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Mothering, human capital, and the "ideal immigrant"

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Synopsis

In this paper, we explore how women negotiate femininity and family in relation to their children's schooling within a context of powerful discourses—in particular human capital theory—that produce the subject position of the "ideal immigrant." Our study is based on mothers and daughters who had recently arrived in Canada from a variety of source countries including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, and Iran and who were settled in an outer suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. Using in-depth interviews, we illustrate how the women in their struggles over gender, generation, class, and race inequalities negotiated and challenged human capital discourse at the three sites of paid jobs, children's schooling, and hopes and dreams about daughters' futures. While the women made claims through discursive prisms of human capital to articulate their longings, their experiences also point to the discursive incoherence of human capital and illuminate its ideological disguise of power relations.

Introduction

How do immigrant mothers forge a political space within dominant discourses of human capital that carry unstated norms of the "ideal immigrant," from which they are largely excluded? We explore this question based on in-depth interviews with 17 women and their teenage daughters who had recently arrived in Canada from a variety of source countries including Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, China, and Iran and who settled in an outer suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia.[1] When we began our research, we initially focused on how the mothers and daughters reworked notions of femininity, motherhood, family, and schooling. We found in the interviews, however, that the women wanted to talk more particularly about other experiences that had to do with economic security, isolation, and health problems. The women used the interviews to persuade, to make claims, and to negotiate, with whatever cultural meanings were available, their everyday concerns with us.

In this paper, we explore how, in discussing their concerns, the women negotiated femininity and family in relation to their children's schooling within a complex context of powerful narratives that constitute mothering. First, we examine dominant narratives of belonging of the "ideal immigrant," the relation of these narratives to human capital discourse, and the growing influence of neoliberal restructuring in Canada. Second, we illustrate how the women negotiated and challenged human capital discourse that existed in three local sites of paid work, children's schooling, and hopes and dreams of daughters' futures. Third, we conclude with a discussion about the implications of human capital discourse and practices for women's social belonging and citizenship.

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Narratives of belonging: the "ideal immigrant," gender, and human capital

Anthias (2002: 277) suggests that narratives of belonging function "to ask us to find, discover or rediscover belonging and a shared place where we can feel 'at home,' not just in the literal sense of place but also in the imagining of a collectivity." These narratives also form uncertainties of belonging and involve a vast spectrum of social processes that include real and imaginary boundary/border crossing (Anthias, 2002).[2]

The narrative of the "ideal immigrant"—who deserves to become a citizen and belong to the nation state and the counterpart "deficient immigrant" who does not—contributes to the construction of an "imagined community" of belonging in Canada.[3] A vital discursive part of the hegemonic narrative of immigrant belonging and citizenship in Canada, we argue, is human capital theory. The core of the dominant theory of human capital postulates that: "[h]igher levels of skill and knowledge, achieved through education and training, lead to higher productivity which is expressed in higher earnings for those who possess them" (McBride, 2000: 161). Crucial to human capital theory is the definition of skills and credentials as formally obtained, embodied, and institutionally recognized and instrumental to the goal of economic self-sufficiency.

While studies of immigration have often relied upon human capital theory to explain migration flows, Silvey and Lawson (1999) suggest that such a modernization theory needs to be examined as a discourse. A discursive perspective represents migrants not as theoretical "objects" but as interpretive subjects who negotiate and inhabit multiple subject positions. In focusing on migrant narratives, studies are then able to examine multiple motivations, ambivalence about actual experiences, and resistances to and reinterpretations of dominant discourses (Silvey & Lawson, 1999).

As a preexisting discursive practice, human capital theory enables and constrains thoughts, actions, and worldviews of arbitrarily established boundaries of acceptability of individual and community action (Hyslop-Margison, 2000). It is ideological in precluding systemic critique and reform by circumscribing the framing of social justice issues. While its laws can appear, like the law of gravity, as natural and inevitable, they can also be contested (Hyslop-Margison, 2000), as we show in this paper. Other studies indicate ways in which immigrants negotiate a range of cultural/symbolic capital in facilitating their positioning and cultural acceptance (e.g. Mitchell, 2001; Ong, 1999; Waters, 2001). Our study focuses, in particular, on how women negotiate and challenge human capital discourse in relation to economic security, narratives of belonging, and citizenship.

The resurgence of interest in human capital theory is manifest in international and national governing bodies which enthusiastically endorse neoliberal principles and policies (e.g. Hyslop-Margison, 2000). Firmly rooted in the neoliberal paradigm, human capital theory is the mainstream and theoretically dominant approach to the analysis of labour markets in global capitalism (McBride, 2000). As a discourse, human capital theory is located predominantly in the labour market, but it also plays out as a neoliberal element in various interpenetrating spheres including the welfare state, immigration, citizenship, schooling, and the family.

