

Neither Temporary, Nor Permanent: The Precarious Employment Experiences of Refugee Claimants in Canada

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Although refugee claimants are often portrayed as a drain on Canada's economic resources, their employment experiences and contributions to the labour market remain under-represented in the literature. This study explores the employment experiences of refugee claimants in Toronto, Canada. Through the lens of *refugeeness*, it traces the subjective employment trajectories of refugee claimants, as well as the objective forces compromising their employability. Drawing on 17 interviews with refugee claimants, our analysis shows both that refugee claimants face distinct barriers stemming from their precarious legal status, and that refugee claimants' employability is perceived as shaped by real and ascribed barriers associated with this status. In addition, refugee claimants perceive employment as an expression of belonging and citizenship.

Keywords: refugee claimants, refugeeness, employment barriers, employment experiences

Introduction

Canadians tend to be proud of being a humanitarian and caring people (Environics Institute 2010). Refugees have both embodied and facilitated Canada's national humanitarian identity since the country ratified the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1969 (Becklumb 2008). Canada's ministry responsible for refugees, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), highlights this mutually beneficial relationship, stating that refugees 'bring their experiences, hopes and dreams to Canada to help build an even richer and more prosperous society for us all' (CIC 2012c). However, in light of increasing public scrutiny of

Canada's commitment to humanitarianism (e.g. CIC 2012d, 2012e, 2012f; Cohen 2012; *National Post* 2012b; *Toronto Sun* 2012) it may be questioned whether the welcoming of refugees is part of the Canadian identity, especially in respect of inland refugee claimants (RCs).

The groundbreaking study *Making Ontario Home* (Ali *et al.* 2012) recently reported that over half of interviewed RCs experience difficulty in finding work, forcing many to turn to government assistance. Such RCs typically feel 'humiliated' by the fact that they are professionals on welfare and feel they are no longer 'socially valued and contributing members of society' (Lacroix 2004: 158). However, despite an increased public focus on such costs as providing RCs with social assistance (e.g. Carlson 2011; Elliot 2012; Mahoney 2010), the employment experiences of RCs remain understudied.

Our study seeks to help fill this gap by examining the labour market experiences of RCs in Toronto and exploring the following research questions: *what employment barriers do refugee claimants face? What does employment mean for refugee claimants?* In examining both the employment barriers faced by RCs and their labour market experiences, our study highlights the subjective and objective forces that frame and shape refugees' experiences, and explores the role employment plays in shaping RCs' integration and sense of belonging. Accordingly, our study draws on a *refugeeness* framework as a lens to observe the subjective trajectories of refugees' employment experiences (e.g. Dobson 2004; Jin Lee and Brotman 2011; Lacroix 2004). Using tenets from Pozniak (2009), we further develop the *refugeeness* framework by exploring how public narratives are appropriated by RCs in order to shape, understand, and proclaim their Canadian identity, as well as how these narratives may act as barriers to employability.

In the following sections, we first provide background information on refugees in Canada, our theoretical framework, refugee representations, and the literature on refugee employment. Then, we describe the methodology used, before presenting the results, which are divided into two sections: barriers to employment, and employment experiences. Here, we discuss the distinct barriers encountered by RCs looking for work, as well as their unique, in limbo position in Canada. In particular, the role of employment as a vector to feelings of belonging and citizenship is discussed. This is followed by a conclusion where we discuss the significance of these results.

Background

Refugee Claimants in Canada

In Canada, potential refugees may enter through one of three streams: as an inland RC, as a Government-Assisted Refugee (GAR), or through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees programme (PSR). GARs, PSRs, and RCs are deemed to be accepted, or Convention, refugees pursuant to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol (CIC 2012b). However, while

GARs and PSRs are considered to be Convention refugees while living outside of Canada, such as in a refugee camp, RCs arrive by their own means, and typically make a refugee claim at their respective points of entry. Through a process that can take several months or even years, RCs then have their case heard by the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), which ultimately determines if they will be accepted as Convention refugees.

In 2011, 24,981 cases were referred to the IRB (this number includes many claimants who had waited years for their hearing); of these, 38 per cent were accepted. Ten years earlier, in 2001, 43,996 cases were referred and a notable 47 per cent were accepted as Convention refugees (University of Ottawa Human Rights Research and Education Centre 2012). While awaiting their IRB hearing, a period ‘critical to urban re-settlement’ (Manjikian 2010: 51), RCs can work legally by obtaining a work permit and temporary Social Insurance Number (SIN), which begins with a 9 to denote its temporary status. In order to apply for these permissions, RCs must present their Personal Identification Form (PIF), records of medical examinations, and proof of their financial needs to CIC, amounting to an average wait of two months. There is no cost for RCs to obtain a work permit or SIN (CIC 2012c).

RCs also have access to a variety of other services, including free language training and employment assistance. The Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants’ comprehensive survey of how newcomers use settlement services found that 53.1 per cent of RCs who settled in Ontario in the past ten years generally use settlement services, and that 54.3 per cent of RCs use employment services within their first year of arrival. Nevertheless, 58.6 per cent reported ‘experiencing challenges in finding employment when they settled in their current cities’ (Ali *et al.* 2012: 36).

