



# Immigrant Work Integration: A Wicked Problem

Immigrant integration is a wicked problem (Brunner, 2022; King, 2021), ridden with conflicts, linked to other problems, and most importantly, without an easy solution. Decades of personal stories, academic scholarship, and fervent activism have revealed that integrating newcomers is an ongoing process shaped by contradictory forces and changing circumstances. In the last few years, we have witnessed the latest of these effects with dramatic changes to global mobility and immobility. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic halted movement in the form of public health measures to curb the spread of infection and demonstrated just how dependent we are on cross-border movements. On the other hand, we witnessed record levels of forced mobility due to climate change, political upheaval, and war. At this time, the UNHCR estimates that close to 7 million Ukrainians have fled Ukraine (UNHCR, 2022), which is only one current example of such large-scale displacement.

Wicked problems constitute a ‘system of problems’ (Ackoff, 1974, p. 21) that are inseparable from other challenges, making them complex, ‘elusive and logically endless’ (King, 2021, p. 26), and resistant to analysis and resolution (Horn & Weber, 2007, p. 6). This framework, initially introduced in the domain of planning by Rittel and Webber (1973), has been adopted by scholars studying various migratory movements and immigrant populations (Brunner, 2022; King, 2021) to understand the interconnected, contested, and enduring nature of these transnational processes and actors (Head, 2019).

When it comes to immigrant integration, barriers and opportunities are present at multiple levels, varying based on specific situations facing individuals, organizational realities, societal perceptions, and multi-jurisdictional policies and structures (Syed, 2008). Wicked problems are known to have many stakeholders with radically different ways of understanding the problem (King, 2021, p. 26). In the case of immigrant integration, stakeholders include governments, immigrants, and employers. Moreover, ‘solutions to wicked problems are not ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ nor ‘true’ or ‘false’...they require a great number of people to change their mindset’ (King, 2021, p. 27).

We can look at the example of labor shortages reported in traditionally immigrant-receiving countries to understand how these different and sometimes contradictory understandings of the same problem emerge, requiring a multilevel and multi-pronged response. A recent report from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Pizzinelli & Shibata, 2022) shows that in the United States and the United Kingdom, the enduring nature of national labor shortages is not caused by a mismatch between workers’ skills and labor market needs. Rather, labor shortages result from workers being increasingly reluctant to take up jobs with poor work conditions. These workers would prefer to exit the workforce; this phenomenon has been dubbed the ‘great resignation.’ Cook (2021) shows that this trend is common to all levels of skills and sectors and is often attributed to higher workloads and burnout.

The long-standing and popular solution to address labor shortages relies on immigration as a key policy strategy. Countries design immigration policies to attract talented individuals, and organizations spend significant resources to attract, recruit, and retain talent consistently in short supply. Despite these efforts by countries and organizations to prioritize the immigration strategy, immigrants continue to struggle to integrate upon arrival and even after. In terms of work integration, it is well documented that immigrants face a persistent challenge when entering the labor market of receiving countries. In particular, they experience unemployment, underemployment, and downward career mobility (Al Ariss et al., 2012; Hari, 2013) attributed to the non-recognition of education and work experience acquired abroad (Banerjee et al., 2021; Damelang et al., 2020), perceived linguistic abilities, loss of previous social memberships and networks, and racial and gender prejudices (Ellermann, 2020; Esses, 2021; Man & Chou, 2020). Therefore, the complexity of immigrant work immigration requires a multilevel approach to get all relevant

stakeholders on board. This is the area in which we aspire to make our contribution.

Our purpose with this book is twofold. First, we aim to make sense of the wicked problem of immigrant work integration, motivated by our long-established research interest in the topic and professional, personal, and community networks. We explore this problem at multiple levels of analysis (individual, interactional, organizational, and institutional). Second, we aim to contribute to scholarship and policymaking on immigrant integration by explicating and exploring the utility of the sensemaking perspective as a theoretical framework to motivate further research.

This introductory chapter starts by specifying qualified immigrants (QIs) as the focus of our analysis and provides a brief background on the significance of QIs' work integration. This is followed by an introduction to sensemaking as a theoretical lens to begin to unravel the 'mess' of immigrant work integration.