Neoliberalism, which promotes market economy principles that emphasize fiscal restraint, smaller government, reduced social spending, and increased privatization, increasingly shapes Canadian policies and practices (Brodie, 1996; Mitchell, 2001). Neoliberalism is not only about budgeting, however; it is also about citizenship entitlements and public responsibility for social needs and rights and the status bestowed on members of a community. Neoliberalism represents a move away from postwar principles of the welfare state that underscore the rights of citizens to a basic standard of living and the responsibility of society for the well being of individual members—an inclusive social citizenship—to an exclusive notion of the common good based on market values such as paid work and self-reliance (Brodie, 1996). Such market-oriented conceptualizations of social citizenship intensify the notion of the "self-sufficient citizen," complementing other tendencies including neoconservative's growing challenge to a "rights discourse" and emphasis on a "duties discourse," in particular, the obligation to undertake paid employment (Lister, 1997).

While neoliberalism, as Apple (2001: 116) notes, is a class-based ideology of markets, privatization, efficiency, and flexibility, it is also founded upon "masculinizing logics and visions of citizenship in which

paid work is its identifactory sign." At the same time, government cuts to education, health, and welfare spending leave more unpaid caregiving work (e.g. care of the sick, children, and the elderly) to commercialization or the self-sacrifices of women (McDaniel, 2002). Because of increased privatization, women's unpaid, caring work has become even more invisible and irrelevant to the calculations of how individuals contribute to and belong to society (Brodie, 1996).

Neoliberal restructuring not only affects the social citizenship of Canadian citizens; it has an impact on those who have unequal and ambiguous relations to formal citizenship. In the 1990s, changes in Canadian immigration and settlement policies increased expectations about what immigrants must offer to their new country as well as a lesser commitment from the Canadian state for their rights and welfare (Arat-Koc, 1999). In particular, immigration practices increasingly underscore a distinction between (good) self-sufficient, "independent" immigrants and (not so good) "dependent" family class immigrants (Abu-Laban, 1998; Arat-Koc, 1999; Thobani, 2000). These distinctions were embedded within the point system for selecting immigrants that the state developed in the late 1960s and entrenched in the Immigration Act 1976–1977. The point system organized immigration ideologically under the two main categories of independent class—constructed as masculine, economic agents who contribute to the economy—and the family class, associated with the unproductive feminine, which rendered invisible the social and economic contributions (both paid and unpaid) made by this category of persons (Thobani, 2000).[4]

Informed by human capital discourse, the immigration point system implies that skilled, market-based workers drive the economy, and that those who enter Canada as family class or refugees, who work in poorly paid jobs, who have difficulties in finding employment, who lack employment, who are poor, or who may be "merely" mothers, fail to contribute adequately to society and, indeed, are "drains" on the system. Collacott (2002), a former Canadian ambassador, highlights the fact that newly arrived immigrants, especially those in the family-class category, are showing higher poverty levels than before. These findings, he reasons, lead to the conclusion that the government should restrict further family-class sponsorships. After all, he asserts that, "family class immigration may gain votes but does not help the country" (Collacott, 2002: 19). In doing so, Collacott draws on powerful fictions that distinguish between "ideal" and "deficient" immigrants, that obscure how family-class categories already are very restrictive, how family-class members contribute to society, and how entrenched inequalities in Canada are responsible for the difficulties of "integration" (Thobani, 2000).

Recent immigration policy and practices have strengthened the emphasis on human capital as a measure of economic self-sufficiency, immigrants' worth, and the "problematization of immigrant families" (Abu-Laban, 1998: 205; Li, 2003). The new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (effective June 28, 2002), for example, establishes more points for formal education and knowledge of official languages in the skilled workers category than the previous point system. In stressing human capital as a criterion for selecting immigrants, the Act seeks to attract applicants with "the skills and education needed to drive economic growth and innovation in Canada" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2002).

Human capital discourse that informs the point system conceals the ways that gender and other forms of asymmetrical "difference" organize experience. Despite its scientific aura, human capital is laden with normative content in its search for scapegoats, its reduction of human beings to factors of production and to mere economic actors, and its assumption that the distribution of work (e.g. level of pay, degree of employment) is simply the result of human capital and not of social inequalities such as class, gender, and race (McBride, 2000). Further, in its masculine construction of skill, human capital discourse obscures the gendered division of labour and women's responsibilities for household work, how mothers "invest" in their children's schooling, and how they generate capabilities transferable from the household to market work (Gardiner, 2000). Human capital discourse also obscures feminist political struggles over the meaning of knowledge and skill (Gaskell & McLaren, 1991). As Butterwick (2003: 174) argues, human capital theory "values individuals and their skills only if they are considered to be economically productive."

