religion, language, culture, and citizenship (Stasiulis, 1999) among others.

### **Methodology**

This paper reports on the findings that emerged from interviews with 20 internationally trained engineers regarding their experiences of discrimination in searching for and securing suitable work in Canada. The larger study that informed this paper included a survey of 309 internationally trained engineers,<sup>1</sup> in-depth interviews with twenty internationally trained engineers from the survey participants, and another survey of 200 locally trained engineers. This paper also uses a small subsection of the survey data findings to expound on an argument made in this paper.

Twenty participants of the internationally trained engineers' survey who had indicated their willingness to participate in in-depth interviews were questioned to get a deeper understanding of their experiences in finding suitable work.<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes each. All names of the participants have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

The goal of the interviews was to understand whether the participants felt they had been discriminated against while looking for employment in their profession, or once they had secured work in Canada. The participants were asked whether they had faced substantial barriers in finding meaningful work and what they thought contributed to that barrier—their English language skills, foreign education, religion, or ethnicity. Participants revealed they believed all of these factors and more contributed to barriers in finding work in Canada. These factors also continued to play a role in the discrimination experienced by the participants in their workplaces after finding employment. The intersectional nature of these barriers became apparent during the data analysis stage.

The interviews were documented through audio recordings with the permission of the participants and through detailed note taking by the interviewer. Care was taken to ensure the quality of the data collected by prescribed strategies such as thick description (Patton, 2002), member checking, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analysis was done with the help of the qualitative data software NVIVO, using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) techniques. Each interview transcript was read in great detail and the researchers identified codes that captured the oppressions at play both when finding work as well as in the participants' employment situations. These codes were modified, grouped and regrouped with each additional case reading so that a coherent picture emerged.

This paper uses the intersectional approach as a framework to discuss and analyze the findings related to factors the internationally trained engineers perceived as contributing to their experience of discrimination in the workforce. An intersectional approach was deemed as an appropriate analytical framework as the data indicated many participants perceived multiple factors to be simultaneously at work to create conditions of discrimination. Literature informs us of the need for social work research that uses the intersectional lens to capture the complexity of the human experience and which reduces the likelihood of homogenized knowledge to predict outcomes about marginalized groups (Murphy et al., 2009, p. 36). The analysis uses an intra-categorical approach (McCall, 2005) to study intersectionality, wherein the focus is on one social group caught at the intersections of multiple master categories.

A limitation of this study is that it is from a group of participants who self-selected to participate in a research study on the experiences of internationally trained engineers in the workplace. It is possible these participants represented a group that had experiences that had affected them enough to want to share with others. As the study is based only on interviews with internationally trained engineers in the Greater Toronto Area, it is also not possible to generalize the findings of this study to internationally trained engineers in other places or with other professional immigrants.

#### *Profile of the participants*

The interview participants were comprised of 15 males and five females who had been in Canada between one and six years. These internationally trained engineers migrated to Canada from 11 different countries—India, China, Pakistan, Columbia, Mexico, Romania, Uganda, Bangladesh, Iran, Egypt, and Sri Lanka. For the most part, the participants had earned their engineering degrees from, and had past engineering experience in, their countries of origin. Three of the participants held jobs in an engineering-related field while most others held temporary or contract jobs as machine operators, sales persons, or call centre personnel. Three of the participants were unemployed at the time of the interview.

#### **Findings**

The data offered two broad themes related to experiences of discrimination. The first theme discusses the multiple oppressions faced by the participants based on social identity—race, ethnicity, gender, language, foreign credentials, and outsider status—on the basis of which the participants perceived discrimination in relation to employment. The second seemingly contradictory theme was the perception of the absence of discrimination on the part of some of the participants. The implications of both findings will be addressed in the discussion section.

*i. The simultaneous and multiple nature of discrimination.* The interview data revealed many dimensions pertaining to social identity, which the participants felt contributed to their experiences of discrimination in their search for employment or in their employment situations—ethnicity, language, religion, ethnicity and race, language skills, being an immigrant, foreign education, and lack of Canadian work experience. Often, more than one of these dimensions were experienced simultaneously by each participant. The sharing of the participants' stories below reflects the multiple identities for which they experienced discrimination.

