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Recommended Citation

Shan, Hongxia (2006). "Periphery of Practice: Chinese Immigrant Women Navigating the Canadian Labour Market," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/59>

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Periphery of Practice: Chinese Immigrant Women Navigating the Canadian Labour Market

Hongxia Shan

Keywords: Periphery of practice, immigrant women, occupational orientation, mediation of learning, meaning negotiation

Abstract: This paper proposes periphery of practice as a conceptual lens to examine the learning experiences engaged by Chinese immigrant women navigating the Canadian labour market.

Part One: Periphery of Practice: A Learning Perspective

Canada is a country depending on immigrants for its economic and demographic growth (Jakubowski, 1997). Since 1967, without enough people coming from its traditional immigrant source countries, Canada has officially opened its door to non-Caucasians from other countries but with a point system to ensure the entry of immigrants as desirable as possible. Despite Canada's preferences for skilled and highly educated immigrants, research has shown that these immigrants experience systematic employment degradation and deprofessionalization (e.g. Basran & Li, 1998). The economic fortunes of the recent immigrants have declined compared with their counterparts before the 70's and it is known that there is a correlation between the magnitude of this decline and the changing composition of recent immigrants (Baker & Benjamin, 1994). A plethora of studies have tried to explain immigrants' unfortunate economic outcome, and to communicate the integration barriers that immigrants are faced with. However, how immigrants cope with these barriers and the learning entailed have only become a focus of study in recent years. However, there is a lack of learning perspective that helps to illustrate the learning of immigrants on the periphery in order to have a bearing the host society.

In this paper, I am proposing "periphery of practice" as a learning perspective, which is informed by the learning theory of community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and the sociological approach of institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987). Periphery of practices treats learning as enterprises engaged by individuals whose identities are constantly in the making, and as social phenomena constituted through familial and social processes penetrating and encompassing the local. It has benefited from Wenger's (1998) notion of participation and reification as two integral aspects of learning. Participation is the embodied experiences of people that combine doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging. Reification refers to the process that gives forms to our perception of experience, which is essentially a meaning negotiation practice. Central to the meaning making process is identity formation and/or transformation, which includes the enactment of identification, and the exercises of negotiability or "the ability, facility and legitimacy (of individuals) to contribute to, take responsibility for and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration" (Wenger, 1998, pp. 197).

My attention to the subjectivity and identity of learners is to help the understanding of learning as socially situated and embodied practices. As Bakhtin (as cited in Smith and Lave, 2001), points out: "in the making of meaning... we "author" the world and ourselves in that world. But, the "I" is by no means a freewheeling agent, authoring worlds from springs of meaning and insight within. ... the "I" builds and so is built, opportunistically with preexisting materials" (p. 10). Instead of seeing identity as "undifferentiated, equal, equally ephemeral,

fragmented" (ibid., p. 25), I perceive people's identity as historical, unfinished, and always in the process of making: people's personal history, their identity formed and foregrounded at different historical points all contribute to their meaning making and labour market negotiation processes.

Wenger's conceptualization of participation, reification, identification and negotiability directs our attention to learning that individuals engage through interaction with the social world. On the other hand, the social world and historical context also help to mediate immigrants' learning experiences. To explicate the organizational property of learning, I am using the notion of institutional mediation of learning, which is inspired by the sociological approach of institutional ethnography. I argue that people's experiences are not random or whimsical, but socially mediated through institutional processes. By institution, I do not mean a specific organizational entity. Rather, it refers to a complex of relations organized around a specific function such as law, health care and so on (Grahame, 1999; Smith, 1987). For instance, families, often organized around heterosexual norms of reproduction, immigrant training practices, organized around training for the labour market are all distinct institutions that nevertheless intersect to mediate the occupational learning experiences of immigrants in the labour market. These institutional processes and immigrants' experiences are woven together through the constitution of social relations such as gender, race and class, that are only possible with the presence of people's activities but that subsume people whose activities make the social relations real (Smith, 1987, p. 133). Through addressing this social mediation of learning, I am hoping to address the power dynamic operative in immigrants' learning experiences.

Mediation of learning can be accomplished in various ways. In particular, it can be achieved through text. Texts are some kind of documents or representations that have a relatively fixed and replicable character (DeVault & McCoy, 2001). They can be forms, policies, and regulations; they can also be TV programs, photographs or other images (DeVault & McCoy, 2001). What is common for these texts is that they can be enacted across different localities to accomplish ruling relations, or distinctive forms of organizing and ruling in the capitalist society, that grasps power as structured (Smith, 1987) and materialized.

Part Two: Immigrant Women's Learning in Their labour Market Participation Process

In this section, I use periphery of practices to examine the experiences of four highly educated Chinese immigrants in Toronto, Canada, and the familial and social processes penetrating and encompassing their experiences. The data was from my Master's field research in 2004 on immigrant women's settlement experiences. A major thread of their respective stories is how the women learn to fit into certain sectors of the Canadian labour market. On the individual level, they actively participate in the labour market with a gendered, racialized and classist subtext and learn to position and reposition themselves vis-à-vis the labor market in terms of occupational orientations. Throughout their participation processes, they constantly give meanings to their experiences to come to grips with the Canadian labour market. Their meaning making is central to their Canadian labour market learning experiences, where they not only "learn about" what jobs to look for, but "learn to be", i.e. learn about their identities socially produced and attributed and to negotiate their identity in the host society.

