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Social Capital and the Labour Market Process among New Generation Youth from Visible Minority Immigrant Families

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SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE LABOUR MARKET PROCESS AMONG NEW GENERATION YOUTH FROM VISIBLE MINORITY IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, the composition of immigrants to Canada has shifted from being predominantly European to being predominantly Asian and Middle Eastern. As a result of this shift, a new cohort of new generation youth from visible minority immigrant families have become established and begun to replace the aging Canadian labour force. Based on existing literature, being young, being a visible minority, and coming from an immigrant family are possible disadvantages in the labour market. Research on this new generation youth, however, is limited. This paper reports findings of a qualitative study examining how new generation youth without university degrees find work and what kinds of resources they use in their job search. The economic boom in British Columbia has offered easy access to the labour market. Coming from immigrant families, however, these new generation youth benefit very little from either their personal or their familial social ties.

INTRODUCTION

Given the inequality and instability of earnings among immigrants (Statistics Canada 2007), a high proportion of which are visible minorities, Canadian researchers have already expressed their concern that immigrants with visible minority backgrounds may often experience disadvantages in the Canadian labour market (e.g., Hum and Simpson 1999; Kazemipur and Halli 2000; Samuel and Basavarajappa 2006). Less is known about the labour market experiences of the children of these immigrants. This new generation of Canadian youth with visible minority immigrant family backgrounds is the focus of this research. These are largely the children of immigrants from Asia and the Middle East, whose numbers have been increasing since the adoption of the point system in 1967 (Fleras and Elliott 2003). Visible minority immigrants to Canada have come to exceed the predominately “white” immigrants from Europe (Statistics Canada 2007), and their children who were born in Canada or arrived when they were very young are now a major component of the Canadian labour market (Statistics Canada 2005).

This new generation faces a job market that has been particularly notorious for its discrimination against visible minorities and the foreign born in Canada (Pendakur and Pendakur 1998; Tran 2004; Pendakur 2005). As challenging or even worse a characteristic in the context of their job search is their youth, a major disadvantage in the Canadian job market. Like many developed countries, Canada has a consistently high youth unemployment rate, which tends to be three times higher than the general unemployment rate (International Labour Office 2006). Yet, the youth unemployment issue is still overshadowed by the adult unemployment problem. In Canada, the in-

visibility of youth unemployment is described as a “hidden deficit” (Canadian Youth Foundation 1995) and discussion of youth (un)employment is relatively sparse in employment research. Similarly, as Portes (1994) notes, the growth and adaptation of the new generation has received very little attention in the conventional immigration research. Although this gap is being rectified, there is still need for examination of this new generation of Canadians.

The objective of this paper is to study the experiences of non-university going young people who are both a visible minority and new generation youth from immigrant families in the Vancouver job market. What are the actual experiences of these youth, what difficulties do they encounter, and what resources do they draw on to adapt to the job market? We are also interested in their subjective perceptions of the labour market—what values, goals, and future expectations do new generation youth hold? We approach these questions primarily with a set of qualitative data collected in 2007 based on five focus-group interviews with new generation youth not holding university degrees.

The Vancouver labour market provides an important context for this study for two reasons. First, the BC and Vancouver jobless rate has been in decline since 2002 (White, Michalowski et al. 2006; Akyeampong 2007) and the province held steady near full employment in 2007—the time of this research. This tight labour market provides an advantage for job seekers. Second, the service sector has come to dominate employment in Vancouver, replacing natural resources and goods production as the primary mover of the local economy and now accounting for four out of five jobs in the region (Panzenboeck 2008). Notorious for low wage entry-level jobs that require little education and training, the service sector is actually quite diverse, including jobs, such as legal and health care professionals, that require higher levels of education

