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Between Conformity and Contestation:
South Asian Immigrant Women Negotiating Soft-Skill
Training in Canada

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BETWEEN CONFORMITY AND CONTESTATION: SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN NEGOTIATING SOFT-SKILL TRAINING IN CANADA

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Abstract

In the current Canadian neo-liberal labour market work-related learning and training are considered key strategies for developing workers' economic productivity and expediting their integration to the labour market. An important aspect of such training and learning now consists of soft-skills. Yet, some scholars are ambivalent about the nature of such soft-skill training as their curricula are often suffused with cultural and racial values geared towards assimilating immigrants of colour to the dominant and normative national culture of the country. This paper further problematizes soft skill training by examining the training/learning experiences of highly educated South Asian women trying to enter the Canadian labour market after immigration. In particular, it highlights these women's engagement with such soft skill training and their negotiation processes, thereby analyzing their agency in the context of work-related learning.

Résumé

Sur le marché du travail néo-libéral canadien d'aujourd'hui, l'apprentissage et la formation liés à l'emploi sont considérés comme des stratégies clés pour développer la productivité économique des travailleurs et pour accélérer leur intégration au marché du travail. Actuellement, les compétences relationnelles constituent une partie importante de cet apprentissage et de cette formation. Pourtant, certains chercheurs sont ambivalents au sujet de la nature de la formation de ces compétences relationnelles, car leurs programmes scolaires sont souvent empreints de valeurs culturelles et raciales visant à assimiler les immigrants de couleur à la culture nationale dominante et normative du pays. Cet article problématise la formation des compétences relationnelles en examinant les expériences d'apprentissage/de formation des femmes de l'Asie du Sud qui ont un haut niveau d'éducation et qui cherchent à entrer au marché du travail canadien après leur immigration. L'accent mis sur l'implication de ces femmes dans la formation de ces compétences relationnelles et

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leurs processus de négociation, cet article analyse leur agentivité dans le contexte de l'apprentissage lié à l'emploi.

Introduction

In the current Canadian neo-liberal labour market, work-related learning and training are considered key strategies for developing workers' economic productivity and expediting their integration to the labour market (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2011). An important aspect of such training and learning now consists of "skill formation" (Anderson, 2005; Shan, 2013), especially soft skills (also sometimes referred to as life skills or interpersonal skills). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines soft skills as

a group of psychosocial competencies and interpersonal skills that help people make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, and cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and productive manner. (World Health Organization [WHO], 2003, p. 3)

According to scholars, the changes in the current labour market from manufacturing to service sector jobs have led to the increased interest for soft-skill development (Handel, 2012) among employees. As Nickson, Warhurst, and Dutton (2005) pointed out, "Within service-dominated economies, the nature of skills required by employees is changing to roll up both attitude and appearance" (p. 196). Thus, reports and policy documents published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or ILO have been consistently emphasizing the need to develop national skill policies as well as invest in skill training (ILO, 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). Soft skills have been identified as increasingly important hiring criteria in most of these documents (OECD, 2011).

Despite such policy emphasis on soft-skill training for labour market integration, a growing body of work has taken a critical approach toward the nature of such training and its impacts on workers, especially racialized immigrants trying to enter the Canadian labour market (Haque, 2014; McCoy & Masuch, 2007; Sparks & Butterwick, 2004). They point out that soft-skill training programs in Canada are often designed from a "deficit orientation" (Sparks & Butterwick, p. 286; see also Guo, 2013) that perceives the education, values, and cultures of immigrants of colour as different and therefore deficient and "incompatible and inferior" (Donaldson, 2007, p. 55) to the Canadian standard. Consequently, the curricula of such training are often suffused with cultural and racial values geared toward assimilating immigrants of colour to the dominant and normative national culture of the country. Drawing on the above critiques, this paper critically explores soft-skill training by examining the training/learning experiences of a group of highly educated South Asian women trying to enter the Canadian labour market after immigration. In particular, I highlight these women's engagement with soft-skill training and their negotiation processes, thereby analyzing their agency in the context of work-related learning.

