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A Critical Analysis of International Students' Experiences in Using Career Services by Adopting Neo-Racism Theory Analyse critique des expériences des étudiants étrangers quant à l'utilisation des services d'orientation professionnelle en adoptant la théorie du néo-racisme

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Article abstract

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**A Critical Analysis of International Students' Experiences in Using Career Services by
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**Analyse critique des expériences des étudiants étrangers quant à l'utilisation des services
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Abstract

International students frequently encounter difficulties using university career services for their postgraduation career development. University career services provide very little customized and inclusive support for international students coming from different national and cultural backgrounds. By adopting neo-racism theory and drawing on findings in the literature and from my master's thesis, I provide a critical discussion on how this lens can be applied in analyzing international students' challenges in using career resources in the Canadian context. Pragmatically, the paper underscores the need for university career centres to adopt a culturally sensitive approach to support international students' career development.

Résumé

Les étudiants étrangers rencontrent souvent des difficultés dans l'utilisation des services universitaires d'orientation professionnelle pour développer leur carrière après l'obtention de leur diplôme. Les services universitaires d'orientation professionnelle offrent très peu de soutien personnalisé et inclusif aux étudiants internationaux issus de milieux nationaux et culturels différents. En adoptant la théorie du néo-racisme et en m'appuyant sur les conclusions de la littérature et de mon mémoire de maîtrise, je propose une discussion critique sur la manière dont cette optique peut orienter la recherche dans l'analyse des difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants étrangers dans l'utilisation des ressources de carrière dans le contexte canadien. D'un point de vue pragmatique, l'article souligne la nécessité pour les centres d'orientation professionnelle des universités d'adopter une approche sensible aux valeurs culturelles pour soutenir le développement de carrière des étudiants étrangers.

Keywords: international students, career service, neo-racism, culturally sensitive approach

Mots clés : étudiants internationaux, service d'orientation professionnelle, néo-racisme, approche sensible aux valeurs culturelles

This paper critically examines international students' difficulties in using career services from a neo-racism perspective. International students from diverse cultural and national backgrounds often encounter difficulties seeking constructive career guidance and support (Mills & Stefaniak, 2020). They are expected to navigate career services proactively but receive inadequate instructions tailored to their unique needs compared to their domestic peers (Li et al., 2021). Neo-racism theory provides a conceptual framework for discussing how differences in national and cultural background lead to international students' specific challenges in using career services. In this paper, I first discuss the cultural difficulties international students encounter to understand the differences in career services offered in their home countries and in the host countries. I then introduce neo-racism theory and discuss how this framework can contribute to examining the issue by reviewing existing literature and my master's thesis. Finally, I call for a more culturally sensitive approach to support international students' career development.

Background

The postsecondary-level international student population has grown dramatically by 199% from 2015 to 2022, with a current total number of 428,685 students (Government of Canada, 2023). Universities and colleges enroll and cultivate highly qualified international students with specialized knowledge and support them to gain postgraduation work experience (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Scott et al., 2015). The Canadian government aimed to provide opportunities for international students to work after graduation to boost the national labour market.

However, it is essential to acknowledge international graduates' significant contributions to workplaces in terms of economic benefits and diversity of culture and mindsets (Gribble et al., 2017; Reichert, 2020). University career centres have responsibilities for helping international students with their career goals and job applications and for understanding how their intercultural identities are valued in the marketplace.

International Students' Use of University Career Services

Recent literature has pointed out that international students face various challenges in using university career services. Miller and Berkey (2016) reported that international students found university career services useless and not worthwhile. The issue can be attributed to students' lack of awareness of career resources (Mills & Stefaniak, 2020), students' lack of language proficiency (Gribble et al., 2017; Zeltner, 2018), and cultural differences between host countries and international students' home countries (Li et al., 2021).

Regarding cultural differences, Mills and Stefaniak (2020) in their study pointed out that staff at a university career centre lacked intercultural and interpersonal training to support students from different social and cultural backgrounds. International students experiencing cross-cultural transitions often faced more challenges than domestic students in accessing university career services, since the Canadian approach to career development may conflict with international students' cultural values of career (Arthur & Nunes, 2014). In contrast, domestic students in North America found it more natural to use the career counselling service and they asked for tips on their career preparation (Yi et al., 2003; Yoo & Skovholt, 2001).

Neo-Racism Theory

As opposed to racism, which emphasizes discrimination based on biological characteristics, neo-racism "justifies discrimination based on cultural order and stereotypes in that people from certain cultures are discriminated against because they are from countries that are perceived as inferior to

Western countries” (Lee, 2006, p. 4). Neo-racism is built upon the superiority of dominant groups and the marginalization of minority groups from other national or cultural backgrounds. The form of neo-racism is hard to detect or measure since it can vary from direct verbal insult to implicit practice. International students might not be always conscious of neo-racist acts against them if the practice is well hidden in the culture or system of higher education institutions. In the next section, I discuss how previous literature used neo-racism framework to critically examine international students’ specific difficulties in understanding and accessing university career services in the host country.

