

Citizenship learning and political participation: the case of Latin American-Canadians

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This article explores the informal learning processes and the changes in the values of a group of 200 Latin American immigrants to Canada. Results show that the majority of the respondents underwent at least one political or civic learning process, like increasing tolerance or environmental responsibility. The findings also suggest a number of tensions between the set of values brought from the home countries and those incorporated in the home country. The author argues that these tensions led some interviewees through a process of transformative learning.

Keywords: citizenship learning; Latin American Canadians; immigration; informal learning; political participation

Introduction

Many times, even in pedagogical spheres, the conception of education is usually restricted to a scholastic activity. Likewise, education is generally understood as a process that happens, exclusively, in a classroom with the presence of teachers and following a curriculum. Only when we expand our perspective, we understand the educational process as a learning experience influenced by daily life.

For human beings, acquiring knowledge is a lifelong learning process that includes a temporal and spatial dimension. In this context, people who move from one country to another often go through several civic and political learning experiences that might occur either as they purposely participate in the civic and political life or as a consequence of their daily interaction with the host society.

Many of these processes, which involve acquisition of new knowledge, turn into *transformative* learnings. For adult immigrants, moving to a new country means incorporating skills, attitudes and practices that allow them to develop and function in the new society. These learning processes, usually informal, sometimes lead immigrants to critical reflections, which challenge their previous assumptions. Responding to gaps in current studies regarding citizenship learning and civic participation of immigrant populations, this paper explores the civic learning processes and changes in the attitudes, values and practices of a group of Latin American immigrants to Canada.

The scope of informal learning

The temporal dimension of learning indicates that we learn from the first to the last day of our lives. In a pioneering study on the field, Berger and Luckmann (1966) note that socialisation – the wide and coherent induction of individuals in the objective world of a society or in a sector

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of it – takes place from birth to death (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The authors also distinguish between primary and secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation happens in childhood, and is usually the most important because individuals internalise through the influence of their families a series of norms, customs, values and perspectives of the social reality. At this stage, the subjects also acquire the seeds of the ‘common sense’, understood as it is in the Gramscian literature.

The secondary socialisation includes all the subsequent processes that induce the already socialised individuals to new sectors of the objective world of their society (institutional sub-worlds). Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that the world internalised during the primary socialisation is much more embedded than those internalised in the secondary socialisation. For that reason, in the secondary socialisation, individuals tend to look for experiences that are coherent with the norms, customs and values incorporated during the primary one (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

The literature in the field usually identifies three different spheres in which the learning processes take place: formal, non-formal and informal. Formal and non-formal learning being those that occur within institutional structures, this work focuses on informal learning, which consists of all the learning that happens outside the formal and non-formal system (Livingstone 1999; Schugurensky 2000; Coombs 1985; Selman and Dampier 1991).

Despite the little attention received in the educational field, the informal subsystem is the space where most – and the most significant – learning of our lives takes place. Much of the political and social learning occurs in the informal subsystem. Informal learning can happen in a workplace, in a community centre or in any other daily circumstance. Moreover, it can be particularly significant for those who do not have access to formal and non-formal educative processes due to their lack of economic resources (Eraut 2000; Straka 2004). Informal learning can occur inside formal and non-formal educational institutions and might adopt three different forms: self-directed learning (they are usually related to ‘learning projects’ undertaken by individuals, which are intentional and conscious); incidental learning (unintentional but conscious); and socialisation (the learner had neither intention nor awareness of having learned something) (Schugurensky 2000).

Although most of the informal learnings acquired in adulthood reinforce the vision of the world internalised during the primary socialisation, there are occasions in which new learning questions some of the individuals’ assumptions or even their frame of reference. In this case, individuals face transformative learning. As Mezirow (1991, 2000) suggests, adults hold values, attitudes and certain practices, which determine their interaction with the surrounding world. Nonetheless, particular circumstances, crises and new experiences might challenge those previous assumptions. Transformative learning allows individuals to construct, validate and re-elaborate their experiences and learn from their own critical self-reflection. In so doing, they become capable of reformulating the way in which reality is interpreted, as well as creating new models of thought to interact with society (Mezirow 1991, 2000).

Although a number of studies explore the educative dimension of civic participation (Pateman 1970; Mansbridge 1980; Marquand 1988; Schugurensky and Myers 2003), little attention has been paid to the learning processes and the changes in immigrants’ values originated in the integration of these populations into the host society. Individuals who move from one country of the world to another go through several civic and political learning experiences that might occur either as they purposely participate in the political life or as a consequence of their daily interaction with the receiving society. Many of these processes that involve acquisition of new knowledge turn into transformative learning. For adult immigrants, moving to a new country means incorporating skills, attitudes and practices that allow them to develop and function in the new society. These learning processes, usually informal,

sometimes generate critical reflections about the host society and/or the home society, which challenge previous assumptions.

