Making Critical Sense of Immigrant Experience

A Case Study of Hong Kong Chinese in Canada

CRITICAL MANAGEMENT STUDIES

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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About the Book

This book showcases a critical sense-making study of how professional immigrants from Hong Kong to Canada make sense of their workplace experiences, and what this can tell us about why a substantial number leave in their first year in Canada. Data show that informants have accepted unchallenged assumptions: (1) that the government is providing help for them to "get in" to the workplace; and (2) that the ethnic service organizations are offering positive guidance to their workplace opportunities. At the organizational level, a master discourse emphasizing integration has mediated immigrants' struggles. Within these frustrations, many have internalized a hidden discourse of inadequate or deficient selves and adopted a sacrificial position to maintain a positive sense of identity.

Racism exists at both the systemic and personal level for professional immigrants moving from Hong Kong to Canada. However, many immigrants are unaware of the ways their assumptions may be informed by racism; hence, they may accept unequal practices as "normal." Although contextual elements are powerful, some immigrants have developed strategies at the micro-level to resist.

The study concludes that a critical sense-making approach allows a greater insight into immigration processes than realist surveys, which tend to impose a pre-packaged sense of the immigrant experience. Through critical sense-making, readers are encouraged to rethink the current role of ethnic service organizations in the immigration system.

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Preface

The motivation for this book is twofold. First, this book is intended to give voice to immigrants. The second motivation lies in my own frustrating experience as a doctoral student when the research method that I wanted to use was supported by few publications in the scholarly literature. Even where I found those publications helpful, the methodological details were usually too concise (due to the limitations on length in a journal article) and thus it was difficult to figure out how Critical Sensemaking worked in practice.

This book was written to fill this gap in the literature. I have written with a broad audience in mind: doctoral or graduate students who are searching a methodology to fit their philosophical positions; academics who are updating their course readings in qualitative research method courses even if they do not intend to use such methods themselves (Chapters 1−4 and the Epilogue); seasoned researchers who are turning to Critical Sensemaking to complement other modes of inquiry; practitioners who are interested in hearing the voices and reflections of immigrants and potentially rethinking their current roles in the immigration system (Chapters 5−8); and finally policy makers who want to gain an in-depth understanding and create sustainable solutions that realist survey methods cannot offer (Chapters 5−8). Additionally, this book may be of interest to scholars in diversity management, identity work, and social studies.

Like all academic work, this book only exists because of the help and creative insights of many people. The first and most important acknowledgment is to Dr. Albert J. Mills of Saint Mary's University, the series editor, who has dedicated years of commitment to critical scholarship and has encouraged me to publish this book. I would also like to thank the Emerald publisher, John Stuart, and the four anonymous reviewers for their time and effort in reading and commenting on the book proposal. Their invaluable feedback has strengthened the frame of the book.

Introduction

In this latest book in the Critical Management Studies series, Rosalie Hilde contributes to our understanding of the interplay between the individual, the structures, and the discourses that serve to construct a sense of the "immigrant".

Drawing on and developing the method of Critical Sensemaking (CSM), Hilde explores the hitherto neglected experiences of the individual "immigrant." In particular, she is interested in exploring the sensemaking processes of people who immigrate to a culturally different country − in this case, Hong Kong Chinese immigrants to Canada.

As a Hong Kong Chinese immigrant herself, Rosalie Hilde reveals her interests and concerns about a community in Canada that has experienced a high rate of attrition, with large numbers returning to Hong Kong a short time after their initial experiences of being in Canada. One of her concerns is to bring to the surface the hitherto neglected voices of the immigrant while, at the same time, provide understanding of the influences on the sense of the immigrant experience.

Through Critical Sensemaking Rosalie Hilde sets out to develop a method for understanding the relationship between the cognitive, structural, discursive, and formative contexts in which sensemaking occurs. In so doing, she shows us the strengths and challenges of applying CSM in making sense of the immigrant experience. Along the way, she takes us to a world of challenges, stresses, discouragement but also optimism as she talks to immigrants about their various experiences, ways of making sense of those experiences, and the contextual influences involved. The result is a complex series of insights that provide a novel understanding of the immigrant experience of non-Western immigrants to Canada.

