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THE EVALUATION OF IMMIGRANTS' CREDENTIALS: THE ROLES OF
ACCREDITATION, IMMIGRANT RACE, AND EVALUATOR BIASES¹

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Abstract:

Theories of subtle prejudice imply that personnel decision makers might inadvertently discriminate against immigrant employees, in particular immigrant employees from racial minority groups. The argument is that the ambiguities that are associated with immigrant status (e.g., quality of foreign credentials) release latent biases against minorities. Hence, upon removal of these ambiguities (e.g., recognition of foreign credentials as equivalent to local credentials), discrimination against immigrant employees from minority groups should no longer occur. Experimental research largely confirmed these arguments, showing that participants evaluated the credentials of black immigrant employees less favorably only when the participants harbored latent racial biases and the foreign credentials of the applicants had not been accredited. The results suggest the importance of the official recognition of foreign credentials for the fair treatment of immigrant employees.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Recently, immigrants, who already comprise approximately 20% of the labour force, have accounted for over 70% of labour force growth. Yet the analysis of census and survey data in Canada demonstrates that immigrants consistently experience lower rates of labour-force participation and lower earnings relative to the native-born population. Macro-level research by economists and sociologists has indicated that the lack of recognition of immigrants' foreign credentials, such as education (e.g., degrees and diplomas), contributes significantly to the suboptimal integration of immigrants. In particular, the credentials of visible minority immigrants are evaluated less favourably than those of white immigrants and native Canadians.

The devaluation of foreign credentials of visible minority immigrants presents a lose-lose situation. It leads to lower economic and psychological well-being for immigrants and it limits the extent to which Canada can take advantage of immigrants' skills and experience. Because visible minority immigrants consistently constitute an increasing proportion of all immigrants to Canada, it is critical to understand the reasons underlying the suboptimal utilization of their skills. Two answers are plausible. First, one possibility is that compared to native Canadians, immigrants may come from countries where the educational standards are lower than they are in Canada. Hence, the lower evaluation of immigrants' credentials reflects a difference in the actual quality of the education, resulting in a lower market value of immigrants' credentials. An alternate possibility is that the credentials of immigrants and native Canadians are at a minimum equivalent in their quality. Then, the lower evaluation of immigrants' credentials reflects prejudices employers hold against visible minorities.

Prior research on the devaluation of immigrants' skills was conducted with census and survey data. Such data do not directly measure prejudice and do not include information on the accreditation of foreign credentials, and therefore miss out on understanding potentially important reasons for the devaluation of immigrants' skills. With the intent to help close this gap of knowledge, we focused on three antecedents of skill discounting: the accreditation of credentials (whether their equivalence with Canadian degrees has been established), the race of the immigrant, and evaluators' subtle prejudice. We studied accreditation of credentials as important policy initiatives are currently underway to improve foreign credential recognition in Canada. Further, research has shown that in today's society subtle prejudice is more commonplace than is blatant prejudice, which has been on the decline since the 1960s.

Research on subtle prejudice suggests that individuals will act on their prejudicial attitudes if non-prejudicial justifications for such actions are available. We argue that individuals who make hiring decisions in Canada may consciously try to avoid being biased against visible minority immigrants yet the availability of a non-prejudicial justification might still facilitate behavioural manifestations of subtle prejudice. Specifically, the ambiguity associated with the true value of foreign credentials can be used as a seemingly legitimate justification for the expression of prejudice against visible minority immigrants. Once the foreign credentials have been accredited (i.e. their equivalence to Canadian credentials has been established) in Canada, however, the justification for expression of subtle prejudice is removed and visible minority immigrants would be treated fairly as white immigrants and native-born Canadians.

As our research aimed to uncover the psychological (i.e., subtle prejudice) factors that affect the evaluation of immigrants' credentials versus those of native Canadians, it had to involve human participants in a controlled setting. Four hundred five (48.15% female; 88.7% Canadian) students at a large Canadian university participated in a two part laboratory study. Of the participants, 304 had full-time employment experience ($M = 21.92$ months). For 199 participants, their past experience included supervisory responsibilities ($M = 12.44$ months).

In the first part of the study, we assessed participants' subtle prejudices. Several weeks later, in the second-part, participants evaluated profiles of three male applicants for a sales executive position in a Canadian firm. Two of the applicant profiles – a qualified white Canadian and an unqualified white Canadian - were kept constant for all participants. For the third profile, of a qualified applicant, we varied two factors: (1) job applicants' race (*black* or *white*) manipulated via the applicant's name and (2) job applicants' status in Canada (*landed immigrants from South Africa whose foreign credentials had been accredited in Canada* or *landed immigrants from South Africa whose foreign credentials had not been accredited in Canada* or *Canadian citizens with Canadian credentials*). The qualifications indicated in the third applicant profile were equivalent.

Our results show that, if foreign credentials were accredited, they were no longer discounted relative to Canadian credentials of equal quality. Furthermore, the accreditation of credentials immunized the evaluation of credentials from effects of immigrant race or personnel decision makers' biases. Participants did not differently evaluate the credentials of black and white immigrants when the credentials were accredited, but they did do so when immigrants' foreign credentials were not accredited. Importantly, subtle prejudice affected the evaluation of black immigrants' credentials relative to those of white immigrants only if they were not accredited.

Our study is among the first to highlight the role of the accreditation of foreign credentials in establishing turning a lose-lose situation into a win-win situation for immigrants and the Canadian economy. When immigrant credentials were certified as equivalent to Canadian credentials, the negative effects of their "foreignness" (or not being Canadian), applicant race, and evaluators' biases disappeared. According to our research, accreditation is not only an "equalizer" of credential quality, but also a "bias suppressor."

In terms of policy implications, our study suggests that non accredited foreign credentials constitute a key labour market barrier for visible minority immigrants. In that regard, immigration policy makers would be well served in framing initiatives around foreign credential accreditation. For example, foreign credential accreditation may become an important requirement for admission of immigrants (similar to the Australian approach) or the first step in the integration of newly arriving immigrants. Additionally, as our study indicates, addressing foreign credential accreditation is also relevant for managing the expression of prejudice against visible minority immigrants.