

Finding Employment: The Experiences of Ghanaian Male Immigrants in Canada

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Canada continues to attract skilled labour from all over the world. My personal story about my struggles as an immigrant to Canada led me to further explore the experiences of Ghanaian men in Canada, looking for professional work. This study attempted to showcase the narrative of employment through the lens of Ghanaian male immigrants. The men in this study all had a minimum educational qualification of a university degree. The goal of the study was to give voice to Ghanaian males who have immigrated to Canada within the last two years and their experiences of seeking and securing employment. I used a narrative inquiry methodology to capture the stories and experiences of the participants through semi-structured interviews. Analysis focused on identifying recurring themes or patterns that appeared through the interviews. In the study I discussed the hurdles they encountered as immigrants and the support system that assisted them in settling down in the country as they sought to find jobs. The findings included hope, optimism, and belief in their new country. The study proposed changes and improvements for immigration reform for skilled immigrants. The study adds perspectives from immigrant men of colour to assist immigration policymaking in Canada.

Key words: Employment; immigrants; Ghanaian men; experience; narrative inquiry

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Canada attracts immigrants from all over the world (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2019). Since the early 1970s, the average employment earnings of immigrants have declined steadily compared to those of Canadian-born workers (Kustec, 2012; Picot, 2008). Immigrants typically resort to doing menial jobs to survive—working in lower-level positions relative to employment they would be taking up in their home countries (Nakhaie & Kazemipur, 2013). Several reasons account for this trend. They include discrimination (Dechief & Oreopoulos, 2012); lack of recognition of foreign credentials and work experience in source countries (Ferrer & Riddell, 2008); and a growing and competitive labour market seeking highly educated Canadians (Picot, 2008). In this study, I sought to understand the challenges Ghanaian male immigrants faced when looking for employment.

Methodology

I employed a narrative inquiry approach to explore the stories Ghanaian men live and tell daily as immigrants to Canada. The choice of narrative inquiry as a methodology is ideal for “capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of the lives of a small number of individuals”

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(Creswell, 2014, p. 55). My perspective as a Ghanaian male immigrant increased my curiosity to learn more about the experiences of other Ghanaian male immigrants. These stories show the confluence of social influences on a person's life, environment, and history (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). I interviewed five Ghanaian men in western Canada. My participants were university graduates who held stable jobs as professionals before immigrating to Canada. They had worked full-time for a minimum of three years in Ghana before immigrating to Canada to seek new opportunities.

Methods

This principal focus of the research was guided by the key question that inquired about the challenges and opportunities experienced as Ghanaian male immigrants to Canada. I audio-recorded one-on-one semi-structured interviews and asked a range of questions including the type of work they did before immigrating to Canada, the reasons they chose to immigrate to Canada, and significant moments and experiences they encountered in Canada. I analyzed the audio-transcriptions for recurring categories and themes (Hendricks, 2012). I also referenced my notes and compared them to the interview data. The emerging themes from my study became the building blocks of my research. I employed a coding process to systemically categorize and reduce the codes to a workable number of themes. I aligned the final themes to answer my research questions (Bui, 2013).

Findings

The findings were based on the dialogues, stories, and experiences shared by my research participants during the interviews, which were revealing, insightful, and thought-provoking. The pivotal path to finding jobs was a theme that emerged from the study. The first task as a male immigrant—from a Ghanaian *cultural norm*, where men are seen as the head of the family—is to get a job, take care of one's family, and pay the bills. The participants were all highly skilled and finding a job in their area of expertise was crucial to their success in securing employment, being financially stable, and taking care of their families. Networking, mentorship, having a Canadian education, volunteering, and internships all played important roles in their quest to find jobs. It is worth mentioning some of the salient phrases and words that are exemplars of the path-to-jobs theme. Among a select few are “who you know,” “getting into the mind of the employer,” “overqualified,” and “networking.” The literature that supports the challenge of job searching for immigrants can be found in works on immigrant labour market integration (Li, 2008; Nakhaie & Kazemipur, 2013).