The concept of "negotiation," as employed in this paper, denotes a form of agency different from the commonly perceived notions of agency as formal, large-scale, macro organization or resistance. This particular form of agency as negotiation, constitutive of

the simultaneous processes of conformity and contestation, demonstrates that resistance can also take such forms as critique or alliance put forward by individuals as they try to gain “cultural knowledge and Canadian communication” (McCoy & Masuch, 2007, p. 194). These alternative forms of agency suggest that there are bound to exist other “expressions [or] conduct[s]” (Ong, 2003, p. 10) that can challenge or disrupt the assimilationist ideologies and practices that shape such skill-training programs.

Literature Review

It was as early as 1972 when the term “soft skill” was mentioned in a US Army training manual (Moss & Tilly, 2001). However, it was in the 1990s that employers and policy holders in OECD countries started promoting soft skills as instrumental for succeeding in the restructured economy that required workers to be flexible, adaptable, and competitive. Investment in soft-skill training was seen as essential for managing workplace culture “just like other aspects of production” (Jackson & Jordan, 1999, p. 11). In Canada, too, there has been an increased focus since the 1990s on skill development, especially to “help” immigrants learn employment-related soft skills and the organizational culture of the Canadian labour market (Reitz, Curtis, & Elrick, 2014).

Some scholars, however, find the domain of soft skills elusive and contested. In the 1990s, Moss and Tilly (1996), for instance, drew attention to the problematic aspects of hiring based on such soft skills as behaviour, attitude, or communication. Based on interviews with employers in the Los Angeles and Detroit metropolitan areas, they argued that “soft skills are in part culturally defined, and therefore employer assessments of soft skills will be confounded by differences in culture and by racial stereotyping” (pp. 257–58).

Arguing along similar lines, adult educators have drawn attention to how adult training of soft skills can be permeated with gendered, racial, and cultural undertones as well. Scholars such as Walsh (2011) have pointed out how training programs can undervalue the fact that women’s participation in such programs is incumbent upon their fine balancing between child care, domestic responsibilities, and the need to earn a living. Moreover, experiences of women as mothers and the different cultural values of homemaking are hardly ever discussed within life-skill training programs (Sparks & Butterwick, 2004). Furthermore, scholars express doubts about the extent to which soft-skill training programs actually address the sexist attitudes women might experience within the masculine work culture of many sectors (such as information technology) in the current knowledge economy. They propose an integration of reflective learning in the curriculum so that women can be provided “with a way of identifying the mechanisms of their disadvantage, and with the confidence to challenge these” (Walsh, 2011, p. 143). Additionally, scholars draw attention to the overrepresentation of immigrant women of colour in low-paid, dead-end, precarious service sector jobs in Canada that often rely on such “feminized” skills as caring, servitude, politeness, or friendliness (Galabuzi, 2001). They ask whether apolitical and decontextualized soft-skill training might inadvertently prepare immigrant women of colour for further confinement within such job sectors as opposed to leading them toward greater and meaningful employment opportunities (Walsh, 2011).

Along with focusing on gender, others such as Sparks and Butterwick (2004) have demonstrated how life-skill training can be a “site of cultural practice” and a way of reinscribing dominant cultural views. Analyzing a case of adult literacy practice in the

United States and life-skill training programs in western Canada, they called attention to how within adult classrooms occupied by non-dominant groups, there is a "culture of power" at work that "contains codes and rules relating to communicative strategies, linguistic forms and presentation of self—that is ways of walking, dressing, writing, interacting" (p. 280).

Additionally, a few scholars examining language and communication training as part of soft-skill enhancement have reported findings similar to the above. While scrutinizing English as a second language (ESL) programs for immigrants in Canada, Guo (2013) indicated how the curriculum is focused on "teaching Canadian values, thus ignoring the complexity and ambiguity of the cultural experience of most newcomers" (p. 24). While such skill training is often justified based on its capacity to help immigrants "fit in" within the Canadian labour market culture, Guo felt that it is necessarily a one-way integration in which only the immigrants are expected to learn and modify their behavioural and communicational abilities. In this way, all other existing skills and competencies of immigrants are erased or rendered secondary and multilingualism devalued (Haque, 2014). Additionally, through such training, an "idealized universal Canadian workplace culture" is endorsed along with the presentation of the "ideal Canadian employee" (Guo, p. 36).