Hilde's approach draws attention to the role of context and its impact of the various sensemaking interrelationships between and within that context. Importantly, through a focus on the specific contextual aspects of Hong Kong Chinese immigrants in

Canada, Hilde encourages researchers to take a more nuanced approach to the "immigrant experience" in context. As such, it will be of interest to those searching to move beyond purely structural and uniform ways of understanding the problems and challenges of immigration policy.

Albert J. Mills

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Introduction and Outline

1.1. An Overview of Contemporary Immigrant Issues

Immigration seems to be making more headlines in recent years. Europe is experiencing one of the most significant influxes of migrants and refugees in its history. Pushed by civil war and terror, and pulled by the promise of a better life, huge numbers of people have fled the Middle East and Africa for Europe, risking their lives along the way. International communities and Western policy makers are confronted with an uncomfortable new reality (Papademetriou & Fratzke, 2016). They need new ideas to manage mixed flows and create sustainable long-term solutions for refugees and asylum-seekers.

Among all this discussion, US President Donald Trump's immigration policy and executive orders (in which he characterizes immigrants and refugees as threats) have generated the most rhetoric and debate. On January 27, 2017, President Trump signed an executive order that indefinitely suspends the resettlement of Syrian refugees, pauses the overall refugee resettlement program, and temporarily bars noncitizens from seven majority-Muslim nations from entering the United States. The "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States" executive order has been the subject of numerous legal challenges. Even though it has been suspended, migrants have lost trust in the United States, and thus some immigrants

made their icy crossing into Canada during the snowy winter of 2017 (Porter, Levin, & Austen, 2017).

Obtaining citizenship and integrating into Canadian society may not be easy, however. Recently, Bill C-24 gave the Canadian government greater powers to revoke citizenship (Dyer, 2016). Immigration often makes visible deep-rooted issues of racial discrimination, white supremacy, workplace inequality (exploitation), and xenophobia. Immigrants are trapped in the middle of these battles.

Preserving the capacity to accept more newcomers requires governments to not only make extensive investments in integrating those who have already arrived, but also demonstrate the effectiveness of these efforts to nervous voters. If the public perceives that recent arrivals are developing behaviors that lead to long-term dependence (Schmidt-Catrana & Spiesa, 2016), are unwilling to play by the rules of receiving societies, or are becoming socially or culturally isolated or harmful, the willingness to take in additional refugees and migrants can fade rapidly. In addition, negative publicity about criminal acts committed by immigrants is demonizing their image in society. The chaotic way newcomers have entered receiving nations and their sheer numbers, together with their religious and cultural composition, are fueling growing anxieties among many citizens. Meanwhile, other citizens have organized to welcome newcomers and demand that governments meet both the letter and spirit of their humanitarian obligations. Validating and maintaining the integrity of the migration system — in large part by returning those whose claims have been determined to be unfounded — is critical to safeguarding both citizens and immigrants. Integration of immigrants is easier said than done.

The key challenge is to facilitate the smooth integration of newcomers — whether economic migrants or refugees. No doubt, there will be hardship and difficulties at the outset, whether logistical, fiscal, or political, but these need to be weighed against the benefits that accrue over the medium to longer term, if the integration process is working properly (Lagarde, 2015). This book aims to provide a different perspective on that process by giving a critical voice to immigrants through their subjective experiences. Through a lens of Critical Sensemaking (CSM) theory, practitioners, policy makers, and other stakeholders can more easily understand the hurdles faced by immigrants and perhaps create sustainable solutions for the issues.

1.2. Introduction to the Study

This research study investigates immigrants' workplace experiences in Canada; more specifically, it focuses on Hong Kong Chinese skilled worker immigrants who have come (through an application process) to Canada with the purpose of entering the workforce. The government calls them economic and skilled worker immigrants, implying that they are *contributors* to the Canadian economy. Immigration policy, then, is "working," but in what way and at whose cost?

