



The cultural preparedness model of aspiration and engagement: understanding the dynamics of integration

Gideon Arulmani

To cite this article: Gideon Arulmani (2018): The cultural preparedness model of aspiration and engagement: understanding the dynamics of integration, British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, DOI: [10.1080/03069885.2018.1513284](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2018.1513284)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2018.1513284>



Published online: 24 Aug 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The cultural preparedness model of aspiration and engagement: understanding the dynamics of integration

Gideon Arulmani

The Promise Foundation, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

This paper uses the cultural preparedness approach to analyse the interface between the aspirations of immigrants and their engagement with systems of the host country. It draws upon interviews with 84 immigrants from 35 developing countries living in 9 high-income countries. Based upon Edmund Husserl's hermeneutical phenomenology, two studies are presented to understand the disturbance of equilibrium in cultural preparation status experienced by immigrants as they try to find their way in a host country. Aspiration-Engagement themes and responses to the challenges of integration are discussed. A model of aspiration and engagement based on the cultural preparedness approach is proposed as a framework that guidance and counselling workers could use to help immigrants optimise their engagement with the systems of the host country.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 September 2017
Revised 2 August 2018
Accepted 15 August 2018

KEYWORDS

Acculturation; aspiration and engagement; cultural preparedness; enculturation; immigration

Introduction

The contemporary immigrant arrives in a location that is usually culturally occupied by others. While different push or pull factors influence migration (e.g. Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell, & Long, 2018), it is likely that nearly all immigrants aspire to a "better life" in the host country. From the side of the host, systems and supports are created and resources spent to help immigrants realise their aspirations. However, engagement with such services is not always optimal. In Sweden, for example, 10.5% of foreign-born students drop out of upper-secondary education compared with 5.4% native-born students, and 24.1% change educational choices compared to 12.6% of native-born (OECD, 2014). In Canada, recent immigrants are 2.5 times likelier than Canadian-born individuals to be working in low-skilled jobs and immigrants who have spent 15 years are still twice as likely as the Canadian-born to be working in low-skilled occupations (TIEDI, 2011). Similar trends are seen in other immigration destinations. Of concern is the fact that these disparities prevail despite substantial provisions made by "the system", where system is defined as the rules, mores, requirements, common practices and expectations that compose the social, educational, economic and cultural structure and organisation of the host country. An important mechanism available to the migrant to re-attain stability is through engagement with supports offered by the system. It is a moot point as to whether the system's offerings are consonant with the immigrant's cultural preparedness (described in greater detail below). Against this background, the relevance of this paper arises from growing concerns pertaining to the integration of immigrants (or lack thereof) into the cultural and economic fabric of host countries (e.g. OECD, 2014; TIEDI, 2011). This paper draws upon the constructs of aspiration, engagement and their interface to argue that identifying themes underlying engagement with systems of

the host country and distinguishing responses to these themes could yield a frame of reference for deeper insights into the dynamics of immigrants' integration.

The paper begins with a discussion on the concepts of aspiration and engagement and juxtaposes these two constructs to show four theoretically interesting interactions referred to as the A–E matrix. The key constructs of the cultural preparedness approach are then described and used as a framework to understand the aspiration–engagement interaction. The philosophic moorings of the two studies reported here are Husserl's hermeneutic phenomenology and the nonlinear principles of Indian philosophy. Study 1 examines the author's interviews with immigrants conducted over a 17-year period and identifies themes reflecting the nature of immigrants' engagement with the systems of the host country. Study 2 examines data emerging from Study 1 to find descriptors for the four categories of the A–E matrix. These two studies suggest that the A–E matrix could provide clues that are useful for guidance and counselling workers to help immigrants re-establish their lives by discovering a new cultural preparedness equilibrium.