While the above studies are critical in highlighting the multiple correctional processes of regulating the "immigrant" body and mind through soft-skill training, questions arise as to whether there are possibilities of challenging these cultural practices, or is it that they are so deeply ingrained that individuals have no other recourse but to conform to them? I argue through my data analysis that, given the subtle and insidious nature of these hegemonic regulatory training processes, any form of struggle against these forces cannot simply be conceptualized in terms of overt action or complete resistance, but needs to be thought of as a process of "negotiation" between conformation and contestation, an ongoing process of adjustment vis-à-vis conflict. In the next section, I discuss this conceptualization of negotiation as a form of agency.

Theoretical Framework

Notions of women's agency have been central to feminist discourses elucidating women's roles in challenging their exclusion, marginalization, or oppression due to race-, gender-, or class-based discrimination. While the conceptualization of agency has evolved since its earliest formulations, in the context of my discussions in this paper I argue that agency cannot only be conflated with defiance or resistance but needs to be thought of as multiple, variegated, situational practices of conformity and opposition that often blend into each other. This understanding of agency going beyond the victim/actor dichotomy spells out a complex and fluid notion in which women can accept, accommodate, critique, or make alterations—sometimes all at the same time. It is this nuanced and complex understanding of agency that is the core of the analysis in this paper. My view of agency as constitutive of the dual processes of conformation and contestation is based on the observation that in the present era of the neo-liberal market economy, the "microphysics of power" has become so diffused and dispersed that we need subtle resistance strategies "rooted in everyday politics" (Pun, 2005, p. 195; see also Fisher & Davis, 1993). Living in what Deleuze (1992) defined as a society of control in which individuals are no longer coercively disciplined within the confines of discrete institutions, Hardt (1995) argued that the deployment of power is aimed toward constant modulations of "normalized subjects and thus exerting hegemony

through consent in a way that is perhaps more subtle but no less authoritarian than the exertion of dictatorship through coercion” (p. 31). This consensual hegemonic process can educate or train citizens in such a way as to create within them “desires that are in line with the State” or corporate entities (Hardt, p. 32). Individuals, therefore, when they conform to the hegemonic discourses, do so not out of repression but out of consensus or even through desire, infused within them by various regulatory tactics and strategies. Thus, the present forms of control have become so normalized and part of common sense that any subversion to such forces cannot always be thought of in terms of distinct categories, but may blend into the dual processes of consent and contest.

James Scott’s (1985) conceptualization of “everyday forms of resistance” has been instrumental in this context. By highlighting the small, seemingly trivial daily acts, Scott demonstrated how such acts can equally undermine the oppressive power structures and not just the organized, collective, large-scale protest movements, strikes, or picketing. Scott’s conceptualization complements other collective action theories by expanding them to include those commonplace forms of struggle that do not always require much planning or coordination and arise out of people’s lived experiences.

Many feminist scholars have also analyzed the dynamic and complex ways that women, especially women of colour, negotiate with power structures in their everyday lives. For example, apparent docility can be one form of negotiation while manipulation another. In an analysis of Egyptian women involved in a mosque movement who chose to wear a veil, Mahmood (2001) argued that, although the very act of wearing a veil might seem to be an act of disciplining women’s bodies and their conformity to religious subjugation, in actuality women’s decision to wear a veil was not to don the “symbolic sign of Muslim/ Arab identity,” but oriented toward “the creation of a shy and modest self. The veil in this sense is the means both of being and becoming a certain kind of a[n] [agentival] person” (p. 215). Others pointed out oppositional consciousness (Stone-Mediatore, 2000), evocation of familial and social relationships (Pun, 2005), or a collective process of remembering, reprocessing, and reinterpreting lived experiences (Stone-Mediatore) as examples of the variegated forms that women’s agency can take based on their socio-economic and cultural contexts.

