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Skill regime in the context of globalization and migration

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In the contemporary age of migration, the notions of skill and competency have caught the imagination of policy-makers and practitioners alike. Immigration policies in many countries have made skills, that is, educational backgrounds, professional experiences, and language proficiency, central criteria to determine the admissibility of immigrants (IOM 2013). People who immigrate by virtue of their skills, however, do not necessarily find themselves recognized as skilled immigrants in the host labour markets. Many have to undergo a range of social and institutional processes to prove their skills and competencies for a host of social purposes, such as professional licensing, schooling and education, and employment. Meanwhile, a variety of occupational and linguistic matrices of skill and competency have been created, recreated, and adopted as the cornerstone of instructional designs, prior learning assessment, foreign qualification recognition, professional licensing, and occupational certification. These matrices of skill and competency, it is believed, provide employers as well as policy-makers with objective reference points, and quality assurance vis-à-vis a diverse workforce. The enthusiastic embracing of skill and competency in different fields of practices has constituted what we call a regime of skill, or a new mode of control and modulation that defines the desirability of individuals in the labour market, shapes the subjectivities, sensibility, and emotionality of migrants and workers, and produces the everyday struggles of practitioners at work. Notably, rather than providing a fixed set of reference points, the regime of skill is rather a shifting ground that affords opportunities to some while closing doors to others. Against this background, this special issue grapples with the complexity, contradiction, and contestation of the notions of skill and competency across fields. More importantly, it addresses how skill and competency, as relational constructs, join hands with other social relations to produce differences while maintaining the power and practices of the hegemonic West.

Introduction: the context of migration and globalization

The scale of migration today is unparalleled. In 2013, the global migratory population was estimated to be 232 million, which constituted 3.2% of the world population, up from 175 million in 2000 and 154 million in 1990. About a third of immigrants moved from developing or less developed countries to the developed

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West (United Nations Population Division 2013). Meanwhile, developing and less developed countries have also witnessed a rapid growth in urban population, which is in part the result of massive internal migration (United Nations Population Division 2012). While wars, social unrest, natural disasters, and other social factors, such as changing employment patterns, have contributed to the migratory flows, the labour needs in urban cities, and the proactive and preferential immigration policies for skilled workers in post-industrial countries have also served as a major force inducing the movement of people.

The scale and pattern of migratory movement today suggest heightened global competition for resources, that is, human capital. On the international scale, migratory flows are imbedded within the global war for talents (Brown and Tannock 2009), where skilled and professional people seem to have gained unprecedented mobility across national borders, although this differs from country to country. In Canada for instance, around 250,000 people are admitted to the country on an annual basis as permanent residents, with more than half coming through as 'skilled' immigrants. Unfortunately, the spatial mobility afforded with proactive immigration policies does not always translate into occupational mobility, especially for immigrants moving from developing countries to the developed West, such as Canada, Australia, and more developed countries in the European Union (EU) (Ciupijus 2011; Galarneau and Morissette 2008). Competing discourses exist to explain the limited mobility of immigrants in the host labour markets. Some believe that immigrants' labour market outcomes are impeded by their lack of quality education (Sweetman 2004; Coulombe and Tremblay 2009) and lack of proficiency in the language of their new country of residence (Boyd and Thomas 2001; Andersson and Fejes 2010). Some researchers on the other hand have pinpointed the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications in the host country (Schuster, Desiderio and Urso, 2013). Other researchers have argued that lack of language proficiency has been used as a rhetorical discourse to justify discrimination in hiring practices (Amin and Kubota 2004; Shan 2013, Slade, 2008). Language, Slade (2008) argues, is 'one of the signifiers around which the labour market exclusion of immigrant professionals is organized' (47).

To facilitate the movement of immigrants, some countries and organizations have sought to improve foreign qualification recognition policies and practices. In 1997, the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region was developed by the Council of Europe and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The convention stipulates that degrees and educational experiences must be recognized across national borders unless substantial difference is identified. This convention as of today has been signed by 55 countries, including the majority of EU member states and non-EU states such as Canada, and ratified by 53 countries (Council of Europe, 2015). In Europe, foreign credential recognition was central to the Bologna process, which is the process that led to the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. Through this process, a Europe-wide quality assurance system was established to translate the value of credentials across countries (Saarinen 2005). In other parts of the world, recognition of foreign credentials has also witnessed significant changes. In Canada, for instance, to get their prior learning and experiences recognized, immigrants have been using existing recognition systems that may be designed more for the Canadian-born population than for the internationally trained. Given mounting critiques, Canadian governments recently launched new initiatives to facilitate foreign

qualification recognition through policy interventions. While these initiatives aim to promote fair, timely, and transparent recognition practices, they have also played an instrumental role in reinforcing the ideals of market individualism and procedural fairness (Guo and Shan 2013). In addition to the state initiatives, industries, sectors, and professional organizations have also stepped up their efforts to be more specific as to the kind of competencies needed for people to acquire professional or occupational status.