Aspiration and engagement: a matrix of interactions

Aspiration

In general terms, "to aspire" is defined as a longing, or aim; a goal or objective that is strongly desired (aspiration, n.d.). As a psychological construct, aspirations have been described to be expressions of personal agency involving intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001). An interesting distinction that has emerged in the literature is between aspiration and expectation. For example, while Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) in a meta-analysis (16 studies) found no significant difference between the career aspirations of ethnic minority and non-minority individuals, they did find that ethnic minorities expected fewer career opportunities and a larger number of career barriers than their nonminority peers. Therefore understanding congruence or discrepancy between an individual's career aspiration and expectation is important. The development of aspirations is not just an individual-specific matter. The prevailing opportunity structure (e.g. Schoon & Parsons, 2002), constraints of social circumstances along with systemic and structural barriers (e.g. Arulmani, Van Laar, & Easton, 2003), all affect the manner in which aspirations are formed and realised. Contemporary discourse pertaining to migration argues that the aspirations of immigrants are not linked merely to economic benefits and Meyer's (2018) conversations with immigrants, for example, found that aspirations were linked to their self-perceptions, their feelings about their home region and their concerns about their futures. Building upon such observations, Carling and Collins (2018) define aspiration as "... an intersection of personal, collective and normative dimensions" (p. 915). They point out that aspirations could be emulative, in that, immigrants find virtue in aligning with the aspirations of others like themselves in the host country. Also pertinent to the arguments that will be made in this paper is the introduction of the vocabulary of desire into the aspiration discourse which draws attention to the possibility that instigators of aspiration could refer to "... a wide range of conscious and sub-conscious influences ... combinations of strategic planning, opportunism and fancies that manifest in movements to take individuals into other worlds, to achieve or avoid (un)desirable futures" (Collins, 2018, p. 966). Viewed from this perspective, aspiration is not merely a cognition but implies a deep emotional investment on the part of the individual, the fulfilment of which is to be seen not only as future possibilities but also reflective of the immigrant's past experiences and present situation. Migration (whether by choice or coercion) may not be an end in itself but motivated rather by what the migrant aspires to achieve through immigration. This paper views immigrants' aspirations as indicators of the kind of transformation they desire. It is possible that the aspiration is for a better quality of life, greater opportunities, or for refuge, higher security and safety. It is also possible that the aspiration reflects the immigrant's desire for the above in conjunction with the freedom for continuance of an earlier way of life as dictated by the tenets of his/her home culture.

Engagement

In general terms, to “engage” is to bind (someone, such as oneself) to do something, to have contact and establish meaningful communication with someone or something (engage, n.d.). Prominent amongst attempts to operationalise engagement as a psychosocial construct are the person-environment models. Neufeld et al. (2006) define engagement as “... the quality of a person-environment relationship determined by the extent to which negotiation, participation, and evaluation processes occur during the interaction” (p. 251). Brown’s (1987) research showed that locally specific working-class culture engenders cultural predispositions toward education that are seen as three forms of engagement: a positive, normative acceptance of schooling, a negative alienated rejection and between them, an alienated but instrumental orientation to schooling. Macdonald and Marsh (2004), nearly 20 years later, extend Brown’s categorisations showing that the nature of engagement need not be fixed and stable. Pupils move from one form of engagement to another. Seen from another perspective is Schaufeli and colleagues’ hypothesis that engagement is the opposite of burnout. They define engagement as “... a positive fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002, p. 465). The important point arising from these discussions is that engagement and disengagement ought to be viewed along a continuum and not as dichotomous, polar opposites (Macdonald & Marsh, 2004). Linked to the idea that the quality of engagement lies along a continuum is Neault and Pickerell’s (2011) postulation that engagement is optimal when the challenges of job tasks match the individual’s capabilities. Of particular relevance to this paper is Collins (2018) observation that although host countries invest considerable energy in developing modalities for engagement, rarely do immigrants “... act in the manner of rational calculating subjects, making decisions from available information, assessing risks and planning for determinate futures within the constraints of regulation” (Collins, 2018, p. 977). The quality of immigrants’ engagement is instead strongly influenced by their willingness to acknowledge and accept the rules of the host country. In this paper, quality of engagement with the system is seen to reflect the depth of psychological connectedness between the individual and the system. This connectedness could be manifested as the ease, comfort, security and sense of belonging that the individual experiences in his/her interactions with the system.

Bringing aspiration and engagement together

It seems from the foregoing that aspiration and engagement taken severally and/or conjointly could throw light on immigrants’ settlement into host locations. The juxtaposing of the constructs of aspiration and engagement (A–E) provides four theoretically interesting interactions between aspiration and engagement. Thus, interactions could show low aspiration-low engagement, high aspiration-low engagement, high aspiration-high engagement and low aspiration-high engagement. Each of these associations is a theoretical grouping and it is unlikely that any one individual would “fit” purely into any one category. Instead, the patterns presented are a theoretical starting point to explore the interplay between aspiration and engagement. These interactions are captured in Figure 1.

The cultural preparation process

This paper uses Arulmani’s (2014, 2015, 2016) formulation of cultural preparedness as a theoretical framework to further understand the aspiration-engagement interaction. The cultural preparedness approach proposes that *global trends* form the backdrop against which human engagement with work and career play out. These are macro, external factors (social philosophies, economic trends, political changes, technological advances, natural phenomena) that affect the individual/group but over which they have little or no control. The process of *enculturation*, facilitated by the human