Constructed Representations and Refugeeess

The notion of *refugeeness* permits theorizing how one’s identity *as a refugee* shapes employment experiences. *Refugeeness* is understood as an ongoing, constitutive process of becoming a refugee, with each ‘refugee experience’ building on the previous and shaping the next. Further to the assertion that the act of being forced to cross borders creates an experience universal to all refugees (Lacroix 2004), this framework supports the more nuanced position that ‘it is a mistake to regard the refugee as... a member in a mass group in flight’ (Dobson 2004: 23). As a subjective, uniquely experienced construct, *refugeeness* is informed by various experiences, such as where one engages with ‘social political, and legal constructions of refugees within the Canadian refugee system’ (Jin Lee and Brotman 2011: 245). Malkki (1995: 497), for example, conceives of *refugeeness* as ‘a way of understanding the particular subjective experience [of the refugee] in relation to existing policies’. Similarly, Lacroix (2004: 149) argues that understanding the *refugeeness* process may include legal definitions but ‘moves beyond to consider

the individual's subjective experience of having to flee one's country'. Being forced from one's country and the subsequent experience of *becoming a refugee*—that is, negotiating one's identity vis-à-vis the refugee label—creates a *refugee* lens through which 'refugees' interpret their experiences. Once defined as refugees, individuals begin 'rebuilding their subjectivity, their sense of who they are' (Lacroix 2004: 156). The impact of *refugeeness* in re-shaping identities has been explored vis-à-vis sexual orientation (Jin Lee and Brotman 2011), refugee depoliticization (Szczepanikova 2010), and in regards to gender and ethnicity (Schrijvers 1999).

Jin Lee and Brotman (2011) attribute refugee identities to Canadian refugee policies, social institutions, and, in the case of sexual minority refugees, heteronormative discourses. Similarly, Lacroix (2004) links the role of work, family, and bureaucratic institutions in the construction of refugees. Lacroix also notes the importance of discursive practices in shaping the refugee identity, wherein discourse is conceptualized as 'a wide range of activities derived from legislation and administrative regulations' (2004: 154). This article builds on Lacroix's findings on discourse and shows in addition that refugees' interactions with public, non-legislative representations are also critical in shaping their *refugeeness*. As refugees' place in Canada is frequently contested in the public sphere (Bradimore and Bauder 2011), public refugee narratives are increasingly politicized and shape refugees' integrative experiences. Subsequently, we employ Pozniak's (2009) discussion of the power of discourses to illustrate how public narratives—specifically, the 'bogus refugee' discourse—act as critical sites to forming one's *refugeeness*.

As a site of identity contestation, refugee representation in public discourses is under-explored; however, this notion has been examined in relation to non-refugee immigrants by authors such as Pozniak (2009). Through an analysis of Canadian newspapers, Pozniak analysed 'dominant images/metaphors that shape government and media discourses around immigration issues' (2009: 176). These images were grouped into two themes: the 'assets and costs' and 'immigrant ethic' narratives (2009: 174), which constitute key components of hegemonic Canadian discourses on immigration and, subsequently, narratives that must be negotiated by newcomers to Canada. Pozniak (2009) explains that recent immigrants are aware of the discursive distinction between 'good' (i.e. hard-working) and 'bad' (i.e. free-loading) immigrants, and in turn, align their own identities and experiences with the 'good' hard-working immigrant. Our study builds upon Pozniak's work, and asserts that publicly constructed identities of refugees as 'bogus' and 'queue jumpers', situated within discourses of worthiness, similarly serve 'as a prism through which newcomers construct their experiences and identities' (Pozniak 2009: 188). Furthermore, while we find that RCs engage with and appropriate this discourse of legitimacy, worth, and value when navigating and proclaiming their Canadian refugee identities, several interview respondents also indicate that negative discourses and related public distrust may impede RCs' ability to enter the labour market.

Understanding the role such narratives play in shaping a refugee's identity is predicated on the assumption that identities are largely relational. This proposition is widely supported in the migration and refugee literature (e.g. Létourneau 2001; Bauder 2008, 2011). In this article we explore how public discourse influences how refugees identify themselves and perceive their own employability; in particular, we explore how the process of *refugeeness* (and in particular, ascribed refugee identities) is perceived as creating unique employment barriers and shaping RCs' employment experiences.

Refugee Representations

Both government and media discourses tend to dichotomize the 'good and bad immigrant' (Pozniak 2009: 178). While 'good immigrants' are skilled, hard-working, quick-to-adapt newcomers who never require government assistance, 'bad immigrants' represent a cost to the Canadian taxpayer, as they fail to learn English, require government assistance, reject work in low-paying positions, and are 'unwilling to adapt to Canadian norms' (Pozniak 2009: 178).

When framed within an understanding of legitimacy and worth, characteristics associated with 'bad immigrants' may be understood as applicable to RCs. A similar framework to determine newcomer value is also often applied to RCs. Through terms such as 'bogus refugee' and 'queue jumper', government and media discourses summarily dismiss claimants' legitimacy and worthiness of Canadian humanitarian aid. These labels, as respondents observed, are seen in newspapers (e.g. Cohen 2012; *Montreal Gazette* 2012; *Toronto Sun* 2012) and government publications (e.g. CIC 2012d, 2012e, 2012f) and are used to 'represent a category of refugee applicants who are not only undesired but who also inflict damage by consuming the resources needed to support "deserving" refugees' (Bauder 2008: 89), creating an overall environment of distrust and distaste of RCs.