The immigration system's increased emphasis on human capital narrows and strengthens the boundaries that distinguish the "ideal" from the "deficient" immigrant. The "ideal immigrant"—who is a highly

skilled, abstracted individual, "untroubled" by the baggage of "difference"deserves to belong to the nation-state. In contrast, the "unskilled, deficient immigrant," associated with "difference," does not. As a vital part of this deficiency narrative, human capital discourse informs the socially constructed category of an immigrant, refugee, or Third World woman: "she does not speak English; she is passive, oppressed, and homebound; she is usually found in the lower echelons of the workforce; and if labeled a refugee, she is a drain on the system" (Dossa, 2002b: 343–344). Human capital theory argues that if immigrant or refugee women cannot find paid work, or if their work is poorly paid, it is because they lack skills. If they are not in the labour market, they are not contributing to society and therefore do not belong.

The experiences of the women we interviewed were far removed from the narrative of the ideal immigrant who is normatively male, white, well-educated, eminently employable, and flexible. Yet, the women yearned for enhanced "skills," employment, and self-sufficiency for themselves, their families, and their daughters in ways that are eerily similar to the prevailing human capital discourse and could be mistaken as endorsements of it. The women's experiences, however we suggest, point to the discursive incoherence of human capital discourse and help to illuminate its ideological disguise of power relations, be they gender, race, or class. Its ambiguities and contradictions left spaces for other scripts. We show how the women from their multiple subject positions negotiated hegemonic narratives of belonging constituted by human capital discourse, challenging the meaning of human capital discourse and transforming it for their own purposes. In particular, we illustrate how the women used official discourses of jobs, education, and skills as vehicles through which to negotiate femininity and family in Canada in three local sites.

Negotiating human capital discourse

The women we interviewed were located within the social relations of immigration and prevailing discursive constructions about immigrants, citizenship, and the role of human capital. The women and their families may well have employed human capital discourse and practices before coming to Canada. Having been "channeled" through the immigration system, however, the women were also exposed to its techniques (e.g. the point system) and narratives of skill, paid employment, and schooling for regulating behaviour. We illustrate how the women in their embodied experiences in Canada mediated human capital discourses of the ideal immigrant that informed the three sites of paid work, children's schooling, and hopes and dreams about daughters' future. The interviews themselves provided a site for the women to use whatever cultural meanings were available—mainly in the shared language of English—to negotiate their everyday concerns, to make claims, to persuade, and to effect change. As recently arrived immigrants, the mothers' accounts were filtered through their varying understandings of English. They usually spoke to us in English, although in several cases, the daughters translated conversations, and in one case, a settlement worker helped to translate the interview.[5]

Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

As in market-based human capital discourse, the women's accounts were highly saturated with the mantra of jobs, skills, and self-sufficiency. Most of the women were very concerned about paid work and expressed their concerns often in embodied ways (e.g. with tears, ill health, and talking about deeply felt hopes and anxieties). The women were negotiating what it meant to be a woman in Canada, what kinds of jobs were available to women, what skills they required, and how they could possibly find paid work. In wanting to increase their "self-sufficiency," so fundamental to neoliberal narratives of belonging, the women used paid work as a primary entry point for negotiating their positions as mothers, immigrants, and citizens. They negotiated linkages of "skills" and "jobs" in various ways, working through their tensions and ambiguities.

Most were seeking employment, and all were developing their "skills." Three had paid jobs; only Narinder (we use pseudonyms) was satisfied with her job. It suited the qualifications she had acquired before coming to Canada and the further training she took in Canada. Ulla's work did not reflect her training, which was frustrating: "I need a lot of English and I must make a test… it's hard work. I

cannot do it, so it takes time." In contrast to Taiwan, Yen had only been able to set up "a very small business" in Canada because the "economic [climate] not very strong."

Most had not found paid work and were often distressed by the lack of jobs—sometimes on behalf of husbands—but predominantly because of their own lack of opportunities. Mayling was concerned about her husband's lack of work because, "no job no money." He only had a temporary, part-time job. Four husbands had full-time, steady jobs in Canada, seven were unemployed, and four worked in their country of origin (one of whom worked part-time in Canada). Four families had adopted a transnational family strategy, with fathers living in the country of origin (primarily full time) and mothers and children living in Canada.[6]

Youngsook, who had obtained a university degree in Korea, had been in Canada for almost a year and was anxious because she had not found a job:

> Yeah, most people from Korea who wanted to immigrate here, they thought their reason is to improve the quality of life. In Korea, I thought that the same, I feel the same. Here sometimes I think I improved my quality of life, sometimes, but sometimes to survive here it's not so easy. Me, I graduated from university in Korea but here I can't get a job. It's very difficult. So, in the case, it's not an improved life. This I'm thinking about, some things more difficult here. So sometimes I feel confused but I don't regret.

She was deeply disappointed that the promised link between skills and jobs had not materialized and that if she were fortunate enough to find work, it would be a "little job," without the income and status of her former work in Korea. Moreover, she had originally thought that "Canada is a good place, like being in heaven for women. . .but now I don't think so. Here in Canada, women have to work like men do. And then women can be respected by men. . ."