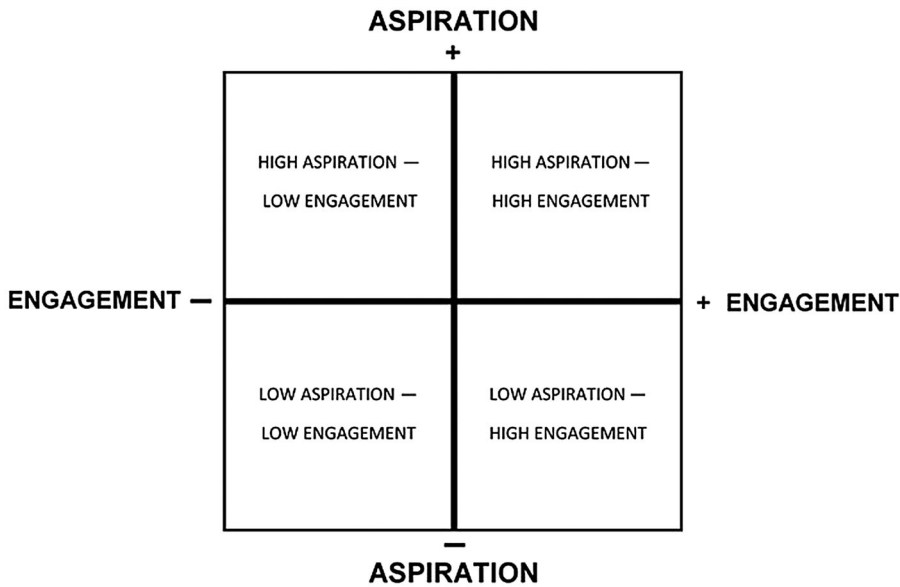


Figure 1. The cultural preparedness model of aspiration and engagement. Printed with permission from The Promise Foundation, 2010.

ability for *cultural learning*, leads the members of a group to absorb the ways of their culture. Enculturation is effected through three key factors: patterns of social organisation varying along the individualism-collectivism continuum, patterns of value attribution and processes of role allocation. Enculturation creates a unique state of balance and internal stability, reflected in the person's engagement with the world. This internal stability is described as the *cultural preparation status equilibrium*. This equilibrium is not permanent. The forces of *acculturation* can affect this state of equilibrium. Acculturative forces could be consonant or dissonant with the individual/group's cultural preparation status. Consonance would mean that the acculturative force supports, enhances, or further stabilises the existing equilibrium. Dissonance would mean that the existing equilibrium is disturbed. Underlying the hypothetical A–E categorisation shown in Figure 1, are propositions rooted within the processes of cultural preparedness. Accordingly, the immigrant is already in a state of cultural preparedness equilibrium when arriving in a new country. Immigration by its very nature results in the disturbance of this equilibrium. Immigrants' responses to this disturbance could range from establishing a new equilibrium by integrating with the host system to adopting a separatist position by rejecting the host and retaining the original cultural orientation. Understanding the variations seen in migrants' A–E responses to supports and services offered by the host country could throw light on the dynamics of integration and potentially inform policy and practice.

Philosophic moorings

This study is undergirded by philosophic constructs from Asian and Western thought with a strong emphasis on lived experience. Edmund Husserl's, hermeneutic phenomenology is of interest here (Husserl, 1913/1931). This style of enquiry seeks to create an intellectual ethos for the objective study of topics typically considered to be subjective such as judgements, perceptions, and emotions. Phenomenological data comprise conscious human experience rather than data emerging from experimentation. The fact remains however that perspective is ever present and cannot (perhaps need not) be neutralised. The notion of karmic dispassion from Asian philosophies is relevant here. The seeker of truth is exhorted to engage with life and its duties with vigour, but at the

same time practice dispassion (Hiriyanna, 1993). This principle of distancing oneself from a task, yet engaging with it wholeheartedly could be relevant when applying the phenomenological approach.

Husserl and his colleagues (Heidegger, 1927/1996) draw upon the principles of hermeneutics to describe a hermeneutic phenomenology that strives to reflect upon basic experience before it has been coloured by theory, translated or elucidated in any way. One key tenet of hermeneutic phenomenology is phenomenological reduction (epoché) or bracketing. This requires the identification of personal assumptions about the external world and the bracketing of these assumptions in order to focus on the analysis of the original experience without bias. A repeated and consistent return to and a re-viewing of the original material is said to provide new insights which can inform the modification of earlier impressions creating a process of iterative reflexivity that continues throughout the examination of the data. Husserl's hermeneutic phenomenology guided this study. Reflections of this approach are seen in the nonlinear karmic principles of Asian thought. Cause and effect are not seen as polarities but as integral aspects of the same phenomenon. Enquiry is portrayed as an ever expanding spiral (Arulmani, 2014). Development occurs upon previous development, whereby one constantly learns from the past and looks to the future accepting all experience as integral to knowing. Applied to hermeneutic phenomenology one could conceive karmic engagement with data as a spirular (spiral-like) evolution of ideas.

