

Barriers and paths to success

Latin American MBAs' views of employment in Canada

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine perceived barriers and paths to success for Latin American immigrant professionals in the Canadian job market.

Design/methodology/approach – Findings are based on 20 semi-structured interviews with Latin American graduates of Canadian MBA programs. Interviews were analyzed for emergent categories and common themes.

Findings – Despite their strong educational backgrounds, participants perceived several challenges to their success in the Canadian workplace, specifically, language barriers, lack of networks, cultural differences and discrimination. They also identified factors that influenced their professional success in Canada, such as homophilious networks and their Latin American background.

Research limitations/implications – By investigating stories of Latin American immigrant professionals, the study explores subjective views of immigration experiences and discrimination in this unique and rarely examined group. A larger sample will increase the confidence of the study's findings and future studies should examine dynamics of these issues over time.

Originality/value – This paper presents insight onto the labor market experiences and coping mechanisms of the currently understudied group of Latin American immigrant professionals in Canada. The study's qualitative approach enabled the examination of challenges experienced by immigrant professionals beyond those typically studied in this literature (e.g. devaluation of foreign credentials) and led to the finding that being Latin American can act both as a disadvantage in the form of discrimination and as an advantage as it differentiates immigrant professionals from other job seekers.

Keywords Immigrants, Employment, Master of business administration, Discrimination, Canada, Central America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Given declining birth rates, aging populations and shortages of skilled labor, many societies rely on immigrants and specifically on professional immigrants to remain competitive in the global economy (Boyd and Thomas, 2002). Canada has one of the highest numbers of immigrant professionals (IPs) in the world (Hawthorne, 2008) and therefore presents an ideal context to further examine this population's experience in the labor market. Previous studies conducted with foreign trained IPs in Canada concluded that this population receives lower financial rewards (Alboim *et al.*, 2005; Reitz, 2005) and experiences higher under-employment (Boyd and Schellenberg, 2007; Galabuzzi, 2005) if

The authors sincerely thank Rekha Karambayya for her insightful contributions to this paper.

compared to native-born professionals. Thus, this literature suggests that for immigrant professionals, education in and of itself does not necessarily lead to high-status employment and that in fact, human capital acquired abroad is discounted in the Canadian labour market (Boyd and Thomas, 2001; Kustec *et al.*, 2007; Reitz, 2001, 2005).

In response to the discounting of internationally obtained qualifications, some IPs pursue additional local human capital (Fang *et al.*, in press). In particular, IPs in the area of business may pursue Canadian MBA degrees, believing that this will compensate for the discounting of their foreign skills. However, previous research has not yet reached a consensus on this issue. While some studies show evidence in favour of this strategy (Wanner, 1998; Zeng and Xie, 2004), others indicate that despite obtaining local human capital, many IPs still report lower career success and satisfaction than native professionals (Fang *et al.*, in press).

The experience of IPs may also vary between immigrants of different ethnic origin. Specifically, Latin American immigrants represent an under-researched group, which merits closer attention, as it comprised the sixth largest of all incoming groups to Canada between 1991 and 2001, an inflow that has been growing steadily (Statistics Canada, 2001).

This study explores these issues through the following question: How do Latin American immigrants with Canadian MBA degrees – having therefore obtained equal educational levels as Canadians – perceive their experience of entering the Canadian job market? In particular, we will investigate the barriers that these immigrants perceive when looking for a job in Canada, such as the scarcity of their social networks (Friedman and Krackhardt, 1997; Ibarra, 1993) and discrimination (Esses *et al.*, 2006; Reitz, 2001; Galabuzzi, 2005), as well as their paths to success in the Canadian labour market (Zikic *et al.*, 2008).

Theoretical framework

Social networks

Social networks have been identified as important determinants of labor market outcomes of IPs. For instance, Friedman and Krackhardt (1997) found that the lack of social ties in the workplace negatively influences job success rates and returns on education for Asian immigrants, suggesting that access to high-status organizational members influences professional success and that IPs tend to lack such access.