Yeu Lai had obtained a university degree in Taiwan and her family had been in Canada for 3 1/2 years. When she began looking for employment over 2 years ago, she was "quite upset" when she "found out the job market was bleak, so unbelievable bleak, and even for Canadians, it is hard to find a job. And I thought, oh, I don't want my children end up in the street in Canada. I don't want that." In constructing the stark alternatives between market-based work and living on the streets, Yeu Lai vividly conveyed her fears about not being the ideal immigrant/citizen who is economically self-sufficient and the disastrous consequences that could have for her children. Homa also conveyed a sense of social abandonment. Despite the fact that she possessed a Ph.D. degree and had been accepted into Canada on the basis of her specialized education and work experience, upon arrival, she observed: "they leave you in an ocean." According to human capital discourse, she was an "ideal immigrant," yet, after being in Canada for 4 years, she was still looking for work: "And I sent several resumes to other places. I haven't heard from them yet. So, this is the story of our lives. Immigrant—immigration always has difficulties. . . I'm happy that we have this apartment, this building. But the job is another problem. I think all immigrants have the same." In making the connection between her educational qualifications and jobs, she saw herself as a major breadwinner, challenging the deficiency discourse about "immigrant women": "I'm the one who has to find job, he's not as educated."

The women with university degrees, who possessed the skills that the market was supposedly seeking, were not passive observers. They held the claims of human capital to account, pointing to the failure of such a discourse to deliver on its promises of "skills" leading to decent work. Regardless of whether they named the labour market as bleak for all Canadians, or particularly for immigrants, the women's lack of jobs threatened their sense of well being. Fatima, who was depressed by the fact that she could not find a job that reflected her professional education and experience, was experiencing a frightening sense of losing control of her life in Canada: "Sometimes I think I miss myself." She talked about the lack of order in her daily schedule: "In Iran I go outside every morning and everything was scheduled, and I don't this model of living here, everything. Yes. I can't good planning here because I don't know what happen, for example, next month." She did not "feel very well because of immigration."

In contrast, women who were less educated challenged the link between formal qualifications and jobs. Irrespective of their so-called human capital, they claimed the right and necessity of employment, which

could counteract stereotypes, and provide a sense of meaning and belonging. Hyun-Joo was concerned about the stereotype that Koreans are lazy, a quality she attributed to unemployment. "Korean people really hard-working, yes. Now no job so less, lazy, but have a job, very hard-working, yeah." Faideh, a refugee from Iran, had been in Canada for about four years. She was clinically depressed because she and her husband could not find jobs. She possessed little formal education and wanted work for economic security. But as an immigrant settlement worker who helped as a translator in the interview put it, "in our culture" (both were from the same country and faith community), "work had also the spiritual meaning of 'worship'." Faideh was distressed because she could not even find a workplace that would give her unpaid work, a chance to gain Canadian experience, to learn English, and to become part of the "working force." She hoped that through our research, the government would hear of the plight of immigrant and refugee families and their need for jobs.

Resonating with neoliberal discourse, the women's accounts invoked employment as a primary means for securing a sense of belonging and perhaps self-sufficiency. They also emphasized the need to improve "skills" for the purpose of paid employment. Several had invested personally in market-based training by taking certified courses. Their development of "human capital" depended, however, on personal resources and gave no assurances that their new certification would lead to a job. Homa had paid for further professional development, which "was a lot of money," but it did not help her find work. The skill that the women most wanted to improve was competency in the dominant language of English. In investing in the development of this skill, most were hoping to transfer it to market-based work. Mi-Hae, who had taken basic English in Korea before coming to Canada, was taking an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) class and hoped that once her English improved, she could take up the kind of work she had done before coming to Canada. Yin-Li was taking an ESL class and had joined a job-finding group. Zahra, speaking through her daughter, said, "just a big problem is jobs." She was planning to become recertified in Canada, which would require her to improve her English language skills considerably before she could take the exams.

All the women invested in learning English using informal occasions such as the interview itself as a forum for practicing English and getting to know "Canadians." They also sought more formal possibilities that could provide "human capital" credentials. Yet, their opportunities for learning English were haphazard and contingent, depending on their resources and confidence. If advanced classes were available, they were fee-paying and did not prepare them sufficiently for a "working knowledge" of English. As the key places for learning English, the workplace and schooling took on an iconic status in the women's narratives. Haideh wanted to work somewhere, at any job even if unpaid, to improve her English. Yeu Lai wished she could attend a school like her daughter, whose English had improved so "fantastically." Fatima who studied English in university before coming to Canada saw her language as a "big problem." She did not have time to concentrate on learning English because she had many chores to do throughout the day. She said, "if I was free, like my children, maybe I get sooner." She had not yet looked for paid work because she was trying to improve her English, which she believed was "not perfect yet."

