

“Don’t worry, you’ll find something.”: Emotional Support as Social Capital in the School–Work Transitions of Second-Generation Immigrants



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ABSTRACT

Drawing from wider findings on a study examining the school–work transitions of 27 second-generation immigrants, the role of social capital was found to be particularly significant. While participants identified their lack of access to career-related social capital as a key challenge in their transitions, the emotional support they received from their parents was considered to be an extremely valuable form of social capital. Considering that young second-generation immigrants face a number of disadvantages in the labour market, it is important to illuminate their experiences and shed light on the strategies that help to ease this transition.



BACKGROUND

More than 5 million Canadians, or 17.4% of the population is composed of second-generation immigrants.¹ Existing data suggest that second-generation immigrants generally fair well in the Canadian labour market.² The educational attainment of this population surpasses those of their peers with Canadian-born parents.³

While second-generation immigrants as a whole appear to be thriving in the school to work transition, those who identify as a visible minority experience more negative outcomes when compared to those who do not identify as such.⁴

The economic outcomes of the second-generation are a key determinant of their ability to integrate into other facets of society within the host country.⁵

Although human capital theory is useful in explaining the importance of educational qualifications and the significance of credentials for access to skilled labour, it is not sufficient in explaining the inequality of labour market outcomes among different groups with the same human capital. As such, we turn to the role of social capital.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the roles of human and social capital in the school–work transitions of second-generation immigrants?
2. How does emotional support from parents function as a form of social capital?

FINDINGS

A shared understanding of parental sacrifice and the pursuit of success through educational attainment was a dominant narrative among participants. As a result of the decline in their socio-economic status and the hardship they faced upon arriving in Canada, interviewees indicated that their parents pressured them to do well in school early on in order to ensure that they were able to gain upward mobility. However, the pressure to do well academically waned as these young people transitioned into their post-secondary studies. While parents did have high ambitions for their children, there was no intensive push to pursue studies in STEM fields, as may be expected. Most parents wanted their children to have a good education and a fulfilling career that would make them happy and allow them to support themselves. Respondents also found that watching their parents sacrifice their own happiness and dreams to provide them with a better life became a key motivator in their own pursuit for success. While the majority of participants stated that their parents were not able to provide them with access to useful networks in their field, almost all participants indicated that their parents provided them with emotional support during their transition into the labour market. Since the investment in human capital via education appears to be part of a shared value or a collective ambition between parents and their children in order to gain upward mobility in the host society, the parents of these young people were willing to continue supporting them as they searched for work. The support and motivation that parents provided their children with helped to ease their school–work transitions, as having someone to encourage them and calm their anxieties was considered to be important by participants.

METHODOLOGY

Participants were recruited across Southern Ontario through convenience sampling and passive snowball sampling. A mix of visible and non-visible minority participants were sought in order to examine the role of race-ethnicity in the job search process. In-depth interviews were conducted with 27 participants. Interviews were between 60-90 minutes in length. The sample included:

- 16 racialized participants
- 11 non-racialized participants
- 19 females
- 8 males

Participants were asked about their employment history, job search techniques, academic history and the role of schooling, impact of family, barriers and challenges faced in the job search process, and the role of their second-generation immigrant status (including the impact of ethnicity, and if applicable, race).

Eligibility Requirements for Participants

- Between the ages of 20 and 30.
- Born to immigrant parents in Canada, OR arrived in Canada by or before the age of 8.
- Completed a Canadian post-secondary program within the last 4 years.
- Actively searching for permanent employment, OR currently employed in a permanent position.

REFERENCES

¹ Statistics Canada. 2013. *Generation status: Canadian-born children of immigrants*. Ottawa: Minister of Industry. Catalogue no. 99-010-X2011003.

² Aydemir, Abdurrahman, Wen-Hao Chen, and Miles Corak. 2013. *Intergenerational Education Mobility Among the Children of Canadian Immigrants*. Canadian Public Policy, 39, S107-S122.

³ Abada, Teresa, and Sylvia Lin. 2011. *The Educational Attainments and Labour Market Outcomes of the Children of Immigrants in Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

⁴ Hum, Derek and Wayne Simpson. 2007. *The Legacy of Immigration: Labour Market Performance and Education in the Second Generation*. Applied Economics, 39(15): 31-42.