In line with this, Ibarra (1993) concluded that it is difficult for minority group members to forge ties that are homophilious, that is, that are composed of people similar to themselves, because of the very small number of minority group members in today's organizations. When they are homophilious, the networks of minorities are not likely to involve high-status contacts since the similar others who are present in organizations are usually not in positions of authority. Nevertheless, strong and homophilious ties have been found to have important benefits for minority group members, acting as sources of support and trust (Lin, 1982; Woolcock, 1998) and, in the case of immigrants, informing them about job opportunities that will ultimately help them to enter the local labour market (Boyd, 1989; Hagan, 1998). However, in analysing the positive effects of homophilious networks, previous studies have not yet addressed whether they compensate for the problems faced by IPs due to their lack of access to high-status contacts in mainstream organizations.

Discrimination

Another factor that has been identified as important to understand the experiences of immigrants in Canada is discrimination. For the purposes of this study, discrimination is understood to be differential and hostile behaviours towards members of a group, on account of their membership of that group (Brown, 1995). Previous research has indicated that discrimination towards IPs in Canada is evident through the devaluation of international credentials, with less value being attributed by employers to internationally obtained credentials than to those obtained in Canada (Alboim *et al.*, 2005; Boyd and Thomas, 2001; Boyd and Schellenberg, 2007; Galabuzzi, 2005; Kustec *et al.*, 2007; Reitz, 2001).

More recently, researchers have drawn attention to the difference between blatant and subtle prejudices as sources of discrimination (Brief *et al.*, 2000; Esses *et al.*, 2006; Petersen and Dietz, 2005). While blatant prejudice is easy to recognize and hence easier to address, subtly prejudiced individuals may not recognize or admit to being prejudiced (Petersen and Dietz, 2005). Furthermore, because prejudice and explicit discriminatory practices are no longer socially acceptable in contemporary, western societies (Brief *et al.*, 2000), many of those who espouse prejudiced ideas only act on them when there are other readily available rational justifications for their behaviour (Esses *et al.*, 2006).

In line with this, employers' common demands for "Canadian experience" in job applicants (Bauder, 2003; Nwosu, 2006; Ralston, 1998) and differential interview outcomes based on accents (Creese and Kambere, 2003; Purkiss *et al.*, 2006; Scassa, 1994) have been identified as manifestations of subtle discrimination. While for certain jobs not having experience in the Canadian market and knowledge of Canadian culture can be a legitimate reason not to hire a foreign candidate, in other cases, it could be a sign of subtle prejudice (Esses *et al.*, 2006) and interpreted as discrimination. Similarly, while having a local accent may be advantageous in certain professions, in most occupations accents have little impact on performance (Scassa, 1994). Thus, differential treatment based on accents alone may be viewed as a form of discrimination in certain situations. In particular, job interviews have been identified as occasions in which accents may cause candidates to be under-valued regardless of the content of the interview (Purkiss *et al.*, 2006; Scassa, 1994).

While very little research on discrimination against Latin Americans in Canada currently exists, previous studies have indicated that Canadians are less comfortable around some ethnic minorities than others and hold stereotypical views of certain ethnic minorities. Specifically, these studies show that Canadians are least comfortable among ethnic groups of non-European origin (Berry and Kalin, 1995; Kalin and Berry, 1996). Given that attitudes toward members of ethnic groups can lead to discrimination (Ziegert and Hanges, 2005), this lack of "comfort" could feasibly bring about differential and negative treatment of non-Europeans, including Latin Americans. Several studies have addressed the treatment of Latin American immigrants in the US labor market, arguing that this population is discriminated against (Johnson, 1999) and that managers in the USA have consistently low expectations of the abilities of Latino workers (Blank and Slipp, 1994). However, whether those insights are fully applicable to Canada is questionable, since the nature of ethnic relations and immigration policies in the USA and in Canada are notably different (Reitz, 2002). Thus, one of the aims of this study is to investigate the experience of Latin American professionals specifically in the Canadian context.

Factors for success

Despite the many barriers they face, IPs often achieve professional success in their host countries (Zikic *et al.*, 2008). In particular, several psychological or environmental factors have been shown to determine IPs' career success. For instance, it has been argued that this population experiences different degrees of success in Canada depending on their country of origin (Boyd and Schellenberg, 2007; Reitz, 2001). In addition, traits such as career motivation and resilience (Boneva and Frieze, 2001; Bhagat and London, 1999) have also been found to contribute to immigrants' labour market success in their host country.