and training and pay comparatively well. These unique circumstances raise questions about the influence of easy access to work and the diversity of service sector work on the labour market experiences and perceptions of new generation youth. We explore these questions in more detail below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research investigates the causes of youth unemployment and its personal and social impacts (e.g., Casson 1979; Banks and Ullah 1988; Hutson 1989; Winefield, Tiggemann et al. 1993; White and Smith 1994; Canadian Youth Foundation 1995; Marquardt 1998). Among all the possible causes, Payne (1987) found that unemployment may run in families, which, as Granovetter (1974) argues, is the major source of job referrals for young people. Immigrant families have suffered from many socio-economic challenges. As reported in the recent report from Statistics Canada (2004) on immigrants in Canadian urban centres, immigrants tend to have lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates than Canadian-born individuals. The economic performance of immigrants, particularly in terms of income, is also lower than their non-immigrant counterparts in the general population (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2004; Zietsma 2007), even among those holding the same Canadian credential (Anisef, Sweet et al. 2003). Therefore, the family's economic background and social network can have a significant influence on the employment of immigrant youth.

There are other indications that the labour market experiences of youth from immigrant families may differ according to where they were born and the age at which they immigrated to Canada. First generation immigrant youth, like their parents, have also faced numerous challenges in the job market including language, recognition of foreign credentials and education, lack of

Canadian experience, access to information, and culture shock (e.g., Isajiw 1999; Shields and Rahi 2002; Yee et al. 2003). As Kilbride et al. (2004) find, the distinctive experience and concerns of immigrant youth as well as the level of proficiency in both the English language and Canadian pronunciation may have great impact on immigrant youth's settlement process, including job searching. Anisef, Sweet et al. (2003) also indicate in their findings that age at immigration may have an impact on immigrant youth's success in the labour market. Another Canadian study (Kunz 2003) also concludes that both a longer length of Canadian residency and a younger age at immigration have a positive impact on the employment rate of first generation immigrant youth. In comparison to their first generation counterparts, particularly those who immigrated to the host country at an older age, the second generation and those with more years in the host countries find significantly more favourable conditions (Maani 1994; Kunz 2003). Learning from these studies, we can speculate that the new generation youth, including those born in Canada and those who immigrated to Canada at a very young age, *should be* better positioned than their first generation counterparts in terms of language and level of acculturation.

Given these advantages, the economic achievement of the new generation youth from visible minority immigrant families is, however, still curious. Compared to the general youth population, this group of new generation youth tend to have lower income and less desirable jobs (Kunz 2003; Cheung 2005; Palameta 2007). In their study, Anisef, Sweet et al. (2003) note that there is a strong association between one's racial-minority status and one's successful adaptation. In addition, a study in Australia demonstrates that while the ethnic background of immigrant youth may impact on their unemploy-

ment, their perceived standing in the host culture also influences their job seeking (Nesdale and Pinter 2000).

The Theoretical Lens – Social and Human-Cultural Capital

We approach this study largely with an interest in how social capital affects the labour market experiences of new generation youth. Social capital has become a key concept in research on immigrant and ethnic minorities (e.g., Zhou and Bankston 1994; Portes 1995a; White and Glick 2000; Aizelwood and Pendakur 2004) and labour market activities (e.g., Erickson 2001; Fernandez and Castilla 2001; Marsden 2001). However, this is also a constantly expanding and contestable concept (Field 2003), which may lose any distinct meaning (Portes 1998). Lin (2001) considers social capital, in its most basic form, a resource individuals access through their social ties in order to reach goals such as social mobility. To understand this concept in the context of immigration study, Portes (1995a) defines social capital as “the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures” (p. 12).

Our attention to social capital leads to an interest in the role of family and ethnic community in our framework. Nee and Sanders (2001) develop the important role of family for providing key resources in the experiences of new immigrants. For them, immigration is no longer an individual experience but a family experience. Family is perhaps believed to be the most readily available resource for youth to access the labour market—through the social ties of parents, siblings, and relatives as well as their friends. Borrowing Putnam’s (2000) conceptualization, these ties can roughly be distinguished as bonding and bridging forms of social capital. Bonding social capital reinforces specific reciprocity by mobilizing internal solidarity within groups, while bridging social

capital links one social group to external assets and information through social network ties. By providing both forms to its members, the ethnic community can act as an important resource for immigrant families, providing an economic niche for newcomers and their children. As Portes (1995b) has pointed out, however, there can be a downside to bonding ties when the community lacks non-social resources and/or the bridging social capital required to access the pool of social resources available in the larger society.

