

Multifaceted immigration: Canadian Jewish intersections of identity and multiculturalism

Joanna Deborah Mirsky Wexler

Abstract

This paper explores immigration in a multicultural landscape as an intersection of diverse identities. In seeking to understand the multidimensional nature of the immigrant experience, integration upon arrival and acceptance from non-immigrant communities, the paper addresses some trends in Canadian immigration policy with a focus on the Jewish immigrant experience, particularly those with multiple marginalizations. Race, gender, nationality, religious affiliation, and sexual identities impact one another in dynamic ways, and intersectionality theory adds depth in examining a complex and multifaceted immigrant experience. A response to Will Kymlicka (2013) on multiculturalism and immigration policies is also discussed.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Judaism, Racism, Immigration, Intersectionality, Jewish Identity

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As Canadians, we are part of a multicultural society, one that is made, in large part, of immigrants and their descendants from around the globe. Although we generally see ourselves as welcoming, we are starting to see a shift in the reaction to waves of immigration, as more protectionist voices are being heard in Europe, the US and Canada. Immigration, in this multicultural landscape, creates a unique combination of diverse identities. We must understand the cultural, racial, sexual, gender, and religious components of immigration to understand the intersectionality of the immigrant experience, as well as the integration of communities upon arrival. I will examine some trends in Canadian immigration policy and discuss some conclusions drawn from historical data, with a focus on Jewish immigration to Canada.



Touching on intersectional Jewish experiences highlights the dynamics specific to groups with multiple marginalizations. Through this lens, I will respond to Will Kymlicka's work (2013) on multiculturalism as lacking two qualities: The first, an adequate exploration of the racial undertones of the rejection of immigration policy and secondly, by separating race, nationality and culture from their immigration experience, Kymlicka is not accurately describing the complexity of an individual's lived immigrant experience. Intersectionality theory, however, attends to some of the shortcomings of viewing multiculturalism as compartmentalized from immigration.

Many Western countries are multicultural, with waves of immigrants and refugees migrating across borders. As the generations progress and shifts occur in societies' tolerance of religious, racial and sexual diversity, the global community is becoming more integrated. In the Canadian context, multiculturalism is public policy. Our Charter of Rights and Freedoms espouses human rights for all, and, theoretically, we do not discriminate based on race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Sociologist Morton Weinfeld (2011) contextualizes, "By the beginning of the 21st century, the equal rights paradigm is ascendant. Minorities now seek to integrate as equals into host/majority societies, while retaining, to the degree they wish, identities and ties linked to other traditions or former homelands" (Weinfeld, 2011, p. 70). We must still recognize that there is historical privilege that is associated with the culture of the majority and its mainstream lifestyle. Privilege takes on a hierarchy of the dominant; white, male, heterosexual, cisgendered, culturally Christian. Outside of this combination of Canadian society's most privileged traits exists a spectrum of "other" in each of these respective categories, the further from the historical privilege point, the more marginalized an individual may be.

Typically comprised of second and third generation immigrants, Jewish communities are well established in Canadian society, though early arrivals were less welcome. Refugees flooded North American ports seeking asylum from violence in Russia at the turn of the 20th Century, and post World War II another wave hit as Jews fled Europe and the Nazi regime. Jews from these areas were religiously distinct from other European immigrants of the time, an additional marginalization dynamically interacting with differences of dress, language and culture. From the turn of the 20th Century through to



the Second World War and the years that directly followed, the majority of immigrants to Canada, including Jewish immigrants, were European. Now an established and integrated ethnic population, “most diasporic Jewish communities are majority non-immigrant, on average economically successful, and seen as white” (Weinfeld, 2011, p. 65). Though many are of Ashkenazi (European) descent, it can be argued that most Canadian Jews consider themselves as “other” to the Canadian cultural majority, even though the tiny population is referenced as token examples of successful multiculturalism.

Initial waves of general immigration to this country were mostly European, but with a shift in policy came a shift in the fabric of Canadian society, and a visible change in the multicultural landscape. In crafting a future Canadian population, in 1962 policy makers removed racial, ethnic, and national restrictions and emphasized education and employability in immigration selection. This prioritization of skills encouraged educated and professional people of colour to settle in Canada (Train, 2016). This change would impact dominant society, requiring a shift in paradigm as well as public policy to counter racism and create employment opportunities for the new Canadians.