Skill and competency as relational constructs

As skill and competency figure increasingly significant in reordering workers on the global scale, it is imperative to examine these notions for exactly what they mean and how they operate in practice. The notion of skill has predominantly been associated with human capital and human resources that need to be cultivated to feul the labour market and to enhance national competitiveness on the global stage. The notion of competency came about during the 1970s when American psychologist David McClelland sought to replace intelligence tests with criterion reference testing, believing the former was irrelevant to the workforce (McClelland 1973). Competency has since come to denote 'an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance on the job (Klemp 1980, 21).' Ellström (1997) makes a distinction between competence and qualification. The former concerns the individual's potential ability to act successfully in relation to a certain task, while the latter concerns the competence 'objectively' needed in relation to the character of the task and/or employer demands. Thus, a person might have several competencies not asked for by an employer or needed for employment, or work tasks might demand competencies that the individual does not have. In this issue, we treat skill, competency, and qualifications as neighbouring discourses that policy-makers and practitioners use to construct employability, desirability, as well as the demands from employers.

While skill and competency are increasingly used as approximate for people's chance to succeed in the labour market, there is no consensus over what exactly they connote; power and politics are often involved in how they are constructed in practice. In Attewell's review of the use of skill in sociological research (1990), for instance, he identifies four epistemological traditions in which skill is conceptualized: positivist, ethnomethodological, Neo-Weberian, and Marxist. What he calls positivist approach sees skills as objective attributes that are amenable to quantitative measurement using universal yardsticks. The ethnomethodological perspective, on the other hand, directs attention to the complexity in the realization of seemingly mundane tasks. From this perspective, visibility of skills depends on the rarity of associated activities. The Neo-Weberian perspective is interested in the political processes through which certain occupations achieve high-skill status; professional closure, for example, is one such process. The Marxists do not have a clearly-defined notion of skill, and they have used it in all senses above to grapple with how the changing organization of work impacts the autonomy and skill levels of workers. These approaches to skill, when taken together, point to a common tenet. That is, 'what passes for skill (and by extension competency) in a given social formation and at any specific point in time is the product of complex phenomenological, social, economic, and political process' (Dunk 1996, 101).

Indeed, historically, skills valued in the labour market have changed given the shifting mode of production. Traditionally, skill is associated with 'craftsmanship', which according to Braveman (1974), has been eroded with the introduction of technology and scientific management. In 1972, Bell noted that the economy has moved from primarily providing goods to providing information and knowledge. He hence forecasted the arrival of a post-industrial society where information, technology, and scientific knowledge become more valuable than before. As countries in the West increasingly moved into service-based economies, the notion of soft skills started entering our vocabulary as the new buzzword. In contrast to the emphasis on formal and technical skills, soft skills refer to the 'abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behaviour' (Moss and Tilly, 1996, 253), including the 'right' look and the 'right' sound (e.g. Nickson, Warhurst, and Dutton 2005). The embracing of soft skills, particularly in policy discourses, as Payne (2000) points out, may not be in sync with the pursuit of a knowledge-based economy. Yet, the ascendance of soft skills to salience and legitimacy speaks of the super-exploitative nature of the service economy, which capitalizes on the commodification of personal emotions, attitudes, and ways of presentation.

The dominant construct of skill not only caters to the productive interests of capital but it is also closely related to the perpetuation of hierarchical social order, along axes of social differences, such as gender and race. For instance, women's work is often "seen as reflective of 'natural' talents or aptitudes" (Dunk 1996, 105). As such, women's skills often go unnoticed and unrewarded (e.g. Jackson 1991; Ng 2005; Fejes 2012) and jobs done primarily by women are often considered less skilled than those done primarily by men (e.g. Phillips and Taylor 1981). When women make their entrance to male-dominated jobs, men may start reassessing the 'skill extent' of these jobs, which is indicative of not only the prevalence of macho power, but also the alienating effects of the labour process (Cockburn 1983; Phillips and Taylor, 1981). Just as the skill discourses are gendered, they are also deeply racialized. Studies of hiring practices in the US for instance find that hiring managers may hold racial stereotypes that work systematically against marginalized groups; African Americans, as a case in point, are often perceived as lacking in soft skills and consequently not qualified for jobs where they have historically had low representation (e.g. Waldinger 1997; Zamudio and Lichter 2008).