Such fluid notions of agency are also perceived as critical of Western discourses of autonomy and empowerment. Wray (2004), through her study of the impact of aging on women, drew attention to how British and American notions of agency are overtly constructed based on such notions as self-sufficiency, autonomy, and/or empowerment (p. 23). In effect, this kind of formulation, by squarely equating power with independence and powerlessness with dependence, completely overlooks the fact that “it is possible to be dependent without this posing a threat to autonomous or independent action and to be empowered and disempowered at the same time” (Wray, 2004, p. 23). Any blanket equation of dependence with powerlessness results in elision of the diverse forms that agency can take depending on ethnic, cultural, and historical specificities.

My discussion of agency in this paper is in the context of the above discussed scholars who demonstrated how women employ various agentive strategies depending on specific contexts. I add to this literature by highlighting how agency can comprise acts of critique or alliance, acts that are performed either individually or in concert with others, and acts that can be viewed as sometimes pragmatic and at other times strategic. Based on this analysis, I will demonstrate how South Asian immigrant women, while internalizing certain normative

cultural messages imparted as part of the soft-skill training, also end up contesting those very discourses—contestations that emanate from their own racial and gendered positions.

Methodology

The findings discussed in this paper are based on my doctoral research where I examined the skill training experiences of 25 South Asian immigrant women living in Toronto. All the interviewees had immigrated to Canada with their spouses between 2000 and 2005. They were all highly educated with graduate and post-graduate degrees in arts, commerce, or science. Their pre-migration work experiences were primarily in office administration, teaching, information technology, telecommunications, and sales. Interviewees were recruited initially through community networks. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used.

Methodologically, my research was informed by a feminist interpretive inquiry that enabled me to recognize and understand the lived experiences of these women as racialized immigrants and how they interpreted the training experiences from their own perspectives. According to Guba and Lincoln (1998), this focus on individual understandings of the everyday is important to building and sharing a broader picture of the particular situation as shaped by the ideology of culture, society, race, ethnicity, or gender. Feminists, too, have embraced the prominence of lived experiences to include women's own stories and understanding of their experiences (Jansen & Davis, 1998) into the research process.

The study relied on semi-structured (open-ended) face-to-face interviews based on a set of questions I had prepared. Semi-structured interviews are known to provide the "principal means by which . . . to achieve the active involvement of . . . [the] respondents in the construction of data about their lives" (Graham, 1984, p. 112). After completing the interviews, I read and re-read the transcripts, trying to understand the conversations and the analysis that the women had presented with regard to their skill-training experiences in Canada. While reading the transcripts, I looked for overarching themes and patterns that emerged from the conversations. It was at this stage that women's voices seemed to come alive through the quotations. In the final phase, my task was to organize the stories "in the context of the women speaking them and to create some flow and focus for their stories to merge" (Borbridge, 2000, p. 92).

Data Analysis

Soft-Skill Training: Producing Conformity

While sharing their experiences of attending soft-skill training workshops, the South Asian immigrant women participated in an in-depth discussion of their socialization into Euro-Canadian norms and values as a prerequisite for gaining entry into the labour market. The training was in place to correct and modify an individual's habits, attitudes, customs, or ways of thinking in order to develop within her/him an efficient, productive, and competitive worker subjectivity (Rose, 1992).

In Canada, the White national subject is "exalted" as a "stable, conscious . . . enduring" (Thobani, 2007, p. 7), and superior being. Thus, when immigrants of colour are taught to emulate the ideals of a Canadian culture, the notion of "Canadian" represents people who have white skin and European background (Bannerji, 2000). In opposition to the "authentic"

Canadian subject, imagined as White and Euro-American, stands the immigrant—a deeply racialized figure who is usually a person of colour from a different cultural background and possibly with limited proficiency in English (Li, 2003). Within this broader context, women immigrants from South Asian countries are normatively understood to be different, in cultural, social, racial, and linguistic terms, from the dominant Canadian ethos. Therefore, it is assumed to be their responsibility to efface their differences in order to have any chance at integration, including abandoning all “cultural distinctiveness” of their South Asian identities (Li, p. 43). Thus, South Asian immigrant women, similar to other immigrants of colour, find themselves to be under a lot of pressure to re-socialize themselves according to Canadian norms of speech, bodily dispositions, forms of social interactions, and so on.