This change in public policy also required both majority and minority sub groups to challenge their definitions of identity as religious institutions were suddenly racially and ethnically diverse. Though there is a long history of diaspora within the global Jewish community, Canadian Jews were subject to the same social constructs and hegemonies as the non-Jewish Canadian population. Jews of colour arriving to Canada, for example, had to deal with racism from both mainstream Canadian society as well as Canadian Jewish society. Afro-Jewish philosopher, Lewis R. Gordon (2016) speaks to this internal and external racial dynamic: “There is, as well, much to be learned through knowledge of *halakha* and race, and how both were manifested in the complex history of colonization that was not only faced by Jewish peoples, but also marked by Jewish participation in such enterprises” (Gordon, 2016, p. 115).

Jewish Immigrant Aid Services of Canada (JIAS) and Congregation BINA (Bene Israel North America), a specific congregation of Jews who have lived in India, are examples of active responses to addressing such complex interactions. The focus of JIAS is to meaningfully connect new immigrants from a variety



of countries with established community members to facilitate integration into Canadian Jewish life. BINA's focus is the retention of unique cultural practice as a part of a Jewish mosaic, promoting integration without assimilation. This acts as a determined preservation of sub-culture within a larger Jewish context.

For individuals who are "othered" in multiple categories, the interaction of these identity facets creates unique experiences. One may consider a Jew's intersectionality on several fronts; race and class, religion and belief systems, gender and sexuality. A black Ethiopian Jewish woman has a multifaceted experience that is altogether distinct from that derived by an individual with only one deviation from the Canadian cultural majority. Intersectionality theory understands this culmination of identity aspects as dynamic rather than separate. An Ethiopian Christian man will have more in common with the Canadian cultural majority as being othered in only two categories; race and nationality, rather than four. German philosopher and theorist, Tom Palmer (2003) writes, "Each of us has certain 'constitutive self-understandings' without which we would simply have no fixed identity, and those self understandings are so connected with the 'family or tribe or city or class or nation or people' that what is really identified is not a numerically and materially individuated human person, but a collective person" (Palmer, 2003, p. 8). These aspects that deviate from the cultural majority cannot be specifically removed as individual pieces. Instead we must view the interwoven individual holistically, being African and black interacts with racism within and external to the Jewish community, and being a Jewish woman interacts with the patriarchy that exists within the Canadian context of Jewish diaspora. Any Jewish person regardless of colour may be subject to anti-Semitism in a Canadian (or other Western) context. But a Caucasian Jewish woman may be mocked as something entirely different than her Ethiopian counterpart: a Jewish American Princess, an intersectional stereotype found in media culture that attributes Jewish white women with their own specific negative cultural qualities.

To further understand the nuances of cultural lived experience, one must break down the different aspects into more than essentialist points. Within the religious category "Jewish" there is a broad range of religious denominations, and within those, a diversity of practice. As within every subculture, there is



a range of sexual orientation, gender identity, wealth, politics, and abilities. These are not binary distinctions, they exist on a spectrum with blurred lines between the categories. Racially, the Jewish people are very diverse, they are a diaspora found on every continent, and are therefore subject to diverse cultural and political influences. These cultural spheres include systemic marginalizations, both within and outside of the established Jewish communities, that runs a gamut ranging from overt anti-Semitism to cultural tolerance.

Since the 1960s there have been several waves of ethnically diverse Jewish communities immigrating to Israel, Canada, and countries around the world, seeking a better life. These include large communities of Sephardic, Ethiopian, Indian and Ashkenazi Jews; all with slightly different histories and practices. Dealing with systemic racism in a new country is challenging and hurtful, but facing similar responses from within one's religious community is a deeply painful betrayal. In addition to the integrative challenges of new immigrants based on class or poverty, in the early 1960s "Indian Jews faced rejection and marginalization from the established Jewish community and its members based on issues of skin color and race, as well as on the issues of culture, customs, practices and histories that did not jibe with those of Ashkenazi Jews" (Train, 2016, p. 7). The same hierarchies of dominance expressed in general Canadian society can be seen in microcosm within Jewish communities, even in terms of access to immigration. Lewis Gordon (2016) writes, "Brief discussions with Russian Jews would reveal stories of Russian Christians achieving immigration as Jews in Israel and in North America (through claims of being persecuted as Jews) over Afro-Jews who count back their Jewish ancestry and their adherence to Judaism for dozens of generations" (Gordon, 2016, p. 112).