Creese (1992) shows that such negative representations of refugees emerged in Canada alongside the 1987 arrival of the *Amelie*, a boat carrying 173 Sikh refugee claimants. The *Amelie* created a national uproar that led to the passing of Bill C-55 and thus, the formation of the IRB. In 1999, Chinese boats arrived carrying 599 refugees, who were similarly described by the media as 'racialized, illegal, and non-belonging' (Bauder 2008: 85). As non-traditional arrivals, 'boat people' are often perceived as 'illegals' or 'queue jumpers' (e.g. Gale 2004; Johnson 1999), which has resulted in an increased focus on security in Canada's immigration system (Bradimore and Bauder 2011).

More recently, public discourse and media representations have focused on the arrivals of inland RCs from countries not traditionally conceived of as refugee-sending nations, such as Hungary. Under the direction of Minister Jason Kenney, Citizenship and Immigration Canada often describes arrivals from democratic states and Canada's trading partners as 'bogus' refugees who arrive at the airport and, as the Minister suggested, ask 'where they

can get their [welfare] cheque from' (Carlson 2011; *National Post* 2012a; see also e.g. CIC 2012d; CIC 2012e; CIC 2012f). As the government's rhetoric of 'queue jumpers' is reproduced in media outlets (Mann 2009), it is arguable that RCs' welcome in Canada is eroding. Noting this, Cresswell and Merrimen (2011: 260) suggest that the use of this 'language of alterity' is not only divisive, but dangerously permits 'the homogenization of RC experiences'.

In the midst of economic recession, a national refugee discourse rooted in financial costs is an important policy tool. In Canada, the use of the 'bogus refugee' narrative has been linked to an economic-utility perspective that represents immigrants in light of economic costs and benefits (Bauder 2011). As our discussions suggest, those who arrive under the *refugee* label are acutely aware of the narratives taking place across public forums debating their legitimacy. Some of our interviews indicate that the associated labels and narratives also shape RCs' labour market experiences if employers, for example, embrace and act upon these labels.

Refugees in the Canadian Labour Market

Research on refugees' labour market experiences is sparse (but see Centre for International Statistics 1999, Coates and Hayward 2005, Krahn *et al.* 2000). However, these experiences may to some degree reflect the experiences of non-refugee immigrants in Canada. This literature exploring newcomers' employment barriers is extensive and well developed (e.g. Bauder 2003, 2006; Buzdugan and Halli 2009; Fuller and Martin 2012; Hadak *et al.* 2010; Lewin-Epstein *et al.* 2003; Reitz 2001) and generally suggests that there is a combination of barriers facing newcomers. In this section, we review barriers to employment likely to affect RCs.

Credential recognition presents a barrier not only for skilled immigrants but also for refugees. In a rare study focused on GARs, Krahn *et al.* (2000) found that 44 per cent of 525 interviewed GARs reported credential recognition issues. While 25 per cent of mostly European respondents were able to find positions similar to their former professions, the majority were unable to find employment appropriate to their educational and professional background. Coates and Hayward (2005) suggest that citizenship bears a greater effect on credentials and licensing than source country or discrimination. In fact, some industries and occupations, such as truck driving, are out of reach to RCs because necessary licensing or credential recognition is only available to permanent residents or citizens. DeVoretz and his colleagues (2004) also find a lack of credentials to pose barriers, as only 20 per cent of refugees from non-European countries arrived in Canada with post-secondary education. Even with earned credentials, RCs are often forced to flee with little notice or preparation, and many 'arrive without transcripts or certificates, and the country they have fled may be reluctant or unable to provide copies of such documents' (Krahn *et al.* 2000: 36).

Similarly, issues relating to language skills, including proficiency and accent discrimination, are well established as posing employment barriers for immigrants and refugees (e.g. Beiser and Hou 2000; DeVoretz *et al.* 2004; England and Stiell 1997). Interestingly, refugees from areas other than Europe, such as Southeast Asia, have been found to possess lower post-secondary education levels but have more established English capabilities (Beiser and Hou 2000; DeVoretz *et al.* 2004), which is important as English proficiency is often a greater indicator of long-term career attainment than other forms of credentials (Beiser and Hou 2000). However, some refugees find that English language training programmes in Canada are inadequate (Krahn *et al.* 2000). In addition, like many newcomers, refugees generally lack Canadian experience, which may prove injurious when searching for employment. Foreign-trained professionals are often perplexed as to why Canadian experience is required by employers and angered at the devaluation of their often decades of experience (Azuh 1998; Bauder 2003; Krahn *et al.* 2000; Reitz 2007). Newcomers are often forced into unpaid volunteer work in fields related to their profession or in any position to gain Canadian experience and obtain Canadian references (Krahn *et al.* 2000; Lacroix 2004).