This study examined the influence of immigrants' economic experiences on the degree of their attachment to Canada, as well as the nature of the interaction between immigrants and the host society. When such interactions are pleasant and consistent with immigrants' expectations, the final outcome is a strong sense of attachment to the host society. This study raises new questions as to how roadblocks to seeking jobs can be reduced and how integrating immigrants into the Canadian workforce can be made easier, so that skilled arrivals can contribute their quota to the Canadian economy. This can be achieved by more government participation in the integration process of new immigrants, such as offering employers and organizations tax incentives to employ highly trained immigrants (Otoo, 2018). Skilled immigrants are here to contribute their quota and help to build Canada. They possess knowledge, expertise, and experience, and did not come with the intention of being dependent on the social system. These trained immigrants want decent jobs and want to see themselves as fully fledged members of

Canadian society, who are contributing their quota to the country they have chosen to live in. It should not be too much of a challenge for employers to harness what these educated immigrants have to offer. Most of them speak English, French, or even both languages. The caveat for an incentive approach is that if it is not well implemented and monitored, it may lead to potential abuse by employers, and the whole purpose can be defeated. Abuse could take the form of employers hiring immigrants just for the tax exemption, and then letting them go. Employment could be possibly tied to a retention policy for the tax incentive effectively take place.

Another finding was that the lack of Canadian work experience impacted the immigrant's abilities to find a job. As one participant put it:

But then again, I spoke to some few colleagues, spoke to some few agencies, and pretty much I lacked the Canadian experience, so to speak. I think that working at some of Canadian retail stores—for example, I worked in [local store] as an overnight support manager. And then I worked in [local store]. So, if you have all these on your resume, employers tend to kind of pay attention to some of these things, like, “Hey, you’ve had pretty much very good interactions with the Canadian society,” and then it pretty much helps out.

The road to finding a job was fraught with many challenges and difficulties for the participants. Some of the challenges involved the non- recognition of foreign credentials. One participant put it this way:

Well, again, one of the challenges for immigrants is, even your type of education and degree being accepted in a system, they have a required system where they check your records. Done that. And since I studied in a developed country, yeah, so I knew that my degrees, education should be accepted here.

This participant had a doctorate degree from Germany, but still struggled to find employment.

Nevertheless, almost all participants found meaningful work at some point in their job search through networking and volunteering. One participant addressed how this helped him find employment:

They have this networking program that they used to do. Yeah. I think they did that once every month. So yeah. I was attending that every single month to get networks, and also try to see if that can help me at least get a job. Yeah, so. Eventually, like I said, through the mentorship program, that’s why I got through. I got an interview for a job.

Although the work was meaningful and was somewhat related to their prior experience, almost all the participants had to start from entry level positions within their given fields. One of the participants highlighted employment discrimination and believed that some jobs were reserved solely for Canadian-born citizens.

The findings from this research regarding the non-recognition of academic credentials acquired outside of Canada, the lack of job opportunities for immigrants, and the need for Canadian experience situates my study within existing literature and confirms the work of various scholars (Buzdugan & Halli, 2009; Creese & Wiebe, 2012). All the interviewees experienced these personal and social challenges as immigrants to Canada. They were dismayed to find out that employers did not recognize their qualifications. Four out of the five participants had to do other forms of ancillary courses, ranging from certificate courses to postgraduate diplomas so that prospective employers could see that they had some Canadian education.

Limitations and Future Direction

My own biases as a researcher stem from the fact that I am also a skilled and internationally trained Ghanaian immigrant. As a researcher, it is important to identify and

acknowledge my biases (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015). According to Czarniawska (2011), the limitation of narrative inquiry as a research methodology is the differing capacity and interest by people in relation to storytelling. A qualitative case study as a methodology also offers an opportunity to address similar research questions.

One area for potential future research is related to the experiences of internationally trained women of colour who immigrate to Canada. I see merit in extending research to understand the perspectives of these women; in particular (a) how have their gender and colour aided or hindered them in finding meaningful work, and (b) how have they coped with or without family in adjusting to a new country? The study offered a platform for the participants to have a voice in the job search discussion from the perspective of minority men of colour from Africa.

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