CONTESTING A RACIALIZED REGIME OF SKILL FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF RECENT IMMIGRANTS: THE CASE OF CANADA

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ABSTRACT

In the age of globalization when competition is fierce among nation states and individual employers and employees, skill has been promoted as a strategy to ensure high employability, productivity, and economic competitiveness. Critical scholars such as Fenwick (2006a, 2006b) and Sawchuk (2006) point out that the notion of ‘skill’ is far from consensual or accepted unproblematically. Fenwick highlights the inherent flaws of conventional conceptions of skill for their overemphasis on skill as a discrete competency and an individual acquisition through processes of mental reflection on concrete experience. She maintains that the skills-based initiative is based on the presumption that individuals are singular coherent beings ingesting rather than socially constructing knowledge and skills, which consequently ignores issues of collective learning and politics of knowledge. In particular, she questions the a-political approach for its failure to recognise the politics of skill by which particular knowledge and skill becomes valued and recognized. In this regard, Sawchuk (2006) joins Fenwick calling for a critical, integrated approach in understanding skill. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the politics of skill in relation to the devaluation of immigrants’ international credentials and prior work experience in Canada. Drawing on critical race theory, it examines processes of deskilling and reskilling and by extension contesting a racialized regime of skill in the age of transnational migration.

THE SKILL DEBATE

The definition of a ‘skill’ is a much debated topic, attracting the attention of contemporary scholars in Canada and internationally. These debates have highlighted numerous ambiguities and contradictions of the term regarding what constitutes a ‘skill’, whether skill is neutral and value free, and how skill should be assessed. These questions beg for answers from researchers, policymakers and practitioners who are interested in issues related to skill, work and learning.

A comprehensive analysis of the existing skills literature reveals the dominance of human capital theory. From the perspective of HCT, skill is treated unproblematically as a concrete and measurable attribute of an individual, acquired through education or training (Attewell, 1990; Cornford, 2005; Hall & Lansbury, 2006). Human capital theory views skill development as an investment which can yield dividends in the form of
productivity and economic prosperity (Bouchard, 2006). Sawchuk (2008) summarizes the unarticulated presumptions that frame both past and current understanding of skill from the standpoint of organized labour: “The motive is embedded in the need for productivity, but productivity of a profitable kind; it is embedded in the need for competitive national firms, but competition under certain auspices; it is embedded in the need to engage and reward people, but people constructed as individuals vis-à-vis a labour market; and ultimately the motivation is embedded in matters of control and struggle” (p.53). It seems the ideological danger lies in its simplistic framing of the issues that brackets out more robust, accurate and helpful analyses of the system’s structural problems (Fenwick, Guo, Sawchuk, Valentin & Wheelahan, 2005).

What particularly concerns Canadian scholars is the ways in which a narrowly-focused skills agenda obscure the darker consequences of the ‘new economy’. Introduced by the Canadian government in the early 1990s, the Innovation Strategy promoted up-skilling and re-skilling for the development of a competitive and flexible workforce (Gibb & Walker, 2011). Following this, Canada unleashed its Essential Skills initiative in the mid-1990s to increase citizens’ employability and productivity, despite critiques that the skills-based initiative is individualistic, decontextualized, fragmented, and gendered, with an overall ideology emphasizing a worker’s individual capital and responsibility to accept and adapt flexibly to the ravages in the labour market caused by a global knowledge economy (Fenwick, 2006b). Sawchuk (2008) examines the complexity and inner contradictions of skill formation, which shows how concerns over actual skill are marginalized in relation to traditional model of economic struggle. From labour perspectives, skill is a floating signifier that obscures context, inequities and the social nature of the learning process itself. Sawchuk summarizes the failure of skill frameworks as follows: “the failure to recognize the socially situated and collaborative nature of all skill performance; the failure to openly address the imbalances of power and thus the tendencies to reproduce inequities; the failure to recognize economic, sectoral, organizational dynamics; and finally the failure to address the conflation of ‘actual skill/competency’ versus relations of ‘power/control’” (p.54).