Study 1

The objectives of Study 1 were twofold: identifying themes reflecting engagement with the systems of the host country and discovering responses to these themes. Study 1 draws upon interviews conducted by the author between the years 2000 and 2017 with 84 immigrants from 35 developing countries living at the time of the interview in 9 high-income countries (24 cities). Research indicates that the strongest impact of acculturation is felt by first-generation immigrants with subsequent generations assimilating the host culture with greater ease (e.g. OECD, 2014). The cultural preparedness approach suggests that the greater the cultural and economic difference between the home and host country (e.g. collectivist-individualistic social organisation, post-industrial work environment), the greater are the challenges faced by the immigrant (Arulmani, 2014). Hence Study 1 focused exclusively on first-generation immigrants. These interviews are a part of what is essentially the author's travelogue, compiled in the course of his travels on assignments. They are hence limited to immigrants one would encounter during international travel (e.g. in airports, hotels, restaurants). The collection of case material followed a serendipitous approach, "... making fortunate discoveries unexpectedly, by accident or coincidence" (Nutefall & Ryder, 2010. p. 3). The interviews were conducted in English with the duration ranging from 45 to 120 minutes ($M_{\text{interview time}} = 60$) depending on the availability of the interviewee. An invitation to a formal interview was made only after the person spontaneously began a conversation with the author over and above the transaction at hand. For example, some taxi drivers would remain silent throughout the drive while others would ask the author where he was from, why he was in the country, what he thought about the country and so on. This spontaneity was taken as an initial indication of the person's openness to engage in a broader conversation. The author then would introduce himself, explain his interest in understanding how immigrants settled into their new home and ask if this person would consent to have a more formal interview about these matters. All were informed that their narratives would be used to develop a deeper understanding of how immigrants engaged with the systems of the host countries and that these stories would finally be published (after anonymisation) for a public readership. About 40% of those whom the author approached declined participation. On the other hand, about 25% of those interviewed also brought their friends/relatives to meet the author. All interviews were conducted with verbal informed consent based on the assurance of confidentiality. The identity of participants was anonymised by transforming identifying data (e.g. name, place of employment) into alphanumeric codes, the expansion of which was known only to the author. No incentives were offered. Recordings were handwritten in the form of jottings which

were transcribed into complete narratives. Participants could not be invited to verify the final version. When the author decided to analyse the interviews, ethics clearance for the study was obtained from the author's parent organisation, [identifying information removed for blind review], which researches and develops interventions related to mental health.

Interview protocol

The overarching objective of this study was to gain insights pertaining to the interaction between aspiration and engagement based on immigrants' *lived experience*. Interviewees were encouraged to look back to their earlier lives, compare and contrast it with their present situation and articulate plans for the future. After collection of preliminary background information, all interviews began with the question, "Tell me how your life has played out over the last few years". Other questions included, "Tell me about failures/successes/barriers you have experienced here", "How did you deal with any barriers you faced", "How has this move affected your family life/values/identity". Mother tongue expressions were encouraged and the author used prompts, encouragement and reflective statements to obtain as full a narrative as possible. All interviews were conducted by the author. An overview of the sample is presented in [Table 1](#).

The research group

As described above, these interviews were conducted over many years, in multiple locations, within varying political, economic and cultural environments. Since the case material is multicultural in nature, it was important that the research team was itself varied and comprised individuals who were not only experienced and knowledgeable about the phenomenon being studied, but who were from different cultures. The author turned to colleagues with whom he had worked before. The project, as well as its philosophic orientation, was explained. All those the author approached, accepted to join the panel. The research group comprised three men and three women in the age

Table 1. Overview of sample.

Host country (city)	Number of interviews	Males	Females	Age range
Austria (Feldkirk, Vienna, Innsbruck, Salzburg)	8	4	4	18–47
Australia (Perth, Sydney, Melbourne)	9	5	4	28–55
Canada (Montreal, Quebec City, Toronto)	5	2	3	28–34
Liechtenstein	3	0	3	24–32
New Zealand (Wellington, Auckland)	8	6	2	22–45
Sweden (Stockholm, Gothenburg)	14	8	6	21–48
Switzerland (Zurich, Berne, Freiburg)	14	9	5	30–46
France (Paris, Nice, Roissy)	13	7	6	24–54
Italy (Rome, Bergamo, Turin)	10	6	4	28–54
Total	84	47	37	

Mean Age: 36 years (range = 20–55 years).

Means years of residence in host country: 6 years (range = 1–12 years).

Countries of origin: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Angola, Argentina, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Cameroon, Caribbean, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Eritrea, Ghana, India, Iraq (Kurdish), Kosovo, Lebanon, Morocco, Philippines, Poland, Serbia, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkey (Kurdish), Ukraine, Vietnam.