All the women (I am naming them Ann, Brenda, Cindy and Dolly) were with engineering background in China: three in computer engineering and one in mechanical engineering. All women, except for Dolly were married with a kid each. By the time of the interviews, all women except for Dolly had decided to become clerical accounting workers. In the processes whereby the three married women were oriented towards clerical accounting, I found that their

occupational “choices” have to be understood as an integral aspect of their embodied settlement experiences and constant meaning negotiation processes.

In the interviews, it has been observed that the women have experienced a declassing process because of the shrinking of the buying power of their savings given the exchange rate. As such, even Ann who planned to be a full-time mom before immigration, had to look for jobs shortly after landing. Whereas initially all women, except for Dolly took up low-end, low paying service jobs that did not offer them any fulfillment, these women had been seeking for different learning opportunities, to refashion themselves to fit into certain sectors of the labour market and to upgrade their employment status.

Brenda, upon landing, did not plan to go for computer programming. Instead, she planned to follow her heart and work in the area of marketing through doing a college program, hoping a Canadian degree would add to her negotiability in the labour market. The specific program that she chose to take had a co-op requirement. However, she was disturbed to find that “None of the Chinese students got co-op opportunities except for the Anglo-Saxon Caucasian student.” In order to graduate, she, along with other Chinese had to switch to a program without co-op requirement. The setback at school has taught Brenda to be conscious of her identity as a Chinese, and as different from, if not inferior to the Caucasians. In her subsequent job search, she decided to take on a Caucasian name, which indeed brought her more responses from job agents.

Cindy and Dolly also encountered difficulties in their job search. Cindy never understood why her resume got her no responses when “the job description says exactly what [she] did in China”. Dolly was comparatively lucky. She initially landed a job as a low paid “computer programmer”. The company went bankrupt and she was between jobs for a nearly a year before she discovered a co-op program and landed another one right before she exhausted her savings.

At the time of the interviews, all women, except for Dolly were inclined to work in Clerical accounting. They were oriented to this field differently. Ann learned from her peer immigrants that clerical accounting was promising for Chinese; Brenda, through job Ad study found that there was a need for office workers with clerical background. Cindy came across an immigrant training centre and was encouraged to take up clerical accounting. Their "choice" of clerical accounting informed and were informed by an inner conversation, or inner negotiation within the women. Cindy's summarized the common reason why they chose clerical accounting.

...Fast, and easy to get into the field. Plus, it is very easy for Chinese to learn accounting. You don't have a whole lot of barriers in language, ... And accounting is also a hard skill... This way, I am kind of bypassing my weakness [in language].

What can be perceived is that it was with considerable deliberation that the women went for clerical accounting. During the first while after landing, the women took up low-end service jobs. In the interviews, however, they repeated that “the bottom line is that you have received so many years of education (Brenda)”. They did not want to have their personal history as an educated woman entirely erased. With that on mind, they kept on looking for different opportunities to increase their negotiability and have their bearing in the labour market. In their choice of clerical accounting, they resorted to idea that “Chinese are good with Math”, which is a generalizing idea, but nevertheless a manifestation of how the women were proactively interacting with, and negotiating a niche in the host society.

In the processes where professionals are made (potential) clerical workers, women were not simply making intellectual choices. Their occupational journeys both enlisted and inscribed who the women were. Gender, race, and class relations have been shaping and shaped by

women's experiences. Contrary to the commonly held view that personal abilities determine job status, the women's negotiability in the labour market and their identification as Chinese mutually informed each other, and both participated in making clerical workers out of these women. Women's experiences did not take place in vacuum. Rather, they are an inextricable aspect to and forthright manifestation of, the power dynamic extending beyond the women's local experiences to the institutional practices that penetrated and encompassed the local.

Hereby, I present family and employment training programs as two distinct institutions, that nevertheless intersected and mediated immigrants' labour market experiences and learning processes. By emphasizing home as an institution, I am highlighting the gender dynamic that tilted away from the women interviewees. I argue that women's negotiability in the labour market, and their job search were not simply an individualistic enterprise. Family dynamics actively participated in how the women made meaning out of their labour market experiences.

One notable feature of women's home dynamic is that they tended to downplay their skills, as well as their employment expectations to give career developments priorities to their male spouses. I found that when Cindy and Ann positioned themselves secondary to their husbands, they tended to naturalize their decision on the grounds that their spouses were better than them in terms of English and skill levels. In contrast, when Brenda's husband did manual jobs to support Brenda's study at school, Brenda showed sincere appreciation, and explicitly acknowledged that her husband 'gave' her the opportunity for an education. Pronouncedly the women played the role of supporters at home, which was accompanied by an unlearning of their own personal assets, skills and capabilities. It however can not be generalized that Chinese women are inferior members at home space (Wylie, 2004). However, it is noted that immigration and unfavorable position in the labour market of Chinese however, have complicated the gender relations, prioritizing men over women in terms of occupational development, especially when only one person's career development was possible.