A growing body of literature has raised further, serious concerns about male bias in the conceptualizations of skill. Feminist scholars argue that conceptualization of skill should focus on problematizing the relationship between gender and the conception of skill (Bryant & Jaworski, 2011; Collins, 2002; Steinberg, 1990). Steinberg (1990), for example, argues that what constitutes skill is socially constructed under particular historical circumstances. Using the theory and practice of comparable worth, Steinberg’s analysis of skill as a social construct focuses on claim-marking around certain categories of work, the structural conditions that render such claims success and failures, and the institutionalization of these claims in ongoing labour market processes. Her study of comparative worth demonstrates the significance of power differentials and cultural assumptions about gender in the social definition and evaluation of skills. By making visible what has been unrecognized, Steinberg uncovers the often arbitrary and subjective basis of skill determination and its relationship to job awards. She concludes that males exert considerably more power over the definition of skills, and the maintenance of those definitions.
In more recent years, the skills debate has supplemented questions around technical skills with those of the nature of 'soft skills', or personal qualities and attributes (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). Grugulis and Vincent maintain that the emphasis on soft skills may support discrimination by legitimizing gendered and racialized assumptions while ignoring the structural aspects of work that create and reinforce such assumptions. Often employer-defined and locally-constituted, soft skills are likely to vary from firm to firm, and from one context to another. They are determined at the discretion of employers, often explicitly as a strategy for improving productivity and competitiveness. Grugulis and Vincent also point out that conflating personal attributes and skills also individualises responsibility for them and negates their reciprocal and relational elements. They argue that soft skills “polarized the workplace, advantaging those who already benefited most and depriving others of not only the few skills they have but also any hope of a route out of a low skills, low income trap” (p.611).

The above discussion has made it clear that skill is not a thing; it is an ideology. Skill is not neutral; it is socially constructed. In this view, it is necessary to conceptualize 'skill' as a relational construct that is implicated in the social, cultural and economic organization of work and workers (Shan, 2013). What is missing from this animated discussion, however, is the experience of immigrants with respect to how their skill and experience have been (de)valued in Canada, which will be examined in the next section. How skill is conceptualized is especially important for immigrants, particularly for understanding their experiences of deskilling, and the devaluation of their prior learning and work experience. Before focusing specifically on Canadian cases, it is helpful to contextualize Canadian immigration in the age of transnational migration.

THE DESKILLING EXPERIENCE OF RECENT IMMIGRANTS IN CANADA

As the globalization of migration intensifies, Canada has joined an international competition for the most talented, skillful, and resourceful workers to help ameliorate its labour shortages and the effects of its aging population. With Canada’s pursuit of a knowledge-based economy, its immigrant selection practices have placed more weight on education and skills, favouring economic immigrants over family-class immigrants and refugees. This strategy is based on the assumption that economic immigrants bring more human capital than family-class immigrants and refugees, and are therefore more valuable and desirable. Since the 1990s, Canada has been successful in attracting highly skilled workers from all over the world, particularly scientists and engineers. Despite Canada’s expressed preference for highly skilled immigrants, and despite the fact that immigrant professionals bring significant human capital resources to the Canadian labour force, a number of studies reveal that many highly skilled immigrant professionals experience deskilling and devaluation of their international qualifications and work experience after immigrating to Canada (Guo, 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Guo & Shan, 2013; Li, 2008; Reitz, Curtis & Elrick, 2014; Shan, 2009a, 2009b).

Deskilling affects skilled immigrant workers, and prevents them from reaping the full benefit of their skills. Even when knowledge and skills are legitimised as valid, the skills and work experiences of internationally trained professionals are often treated with
suspicion, or considered inferior (Guo, 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Guo & DeVoretz, 2006; Li, 2008; Maitra, 2015; Shan, 2009a, 2009b; Slade, 2012). Some immigrants experience major shifts from prior occupations in sciences, engineering, business, and management to relatively low-skilled positions in sales, services, and manufacturing. In a Vancouver-based study of immigrants from China, Guo and DeVoretz (2006) found that many recent immigrants came to Canada with post-secondary education, including masters’ and doctoral degrees. A large number of them could not find jobs commensurate with their qualifications and experience because their Chinese credentials and work experiences were not recognised. Bauder (2003) reports similar challenges experienced by highly skilled South Asians in Vancouver, who came with high human capital, but were often excluded from the upper segments of the labour-market owing to non-recognition of their foreign credentials. Bauder concluded that professional associations purposefully used the practice of credential devaluation to actively exclude immigrant labour from the most highly desired occupations in order to reserve these occupations for Canadian-born and Canadian-educated workers.