Career success has been conceptualized in both subjective and objective terms (Judge and Bretz, 1994). The former refers to a feeling of accomplishment and of doing one's best (Mirvis and Hall, 1994), the latter to observable and measurable achievements (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). This study focuses on the subjective dimension of career success in analysing the stories of IPs, specifically regarding the extent to which they perceive their ability to enter the Canadian labour market in positions that are commensurate to their skill level and expectations.

In summary, the literature suggests that there are barriers that make it difficult for immigrants and specifically IPs to become fully integrated to the job market of their host country. However, the literature also indicates that such integration and career success is possible. In the present study, we aim to contribute to the growing literature on IPs by investigating whether such barriers and factors for success are experienced and perceived by a particular, highly educated immigrant group: Latin American graduates of highly ranked Canadian MBA programs.

Method

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology to address its research questions. Choosing a qualitative methodology is important and appropriate for at least three reasons: First, qualitative studies allow for an in-depth examination of participants' subjective perceptions or "lived experience" (Cassell and Symon, 1994, p. 5). This focus on the point of view of the target population when addressing discrimination is desirable, as it can lead to a better understanding of the actual experience of prejudice and marginalization as felt by minority group members (Stangor and Swim, 1998). Second, qualitative methods are well suited to studies in contexts where cultural differences play an important role because such studies frequently deal with subtle and hidden nuances that are difficult to capture through other methodologies (Schollhammer, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Werner, 2002). Third, the potential to capture a richer depth of information make qualitative methods particularly valuable for theory building and elaboration (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Since little developed theory exists that addresses the subjective experiences of Latin American (and other) IPs, we conducted face-to-face interviews in order to best capture and explore the participants' perceived experiences.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Latin Americans who had graduated from MBA programs in Ontario, Canada, less than five years before the time of the study. All interviewees had graduated from MBA programs commonly ranked among the top five programs in Canada and had lived in

Canada for less than three months before beginning their MBA studies. Therefore, their first experience in looking for a job in Canada was during or after their MBA studies. All interviews were conducted in English and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview guide was developed based on a review of the relevant literature, a review of our own experiences and observations regarding Latin Americans' insertion in the Canadian labour market and preliminary, informal interviews with this population, according to the methodology proposed by McCracken (1951). The resulting interview guide can be found in the Appendix. Initial answers were followed up by asking participants to provide clarification, if necessary and specific personal examples to capture rich descriptions of their subjective experiences (Willis, 2007).

A snowball sampling technique was used to identify participants for this study. After the first participants were identified through the alumni network of one institution, those individuals' personal networks were utilized to find further interviewees. In total, 20 Latin American graduates of Canadian MBA programs were interviewed for this study. The age of the participants ranged between 26 and 38 with an average age of 31. A summary of the sample demographics is presented in Table I.

The fact that all interviewees had graduated from highly ranked Canadian MBA programs is noteworthy, as this allowed us to control the impact of devaluation of foreign degrees by Canadian employers, a common focus in studies on immigration (Boyd and Thomas, 2001; Boyd and Schellenberg, 2007; Galabuzzi, 2005; Kustec *et al.*, 2007; Reitz, 2001). Because all participants received recognized Canadian professional degrees, we were able to reduce the likelihood that any differential treatment was caused by their academic credentials. Hence, we were better able to identify other factors that affected the experiences of the participants in the Canadian labor market.

Country of origin	Gender	Time since graduation (years)	Current area	Native language
Argentina	F	3.5	Consulting	Spanish
Argentina	M	0.5	Finance	Spanish
Brazil	M	0.5	Finance	Portuguese
Brazil	M	0.5	Marketing	Portuguese
Brazil	M	1.0	Consulting	Portuguese
Brazil	M	1.5	Consulting	Portuguese
Brazil	M	1.5	Supply chain	Portuguese
Chile	M	0.5	Finance	Spanish
Colombia	M	0.5	Finance	Spanish
Mexico	F	0.5	Finance	Spanish
Peru	F	0.5	Finance	Spanish
Peru	M	0.5	Marketing	Spanish
Peru	M	1.5	Finance	Spanish
Peru	M	5.5	Finance	Spanish
Peru	F	0.5	Finance	Spanish
Peru	F	0.5	Procurement	Spanish
Venezuela	F	1.0	Marketing	Spanish
Venezuela	F	5.0	Finance	Spanish
Venezuela	F	5.0	Organizational development	Spanish
Venezuela	M	2.0	Project management	Spanish