Ajay, an immigrant from India, perceived covert discrimination in many of his past jobs due to his physical appearance, religion, and ethnicity. In one of these positions, he had been targeted because he had a moustache, and in another more recent job, because he wore an amulet. In yet another job, Ajay noticed that even though he was hired as a permanent staff member, it fell upon him to do the mopping when the machines were out of order, while the temporary staff (three of whom were White and one Black) were not asked to do this work. When race/ethnicity was referenced directly in providing or withholding privilege or opportunities at Ajay's place of work, they were attributed to persons other than those who used these markers to their own ends. For example, in a sales job in which Ajay described his relations with his co-workers as "very good and very nice," and where he perceived he was "accepted very well," Ajay shared:

Sometimes when I'm dealing with a customer, my partner comes and takes the customer away and he deals with him. Then he tells me that "from my experience I can tell that that customer did not want to deal with you because you're a brown guy."

Henry and Tator's (2006) concept of democratic racism comes close to describing Ajay's co-workers' actions. Democratic racism is an ideology that allows for conflicting sets of ideologies to exist—an espousal of egalitarian values of equality, justice with negative feelings, and the practice of discrimination against persons of colour. Ethnicity was also one of the dimensions identified by Doris and Hemant that contributed to their experience of discrimination while searching for suitable employment.

People say don't write down a Chinese name on your résumé. And if you're writing a Chinese name, nobody gives you an interview ... maybe it is the Canadian experience that is the main (reason) and the second thing ... suppose if I am European or from another part, from some other country, definitely this will not be the barrier.

Cynthia, who holds a Bachelor of Engineering degree from Columbia University, perceived not being native-born and not being fluent in English as reasons for discrimination. This is how she described her



relationship with colleagues who were mostly recent graduates from Canadian universities.

At the beginning we tried to sit at lunch with them (the Canadian educated colleagues) and socialize a little bit so to get integrated. Well they just didn't talk with us so at the end we give up and we start to have lunch together without them ... because it's hard.

Cynthia attributed the chasm between her and her co-workers to what she perceives as her lack of fluency with the English language, or more hesitantly, on the fact she might be “not Canadian” and is so “different” from her colleagues who “are born here.”

Lack of language proficiency is repeatedly found as a barrier to immigrants wishing to find work (Schellenberg & Maheux, 2007). While Cynthia did feel a lack of English language proficiency might have affected her ability to socialize at work, Manas felt that being proficient in the language was no guarantee for securing work.

In Montreal learning French does not help to get you a job. My wife, she was fluent in French in one year and she was looking for jobs seriously. We could understand that we are not native French in Montreal. There was definitely discrimination the first year.

Cynthia and Manas' interviews suggest the concept of being a cultural “outsider” served as a basis for discrimination. Associated with the “outsider status” is a “fear of the unknown” that one of the participants identified as contributing to discrimination towards immigrants. According to Imran, it was a combination of his ethnicity (identifiable by his name), religion, and the fears his employer had in relation to Imran's potential behaviour (getting along with the unknown immigrant), that might have been at play in preventing him from getting many of the jobs he had applied for.

Describing ordinary, everyday interactions within workplaces, Imran elaborated on how the immigrant could be seen as not fitting in:

Canadians typically would talk about ice hockey, the local game, about Tim Horton's ... So many immigrants who come in might not be able to involve themselves in such activities or discussions ... they won't understand what the joke meant or what things are these. That might be an issue. People want to have their own type of people around them who can understand their jokes, who can discuss the same things that they want to discuss.

