

0561

Occupation, Immigration and Integration: Negotiating language, 'race' and gender

Suzanne Huot, Debbie Laliberte-Rudman, Lilian Magalhaes
University of Western Ontario, London, Canada

Introduction: Language is a vital part of culture, enabling social interactions and contributing to identity. As people migrate internationally, their integration and opportunities for occupational engagement are influenced by the fit between their language preferences and capacities and the language demands of their new environments. French is one of Canada's two official languages, but English use predominates. Although immigration policies are being strategically used to attract more French speakers, the predominance of English may present challenges to occupational engagement for French-speaking immigrants.

Objectives: This research explores the intersections of language, race and gender and their implications for occupation and identity among French-speaking immigrants in London, ON, Canada. It addresses how immigrants negotiate changing, often implicit, social rules that make up habitus and negotiate integration into their new environments through occupation. In particular, the impacts of migration upon occupation, and the role of occupation for social integration are emphasized.

Methods: A critical ethnography is currently underway, involving 8 French-speaking immigrants and 6 members of community organizations serving French-speakers. Data collection methods include interviews (narrative and semi-structured), participant observation of routine occupation, and a mapping exercise to gain insight into their spatial mobility. Iterative and emergent analysis will be grounded in antiracist and postcolonial theory.

Results: Data collected to date point to complex intersections between language, race and gender that erect barriers to occupational engagement for minority language speakers. Examples include: withdrawal from the full-time labour market in order to engage in more intensive English language learning and difficulty in obtaining employment, despite fluency in French and English, due to the practice of veiling.

Conclusion: Language intersects with other aspects of culture and identity, and policies on immigration must recognize that fluency in a country's official language alone does not suffice to guarantee successful integration.

Contribution: An understanding of how occupation and identity are interrelated throughout the integration process can inform services that support occupational engagement of immigrants. Occupational therapists can contribute to research, policies and programs that enable more equitable opportunities for occupational engagement among immigrants who face challenges arising from intersections of language, 'race' and gender.