The study has been triggered by questions about immigrants' relative lack of "success" in employment settlement in Canada (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007). For example, why is there such a high return rate among visible minority[1] economic and skilled immigrants? (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006). Twenty percent of working age men (aged 25−45) leave Canada within the first year of arrival (Statistics Canada, 2006). Compared to immigrants from all other regions, male Hong Kong immigrants aged 25−45 have the lowest retention rate: about half of them leave within 10 years of arrival in Canada (Aydemir & Robinson, 2006). Why do they leave? There is substantial evidence showing that recent immigrants have had difficulties entering the Canadian labor market or obtaining earnings equal to those of native-born Canadian despite their higher qualifications (Galarneau & Morissette, 2008; Grant, 2008; McMahon, 2013; Paperny, 2014; Reitz, 2007; Reitz & Banerjee, 2007; Syed, 2014; Yssaad, 2012). Why and how are some immigrants more "successful" than others in their experience of Canadian workplace opportunities? Why do visible minority immigrants from the same region (e.g., Hong Kong) not all face the same sets of constraints (or discrimination)? Are they not imprinted with the same class, same race, and same ethnic background? I am particularly interested in this phenomenon among those who have obtained adequate credentials[2]

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[1]The term *visible minority* is used to define racialized "non-White" people in Canada (Abella, 1984, p. 46).
[2]What is considered *adequate credentials* can vary depending on the intended occupations of informants. I am interested in people who have some post-secondary education, such as master's degrees or bachelor's degrees, and who are pursuing non-regulated professional designations (such as office managers). Further sample requirements will be explained in Chapter 4.

and are proficient in English, since the inability to speak English and lack of credentials seem to be the most frequently mentioned barriers to immigrant "success" in accessing their intended occupations and obtaining appropriate earnings (Al-Waqfi & Jain, 2006; Grant, 2008; Grenier & Xue, 2011; Yoshida & Smith, 2005).

Answers to these questions have traditionally been framed in workplace studies from a structural perspective (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007), with a focus on the outcome of systemic discrimination and its embeddedness within the structures of workplace practices (Abella, 1984; Agócs, 2002; Guo & DeVoretz, 2006; Jain & Kanungo, 1977; Ng & Burke, 2010) and cultures (Agocs, Jain, & Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2001). Nevertheless, these answers have never been able to alleviate the suffering of immigrants. These deep-rooted issues are common in many Western economies. For instance, American researchers long ago laid the foundation for research on immigrants and discrimination from the perspective of economic exploitation (Bonacich's, 1972, dual/split labor market theory; Reich, Gordon, & Edwards's, 1973, labor market segmentation theory). In addition, the pioneer work of Thomas and Znaniecki (1984) has revealed the unequal situation of Polish immigrants in Europe and America. Nonetheless, Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng (1994) argue that economic exploitation is less a concern for "new" Asian immigrants, who differ in many ways from those who arrived prior to World War Two. This study asks the question, "Does this phenomenon remain?"

Indeed, over the past 30 years much of the debate about equality at work in Canada has been framed by the structural systemic approach of the Abella Commission Report (1984), which has influenced the way Canadian researchers have focused on the visible minority immigrant experience at work (Mighty, 1997; Reitz, 2001; Reitz & Banerjee, 2007; Reitz, Curtis, & Elrick, 2014). As valuable as these approaches have undoubtedly been and continue to be, they miss, I will argue, two important elements that can provide us with crucial insights into the immigrant experience, namely, the *reflections* and the *voices* of the immigrants themselves.

To understand immigrant experiences in the Canadian workplace, we need to know not only how the thinking of dominant established institutions is translated into systemic thinking and practices (e.g., policies or practices that are part of the normal operation of employment and immigration systems) but also what sense immigrants make of the structures and processes they confront — their reflections. We not only need to understand

how dominant systems have contributed to the identity work of the immigrant, but also need to hear and understand the voices of the immigrants themselves, who struggle within these situations. What are the *senses* (understandings) they have made of their situations?

Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural hegemony helps partially explain how and why dominant groups continue to exercise influence over the subordinate majority through cultural understanding. A political element or world view that is maintained by dominant groups continually works against the interests of the subordinate majority. Gramsci argues that, through cultural hegemony, the mass media, governments, and other dominant elites can popularize world views and practices that sustain the population's acceptance of certain ideologies. In this way, power is exercised not so much through coercion but through consensual and contested processes (Grandy, 2007; Ives, 2004).