Manas shared an “incident of a little conflict” or “misunderstanding” involving him, a colleague, and his supervisor, where the supervisor, unsure of the technicalities of the issue, sided with his colleague. Manas

attributed this experience to a “branding issue.” The problem, according to him, was that the “Indian brand” was not known enough for the supervisor to trust his competency. The supervisor’s actions supported Imran’s perception that discrimination that has its roots in lack of knowledge or familiarity with countries, cultures, education or the experience that immigrants represent.

Having foreign educational and work backgrounds were bases for discrimination for our participants. The requirement of Canadian work experience is a well-known barrier faced by many immigrants who look for employment in Canada (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Preston, 2001; Schellenberg & Maheux, 2007). A few of our interview participants felt the requirement for candidates to have Canadian experience, was discriminatory as engineering principles and practices are the same all over the world. Others, like Sanjay, felt this could not be considered discriminatory as local codes and systems varied from place to place and so the requirement for Canadian experience was justified. His opinion was shared by Suresh, however, both felt the solution was to create opportunities for such learning for newcomers instead of holding it against them at the hiring stage.

Doris, on the other hand, felt that lack of Canadian experience was an excuse given by employers who did not want to hire the person for different reasons—language skills in her case. She could not accept that her ten years of highly specialized engineering experience were not considered adequate to be offered a job. Raju and Aslam felt they were being discriminated against because of their foreign training. For Aslam, the thought that he had been discriminated against in Canada while trying to find a suitable job was crystallized when he saw a Statistics Canada report on unequal earnings for internationally trained professionals. The fact that credential recognition involves institutional processes that involve many gatekeepers, speaks of the institutional nature of discrimination. Past research has also pointed to the dilemma posed by this requirement, as immigrants cannot gain the required experience without first being hired (Liu, 2007).

Gender was a prominent marker of discrimination for Julie. Her experiences suggest a lack of appreciation for her role as a mother and underline a professional penalty that women have to pay if they choose to stay at home to look after their children. Often, the decision to leave paid work to look after children is the outcome of weighing the cost of paid daycare with the revenues generated from largely precarious, low-paying and low-skilled employment available to immigrants. More often than not, it is the mother who has to make this compromise. Julie’s interview with a job placement agent revealed it was a combination of her Mexican work experience, and the fact that she had a gap in her career for the years she stayed at home to look after her children, that were the major reasons for her not being able to secure a job. “And he told me ‘I find

that gap, it could be an issue because what have you done since 2003 up to now in your career?”

Julie says she was recently laid off from her part-time factory job after she complained to her human resources department about sexual advances that were made towards her by a colleague. Soon after this incident she was accused of violating safety processes and was asked to leave. According to Julie, the company chose to deflect attention from the sexual harassment complaint by targeting her for alleged safety violations. Julie is convinced the company did this as a way to protect the male employee she had reported. Julie felt at a disadvantage not only because of her gender but also because of her precarious status as a part-time, temporary employee.

Doris was the only employee of Chinese origin in a service-providing agency, and her time and work were constantly being monitored by her immediate supervisor. She spoke of her fear of being late for work and of the constant close watch by her supervisor who made her write down every detail of her workday's activities and even encroached on her privacy to scrutinize this documentation.

“Can you tell me your computer password?” she said and I said “okay.”  
You know everything I had to give (to) her and I don't know if she's a  
Canadian work spy. You think so?

The situations Doris had to face at work point to her vulnerability as an immigrant woman with low language skills and lack of knowledge of her rights as an employee in Canada. Though obviously worried about the scrutiny she faced, Doris had no context to understand it as either harassment or discrimination. Her experience suggests that lack of context and past experience might influence the extent to which a person recognizes and identifies with concepts such as “discrimination,” “harassment,” and “racism.”

In summary, there were often many dimensions to the participants' social identity for which they experienced discrimination. These dimensions occurred simultaneously, often with more than one dimension at play.

*ii. No discrimination.* Though many of the participants were unable to find work in the engineering field, six of the participants perceived they had not experienced discrimination in any of their work related experiences. Irfan and Aamir were two such participants who did not feel comfortable with the term “discrimination” to describe their own experiences but were unsure what to attribute these experiences to.