Previous research and data

Currently, Canada's population reaches approximately 32 million people. In order to cope with demographic decline, since 1991 until the present the Canadian government has yearly issued an average of 220,000 landed immigrant permits. In this context, and according to the last Canadian census, in 2001, a total of 520,260 people who came from Latin American countries were living in Canada. This figure excludes Latin Americans who did not identify themselves as 'Hispanics' and those who live in Canada without any migratory status.¹ It is also important to mention that data are seven years old and that since 1961, 40% of the Latin American migratory flow occurred between 1991 and 2001, which suggests a growing trend. Considering the confluence of these factors, several community organisations believe that, today approximately 700,000 Latin Americans live in Canada.

Several studies document the barriers faced by Latin American immigrants to attain integration into the Canadian society. While some studies focus on the difficulties that this community goes through as it interacts with the Canadian educational system (Bernhard and Freire 1999; Bernhard 2004; Corter et al. 1999), other pieces of research address labour rights and job-market related issues (Basok 2000; Hinnenkamp 2007).

The civic and political participation of Latin Americans in Canada has started to be studied only in the last years. Previous works identify the lack of English and French skills, political illiteracy,² the existence of closed networks, as well as discrimination, as the main factors that hinder the civic and political engagement of Latin Americans in Canada. These studies also suggest that a growing transnational trend is expanding and promoting the political participation of this community (Long 2002; Chute 2004; Veronis 2006; Ginieniewicz 2007). In spite of the fact that some of these studies make isolated remarks to the civic and political learning processes as well as to the changes in immigrants' values involved in these circumstances, none of them address the subject in a purposeful and deliberate manner.

Using data drawn from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded project called '*Lifelong citizenship education, immigration and social cohesion: examining civic change among Latin Americans in Canada*', this study analyses the responses of 200 adult (between 25- and 70-years-old) Latin American immigrants to Toronto and Montreal, who are either landed immigrants or Canadian citizens. In addition, respondents have been living in Canada a minimum of four years.

The sampling method used in this research is a combination of quota sampling and snowballing. The sample did not aim to be representative of Latin American-Canadians. Rather, it had an *exploratory* purpose. Data were drawn from two sources: 200 interviews and three focus groups.³

Findings

Seventy nine per cent of the interviewees said that, in Canada, they underwent at least one political or civic learning process. If we take into account only affirmative answers ($N = 157$), while 45% of the interviewees considered that they learned to be tolerant, 37% said that they learned to protect the environment; 21% pointed out that they increased their 'civic sense'.

In addition, 83% of the respondents (166 interviewees) said that they changed their values after immigrating to Canada. When they were specifically asked which values they have changed, 40% said they have increased their tolerance and were more 'open-minded', 35%

have increased their awareness of other cultures and 24% have increased their respect for the environment. Using interviewees' quotations, below, I briefly describe the learning in these areas.⁴

Tolerance and diversity

Several participants highlighted that, as a result of immigrating to Canada, they became more tolerant individuals. In Canada, many respondents linked tolerance to an enhancement of the political freedoms. Summarising this perspective, one interviewee pointed out: 'in Canada, there is political respect; there is neither space for fanaticism nor for violence' (I 13).⁵

One respondent reflected upon the different relationship that political opponents develop in Canada and in his country of origin:

I always thought that one of the most important differences between Colombia and Canada was that, here, there is respect for the opponent's opinions and his/her activities. In Colombia, respect for other's opinions is nonexistent. When I lived in Colombia, there was too much violence. Liberals killed Conservatives and vice versa. Actually my father's life was in danger. In Canada, there is no such a thing. Realising that different people are able to peacefully live together was a novelty for me. That was the most significant learning for me. (I 32)

Some respondents indicated that, in Canada, the 'climate of tolerance' made them change their own political attitudes and behaviours:

Here, I am not as radical as I was in my country of origin. Now, I accept that people may have different stances. In my country, when I came across someone who had different thoughts, I directly refused to have anything to do with that person. But, now, I realised that, although I may not share the same viewpoints and ideological position with other people, I still can find other similarities and values to get closer to that person. (I 45)

In the last decades the increasing diversity of the largest Canadian cities (Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver) has been notorious, which evidently had an impact on the opinion of the interviewees:

Undoubtedly, since I moved to Canada, my awareness of diversity has increased. Basically, what I adopted as a new value is the notion that everybody has the right to be respected and receive equal opportunities regardless of his/her sexual orientation, ethnic background, social origin and educational level. Everyone should have enough space and freedom to express his/her opinions. When I started to return to Chile I had big arguments with friends and colleagues because, compared to Canada, in Chile, I noticed high levels of racism, sexism, homophobia and classism. Yet, in the last years, I realised that my friends and family, as well as many Latin Americans that I know have changed, too. (I 17)