As relational constructs embroiled in intersecting relations of gender, race and class, discourses of skill often work in complex ways, producing differential experiences for different groups. For example, Waldinger (1996, 1997) shows that employers' biases against black Americans for their "lack of" soft skills may have provided immigrant Latina/os with some employment advantage for certain low-entry jobs. It is however problematic to see this as gains accrued to the Latina/os. As Zamudio and Lichter (2008) point out, soft skill preferences may be ways to cloak exploitation of the tractability of Latina/o immigrants. In Shan (2013), she also finds that the discourse of communication skill works to different effect for the same population: Chinese immigrant engineers, in two different labour markets in Canada. Where the market demand for engineering professionals is high, this discourse is rendered irrelevant. Where the supply of engineers is higher than demand, communication becomes a discourse of convenience to justify low pay for professional jobs. In Collins's study (2002), she also finds that skill discourses, or rather discourses of a lack of skill on

the part of women garment workers in the US, have served as a rhetoric to justify managers' decision to move production out of the country in search for cheaper labour. This study points to the role that skill discourses play in exacerbating alienation and gendered exploitation on a global scale.

The last two decades have witnessed the rise of extended discourses of skill and competency such as employability skill, generic skill, core skill, transferrable skill, essential skill, core competency, functional competency, and occupation-based competency. The use of these terms has been traced back to the behaviour tradition which is reductionist in nature. Questions have been raised as to the disjuncture between what it takes to get the job done and what is observable and measurable against a set of criteria of skills and competencies (i.e. Jackson 2000; Jackson and Slade 2008). Often times, competency and skill based education may better serve as an administrative tool than a means conducive to learning and teaching. For example, in the field of medical education, Brooks (2009) has argued that competence 'is an inadequate, and even harmful, concept to use as a guiding motif for professional education' (90). He poignantly points out that a competent doctor may not be a good or even adequate doctor.

All considered, what is counted as skill and competency and who are considered to be skilled and competent workers are actively shaped by the interplay of social, cultural, and economic relations. Rather than some fixed benchmark that we can all measure ourselves against, skill and competence are rather floating discourses. Uncritical acceptance of discourses of skill and competency may only work to perpetuate the power and privilege of dominant groups. We need to be wary that these discourses also serve as emerging and yet shifting social stratifiers, perpetuating hierarchical social order by constantly redefining the desirability and acceptability of workers in the context of globalization and immigration.

In this special issue, we try to grapple with how discourses of skill and competency have played out in the context of globalization and migration. We hope to shed light on the following questions in particular:

(1) How skill and competency are socially constructed and legitimized to produce differential opportunities for migrants;
(2) How migrants navigate and/or contest the regimes of skill and competency;
(3) How skill and competency are worked up to regulate the everyday work of practitioners working with migrants, particularly in areas such as language assessment and settlement services.

Skill and competency at work: contributions from the authors

The current trend of immigration policies conjures a borderless career pathway for skilled workers and professionals. Shibao Guo, through a review of the literature on immigrants' experiences in Canada significantly disrupts this narrative. From the lens of critical race theory, he argues that racialization remains central to how skilled immigrants are perceived and received in the host labour market. Notably, visible immigrants experience a consistent earning penalty for credentials and qualifications acquired from their home countries. Guo further observes that while immigrant training programmes exist in Canada to integrate immigrants through reskilling, these programmes have largely served as a social engineering programme that produces normative white subjects.

In the context of an increasingly diversified labour force as a result of immigration, stakeholders, in the pursuit of 'assurance' for quality employees, started seeking standard benchmarks against which immigrants can be measured. Canadian language benchmark is one such product. Tara Gibb's paper, based on an institutional ethnographic study, problematizes how language assessment practices in Canada serve to reify, objectify, and obscure the social relations within which language is locally practiced. Her article pinpoints that language is not an abstract system that can be parsed into discrete skills. She instead argues that this modernist notion of language can only reinforce existing social hierarchy, dividing people by virtue of 'variations of codes, expressions and accents'. As this paper illustrates, language should be treated as a social practice in conjunction with professional practice so that practitioners can start 'acknowledge(ing) the historical and local generation of language from which other practices are generated'.

