

Immigration and Racism in Canada: The Chinese, Japanese and my own personal experience

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Abstract

Immigration has been key to Canada becoming the country it is today. This essay focuses on racism and discrimination faced by immigrants that are considered, or consider themselves, visible minorities. The essay first analyzes historic racism in Canada experienced by the Japanese and Chinese immigrants in the 19th and 20th century. This is followed by the current environment and statistics from the 21st century, tying in my own racist experiences in Canada as an immigrant. Canada is a beacon of multiculturalism and welcoming immigrants, as proven by their immigration policies. However, it is naïve to say that minorities and immigrants do not face discrimination in this country. Even though Canada welcomes hundreds of thousands of immigrants every year (Statistics Canada, 2016) and even though there are anti-racism and pro-multiculturalism policies in place, most immigrants and citizens of colour still experience racism while living in Canada. Racism used to be systematic, came from the government through racist and discriminative policies. Today, with immigration focused on skilled labour, family members, and refugees from war-torn countries, racism continues to exist, but is more covert and subtle.

Keywords: *racism, immigration, Canada, multiculturalism*

Introduction

Immigration has been key to Canada becoming the country it is today. From welcoming immigration policies, to cherishing the diversity of cultures that currently exist in the country, Canadians pride themselves on being a diverse country (Eisenberg, 2019). However, Eisenberg (idem) explains that minorities in Canada still experience racism in their daily life, including lower income, higher poverty rates, and lower rates of education. This essay will focus on racism and discrimination faced by immigrants that are considered, or consider themselves, visible minorities. The research has an interdisciplinary scope because racism is experienced in all areas of life: judicial, academia, and day-to-day life. The goal of this essay is to examine the literature on Canadian immigration and racism in order to understand the marginalization that immigrants face in Canada, focused on the Japanese and Chinese primarily. I will be doing this by evaluating relevant literature, historic immigration trends and policies and my own experience as an immigrant in Canada. The literature used was found through the Athabasca University Library and Google Scholar. I carefully chose sources that dwelt on topics such as immigration into Canada, racism faced by minorities or immigrants, and multiculturalism in the country. Additionally, I looked at Statistics Canada's reports on immigration in the last 20 years and Canada's current immigration policy.

Historic racism: the Japanese and Chinese cases in Canada

Canada's history has different phases of marginalization and discrimination by white settlers to 'other' ethnicities and communities. From First Nations to Japanese, to Chinese and women in general, citizens and immigrants who are not white men have historically faced many hardships in Canada. Even though I would like to do a deep analysis of each phase of discrimination, I will focus on the Japanese and the Chinese immigration waves, and the racism they faced in Canada. Other immigrants and minorities likely have faced discrimination in Canada as well, however the reasoning behind the focus on Chinese and Japanese immigrants is due to there being an abundance of scholarly articles and research available, and the fact that such discrimination and racism was supported and sometimes encouraged by the government through legislation, policies, and taxes. Furthermore, the experiences of the Japanese and Chinese were more recent, taking place in the 20th century. I have chosen to not analyze the discrimination faced by First Nations in this paper since they did not immigrate to Canada.

According to Tan and Roy (1985), the first Chinese immigrants came to Canada in the 1800s during the gold rush and stayed in Canada while there were equal rights for them as workers. They switched industries often and found themselves facing prejudice in the late 1800s when white workers claimed they could not find jobs because the Chinese would work for less. The federal government allowed mass immigration of Chinese workers in order to build the Canadian Pacific Railway, which consists of tracks still used today to transport goods from the East to the West coast, and vice versa. After the railway tracks were complete, the Chinese started looking

for work elsewhere, and since they could be paid less, white citizens began being phased out of employment. This led to the federal government establishing the Chinese Head Tax, which Tan and Roy explain as a \$10 per head tax on all Chinese immigrants. The same policies also banned all imports from China, and encouraged all Chinese immigrants to return to their home country. Two years later, the federal government raised this tax to \$50 per head on all Chinese who wanted to enter Canada (idem). The Chinese Head Tax continued to be raised every two years, and by 1906 it had reached \$300 per head. Since 1906, Canada has seen an inflation of at least 2,000%; \$300 in 1906 amounts to at least \$6,800 today (Inflation Calculator, n.d.). In 1923, the federal government passed legislation that effectively banned further Chinese nationals from immigrating into the country (Tan and Roy, *The Chinese in Canada*, 1985). Most Chinese immigration subsided between 1923 and 1947 due to this Act, and many immigrants returned to China or immigrated to other countries. According to the authors, the exclusionary legislation was repealed at the end of World War II, when Canadians realized that all countries had suffered from the war and some sense of unity was needed to re-build the countries that were heavily affected (idem).