Some interviewees said that, after moving to Canada, they have an increasing awareness and respect for other cultures. One respondent pointed out:

In Canada, I experienced changes linked to the multicultural society. I see more what is going on in other countries of the world because I have friends and co-workers from several countries of the world and, therefore, I have more respect and understanding of ethnic and cultural diversity. I enjoy learning about other countries from the original source. (I 2)

Another participant elaborated on the effects of a diverse society:

In Canada, I have lost some of my prejudices. In my country of origin I could not have a friend who was not 'left wing' oriented. It was as simple as that. Canada changed my mind about political orientations and I have learned that it is possible to work with people from other political signs; I have learned to be more tolerant, more open-minded. I think the main reason for such a change is the difference in the diversity of the societies. In Chile, I had no chance to meet, for instance, people from India or Pakistan as I had in Canada. (I 23)

Learning about discrimination

Changing the perspective about the home country

For the group of immigrants surveyed in this research discrimination represented a complex and broad issue, which drove many of them to challenge their previous attitudes and values. Interestingly, they did not specifically associate discrimination with a learning process. Yet, the analysis of the qualitative data shows that dealing with discrimination, indeed, involved a learning process at several levels. For instance, the kind of discrimination that some immigrants suffered in the host country brought them memories of the home countries; sometimes, this process included the exercise of comparing their own situation in Canada to the situation of other people who live in the countries they left.

Many of the Latin Americans who participated in this study, woke up to the realisation that, as they felt discriminated against in Canada, others might be suffering from the same treatment in Latin American countries:

Personally, as soon as I arrived here, my status dramatically changed because, in my country, I had certain privileges (a decent job, access to the university), which, in Canada, suddenly vanished. In Canada, I felt discriminated against and, at the beginning, I wondered what was going on. I experienced injustices. In my country, I was an engineer, which gave me 17 points in the Canadian immigration score-system and allowed me to get the permanent residence. But, in Canada, I realised that, working as an engineer was not going to be that simple; I had to do one million errands. I started to think that the laws were against immigrants or, at least, that they were made to complicate our progress. These disadvantages made me reflect on my own values and principles and, after a period of time, I started to change my perspective on Colombia. I started to pay more attention to the social conflict there and to think that some people are just discriminated against because of their social condition. (I 76)

Another respondent explained to what extent feeling discriminated against in Canada, made her reflect upon her own attitudes in her home country:

Since I moved to Canada, I have changed. When I lived in Lima, Peru, I remember treating people differently according to their social origin. When I came to Canada, I felt the same way because I experienced the same disdain. I realised how awful can be feeling discriminated against. (I 27)

How does discrimination unfold in Canada?

In Canada, participants identified two different types of discrimination:

- Discrimination of Latin Americans against other Latin Americans or other minority groups.
- Discrimination of Canadian-born against Latin American immigrants and other minority groups.

Addressing the issue of discrimination within the community, one respondent considered that Latin American-Canadians need a genuine and conscious self-criticism:

We Latin Americans do not look at ourselves because, in Canada, we complain about racism but, firstly, we have to accept that we are racist regardless of our country of origin. We brought these sentiments to Canada and it is difficult to get rid of them. For me, it is like an endless process, in which we have to keep working to understand other's cultures. Early socialisation has a lot to do with this. (I 48)

One interviewee analysed how he sees discrimination unfolding within the Latin American community in Toronto:

I clearly see discriminatory behaviours within our community. For example, you see a Salvadoran driving a delivery truck but he does not do the hard work. He hires a Costa Rican to load and unload

the heavy stuff. And who is the manager who hired the Salvadoran? He/she is an Argentine or Uruguayan. ... Something similar occurs with Argentine workers in the construction sector. You see Argentines, who 'just got off the plane', hired by 'older Argentine immigrants'. You always see the same situation: older immigrants compelling newer immigrants to work in very bad conditions. And you see the exploitation of immigrants, within our community, going on and on according to the 'status', which is usually given by the length of residence. (FG 1)

Some participants suggested that, although the discrimination within the Latin American community in Canada exists, the most serious kind of discrimination is the one that Latin Americans have to face due to their condition of immigrants.