Although the literature touches upon barriers faced by refugee claimants, the uniqueness of RCs' precarious status is seldom fully explored as a potential employment barrier. In a rare acknowledgement, Coates and Hayward (2005) did suggest that the label of 'refugee claimant' and markers such as 900-series SIN numbers lead to discrimination. Based on the literature review above, it is evident that RCs, like many newcomers, face structural as well as institutionalized barriers to employment; yet, their refugeeeness likely put them in a more precarious situation than other immigrants.

Methodology

Our study employed a qualitative and exploratory research approach (Strauss 1987; Wesley 2011). Participants in the study were Toronto residents over 18 years of age, had made a refugee claim in Canada in the past five years, and were within the parameters of the refugee claimant process at the time of interviewing. If the participants had received a positive refugee determination decision, this adjudication must have been rendered in the past two years. One participant had entered Canada without passing through official immigration or refugee channels, and was living without citizenship status at the time of interviewing.

Participants were recruited through the use of research recruitment posters, which were placed—with permission from service coordinators—in four refugee settlement agencies within Toronto. Service coordinators were instrumental in advertising this study as they presented the research poster to potential participants they believed might be interested. In total, 17 interviews were conducted. The resulting sample was diverse, capturing a range of perspectives from varying stages of the refugee determination process (Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Sociodemographic Information			
Interviewee	Gender	Country of Origin	Status:
1. Adela	F	El Salvador	H&C (RC denied)
2. Bernardo	M	Columbia	PR (RC accepted)
3. Carisa	F	El Salvador	RC
4. Dante	M	El Salvador	RC
5. Elias	M	Mexico	Beginning H&C process (RC denied)
6. Flor	F	Mexico	TR (RC denied, H&C accepted)
7. Gil	M	Honduras	PR (RC accepted)
8. Herminia	F	Mexico	TR (RC accepted, delay in receiving PR)
9. Inez	F	Columbia	RC
10. Jon	M	El Salvador	RC
11. Katia	F	Mexico	Beginning H&C process (RC denied)
12. Lazar	M	Hungary	RC
13. Malik	M	Turkey	RC
14. Nelia	F	Columbia	H&C (RC denied)
15. Omer	M	Columbia	RC
16. Lucien	M	Congo	Non-status
17. Adriana	F	Mexico	Beginning H&C process (RC denied)

H&C: Humanitarian and Compassionate consideration

RC: Refugee Claim

PR: Permanent Residence

TR: Temporary Residence

Sixteen of the interviews were conducted in English, while one was conducted in Spanish with the assistance of a translator. Semi-structured interviews included open-ended questions that facilitated the participant's own digressions. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed.

After a careful first reading, each transcript was individually analysed using open coding, followed by selective coding. This method was effective for comparing data to note interesting discrepancies and similarities (Wesley 2011). We distinguished between *thematic codes*, *descriptive coding*, and *objective coding*, and noted links between the core and sub-codes. Descriptive memos were written to highlight pertinent themes and linkages. Codes were then arranged hierarchically, and aggregate lists were created to organize, pair and note thematic connections and relationships between codes, which prepared the data for final analysis.

The work with vulnerable RCs raised important ethical issues (Gillis and MacLennan 2010). To address the participants' vulnerability, a series of steps were taken to avoid refugees participating in this study out of feelings of obligation or fear and to minimize 'the interviewer effect' (Archer and Berdahl 2011). Full disclosure of the study's intent and the interviewer's

positionality was pertinent to this study. In addition, participants' anonymity was ensured, for example, by removing their names and links to settlement agencies from recordings, transcripts, and other records. Results and interview analyses were shared with interested respondents, as well as the refugee serving agencies which assisted in advertising this project.

Results

Overview of Findings

Participants came from a diverse yet largely skilled background: seven had post-secondary education prior to coming to Canada, including two who worked in regulated professions; five were skilled workers; and five participants arrived with unskilled work experience. Previous positions included university professors, autoworkers, two land dispute mediators, and a customer service agent. Interestingly, both land dispute mediators identified their former employment as the source of their persecution.

With the exception of one man who managed a retail store, all participants worked in one of four industries once in Canada: construction, cleaning, general labour, and food preparation. Most respondents had worked in several positions since their arrival in Canada, nearly all of which were temporary and part-time. Additionally, three female respondents provided childcare at no charge, unpaid work they did not perceive as Canadian experience. Katia, Omer, and Elias said it was not uncommon to work long hours for less pay than was promised, only to be told there was no work the next day. Despite work permissions, several participants were told by employers they would be hired only if they accepted cash, and with that, the exploitative conditions that often accompany informal employment. Two respondents were employed informally at the time of the interview, and four respondents had worked informally at some point when they were unable to find other positions. All participants reported experiencing downward mobility. Gil collects with macabre humour:

I worked for a woman's clothing store. It was so funny because first I was dealing with land disputes and had six death attempts. One of them I got thrown out of a police SUV and two of my bodyguards and one of my lawyers were killed. And a year later I was selling women's dresses. It was pretty crazy.

Occupational downward mobility, such as from psychologist to kitchen helper or from university professor to duct cleaner, were 'a big change' (Katia) for most respondents, who often felt powerless regarding their ability to improve their situation.

All participants had engaged with a settlement agency in some way. The most frequent reasons for contacting settlement agencies were to seek assistance with attaining a SIN and work permit, to secure employment, and to find housing. Almost three-quarters of participants sought language

assistance through English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes at some point during their refugee determination process. Five respondents reported seeking assistance from employment specific agencies.