Table I.
Sample profile

Data analysis

The analysis of the data comprised three stages. First, two of the authors individually reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and identified all information relevant to the participants' experiences in the Canadian job market. Next, the two authors individually coded concepts that emerged from the data. In stage two, the two authors met to discuss their individual findings and conceptually order the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). High agreement (more than eighty percent of the cases) existed between the individual ordering of the two coders. Cases in which the investigators disagreed were discussed until a mutually satisfying solution was found. In stage three, the concepts identified in the previous stage were used to develop themes. A total of six themes were singled-out and ultimately classified as either perceived challenges or perceived success factors. The themes are described in more detail in the results section.

Results

Based on previous research and informal interactions with immigrants, we expected to mainly find themes related to challenges to entry in the Canadian job market. However, we also found evidence that this group of immigrants perceive themselves to be successful precisely because of their Latin American backgrounds. This led us to divide the recount of emergent themes between the anticipated "Perceived challenges" and the less anticipated "Perceived success factors". All of the six themes were mentioned by at least 45 percent of the participants as is illustrated in Table II. The vast majority of informants referred to both challenges and success factors in their interviews.

Perceived challenges

Several perceived challenges appeared recurrently in the interviews, some of the most common and more highly emphasized by the interviewees were: networks, English as a second language, cultural differences – or "feeling foreign" – and subtle discrimination. We will describe how the respondents addressed each of these themes in the following paragraphs.

Networks. A total of 45 percent of the interviewees addressed networking as a challenge to career success. This theme can be subdivided into two dimensions, the perceived lack of established professional networks and the respondents' unfamiliarity with networking as a common job search strategy. Specifically, respondents stated that

Salient themes	Response by theme	
	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Barriers</i>		
Networks	9	45
Language	13	65
Culture	11	55
Discrimination	15	75
<i>Paths to success</i>		
Homophilious networks	10	50
Latin American origin	10	50

Table II.
Results by theme

professional networks take time to establish and that Canadians are at an advantage because they have had many more years to establish such networks, which, according to some, start being formed as early as in high-school. The following quote is symptomatic of this perceived lack of established networks:

[...] I think the fact that you don't have a good network, I think this is a big challenge, you have to build your whole network [...].

Respondents also felt that the need to build networks was a challenge in itself as this was not a common strategy for looking for employment in their countries of origin. For example, one interviewee stated:

[...] in (my country), I finished in the best university, so students who finish at my school usually get a job as soon as possible, and really good jobs, so here, you have to start doing networking, cold calling, so I was not used to that process [...]

Thus, both the practice of building networks and the fact that they have not been in Canada long enough to have extensive networks were seen as challenges to career success.

English as a second language. Although all respondents had lived in Canada for at least two years and had completed a demanding post-secondary degree in English, lack of fluency in the language was seen as a challenge both with regards to success in employment interviews and also to advancement within companies. In total, 65 percent of the participants mentioned this as a major challenge. For instance, one interviewee revealed that:

[...] What I always saw as an issue and I still see, is the fact that English is my second language ... that you can hear my mistakes when I am speaking ... and I am always self-conscious of that.

Thus, being a non-native English speaker did not only affect the perception of the respondents by others, but also respondents' self-perception. Interviewees were aware that English would always be their second language, which would present additional challenges to them in the Canadian job market, where they are compared to native English speakers.

Furthermore, some interviewees also commented on the difficulty to truly express oneself and reveal one's true personality in job interviews or to colleagues in the workplace in English. An example of this is an interviewee who stated:

[...] in interviews, it's even very difficult when you are speaking your own language ... when you don't have this kind of asset ... I think that 90 percent of chances you will miss something, you will not say something very important in the interview, you will not ... expose yourself the way you are ... you are always playing a role, you know?

Hence, communicating in a second language is not just seen as a potential professional shortcoming, but also as a personal one. Participants experienced a certain frustration with not being able to be oneself and project one's image as intended in interviews or in the workplace because of a lack of comfort with the English language.