A question that haunted the women's narratives was when would their skills be perfect, or even adequate? No matter how well represented with credentials (e.g. university degrees), the women's "human capital" had little currency in a shrunken job market that uses signs including gender, skin colour, and foreign accent to exclude. How would Fatima's knowledge of English, which was "not perfect yet," be judged, along with her attributes of being a woman, who was racialized, who spoke with an accented English?[7] In what circumstances did the "colour of her English" undermine the assessment of her knowledge and competence (see Creese & Kambere, 2002)? The "immigrant woman" in Canada, like the Asian immigrant in the United States in Lowe's study, "at odds with the cultural, racial, and linguistic forms of the nation—emerges in a site that defers and displaces the temporality of assimilation" (Lowe, 1996: 6). While the women were unable to secure the significant symbolic capital of English language fluency and a "Western education" (Waters, 2001), they invoked these forms of "capital" in supporting their children's schooling and in their hopes and dreams for their daughters' futures.

Children's Schooling

Human capital discourse in Canada and elsewhere constructs education as an instrumental realm that needs to produce highly skilled students to be self-sufficient and employable (Hyslop-Margison, 2000). It also constructs the neutral "parent" as responsible for investing in their children's education to ensure they possess the requisite marketable skills. This narrative of the responsible "parent" obscures the fact that in the unequal, gendered division of labour in Western liberal democracies, it is mothers who are primarily responsible for the family's daily investment in children's schooling. Human capital discourse also naturalizes the necessity of investment, obscuring the productive role of its own discourse, which contributes to mothers being caught up in what Reay (1998) identifies as a wave of educational urgency in the current marketplace of "flexible" labour and "marketized" education.

While we found that human capital discourse constituted a sense of educational urgency and incited the women to invest heavily in their children's education, it also rendered their mothering and domestic work invisible. In negotiating the sites of paid employment and children's education, the women's everyday, embodied practices revealed the textual contradictions of human capital theory, which casts these two sites of activity and desire in abstract, ideal form, as detached and separate. Human capital discourse implicitly calls for women to become skilled workers (not mothers) and to generate human capital in their children to meet the neoliberal idea of citizen self-sufficiency. In negotiating these contradictory demands, the women limited not only their own skill and job opportunities, but also their spatial mobility, compelled as they were to stay in Canada, at least until their children completed schooling.

In addition, in presuming the abstracted "investor," human capital discourse obscures the inequalities that the women negotiated in their children's schooling. The women struggled with a paradigmatic model of mothering that rests upon specific kinds of knowledge and experience, skin colour, and material conditions (Griffith & Smith, 1991; McLaren & Dyck, 2002). The women needed various forms of "capital" (e.g. to hire tutors, to be able to stay at home to help their children, to negotiate English and the dominant culture, to share information with knowledgeable friends and family, and to help children with their homework). Even when they possessed high levels of economic, cultural, social, and educational resources, they continued to face boundaries of exclusion. Their English was not good enough, their children could not talk properly, and they were not of the right culture or right "race." Since the schools did not address adequately these fundamental boundaries of exclusion, the complexity of the women's protective "mother-work" was profound.

Yet, human capital discourse also gave the women hope that their children's education in Canada would result in the possession of skills and credentials that would lead to employment and a secure future. In countless, ordinary and extraordinary ways, the women not only pursued school opportunities to enhance their children's human capital, but they also actively generated it. They worked with their children on homework, hired tutors, sought assistance from other members of the family to help the children with their school work, networked with other parents, visited schools, met their children in libraries after school, and so on. Mayling helped her children with their homework and drove her daughter to an English tutor. She joined an association for Chinese parents who do not speak or understand English very well and who wanted to be involved in their children's schooling. Mayling explained, "Now I know many, many news from the school."

Several mothers said that they had very little or no contact with their children's school or teachers and often attributed this fact to their inability to speak English. Hyun-Joo had only met the teachers at her daughter's school once when she first entered the school. She explained: "English a little bit, so I didn't go there." Even some of the mothers who had university education and had learned English before coming to Canada found it difficult to speak English at their children's school. Youngsook expressed her dismay about her experiences when she attended a school parents' meeting. As she told us, her composure broke down: "(W)hen I attend some meeting, and when there is, when there are only Canadians, Canadian parents there, I feel very nervous. And when I speak English, always I feel nervous. They are looking at me, they are listening to me then." Her experience of marginalization and

the contextual fragility of her "human capital" (i.e. university degree in English) was clearly memorable and visceral.