In a similar vein, Foucauldian discourse considers how a world view is constructed as knowledge through which people draw their "soft" power (Foucault, 1979, 1980). In Foucault's view, power in modernity mostly operates through knowledge and the seemingly gentle means of guiding and defining understanding (i.e., it works as a guiding force), and it exists at all levels. By examining discourse, Foucault exposes the ways power works and reveals how individuals accept and buy into institutionalized practices. In this way, Foucault's genealogical studies of discourse provide a way to detect how immigrants come to act within and resist institutionalized power.

To tackle some of these complex issues differently, this study describes and analyzes the "sensemaking" processes (Weick, 1995, 2001) of first-generation Hong Kong Chinese immigrants to Canada in relation to their workplace opportunities. The concept of sensemaking developed by Weick (1995) means "the making of sense" (p. 4) and is an "ethnomethodology of organizing" (Mills, 2008, p. 29). It is an alternative approach for understanding the process of organizing everyday life in organizations (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010; Mills, 2008). To make sense is to ask questions like "what's happening?" or "what's the story?" when searching for direction (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking draws from phenomenology and is particularly useful in studying experience. Within this frame, I propose my key research question: *How do Hong Kong Chinese immigrants make sense of their workplace experience, individually and collectively?*

My research focuses on how a selected sample of immigrants (i.e., Hong Kong Chinese) makes sense of workplace experiences in the context of systemic thinking. *Systemic* is best understood in this context as "sets of power relations (Clegg, 1989) that are deeply embedded in the institutionalized practices and taken-for-granted rules" (Hardy & Phillips, 1999, p. 5) of an organization. The structuration processes produce patterns of institutionalization that give advantage to some members at the expense of others. A focus on sensemaking should also take into account the social context ("members of a local social scene"; Garfinkel, 1967) and the power relations in which sensemaking occurs. To that end, my approach draws on the work of Helms Mills and her colleagues and their Critical Sensemaking methodology (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills & Mills, 2000, 2009; Helms Mills et al., 2010; Mills, 2008; Mills & Helms Mills, 2004; Thurlow, 2010); my research adopts a broad racioethnic paradigmatic framework that attempts to understand those studied from their own ethnic backgrounds and perspectives (Cox, 1990; Mills, Helms Mills, Bratton, & Foreshaw, 2007).

Collinson (2003) warns us that mainstream theorizing views "human beings as unitary, coherent and autonomous individuals who are separate and separable from social relations and organizations" (p. 527). Yet, arguably, people's identities are partially defined by their access to power, privilege, and prestige, and a lack of access to these resources can be problematic — particularly for visible minority immigrants (Anderson & Lynam, 1987; Henry & Tator, 2002; McCoy & Masuch, 2007). In many ways, in the process of making their sense of self, visible minority immigrants may also lack some of the important cues coded in the dominant culture. Quite often, they are treated as a uniform group, and policy makers tend to universalize their problems. Thus, many traditional research strategies are not well suited to study visible minority immigrants' experience.

In recent years, there have been a growing number of approaches from within the *postpositivist* tradition (Prasad, 2005). Prasad has provided insights and the methodological strategies for studying identity work and power in context. These include racioethnic approaches (Cox, 1990; Prasad, Pringle, & Konrad, 2005), as well as postcolonial theory (Prasad, 1996, 2001; Said, 1978), which looks at events from the perspective of the so-called Other. Helms Mills (2002) has used Critical Sensemaking to explore identity work in the context of those (female employees) who struggle to make sense of discrimination.

Critical discourse analysis (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) has captured alternative voices where power is in play. Narrative analysis (Boje, 2001; McKenna, 1999, 2010), ethnomethodological analysis (Weick, 1993), standpoint theory (Harding, 1987; Smith, 1987), and critical hermeneutics (Prasad, 2002; Prasad & Mir, 2002) are all gaining wider acceptance by organizational scholars, and to a limited extent these approaches have been used to study immigrant workplace experiences in Canada (Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Jones, 2008; McCoy & Masuch, 2007; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Mirchandani, 1998; Ng, 1996).