Cultural differences – "feeling foreign". Several of the interviewees mentioned a feeling of not fitting in to the dominant Canadian culture, either because they do not recognize themselves in the informal interactions that take place at work or because they are not accustomed to the Canadian work culture. Specifically, 55 percent of the

interviewees mentioned this as a challenge and as a hindrance to their personal and their professional well-being in Canada. For instance, one interviewee noted:

[...] when people arrive at work, they start to joke, to talk about the news, about sports, everything, and you are always kind of an outsider, because you are not so fast to follow them and you don't know what is going on in sports because they are sports that you've never followed [...]

Thus, the lack of familiarity with Canadian culture and with informal conversational topics that are part of this culture can contribute to participants' experience as outsiders in their work contexts.

Subtle discrimination. Although discrimination against Latin Americans and other minority and immigrant groups is a common theme in the relevant literature, none of the interviewees explicitly mentioned discrimination as a challenge. However, although the word "discrimination" was never mentioned, 75 percent of the respondents referred either to a general and unspecified sense of differential treatment due to not being Canadian or to the perception of different treatment based on accents or lack of Canadian experience. The following statement is an example of a somewhat vague sense of differential treatment:

[...] when you asked me if there was a difference between Canadians and us, I would say no, but ... now that I think about it, you can tell when you walk into a room and the people looking at you were expecting a Canadian person or a white person or something else ... you can see their face. This happened to me with one head hunter for example, I was meeting her and ... I don't know if it's because of me not being Canadian ... so when I saw her face it was like a puzzle, she was so confused ... I don't know why.

Other interviewees spoke of differential treatments based specifically on their accents. The following excerpt is an example of this:

[...] many employers are hesitant to deal with people with accents. They think ... they feel like they don't have enough knowledge of English ... someone told me that some people think that because you have an accent you think with an accent as well.

Hence, it may often not be the accent itself that prevents Latin American IPs from succeeding in the Canadian labor market, but the unjust assumptions about insufficient language skills or lower performance levels that are associated with accents.

Informants also experienced differential treatment because of a perceived lack of Canadian work experience, even if specific work experience in Canada did not appear to be critical for the particular job. The following quote is an example of this:

[...] the main one (challenge) was the Canadian experience, that's the main one. Almost all the letters that I received from the other banks and other companies was: "Sorry, you don't have Canadian experience" [...]

Thus, while none of the interviewees explicitly referred to discrimination, these accounts of differential treatment may be signs of subtle discrimination as identified in recent research (Esses *et al.*, 2006; Petersen and Dietz, 2005). We will explore reasons for why those incidents may connote discrimination and why respondents may have been hesitant to use the term "discrimination" in the discussion section.

Perceived success factors

In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, several interviewees spoke of the factors that contributed to their success in the Canadian job market. Of the 20 participants 17 were able to find jobs in Canada within six months of graduation, a number that is only slightly lower than the common placement rates (around 90 percent) reported for Canadian MBA programs (Prashad, 2008). Many of those informants attributed their success in finding a job to their immigrant status. The main factors for success that emerged from the interviews were: establishment of homophilious networks and specific aspects of their Latin American origin.

In many cases, the same respondent spoke of both challenges and success factors. For instance, one interviewee believed that the lack of established networks represented a challenge, but felt that being of Latin American origin was a factor that helped him to ultimately find a job.

Homophilious networks. While the lack of existing networks and specific networking skills were perceived as challenges by many participants, ten of the 20 interviewees indicated that their networks of other Latin Americans facilitated their success in the job market. The following is a representative quote referring to the role that personal networks played:

[...] One thing I did was to call my colleague, one of my previous bosses in Venezuela. Just a coincidence, we were not close at all, but she came to Canada half a year before I did, so I contacted her and told her that I needed help and she gave me a bunch of numbers and names of all the people she was working with. Great, great, great organizations [...]

Thus, participants demonstrated awareness that contacts with other Latin Americans were instrumental in helping them to find a job in Canada.

Latin American origin. Interviewees' nationality and culture, described as challenges above, were perceived by 50 percent of the sample as factors aiding success in the job market. Latin American origin contributed to informants' ability to find jobs either through their knowledge of the Latin American context and/or languages or through cultural traits associated with Latin American cultures that were perceived as desirable by employers. Unsurprisingly, knowledge of Latin American cultures and languages was valued by companies with operations in the region. For instance, this interviewee referred to an employing company's need for Latin Americans:

[...] I think they will need people who are going to be inserted in this, because ... a big portion of the revenues of (the organization) comes from the Spanish speaking countries, and you need people who understand the cultures [...]