In failing to recognize its own strangeness and biases, the schooling regime excluded the mothers at the same time that it demanded their supplementary work. When Homa's daughter was having trouble in a particular subject at her previous school, the advisor said "you have to hire a tutor." Homa told us: "So how can I hire a tutor when I don't have a job?" At her daughter's current school: "the advisor was very good, and she gave me some books and said 'go and read with her.' So we came home spend the Christmas break, so I studied with her, now she's like other students." Homa drew on her own educational experiences and fluency in English to help her daughter. When her daughter experienced racism, the principal said he could not do anything about it. When her son was intimidated by other students in his previous school, the children came home for lunch. Needless to say, Homa's educational and protective work limited her opportunities of finding employment, contradicted most employment schedules, and reduced her potential "flexibility" as a "worker."

Fatima also talked about being directly involved with her children's school. She had frequently talked to her children's school counselors. She was "all [the] time contact with their counselor" and felt very comfortable with the counselor. She suggested that her sense of isolation and her unhappiness with her circumstances led her to focus all her attention on her children's schooling: "maybe first generation in immigration every time lose, but next generation, maybe more successful and good, better future and better life here." While "investing" in their children's education, the women reworked their hopes and dreams for their daughters' futures.

Hopes and Dreams about Daughters' Futures

The site of the women's hopes and dreams about daughters' futures served as a crucible for tensions in their lives. Bannerji (cited in Dossa, 2002a: 13) addresses the complexities of the mother–daughter relation in her observations that "our mothers are/were not in a position to give us much of the world, which mostly lay beyond their reach. Yet, they did leave us with an inheritance of a longing for the out-of-reach world." A prominent theme in studies about socially marginalized mothers is their profound hopes and desires about their daughters' life chances. In her study of women living in poverty in Mexico, Price (1999: 49) suggests that the mothers were reworking the site of "inner landscapes" of "hopes, dreams, and fears, those spaces within which women reflect on their lives and plan for the future" in relation to oppressive social conditions. Central to the mothers' hopes and dreams was the desire to ensure a better life for their daughters. In our study, the women longed for a better future for their daughters and many turned to education as a pivotal answer. Human capital discourse constituted the women's hopes and dreams for their daughters' futures in specifying market-based definitions of work and skills, the significance of women earning their own way, and the meaning of citizenship that valorizes independence located in the labour market. In using the "neutral" job and skill discourse to seek opportunities for their daughters, the women reworked femininity.

Many of the women said that a primary reason that they and their families came to Canada was because they sought the "human capital" that schooling promised—especially in the form of certified and fluent knowledge of English and possible access to university credentials—to ensure their daughters' future job opportunities. Yen emphasized the difficulties of the educational system in Taiwan: "if you want to get very the famous high school or university you must very hard working, hard study, very, very hard, every morning you must pass the test, test, test every morning. So it is very hard for her. I want to she can speak more the English and she might eyes open. I want so she have more opportunity to change her lifestyle." Yin-Li stated that she and her husband came to Canada, "seventy percent" for their daughter. En route between their country of origin and Canada, they had lived in an Asian country where, she suggested, women stay at home with the children and take care of their husbands, which was "no good for future." Fatima said that probably "seventy percent of our [Iranian] community are here for good education." Iranian universities don't "pay attention what everybody like. And what's career they like to have in future. They don't pay attention.... I don't like this way for my daughter" having to face the "many wall

in front women'' which she herself had experienced. Zahra believed that Canada is a very good country for children, but not for adults, because the children can get an education in Canada which would enable them to find jobs, ''so there is no problem for sure, if they study.'' On the other hand, Haideh did not express any hope for the future: ''I have been here three years, but everyday passes I feel that yesterday was better than today. Instead of being given the hope... that the future will be better than today.'' She was worried about her daughter's future because the family had not been able to save money for her to go to university.

The women used the discursive power of human capital, however, to delineate widely differing narratives about belonging that ranged from a strong commitment to stay in Canada, to return migration to their former country, and to a form of flexible citizenship. Their narratives of belonging reflected both unified family strategies as well as profound disagreements and negotiations within families. Mayling was adamant that the family would stay in Canada: ''We've got not intention to return home to Hong Kong.'' Youngsook, whose husband was currently working in Korea, hoped that her daughter would find a job and spend her future in Canada. Yeu Lai was determined to make every effort to establish the family life in Canada. However, her husband, who was concerned about their daughter's employment future in Canada, was encouraging her to return to Taiwan once she finished her degree in Canada. Still, the daughter said that she was planning to stay in Canada for the rest of her life. Yin-Li hoped that her daughter would stay in Canada: ''I hope [she] understand Canadian because we, after life, live in Canada, must understand Canada, important for her when she going to job it is very important I think.'' But the daughter was thinking of teaching English in the country that the family had lived in for several years en route to Canada from their country of origin.