Building on Prasad (2005), Bryman, Bell, Mills, and Yue (2011) define postpositivism as "a disparate number of 'intellectual traditions' that share a common rejection of fundamental tenets of positivism — especially the insistence on emulating the natural sciences in the study of human society, and its characterization as a unified scientific community of practice" (p. 58). I contend that a postpositivist framework is a useful starting point in studying the immigrant experience in an unequal social system. For example, ethnomethodologists (Garfinkel, 1967) and phenomenologists (Goffman, 1959) have written about the methods of practical reasoning that underlie the accomplishment of identity as a way of revealing everyday social relations. Feminists have long argued that gender is not so much a result of apparently essential characteristics arising from sex or gender roles, but rather "an axis of inequality/domination-subordination where gender relations are hierarchical power relations" (Calás & Smircich, 2009, p. 247; see also Smith, 1987, on *ruling relation*). In fact, Litvin (1997, p. 203) has rejected the "essentializing discourse of diversity" in which workforce diversity was presented as demographic category membership (such as race, ethnicity, or gender) while denying that individuals were influenced and pressured by macro-level social, political, and economic forces. More recent research has also pointed to the role of intersectionality (a nexus of race, gender, class, and a number of other potential identity points) as a way of making sense of identity work (Bagilhole, 2010; McCall, 2005).

Nevertheless, one of the postpositivist intellectual traditions referred to by Prasad (2005) is poststructuralism, which offers a radical critique of modernist thinking. This approach attempts to understand the relationship among texts (broadly defined), power, and discursive practices. To put it simply, texts are seen as discursive outcomes of, yet also influences on, patterns of behavior. Texts, for example, are not structures that obscure underlying meanings (as structuralists would argue) but rather

they are simultaneously outcomes and processes in the development of meaning. In offering a poststructuralist account within a postpositivist framework, I intend to examine the complex conditions and processes of discursive practices within an unequal power system in which people's lives are inextricably interwoven with the social world. My goal is to bring to the surface the hidden discourses that mediate the workplace opportunities of visible minority immigrants.

To that end, I collected some publicly available documents (see Table 4.1) and conducted a series of interviews with first-generation (Hong Kong Chinese) immigrants[3] to Canada. From these data, I developed a critical discursive analysis of their sense-making processes and associated identity work (Brown, 2000, 2001, 2006; Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008).

1.3. The Contribution of This Study

Since important aspects of identity can be imposed by others (more powerful players) through social interactions (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker, 1968; also see "symbolic interactionism" in Serpe & Stryker, 2011), and identity can be constructed by oneself within the context of socio-cultural and organizational discourses, how one makes sense of one's identity labels becomes a part of the key research question of this study. This process of identity work may affect immigrants' survival (i.e., making a living) or social mobility in the Canadian workplace. Nevertheless, rejecting or distancing oneself from immigrant identity labels does not necessarily imply that one has faced less (or no) discrimination in the workplace. Rather, the discrimination might take different forms that require different strategies to counteract or resist (Van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Thus, locating the hidden discourses and the associated discursive practices that mediate immigrant acclimatization is my intended contribution to the literature in this field.

While we often accept that discourses of discrimination begin from the imposition of the dominant white male culture onto the visible minority racialized female, some striking findings note

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[3]For simplicity, this study uses the term *immigrant* to refer to all first-generation Hong Kong Chinese in Canada, whether they have obtained citizenship or not.

that discriminatory discursive practices can also originate *within* a visible minority or an ethno-linguistic group (Flowerdew, Li, & Tran, 2002; Geddes & Konrad, 2003). Thus, an examination of the direction of discrimination — between white and non-white, versus among the same racioethnic group — may uncover new phenomena that contribute to new theories (Davis, 1971).