Often multiculturalism plays the role of identifying and celebrating relatable aspects of minority cultures without addressing embedded or systemic oppressions, or varied cultural traditions or ideologies that may conflict with Western (dominant) values. Canadian political philosopher Will Kymlicka (2013) explores relatable aspects of culture as "Multiculturalism takes these familiar cultural markers of ethnic groups - cuisine, music, and clothing – and treats them as authentic cultural practices to be preserved by their members and safely consumed as cultural spectacle by others" (Kymlicka, 2013, p. 402). While this



focus on relatable cultural presentation restricts the ability for the Canadian cultural majority to acquire a depth of understanding of minorities, it can have social benefits. In many communities, this cultural integration has led to assimilation, acceptance of shared Canadian values along with ancestral ties, racial and cultural blending of families. This integration has created opportunities to address identity from a broader perspective.

While multicultural perspectives look at minority groups as culturally separate components, intersectional perspectives see the truer, multidimensional nature of identity. There is an examination of multiple oppressions, the stratification of race, class, and gender existing concurrently and having a dynamic impact, one system of oppression over another. “Intersectionality theory provides a formidable challenge to the notion that scholars can adequately examine or provide solutions to one form of subordination without analyzing how it is affected and shaped by other systems of domination” (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 308). As in the case of Indian Jewish immigration and their attempt to assimilate into Canadian culture, some members of that community had difficulty integrating. The difficulty was neither in being Jewish nor in being Indian, but in being Indian-Jewish. As a group, many found themselves considered “other” in both communities.

Generally, in Canada, we are seeing an increasing conflict in the tolerance of increased immigration and demands for policy shift favouring protectionism for members of the cultural majority. Kymlicka (2013) addresses this rejection directly. “So it is only with respect to immigrant groups that we see any serious retreat. Here, without questions, there has been a backlash against multiculturalism policies relating to post-war migrants in several western democracies” (p. 408). As a recognizably multicultural country, we must ask ourselves why globally there is a trend towards discomfort and fear. Some conclusions may be drawn from statistical data collected on immigration. In a study on Canadian populations, Edmonston (2016) presented data from 1991 to 2011 that showed a decrease in immigrants who self-identified as Christian by more than 30%, whereas Muslim-identified immigrants doubled during that same time period, from 9% to 18%. There is a high statistical probability that this culturally Christian majority will



continue to proportionately diminish over time. This prospect is illustrative of an uncomfortable notion for those in the majority position to reflect on; they may one day be in the minority.

As immigrant communities continue to add diversity to Canadian society, Canadians must untangle these components through policy to address both the concerns of immigrant communities as they integrate and support their complex and dynamic needs. The qualifier status of immigrant is not nuanced enough to address any particular lived experience within the sub set that defines a given set of interactions. A secular Jewish immigrant with pale skin born in Russia faces a different set of challenges than a religious Jew of Indian, Syrian, or Ethiopian descent. A Jew of any race may choose to dress in garb that religiously identifies them as “other”, and that choice will impact how they are treated by a society that lacks a cultural awareness of the practice. Within the spectrum of collective identity, the culmination of a single identity may or may not include all individual aspects. Kelly Train (2016) highlights the complexity of identities when describing, “Homogenous and exclusive claims of authentic Jewish identity marginalize, delegitimize, and exclude diverse realities of Jewish experiences and identities that reflect different social, historical, geographic, economic and cultural contexts” (Train, 2016, p. 7). In effect, to speak of “immigrants” without qualification does not address the nuances of their circumstances. Immigration cannot be described as a singular issue.

In “The Rise and Fall of Multiculturalism”, Kymlicka (2013) examines multicultural theories from a public policy perspective. He defines this as “developing new models of democratic citizenship, grounded in human rights ideals” (p. 406) and examines three themes; the empowerment of indigenous peoples, creating autonomy and power sharing for sub state national groups, and citizenship for immigrant groups. While he recognizes that there are some gaps in Canadian policy dealing with immigrant populations, he glosses over the racial overtones behind the negative reactions to policy shift as a “rejection of the public recognition of ethnocultural diversity. On the contrary, many of the countries are actually strengthening the institutional recognition of their old minorities” (p. 409). When Kymlicka discusses these old minorities, he is generally identifying sub state groups that are “othered” in fewer



categories, perhaps identifying with different religious roots or language, but racially or culturally similar.

This example speaks to our generalized multicultural position and the lack of nuanced understanding that intersectionality explains. We must examine whether rejection of immigrant populations increases with their multiplicity of “otherness” on the fronts of racial, religious, and cultural bias. Canadian statistics from 2011 show a majority of non-immigrant youth are of European ancestry, as opposed to the majority of immigrant youth who are not. Data shows racially diverse children “are more likely to be in low-income families, although the proportion in low-income families is higher for immigrants than non-immigrants” (Edmonston, 2016, p. 95). These interactions begin to narrate a story of historic discrimination where a lack of employment opportunities results in low income for families. This affects immigrants from communities of colour first, then the non-immigrants from these communities. Both immigrants and non-immigrants of European descent will likely have greater access to employment opportunities and thus higher incomes based on systemic and societal racism here in Canada.