Barriers to Employment

Participants stated that they encountered various intersecting barriers. Challenges encountered included language barriers, devalued credentials, and issues relating to assumptions of RCs' worth and capabilities.

All but one participant felt comfortable conducting the interview in English. Yet, interestingly, all respondents described *English proficiency* as their most formidable employment barrier. Supporting findings by England and Stiell (1997), three participants felt that co-workers and potential employers dismissed them as 'incompetent' because of their accents and language limitations. This dismissal evoked vivid imagery from participants. Bernardo stated feeling 'mutilated; as though you cannot speak'. Similarly, Herminia said: 'I felt before, how do you say? *Impotente*. Impotent, powerless! I wanted to express myself, but I can't!' Such responses indicate participants felt disempowered and angered by their inability to communicate effectively. Importantly, however, language barriers were not perceived as static:

I went to the [English] school because they told me we had to go to the school, but I liked to and I wanted to learn the language... my friends said, 'you have to learn English to have opportunities we don't have in our countries'. And I felt very excited for that news (Inez).

While encountering barriers to communication such as accent discrimination and difficulties communicating in English was described largely as an 'extremely frustrating' (Carisa) experience for RCs, such barriers were also perceived as the most conquerable. Six responses indicate that while other barriers such as education were 'too expensive', improving one's English proficiency and acquiring a more Canadian accent was facilitated by free ESOL classes or often, through social networks and even workplace practice. These findings support research by Prefontaine and Benson (1999: 19), who indicate language to be the most 'acquirable' form of human capital. Gil accepted a retail position he knew would improve his English. Although working in construction was more profitable, 'I wouldn't practise my language and then it would take me even more [time] to get something in my field', he recalls; 'I was just focused on learning language'. While Gil's lack of familial dependents permitted settling for a lower paying job, others, such as Nelia and Omer, felt that their jobs prevented language development. Omer described RCs as falling in 'a trap between work and school for English', as he often had to stop English programmes as work became available.

Devalued educational and work experiences are also long-established barriers affecting newcomers of all streams, and RCs are no exception. Whether

coming from a professional or skilled trade background, seven participants, whose past professions ranged from university professor to land dispute mediator, stated that their educational credentials were not recognized in Canada, and not one participant was working in the same profession following migration. Echoing findings by Teelucksingh and Galabuzi (2007), participants' experience elicited feelings of frustration and powerlessness as they grappled with their declining professional status. Elias, for example, remarked 'I have two degrees for chef...but nothing from the past counts. Now, it is everything new. Only construction. It's hard'. Similarly, Bernardo said: 'I know I can give support to people [as in my former career]...but the problem isn't if you're able to do the job. The credentials, the background, that is what matters'.

While deskilling and credential non-recognition are problems not unique to RCs, the barriers precluding them from enrolling in 'bridging' programmes (i.e. courses aimed to adapt internationally-acquired credentials, education and experience to Canadian requirements) often are. As non-permanent residents, four respondents—Adela, Flor, Elias and Lazar—stated they were unable to enrol in bridging programmes because they would have been charged international tuition rates, which are much higher than domestic fees. These results echo findings by Coates and Hayward (2005), who suggest that credential recognition is effectively available only to permanent residents and citizens.

All participants described navigating the SIN and work permit application process as 'easy' to understand and complete. However, as mentioned above, social insurance numbers assigned to RCs begin with a 9, denoting non-permanent status. Supporting research by Cholewinski and Taran (2010), four participants reported direct experiences of employer discrimination based on one's SIN. Regarding the SIN, Nelia observed: 'it marks, *refugee, refugee, refugee*. Somebody will see it and think, [not a problem] 'it's good, it's good'; but somebody else will see that and think no, many problems'. Other participants stated that they believe their SIN 'gave them away' as undesirable employees, preventing them from obtaining jobs.

The 900-series SIN number assigned to all RCs poses a practical barrier because it implies impermanence and 'unnecessary trouble' (Lazar). Seven respondents suggested that their status was perceived as precarious or transient and thus, unattractive to employers. Flor noted the predictable trajectory: 'I'll get as far as the interview without having to reveal I'm a refugee claimant, but I always have to show it eventually, and it always hurts me'. Employers do not trust refugee claimants, she explained, because they do not know where they will be tomorrow: 'In a way, they're right. I am in limbo. I understand where they are coming from, I don't judge them.' Indeed, RCs are neither temporary workers, nor permanent residents, and instead straddle the precarious gap between permanence and transience. As a result all but one participant reported finding only temporary, part-time or contract work despite remaining in Canada for many years. 'People think RCs are just here

for a short time,' stated Inez, 'but really, it could be for years and years'. Herein lies the distinctiveness of refugees' labour market experiences; despite entering Canada without any guarantee of permanence and for decidedly non-economic reasons, RCs still enter the labour market to fill precarious, temporary positions. However, the reality remains that RCs' stay in Canada is rarely short-term. On average, RCs remain in Canada with this status for 1,038 days prior to their refugee hearing, with some people remaining *in limbo* within the determination system for as long as ten years (CIC 2012a).