In addition to the abovementioned Vancouver-based studies, a number of scholars consistently report similar findings about the deskilling experiences of immigrant professionals elsewhere in Canada (Grant & Nadin, 2007; Maitra, 2015; Wong & Wong, 2006). A prairie-based study focused on skilled immigrants from Asia and Africa show that almost all of the participants in this study (97.5%) held post-secondary degrees from their countries of origin, but were surprised by their inability to find suitable Canadian employment because of institutionalized sanctioning of their foreign credentials and work experience. Many were forced to take casual and part-time jobs that underutilized their skills. This resulted in a considerable waste of valuable human capital, and triggered strong emotions among immigrant professionals, including disappointment, sadness, and anger. For Chinese scientists and engineers in Calgary, when their incomes are examined, there is a much lower return to their education and the experience when compared to Whites, pointing to their under-representation in higher paying management positions (Wong & Wong, 2006). Like many immigrants of colour, Indian immigrant IT workers in Toronto also faced multi-faceted barriers in the Canadian labour market (Maitra, 2015). Despite being highly educated with experience in the IT sector, it had become an exhausting and alienating experience for many of them after applying for jobs for months and years and getting rejected. Many had to resort to transnational networks with staffing agencies, also known as body shops, to find employment in their own areas of expertise. To Maitra, the demands for Canadian experience or credentials have become coded euphemisms for hiding the more overt references for race or gender.

The situation of immigrant women is worse still. A number of studies demonstrate that immigrant women face multiple barriers in adapting to the host society, particularly in accessing the labour market, owing to disadvantages inscribed by gender, class, and race (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Maitra & Shan, 2007; McCoy & Masuch, 2006; Mojab, 1999; Ng, 1999; Shan, 2009a, 2009b). Feminist scholars argue that, in the labour force, the category of ‘immigrant women’ serves to commodify these women to employers (Mojab, 1999; Ng, 1999). Advanced capitalism simultaneously creates and destroys
jobs, and requires both the skilling and deskilling of the labour force. Immigrant women’s already weak class positions are reinforced when they are forced into occupations that provide cheap, docile labour to the state under exploitive conditions, often permeated with racism and sexism. Highly skilled professional immigrant women learn to reorient and re-shape their skills, experiences, and aspirations in order to secure employment (Maitra & Shan, 2007). Shan (2009a) found that the women resort to re-training and re-education as a means to improve their employment prospects. She uses the credential and certificate regime to explain the social process and practices that attribute differential values to credentials and certificates produced in different places. Other strategies may be both conformative and transgressive. Some women resort to strategic tolerance, mobilize their prior knowledge and expertise, and become agents of change (Shan, 2009b). Shan further argues that the legitimate space presupposed in situated learning was an entitlement that the women had to earn in Canada. Crucially, feminist scholars took up these issues and examined how gender, class, and race interacted to shape the experience of immigrant women, particularly women of colour.

Guo (2013a) uses the triple glass effect to illustrate the multiple layers of barriers facing immigrant professionals as a result of deskilling of their prior credentials and work experiences, including a glass gate, glass door, and glass ceiling. The concept of the triple glass effect was developed out of a study of the integration experience of recent Chinese immigrants in Canada with a goal determining the extent to which glass ceiling and related effects may apply to this group in the process of adaptation. The findings demonstrate that Chinese immigrants hit glass ceilings in the process of transferring their human capital to Canada. Despite the fact that many immigrant professionals came with masters’ and doctoral degrees, they faced serious barriers in their transition to the Canadian labour market. Because the glass ceiling concept is primarily concerned with the ability to rise to management positions in the corporate hierarchy, Guo (2013a) argues that it alone cannot fully explain immigrants’ experience because the main issue for immigrants lies in entering the corporate hierarchy in the first place. Hence, the triple glass effect was developed to interpret the experience of Chinese immigrant professionals, a framework which can be used to understand other visible minority groups in Canada.