I agree with those who say that we have serious problems of discrimination within our community; these issues include sexism, racism and classism. This situation, undoubtedly, limits us; the worst aspect of this problem is that it is something hidden that should be addressed and it is not. Discrimination in our community is also originated in regional and border conflicts. However, the most serious issue is that we as Latin American immigrants are discriminated against. We have to say it loud. For example, my father was a meteorologist in Chile and, in Canada he had to work in a factory because meteorologists had to be Canadian born. (FG2)

Discrimination might adopt in different forms and shapes:

It often occurs to me that if I speak on the phone with someone I do not receive as good treatment as if I speak to the same individual in person. And this is because I am not a visible minority but an audible minority. (FG3)

Elaborating on how she perceives discrimination, one Salvadoran woman gave an example:

In Canada, racism is an obstacle. There is a kind of subtle racism, one that is not easily perceived. For example, sometimes when you fill out an application for a job or for rent an apartment and they are just rejected because you speak the language with an accent, you understand the dimension of discrimination. For example, I know cases of Latin Americans who call to rent apartments and are told the apartment is already rented. Then, a moment later, a friend of them, a Canadian born without accent, calls and is told the apartment is free. (I 220)

Another respondent pointed out how he perceived discrimination in Canadian society:

For me the physical appearance is the determining factor. For example, my two sons are more fair skin than my daughter. The three of them speak perfect English, without any accent. And my sons are always treated better than my daughter. While my daughter has many stories of discrimination, my sons have none, which means that skin colour matters. (FG1)

Environmental awareness

Some interviewees mentioned that they have incorporated environmental values only after immigrating to Canada:

What really surprised me after my arrival in Canada was the importance given to the environment. That was a big difference compared to El Salvador and it really changed my mind. I started to think that almost every aspect of our lives is somehow related to the environment and that everyone can do something to improve it. (I 225)

Similar was the opinion of another interviewee:

I admire the fact that, in Canada, people are concerned about ecological issues. It helped me to realise that many of our daily problems are somehow related to ecology. I would like to see this attitude in our countries of origin, especially in El Salvador, where there is an awful deforestation. (I 46)

Another respondent pointed to the diverse priorities faced by people in Latin America and Canada:

Before immigrating to Canada, I did not know that much about ecology or industrial development and how it affects the environment. In my home country, I was not aware of these issues because there are different needs and people are worried about other issues. (I 226)

Another participant criticised certain anti-environmental behaviours he perceived in Canada:

In Canada, I see too much 'anti-environmental' behaviour. For instance, overconsumption is a serious problem. I see how people waste energy and it makes me feel bad; you see people driving their cars just for two blocks when they could walk instead. (I 289)

One respondent referred to a concept that he learned after moving to Canada:

I have learned what 'sustainable development' means: the importance of synchronising technology and development and to what extent we should not exploit natural resources without thinking about future generations. I learned the risks of overconsumption; we are making others, our children, to pay the consequences of our living standard. (I 21)

Most respondents mentioned recycling as a practice incorporated only after arriving in Canada: 'recycling has been the most important change in my daily practices since I moved to Canada' (I 239). Another interviewee said: 'I am much more aware of environmental issues now; I recycle and think about taking care of the planet. Before immigrating to Canada I did not even think about issues like recycling, garbage or pollution' (I 221).

Civic sense

Some participants mentioned increasing appreciation of civic principles as a value incorporated in Canada:

I remember that, when I was living in Argentina, I did not really care about my neighbours or my community. In Canada, I learned a lot about respecting other's rights, observing the norms and the system and living together with other communities. (I 216)

One interviewee elaborated on the 'different type of relationship' that people develop with the state, and particularly with the norms, in Latin America and Canada:

In Canada, we Latin Americans have a different relationship with the norms and legality: we tend to respect more the norms here in Canada than in Latin America. In our home countries, in the 'small things' we did not care too much about what was legal or illegal. For example: in Canada, I know for sure that if I do something wrong while driving, I will get a ticket. (I 63)

Compared to their home countries, in Canada, some participants noticed a different type of interaction among community members: 'in Canada, people are gentler than in Mexico. You can see that in drivers' behaviour; you see that they always yield to pedestrians' (I 47).

Similar was the opinion of another interviewee:

Overall, I noticed more respect for the neighbour in Canada than in my country of origin: people obey traffic signs, yield to pedestrians and respect queues while they wait for a bus. Moreover, you see more awareness of the dangers of drinking and driving. (I 8)

A Uruguayan respondent exemplified with an anecdote the differences, between her home country and Canada, in the driving rules:

When I travelled to Uruguay, I saw children jumping or playing in the rear seats because many cars do not have rear seatbelts. In Uruguay, people's attitudes are also different. A friend of mine once told me that, when her child starts crying, she puts her in the front seat on her lap. ... I was shocked! In Canada, you have to fasten their seatbelts and take them in the rear seat until they are 12-years-old. This is a bylaw and nobody would dare to take his/her children to the front seat. It is very different. I am aware that I learned these civic values because I live in Canada and now, when I travel to my home country, I am stunned with these things but I know that had I lived there I would have these 'Uruguayan habits'. (I 90)

Gender issues

In Canada, both men and women have increased their awareness of gender issues. A Colombian woman said: 'in Canada, I have increased my consciousness of gender issues; there is no doubt about it' (I 2). One Colombian man pointed out: 'since I moved to Canada, my admiration for immigrant women has considerably increased. I realised that, for any immigrant family, the burden of the resettlement falls mostly on women' (I 7).