Participants also felt they benefitted from being perceived to possess certain traits frequently associated with Latin American cultures. They reported that employers would link apparently desirable attributes such as friendliness or straight-forwardness with their Latin American origin. For example, one interviewee affirmed:

[...] I think in terms of our culture that Latin Americans ... we're straight forward, we look people in the eyes ... so I would say that it's easier for us because of the culture [...]

Thus, being Latin American was perceived as a source of advantage in the job market when potential employers were seeking particular Latin American knowledge and skills or were attracted by perceived Latin American cultural traits.

Discussion

The main contribution of this study is the finding that ethnic diversity can simultaneously have positive and negative effects for IPs entering the job market. Specifically, while ethnic diversity may bring about subtle discrimination and negative feelings due to being different, certain cultural traits may also facilitate job acquisition and networks of similar others can provide support in finding a job. In particular, this study's findings regarding the potential advantages and drawbacks of networking in a foreign culture are important insights that extend previous research. Hence, this study contributes to the literature on IPs by pointing to the dual nature of foreignness, highlighting its assets and liabilities. In addition, by studying individuals who received Canadian MBA degrees, this study provides further evidence for the existence of factors that may negatively affect the job search experience of IPs even when they have obtained Canadian training. Thus, it adds important insights to the debate on the importance of local education in enabling the career success of IPs (Fang *et al.*, in press; Wanner, 1998; Zeng and Xie, 2004). Finally, this investigation sheds light onto the experience of Latin American IPs in Canada. To date, this group has not received significant attention, despite its increasing cultural and economic significance in the last five decades (Statistics Canada, 2001).

The perception that Latin Americans may benefit from their cultural background and from certain characteristics associated with it, such as friendliness and straight-forwardness, was an important theme that emerged from the interviews. Effective interpersonal and communication skills are frequently ascribed to Latin Americans, based on the high degree of collectivism (e.g. Hofstede, 1980) and orality (Thatcher, 2001) of their cultures. Thus, the positive treatment Latin Americans receive in response to those perceived characteristics may be seen as a flipside to "negative" discrimination, as it also constitutes differential treatment based on membership to a certain group, but in this case, with positive consequences.

There were also cases in which participants perceived ease in entering the job market because they were hired by an organization that had specific business interests in the Latin American region. While this may be seen as advantageous by these IPs, previous studies reported that when minority members are hired with the specific purpose of advancing links between the organization and their communities, they are placed in niches or "pigeonholes", which ultimately hampers their ability to reach positions of power within their organizations (Collins, 1997; Thomas and Ely, 1996). Because the interviewees in this study had only recently entered the labour market, those hurdles to future career growth may not yet have been visible to them. Therefore, they only perceived the possibility of working for a company that values their cultural knowledge and skills as an advantage. While the investigation of informants' long-term career success is beyond the scope of this study, previous research suggests that assets in entering the labour market may turn into liabilities for long-term career success.

Networks were also seen as potential enablers of IPs' career success. Previous studies have indicated that the relationships that immigrants build with others from the same country or region of origin can help them to find a job (Boyd, 1989; Hagan, 1998). Indeed, many of the participants in the current study recognized this and spoke positively of the help provided to them by other Latin Americans. However, other aspects of networking were perceived as challenges. Specifically, the need to learn to look for jobs the "Canadian way" and build professional networks – sometimes with

high-status, non Latin American contacts – was seen as demanding and difficult. These perceptions support and extend previous findings, according to which minorities tend to have lower-status and less useful networks (Friedman and Krackhardt, 1997; Ibarra, 1993), in part because they lack knowledge about networking according to the ways of the local and dominant corporate world (Nkomo, 1992).

While none of the study's informants explicitly spoke of discrimination, they did describe differential treatment based on their ethnic membership, such as when they sensed that employers hesitated to hire them due to their accents or lack of Canadian experience. Such behaviour may point to the existence of subtle discrimination against Latin Americans in the Canadian labour market. Considering that subtly prejudiced individuals tend to use plausible rationales to justify discriminatory actions (Esses *et al.*, 2006; Petersen and Dietz, 2005), the perception of subtle signs of discrimination may be reflective of mechanisms used by employers to hide prejudices.