Guo (2013a) maintains that immigrant professionals potentially face three layers of glass in their integration process. The first layer, the glass gate, denies immigrants' entrance into guarded professional communities. Among the number of players and institutions that may be blamed for the devaluation of immigrants’ foreign credentials and prior work experiences are professional associations and prior learning assessment agencies, which often function as gatekeepers by restricting immigrants’ access to high-paying professional jobs. Immigrants’ skills and experiences are often deemed deficient and devalued simply because they are different. At the same time, successful licensure does not automatically guarantee a professional job, and immigrant professionals need a professional company to house them. According to Guo, in their attempts to secure a professional job, many immigrants hit the second layer of glass – the glass door, which blocks immigrants’ access to professional employment at high-wage firms. At this level,
employers are the key players. Employers may refuse to offer immigrants professional jobs because they do not have Canadian work experience, or their prior work experience is devalued because it is seen as inferior to the Canadian experience. Alternatively, immigrants may not secure a professional job because of their skin colour or their ‘non-standard’ English accents. Having a foreign-sounding name (Chinese, Indian, or Pakistani) could mean 40% fewer interviews (Oreopoulos, 2009, 2011). The third glass is the glass ceiling that prevents immigrants from moving into management positions, often because of their ethnic and cultural differences. Worse still, some immigrants may work on the same job but be paid less than their white colleagues, creating racialized disparities in earnings. Author concludes that the glass gate, glass door, and glass ceiling may converge to produce a triple glass effect that creates multiple structural barriers. These barriers contribute to unemployment and underemployment, poor economic performance, and downward social mobility.

CONTESTING A RACIALIZED REGIME OF SKILL

It is important to recognize that not all foreign credentials and skills are devalued in Canada (Li, 2008). According to Li, foreign credentials and skills held by majority member immigrants (e.g., British, North and West European) bring a net earnings advantage; only those credentials and skills held by visible minorities (e.g., Black, Chinese, South Asian) suffer an earnings penalty. Li’s study reveals that visible minority immigrants earn substantially less than immigrants of British origin, varying from over $18,000 a year less for immigrants of Chinese and Black origin to $13,000 less for immigrants of South Asian origin. Visible minority immigrants with undervalued foreign credentials thus carry a human capital deficit. Li’s study suggests that immigrants’ knowledge and skills associated with foreign credentials have been racialized and that the market value of foreign credentials varies depending on the racial background of the immigrants. Apparently it is the ‘colour’ of the skill associated with immigrants’ skin colour rather than the skill itself which causes the devaluation and denigration. Li’s findings speak to the process of racialization as the discriminatory practices which assign social significance to perceived phenotypical and cultural differences among groups of peoples (Miles, 1989).

In another study, Reitz, Curtis and Elrick (2014) confirm the racialization of immigrants’ credentials and skills that Li spoke of. Reitz et al. use Canadian census data from 1996, 2001, and 2006 to examine recent trends of immigrant skills utilization. Their analysis shows that the most recent cohorts of immigrants to Canada are better educated than earlier ones in every comparison. Among immigrants arriving five years before 1996, the proportion with university degrees was nearly twice as high as for the native-born population, which increased to three times for men and two and one half times for women for the most recent immigrants in 2006. Despite of this, immigrants did not fare well in access to high-skilled occupations (e.g., managerial or professional occupation). Reitz et al.’s analysis shows that for male university graduates arriving 5 years before each census, the percentage in high-skilled occupations was 50.4% in 1996, rising to 54.2% in 2001, but then falling to 43.5% in 2006. For immigrant women, the percentage in highly skilled occupations went from 34.6% in 1996 to 42.3% in 2001, only to fall to
34.4% in 2006. Reitz et al. also found the proportion of highly skilled immigrants in the lowest-skilled categories (e.g., cashiers, kitchen helpers, cleaners) rose steadily, from 1.5 times the proportion for the native-born to 2.3 times and then to 2.4 times over the same period of time. They then calculated the total earnings lost to immigrants as a result of skill underutilization in each of the three census years as $4.8 billion in 1996, $6.02 billion in 2001, and $11.37 billion in 2006. The study confirms that immigrant skill underutilization not only persists in Canada, but has grown. The low value of immigrant skills leads immigrants to be paid less than equally qualified native-born Canadians even when they work in occupations at the same skill level. Reitz et al. attribute the problem to racial discrimination based on which discounting of immigrant qualifications are disproportionally affecting visible minorities.