One Peruvian man said that he experienced a change in his values with regards to gender issues: 'in Peru, I was much more conservative, I guess, because of the weight that religion has in our societies. Canadian society is more open-minded than any Latin American country with regards to gender issues' (I 51).

One Ecuadorian woman elaborated on the differences between her country of origin and Canada:

My mother is a very conservative person and represents the stereotype of the typical Latin American woman. Her principles are: a white wedding; never, ever an abortion; 'you must obey your husband', and things like that. I am completely the opposite! Even though, Ecuador is now slowly changing, that situation always generated some tension between my values and those of my family, back home. So, there have been changes in my original values. The type of education we receive in our countries has disastrous consequences for Latin American women: for instance, 'women must obey men'; 'women must be submissive'. This situation has its origin not only in the kind of education that is taught but also in the embedded culture ... we have to obey our father, brothers and husbands. Religion plays a significant role in this issue, too: there is a kind of indoctrination with regards to gender roles. (I 264)

Gay rights

Some respondents emphasised that they perceive a significant difference in the way that Canadian and Latin American societies treat gay issues, which have generated a change in their values. One Colombian interviewee said: 'in Colombia, even though you can hear people discussing gender issues, the daily language is very homophobic' (I 2).

Another participant pointed out that she only compared Argentina to Canada when she came back to visit her home country:

I realised that I have changed because the first time I came back to my country of origin, Argentina (after one year of living in Canada), I noticed a very homophobic language, especially in humour. I was really shocked by what I heard. (I 72)

One Mexican interviewee analysed the changes he experienced in terms of his perspective towards gay issues: 'I currently interact with homosexuals normally but, when I lived in Mexico I was not as open-minded as I am here' (I 47).

For an Ecuadorian woman, homosexuality is still a difficult issue to address in her home country: 'in Ecuador, homosexuality is a taboo subject. When I came to Canada I changed my mind and understood that everyone is similar and should be treated with respect' (I 99).

Discussion

Canada's population is aging and although immigration is placing renewed and complex challenges to the host society it showed to be an effective (if not the only one) tool to mitigate the impact of a low birth rate and declining labour force. As Dorais (2002) points out:

... in a socially cohesive society, both individual and society recognise the value of building a sense of acceptance and belonging among people based on trust, shared values and common experiences that bridge social, cultural, linguistic and religious differences. (Dorais 2002, 4)

This paper explored the civic learning process and the changes in the values of a group of Latin American immigrants to Canada. In this context, I identified several learning processes that occurred ‘incidentally’: the respondents did not have any previous intention of learning something out of their experience, but after going through several situations, they became aware that some learning had taken place. These learning experiences were unintentional but conscious (Schugurensky 2000). As Schugurensky (2000) points out:

... the awareness that an unintentional and unconscious learning experience took place (through socialisation) could occur immediately after the learning experience or many years after it, and the process of retrospective recognition can be internally generated or externally led. ... Informal learning, as any other type of learning, can be additive or transformative. Additive learning refers to the addition of knowledge, the improvement of skills and the development of values that expand and strengthen existing knowledge, skills and values. (Schugurensky 2000, final remarks section, 6, 7)

It is my contention that the interviewees went through several learning experiences, which made them incorporate civic and political practices, which they now retrospectively recognise as *new* values and attitudes. For many of them, the addition of these experiences was transformative (Mezirow 1991; Cranton 1994; O’Sullivan 1999; O’Sullivan, O’Connor, and Morrell 2002). Although the sample size did not allow me to correlate length of residence in Canada to the different learning processes, the qualitative data suggest that these processes did not occur in a short period of time. Overall, it may be argued that the fluctuation between past (Latin America) and present (Canada), in which incidental learning gradually occurred, gave way to a process of socialisation, in which a new set of values became part of the daily life of this group of immigrants.⁶

Tolerance and increasing respect for the other

The majority of the respondents, who said they have gone through a process of civic and political learning in Canada, pointed out that, in the host country, they became more tolerant individuals. For them, the impact of past political experiences has been crucial. Many Latin American societies experienced in the near past, and for others it is not yet over, high levels of physical violence and intolerance. The fact of having experienced extremely violent situations in Latin America made some respondents particularly appreciate the significance of moving to a society that respects the essential freedoms and political divergences. For this group of Latin Americans, the core values of the Canadian democracy (freedom of speech, freedom of association and free vote) were strongly bonded to the concept of tolerance.⁷