This socialization was most evident when women described their experiences in the various training workshops where, in the pretext of preparing immigrants for Canadian employers, a normative White Canadianness was imposed. According to Malathi:

In Canada, I must have attended I don't know how many workshops and various agencies. They have a number of workshops that you have to attend. Each session is about a different module so there can be résumé workshop, interview skill workshop, mock interview session, communication workshop. There's presentations and guest speakers . . . I won't say I didn't learn anything. For example, in one of the workshops we were told to dress up professionally, brush our teeth before an interview, learn to do small talks, not to sit cross-legged.

Shaoli, a science graduate from Bangladesh, mentioned:

Every workshop I attended they just kept harping on how to dress, how to do water cooler talks, how to be presentable. They would say things like wear black or brown shoes or high heels, wear fitted clothes, not too much jewellery, chew a gum before going for your interview. It is useful sometimes to learn about the work culture here because we are in a different country, but not everything is necessary.

In both cases, the perceived inferiority of non-Canadian life worlds motivated service providers to selectively tutor and train professional, educated immigrants about the basic skills of social processes demanded by a normative Canadian employer. There is hardly any regard for the educational achievements or professional experiences of the immigrants concerned.

Many others pointed out how they were told to wear Western clothes such as suit or pants, do a firm handshake with the employer, or look straight into the eyes of the employer while talking. Women mentioned that in the workshops, trainers would consistently talk about the usefulness of these skills more than anything else. For instance, Mita, an administrative assistant from India, explained:

I got the sense from the trainers that employers here are more interested in soft skills as they would need employees who can work well in the Canadian work culture. Coming from different parts of the world, we are different and not used to the Canadian environment. So the need to learn, say, effective communication . . . I mean I should know about hockey so that I can do small talk during breaks. If I am unable to join my other

colleagues, obviously I would feel left out. So that's how I interpreted what the trainers were trying to tell us.

Appearing to be neutral and productive modes of increasing the soft-skill proficiencies of immigrant women for surviving in the Canadian labour market, these hegemonic practices are actually subtle means of remaking immigrant subjects to conform to the normative Canadian social forms. The severe deficiencies—including in terms of hygiene standards, professional etiquette, bodily deportment, and so on—that the immigrant women of colour were conceived to be carrying with them were repeatedly made visible to them in the course of training. From the perspective of training, it was imperative that the immigrant women could identify their own deficiencies so that they can then work to overcome them. Thus, starting with training programs, a whole set of other factors come into play in devaluing the existing sensibilities, dispositions, communicative modes, and social skills of immigrant women so that they can be made into the objects of long-term training and rectification.

Negotiating Soft-Skill Training

Critiquing the system. Eager to enter the Canadian labour market, the interviewees not only went through such remedial processes as part of their skill training, but also followed many prescribed rules to improve their soft skills. Women mentioned saving money to buy suits and trousers to present themselves in a proper manner to employers. Following a suggestion from her trainer, Tina relentlessly listened to Canadian news and other English programs to improve her accent and presentation abilities: "I thought if they [trainers] are telling us to improve our spoken English skills and accent to be able to compete with Canadians, we should do that. After all, I thought, we are in a Western country and the trainers know better." Nabila, Priya, Neeta, and many others practiced their presentation skills and body language and attended mock interview sessions to prepare themselves for the labour market. Since the résumés they had from their home countries were considered inadequate for the Canadian system, a majority of the women substantially corrected these, highlighting their past skills and education and updating them regularly. A couple of women even changed their names on the résumé to appear more Canadian. They were advised by the trainers to do so.

Apart from the above, conformity to training ideologies was also evident when some women shared that they felt the training was useful to some extent in inducting them into a Western workplace culture:

I wouldn't say the sessions were not at all useful. They added to my confidence. I mean, I enjoyed dressing up in trousers, which I felt made me more smarter looking . . . I am in Canada and I need to look smart. But then using [chewing] a gum . . . come on, being a professional I know that much at least. That's the ludicrous part and not sure how much that is useful. You know some of us South Asians we would joke around and say amongst us, "hey did you take a gum before coming for your training?" (Shaoli)