Occupation in home country: accountant, auto mechanic, bank teller, bus driver, businessman, carpenter, clerk, computer teacher, doctor, electrician, factory worker, farmer, fish canning industry, food technologist, graphic designer, head of school, history teacher, housewife, journalist, lab technician, lawyer, lecturer, miner, nongovernmental organisation worker, nun, nurse, nursery school teacher, physiotherapist, policeman, preschool teacher, rug maker, scientist, senior teacher, shop attendant, shop keeper, shop owner, social worker, software programmer, soldier, student, teacher, tour guide, unoccupied, waitress.

Occupation at the time of interview: accountant, accounts clerk, auto mechanic, bar tender, box office clerk, bus driver, career counsellor, clerk, electrician, farmhand, front desk (hotel), housekeeping (hotel), housewife, janitor, junior accounts clerk, luggage handler, machine operator, maid, nun, nurse assistant, relief teacher, shop assistant, shop owner, software programmer, street vendor, student, supermarket clerk, taxi driver, tour guide, unoccupied, waiter/waitress.

Reason for Shift: better prospects, loss of livelihood and property, marriage, political unrest, war.

range of 28–55 years. Three were from India. The others were from Sweden, Vietnam and Sri Lanka. Two held doctoral degrees in clinical psychology and one in human development. One was in the final year of a 4-year doctoral programme in career psychology, one held a Master's degree in social work and one a bachelor's degree in sociology. All members of the team were professionally engaged in counselling and guidance and had practical experience ranging from 10 to 25 years. Five had direct experience with immigrants. They were all closely acquainted with the author's work on cultural preparedness.

Procedure and data analysis

All team members were oriented to the concepts under study and the undergirding phenomenological principles. This was led by the author through discussions (group and individual) and written briefs. The following criteria for inclusion of a theme were set: the theme characterised at least 75% of the cases and concurrence between all members was 100%. The technique of memoing (Glaser, 1978) was used throughout the study.

Before the analysis, bracketing required all team members to describe their assumptions with particular reference to immigrants' aspirations and processes of engagement, cultural preparedness, as well as their expectations of the study. The objective was to achieve, as far as possible, a suspension of assumptions through the articulation of these assumptions, sharpening personal and mutual sensitivities to personal orientations and thereby mitigating the influence of bias. Over the next three months, each member of the group followed a two-step examination of each interview.

Step 1: Identifying key themes reflecting immigrants' aspirations and their engagement with the host country's systems and provisions, with primary reference to education and career. Thematic extractions were conducted to identify core phenomena (broad themes) specifically linked to finding one's way in the host country (e.g. learning the host country's language). This analysis of the case material was conducted in 6 rounds, over a period of 8 weeks, with each member examining 14 cases per round. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to identify distinct, independent concepts and categories in the case material. On completion of open coding, the study drew upon hermeneutic phenomenology to re-examine the first round of analysis. Each team member shared with the rest of the group, a written document listing identified themes with illustrative quotations from the case material. Each member was then required to perform two functions: firstly, indicate consensus with the themes in other members' lists and secondly, based on readings of others' lists, edit to include or delete themes they had originally listed. After one such round of editing, themes that found complete consensus were marked as selected. Members debated the inclusion/non-inclusion of remaining items on the theme list. This reflexive-hermeneutic iteration allowed the team to learn from each other, re-examine their own reflections and engage in an expanding spirular evolution of ideas. Three such rounds were held iteratively after which it was decided that the analysis was saturated and further analysis would not make substantial additions. Items that had not found consensus by this stage were dropped. The core phenomena listed were referred to as *Aspiration-Engagement themes* (A–E themes).

Step 2: Identifying responses to the A–E themes. Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to list the various ways in which interviewees engaged with the A–E themes. The same method of case allocation used in Step 1 was followed. Each A–E theme was examined across the cases to identify how the interviewee responded to the challenge, task or requirement presented by that theme (e.g. responding to failure to learn the language of the host country by *trying again*). The process of reflexive iteration was repeated. The objective this time was to find consensus about the best fit between the responses emerging from axial coding and the A–E theme to which each response best belonged (e.g. response of *failure* to learn the language best fits under the *failure experience* theme). Items that did not find consensus about fit with an A–E theme were dropped after the third iteration and the final list of responses referred to as *Aspiration-Engagement responses* (A–E responses) took shape.

Results

Open coding identified seven A–E themes and axial coding drew out four to ten A–E responses to each theme, together composing seven A–E sets. For example, Perception of the System is an A–E theme and corresponding responses of engagement such as acceptance, criticality or trust toward the system are the A–E responses. Together they compose the Perception of the System set. The following section presents illustrative vignette-pairs. Background information is given in parenthesis in the following order: gender, country of origin, age, present occupation, previous occupation, year of interview, location of interview, duration of stay in host country, reason for immigration. The superscripts AE and AER are used to mark phrases that open coding and axial coding identified as an A–E theme and A–E response respectively. A given vignette intends to illustrate one A–E set. All vignettes are verbatim extracts from the interviews.