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2010. *Equal Opportunities?: The Labour Market Integration of the Children of Immigrants*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Downward
Mobility of
Parents

My mom went to school to be a physiotherapist in Poland, which she did for a while. Then she came to Canada and couldn't get any job with those qualifications. She worked for a while, she worked at a rehab hospital for children in [City]. Then they were laying people off and she ended up having to go back to school and took some courses. Now she's a renal technician at the hospital. She helps with the machines that clean everyone's kidneys, so that's what she does now.

–Victoria (Polish, research assistant & office administrator)

My mom is a factory worker, and she actually has a degree, but from Vietnam. She used to be a teacher, so she has two degrees from Vietnam, but nothing here.

–Bohai (Vietnamese, accounting assistant)

I mean, my parents obviously felt pressured to get something. To get a job immediately so they can help provide for my brother and I. And even though they had schooling, they went to university in Serbia, but none of that applied here, and they just took like the quickest job they could find so that they could get money, right?

–Ivana (Serbian, administrative coordinator)

Collective
Ambition

Yeah, my mom definitely cared about marks. But she never had to pressure me or my brother to do well, we sort of had that drive on our own. So she never had to give that spiel, right? But yeah she definitely wanted us to do well and get good marks. [...] I think my dad worked a job he didn't really love, because he had to. So for me, that was the drive to do something that I like. And yeah, again they never said, "You should do well because we never had these opportunities," but for me, it was partly because of that.

–Hamid (Sri Lankan & Ugandan, financial analyst)

I think they did put pressure on me. I think the hope of any parent, especially immigrant parents is to see their child succeed, and to complete a few things that they didn't have the opportunity to do. So my parents didn't have strong education back home, and they came to Canada as refugees and had low income jobs for a very long time, and I think when they started to have children they made a promise to themselves that they wanted to see their kids succeed very well and be educated. So yeah it is pressure, but it's pressure that I understand. Pressure that I appreciate. I think it all has to do with succeeding well and functioning in society and doing well for yourself. [...] I mean I think it is a motivator, you know, I am studying and working not only for myself but for my family. I think that motivates me.

–Delia (Sri Lankan, unemployed)

Emotional
Support

Yeah, definitely a lot of emotional support. There is so much emotional support, and there isn't that pressure to go out in the world and do something for yourself because we aren't going to help you anymore. It was never like that. It was kind of like, "We will continue to help you until you can help yourself." But I know a lot of [Canadian] people who don't have the same culture and it's like, "That's it we aren't going to help you anymore. You can fend for yourself now." In a lot of ways, it was an advantage. You know your parents are immigrants, they have struggled really hard to give you everything that they can, but they are okay with continuing that.

–Namrita (Indian, regulated immigration consultant)

They literally sacrificed everything for us. With immigrant parents, I think that is a very common trend. I find that with Canadian parents, it's like, "Okay you are 18, get out of the house."

–Aleksandra (Romanian, telephone banking specialist)

They would always try to drive me back home and drive me to the bus station and things like that, and I think that those little things matter. [...] They keep telling me, "Oh don't worry about work, you'll find it, you just relax," and they do all the cooking and cleaning and all this.

–Delia (Sri Lankan, unemployed)

Social
Capital/
Fulfilling
Career

[...] and like you know typical brown parents like, "I want my daughter to be a lawyer, I want her to be a doctor, I want her to be an engineer." You know the stereotype. My parents were like you guys could do whatever you want. I hate math, so they were never like you have to take academic math, they were like, "If you want to take applied math, take applied math, why are you busting your head over this, you are still in school, math isn't something you have to pursue." [...] They are very understanding; they are not like—they don't force me to go into something.

–Saramathi (Sri Lankan, legal assistant)

I think I'm really lucky in that my mom was never one of those parents who was like, "You need to get a job as a doctor, or a lawyer," it was just like you need to do something with your life. Do something that you like, something that you can survive off of and support yourself with, and make sure you have the education that you need for that job.

–Sarah (Guyanese, project planning coordinator)

They put pressure in the sense that school is important, make sure you have a job, you need to be able to support yourself and your kids. But it's not so much like make sure you are a doctor because a doctor is a high paying job.

–Alicia (Croatian, five part-time jobs).