

Statistics show that, in accordance with Quebec's immigrant selection criteria, the majority of Moroccan and Algerian newcomers to the province have a sound knowledge of French and a high level of education. Despite this, in 2001 their unemployment rates were 17.5 percent for Moroccans and 27.2 percent for Algerians, compared with the provincial average of 8.2 percent. Among Moroccans and Algerians who had lived in Quebec five years or less, the unemployment rates were even higher, at 33.6 percent and 35.4 percent, respectively.

And yet these immigrants have many of the qualifications needed to find a job, and they were selected on the very basis of these qualifications. This study examines possible explanations for this situation by analyzing the perceptions of immigrants from the Maghreb and of job counsellors.

The authors interviewed 22 North African job seekers and 15 counsellors in Sherbrooke and Montreal. From these interviews, the authors discerned three major areas of agreement between the two groups. The first is the difficulty these immigrants experience in getting their work credentials recognized: education and work experience acquired abroad tend to be discounted by employers. The second relates to the immigrants' own shortcomings in the context of the Quebec labour market: inadequate knowledge of English, lack of Canadian work experience, lack of occupational networks, and inability to rapidly meet the requirements of professional associations. The third area is discrimination among employers.

The authors show that the North African job seekers and the job counsellors look at the situation through very different lenses. Comments by the immigrants indicate that their expectations upon arrival (to achieve a rapid improvement in their living conditions and their professional situations) affect how they perceive the steps they have to take and the difficulties they encounter in their job search. Job counsellors' perceptions, on the other hand, reflect how job seekers approach their work – in their view job seekers can and must take action on their own. But other factors also influence these counsellors' perceptions, including ethnocentrism ("Quebec society is unquestionably superior"), cultural bias ("the difficulties encountered by North Africans are due to certain aspects of their culture") and feminism ("relationships between men and women in the Maghreb are unequal").

These different ways of interpreting the situation lead to significant differences in the two groups' understanding of the expectations and needs of North African workers. The immigrants feel they are entitled to a job and to individualized employment services, since they were selected on the basis of criteria linked to their skills in the first place. Job counsellors view the immigrants as being the same as all other job seekers; they believe that all job seekers are primarily responsible for doing what is necessary to find work. As a result North African immigrants are not focusing on what they could do to join the labour market; instead, they tend to question the criteria used to select them, the type of support they receive and the attitudes of employers. Job counsellors believe that the difficulties experienced by the newcomers from the Maghreb are linked to attributes of the immigrants themselves, such as unrealistic expectations, the need to upgrade training, lack of Canadian experience, and the particular demands of their culture and religious practices.

Those counsellors who said they wished they had more tools at their disposal to improve the support provided to immigrants and to encourage employers to hire them have little room to manoeuvre. Thus the lenses through which they interpret the situation could be viewed as their way of coping with the powerlessness they feel in their work context. The problem, however, lies in the fact that these lenses, when combined with the discrimination North African job seekers experience, serve to exacerbate and justify the vulnerability of immigrants.

The authors add that while several of the job counsellors adopted a resigned or passive attitude toward employers, thereby reinforcing exclusion and discrimination, others looked for effective ways to combat discrimination. Some, for example, attempted to get employers to reflect on their prejudices toward North Africans and to instead focus on their primary concern, which is to hire competent workers. This strategy, which requires establishing a relationship of trust between employers and counsellors, is a common element of intercultural training, something the authors recommend for all job counsellors. This could help to reduce discrimination among employers and would be a tool that job counsellors could use to combat their own feelings of powerlessness in fighting against discrimination.