Participants believed that they are relegated to certain sectors within the Canadian labour market. 'We are in some fields now that Canadians, they won't do', asserted Adele, 'cleaners, in farms, in factories, in lines of production, kitchen helper... you will never see a Canadian person working such a job'. The phrase 'refugee jobs' was used to denote physical labour, cleaning, and construction, which matched some employers' low expectations of RCs' capabilities. Carisa argued that employers assume that RCs, unlike immigrants, are incapable of adapting: 'They think the big difference between me and other immigrants... is that immigrants can know the country, and how they do everything here.' Other participants reported that employers wrongly assumed that RCs have *no credentials* and are only capable of unskilled labour. All but three participants suggested their impermanence and stereotypes associated with the RC label consigned them to certain positions in the Canadian workforce.

Discourse, Identity, and Employment

Canadian immigration discourse often presents immigration, immigrants and refugees in dichotomies of merit and costs, 'good' and 'bad' migrants, and 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees (Bauder 2011). Li (2003: 47) argues the very term *refugee* implies an unsolicited immigrant who will be a 'burden to the state, since their successful integration to Canada is seen as depending on the state's capacity to provide adequate settlement'. According to Pozniak (2009: 188), these narratives and labels shape how newcomers represent themselves, as they quickly understand 'the acceptable language of representation', and then appropriate their own experiences to construct their self-representation as 'good refugees'.

Our findings suggest that while most respondents are aware of the 'bogus refugee' narrative and label (Pozniak 2009), several also perceive these narratives as contributing to public distrust and thus, as adversely affecting their employability. Ironically, participants explained that they think the very narrative of 'RCs as an economic burden' actually limits their job opportunities. We discuss this matter further below in the section, *Perceptions, Identity, and Barriers*.

Most respondents both acknowledged and refuted this 'undeserving refugee' narrative. Importantly, participants were acutely aware of refugees' position in relation to changing public policy, as well as the ongoing

debate regarding Canada's responsibility to provide services to refugees, such as healthcare. Indeed, through interview discussions and, for six respondents, attending weekly protests demanding refugee rights, responses provided stark contrast to the stereotype of refugees as passive (Manjikian 2010).

Interestingly, however, while respondents rejected these discourses surrounding policy change, several respondents used them as tools to describe and assert their own position as a refugee in Canada: i.e., to stress that they *were not* the bad, undeserving queue jumper. Pozniak (2009: 181) suggests that newcomers use discourses to 'validat[e] and reforc[e] their perception of themselves'. In the case of our study, participants reject but then appropriate ascribed, deleterious identities to publicly legitimize their own lives, stories, and current position as *genuine* refugees.

In line with findings by Pozniak (2009), participants strongly desired to distinguish themselves from the 'bogus refugee' stereotype. Jon said:

Welfare? No. No! It is better to work for so many reasons—more money, you don't feel uncomfortable, and you are knowing more Canadians. So I know having a job is good for me for so many reasons.

Similarly, Gil remarked: 'It's simply contradictory to think that a RC is coming here because of the generosity of the social benefits.' All participants we interviewed indicated a fierce desire to become financially independent through gainful employment and no longer rely on government assistance. While 'refugee jobs' were described as disempowering, RCs overwhelmingly indicated their preference for obtaining such a position over accepting government assistance, which was described with disdain and embarrassment. Lazar said:

I was on welfare for a short time but only because I had to be. I didn't want to be. When I was on welfare... being on welfare...it is uncomfortable. It makes me so uncomfortable. I want to live on my own, not live on the government. But I had no choice, because I couldn't sleep outside, I had to eat something.

Indeed, many respondents defined themselves through proximal acts of citizenship, such as paying income taxes. The desire to work, pay taxes, and to 'give back' to Canada was described synonymously with a desire not to embody negative stereotypes, or be perceived as a burden to the state. Respondents acknowledged oppressive discourses as unjust, yet appropriated the same narratives as tools to construct their own identity as a refugee. Herminia said:

When the [RC] people come to here, they apply for welfare... And we saw many, many people, doesn't working, having child and child to just keep getting money from the government. And the people that are working, that are trying to do something for themselves, for ourselves, or try to...because we know, we

need to study. Why? To get better jobs. We get a good job, we're going to make good taxes for the government! Cause that is important here.

Similarly, Katia also intentionally distinguished herself from an undesirable refugee stereotype; between jobs at the time of interview, she explained: 'I don't want to stay at home expecting a cheque for the social assistance... Part-time, full-time; it will be very important for me.'

Perceptions, Identity, and Barriers

Several respondents perceived public discourses (i.e. news media and government releases) as equating the term *refugee claimant* with bogus refugee and queue jumper, which delegitimizes RCs' presence within Canada and creates an environment of cynicism and suspicion towards RCs. For example, Gil remarked that the image of the bad, *bogus* refugee

is creating a lot of divisions among Canadians, among people... by using phrases like 'why RCs get a benefit when the average Canadian taxpayer is not eligible for it?' Of course, say it like that and anybody will agree.

