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Career decisions of immigrants: Role of identity and social embeddedness

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of individuals who leave their nation of origin and immigrate to live in other nations. The acculturation literature has noted several issues immigrants face in their host nation. Amongst these, establishing a career is of considerable importance. However, existing career theories have been criticized for their failure to identify the antecedents and explain the mechanism which underlies immigrants' career decision making. Importantly, these theories ignore the role of social identity in this process. To this end, this paper develops an identity-centric framework to explain the manner in which immigrants' social identity influences their career decisions and provides an understanding of the psychological, sociological and cognitive mechanism that underlies this process.

1. Introduction

The past few decades have seen an upsurge in the number of individuals who leave their nation of origin (hereafter ethnic) and migrate to live in other nations (hereafter host). For instance, by the year 2015, nearly 14% of the United States (U.S.) population comprised immigrants (U.S. Census, 2015). Corresponding figures for Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany and Saudi Arabia were 28%, 21%, 13%, 12% and 32% respectively (MPI, 2015). On a global level, there are nearly 244 million migrants (OECD, 2015). Scholars in the acculturation stream of research have noted several issues that immigrants and their children face in adjusting to the host nation. Amongst these, establishing a career is of considerable importance, as it not only offers economic stability to these individuals, but also impacts their psychological well-being and socio-cultural adaptation (Bhagat & London, 1999; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008). For these reasons, several studies (e.g., Algan, Dustmann, Glit, & Manning, 2010; Ceric & Crawford, 2016; Fang, Zikic, & Novicevic, 2009; Ma & Yeh, 2010; Schultheiss & Davis, 2015; Valdivia & Flores, 2012) have emphasized understanding the career-related issues of immigrants.

A review of the immigrant occupation literature suggests that immigrants pursue different forms of career (entrepreneurship versus employment) in different market segments (ethnic versus mainstream) within their host nation. Various theories (e.g., the disadvantage theory, blocked mobility hypothesis, culture theory, enclave hypothesis, human capital theory) have been advanced to explain the factors that influence their decision to pursue these career choices (See brief overview of some major theories in Table 1). Even though these micro and macro-level perspectives have contributed to our understanding of immigrants' career decisions, these have also been criticized (Al Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin, & Suutari, 2012; Fang et al., 2009; Leong, 2014; Shinnar, 2007) for presenting only isolated accounts of the structural and personal factors that underlie immigrants' careers. Importantly, these ignore the role of social identity (Tajfel, 2010) in this process. Understanding this, however, is important as social identity is a critical factor that influences

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Table 1
Summary of major theoretical perspectives about immigrant career decisions.

| Theory | Explanatory mechanism | Example studies |
|--|--|---|
| Macro-level theoretical perspectives | | |
| Structural/institutional theories | National and regional institutions impose structural constraints (e.g., requirements to comply with regulations, policies, etc.) that affect immigrants career in the host nation | Al Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin, and Suutari (2012); Al Ariss, Koall, Özbilgin, et al. (2012); Hosoda, Nguyen, and Stone-Romero (2012) |
| Social dominance, social discrimination, theories of social stigmatization | Host societies consider themselves as superior. Social comparison leads to in-group favoritism. While increasing self-esteem of host society members, this increases discrimination for immigrants and influences their career decisions. The theory also explains preferential treatment of some immigrant group over others. | Coates and Carr (2005); Hosoda et al. (2012); Huang, Frideger, and Pearce (2013); Stone-Romero and Stone (2007) |
| Culture theory | Values, beliefs, norms, etc. that are dominant within a particular society influences the career decisions and choices its members make. Thus, immigrants from different cultural background may display preference for certain categories of occupations. | de Vries (2012); Ma and Yeh (2010); Ogbu and Simons (1998); Shinnar (2007); Stone and Stone-Romero (2008) |
| Economic theories | The supply and demand of immigrants (and different immigrant types) influences their career in the host nation. | Constant and Massey (2002); Massey et al. (1993); Portes and Zhou (1992) |
| Micro-level theoretical perspectives | | |
| Blocked mobility/disadvantage theory | Immigrants face limitations to pursue different occupations in the host nation due to their language, educational credentials, name, race, religion, etc. | Al Ariss and Sidani (2016); Clark and Drinkwater (2000); Cotton, O'Neill, and Griffin (2014); Raijman and Tienda (2000a, 2000b) |
| Human capital theory | Experiential capital, training, knowledge, skills and capabilities that immigrants acquire in the home and host nation influence their career in the host nation | Dietz et al. (2015); Fang et al. (2009); Kanas and Van Tubergen (2009) |
| Acculturation perspective | Immigrants' adaptation to the host society (incorporating its values, speaking its language, etc.) and its attractiveness is said to impact their career. | Leong and Tang (2016); Miranda and Umhoefer (1998); Yakushko et al. (2008) |
| Attitudinal theories | Differences amongst immigrants in their socio-economic status, immigration status, education level, functional capabilities, etc. influence the extent to which they gain receptiveness and acceptance from the host society members and its organizations. This tends to impact their career in the host nation. | Binggeli et al. (2013); Crowley-Henry, O'Connor, and Al Ariss (2016); Crowley, Lichter, and Qian (2006); Stewart and Mulvey (2014); Stone-Romero and Stone (2007) |