I enjoyed [it] initially because I knew I have to learn about the Canadian work culture. Although I have worked before . . . a foreign country is different. I also met many other women and some of us have become

friends. But most of the sessions were useless . . . I mean I know I have to dress smartly or shake hands. Rather teach me something really useful (Rita, a former NGO worker from Bangladesh)

What is interesting in the previous quotations is the blending of conformity with critique. Eager to enter the labour market and integrate into the Canadian society, many women indulged in anglo-conformity and certain self-regulatory processes to appear and behave more like “Canadians.” At the same time, such conformity was fraught with conflict and selective absorption. For instance, the women were critical in identifying the contradictions underlying the training programs. They clearly expressed their dissatisfaction with the training practices that they felt were preoccupied with eradicating deficiencies of immigrants of colour and hardly took any notice of the knowledge and learning these women brought to the country. For example, Malathi felt frustrated to have to sit in the workshops every week to learn about how to present herself to an employer during an interview, including what to wear and how to speak, despite the fact that she had several years of work experience from her home country. Others would joke about the uselessness of some of the sessions or discuss the lack of knowledge on the part of many settlement workers to assist skilled immigrants of colour.

Along with a critique of the cultural assumptions underpinning the soft-skill training, women were also active in analyzing the lack of gender sensitivity. Although most of the interviewees attended many sessions to learn about Canadian work culture, they were at the same time unhappy about how most of the training modules took hardly any notice of the amount of balancing women had to go through to attend the sessions. Mala, a data entry operator from Sri Lanka, said:

Most of the sessions start in the morning and are half a day or day long. It was really hard for me to attend the sessions. I have two small children and we can't afford day care. In the morning I will get up at 5 in the morning, prepare breakfast and leave for the training. My husband took care of the children. After coming back I will cook for the evening while my husband would go for his evening shift.

In most of the families, women had greater responsibility for household work and child care. Many women worked exceptionally long days. They usually got up early in the morning and worked throughout the day preparing meals, cleaning the house, or sending the children to school. Women who also had part-time paid work outside the home not only worked long hours, but also had to put more effort into managing their domestic responsibilities (Maitra, 2013). Transportation was also an issue with many immigrant women who often did not have access to a private vehicle. Saadiya gave an example:

And there were so many women who initially were in the session and later they would not come, and then they eventually left, quite a few of them left. And I was wondering why and then I thought, it was winter time, I was fortunate that I had a car and had a license; I was mobile. Many women were coming to [the] workshop from Markham by bus and in a winter it's not a joke, catching a bus, so then I was made aware of the struggle so many of us women had to pay.

They were thus quite vocal about how the training did not recognize any of the domestic skills of the women or take into account how much adjustment an immigrant woman goes through in the host country while trying to balance her household and professional life. Mita shared:

What I really feel bad about is how my background disappears in these training sessions. I am a mother, a loving wife, and a former office administrator. It's a new country for me. I work so hard from morning to night and then attend the sessions. But if they are simply teaching me some trivial skills with no concrete lead to jobs . . . I don't know, I am not motivated to attend any more.

Built as neutral and objective, skill-training programs thus fail to address and recognize immigrant women's different social ties and household responsibilities. In an attempt to carve a particular identity for immigrant women that is allied with normative expectations of Canadianness, the training renders invisible the sheer diversity in women's everyday lives. Instead, a unified and monolithic identity is imposed on them that remains mostly alien to their actual material, cultural, and social circumstances.

Creating alliances. While trying to learn competitiveness, professionalism, and Canadian workplace culture, women also actively fostered alliances and relationships with other women in the community. Most of the training courses that women attended were assimilatory and encouraged them to "abandon or 'unlearn' their original knowledge and skills, including their language and culture" (Goldberg, 2007, p. 33). In their anxiousness to overcome their labour market barriers, many women worked on their accent, habits, or disposition. Yet such adjustments were painful and almost felt like donning a new identity. As Saadiya mentioned, "It seems like I have two selves . . . one is for the outside society and the other when I come back home . . . you know what I mean . . . I am like an actor and that can be stressful." Thus, the process of becoming a Canadian was almost like a "dual process of displacement and replacement" that produced "anxiety, uncertainty, and pain for individuals in their daily struggles" (Pun, 2005, p. 132) and drove them toward a self-regulatory project. The only recourse women had then was to purposefully adhere to some of their own cultural values and relationships to create "sisterhood networks" (Pun, p. 61) among themselves. Women's building of relationships and social ties has been elaborately discussed by many scholars. Pun, for instance, mentioned how Chinese women factory workers often resorted to a cultural sense of collectivity by making friends or adhering to kinship bonding within the factories to fight market forces and the internal regimes of surveillance and punitive control.