Some mothers wanted to return to their country of origin but felt compelled to stay in Canada for their children's education. Homa wanted to return to her job in Iran, but stated that her children refused to go back. ''When you bring your kids over, you show them another country like here, you can't take them back. It's very hard. Many people are stuck somewhere that they didn't want to. They couldn't; they were not successful. But because of the kids, they had to stay.'' Mi-Hae said that she would like to return to Korea, but that they had to stay in Canada for their daughter's education. ''But for us, for education, she have to stay here.'' The daughter would like to return to Korea in the future and her father, ''says it's difficult to find a job'' in Canada. ''Korea is much easier to get a job and money.''

Several mothers talked about keeping options open. Fatima stated ''And I like my children have good education and they can speak English and know international language is English.'' Po-Ying's husband who worked part-time in Korea and in Canada wanted the mother and daughter to return to Korea eventually, which they were considering. Pei-Ti's older daughter: ''just passed a big test in Taiwan so you want to be a...this is her dream so she go to Taiwan to study. Because I think that if you want to university, this is your choice. You can go to American, you can go to ____. It's your choice. So I think her choice is right.'' Pei-Ti's teenage daughter was thinking of returning to Taiwan if she could not find full-time work in Canada. Yen was open to the idea of her daughter going back to Taiwan or living and working in the United States. She did not believe that Canada would offer good employment opportunities to her daughter. She described a friend with a master's degree who was employed for the same wage as in Taiwan after graduating with a bachelor's degree. Yen did not want her daughter to experience the problems of discrimination and racism in the future because ''this means you can't have more opportunity to get higher and higher, you can't. So maybe you keep same working, same job, even if you have more ability. It's unfair.'' Yen's daughter was determined that she would return to Taiwan: ''I already make decision. After I graduate even if I can find job in here I will go back to Taiwan.''

In pursuing the logic of the skill-job linkage, the women sought to maximize investment in the development of their daughters' skills and credentials. Paradoxically, however, for the national narrative of the ''ideal immigrant,'' such a desire could lead to scripts that decentre narratives of citizenship. Some mothers had visions that their daughters might not become citizens of Canada, or that they would become ''flexible citizens'' of transnationalism, who forge social relations that are anchored in but transcend one or more nation-states (e.g. see Mitchell, 2001; Ong, 1999). While several families had already

adopted transnational strategies,[8] it was the women, nevertheless, who were constrained to stay in Canada while their children completed schooling, reflecting family regimes that generally valorize mobile masculinity and localized femininity (Ong, 1999). The women lacked mobility because their children would have had difficulty returning to the school system of the country of origin, with its different and perhaps more structured curricula.

As Mitchell's (2001) research suggests, school constraint on family transnational strategies may lead immigrant parents to seek educational reforms. In her study, she found that a group of well-organized immigrant parents from Hong Kong living in a suburb of Vancouver attempted to establish a "traditional school" primarily because of the concern that their children acquire "portable" educational capital. The parents wanted their children to attend a school with standardized, traditional curricula that would allow greater flexibility and recognition of levels of achievement across national borders. The parents were less interested in preparing their children to be members of a national community than to be successful global citizens.

Discussion and conclusion

In this exploratory study, we illustrate how specific features of neoliberal discourses and practices mediated the women's struggles over gender, generation, class, and race inequalities in three sites. As the women sought better futures for themselves, their daughters, and their families, they made claims through discursive prisms of human capital, language that helped them to articulate their longings. The women's narratives about their experiences, their life chances, and future possibilities were constituted by discursive understandings in Canada of what work and skill mean, the significance of women earning their own way, and the meaning of national narratives of citizenship that valorize independence located in the labour market.

While the dominant narrative about immigrants, human capital, and citizenship intertwined with the women's narratives, the ambiguities and contradictions of human capital discourse gave space for the women's own scripts. As active subjects, the women worked through a multitude of discourses of what it means to be an immigrant, a mother, and a racialized woman, with misrecognized experience, knowledge, skills, or credentials, and with various forms of capital. In emphasizing their own marketable skills, they challenged the deficiency discourse of "unskilled immigrant women," the promised link of market-based skills with employment, the supposed neutrality of market-based skills, and the assumed benefits of investing in skills training and English as a second language classes. They also questioned the masculine model that insists women must work like men and the state model that leads to the social abandonment of immigrants in Canada. Finally, as the women sought the flexibility of educational credentials in the transnational labour market, they brought into question national narratives of belonging. As active players, they struggled for their rights as citizens (national or transnational) and voiced a "civil-voice script" of lived experiences and embodied knowledge (Dossa, 2002a). Their narratives implicitly challenged the market-based discourse of the ideal subject "who regards his or her self as a form of capital to be processed, refined and invested" (Finlayson, 2000: 154). Yet, because of their dislocation and marginality, the women had difficulty contesting their positions, making claims, or participating fully as citizens. Social arenas that would allow them to fight for their rights and acknowledge their discursive and material structured exclusions were absent (Dossa, 2002a). As Dossa (2002a: 21) argues, "immigrant women's lives do not form part of the social and national imagination of the state."