## 1.1 IMMIGRANTS

There are many different types of immigrants. Multiple and varied circumstances motivate people to move within and across international borders. We focus on the experiences of people who have moved with the intention of permanent settlement to immigrant-receiving countries that admit these newcomers through different entry streams, such as economic, family reunification, and refugee. In this book, we are primarily concerned with their work integration regardless of the entry stream they used. Work integration is the process by which immigrants engage in employment or self-employment activities commensurate with their professional goals, qualifications, and experience, with adequate economic security and career prospects (Lee et al., 2020).

Immigrants arriving under different migratory streams have unique characteristics, rights, and entitlements and, as a result, might face unique challenges. For example, highly skilled refugees face more challenges than economic migrants due to heightened hurdles of accessing identity documentation,<sup>1</sup> increased hardships due to the circumstances that led to migration, and decreased opportunities to plan and prepare for integration before migrating. Lee and colleagues (2020) refer to these systemic, multilevel barriers to workforce integration facing refugees as the *canvas ceiling*.

Recognizing that different groups of immigrants face different challenges, we follow other researchers (e.g., Farashah & Blomquist, 2021) and use the term *Qualified Immigrant* (QI) to refer to immigrants with foreign post-secondary education who have relocated to another country permanently to live and work (Cerdin et al., 2014; Farashah & Blomquist, 2021). QIs form a diverse group with varying human and social capital levels, different reasons for migration, and various demographic characteristics in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and ability.

As discussed, QIs' integration is a wicked problem, which despite its resistance to resolution has an immense impact on their material conditions and lived realities. Commensurate employment is critical to supporting the integration of QIs in a new society. Employment grants newcomers a sense of belonging, recognition, and acceptance (Dietz et al., 2015; Frank, 2013; Hansen, 2012; Reitz et al., 2014). In addition, research has shown that employed individuals have significantly higher levels of physical and psychological health than unemployed individuals (Korpi, 2001; Paul & Moser, 2009; Wanberg, 2012).

Many studies, such as the ones cited above, describe the barriers, challenges, and poor employment outcomes of immigrants. These studies assume implicitly that such contextual barriers are objective and uniformly perceived (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Ramboarison-Lalao et al., 2012). A few studies have disputed these claims of uniformity and recognize that even though barriers are prevalent, employment outcomes can differ across different groups of immigrants, organizations, and individuals. These scholars call for a more nuanced understanding of immigrant integration.

The few scholars responding to this call have highlighted the different reactions of QIs to similar contextual barriers and shown how individuals may take different actions toward variable outcomes. For example, Pearson and colleagues (2012) found that some Polish immigrants in Ireland perceived their stay in Ireland as temporary, influencing how they used their qualifications and skills to find work in the new country. Similarly, Aten and colleagues (2016) found that Filipino engineers with similar educational and work backgrounds experienced different career outcomes because they thought differently about their migration and career prospects in Canada. They identified these differences in approaches as mobility frames that influenced the Filipino immigrants in

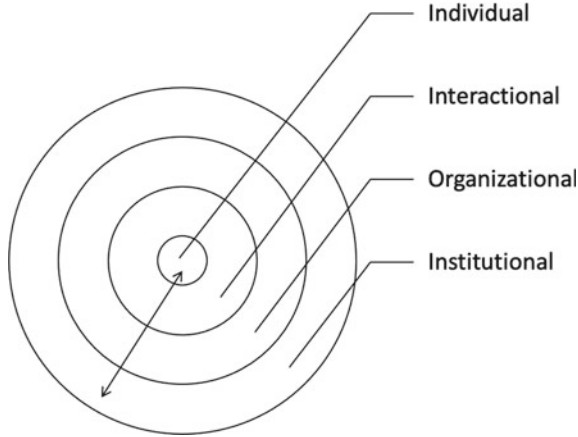
the study to seek employment and rationalize their decision and motivation to stay in Canada. In a related study, Al Ariss (2010) referred to the differential outcomes of immigrants as modes of engagement. He found that immigrants dealt with barriers to work integration in four ways: maintenance (worked within contextual barriers), transformation (tried to alter barriers), entrepreneurship (started their own business), and opting out (gave up their career goals).

However, most of these studies cited above focus on individual understandings and outcomes. As a wicked problem, QI work integration necessitates a perspective that can view its operation at various levels to accommodate its social complexity (Conklin, 2007, p. 19). By adopting a sensemaking perspective, we provide a multilevel framework to understand the whole process of immigrant work integration at the individual, interactional, organizational, and institutional levels.