While increasingly sophisticated discourses of skill and competency have become new stratifiers or signifiers for stratification in the context of migration, the ensuing question is how immigrants, with their particular training, experiences and biographies navigate the host labour market. Two articles focus precisely on this question. Sue Webb, with her focus on the Australian context, shows that who immigrants know may actually be more important than what they know in determining their labour market outcomes. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition, Webb examines the ways in which some immigrants in a non-metropolitan area worked around the doxa – that is, the dominant expectation for immigrants to fit into Australian norms. In her study, some immigrants were able to expand on their cultural and symbolic capital by attending well-known universities in Australia and actively engaging in civic and community groups, thereby growing the 'right' social network that enables career success. Not all immigrants have the privilege to develop the 'right' social capital to fit into the mainstream labour market however. The immigrants who do not have such a privilege in her study nevertheless involved themselves in active civic and community engagements, which sometimes led to employment. Of note, some immigrants within this study developed critical views of the doxa and, more importantly, started cultivating and advocating for diversity at the community level.

The article by Annett Spring shifts focus from immigrants' social capital to their cultural capital, and more specifically, immigration-related competency, or cultural capital that people gain by virtue of growing up as immigrants or being of specific origins. Her article recounts the stories of three first and second generation immigrants who mobilized their immigration-related competency for employment in the area of adult and continuing education. Her paper shows that no systematic efforts have been made to recognize and reward the particular competencies that immigrants may bring with them. Instead, it is always up to individual gatekeepers as to whether institutions would and could 'tap into' the cultural resources particular to immigrants. Webb's paper is conceptually informed by Bourdieu's cultural capital, symbolic exclusion and a firm belief in minority representation as justice.

Drawing on a Foucauldian notion of governmentality, Viktor Vesterberg analyses Swedish reports on labour market projects financed through the European Social fund. The paper shows how migrants are constructed as learning subjects through individualizing discourses; it also reveals tensions between inclusive ideals and the ways migrants are construed as the 'other'. His paper illustrates that immigrants are

often constructed as excluded from the category of Swedish, through labels such as immigrants, people with non-Nordic background, or the foreign born. However, two specific groups, Somali and Roma people, are constructed through ethnicized discourses. These groups are seen as vulnerable, due to high unemployment rates, and in need of specific correctional measures. In the Swedish labour market training projects, Vesterberg points out, issues of gender equality are raised as important for migrants to learn about; whereas Swedish people are positioned as progressive, migrants are constructed as, more or less, patriarchal, traditional, and unequal. Inclusive discourses suggest that by meeting Swedish people, migrants will learn how to become Swedish. However, and problematically, such discourses reinforce the division between us and them, positioning migrants as 'others' in need of correction.

Formation of the subjects is also the focus of the article by Saikat Maitra and Srabani Maitra. The analysis here is on how worker subjects are shaped among marginalized populations in two distinctly different geographical spaces, Toronto, Canada, and Kolkata, India. Drawing on the work of Heidegger and Foucault's notion of governmentality, the authors analyse data from two research projects; one based on 18-month field work in a food based retail-chain in Kolkata, and the second on interviews with 25 immigrants and key actors in various government organizations in Toronto providing employment-related training for immigrants. Their analysis illustrates how individuating training of the two groups of marginalized people contributes to the creation of a labour force that is disposable, low-cost, and malleable enough to function in insecure work environments. Rather than learning a set of skills, these individuals were trained to see themselves as standing-reserve with the potential to develop the capacities, or normative dispositions needed to succeed at work or in the labour market. These individualizing discourses successfully divert attention from issues of structural inequalities and other related issues such as gender and class.

This special issue is a collection of critical research work from different parts of the world, including Australia, Austria, Canada, India, and Sweden. While the social, cultural, economic, and geopolitical context of these countries vary, they all point to the roles that skill and competency, as social constructs, play in shaping the geographical and occupational mobility of migrants. In concert, they lay bare the complex, social relations that redistribute immigrants of different racial and cultural backgrounds in the host labour market. We hope this special issue is not considered as merely a collection of work critiquing the status quo. Rather, it should serve as a starting point of social imagination, or a reimagination of the relationship between 'us' and the 'other', observable skills and embedded practice, as well as training for work and education of people.

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