Do aspects of intersectional life come into conflict? The answer to this question depends on their specific characteristics and combinations, and is individually rather than culturally determined. Dual loyalties, “inevitable among immigrant or ethno-religious minorities, are relatively benign. In some cases, they can lead to difficult choices between competing cultural or social obligations. In others, they can offer an enriching set of cultural and communal options, including hybrid cultural contexts” (Weinfeld, 2011, p. 60). A queer Orthodox Jew, faces a greater juxtaposition of identities, and at the core of his or her identity lie challenges from one aspect to another aspect, necessitating choice, or at least compromise. Gilroy (2013) explores occupying space between camps but acknowledges that this may yield hostility from both sides. Sharing space between conflicting identity requires us “to move outside the frustratingly simple binary categories we have inherited: left and right, racist and anti-racist. We need a political analysis that is alive to the fluidity and contingency of a situation that seems to lack precedents” (p. 396).



Perhaps in order to live a life that is free to be consistent with multiple identities one may find a hidden subgroup with which to connect. A reconstructionist, reform or conservative Jew might belong to the LGBTQ+ community and even be clergy. An Orthodox or ultra Orthodox Jew must closet this forbidden lifestyle. Feminist Jews sometimes find conflicts in orthodoxy, but many synagogues worldwide now function as egalitarian, and many women hold key positions in these institutions. Russian Jews may prefer to have their children attend Russian school over Hebrew school, and therefore choose that aspect of their identity as the priority. Often the dynamics are subtler; a Caucasian Jew may be considered marginalized for their Semitic heritage in North America while simultaneously be considered privileged for their white skin. We are subject to more than one system at a time “and just as the identity of each necessarily cosmopolitan culture may be a shifting focus within overlapping influences, so the identity of the person may be a shifting focus within overlapping influences” (Palmer, 2003, p. 10).

Any and all of these identity markers exist on a spectrum of inward and outward expression. Of course, one cannot change things like their colour of skin, but one may choose to wear clothing that is more or less religiously or culturally associated. One may share their views in public media or culturally identify themselves in conversation, and one may hide their sexual identity while still seeking spiritual involvement and community participation. Even in religious denominations where there is queer inclusion, there may be social barriers that intimidate an individual into remaining in hiding. As a Jew, one is not simply religious or not religious, but can be intentional in their level of observance and choice of denomination to create an individual Jewish experience. American law professor Darren Hutchinson (2001) writes, “Progressive social movements suffer from their singular, essentialist focus. When progressive theorists do not acknowledge the relationships between various forms of subordination, they place progressive movements in tension with one another. Essentialism also forces individuals who suffer from multiple forms of subordination to silence portions of their identity in order to embrace a limited and narrow vision of equality” (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 297). In the case of the Indian Jewish and Sephardic Jewish communities in Canada, some chose to integrate into established synagogue



communities while others chose to create a subculture such as with BINA, including separate congregations, for specific cultural Jewish tradition and practice separate from the dominant European based Ashkenazi Jewish community (Train, 2016). Some Jews may even affiliate with both dominant cultural and sub-cultural movements concurrently.

We must understand Kymlicka's examination of the rejection of immigrant multiculturalism policies from an intersectional point of view. Immigration itself is only one level of "otherness" and is coupled with racial, religious and cultural components. Public policies regarding immigration in Canada assert the post-multicultural claim that human rights take precedence over specific cultural practice. In this way both dominant and "othered" groups must engage in new dialogue and understanding to engage with multiculturalism. It is the individual, lived experience that becomes more relevant than simply addressing policy and how it has been intended to be perceived.

In order to be effective, progressive public policy must connect with public support and understanding of the multifaceted immigrant experience. For multicultural societies to be effectively inclusive, we must be able to address and expose prejudice` both internal and external to immigrant communities. These aspects of identity and how they interact for communities and individuals can not be addressed piecemeal, but rather holistically and intentionally.

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Joanna Mirsky Wexler holds a Bachelor of Science in Marine Biology from Dalhousie University and is a Chartered Professional Accountant, CPA-CGA. As an accountant, her specialization is in the Not-For-Profit and Charitable sector, and she works with small scale businesses as well. Her field of interest is investigating social and economic impacts of market creation designed to address social and environmental problems. She is currently pursuing an MA in integrated studies from Athabasca University.