In his current job with a large telecom company, Irfan felt he hadn't experienced discrimination on account of ethnicity, religion, or language. He described his colleagues as “very friendly.” However, he did notice that higher-level job positions seemed to be occupied only by “White people”

but said he is unsure whether this is related to some form of discrimination, or whether these individuals are better qualified for these positions.

Aamir, a mechanical engineer from Bangladesh, explained an incident where he was being considered for another job in the North Bay area and had made it to the third level of the selection process. He was given a plane ticket to reach North Bay and was even shown an office that he was told was being prepared for him. One of the persons interviewing him had asked whether everyone in Bangladesh was corrupt. His potential supervisor also asked him whether he believed in astrology. While Aamir described these discriminatory encounters during the interview process, he did not label them as such and could not explain why he was not selected for the job. He wondered instead if his language skills had been the reason he did not obtain the position.

Interestingly, the participants who did not feel they were discriminated against concurred that the phenomenon of internationally trained engineers not getting suitable employment could be due to discrimination. There appeared to be a disjuncture between what they perceived as discrimination against the larger group they belonged to, and in the naming of their own experience, even though the outcomes of both were the same; namely, lack of suitable employment. John, who had a bachelor of engineering degree from Romania, perceived discrimination as associated with racism and not something he identified with.

Generally I think about discrimination as regarding the colour, regarding a region, that's the kind of thing regarding even the language. But not about you get hired or not because this one is different.

Another manner in which these participants disassociated their experience from discrimination was by attributing their failure to secure employment or higher-level jobs to lack of Canadian experience and/or to foreign credentials. This is what Chang from China, Ali from Egypt, and Majid from Iran attributed their experiences to.

It is interesting that the word "discrimination" should face resistance from the participants of the study. The research team had an inkling of this resistance while conducting the online survey with internationally trained engineers who formed part of the larger study these interviews emerged from. The online survey which was initially titled "Discrimination In the Workplace" was changed to "Online Survey of Internationally-Trained Engineers" when not much response was forthcoming to the original survey title. After changing the title, the response rate increased and we were able to exceed our target of 300 internationally trained engineers for the survey. Also, answers to some of the survey questions indicated some individuals do not think of themselves as victims of discrimination while they acknowledge that the groups they belong to face discrimination.

### Discussion

Two major findings emerge from this paper. First, that internationally trained immigrant professionals in Canada experience discrimination along multiple and interacting dimensions, either by denying them access to suitable employment or by leading them to experience discriminatory treatment in the workplace and/or while looking for employment.

A generation or two ago, many educated and well qualified immigrants came to Canada without much expectation of holding jobs similar to those they had in their country of origin. Many were ready to make such a sacrifice because they expected their Canadian-born and educated children would enjoy the full advantages afforded to any Canadian seeking employment or starting a career. In recent years, priority has been given to immigrants with impressive educational and professional backgrounds, a clear message to newcomers that their education, skills, and professional experience are valued in Canada. When welcoming messages are combined with other messages around Canada's commitment to multiculturalism and diversity, it is not surprising that immigrants to Canada expect to find a level playing field. When faced with lack of access to labour markets and to their professions, these newcomers attribute it to discrimination. Participants in this study experienced discrimination simultaneously based on multiple markers of identity; with one or more characteristics playing a prominent role for discrimination based on specific situations. Similar to previous studies that show the relationship between discrimination, race and ethnicity (Krings & Olivares, 2007; Pager & Sheperd, 2008; Al-Waqfi & Jain, 2008), our research also shows that ethnicity, race, language, and foreign education are important identity markers for which immigrant professionals can face discrimination. Another lesser known identity marker for discrimination that was revealed by this study is the "outsider status" of immigrants and discrimination based on "fear of the unknown immigrant."