For instance, some participants reported experiencing difficulties in entering the Canadian job market not only because of their lack of fluency in English, but because of their non-Canadian accents. Although having a foreign accent may be a valid reason for not hiring an applicant in some specific occupations, accents do not have a negative impact on performance in most occupations (Scassa, 1994). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that individuals with non-majority accents are frequently rated lower on criteria related to aptitude, intelligence, and social status (Carlson and McHenry, 2006). Thus, judgements based on accents alone may indicate a form of differential treatment that does not take into account job-relevant skills and characteristics (Creese and Kambere, 2003; Esses *et al.*, 2006; Oliveri, 2009; Purkiss *et al.*, 2006).

Moreover, several interviewees mentioned the lack of Canadian work experience as one of the reasons given by employers not to hire them. In many cases, having Canadian experience may be relevant to the job at hand as an indicator of cultural fit or knowledge that is specific and difficult to acquire (Esses *et al.*, 2006). However, the requirement of Canadian work experience has also been identified as a mechanism for employers with subtle prejudices to rationally justify not hiring immigrants (Bauder, 2003; Esses *et al.*, 2006; Nwosu, 2006; Ralston, 1998).

The personal accounts in this study provide at least some evidence for the perception of differential treatment based on membership to ethnic groups. Yet none of the respondents explicitly used the term discrimination to describe their experiences. It is possible that discrimination as defined by Brown (1995) did not occur. It is also possible that the participants did not experience the differential treatment as discrimination. Research suggests that individuals may use cognitive buffers or blinders to deal with the negative effects of discrimination. Hence, the participants may have minimized their accounts of perceived discrimination in order to avoid facing social rejection (Goldman *et al.*, 2006), or in an attempt to increase their feeling of control over their lives (Crocker and Major, 1994). Another possibility for the absence of the term "discrimination" in these interviews is the apparent career success of most informants at the time of the interview. Overall, 17 of the 20 participants had found jobs in their chosen fields less than six months after graduating from their MBA program, which may have coloured their subjective experience of the events. Thus, although they admitted to having faced challenges and differential treatment, the outcome in the job-hunting process was mostly positive and a word as strong as discrimination may have been perceived as inappropriate in the face of this success.

Practical implications

Several findings of this study carry implications that could potentially impact immigrants' successful integration into the Canadian job market. First of all, the difficulties that participants expressed regarding the need to network "as Canadians" and form ties with high-status Canadians as a means to find a job can be a serious drawback, especially according to an assimilationist point of view. This perspective espouses that minorities should try to develop networks similar to those of dominant groups in order to be successful (Bhagat and London, 1999; Thomas, 1993). However, it is also possible to adopt a different, pluralist perspective, according to which immigrants should develop networks that are different from those of the dominant group in order to achieve similar results (Ibarra, 1995). According to this perspective, both homophilious ties with other Latin Americans and contacts with members of the dominant group are important in order to obtain career success. The former would not only provide support (Lin, 1982; Woolcock, 1998), but would also allow IPs to learn from each other about strategies for success (Boyd, 1989; Hagan, 1998). The latter would help them be effective in a Canadian-dominated context (Ibarra, 1995).

The findings from this exploratory study show signs of potential subtle discrimination toward IPs in the labour market. However, participants in this study did not explicitly recognize themselves as being discriminated against. Embracing a radical-humanist perspective (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), one might argue that it is important that immigrants become aware of these hurdles in order to resist discriminatory practices. Yet, it might be just as beneficial – and perhaps more so – if Latin American immigrants were encouraged to take on different, unique routes and thus "dodge" barriers such as discrimination, as an alternative to openly and collectively resisting it or accepting the status quo by attempting to emulate their Canadian peers. This alternative would encourage IPs to find specific sources of competitive advantage not held by Canadians in order to achieve professional success. The IPs interviewed in this study offered appealing suggestions of how to accomplish this, mainly by focusing on creating and maintaining both high status and homophilious networks and by looking for work at organizations where their nationality and culture is especially valued. Further, as migration and global business rise in magnitude and importance, the value of such differentiating characteristics in a global market may also increase, leading such a differentiation strategy to be even more beneficial and feasible.