Using my own ethnic and linguistic background (i.e., my subject position; see Phillips & Hardy, 1997) as a research resource, and examining the problem closer to the root, this study sets out to contribute new insights to the current literature by proposing the key question — *how do Hong Kong Chinese immigrants make sense of their workplace experience, individually and collectively?* — as well as three sub-questions:

1. Context: *How do Hong Kong Chinese immigrants make retrospective sense in Canada?* (Chapter 5)
2. Rules: *Where and how do immigrants search for plausible cues to act at institutional level?* (Chapter 6)
3. Identity labels (agency): *How do immigrants develop strategies in their identity work?* (Chapter 7)

In a poststructuralist paradigm, power is "exercised rather than possessed, closely bound to resistance through multiple power relations, and productive or constitutive rather than simply oppressive" (Mills & Helms Mills, 2004, p. 141). Hence, through informants' reflections and voices, I set out to see how context, rules, and identity labels are accepted or resisted. Taking power and other discursive elements into account, investigation of the above questions can help us to understand what kinds of assumptions and practices are associated with socio-political contexts, and hence widen our understanding of the processes by which immigrants integrate and settle (or not) in Canada.

In addition to the contribution to the literature and wider practice, the theoretical and methodological contributions of this study to the broader literature of immigrant adjustment are fourfold. First, examining how immigrants make sense of their situations and events (e.g., context, rules, and identity labels) bridges our understanding of how power emerges historically, helping us to see how the micro-level analysis (the individual) is engaged by (or subjected to) the macro-level (structural and societal discourse) in a more critical sense. Second, exploring the narratives of immigration experience can provide a theory and a critique of the systemic need for a "deviant" to be outside the boundaries of

the acceptable. Third, by adopting a rather underutilized approach (the Critical Sensemaking framework), this study helps develop a new way to study complex topics such as immigrant experience and workplace equality. Fourth, this research provides an empirical investigation of how discursive activities contribute to immigrants' mobility and sequentially enhance our understanding of the role of power in immigrants' lives (i.e., the possibilities of resistance [agency] over the fact of domination). In short, this study aims to use socio-psychological properties and identity work as heuristics to locate hidden discourses and see how they operate among visible minority immigrants' lives in the Canadian workplace. Without this kind of work, the public may remain largely unaware of the complexity of how racism is historically embedded (the context); institutionally informed (the rules); systemically maintained (the discourse); and micro-politically resisted (agency) in our everyday lives. In the rest of this chapter, I share my own immigrant experience in Canada, outline some key definitions, and summarize each chapter of the book.

1.4. An Insider's Voice

Early in 1997, I left Hong Kong, at the height of my career, and came to Canada alone as a skilled worker immigrant. I believed that having prior work experience and a sufficient level of education (a master's degree) would lead me to a "better" quality of life. In the beginning (for about six months), I was only able to find work in a low-paying, entry-level job that was also associated with a lower social status. I was told that this was due to my lack of Canadian work experience. But if no one in Canada was willing to hire me to work in the career I had followed in Hong Kong, then how would I obtain so-called Canadian experience? I asked myself over and over again, "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" These significant "shocks" — or discrepancies between expectation and reality — disrupted my routines. I tried to search for reasons and simultaneously intensified my efforts at identity-making (Ibarra, 1999). Such activities have come to be called "identity work, which is anything that people do, individually and collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others" (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996, p. 115).

   Retrospectively, my inadequate *social* network was also reflected in my struggles. I could not *enact* the *cues* that made

plausible ongoing sense of the workplace events that my *identity* was built upon (the italicized words here are the seven socio-psychological properties outlined by Weick, 1995). These struggles reveal how the making of sense (e.g., common sense or cultural sense) helps or harms the making of the immigrant's identity in a foreign land. I eventually came to realize that I could only organize meanings based on formative contexts (Unger, 1987b, 1987c), which are widespread social practices and behavioral routines that influence people's behavior, and which limit what can be imagined and done within an unequal social system. My personal story is echoed by Morgan's (2006) famous statement: "We all construct or enact our realities but not necessarily under circumstances of our own choosing" (p. 147). This observation has illuminated two important elements — sensemaking (socially constructed understanding) and formative context (widespread social practices and imaginings) — that aid my understanding of what shapes the workplace experiences of visible minority professional and skilled immigrants.