Many interviewees emphasised that Canada was a more tolerant place to live than their countries of origin. Either because they were politically persecuted and had to flee their homeland or due to the fact that they left Latin America looking for new and more advantageous economic opportunities, respondents stressed that, compared to Latin America, in Canada they perceived lower levels of aggressiveness, intolerance, sexism, homophobia, racism and classism. In other words, the characterisation of Canada as a tolerant society was made by those who escaped Latin American’s repressive regimes in the 1970s and 1980s and by those who emigrated from the region more recently, when a widening socio-economic gap increased the levels of intolerance and aggressiveness.⁸

Some interviewees related tolerance to an increasing civic sense, understood as a sense of communal, city-wide patriotism and respect for the society’s normative structure. The findings suggest that, in Canada, this group of Latin Americans tended to adopt a different relationship with the norms compared to the one they had in their home countries. An increased civic sense and awareness of the community translated into greater trustfulness and reliance on the norms emerged from several comments. Some respondents identified a boost in their ‘sense of

community' only after moving to Canada. The wish to feel, or actually being, integrated into the host country, the fact of being recognised as an 'average Canadian', a 'sense of gratitude' towards the country that welcomed them, as well as a real recognition of several practices as better than in Latin America, made this group of immigrants permeable to the predominant values of the host society. This adaptation or socialisation process included a wide range of attitudes, such as respecting non-smoking environments, a more ecological daily behaviour or a more respectful driving style; all these *new* habits connoted an increasing respect for neighbour's wellbeing, security and comfort.

This increasing respect for other community members also came up when respondents emphasised that, in Canada, 'protecting the environment' and adopting 'a sustainable way of life' became learning processes. In this context, in comparing Latin America to Canada, most respondents who mentioned 'protecting the environment' as a learning process, pointed out that ecological issues are not a priority for most Latin American countries, which are still struggling with more basic necessities. In this context, many immigrants found themselves learning new practices (for example, recycling or saving energy), to protect the environment. These practices, which may represent a routine for many Canadian-born, were considered *new* by many interviewees who came from countries where such activities were still in the very early stages (or they did not even exist).

Respondents who arrived in Canada from particular countries showed more concern than others about the situation of the environment in Latin America. For example, most Salvadorans emphasised the precarious environmental conditions (especially, deforestation) and the lack of consciousness with regards to these issues in El Salvador. In contrast, in Canada, they perceived that the average citizen is much more aware and involved in these matters.

As interviewees became more familiar with the significance of being 'environmentally-responsible' and effective in recognising, the benefits of it, they also became more critical and interested in the regional, national and global dimensions of this issue. Interestingly, admiring the respect of the Canadian society for the environment did not prevent many of them from having a critical stance towards some aspects of the Canadian way of living, such as over-consumption or wasting energy, which were considered negative to develop a sustainable society.

The tension between tolerance and discrimination

The responses were imbued with divergent, and sometimes contradictory, appreciations and perceptions with regard to the level of tolerance and discrimination of the Canadian society. Interviewees emphasised that living in cities like Toronto and Montreal, where they daily share experiences with people from all over the world, promoted their tolerance and openness. This perception was not only related to the political field but also to sexism, homophobia, racism and classism.

Nonetheless, in a number of answers I detected a clear tension between tolerance and discrimination. Results drawn from the same sample, and analysed in another work (Ginieniewicz 2007), indicate that discrimination represents an inhibitor of political participation, as well as an obstacle to integrate Latin Americans into the Canadian society. In other words, for most respondents, immigrating to Canada in no way meant definitely removing discrimination and racism from their lives. In fact, many interviewees discovered and learned that racism and discrimination were also present in Canada.

In addition, it is important to note that in Canada the discourse in favour of multiculturalism is strong and consistent, which might be demonstrating its effectiveness, pervading not only immigrants' attitudes but also their speech. This kind of discourse, which comes mainly from governmental spheres, as well as from groups of the civil society, has a significant influence on

the attitudes of the population because it establishes the parameters of tolerance and determines the type of vocabulary that individuals must use in order to be accepted and function in Canadian society.

Participants identified the presence of discrimination in two different dimensions: external (from older generations of immigrants against Latin Americans) and internal (within the Latin American-Canadian community and caused by ethnic, social or regional differences). For this group of Latin American immigrants, living in Canada implied a comparative exercise, which, in many cases, became a process of transformative learning (Mezirow 1991; Cranton 1994; O'Sullivan 1999; O'Sullivan, O'Connor, and Morrell 2002). Many interviewees have gone through a process in which they re-examined their *old* stances and perspectives, including their sources and the consequences of holding those assumptions. As Cranton points out, 'if this process leads to a change in assumptions, it also leads to a new way of interpreting the world, and transformation has taken place. Actions and behaviours will be changed based on the changed perspective' (Cranton 1994, 730).