an individual's decisions and behaviors (Jenkins, 2014). Akerlof and Kranton (2010) state: “*Identity, norms and categories may appear to be abstract, but their reality is both powerful and easy to see*” (p. 11). Humlum, Kleinjans, and Nielsen (2012) specifically emphasized the importance of identity for career decision making by stating that “*identity issues are as important to career choices as ability variables* (p. 39).”

As immigrants often experience social and cultural dissonance in the host nation (Berry, 1997; Sirin, Ryce, Gupta, & Rogers-Sirin, 2013), the meaningfulness of collective or group-based identity increases for them. Not only does it serve as a means to cope with social and discriminatory pressures, but it also enables them to maintain self-continuity, gain self-esteem and seek belongingness to others in the host society (Carpentier & de la Sablonnière, 2013; Crisp & Turner, 2011). Given the importance of social identity in immigrants' social and psychological existence, it becomes critical to analyze its role in their career decisions (Fassinger, 2001; Fouad et al., 2008; Leong, 2014; Samnani, Boekhorst, & Harrison, 2012; Shinnar, 2007). This study develops a process-oriented conceptual framework to understand the role of social identity in immigrants' career decision making (Fig. 1).

Based on previous studies (e.g., Akerlof & Kranton, 2010; Dietz, Joshi, Esses, Hamilton, & Gabarrot, 2015; Obschonka, Goethner, Silbereisen, & Cantner, 2012) and models of career decision making (e.g., Blustein & Noumair, 1996; Gottfredson, 2002; Savickas, 2002; Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002), we argue that social identity will influence immigrants' career decisions. In elucidating the Identity-career Decisions relationship, we elaborate on the mediating role of social embeddedness-social flexibility. The first link in this mediation is supported by insights from social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Hogg & Mullin, 1999) and network theory (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Lin, 2008) literatures, which suggest that social identity shapes immigrants' embeddedness and flexibility in different social groups. Concerning the second link, the embeddedness perspective (Granovetter, 1985) suggests that social ties provide material, social and cognitive resources to individuals, thus shaping their decisions and behaviors. We complement this outlook by highlighting the role of social flexibility, which accentuates the coercing pressure of social boundaries that immigrants experience as members of different social groups (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993). Our focus on the embeddedness-flexibility duality underscores the importance of social interdependence on immigrants' career decisions (Blustein & Noumair, 1996) and deepens our knowledge of the process by which social identity encourages and constrains them to pursue certain careers over others in the host nation.

Finally, we highlight the role of two moderators in our conceptual framework. First is the societal structural orientation. Consistent with behavioral theories, which consider behavior to be the result of both personal and contextual factors (Bandura, 1991;

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