1.5. Some Definitions

Sensemaking is defined as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409; see also cognitive dissonance theory in Festinger, 1957; and studies in ethnomethodology in Garfinkel, 1967). Sensemaking tends to occur strongly when the perceived state of the world is different from the expected. Weick (1990, 1993) calls these discrepancies or interruptions "shocks" that trigger an intensified period of sensemaking. As sensemaking unfolds, people deal with uncertainty, search for reasons, try to resume the interrupted activity, and remain in action. Action by itself tends to stir up information that can suggest a direction and the next step. This process of sensemaking has at least seven properties: it takes place in a social context; it involves identity construction; it is retrospective; it is ongoing; it involves enactment (i.e., it takes place through action); it involves elaboration of salient cues into broader meaning; and its goal is plausible meaning rather than accurate account. Further, the process of sensemaking affects not only the initial sense one develops of a situation, but more importantly the extent to which people will *update* that sense. These properties have an effect on people's willingness to disengage from their

initial story (and discourse) and adopt a newer or modified discourse that is more sensitive to the particulars of the present context. This is why a sensemaking framework is an alternative approach in the explanation of how different meanings are generated and assigned in relation to the same event. I contend that the sense that immigrants make is crucial for the opportunities they find. I will further elaborate on the seven properties of sensemaking and my methodological approach (Weick, 1995, 2001, 2008; Weick et al., 2005) in Chapter 3: Methodological Approach.

The term *immigrant* can be used discursively to refer to a person of color, and/or someone from a Third World or (supposedly) developing country, who does not speak English well and holds a position low in the occupational hierarchy (Estable & Meyer, 1989). This common definition is problematic and stereotypical, if not offensive. In fact, other than Aboriginal groups, who in Canada can truly claim to be native? Are not most of us immigrants (so-called first-generation immigrants) or the descendants of immigrants (second-, third-, or subsequent-generation immigrants) — people whose origins are overseas? This identity label is either *accomplished* by others (the more powerful players) through unequal social interactions (Garfinkel, 1967; also see Goffman, 1963, on *stigma*), or internalized by oneself within a network of socio-cultural discourses. By affirming the (stigmatized) status of immigrant identities and images, and by dividing the population between immigrant and Canadian in organizations and in society at large, the identity of *immigrant* regulates or normalizes those who are defined as "normal" or "appropriate" subjects (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Foucault, 1979, 1982) in opposition to those who are defined as "inappropriate" and "abnormal." These Foucauldian (1979, 1982) insights reveal that "deviants" are created and then marginalized through hierarchical distinctions and divisions. It is also noteworthy that this binary and hierarchical division occurs not merely between Canadian (the normal) and immigrant (the deviant), but sometimes among visible minority immigrants themselves (Flowerdew et al., 2002; Geddes & Konrad, 2003). For instance, a division of various levels of immigrant identity characterizes new versus established immigrants or Canadians versus Canadians-in-training.

Identity labels, as Collinson (2003) argues, can only be relatively stable and unambiguous in collectivist cultures with relatively simple divisions of labor. If that is the case, identities tend to be ascribed by birth and legitimized through religion and

family status. However, immigrant culture is neither collective nor simple; this study chooses the term immigrant as a flux identity label that is shifting and temporary (see "flux perspective" in Simpson & Carroll, 2008; "structural symbolic interactionism" in Stryker, 1980; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003); *immigrant* is "a sign that evokes meaning" around which "there is always room for negotiation" (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996, pp. 115−116). *Identity* is a socially constructed term that often signifies power, status, and agency in a society and refers to the "qualities of the identity claimant" (p. 115). For instance, a person born overseas but educated in Canada when young (although still originally an immigrant) might consider himself/herself Canadian. This subjective label signifies his/her identity and status in society, while simultaneously rejecting the immigrant (stigmatized) label that implies a lower status and quality. Goffman (1963) pioneered the use of the term *stigma* to refer to "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (Preface). In this sense, a person constructs an identity that reflects his/her qualities depending on the cues she/he draws upon in a particular time. This example illustrates the potential for dynamic identity construction in which individuals may choose certain definitions and discourses to embrace or distance themselves from different times and in different situations (McCall & Simmons, 1966; Simpson & Carroll, 2008; Stryker, 1968).