Perception of the system

This A–E set reflecting attitudes toward and judgements of the host environment characterised every interview.

Vignette 1 (male, Sri Lanka, 45, front desk clerk in hotel, scientist, 2001, Zurich, 6 years, civil war). Yeah ... life is alright. The Swiss system is good^{AE}. But just imagine what I was and what I am now. In Lanka I was a junior scientist in the ministry. But because of the war I could not proceed further. I thought I would be able to continue in the Swiss system. Initially I enrolled in a science programme. But for me this was not to be^{AE}. With job duties and shift timings, how can I maintain a study schedule? So I guess I have given up^{AER}. The money is there. Comforts are there. Children are in good school system. So I guess I just go on^{AER}. My dreams are left behind^{AER}.

Vignette 2 (male, Serbia, 46, supermarket clerk, business, 2004, Zurich, 7, loss of livelihood and property). I lost everything. But here I think I can gain back^{AE}. Not what I lost, but something else. New start^{AER}. Here they allow you to work^{AE}. No thinking which people is which and no making differences^{AE}. In this system all are equal^{AE}. I had a bakery in Belgrade. But all gone. Bombed out! But here now I am studying also^{AER}. Maybe I don't get all back. But sure my children will. We are happy^{AER}. We are working for better future^{AER}.

The *Perception of the System* A–E set provides insights into how experiences of the system shape perception of the system. Vignette 1 shows a depletion in motivation for engagement characterised by indifference and a feeling of having tried and lost. Vignette 2 shows trust and hope leading to an alignment with the system.

Failure experiences

Experiences related to failure were common.

Vignette 3 (male, Somali, 35, unoccupied (engaged in gambling), farmer, 2015, Stockholm, 3, civil war). The first thing to do – learn Swedish. Without that, no chance. I joined the classes. But it was too hard^{AE}. The language is too hard^{AE}. I did not pass^{AE}. How can I pass? I am a farmer. I felt shame^{AER}. Shame is very bad in my country. I am angry^{AER}. How can I pass? Easy way is this ... take money from foolish tourists with this number game^{AER}.

Vignette 4 (male, Turkey (Kurdish), 32, taxi driver, rug maker, 2015, Stockholm, 4, civil war). I tried to continue my rug business. I thought I can bring from my country. But no chance. To export from my country, too much corruptions. To bring into Sweden, too much rules. So my idea of doing my business in Sweden, it failed^{AE}. But in Sweden, at least I can drive taxi. So I am taking you to airport! So I am taxi driver. Fine! So is my destiny, so let it be^{AER}. But please know, all my children they go to school. My work is for them^{AER}. To make them success^{AER}.

The *Failure Experience* A–E set shows that while failure may be system induced, recovery requires concerted personal mediation. Vignette 3 shows anger and frustration along with the tendency to break rules. Vignette 4 is characterised by the acceptance of personal failure along with a shift from aspiring to personal success to the success of the children.

Motivation to engage with the system

Motivation is reflected by the enthusiasm and willingness to form and sustain a connection with a system.

Vignette 5 (female, Philippines, 34, maid, unoccupied, 2000, Rome, 6, better prospects). Because my father died when I was young, I could only study till high school. Jobs were difficult to get in my country and low paid. Then through my church, I got the chance to come to Rome. Now I am still only a maid. But I have good hope for the future^{AE}. I have learned Italian and I know English also^{AER}. I am enrolled for a part time course in nursing^{AER}. I am in my 2nd year. It is slow because of my work. Sometimes I get very stressed wondering how to keep studying successfully for 3 years more^{AER}. I cannot sleep then! But okay. To make it I must keep on working and following the syllabus^{AE}.

Vignette 6 (female, India, 32, relief teacher, accountant, 2007, Perth, 6, better prospects). I worked as a mid-level accountant for Ernst and Young in my country. I moved here after marriage. Look at me now. Just a relief teacher. I wait every day to be called. A daily wage worker! All my education, my experience, my status, all gone. I have no more desire left to make it here^{AE}. The careers office told me I have to re-qualify. But no energy for all that^{AE}. I would quit even what I have^{AER}. But I need the money. I'm on tablets for depression^{AER}. I can't take this^{AER}. Sometimes I feel I should just end it all^{AER}.