It is possible that new generation youth may have considerable access to the social capital within their families and immigrant communities but lack the bridging ties that can link them to social resources in the larger society. Portes (1995b) even suggests that the strong ties within the immigrant community may run against the interests of the new generation immigrant youth by limiting their opportunities for upward mobility. If this is true and if the economic performance of immigrants tends to be less satisfactory than that of the dominant group, the lack of bridging social capital may imply the new generation immigrant youth have limited linking social capital for their social mobility, even if they have better education, command of English and integration with the larger society than their parents.

However, we agree with Nee and Sanders (2001) that the social capital of a family is not the sole attribute affecting the labour market experience of members of immigrant families. Human-cultural capital is also, if not equally important, a major attribute that shapes the trajectories of the job search process of a family's members, including those of the new generation. In Nee and Sanders' discussion, human capital refers to investments in education and job experience that can generate returns on the job market (Becker 1964). Youth from visible minority immigrant families tend to have a higher enrolment rate in post-secondary education and higher educational aspirations (Krahn and

Taylor 2005) as well as higher educational attainment (Davies and Guppy 1998) than their Canadian-born non-visible minority counterparts. Previous research has also shown the importance of education for improving labour market outcomes for both youth and new immigrants (Chiswick and Miller 2003). Cultural capital, which is a hard-to-measure concept, can be understood as a form of socialization (Nee and Sanders 2001), in this case, of labour market information, knowledge and experience obtained from family.

METHODOLGY

The research reported here is based on qualitative data collected from an exploratory study of the job search experiences of a group of new generation youth without university degrees, which can be seen as a crucial determinant affecting the integration of youth into labour markets (Muller 2005). A total of five focus group interviews were conducted with youth from South Asian, Chinese and Filipino/a backgrounds. Participants of these focus groups were recruited through purposive sampling, mainly through the personal network of the two research assistants who are both second generation youth from Chinese and South Asian immigrant families respectively. Each focus group lasted for about ninety minutes. The qualitative data collected through the focus groups and personal interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. They were analyzed with the assistance of NVivo, a computer-assisted-qualitative-analysis software.

Profile of Participants

Twenty male and eight female youth participated in the five focus groups, which were divided according to ethnicity: one Filipino/a, two Chinese and two South Asian. To enrich the information of the Filipino/a youth experience, we conducted one personal interview with a Filipina. The average age of all participants in this study is 20.4. Eleven of them were born in Canada. Among the seventeen who came to Canada, only three came after the age of 15. All except two have completed their high school education in Canada and only three of them have a college diploma/certificate. The majority of them (n=16) are working part-time, ranging from six to thirty hours per week, and three were unemployed when the focus group took place. Twenty of them are living with their parents.

FINDINGS

Below we briefly summarize our current findings from this exploratory research. The data were analyzed by using a thematic approach suggested by Tesch (cited in Creswell 2003). We first look at their employment condition and job search strategies and then highlight some major barriers they faced because of their visible minority immigrant background.

Employment condition

In our interviews, we found that visible minority immigrant youth without university degrees had little trouble in finding a job. As South Asian participant told us, "Every job, I got really fast. I just applied. Whenever I needed a job, I'd just apply. I would just hand out, like, a hundred resumes and then someone would hire me." This ease in finding work was shared by other

groups of youth. A Chinese participant told us, "I saw the sign on the store. . . .Yes, I walked right in and asked for an interview." Then she got the job. With the current tight labour market in BC and Vancouver, it is often possible for these youth to find work through walk-ins and cold calls on employers.

These youth also tend to move regularly from job to job. These job changes are often lateral, rather than moves to better or more stable work. Except for a handful of them, most of the focus group participants have worked or are currently working in low-skill entry-level positions in the service sector. These include jobs in fast food restaurants and retail sales as well as more labour intensive work at supermarkets and gas stations. Often these youth have little invested in these jobs, making them easy to leave, and in BC's current labour market, it is not too hard for them to find another entry-level job. For instance, one South Asian participant told us, "I worked there for about five months. After that, I had worked at Costco . . . uh . . . for a year. I had heard from a friend as well that they were hiring, and then after that, I worked at Best Buy for about six months."

