

Racialisation of Immigrants at Work: Labour Mobility and Segmentation of Peruvian Migrants in Chile

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This article explores the emergent racialisation of Peruvian migrants as one element conditioning the labour segregation that characterises Peruvian insertion in Chile. We understand racialisation as a process of construction of categories in which both individual and collective actors participate, and whose expression is demonstrated by the differentiation and inequality that affects the racialised group. We tackle the articulation of racial differences among individual actors, both Chilean employers and Peruvian migrant workers, to suggest that the attribution of naturalised characteristics to migrants is related to segregation, mobility, and specific trajectories in the labour market.

Keywords: immigration, inequality, labour market, racialisation, social stratification, south–south migration.

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the flow of migrants to Chile, particularly of migrant workers seeking better economic opportunities. The migrant population has continually increased since the early 1990s accompanied by a change in the countries of origin. In the 1960s, migrants to Chile were largely from Europe, but currently the flow has shifted towards a fundamentally Latin American immigration (Martínez, 2003). The foreign-born population represents a small percentage of the total population in Chile (less than 2 percent according to the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas de Chile (INE), 2002 census). However, immigration has been framed as a problem of public interest, partly because it predominantly originates in neighbouring countries. The immigration of Peruvian citizens is noteworthy for largely being a flow of workers, mostly feminine at its outset, who face significant labour segmentation towards low-skilled jobs.

In this article, we focus on the emergent racialisation of Peruvian migrants in Chile, one element that influences the labour market segregation faced by migrants. We suggest that Peruvian migrants are characterised as phenotypically different from Chileans, and are perceived to have personal characteristics that make them ‘naturally’ apt for jobs at the lowest end of the social hierarchy. Hence, we posit racialisation, a process that