In providing seemingly fair, objective, and clear-cut measures, human capital theory gives a benign and seductive appeal to the formation of the "ideal skilled immigrant" as a legitimate subject position of national belonging. But in intensifying the link between social citizenship, skills, and paid work, human capital discourse not only leaves intact the gendered division of labour that devalues "women's labour." It arguably deepens the hegemonic masculinization of the public sphere into "a masculine, tough new world of global competition" (McDaniel, 2002: 136). It also contributes to the legitimation of poverty and social precariousness. As Evans (1997: 107) notes: "(p)aid work, the critical nexus for the modern construction of social citizenship, is becoming more difficult to obtain in the global economy,

while at the same time it is increasingly viewed as a 'badge' of citizenship.''

One step forward to challenge human capital discourse would be to follow the policy option that Kilbride (2000) endorses based on a review of literature on the human, social, and cultural capital of immigrant children and their families: to use the institutions and systems of the nation to recognize, develop, and enhance the capital of immigrant families and their children instead of selecting only those immigrants whose capital comes close to that of the native-born middle or upper class.

Another step forward would be to insist on recognizing women's work (in all its meanings) in relation to various forms of ''capital.'' While the human capital linkage between ''skills'' and ''jobs'' provides emancipatory moments for women, we need to ask about the terms upon which they have been included in the ''public sphere'' and, with that access, what happens to the social order (Dillabough & Arnot, 2000). Our analysis suggests that mothers' work needs to be addressed within a framework of mothers as political actors. For mothers to be actively engaged as citizens, it is necessary to seek conditions that promote parity of participation, denied by models of the skilled worker-citizen. Fraser's (1997) two-dimensional conception of justice—the politics of recognition integrated with the politics of redistribution—indicates a promising way to conceptualize the struggles of racialized, immigrant and classed mothers as they engage with narratives and practices of belonging. As Fraser suggests, the gendered division of labour that splits caregiving and paid work exemplifies the need to integrate cultural recognition and class redistribution. Both dimensions of social justice are woefully lacking in dominant discourses of the ideal immigrant, worker-citizen, and human capital that fail to address inequalities of access to human capital and the misrecognition of other forms of knowledges and skills.

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Endnotes

[1] We have chosen not to name the suburban area and some others forms of identification (e.g. name of school) to protect the identities of the women whose interview accounts feature here; we have also given them pseudonyms. Our interviews are not intended to be representative of the area, but to illustrate ''meaning-making'' within the complex of discursive relations operating at different scales. The top 10 source countries to the study area from 1991 to 1996 were Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Philippines, Poland, Iran, Romania, India, and the United Kingdom. The 17 mothers and daughters' source countries were Taiwan (5), Korea (4), Iran (4), Hong Kong (2), China (1), and northern Europe (1). Our interviews of ''recently arrived immigrants'' (within 5 years) from 1998 to 2000 were conducted by either one of the research assistants or by the authors working together.

[2] The concept of narratives of belonging underscores a dynamic relationship between citizenship and identity, which allows for an exploration of feminist reconceptualizations of citizenship (e.g. Dillabough & Arnot, 2000; Lister, 1997; Stasiulis & Bakan, 1997; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

[3] See Strong-boag, Grace, Eisenberg, and Anderson (1998) for a collection of essays on gender and race in the construction of Canada.

[4] Whereas Canada always looked for immigrants to serve the labour market, until the 1960s, it actively sought ''desirable'' immigrants from specific sources such as Britain and western/northern Europe for their nation-building potential, over and above what they could contribute to the economy (Arat-Koc, 1999). As immigrants from nontraditional source countries have become the primary source of immigration, the point system is arguably leading to an increased commodification of immigrants and decreased emphasis on their contributions to ''nation-building.'' In 1999, 189,816 immigrants landed in Canada. The major immigrant ''classes'' were economic (56%), family (29%), and refugees (13%). The top 10 source countries were People's Republic of China (15.33%), India (9.17%), Pakistan (4.89%), Philippines (4.83%), Republic of Korea (3.80%), Iran (3.11%), U.S.A. (2.90%), Taiwan (2.88%), Sri Lanka (2.49%), and U.K. (2.36%) (Citizenship and Immigration Canada: http://www.cic.gc.ca).

[5] We interviewed the mothers and daughters together. We adopted this strategy to reflect the wishes of the mothers and daughters; it also enabled some daughters to translate for their mothers.

[6] Sixteen families included wives, husbands, and children. One family consisted of a woman (who was no longer married) and her children.

[7] With one exception (a woman from northern Europe), the women in our study were racialized—they were subject to ideological and material practices that devalue experience by reinforcing a white norm. The process of racialization frequently conflates the categories of "women of colour" and "women immigrants."

[8] Waters (2001) examines the recent emergence of transnational household arrangements in Vancouver.

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