When asked about their career aspirations, most of the participants clearly indicated that their existing job is not what they plan for their future. Many plan to upgrade their education. One Filipino participant described his future plans as such: "I just got [out of] college right now, so just try to . . . uh . . . get something decent, like being, like make something out of myself and then maybe go back to school, like a year or two." Despite not having a university degree, the youth we spoke with still valued the importance of education. This spirit is shared among most of the focus group participants. For instance, one Chinese youth said, "I plan to go back to school full-time and getting [*sic*] a degree and then some management position job or something like that."

Going back to school and having a degree constitute an integral part of participants' values and aspirations across different ethnic background. Many reported that these values are inherited from their parents, who have constantly encouraged or even pressured them to pursue a proper post-secondary education. Some understood this pressure to be a product of the struggle their parents went through with their career experiences in Canada, as indicated in a conversation between two Filipino youth:

a: You know, most of our parents came from very poor family when they were growing up. So, uh, you know, they were really poor.

b: It's all they had, education, right. So, you had to do something. You had to do something.

Others attributed this pressure to being a part of their culture:

I also agree with what he said because in our culture, reputation is something very important, and going to school is really important because you want to be successful in the future, you know. Again, our parents came from India, working to make something of themselves, and you know, providing for us, so basically, again, you don't want to let them down. (A South Asian youth)

Meanwhile, peer pressure is also a major driving force in pushing this group of youth to return to school, particularly among the Chinese participants. As one of them said, "I think there's a peer pressure, like say if . . . if couple of your friends are going to university as well, like you don't want to be the one not succeeding and not going to university . . . you want to be at the same level, right? You don't want to be thinking they are this high and you're this low, right?"

For many of these youth, having a degree or diploma also means having a credential that will provide access to a better job. Many described a con-

tinuous approach to their education goals. They regularly take courses in order to “upgrade” their skills and credentials, and we found a majority of the focus group participants to be in some sort of part-time schooling. While some express an interest in completing coursework for a degree, there is no sense of urgency to complete this credential, and in some cases, a specific degree is not the stated goal of taking courses.

Job search strategy

With the current labour market conditions, many of these youth report success finding work simply by walking in or cold-calling employers. Still, regular job movement for these youth is also facilitated by using personal contacts in their search for employment, a practice that can often shorten the job search as well. Youth without degrees take advantage of this assistance as they move from job-to-job, and friends seem to be the major source of personal contacts for this group of youth, with twenty-one of them reporting that they have asked friends for help in their job search. Friends are functional in a variety of ways. They help to connect individuals directly with potential employers; pass along job opening information; provide references; and even, at times, directly hire them. However, these youth realize that there is a limit to what friends can do. As one South Asian participant notes, “I mean [friends] can only refer you, they can’t really get you in if you . . . because when you are interviewed, that is how your skills are going to show what you actually know. They can just refer you.” That is, these youth understand that they also need to have the skills and résumés necessary to secure a job. Although this group of youth regularly made good use of their personal contacts, however, very few of them reported seeking help from a formal service, such as a gov-

ernment program (n=3) or commercial employment service (n=1), of which many of them were not even aware.

Interestingly, while a few of them have found work through their families, this group of youth tends not to ask for personal contact assistance from family members (64 percent), although most of them agreed that their parents have often provided support in other ways, such as helping them to prepare a résumé, checking the newspapers for job advertisements, and calling friends and relatives to enquire about job prospects. There are many reasons why they hesitate to ask their immediate and extended family to help. As one Chinese participant summarized, "They don't know what kind of job I want and I don't think they know people that are helpful." Parents and relatives tend to refer them to jobs in their own fields, which may not be what these young people want. Our participants also express a strong desire to make it on their own merits. For them, that often means without the assistance of their parents. As one Chinese youth explained, "Yeah, because if my dad just pays everything. Then I will just sit at home and be fat and just lay back every day to study. If I wouldn't personally push myself, I wouldn't know the price of how everything works and even if I graduate, I would be like 'I'm so screwed.'" Another reason for their reluctance to work in a job found by parents is that they feel they must work much harder:

If you get, like, family friends or someone in the higher class and they give you a place to work, you generally have to "suck up." People around you would know or that this guy's, like, friend's with this family's relatives. You tend to be on the disadvantage side. You have to work really hard to take off that bad reputation. (A Chinese youth)

This group of youth also resists asking their family to help because very often, family job referrals are within their own ethnic community, something they normally want to avoid. Despite being able to find work with co-ethnic employers, study participants' poor past experiences leave many of them evading such opportunities in search of work outside their ethnic community. Co-ethnic employers frequently expect too much, according to our participants, and often do not fairly compensate their employees. As one Chinese youth comments,

Let's say my dad or my mom will help me find a job. They will find a Chinese place. And I don't want to work with Chinese people. Because they will rip me off, I don't know. You know they always give you less hours or less wages and stuff like that so I don't like them introducing me to Chinese people.

Participants noted having to work long hours for co-ethnic employers, completing arduous work, being asked to accept reduced or delayed pay, and not receiving overtime. Thus these youth wish to avoid these relationships, where they feel their shared ethnicity further compromises their right to fair and equitable treatment. In the current labour market, they can choose to leave these opportunities behind and find work outside the ethnic community.

Coming from a Visible Minority Immigrant Family

In general, these youth perceive their prospects in the job market as better than their parents', who have almost all experienced downward mobility in their careers. As one Filipino respondent explained, his father "has a degree in, I think, engineer [*sic*], but then, you know, he has to study here again. So right now, he's a draftsman." The difficult immigration experiences

of their parents have a positive modeling effect on many of our participants, who plan to return to school and have a better career than their parents.

While they respect the difficult experiences of their parents, many of these young people also see their parents as limited in their ability to help them find a job. First, their parents are themselves often struggling economically, many being trapped in low paid jobs within their own ethnic community. Second, most of their parents do not have the social connections necessary for finding them a job they would want. Parents with good jobs can, of course, help their children find work. One South Asian youth, for instance, got a job at the Port of Vancouver because of his father, who also worked there, while another South Asian youth worked in the same sawmill as his father. However, this kind of situation was relatively uncommon among study participants. Third, as immigrants, their parents often do not have the knowledge required to navigate the job market. In sum, as reported by many respondents, their parents—first generation immigrants—are not useful in their job search because they do not have a professional job, work in the ethnic enclave, or lack a wider cross-ethnic social network.

Coming from a visible minority background may also limit the social connections that these youth themselves have formed. When asked about the ethnic background of friends who are instrumental in their job search process, respondents of this study stated that these friends are largely from their same ethnic group. As reported by this group of youth, they and their parents have 75 and 70 percent of their friends coming from their own ethnic group, respectively. Since friends are a major source of job search support, the ethnically bounded friendship network may limit their job search ability.

Finally, when asked if they have experienced racism in their job search process, some study participants reported that they saw their parents and other family members being treated in a racist way, particularly in terms of their credentials not being recognized. Some Chinese one-point-five youth (i.e. those who came to Canada when they were younger than 12 years old) did mention that their accent in English has caused them problems in certain kinds of jobs, while some South Asian respondents noted being bothered by the myth of South Asian gangs. However, in general, participants think that racism does not have an immediate effect on their job search. This may be due to the booming job market in the service sector, which gives job seekers an advantage. Some also see that they are better positioned in terms of their language skills, local education and understanding of the local culture than their parents and relatives who immigrated to Canada at an older age. Our respondents were optimistic about their prospects in Canada, but some did express the concern that in the long run, being a visible minority would affect their long-term career development. As one South Asian participant noted,

It could in the future, like we are getting stereotyped now, right, so when I hit the job force looking for a proper career in ten years from now, it might have a, like, a weight on me, right, they might just be like, oh this guy doesn't know anything, he's spoiled, he's an Indian, right?