Both these vignettes show the reality of the relative inflexibility of the system. The *Motivation to Engage with the System* A–E set shows that responsibility rests upon the individual to remain motivated and persistent despite expectations not being met. Vignette 5 is imbued with a positive orientation and high energy to maintain the engagement. At the same time, this person also seems to be anxious and experiencing stress not merely because she has to succeed at a set of tasks but because she has to continue to remain successful. Vignette 6 is a contrast. This person shows low motivation and desire. Her energy to persist is depleted and she seems to be dangerously depressed.

Integration and adjustment

This A–E set draws attention to the value placed on integration.

Vignette 7 (female, Vietnam, 32, janitor, accountant, 2014, Toronto, 4, better prospects). I was an accountant and I'm actually quite well qualified. But I've realised that won't work here^{AE}. But still, I like it here^{AE}. I think their system is good and everything is well organised and rational. I want to fit in^{AE}. See this job I'm doing now is a very low job in my country. But here, it's okay. So I don't feel bad or anything^{AER}. I think it would be easier if I just started again^{AER}. Anyway I always wanted to change my career and become a chef! So here's my chance.

Vignette 8 (female, India, 34, waitress, psychologist, 2014, Toronto, 2, better prospects). I was head of a counselling service for 15,000 youth, pan India. I have a master's degree in counselling. I attended 14 interviews here. All said my qualifications are not relevant. This system is wacky^{AE}. They want integration. Why should I?^{AER} They won't do a thing to integrate^{AE}. I got one job in a refugee centre. Didn't last a week. Then they asked me to leave citing no funds. Didn't they know that when they appointed me?^{AE} You know what my boss said when she asked me to leave, that I won't have problems finding another job because of the colour of my skin! Racism in a refugee centre! I'm going back home^{AER}.

While integration may be desired by the system, the *Integration and Adjustment* A–E set points to variations in the value immigrants place on integration. Vignette 7 shows a strong desire to integrate, despite original desires not being fulfilled. Although the present job is low in status, there is a clear plan for optimally using the provisions made by the system. Vignette 8 shows anger, frustration and discontent. This person feels unrecognised and unaccepted. There is a strong feeling of alienation.

Opportunity awareness and planning

Almost all host systems make provisions and create opportunities for immigrants to make a new life. However, awareness of these opportunities and systematic planning are crucial if the benefit is to be gained.

Vignette 9 (female, Cameroon, 32, tour guide, non-governmental organisation worker, 2000, Paris, 7, better prospects). When I came I was lost and confused for two years. But the counsellor in the employment office helped me know more about what is suitable for me^{AE}. Then I found my way. Now even though I am not doing what I used to do, I am still okay with this job^{AER}. It is all about my talent to talk to people and guide them. I did not have to study a lot for it. Now I am going to study and develop in this area^{AER}. It will take about 4 years and I have the plan^{AER}. I know what to do and how.

Vignette 10 (male, Ghana, 33, street vendor, factory worker, 2016, Turin, 6, better prospects). I don't know what to do or where to go^{AE}. Which office?^{AE} I read in the posters, some information^{AE}. But I don't understand^{AER}. Once I found out some courses^{AER}. But what is the use of that?^{AER} So I am selling these items on the road side. You can call me a small business man. But I don't want to do this for always. Sometimes I feel like lost^{AER}. I don't know how to move forward^{AER}.

The *Opportunity Awareness and Planning A–E* set shows variations in capitalising on opportunities. Vignette 9 shows a seeking attitude, and a concerted effort to plan and organise oneself. Vignette 10 shows a low level of awareness, poor quality planning and difficulties in linking opportunities with personal development.

Qualifications, credentials and recognition of past experience

Non-recognition of credentials and prior work and educational experience by the host country emerged as a theme across almost all interviews.

Vignette 11 (female, India, 28, unoccupied, food technologist, 2009, Melbourne, 6, better prospects). I have a master's degree in food technology^{AE}. I worked in a large food processing firm in India^{AE}. But here, these people don't recognise my degree or value my experience^{AE}. They want me to do it all over again^{AE}. WTF! I gave them the finger^{AER}. I am making stuff^{AER}. Pickles, jams, juices. My products are totally natural, homemade. Best you can have! I am selling to a growing circle of buyers^{AER}. All off the record! No qualifications, no license. Let's see what they'll do^{AER}.

Vignette 12 (female, Poland, 40, shop assistant, nurse, 2000, Salzburg, 8, better prospects). I think what they say is true. The first generation of an immigrant family must sacrifice for the children^{AE}. In the beginning I tried to study again and be a nurse here^{AER}. But I could not^{AER}. I am too old for that! So I could not qualify as a nurse^{AE}. I felt bad that I could not get a job like in my country^{AER}. But now I have accepted^{AER}. I do this just to bring some income home. But I am mainly trying to be a good mother and wife^{AER}. Forget a career for me^{AER}.