In an analysis of the 1996 Canadian census data, Li (2001) sought to estimate the market worth of immigrants' educational degrees relative to that of native-born Canadians. He found that the combined negative effects of having an immigrant status and a foreign qualification affected visible minority persons more than White persons. His research concluded that the gender and race characteristics of the credential holders are inseparable from the credentials due to the complex interactional effects they produce. Our qualitative research findings illustrate these complexities can be experienced by immigrants while they look for employment or in the workplace.

While all the study participants were internationally trained engineers whose foreign credentials came in the way of finding suitable work, there were many intra-group differences as highlighted by the intersectional perspective. Our research indicates that within this group of people who

would generally be perceived as sharing similar characteristics (namely foreign training and the inability to find suitable work), discrimination played out differently for each of them and in varying degrees. For one of our respondents, race was a clear marker of discrimination in the workplace and was experienced in different job settings. For another participant who indirectly disclosed that he did not belong to a visible minority group, race was not seen as an issue related to getting or keeping a job. Similarly some participants perceived ethnicity, and poor language skills to be reasons for discrimination while others did not.

Gender identity exacerbated discrimination. In our study, two female participants reported experiencing discrimination—from being penalized for gaps in their work history while caring for children, to sexual harassment, and finally to being subjected to additional and abusive scrutiny in the workplace. The female participants who faced these discriminatory practices did not separate gender related factors from vulnerabilities as workers in precarious work situations. Gender worked along with and through class (reflected in precarious work) and ethnicity to create discriminatory outcomes for these women. Similarly, while some participants shared particular countries of origin and others shared religious backgrounds, there were differences in terms of what they viewed as the causes of discrimination in their own unique cases. The literature on intersectionality draws our attention to the importance of social location (Hill Collins, 2000) of each individual and the manner in which this can define each person's oppressions and privileges.

The "fear of the unknown immigrant" was a dimension on which some of the participants felt discriminated against. Unlike race, class, gender, language ability, religion, and other physical markers attributed to the person of the internationally trained professional, this dimension of discrimination is located in the oppressor; though the outcome still serves to marginalize the victim. The literature demonstrates that this fear of the other or of the unknown has historically played out against the full acceptance and integration of immigrants into Canadian society (Dua, 2007). Some researchers have attributed this in part to Canada's multicultural policy, one that exoticizes differences in ethnic groups, while marking them as "others" or different (Bannerji, 2000; Thobani, 2007). The social and economic exclusion of immigrants is prevalent in many developed countries. Castles (1998) notes the contradiction inherent in the inclusion of persons into a country through immigration and their subsequent exclusion from full economic participation and discrimination. The "fear of the unknown immigrant," along with the requirement for Canadian experience, speak to systemic barriers that intersect with the unique subject locations of internationally trained professionals to create oppression.

A second major finding of this study is that a few of our participants did not view themselves as victims of discrimination even though they

acknowledged discrimination to be at work when others like them were unable to secure appropriate employment. Past research (Crosby, 1984) has commented on this discrepancy in the personal/group perception of discrimination. Taylor et al.'s research (1990) with Haitian and Indian women sought to specifically test this personal/group discrepancy. The authors found "strong support for the generality of the personal/group discrepancy" (p. 254) and provided three possible explanations for this phenomenon: the possibility of denial from the person experiencing discrimination; an exaggeration of discrimination claims from minority groups; and biases in the processing of information, where information related to discriminatory practices related to groups is more readily available to the individual.

We suggest that the participants who perceived no discrimination might come from countries of origin where the language of discrimination is not part of the everyday vocabulary and experience. The high levels of education and professional training of these immigrants make it likely they do not belong to underprivileged sections of society in their home countries. Coming from a context of privilege, it is unlikely they have had any discrimination experience. There is also a possibility that the participants denied experiencing discrimination as it would acknowledge the effects of discrimination on self-esteem and could lead them to question the amount of time, money, and effort spent in immigrating to Canada.