Participants of this study are, after all, in their very initial stage of career development. If racism has its economic function (Omi and Winant 1994), then in a less competitive environment, it is not difficult to understand why most of these youth did not feel they were being racially discriminated against in their job search.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The information reported in this paper is limited in several aspects. First, the sampling method and size of the sample do not allow any claim of generalization. Second, the focus group study format might allow an interactive process for participants to exchange their experience, ideas and opinions, but it does not allow a more in-depth one-on-one exploration of the stories of each of the participants. Third, despite all the efforts we made in recruitment, the Filipino group was not well represented, particularly when the immigration patterns and trajectory of the Filipino community is rather unique in Canada. Fourth, the economic situation in Canada, including the Lower Mainland in British Columbia, has, in the last few years, been booming. We had tremendous difficulties in recruiting unemployed youth to take part in the study. Moreover, we believe the booming job market also distorts the experience of the youth who did participate. Compared with other studies done in Toronto in the 1990s during the economic downturn (e.g., Canada Youth Foundation 1995; Canadian Youth Foundation 1995; Yan 2000), the youth in this study appear to have a more positive attitude toward the job market.

Nonetheless, as an exploratory study, the findings reported here may shed light on the employment issue of the new generation youth, whom are not well understood empirically. Learning from this study, we have several observations that may help future research on this issue. First, unlike suggestions from the literature, the new generation youth from visible minority immigrant families do not typically turn to family members for help in their job search. One of the major reasons for this is that first generation immigrant parents are themselves often struggling culturally and economically and lack the social connections needed to help their children find the kind of jobs

they want. This conclusion supports Portes' suggestion (1998) that the use of social capital is directly linked to the number of resources within families and communities that individuals can draw on. In addition, parents of these youth are first generation immigrants who also lack the cultural capital needed to assist their children in their job search—experience in the Canadian job market and knowledge of how to navigate it. Indeed, they themselves tend to work in their ethnic community and/or unskilled jobs. It appears that among our participants, family can be an emotional support but cannot provide job search resources.

Second, peers seem to be an important social resource for most of the participants. The help from friends is multifaceted—passing on job information, acting as a reference, setting up interviews, sharing interview experiences and providing emotional support. In fact, positive pressure from friends has even helped some of these youth become more motivated in their pursuit of higher education. Nonetheless, their social networks are ethnically segregated. With friends who are from the same ethnic group and who are trapped in similar conditions, the new generation youth from visible immigrant families may find it more difficult to expand their job search circle beyond their socio-economic and ethnic boundaries. If that is the case, then the question is how they can effectively build a meaningful career and benefit from the aging work force.

Third, considering education as human capital, study participants realize that level of education has an important impact on the job market experience for new generation youth and that immigrant families value education and university degrees. Without a university degree, these youth often find themselves in low skill service industry jobs with little chance for advancement and their career moves are lateral rather than upward. The value placed on

higher education among immigrant families may explain why universities have an increasing number of visible minority students.

Finally, the context of near full employment in the Vancouver job market appears to add an important dynamic to many of our findings. When work is so plentiful, not working does not seem to be an option for these young people. All our participants find work quickly and consider having some ongoing work as important. The unique labour market for these non-university goers also apparently influences their interest in co-ethnic employers and their positive attitudes towards their long-term career prospects. These youth are not willing to keep a job they do not like, and in the entry-level low-skill service sector, few jobs are worth keeping. It remains to be seen how the experiences and perceptions of these youth will change when the run of low unemployment ends in the region.

This paper provides a preliminary and qualitative understanding of what social resources are available to the new generation youth from visible minority immigrant families and how they approach the job market. However, these findings also raise many questions that need to be studied. First, how different are the experiences of these youth from those of non-visible minority youth from immigrant families? A more systematic investigation may offer a clearer picture of the differences. Second, how do parents of this new generation youth perceive their roles, strengths and limitations in helping their children to find work? How do the first generation immigrant parents understand the labour market challenges of their children as part of their lifelong integration process? Last but not the least, how do social and human-cultural capitals of their families interplay in their career progress?

We began this research with an interest in the job search experiences of new generation youth. Those experiences, we have found, are influenced by the unique background of these children of first generation visible minority immigrants to Canada. Equally important, however, is our finding that the unique context within which these youth look for work and contemplate their careers and future prospects also affects those experiences. We do not consider this a limit of the findings to a particular time and place. Instead, we consider this one of our key findings and hope this leads to future research that considers variations in the experiences of new generation youth across locations and time periods.

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