The end of World War II may have meant positive things for Chinese immigrants in Canada; however, the Japanese were facing new discrimination laws. According to Roy (2007), in 1944 Prime Minister Mackenzie King condemned the racism that was being witnessed by immigrants and war refugees, but condoned the racial policies the British Columbia (BC) government had put in place to repatriate Japanese immigrants and citizens that had been ‘disloyal’ to the Crown during World War II. BC policy forbid Japanese people to purchase liquor sold in glass bottles

and refused to accept Japanese children in publicly-funded schools, but allowed farmers to hire Japanese children and adults to work on their lands. Furthermore, the author claims that the local governments pressured Japanese people who owned land or houses to sell them to white people and encouraged landlords to not rent to the Japanese. Additionally, the federal government sold the land of all those expatriated or were exiled back to Japan, in an effort to reduce their willingness to return to Canada. The land taken from them was given to veterans returning from World War II (idem). Federal and provincial governments took these measures after the Japanese became part of World War II and supported the Nazi side. The government claimed these actions were necessary to keep enemies out of Canada and keep the country safe (Roy, 2007). Most of the issues cited by government officials were that the Japanese would not be able to assimilate into Canadian culture, that they would not be good Canadians, that they were disloyal to Canada, and wanted to prove their loyalty to Japan by attacking Canadians (idem). All of these ideas were deeply rooted in fear and a belief that Japan attacking Pearl Harbour effectively announced that it sided with Nazi Germany and would not hesitate in attacking allies, and that such attacks could be aided by locals of Japanese origin. The racist policies against the Japanese also included Canadian citizens that were Japanese descendants. This fear is also ironic: the Canadians had joined the war to combat Nazi Germany and their racist policies and actions against Jews and Blacks but were unable (or unwilling) to see their own racist policies towards the Japanese. It was not until 1949, five years after the war ended, that Japanese people were repatriated back to Canada, and dual citizens were allowed to reclaim their Canadian citizenship (Japanese Internment, CBC, 2001).

Current environment, statistics, and policies

According to the Government of Canada (2020), there are several ways in which one can immigrate to Canada: as a skilled worker; through a family sponsor, through a provincial sponsor, as a caregiver, to start up a business, for cultural or athletic self employment, or as a refugee. Since the Chinese and Japanese immigrants came to Canada as workers, we will examine the requirements for immigration into Canada as skilled workers. According to the Government of Canada (idem), each province has different needs in relation to skills sets, and the government is facilitating the immigration of people with these particular skills to the provinces that need them most. The candidate is required to provide proof of their level of either English or French, have worked in Canada for more than one year in the specific field they are skilled in, have an assessment of foreign certificates or diplomas by the Educational Credential Assessment, have enough funds to settle in Canada, and have not committed any crimes (Eligibility to Apply as a Federal Skilled Worker, 2020). There are no requirements based on country of origin or race; this type of immigration is purely based on skill, language, and ability to work. According to Statistics Canada (2017), the country admitted more than 300,000 immigrants between 2015 and 2016, with Prince Edward Island and Ontario seeing the highest increase of immigrants.

According to the Library of Parliament, friendly immigration laws were enacted in the 1950s due to declining birth rates (Dewing, 2009). In 1988 the Canadian Multiculturalism Act came into effect, the first of its kind, acknowledging the variety of people living in Canada, and the

importance of maintaining their own cultures while at the same time integrating with society (idem). The Act “sought to assist in the preservation of culture and language, to reduce discrimination, to enhance cultural awareness and understanding, and to promote culturally sensitive institutional change at the federal level” (idem, p 4). The purpose of the Act was to help immigrants integrate with Canadian culture by bringing their own culture into it, therefore enhancing and expanding Canadian culture beyond its current boundaries. (Immigrant as defined by Statistics Canada is a person who has been granted Permanent Residency by immigration authorities.)

Even though the Canadian Multiculturalism Act systematically aims to reduce discrimination, immigrants and citizens still face discrimination in Canada. Knowles (2016), a Canadian historian that has deeply researched Canadian immigration patterns, explains in her book that Canadian government officials are usually either pro-immigration or vehemently against it. The author explains that some Members of Parliament (MP) prefer to have an “open door” policy to welcome as many immigrants as possible, in the hopes to have more people in the workforce and therefore more taxes that can help alleviate the burden of healthcare and pension systems. There are also other MPs who would prefer the government to encourage a higher birth rate through economic relief for parents, and some who claim it would be preferable to have fewer immigrants accepted every year, blaming them for earning less than past immigrants, and having higher poverty rates (idem). Ironically, these government officials cannot see that the problem does not lie with the immigrant choosing to earn less, but with employers choosing to pay them less.

Many authors have studied the racism that immigrants to Canada face in different aspects of their lives, such as finding employment, earning a living wage, and overcoming poverty. For example, Li in his paper *The Racial Subtext in Canada's Immigration Discourse* (2001), argues that the discourse about immigration encourages citizens to participate in covert racism. The author explains that the 'diversity problem' in immigration is a way of saying that too many Asians and Africans are immigrating, and Canada is in need of more white immigrants. In Addition, Hyman (2009) in her paper *Racism as a Determinant of Immigrant Health* argues that racism is still latent in Canada because the government and society try to address it as single occurrences as opposed to a systemic oppression that exists within all factors of minorities' lives. She further argues that skilled migration might help white immigrants, but immigrants of colour are more likely to be undervalued and work below their ability or experience.