The Application of Neo-racism in Current Literature

Existing literature has extensively applied neo-racism to discuss discrimination experienced by international students and graduates in general academic and professional commitments. One example is that Chinese international students were confronted with anti-Asian racism in the United States and Canada during COVID-19 due to the criminalization of China as the original place of the virus (Koo et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). In the North American context, the issue of neo-racism against international students was implicitly rooted in White-dominant society due to its settler-colonized history. Dengg (2022) researched how neo-racism is rooted in different treatments of international students based on their race and national background. In Dengg’s study, neo-racism and racism coexisted when the career centre staff thought White German students could speak fluent English and could “best” represent their understanding of international students. Students from non-European national backgrounds were naturally ignored. In another study on academic centre, which shares similarity with the career centre, Squire et al. (2023) found that neo-racist attitudes were pervasive in that academic advisors were “homogenizing international students’ cultural idiosyncrasies, expecting students to assimilate to US culture, and fetishizing students” (p. 7). Current literature has adopted neo-racism in analyzing international students’ experiences on campus. However, little research focused on how the theory can be used to explain international students’ experiences in using career services, especially in the Canadian context. Reflecting on my master’s thesis on international graduate students’ perceptions of their use of career services, I suggest how neo-racism theory can be adopted to fill this gap.

Using Neo-Racism to Examine the Limitations of Career Services

In my master’s thesis research (Jiang, 2023), I interviewed seven international graduate students in STEM, Social Science, and Humanities programs and two senior staff with more than 2 years of work experience from two university career centres at a public university in southern Ontario. The research aimed to analyze students’ experiences in using career services, but not from neo-racism lens. The model of my thesis was based on a synthesis of previous literature findings without investigating issues in career services for international students from a critical lens. By adopting neo-racism theory, I drew on hints from my thesis findings and conceptualized how the theory can be used to examine international students’ challenges in using university career services.

Existing literature found that many international students were unaware of the career services offered on campus (Mills & Stefaniak, 2020; Scott et al., 2015). Career centre’s underlying belief that international students pay more attention to career services that are “culturally acceptable for domestic students” (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, p. 706) is built on a neo-racist assumption of assimilation. The point of assimilation is similar to Squire et al.’s (2023) discussion about how international students were expected by academic advisors to get familiar with American culture such as freedom, rule of law, and family when they arrived in the nation.

Neo-racism existed in the advisors' belief that international students would be included once they had assimilated into the dominant White culture (Squire et al., 2023). Other studies also found similar issue happening at the career centre with low cultural sensitiveness, where career counsellors provided Western, individualism-based career services and neglected the significance of collectivistic factors such as friends and families for international students' career development (Miller & Berkey, 2016; Mills & Stefaniak, 2020; Yang et al., 2002). In my thesis, five out of seven international student participants expressed that they had barely received information about how to use career services to support their career development. However, international students who were already familiar with the university system knew in advance how to use career services. The two out of seven student participants (SP) with years of prior study or work experiences in the United States found it more natural to talk with advisors at the career centre and "relatively comfortable in the Canadian workplaces" (SP 1). These two students revealed that they were assimilated into the North American career service culture before they started their graduate studies. Since my initial thesis design did not focus on discussing neo-racism, my goal is not to claim any neo-racism practices in my previous research. Rather, I hope that future research can dig deeper into phenomena like "unfamiliarity" and "unawareness" of career services and use neo-racism theory to critically analyze how and why international students have these challenges compared to their domestic peers.

Career centre's generalization of career services assumes homogeneity of students' needs in their career development. The delivery of "generalized" career services is another form of neo-racism towards international students, who were previously immersed in cultural settings with notions of "career" and "career development" different from the Canadian context. In previous studies, international students showed limited engagement with university career services but had strong expectations of seeking career support from friends, family, and sources related to their cultural values (Arthur & Nunes, 2014; Li et al., 2021). In my research, most career workshops and one-on-one advising sessions were geared towards the imagined "average" students; while the university had a large population of international students on campus, only one career workshop was designed for international students to build connections with alumni. While international students wished to have more customized services for their cultural background, both career staff participants (CSP) admitted that they "did not intentionally differentiate international and domestic students in most services" (CSP 1 & CSP 2). The homogenization of services legitimizes the "otherness" of international students, and neglects the different demands, experiences, and agencies these minority individuals brought with them from their cultural characteristics (Betancur & Herring, 2013). Future research is needed to examine how neo-racism fits into the rationales for the homogeneity of career services.

Direction for Future Research and Practice

Neo-racism theory emphasizes university career centres' racialized concepts of culture in its career services. International students have diverse cultural perspectives on career development, which cannot be measured by an imagined "average" criterion. My point in this short paper is not to criticize the career services of any individual or institution. What I want to express is that my reflection on my thesis with the application of neo-racism theory can open up an avenue for future research on critically analyzing international students' challenges in seeking university career services.

Doing this work may be challenging, as international participants might not perceive neo-racism. Researchers need to design specific interview questions to understand participants' neo-

racism experiences in using career services, analyze the transcripts, and decide whether and why the experience can be considered as neo-racism.

Pragmatically, the neo-racism framework would be helpful to point out the implicit discrimination towards students from non-European countries and call for the student service staff to integrate comprehensive equity, diversity, and inclusiveness (EDI) training to support students from different cultural and national backgrounds, and to design more culturally sensitive career services.

Conclusion

International students play a pivotal role in Canada's higher education landscape and contribute significantly to its workforce. By reviewing relevant literature and my master's thesis, I discussed the possibility of using the conceptualization of neo-racism as a theoretical lens to design empirical studies to analyze international students' experiences in using career services. By providing students with culturally sensitive career services that take into consideration their different cultural backgrounds, the institution will be able to provide a more diverse environment and cater to students' specific needs in career development.

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