Employment training services, on the other hand, with the pursuit of producing "self-sufficient" immigrants as soon as possible converged with the gender dynamics at women's home space, participated in funneling women to the clerical sector. At the immigrant training centre I accessed, there are a variety of programs, ranging from computer training, language training, to profession development programs. Underlying these programs was a settlement policy framework set up by the integration branch of the federal ministry, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which essentially guided the operation of settlement services. The settlement services framework reads:

1. Integration is a two way process that involves commitment on the part of newcomers to adapt to life in Canada and on the part of Canadians to adapt to new people and culture.
2. The ability of newcomers to communicate in one of Canada's official languages is key to integration.
3. The contributions of newcomers to the economic and social fabric of Canada are valued. It is important for newcomers to become financially self-sufficient and be able to participate in the social dimensions of life in Canada. It is important for members of communities in Canada to help ensure that newcomers have opportunities to participate in and contribute to all the positive aspects of Canadian life.
4. It is important to share with newcomers the principles, traditions, and values that are inherent in Canadian society such as freedom, equality, and participatory democracy.

5. Settlement and integration services will be directed at assisting newcomers to become self-sufficient as soon as possible. Priority will be given to those facing significant barriers to integration and who are deemed most in need within the community.

6. Settlement and integration services across the country will be flexible, responsive and reasonably comparable, (Integration Branch, 2001).

With respect to analysis of the above framework, it is relevant to point out that texts are an 'operative part of social relations' (Smith, 1990, p. 121). Textual analysis of governmental documents contributes to understanding the social organization of employment-related services, and the social organization of women's experiences. In the above settlement services framework, the overall objective of settlement is specified as integration, a two-way process demanding efforts from both the immigrants and the host society. In objective three, it is emphasized that integration mainly comprises economic and social integration - the former serves as the foundation of the latter. In the same objective, it is highlighted that in the integration process, it is of paramount importance that the newcomers should attain 'self-sufficiency.' In objective number five, it is also emphasized that settlement services is geared towards assisting newcomers to become 'self-sufficient as soon as possible.'

However, it must be observed that there is no definition or criteria set for 'self-sufficiency.' As an economic outcome, self-sufficiency could signify participation in a wide range of economic activities. To achieve self-sufficiency, immigrants could take any survival and dead-end jobs to support themselves and their families financially; or they may aim at skilled jobs that could utilize the occupational skills they brought to this country (see also Neuwirth, 1999). This appeal for 'self-sufficiency' constitutes a call for immigrants to be 'up and running' as soon as possible to contribute to the Canadian economy with minimum services and minimum welfare expenses on the part of the host society (Sedef, 1999).

I contend that the promotion of 'self-sufficiency' for immigrants disregards the gendered and racialized experiences of the immigrant women in the host society. The fixation on 'self-sufficiency' for immigrants is oblivious to the gendered dynamic of the immigrant family where the onus of sustaining a family is usually on the woman alone, especially during the first while after immigration. Without sensitivity to gender issues, the settlement services framework enhances, rather than reduces, the gendered and racialized experiences of the immigrant women.

This emphasis of 'self-sufficiency' ideologically informs the construction of settlement services, including employment-related services, which in turn may if not negate the reality that immigrant women live. As I indicated earlier, there are a range of immigrant training programs. However, program availability does not mean accessibility to the women. Here is Cindy's experience with training services. She found out that there was a co-op program that enables immigrants to gain "Canadian experiences." She sent her husband to the program and she "worked to pay the rent." Right after her husband found a job in his field, Cindy tried to enroll in an occupational training program. However, she had to let go that opportunity too, because she was not able to procure a space for daycare. She was told that childcare was only available for ESL students. For people looking for professional development, they needed to be ready to work, and the programs were there to help people who are only ready, with a baby to care, she was apparently not ready to work. Caught between the requirement of programs and family obligations, Cindy had to wait for the family saving to dwindle to a certain level to be qualified for subsidized childcare before she could get in a training program.

Part Three: Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that women's negotiability in the labour market and their identification as a Chinese and as a wife informed each other and converged to make their occupational trajectory in Canada. I argued that women's negotiability is socially constructed. Institutional practices such as family processes and the organization of training programs both helped shape women's learning experiences, including how they participated in the labour market and how they gave meanings to their experiences. Throughout the paper, I also illustrated how women's individual experiences were woven into the Canadian social fabric through the constitution of gender, race and class relations prevalent in the host society.

Periphery of practice contributes to the scholarship on learning with an understanding of learning as an embodied process as well as a social process mediated through various institutional practices. It helps to inform immigrant settlement policy makers and training program workers with the learning needs deeper than those articulated by women driven by immediate needs to sustain the family economically. Training policies should be sensitive to the family dynamic that many highly educated immigrant women are implicated in. It can also help to promote learning among immigrants that could lead to their fuller membership in the host society. My unraveling of the family dynamic in immigrant women's home space is not a revelation of women's sacrifices, but an encouragement for women to be more conscious of the power dynamic operative both at home and in the large society that countenances or contains their career development.

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