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### Marginalization through Mobilizing the Discourse of Skill

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# Marginalization through Mobilizing the Discourse of Skill

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**Keywords:** skill discourse, immigrant settlement, transnational call centres, domestic work, community development

**Abstract** This roundtable discusses the deployment of the skill discourse at four different sites. Across sites, the discourse of skill is closely linked to the marginalization of workers.

## Introduction

Discourses of skill building initially gained currency in both highly industrialized countries of the global North and also, comparatively less industrialized countries in the South as 'the password to prosperity' (Jackson, 1991, p. 9). In the former context skill-building has been promoted as a means for further productivity and competitiveness (Jackson & Jordan, 2000) which has rendered individuals forever lacking and responsible for catching up. In the latter, skill-building has meant individual's social mobility which however, has been often compromised by an attendant rhetoric of disposability (Mirchandani & Tambe, work in progress). By discussing the deployment of skill discourse in various sites, this roundtable will explore how the notion of skill maintains and reproduces many of the social anomalies it is believed to eradicate.

### *1. Immigrant women's skill building & the settlement sector in Canada*

Policy level and programming responses to the challenges of immigrants' integration to Canadian labour market is often framed (overtly or implied) within a discourse of skill (CIC, 2010). Accordingly, skill building sits at the heart of immigrant settlement practices in Canada. This skilling discourse turns on the assumption of a superior national culture which is something to aspire to. An intrinsically inferior 'immigrant' is instrumental in maintaining this discourse by allowing the 'national' to feel superior (competent, contributing citizen with liberal principles), while holding immigrants responsible for their hardship (underskilled, pre-modern, non-contributing burden on society). This neoliberal individualizing and racializing of deficit will be discussed through an analysis of settlement project proposals.

### *2. Deskilling through work design: the role of technology in transnational call centre industry*

Organizational discourses and practices categorize racialized bodies as unskilled and prone to making errors and as a result, untrustworthy (Puwar, 2004), and in need of constant supervision (i.e. surveillance). Organizational systems are thus developed with these 'deficiencies' in mind and, in turn, maintain hierarchies and keep the imagined 'Others' in their 'proper' place. An example of this can be found in the use of technology in telephone call centres. Introduced into the intangible, easily manipulated, and constantly morphing production process as a cost-cutting efficiency tool, technology also becomes an extremely effective mechanism of surveillance and control. The work of call centres in particular is characterized by routinization of tasks; low level of control by employees; and potentially higher levels of stress due mainly to interactions with clients (Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt & Blau, 2003). The

work is considered as unskilled and does not require professional training, therefore, “to prevent inexperienced [customer service representatives] from making mistakes, complexity of work is often massively restricted” (p. 313). This results in a production process that provides workers with poor decision latitude, low complexity and high division of work, as well as high repetition of tasks with no or little opportunity for workers to make use of their skills (Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt & Blau, 2003). Omitted in the discourses regarding call centres are the ‘soft’ skills required by workers to manage both their own and clients’ emotions, often under difficult circumstances when speaking with irate clients. The negation of these skills furthers the construction and control of workers via the production process, points to the problematic translation of these skills into quantitative measurements, and renders invisible the abuse experienced by workers.

### ***3. Changing nature of domestic work: working for transnational firm managers in India***

Executives of transnational firms in India require the use of a range of domestic and public services to facilitate their long hours and unpredictable schedules. While these workers are better paid than those employed by people who work in domestic industries or the governmental sector, they have significant responsibilities such as childcare, shopping, planning meals, organizing household schedules and meeting late-night or early-morning needs. These additional responsibilities make it essential for these domestic workers to enhance their skills of cooking, and cleaning without instructions being given in person most of the times, learning to use of new machines and technologies, instilling habits related to ‘increased efficiency’ and ‘professionalization’. Using data from interviews with domestic workers in India who work for executives in transnational firms we discuss how, in spite of a dramatic increase in their job responsibilities from task provision to overall household management, a rhetoric of disposability maintains the unskilled status of their work. As a result, domestic workers feel both essential and easily replaceable.

### ***4. Community development work in postcolonial context: case study from Karachi, Pakistan***

Skill is an ambiguous term in the empowerment narrative of community development work in postcolonial contexts. In the empowerment narrative, development workers model 'success stories' and are morally obligated to translate their success into the success of the larger communities they represent. Essentially, they are the marketing tool for the success of the empowerment narrative. Cracks and slippages in this construct make the narrative fallible and prove detrimental for the business of empowerment and its production of 'empowered subjects'. Thus, any failure of the worker is never attributed to the narrative itself, but to intrinsic flaws and inabilities in the character and skill set of the community workers. They are also implicated in the outcomes of any intervention based on this narrative. Based on empirical research in Karachi, Pakistan the researcher argues that this empowerment narrative is inherently contradictory as it claims to facilitate a process of ‘skill development’ and ‘liberation from oppression,’ yet, reinforces the raced, classed and gendered glass ceiling on community development workers contributing to the precariousness of their employment. The notion of skill here is shaped by power relations and has real material implications, especially for workers responsible for the empowerment of given communities. The researcher considers oral and written English language communication and community development research skills and presents a collaborative analysis formulated with local development workers who challenge the power relations which attempt to contain them and define their subject status.

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