The findings suggest that many respondents have undergone a process in which they have changed their frame of reference. Their previous body of experiences, associations, concepts, values and feelings that would define their world and would selectively shape and delimit their expectations, perceptions and cognition was dramatically modified (Mezirow 1997, 1991). This situation occurred due to the fact that immigrating to Canada moved them towards a new frame of reference that affected their habits of mind and points of view that, according to Mezirow (1997), are crucial in determining the 'feelings, beliefs, judgments, and attitudes we have regarding specific individuals or groups (for example, homosexuals, welfare recipients, people of colour, or women)' (Mezirow 1997, 6).

Many participants became aware of (and challenged) their own discriminatory attitudes in their countries of origin. The reaction towards discriminatory experiences is, nevertheless, varied and complex. For example, it is not possible to say that an individual who has been discriminated against will acquire awareness of his/her own intolerance. Or even more, the fact that an individual is conscious of his/her own discriminatory attitudes does not mean he/she will do anything to change them.

The influence of the values acquired during early childhood and adolescence are often crucial in shaping adults' set of values. Nevertheless, for immigrant populations, as the interaction with a new society occurs, the past experiences in the receiving country start playing a significant role, too. Living with conflicting and clashing sets of values, and deciding which one has to be applied according to the place in which immigrants interact, becomes a daily challenge.

Still, as the years go by, a learning process characterised as *socialisation* (Schugurensky 2000) (unintentional and unconscious) takes place. Interviewees' opinions quoted in this paper suggest that this group of immigrants merged their old values into the ones of the host society. However, this process was in no way homogeneous. While some immigrants reproduced in the host society the intolerance, in terms of sexual orientation, ethnic origin or social class, 'imported' from Latin America, others experienced a profound process of transformation and learning originated in the condition of being a minority group in Canada. As a result, many respondents discovered and questioned their own discriminatory attitudes only after immigrating to Canada and having suffered from discriminatory experiences themselves.

Some responses indicate that interviewees felt the *pressure* from the environment, which demanded them to be tolerant: they felt that, in order to *belong* and *being accepted*, they ought to be in tune with their surroundings. Others experienced a different learning process: when some respondents realised that they were part of a minority group in Canada, and their status did not guarantee certain prerogatives they had in their countries of origin, they started to feel the effects of discrimination.

Schugurensky (2000) considers that:

... informal learning can complement and reinforce the learnings acquired in formal and non-formal education, but it can also contradict it. ... One can be socialised by the surrounding community into a bigot, and learn virtues of tolerance in the public school. (Schugurensky 2000, final remarks section, 8)

Individuals may react differently to the same stimuli. As a result of immigrating to Canada, individuals may learn the value of tolerance and may change their attitudes, becoming more open-minded individuals. For some respondents, who enjoyed certain privileges in their home countries, immigrating to Canada was a jolt, which made them change their attitudes and values. Because they felt discriminated against in Canada, they started to challenge their own discriminatory practices back home. This became an 'incidental learning': unintentional and conscious. Others, likely because they felt discriminated against in Canada, may have started to discriminate against those who were in a more disadvantageous position.

The weight of tradition

Interviewees' comments clearly depicted to what extent moving from Latin America to Canada implied challenging old gender-related preconceptions.⁹ In Latin America, traditionally, the mainstream institutions of the civil society closely watched rigid gender roles and sexual behaviours; indeed, currently, several societies in the region continue to be organised in a very traditional and paternalistic fashion. Well known is the influence of the Catholic Church in Latin American countries, where devotees of that religion (including practicing and not practicing Catholics) usually account for, at least, 90% of the population in any South or Central American country. It follows that the essential values of the Catholic Church, such as commitment to traditional family values and *conservative* gender principles and sexual habits, are strongly entrenched in those societies.¹⁰ In this context, it has been claimed (Wuthnow 1998; Inglehart and Baker 2000) that a decline in the predominance of religious values characterises the industrialised societies and that, in the industrial societies, the attachment to religious principles has tended to decline. For example, Inglehart et al. (2000) argue that 'industrialisation promotes a shift from traditional to secular-rational values' (Inglehart and Baker 2000, 49). These studies also suggest that new kinds of religions such as 'Theology of environmentalism', 'New age beliefs' (Baker 1999) or 'Spirituality of seeking' (Wuthnow 1998) are on the rise in industrialised societies.

Arguably, in Canada, the importance of traditional religions in determining people's lives, as well as its role in organising societal principles, is less significant and preponderant than in Latin America. Moreover, in Canada, the separation between state and Church is absolutely clear. In Latin America, even though most national constitutions formally declare the separation between the state and the Catholic church (as an essential requisite to be considered modern nations), the reality is that most states still support the Catholic church and its influence over the educational system as well as over the area of policy making continues to carry weight in the region. Given that the message received from the state and the Catholic Church tends to be unified and homogeneous, the chances of having a more tolerant society considerably decline.