Additionally, in his article *Difference, Deficiency, and Devaluation: Tracing the Roots of Non-Recognition of Foreign Credentials for Immigrant Professionals in Canada*, Guo (2009) explains that discrimination is written into the immigration policy by requiring experience in the Canadian market. The author explains that this requirement diminishes the experience that can be gained abroad, and it enables employers to give lower salaries and positions to immigrants of colour since their existing experience is seen as inferior. Moreover, in their paper *Color by Numbers: Minority Earnings in Canada 1995-2005*, Krishna Pendakur and Ravi Pendakur (2010) studied the wage differences between white men and women, minority men and women and indigenous men and women and found that white people, whether immigrant or Canadian-born, on average earn more than their counterparts in the same job, and the most discriminated

against are women of colour and indigenous men and women. Finally, Reitz et al in their book *Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion* (2009) explain that even though immigrants to Canada have the highest education ever recorded, they have more difficulty than before of finding a job at the same level as they did in their home countries, and often have to take jobs for which they are overqualified.

My experience of racism in Canada

I first came to Canada in 2011 to visit my mother who had recently immigrated to Canada. We are originally from Venezuela, part of the 1.6 million people who have left the country in the last 15 years (Al Jazeera, 2018). I consider myself to be a person of colour. During my first visit we focused on tourist activities in Vancouver: we went to the Sea Wall, Stanley Park, and the Capilano Suspension Bridge. In 2014 I was living in the Netherlands but my visa was expiring and I had no way of legally staying; my mother requested me in her application as a Permanent Resident (PR), and I was lucky enough to meet all the requirements. In 2015, I moved to Canada as a PR and started looking for a job. During one job interview, the interviewer asked me “How do I know you were really living in the Netherlands, though?” That was my first taste of covert racism in Canada; why wouldn’t the employer believe my resume? Would he have asked the same question if I was of a different race? Once I got a job at a different place, I was asked not to microwave my ethnic foods in the office because they would “stink up” the entire kitchen. That made me wonder if they would say the same to a white person eating curry?

I arrived in Canada with a bachelor's degree in communications, with work experience as an Educational Support Officer, a role based in supporting the teachers and director of the Communications Institute at my alma mater. However, once I arrived, the only job interview offers I received were for restaurant hostess, bartender, or receptionist. After 6 months of having no income and no better luck with my interviews, I ended up choosing to work as an assistant in order to pay the bills. I was overqualified for this position but thought to myself "when you are an immigrant, you got to start at the bottom and prove that you are worth more than this." I realize now that I was dealing with internalized discrimination, as my education and work experience were as valid as that of a Canadian-born person. My personal experience echoes the authors quoted here, who argue that many immigrants experience this in the Canadian job market.

My current job is in food distribution. I was recently discussing with my manager, a white woman, the fact that there are mainly people of colour in lower-tiered jobs at our warehouse, and the higher up the tier, the less people of colour (or women) there are. This composition is the same in our 10 distribution centers across the country and the 20 distribution centers in the United States of America. My manager provided one example of a colleague in supply chain, noting that he was "brown." She failed to see how one person across 30 distribution centers is not diverse. There is still no diversity at the top of our company. I made the same comment to another colleague, who is also a white woman, and she emphatically agreed with me and also said she would like to see more women and people of colour at the top. This showed me that I

was also being judgmental towards the white people in my company; I had assumed that none of them could see our lack of diversity as a problem, but I was happily proven wrong.

I have also faced covert racism outside of work, my native language is Spanish and when I speak English, I have an accent. Usually when a white person meets me, their first question is “Where are you from?” Since becoming a citizen, I answer “I am Canadian”, but then the follow up question tends to be “but where are you *really* from?” This might seem small to someone who has not faced racism before, but to me it feels as if I cannot truly be 100% Canadian since I have an accent, or I look tanned, or I have curly hair. However, I also know that a lot of people just want to know where I am from because they love that Canada is so multicultural and diverse and they like getting to know people from other cultures. Perhaps I had become so accustomed to comments like these being covertly racist, that I can forget at times that humans are curious and like getting to know each other.

Conclusion

Canada is indeed a beacon of multiculturalism and welcoming immigrants, as proven by its immigration policies. However, it would be naïve to say that minorities and immigrants do not face discrimination in this country. Even though Canada welcomes hundreds of thousands of immigrants every year (Statistics Canada, 2017) and even though there are anti-racism and pro-multiculturalism policies in place, such as the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, most immigrants and citizens of colour experience racism while living in Canada. The racism used to be

systematic and came from the government through racist and discriminative policies such as the Chinese Head Tax and the deportation of Japanese-Canadian citizens to Japan. But nowadays, with immigration focused on skilled labour, and refugees from war-torn countries, the racism experienced by immigrants and minorities is subtle. It lies in the inability to get a high-paying job because foreign experience is not considered as good as Canadian experience, it lies in the small comments such as ‘where are you *really* from?’, and it lies in day-to-day experiences that us immigrants routinely encounter. Today’s racism against Canada’s immigrants might be subtle, but it is still alive and well; since it is covert, it tends to be disregarded by those who do not experience it, making it harder to overcome systemically.



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