A limited number of respondents perceived public discourses regarding refugees as so damaging and pervasive, they amounted to a formidable employment barrier. For these respondents, an environment perceived as increasingly hostile towards refugee claimants became an additional barrier facing RCs, as they felt employers were influenced by the hostile government position towards refugees, and were hesitant to hire those who were perceived as having jumped the queue. Bernardo observed:

The people think, 'oh it is a new idea for immigration, we will have better immigrants to improve the economy'. That is the side they are showing; one of the ideas they are working on not so openly is that *RC are a problem area for taxpayers*. That is not true. I hear people, 'oh the refugee claimants, they cost in health, they cost in welfare!' But most of the refugee claimants are people who are working hard. As I saw, the government is not presenting directly that situation [the cost of refugee claimants] but is softly, softly showing that because when you are *implying* something sometimes, you are very more effective than when you are simply saying.

Such respondents felt discussions of their legitimacy in Canada, combined with increasingly strong government positions towards minimizing their length of stay and access to resources such as healthcare, made them unattractive employees, and left them required to prove their value as both workers and future citizens; Elias perceived terms such as 'bogus refugees' as negatively affecting chances of employment: 'The employers prejudice the person... it's in the lingo'. Similarly, Malik suggested that employers view RCs as 'a waste of taxpayers' money'. As Jon perceived, not only did an increasingly critical debate towards RCs affect his employability, but so too did policy changes. Citing the threat of RCs losing healthcare coverage, Jon

was concerned his construction site employers would perceive him as a liability: ‘so employers are thinking if something happened with that person I would have to pay for that because the government is not responsible anymore’. Further study regarding the implications of public discourse and ascribed refugee identities on employment prospects and labour market outcomes is required.

Employment Experiences

In addition to facing unique employment barriers, RCs also *experienced* employment uniquely. While for many participants financial necessity was the prime motivator behind employment, they also indicate that *working* procures many important non-financial benefits for RCs. Notably, 13 participants described the act of ‘working’ as critical not only to practising English but also to meeting and befriending Canadians, developing a sense of belonging, and putting down roots to combat feelings of transient impermanence. Malik stated:

So when you’re not working, it’s really hard you know? You feel like you are not a Canadian. If you working with everybody, actually you meet people, and [they] help you with English and everything. But without working, it ain’t like that. It’ll be okay when I work, but before that, no.

Similarly, Omer remarked: ‘When you start to work, you are *living here*. You have to go to work, so you feel more in the home, like you are doing something’.

Participants felt that employment facilitates their participation and integration into Canadian society. Carissa stated that employment and the associated benefits of being paid, maintaining independence, and paying taxes helps one ‘feel like a Canadian.’ In this way, employment is an important part of ‘the realm of social inclusion’ (Manjikian 2010: 51). Some participants indicated that employment is strongly associated with feelings of ‘giving back to Canada’ (Inez and Malik), both as a symbolic gesture of indemnity and through the tangible act of paying income taxes. Bernardo stated: ‘What I do know is if a refugee claimant can work, he is able to reveal a new life faster, and to give back to Canada instead of being a charge for the taxpayers’. Flors echoed Bernardo’s statement: ‘I think [employment] will help you get accepted [by Canadians] because they will see you are not relying on the government and not taking from them’. In this sense, working facilitates integration by including RCs in Canada’s economic and social networks, while allowing them to ‘give back’ through taxation. For RCs, employment and paying taxes are performative acts of citizenship.

Similarly, RCs valued employment as a manner of setting down roots and countering feelings of *impermanence* stemming from their precarious status. Nelia found employment to be important because it ‘puts [RCs] in the system’. However, if work is exploitative and abusive, then it may not

translate to feeling socially included. Omer, for example, asserts that ‘refugee jobs’ may actually act as a barrier to integration given the often long hours and unpredictable schedule: ‘How can these people increase... their level in Canada and learn about Canadian culture and their education if they are working as dogs all the time? It’s crazy.’ Obtaining a job conducive to integration requires overcoming many of the employment barriers faced by RCs, including ‘getting papers.’ ‘If I had the papers, I would have a good job,’ argued Elias. ‘Everything would be good. Because I am a *worker*, I am a *fighter*. The only thing stopping me is the papers.’

In cases where employment in undesirable jobs proved unfulfilling, several participants approached volunteering as a means of reconstructing identity and fostering a sense of belonging. Following Amundsen, who finds that identity determination ‘becomes particularly significant during times of transition when boundaries are fluid’ such that ‘[t]he interplay between self and the labor market forms the nucleus of identity negotiation’ (1994: 100), former lawyer Gil perceived volunteering in a legal office as critical to his understanding of the Canadian legal profession. Gil stated, ‘through this volunteering I’ve been doing, I get into places I want to be. For example, I’m not a lawyer so I can’t get the same access [to my past profession]... except through the volunteer’.