Limitations and opportunities for future studies

This study has shed light on the experience of Latin American IPs entering the Canadian workforce. However, it should be noted that this sample group is one that – challenges or no challenges – has achieved a certain degree of success in the Canadian job market, with the majority being employed in their fields of choice only six months after finishing their MBAs. Thus, future studies may examine the perceptions and experiences of Latin American IPs who did not find jobs in their desired field after finishing their MBAs and perhaps for this reason return to their countries of origin.

Another limitation to the present study is that because we applied a snowball sampling technique, it is feasible that many of the participants belong to the same network. Hence, it is possible that some of the comments are specific to this particular network and do not apply to the population of Latin American IPs. Yet, despite the use

of snowball sampling, respondents were from different MBA programs, graduated in different years and did not all know each other. Future research may be able to cast a wider web of IPs from Latin America and perhaps other regions to avoid the potential of selection effects. Moreover, future studies may further this research by increasing the size of this sample, thus adding to the confidence of the findings.

Furthermore, this study does not examine the long-term career success of Latin American IPs. The factors that influence hiring decisions may be quite different from those in place as they attempt to climb the corporate ladder in Canada. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to track the career trajectories of Latin American IPs in Canada over time, in order to identify the unique challenges they experience and the strategies they employ. For instance, it is possible that a phenomenon similar to the "glass ceiling" occurs in this and other populations. In fact, previous research indicated that a perceived glass ceiling effect is present among Latin American immigrants (Foley *et al.*, 2002) and is, hence, a meaningful research topic.

Finally, an expansion of this research to MBAs of other nationalities would be desirable to analyze whether the perceptions expressed in this study are specific to Latin Americans or generic to international MBA graduates in Canada. If the latter case were true, such research could motivate new approaches of Canadian MBA programs towards their students and may eventually influence Canadian policy towards IPs.

Conclusion

This exploratory study addressed the simultaneous barriers and paths to success that Latin American IPs face when entering the Canadian labour market. In particular, the study's findings indicate that the ethnic backgrounds of Latin American IPs can simultaneously bring about advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, being Latin American may lead to successful job acquisition when organizations value specific cultural characteristics. On the other hand, the same ethnic traits can also create barriers to entry into the Canadian labour market, in particular by leading immigrants to feel alienated in the Canadian work context or to experience discrimination. We found that networks can either help or hinder IPs labour market entrance. More specifically, investments in network ties with other Latin Americans can provide assistance and support in finding a job, while lack of knowledge of high-status Canadians and lack of Canada specific networking skills may diminish their ability to find a job. Finally, this study demonstrated that even when IPs have high-level Canadian accreditations, they still experience various hurdles when looking for employment in Canada. Thus, the evidence presented here suggests that future analysis of the experience of IPs should go beyond discussions on the devaluation of foreign skills in order to capture the true range of issues affecting this population.

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Appendix. Interview guide

I. Background

- (1) What is your country of origin?
- (2) Are you a landed immigrant?
- (3) How long have you been in Canada?
- (4) Tell me about your academic and professional background.
- (5) What were your professional expectations when you first came to Canada?

II. Entrance to job market

- (1) What were your professional goals and expectations when you finished your MBA?
- (2) How long did it take for you to find your first job after finishing your MBA?
- (3) What was the process of job hunting like (include experiences coordinated by your school's Career Center and opportunities that you pursued on your own)?
- (4) What were the greatest challenges you faced when job hunting?

III. Current status (for those currently working in Canada)

- (1) What is your current position?
- (2) How long have you been in this position/company?
- (3) In your opinion, how are your prospects for professional advancement in your current company? Why?
- (4) What are the greatest challenges you faced or are facing in your current company?
- (5) Do you intend to stay at your current company in the long term?

IV. Further reflections

- (1) In hindsight, how do you see your experience of entering the job market in comparison to Canadians in your graduating MBA class? Please provide an example.
- (2) How do you perceive your chances for professional advancement if compared to Canadians in a similar role as yours? Please provide an example
- (3) If considering only professional aspects, do you intend to stay in Canada?
- (4) Is there anything else you would like to add?

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