In addition to devaluation and denigration of immigrants' foreign credentials and skills, the racialization of skill is also reproduced by framing immigrants' foreign accents as a lack of communication skills. This strategy provides a rationale for disentitlement to employment, or to full participation in civil society without troubling liberal discourses of equality (Creese & Kambere, 2003). Drawing on research with African immigrant women, Creese and Kambere (2003) found that an 'African accent' is frequently named as a rationale for not being hired in the labour market, despite the fact that most of their participants had completed advanced post-secondary degrees from English language institutions. One of their research participants noted, "When you don't have their own accent, they don't want to accept you in areas where you have to speak like receptionist, teacher of English, customer service. It is a big barrier" (p.569). Accent does not only affect immigrants' access to material benefits such as jobs or housing, it has a symbolic effect on immigrants' perceptions of belonging in Canada. Through the intonations of their voices and the colour of their skin, African immigrant women in Creese and Kambere’s study were marked as ‘Other’. This study shows how language skills have been used as a systematic barrier and a form of boundary maintenance, preventing crossing from 'immigrant' to 'Canadian,' regardless of formal citizenship processes. “It is not, after all, about communication;” Creese and Kambere argue, “it is about power and exclusion, marginalization and ‘Othering,’ racism and discrimination” (p.571).

Since a foreign accent is not acceptable, accent reduction programmes have been offered by service providers in Canada to help immigrants eliminate their accents. Y. Guo (2009) examines a career bridging program which prepares immigrants for the labour market with a focus on the presentability and employability through acquisition of accentless proficiency in English, and name changes for participants. One of the program administrators commented: “We're now working with a girl. The tone of her voice makes her sound defensive. No matter what she's saying, it's like she's confronting someone all the time. So that is something we can correct...so that an instructor will be able to guide this person in a way of reducing their accent, bringing them to the proper, not proper, but more clearly understood language” (p.44). This comment clearly shows that the non-native voices sound defensive and confrontational, which need to be reduced, corrected and normalized. A non-native accent is not only different; its difference implies the speakers' incompetence and deficiency. A native accent becomes the yardstick to measure immigrants' workplace competence. Such
practice of accent reduction reveals a pathological approach and a colonial mentality that renders native accents superior to non-native accents. In addition to accent reduction, foreign names are identified as another factor that contributes to employment discrimination. Hence, immigrants are asked to Anglicize their names to gain more symbolic capital, assuming that they are acculturated and integrated if they do so. It is ironic that this program acknowledges racism in the labour market, but is not willing to challenge racist attitudes concerning ‘foreign’ accents and names. Instead, it puts pressure on immigrants to assimilate. Y. Guo challenges service providers to directly confront institutional racism that discriminates against people based on phenotypical features such as skin colour, eye shape, and facial features.

The racialization of skill is also reflected in the discourse and practice of ‘soft skills’ training for immigrants. As stated earlier, high-skilled immigrants bring with them significant human capital resources and skills to Canada, which are then devalued and deskilled; at the same time, they are accused of lacking ‘soft skills’. Soft skills refer to personal attributes and behavioural competencies for the workplace (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). Often employer-defined and locally-constituted, soft skills for immigrants also vary from one context to another. One categorization which has been adopted by many soft skills training programs in Canada is a list of nine essential soft skills, including interpersonal, communication, behavioural and organization skills (Noorani, 2011). The rationale for creating such a list lies in the belief that there are specific ‘Canadian ways’ of thinking and acting that recent immigrants need to acquire in order to get access to and successfully integrate into Canadian workplace. For example, in communication it is the Canadian ‘norm’ to ‘make direct eye contact’, ‘shake hand firmly’, and ‘have water cooler chitchat’ at the workplace. According to Noorani, it is also important to avoid discussing ‘religion, politics, sex, money’, or ‘getting too personal in the workplace’. Other soft skills immigrants are expected to acquire include presentation of the self: appropriate dress, hygiene, facial expressions, and body language. Following the identification of the nine soft skills, a campaign has been launched nationally by various service and training agencies to promote soft skills training under the following banners: ‘Nine soft skills no immigrant should be without!’, ‘Learning to fit in the workplace: Soft skills training’, ‘Enhance skilled immigrants’ essential ‘soft’ skills to boost success’, ‘Soft skills are the key to success at work’. Through such messaging, blame for not being hired is shifted to immigrants in the form of a ‘skill deficit’. The hidden agenda for the promotion of soft skills is the whitening of immigrants through the promotion of ‘Canadian’ ways of thinking, acting, and behaving. The expected outcome of this whitening process is the formation of white, docile corporate subjects, who will depart from their past deficiency, ‘embrace’ the Canadian norms, and become a ‘real’ Canadian.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the construction and working mechanisms of a racialized regime of skill by looking at the experiences of recent immigrants in Canada. Canadian studies of the labour market transition of skilled immigrants are analyzed. The analysis shows that knowledge and skill of recent immigrants in Canada has been racialized and
materialized on the basis of ethnic and national origins, reproducing white privilege and dominance. The above discussion has made it clear that racialization remains central to the operation of a hierarchical skills regime with skin colour rather than qualifications as its basis for discrimination. Racialized immigrants’ foreign credentials, job skills, and work experience are devalued and denigrated based on the skin colour to whom they are attached. It is the ‘colour’ of the skill associated with immigrants’ skin colour rather than the skill itself which causes the deskilling and devaluation. Patterns of a racialized regime of skill are also embedded in discriminatory hiring practices and subsequent opportunities for career advancement. Racialized minorities have lower rates of employment than native-born Canadians and higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. They encounter a persistent colour bar that blocks them from high-paying professional jobs commensurate with their experiences and skills. Racialized minorities are more likely to be concentrated at low-skilled occupations, such as sales, service, and manufacturing, and less likely to be in managerial and professional occupations. Their negative employment experiences have affected their economic performance and career mobility. More importantly, there are significant earning disparities between racialized immigrants and white workers. The racialized regime of skill works as divided practices between accepted and non-accepted, superior and inferior knowledge and skills that categorise people as Canadian and foreign, white and coloured.