A similar support system was apparent among the South Asian women. Many came to know each other from the training sessions that they attended together. Others lived in the same building or neighbourhood. Disillusioned with the training system and critical of the labour market policies, these women gathered every month to discuss their own strategies to enter the labour market. They would share labour market-related resources with each other, comment on each other's résumés, edit cover letters, and practise interview skills within the group. Encouraged by the group members, one of the teachers wrote a letter to the Ministry of Education questioning the reason for not accepting foreign teaching experiences in Canada. She mentioned,

I wrote to them, would you rather that we apply for the welfare so that we can live or rather you give us jobs? Why are you keeping us out of jobs? The reply that I got was unfortunately that teacher education is managed by the Ontario College of Teachers so the government has no say, which I thought was really stupid. I think the government has a direct responsibility for this. They are the ones who selected us to come here.

Also important to these women was the sense of identity they could hold onto as part of the group. As one of the women pointed out, in skill-training workshops it was their identity that got lost:

The most difficult thing that I experienced has been I think . . . loss of identity. Like when I go to workshops, you know people don't see me . . . they just see me as an immigrant woman. So I'm just classified. I've seen when I talked with people, I mean, when I came, [I] must have attended I don't know how many workshops and various agencies . . . and everywhere I knew, people just see me as an immigrant woman.

An oppositional consciousness becomes evident in the above narratives, as women through their discussions tried to make sense of the ideologies underpinning the training system designed for immigrants. As Stone-Mediatore (2000) pointed out, such consciousness does not have to include a “complete self-knowledge or a comprehensive social analysis” (p. 119), yet is still important in demonstrating the courage of these women to confront the forces that dominate their learning and actions.

Many others also spoke about the different ways they would continue their community links. Saadiya, for instance, was volunteering in a local community centre where she mentioned she would help other less-educated women prepare their résumés or type out letters for them. She would also share some of her own soft-skill training with other low-income and low-skilled women with the hope of assisting them to enter the labour market. Rehana offered a free English conversation course from home and gave free Qur'an lessons to girls. Jennifer often babysat for free if someone was facing financial difficulties. Mita taught computer lessons to other South Asian women who could not afford paid training.

The South Asian immigrant women also often cooked and shared food to remain attached to a communal feeling. Meals occupied an important place in the lives of the South Asian women. When I visited them for interviews, I was often offered various snacks and sweets, and many asked me to stay for lunch or dinner. The few times that I stayed, the meals were lavish, consisting of meat dishes, kebabs, pulav, biryani, dal, chapatis, vegetables, kheer, or gulab jamun. Sharing meals and cooking was a common way for women to maintain their ties with other women. These get-togethers over food not only forged friendships but also provided opportunities to share information, exchange social skills, and break out of isolation. These culinary activities thus functioned as a “technique of nearness” (Ganguly, 2001, p. 136), a form of sociability and a collective as opposed to the individualistic correctional processes.

Apart from cooking and sharing food, women also wore ethnic clothing within their homes or while going for grocery shopping, spoke in vernacular, and spent time together in long sessions of *adda*—“the long, informal, and unrigorous conversations” that form a vital idiom of social interaction (Chakrabarty, 1999, p. 110) among the women. Women's insistence to hold onto some of these cultural practices not only overtly created a sense of

community, but also demonstrated their active negotiation with the mainstream training sessions that, while trying to conform them into Western compartments, also aimed at eradicating some of those very deportments or values that women actually practised within homes. Often, in a labour market that refused them access despite months of training, the women fell back on their community's support to help sustain and tide themselves over the economic and social uncertainties. Visiting each other at home, inviting community members for large dinners, and bonding with each other by fore fronting the cultural qualities that training programs specifically seek to erase, the women immigrants consciously rejected certain traits of acculturation insisted on through trainings.