More importantly, we should acknowledge that at least the ability to make sense of events in a new country could be drastically different for so-called first-generation immigrants (who are born and probably raised overseas) than for those born and raised in Canada, the so-called second-generation immigrants (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007; also see Mannheim's Sociology of Generations in Pilcher, 1994). It is important to note that where immigrants are raised is also where they inherit and learn cultural beliefs, values, and practices. The role of culture might directly mediate the way immigrants extract cues, as well as the way they make sense of an organization's inherent power and language. Sometimes culture is an advantage; at other times it may become a burden (see Section 6.4.1).

By *language*, here, I mean neither dialect nor the linguistic background of a natural language such as English or French, but rather the "text and talk" people do when they create, support, and contest identity "through the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts" (Hardy, 2001, p. 28). Identity, then, "emanate[s] from interactions between the social groups and the

complex societal structures in which the discourse is embedded" (p. 28). The effects of colonial discourse (Prasad, 2005; Said, 1978) on identity work also must not be overlooked, as Hong Kong was formerly a colonized city. Psychological and cultural influences can play a significant retrospective role in organizing immigrants' identities. Scholars (Cesaire, 1950; Fanon, 1963, 1967; Said, 1978) argue that "not only does colonialism oppress and exploit entire nations, but it also turns their inhabitants into objectified commodities" (Prasad, 2005, p. 264) thus threatening their cultural identity. I will further elaborate on these ideas in Chapter 5.

1.6. Outline of the Chapters

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature that identifies what has been done and locates the gaps in immigrant identity literature. I outline three themes: (1) how immigrant experience and discrimination studies have been treated and framed in the structural approach and what is missing; (2) how social constructionism has the potential to help understand identity-making, but lacks insights about socio-political stances; and (3) how poststructuralist literature on identity work has shed light on organizational control and discursive practices, yet immigrants' voices and reflections in Canada still remain silenced. This is the gap I seek to bridge.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methodological approach used in this study. In order to ascertain how Hong Kong Chinese immigrants make sense of their experiences in situations of differential power, a poststructuralist lens and poststructuralist methods are employed. Critical Sensemaking is one of these poststructuralist approaches: it probes beneath the surfaces of workplace relations and reveals identity work and other associated issues. As Thurlow (2010) stresses, "Critical Sensemaking provides a lens through which to analyze the power relationship reflected in these inequalities within organizations and the consequence of those power effects for individuals" (p. 257). I demonstrate how the Critical Sensemaking framework and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault, 1979; Phillips & Hardy, 2002) can be used to analyze immigrants' narratives.

Chapter 4 provides details of the research design: my institutional access; the background of the informants; the process of data collection, translation, and transcription; and some thoughts on reflexivity and the ethical considerations for this study. I also

include descriptions of other publicly available texts, such as websites and brochures, in which I locate the structural issues in context. Last but not least, I develop a conceptual framework that guides and organizes my approach to data analysis and discussions.

Chapter 5 outlines the idea of retrospective sensemaking and reveals the contexts of the study. I discuss two aspects of the formative context: first, the historical events that demonstrate how Chinese immigrants have been treated in Canada; second, the historical and cultural background of the sensemakers' origin, Hong Kong, one of the colonized cities. My emphasis is on how cues were extracted retrospectively by informants when they were engaging in contextual sensemaking.

Chapter 6 explores the institutionalized discourses and organizational rules that immigrants face. Here two main themes emerge. First, the dominant discourse of integration; and second, the silent discourse of exploitation of the Other. The local site and its organizational background will be highlighted as backdrops of the analysis, thus demonstrating how organizational rules shape informants' sensemaking processes. In this chapter, we hear more voices of acceptance and resistance when immigrants confront institutional discourses.

Chapter 7 is anchored on the idea of agency in the process of individual sensemaking. Its focus is on how professional immigrants produce orders and develop strategies in their identity work and identity labels. It offers a more textured understanding of the role of power in immigrants' lives and reveals the forms of resistance at the individual level. Why and how do people construct different meanings for the same event? How are they influenced by competing normative discourses about the right kind of immigrant and the right kind of Canadian (citizen)?

In the final chapter, I bring all elements (from Chapters 5−7) together with the goal of unpacking the different dimensions of workplace (in)equality. I discuss the implications for theory and practice, and highlight the contributions of this study to the discipline.