A racialized regime of skill simultaneously de-skills and re-skills immigrants. Through processes of re-skilling, racialized immigrants are channeled into programmes for skill retraining, accent reduction, and cultural brainwashing. As such, a racialized regime of skill has become a social engineering project for manufacturing normative, white, and docile corporate subjects who are expected to think, act, and behave like a ‘real’ Canadian. In this view, a racialized regime of skill has functioned as an assimilation tool for moulding racialized minorities into Canadian norms and workplace cultures.

Critical race theory (CRT) provides an effective conceptual framework for contesting a racialized regime of skill. Originally developed as a critical response to the problem of the colour line in the US, CRT can be traced to legal scholarship countering the positivist and liberal legal discourses of civil rights in the mid-1970s (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). CRT recognizes racism as an endemic, and deeply ingrained in every aspect of society. It seeks to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of racialized minorities have been created and maintained in our society. CRT crosses disciplinary boundaries to offer a more complete analysis of ‘raced’ people (Tate, 1997). With its origins in legal studies, CRT has increasingly permeated other fields, including sociology and education. More recently, CRT is moving beyond the Black-White paradigm and beyond vulgar racial essentialism to consider the racialized lives of other oppressed minorities (e.g., Chinese, Indians, Latinos) (Treviño, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). However, CRT remains faithful to its original mandate of treating the social construction of race as central to the way that people of colour are ordered and constrained. In a sociological reflection about race and power, Luke (2009) argues that racism is an act of power and a form of symbolic and physical violence. He further points out that power is always contingent upon whether the structures and authorities
of social fields set out the conditions where it can be recognised and used for gainful purposes. Racializing practices, he continues, are undertaken both by objects of power (e.g., immigrants) and by those who relationally exercise power (e.g., employers), though obviously not with equivalent institutional force. CRT seeks not only to name, but to be a tool for dismantling the unequal power relations, for eliminating racial oppression, and for achieving racial justice.

A CRT analysis of a racialized regime of skill moves us beyond the traditional gender-and class-based analyses of skill and brings into the forefront omissions of race and racialization, which intersect with gender and class in reproducing white privilege and dominance. The results of this study show that race and racism continue to be discriminatory factors in determining the value of racialized immigrants' knowledge and skills. Contesting a racialized regime of skill not only challenges the myth of skill and skill development; it also exposes the colour-blind approach in the conceptualization of skill. Contrary to the conventional assumptions of human capital theory that investment in human capital can yield high earnings and economic prosperity, this study demonstrates how national and ethnic origins of human capital can affect racialized immigrants' economic performance, specifically in the form of downward career and social mobility. Existing conceptualisations of skill adopt a colour blind approach that fails to account for racialized elements of the social construction of skill. It seems evident from this study that skill is not only gendered and classed; it is also racialized. As such, the term ‘skill’ needs to be conceptualised as a set of social relations in recognizing the political characteristic of skill as coloured and gendered and its role in reproducing racial inequality and white privilege in Canada. In this sense, contesting a racialized regime of skill is a political project that engenders emancipatory practices. To overcome the detrimental effects of a racialized regime of skill, it is imperative to adopt anti-racist education strategies as a critical integrative approach in challenging racial discriminations and power differentials in the new politics of skill as coloured and racialized.

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