Merton's reference group theory (Holton, 2004) also provides a possible explanation. According to this theory, persons aspire to be like others within reference groups that provide normative standards of conduct and beliefs, and also provide a standard against which persons can measure themselves. In the case of professionally trained immigrants from our study, the reference group theory could work in two opposite ways. For those immigrants whose reference group is other immigrants like themselves, it is likely that they would accept the belief systems for which they are being discriminated against, beliefs that are likely justified by the experiences of their reference group. On the other hand, immigrants who might consider their reference group to be the professional engineering community, are more likely to share the normative view within this profession; that is the culture of engineering is not one of victimization nor discrimination and that lack of success is attributed to deficiencies within immigrants themselves.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this paper have important implications for social work practice and policy interventions. Social work has a long history of providing direct and indirect services to immigrant groups. Direct social work intervention with immigrants has traditionally focused on helping immigrants meet their immediate settlement needs, including entry into the

labour market (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). However, very little attention has been paid to oppressions faced by these immigrants on account of identity markers and the role these play in preventing them from attaining positive employment outcomes. The internationally trained professionals in our study experienced discrimination on dimensions which they had some ability to change (i.e., language skills), and those they had little or no ability to change (i.e., systemic barriers such as a foreign degree, lack of Canadian experience, and social identity markers such as race, ethnicity, gender, and “outsider status”). These findings lead to very clear areas of social work intervention. While Canada already has a good mechanism in place to help newcomers acquire language skills, our research shows that being proficient in a language is not enough to prevent discrimination. Language works along with “outsider status” to mark the immigrant as “different.” Social workers who provide employment related services to immigrant groups should recognize this intersectional complexity and work to empower clients through counselling and through programs such as job-specific language programs or mentoring.

Social workers have also been providing many indirect services to immigrants focused on increasing service efficiency, including advocacy (Potocky-Tripodi, 2002). The past few years have seen a host of services being offered to internationally trained professionals who are newcomers, to facilitate their integration into the Canadian work force. A majority of the services are aimed at teaching newcomers the requirements of the Canadian job market and the steps involved in getting their foreign credentials recognized. Few services aim to provide an orientation to the labour market and tacit knowledge about the workplace. Fewer still offer placement services within organizations related to the professional’s field of expertise. For the most part, the social work profession has been conspicuous in its absence from involvement and development of innovative programs that meet the unique needs of internationally trained professionals. Information and education about the Canadian work force and its requirements can be provided to immigrants even prior to their entering the country. We join other studies (Basran & Zong, 1998; Brouwer, 1999; Walters, 2006) that speak to the need for advocacy to remove systemic barriers that deny new immigrants due recognition of their qualifications, and prevent them from gaining relevant Canadian experience. Social workers can work with employers and the government to explore incentive programs for employers who hire new immigrants. While advocating for more inclusive organizations, social workers should look towards creating a business case for diversity by emphasizing that a diverse workforce represents a means to improve the competitive advantage of employing organizations (Cox and Blake, 1991).

George and Tsang (1999) recommend an inclusive paradigm for working with diverse clients. Their paradigm stresses the need for social workers to recognize that “individuals have multiple identities, which are



context-based and socially constructed, and are often independent of their individual definitions” (p. 65). It also stresses the importance of a macro analysis of organizational or structural issues that are interwoven with various forms of social differentiation. Denial of personal discrimination can feed existing discourses of the absence of discrimination, making advocacy efforts to overcome the same difficult. Empowering groups that suffer on account of multiple interlocking oppressions involves making the links between their lived realities and systemic and institutionalized forms of discrimination in society visible to them. This would allow clients to see the problems they face as functions of the intersectionality of their subject locations and of the relationships of public policies and societal structures to the same.

### NOTES

- 1 The survey for internationally trained engineers was conducted in partnership with the Council for the Access to the Profession of Engineering (CAPE) and was hosted on their website. The details of the methodology of the larger study have been reported in some detail in another paper that has been accepted by the Journal of International Migration and Integration (JIMI).
- 2 One hundred and thirty-nine survey respondents agreed to participate in the interviews. Of these, 20 participants were chosen on the basis of availability and the satisfaction of diversity of gender and ethnicity criteria.

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