Volunteering enabled RCs to re-involve themselves in their past professions and thus their past identities. While Lacroix (2004) found former professionals wary of volunteering in their field for the lack of perceived benefits, our participants often volunteered directly in their prior profession or donated time to fields that allowed them to recreate the most loved aspects of their professions. Adela, who was a lecturer in El Salvador, described volunteering in a local youth shelter: ‘I like to be around young people; that’s why I was a teacher. That was a really good time’. Like other participants, Adela experienced downward mobility as she shifted from college teacher to kitchen helper; volunteering was enjoyable for her, she explained, because it allowed her to revive a piece of her identity she thought had been lost due to credential devaluation.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored how the process of *becoming a refugee* is perceived as substantiating RCs’ employment experiences, as well as how one’s *refugeeness* and identity construction are influenced by public discourses. We demonstrated that RCs’ employment experiences during this time of ‘suspended temporality’ (Manjikian 2010: 54) are distinct and framed by unique barriers stemming from their precarious legal statuses. In particular, RCs’ employment experiences are underscored by the looming possibility of removal. Until full citizenship is attained, Dobson’s *refugeeness* explains that refugees will continue to feel this impermanence as ‘compulsive migrants... of sedentary strangeness, with the ever-present potential to move on again’

(2004: 16). The emphasis on RCs' precarious status and *refugeeness* as pre-eminent barriers to gaining employment complements other research that has assumed, for example, racialization and gendering perspectives (e.g. Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2005; Teelucksingh and Galabuzi 2007). Our findings suggest that while RCs face barriers similar to those of other newcomers, such as lack of English proficiency and credential devaluation, claimants experience pronounced hardship in *overcoming* these barriers. Participants further reported that their RC status alongside, perceptions that they lacked education and skills, was instrumental in inhibiting their success in the labour market.

In particular, respondents suggested media and government-fuelled discourses of 'bogus refugees' informed public distrust. As Malik stated,

I think the government, they are so discriminatory about refugees and mostly about Roma people. I don't think the Canadians even knew about so many stereotypes until the government told them all these things about Roma people.

All except one participant reported finding only 'refugee jobs', which was often perceived as attributable in part to a distrust of RCs. These jobs were described as undesirable temporary, part-time, or contract work that provided for only short-term needs, despite most participants remaining in Canada as RCs for many years.

Our findings suggest that the prevalent 'bogus refugee' stereotype is perceived as creating a hostile environment of distrust towards RCs. In particular, respondents suggested the 'bogus refugee' label and its pervasive assumptions regarding RCs' high cost and propensity to abuse the welfare system cast doubt on RCs' legitimacy to live and work in Canada. This narrative also reinforced assumptions about the 'place of refugees' within Canadian society, including which jobs refugees ought to obtain. Participants were notably aware of these refugee discourses and challenged the stereotype of refugees as passive or uninvolved (Manjikian 2010).

Our research indicates that ascribed identities, expectations of which positions RCs ought to be satisfied with, and the perceived repercussions of precarious status often mean that claimants are presumed to be suitable for only undesirable, short-term, dirty, dangerous, and demanding occupations. Employers who act upon these perceptions, in combination with other factors such as deskilling, channel RCs into the secondary labour market where they serve as an expendable 'labour reserve army' (Marx [1867] 2001). This finding confirms other research that shows how vulnerable migrant labour feeds a secondary labour market segment, constituting a structural component of the labour market and the Canadian economy (Piore 1979; Bauder 2006).

To a degree, RCs' employment barriers echo those of recent immigrants. For example, skilled immigrants also earn less money despite high educational attainments (Reitz 2001) and are routinely 'deskilled' through a devaluation of their employment history (Bauder 2003). However, these

barriers are often more difficult to overcome for RCs. For example, unlike immigrants, RCs often flee their country with little time to assemble credential documents (Coates and Hayward 2004), and they are virtually barred from credential bridging because of international tuition fees. Without the guarantee of permanency, RCs are limited in their ability and willingness to invest in overcoming these barriers.

RCs' employment experiences also share similarities with temporary foreign workers. For example, both are subject to exploitation by employers, often in physically demanding labour positions (e.g. Goldring 2010; Lenard and Straehle 2010). However, the RCs we interviewed rarely have any guarantee of continual work, and often work informally, filling very short-term, transient positions, with little assurance of rehire the next day.

Unlike the economic class immigrants and temporary foreign workers who enter Canada, RCs are not recruited for their human capital (Chimni 2009). Their experiences are underscored by the insecurity of their status and the unease of impermanence. Neither temporary nor permanent, RCs occupy a *space between* other migrants, and approach and experience the labour market differently. Yet, while employment is not the reason for entering Canada, upon entry, finding a job becomes critical to make a living, cover expenses such as medical bills or the \$550 fee required to apply for humanitarian and compassionate (H&C) consideration, and to maintain independence and personal integrity during a tumultuous and uncertain period in their lives (Bauder 2006).

While RCs described receiving government assistance as an undesirable embarrassment, they noted various integrative social benefits of employment. Even working in 'refugee jobs' facilitated a sense of independence, control, and agency over their decidedly uncertain lives, although the working conditions in these jobs can also obstruct social integration. In this sense, RCs view employment not only as a necessary means to a financial end, but as an enactment of citizenship. Being employed led RCs to feel like contributing members of society who are 'giving back' to Canada.

Overall, our study affirmed that RCs, much like other migrants, are vulnerable and exploitable labour in the Canadian economy. It has been found that RCs' disenfranchisement is not due to a penchant for passivity or disengagement with labour market participation, but rather, an institutionalized under-utilization of their skills and experience. Moreover, as political actors, individuals who engage with refugee status are keenly aware of the discourses and stereotypes that surround them, and articulate their place in the labour market—and society—accordingly.

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