In Canada, since several religious groups have a considerable number of devotees, the religious life of the country is more fragmented, which makes weaker any kind of influence, as well as the exclusive emergence of a single prevalent group, more unlikely. In addition, in Canadian major cities, like Toronto and Montreal, diversity of ethnic backgrounds brought alongside a diversity of religions, which exposed immigrants to a variety of viewpoints and perspectives somehow different to those they were accustomed to experience in their early socialisation.

Conclusion

For most respondents, immigrating to Canada represented an enriching experience. Given that they got in contact with a different society to the one where they adopted their primary socialisation, they incorporated new attitudes, practices and values, which, surely, have increased their options to face daily life's vicissitudes and circumstances. These processes of informal learning became, in many cases, transformative learnings because they made interviewees to critically reflect on both Canada and Latin America. These reflections can help Latin American immigrants to develop and integrate into the Canadian society as well as to contribute – using a new perspective – in the diverse processes of social change that are taking place in their countries of origin.

In Canada, the multicultural notion of citizenship represents a two-way road. Not only newcomers have to learn about the receiving society (its practices, values and how to react to new challenges and circumstances) but also second generation, and older, immigrants as well as native populations need to be tolerant and open-minded to incorporate the codes and perspectives brought by newcomers.

In multicultural societies that yearly receive a considerable number of immigrants, the dominant values, attitudes and practices become blurred and enter in a process of constant reshaping. In this context, citizenship education entails a daily exercise in which newcomers and older immigrants learn from one another. In Canada, that would certainly help to answer one of the most urgent questions of current times: 'What does it mean to be Canadian?'

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on the demographic and statistics aspects of the Latin American immigration to Canada see the book 'Ruptures, continuities and re-learning: The political participation of Latin Americans in Canada' (Schugurensky and Ginieniewicz 2007).
2. Crick (1978) considers that 'a politically literate person would not only have a high level of understanding of a given [political] context and situation, but would be able to operate efficiently within that context and situation' (Crick and Porter 1978, 39). Overall, 'political literacy' refers to the knowledge and skills that everyone needs to make sense of contemporary political issues, institutions and procedures, or to make a constructive contribution to public affairs, locally or nationally (Davies et al. 2002).
3. The study at large addresses issues such as identity, inhibitors and enablers of political participation, connections to the home country, integration, civic interests, networks and civic change (the complete interview guide comprises more than 50 questions). Several papers and a doctoral dissertation are also drawn from this project.
4. It is pertinent to note that after controlling these items by gender and city of residence (Toronto and Montreal), no significant differences were found.
5. The quotations drawn from the interviews are indicated with an 'I' and those obtained from the focus groups are flagged with the letters 'FG'.
6. It has to be noted, though, that as individuals aged, it becomes a natural process to accumulate more life experiences, regardless of the place where the early political socialisation occurred or what was the 'migratory history'. In analysing the situation of Latin America, the interviewees relied on their memories (some respondents arrived in Canada four years before the interview but some did it more than thirty years ago). Therefore, in many cases, they were in a different stage of their lives, which sometimes makes it difficult to accurately determine whether the changes and learnings were exclusively related to the migratory process or were linked to a process of ageing of the individuals. Moreover, it is worth noting that the social context and the issues that dominated the public opinion, the organisations of the civil society and the states' policies, at the time these individuals emigrated, were, to a great extent, different from those that predominate nowadays.
7. In addition, as I argue in another paper (Ginieniewicz 2007), in Canada many respondents saw their social, economic and political demands fulfilled. This situation, arguably, not only pulled their participatory levels down, but also softened their political stances.
8. The 'idealisation factor' might have influenced newcomers' feelings, too. It usually occurs that, soon after their arrival in Canada, individuals overrate the host society's practices, admiring and emphasising

the best aspects of the receiving country. At that point, the contrast between their home countries and Canada is highly significant. In parallel, as the years go by, memories of daily life experiences, in their home countries, blur and immigrants start to pay more attention to Canada's flaws, which become more visible. Undoubtedly, further research, using a larger and representative sample, would help to clarify this point.

9. Nevertheless, immigrating to Canada does not automatically imply a step forward in all gender-related issues. For instance, in six Latin American countries (Argentina, Cuba, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Mexico and Honduras) women have a better chance of getting elected to national parliaments than in Canada.
10. It is worth mentioning that the proportion of practicing Catholics varies great deal in the different Latin American countries. In addition, the constant growth of the modern urban centers has lessened the impact of these traditions. Still, the influence of the Catholic Church on the school curricula, and other areas of the civil society, remains significant in many countries of the region.

Notes on contributor

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