## 1.2 THEORETICAL APPROACH

In a recent review of theoretical approaches to studying QIs' work experiences, Farashah and Blomquist (2021) found that many studies are atheoretical or only loosely specify theoretical concepts when discussing their findings. Studies with a clear theoretical foundation employed mostly *content theories*, focusing on variables that explain antecedents of migration and the consequences of migration in terms of employment and career outcomes. These content theories include human capital theory, career capital theory, social identity theory, intersectionality, and cultural identity transition. According to their categorization, few studies employed *process theories*, which is surprising given an academic consensus on viewing immigrant integration as a process.

Of the studies employing process theories, Farashah and Blomquist (2021) found the majority drew on Pierre Bourdieu's *Theory of Practice* (1977, 1986) as a starting point to look at capital, agency, and the field to explain QI's work experiences. The remaining studies employed sensemaking theories (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 1995) to explore the cognitive processes involved in QI work integration. Based on our assessment of QI work integration as a multilevel, multi-scalar, and multi-actor wicked problem, we believe that the potential of the sensemaking perspective has not yet been fully realized. The few studies identified by Farashah and Blomquist that use sensemaking as a theoretical framework to understand QI work experiences focus primarily on the individual immigrants



**Fig. 1.1** Levels of sensemaking

and their sensemaking process. To support our multilevel analysis, we extend the sensemaking perspective beyond the individual toward the interactional, organizational, and institutional (see Fig. 1.1).

Each chapter of this book focuses on a level of sensemaking while drawing the connections among the different levels, beginning with the individual immigrant (Chapter 3), individuals with whom immigrants interact (Chapter 4), organizations (Chapter 5), and the macro-environment in which QIs operate (Chapter 6). We acknowledge that a shared understanding to arrive at an accepted solution goes against the very nature of wicked problems. Instead, we present different but connected subjective understandings and strategies of QIs and related actors in relevant environments toward work integration in a new country. We hope this perspective will motivate novel research approaches, offer ideas for future research, and invite practitioners to engage in the process of work integration more mindfully, thereby encouraging more informed practice.

### *1.2.1 Sensemaking and Immigrant Work Integration*

Karl Weick and colleagues (2005) define sensemaking as ‘the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing’ (p. 409). The sensemaking perspective provides insights into

the process of organizing—in particular, how individuals and organizations give meaning to events and make sense of their environment. Following Weick's tradition, we understand work integration as a process of organizing that requires establishing structures, roles, and activities to achieve the goals of an individual and/or organization. People organize to resolve equivocality—the existence of multiple equally-possible meanings—and make the world more orderly (Weick et al., 2005). Consequently, we see the word 'organization' as an all-encompassing label to refer to a stream of activities performed by a group of people. These activities result from individual and collective processes of organizing and sensemaking.

Karl Weick (1995) based his original theorizations on organizational shocks, events, or disasters that instigate system breakdowns and interruptions in routine. Following such an event, people seek to return to familiar or habitual scripts or responses based on what is plausible to them. Their past experiences influence the subsequent construction of their identity. Sensemaking is focused on the social-psychological processes (meaning-making) rather than the outcomes themselves. Therefore, the sensemaking perspective highlights how different meanings are assigned to the same event and seeks to understand how individuals and organizations resolve ambiguity and uncertainty by finding new meanings. Individuals and organizations make sense of what is occurring now and what should be done next.

At an individual level, we treat the decision to migrate as the event from which our investigation of sensemaking starts. The process of migrating leads to interruptions and breakdowns in professional identities, and immigrants contend with multifaceted barriers to work integration, as has already been explained in this introduction. We seek to uncover how QIs make sense of these interruptions and disruptions to their professional identities, assign meanings to their various interactions with local actors involved in the process of work integration, and take actions based on new meanings that emerge. We also explore how local actors and organizations interacting with QIs make sense of immigrants and their talents and influence QIs' processes of sensemaking and integration. Finally, we explore how the macro-environment, through narratives of multiculturalism and professional attainment, informs QIs and local citizens' sensemaking of immigration and influences immigrants' work integration.