Conclusion

In this article I argue how South Asian immigrant women negotiated the ideological processes of soft-skill training programs in Canada. Being seen as different and inferior, these women from so-called Third World countries were hardly considered to be "authentic Canadian in the ideological sense, in their physical identity and culture" (Bannerji, 2000, p. 43). The training was meant to help them "rise up to the Canadian standards" (Goldberg, 2007, p. 32). However, rather than providing them with the knowledge that would genuinely help them understand the labour market and enter their respective job sectors, the focus of the training was primarily on socialization to certain pre-existing values, behaviours, and bodily deportments. This socialization and compliance to prevailing customs or values that the South Asian women were subjected to was more akin to a civilizing mission that tried to treat these women to the ways and cultures of the normative White citizenship.

Yet the effects of training along with its underlying assumptions of deficient bodies remained contingent. As the narratives suggest, South Asian immigrant women perceived the training as critical to accessing the Canadian labour market. For the purpose of economic survival, they were willing to assume and accept some regulation of their habits, communication, or disposition. They would purposely dress up in Western clothes, change their accent, or practise communicating in English. However, they also simultaneously remained critical about the larger objectives of training and how much such remaking of their personhood could actually help them find a bearing in the labour market. They often consciously rejected certain aspects of the training that they found persistently devalued their own understanding of their self-worth and educational attainments, such as the recommendation to brush teeth or chew gum. This constant slippage between assimilation to and rejection of the norms of Canadian social life that the training exposed them to constitutes agency for me. I forward agency as a series of small negotiations that immigrant South Asian women undertake between the demands of accessing the Canadian labour force and the often-conflicting demands to maintain a sense of self-dignity and community to survive under often adverse economic and social conditions after immigration. By forming alliances and friendships with other women from the community, the immigrant women in my study were able to create a support system for themselves that soft-skill training programs were originally intended to provide.

Two forms of work-related learning are evident here. First, the study provides important conceptual insights into how and why, through soft-skill training, women learned to regulate themselves to fit the needs of the Canadian labour market. Second, the women were not passive in the face of such hegemonic regulatory training. Through their critical

reflection and meaning making (Fenwick & Tennant, 2004), they were able to rupture some of the racialized and gendered assumptions inculcated through training. Their skeptical questioning of the content and objectives of training hindered them from uncritically absorbing the dominant ideologies underpinning soft-skill training (Brookfield, 1995). Related to this, what also came out is how reflective learning has the potential to transform learners to critical educators. This was evident in women's involvement in community actions. Being disillusioned with the mainstream training systems, they took up the responsibility to share some of their own skills and knowledge with those low-skilled, less educated immigrant women who faced even greater socio-economic marginalization. Their collective goal was thus to increase the capability of the marginalized.

In terms of policy, I propose that critical reflection and discussion be made part of soft-skill training and pedagogy. Given that cultural training and soft skills are often left to trainers' own biases and interpretations (Haque, 2014), such retrospection would enable trainers to assess and examine their own assumptions, interventions, and pedagogy (Brookfield, 2000; Schön, 1987). As well, discussions of gendered and racialized experiences, needs, and training objectives would ensure equal participation on the part of the adult women learners. These approaches would support soft-skill training that is holistic, inclusive, and "integrative of experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14). I advocate for pedagogy—that is, modes of learning, teaching, and knowledge construction—to be embedded in what Ng (2005) conceptualized as an "embodied integrative anti-racist feminist" approach. Such an embodied pedagogy, critical to the confrontations between dominant-subordinate bodies within adult training settings, urges practitioners to acknowledge and act on unequal power relations within social interactions, disrupt common-sense ideas and normalized practices, and reflect on how practitioners, while following institutional rules and conduct, can unwittingly reproduce sexism or racism (Ng). Congruent to reflective and transformative learning traditions in adult education, embodied pedagogy thus "requires that we envision a society free of oppression and that we change ourselves and society to achieve this vision" (Ng, 2005, what is embodied learning, para. 7).

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