From academic and anecdotal evidence, we know that some immigrants can cope with the significant barriers to work integration while

others cannot. Similarly, despite the popularity of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives, some organizations are more successful in recruiting and integrating QIs in their workforce than others. Adopting a sensemaking perspective allows for exploring processes that happen at the individual, interactional, organizational, and institutional levels that influence QIs' work integration. This perspective is explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

### 1.3 OUR APPROACH

We adopt a multidisciplinary approach as a management scholar (Luciara) and a geographer and gender studies scholar (Amrita) to bring novel insights to our shared interest in professionally trained and qualified immigrants who consistently face a complex disadvantage when entering and integrating into the Canadian labor market. In recognizing the lag between academic research and frontline issues faced by practitioners working on immigration challenges, we heed the growing call for scholars to conduct socially useful research. Our latest work takes a transformative approach (Nardon et al., 2021a) to understand the wicked problem of immigrant work integration while supporting the persons sharing their stories. A transformative approach rejects the notion that participant interactions are neutral activities and instead assumes that the researcher influences the participants' sensemaking process and aims to intervene with intention. These interventions seek to create opportunities for self-reflection in which new understandings are made possible.

This book is a culmination of over a decade of our combined research on immigrant issues and our lived experiences as immigrants to Canada and temporary residents of other countries. Born in Brazil and India, educated in the United States and the United Kingdom, we have life experiences in Belgium, Kenya, and Uganda. These journeys and our identities have made our approach to our research contextual, relational, intersectional, embodied, and politicized. Kusow (2003), in their analysis of immigrants studying their own and other immigrant communities, cautioned that researchers are simultaneously insiders bearing community expectations and outsiders whose identities can be implicated in unpredictable ways. We sought to be self-reflexive and politically aware when developing our various research projects and maintained a responsibility toward ourselves, our participants, and the research outcomes. In addition to undertaking a transformative approach in our research interactions, we



view them as culturally embedded contexts. We are conscientious about how we represent our participants' stories, voices, and 'truths.'

Together we bring an interdisciplinary, intercultural, and intersectional perspective to the study of immigrant work integration. We complement each other's perspectives by bringing an organizational and a gender and policy perspective into conversation, drawing on different literatures and methodologies to bear on the topic, which we believe results in a more robust and sophisticated understanding of this wicked problem. Moreover, we bring our own stories and those of our families and communities to emphasize the lived realities of immigrant communities and the multidimensional challenges they face as newcomers.

The various participant narratives shared in the book are drawn from qualitative data collected during multiple research projects on immigrants to Canada. We have been following immigrants' experiences based on their shared narratives online (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2020; Nardon et al., 2015) and interviews using multiple methodological paradigms for over a decade (e.g., Aten et al., 2016; Hari, 2013, 2017, 2018; Nardon et al., 2021b). We are also immersed and actively engaged in the immigrant community through personal and professional connections.

The stories we share here draw from multiple past (Aten et al., 2016; Hari, 2013, 2017, 2018; Moffitt et al., 2020; Nardon et al., 2021b) and ongoing projects (Nardon et al., 2022; Palic et al., 2022) exploring immigrant experiences of settling in Canada and integrating into the labor market. Although the realities of the labor market have changed, and continue to do so, our observation over time suggests many similarities in the ways individual immigrants experience and make sense of their transitions to the workforce. Specific details of each project are provided in the notes at the end of the respective chapters in which the stories appear.

## 1.4 THE ROAD AHEAD

This chapter began by describing the wicked problem of immigrant integration and later qualified immigrants' (QIs') work integration. We provided some key definitions and briefly introduced the theoretical lens adopted throughout the book, sensemaking, and its utility in making sense of this wicked problem. The next chapter provides a fuller discussion of the sensemaking perspective and its potential to better understand QIs'

work integration. To do this, we discuss properties and levels of sense-making and outline how these ideas will be weaved through the remaining chapters in the book.

## 1.5 KEY POINTS

- Immigrant integration is a wicked problem. Barriers and opportunities are present at multiple levels and vary based on specific situations facing individuals, organizational realities, societal perceptions, and multi-jurisdictional policies and structures. In addition, it includes many stakeholders with radically different ways of understanding the problem.
- Immigrant-receiving countries admit immigrants to fill labor shortages and work in tandem with organizations that seek to find and place global talent. Yet many qualified immigrants are unemployed or underemployed.
- Work integration is the process of engaging in employment or self-employment activities commensurate with immigrants' professional goals, qualifications, and experience, and with adequate economic security and career prospects.
- Sensemaking is the process of giving meaning to situations and rationalizing action. It is a fruitful lens to fully explore QIs' work integration and the role of various actors and institutions with whom they interact in the journey toward commensurate employment.

## NOTE

1. We use the term 'identity documentation' to include various forms of documents and registration required to access employment, education, and services in a new country, which can include birth certificate, driver's license, passport, transcripts, diplomas/degrees, etc.

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