The *Qualifications, Credentials and Recognition of Past Experience A–E* set shows that host countries have their own regulations pertaining to certification which are usually more stringent than developing countries. Vignette 11 shows quite an aggressive and angry response to these pre-established standards. While it is true that this person is attempting to make her way forward, this effort may not be sustainable since it falls outside established regulatory frameworks. Vignette 12 shows a different response. There is a touch of sadness and disappointment about not qualifying to continue professionally. But at the same time there is acceptance and along with acceptance, a shift in perspectives from self to family.

View of the future

Personal development is intrinsically connected with the person's orientation to the future.

Vignette 13 (male, Syria, 48, bar tender, business, 2015, Gothenburg, 9, civil war). When I lost everything (even some loved ones) because of the war, I lost hope. I had a black view of the future^{AE}. But somehow I managed to arrive here. I will never be a prosperous business man again^{AER}. But now my future is not so black^{AE}. I have a good job. It gives me what I need. I am also involved with the labour unions^{AER}. That gives some meaning for what can happen in the future^{AE}. I teach my children that nothing comes when we want it. We have to work for it, and plan for it and wait for the fruits to ripen^{AER}. But, no plans no fruits!

Vignette 14 (male, Ukraine, 51, taxi driver, unoccupied, 2016, Bergamo, 8, political unrest). Before I came I lost my job and was unemployed in my country. Here I thought I will make it^{AE}. But after many years, I am still only a taxi driver. I don't think there is anything more in the future for me^{AE}. My children do not listen to me. They have

grown up in this country and they think like these people. Our culture is lost but they will be alright. And me, I think I will just be a taxi driver. I can't go back. It is too late and I am too poor^{AER}. So, I just carry on with this, day to day^{AER}. I don't think so much now about the future^{AER}.

The *View of the Future* A–E set shows that the person's orientation to the future can have an impact on the quality of his/her preparation for the future. Vignette 13 begins with a bleak view but with the passage of time, much more positivity is seen. The importance of having a positive, planful view is highlighted. Vignette 14 shows a resigned acceptance. There seems to be a sense of giving up and focusing on immediate survival needs.

The A–E sets listed above comprising A–E themes and A–E responses were crystallised at the end of this study. Feedback received from presentations at multiple fora (e.g. international conferences, workshops, workshops) indicated that the information was useful in and of itself. However, such an A–E set still remained merely a list of responses tagged to a set of themes. The relevance of these themes and responses to the practice of guidance and counselling needed clarification. This was the objective of Study 2.

Study 2

This study considered how the A–E sets identified in Study 1 would relate to the aspiration-engagement *matrix* (A–E matrix) described in [Figure 1](#). The objective was to use the A–E set to find descriptors for the four categories emerging from the A–E matrix. Since the objective now focused on application and practice, inputs from practitioners became imperative.

Practitioner group

The Practitioner Group comprised 120 Swedish counsellors in the age range of 24 to 61 years. All had gone through a three year, bachelor of arts programme in guidance and counselling. Their experience ranged between 2 and 21 years. They were all directly involved in interventions for immigrants to Sweden from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Eritrea, Ghana, India, Iran, Iraq, Iraq, Kosovo, Lebanon, Morocco, Poland, Serbia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria and Turkey. About 15% of the participating counsellors were immigrants themselves. The author had no control over the selection of this group since they were a part of a mandatory municipality-wide cultural sensitivity workshop. All participants and the director of the government organisation that employed the participants were informed at the beginning of the workshop that the outputs of their discussions would be material for a larger research project. Informed verbal consent was obtained.

Procedure and data analysis

All members of the Practitioner Group went through a 4-day workshop on cultural preparedness aimed at improving sensitivity to the issues that surround immigrants' wellbeing. The practitioners were met over a period of two years (2015–2017) in six batches ranging in size from 15 to 20 persons. The data for this study is drawn from the culminating exercise of this training course. This was a day-long exercise that required participants to draw upon their experience as counsellors and map the A–E sets onto the A–E matrix. Each batch was further divided into groups comprising 3–4 counsellors and given one of the A–E sets. Written instructions were given to create an A–E map and each small group engaged in a 90 minute focus group discussion to complete the exercise. The author circulated amongst the groups providing explanations along with examples. Each group then presented their mapping exercise in a plenary session. The rest of the batch then added their comments and views. The A–E map created by each group was collected and retained as data.

Results

The frequency with which each response under each A–E theme was attributed by the Practitioner Group to one of the four types of A–E interactions was computed. Responses with the highest frequency for each type of A–E interaction were allocated to that type. Thereby the four A–E categories were populated with a set of descriptors drawn from the A–E sets of Study 1. Table 2 presents the final outcome of the mapping exercise. Drawing upon these findings the salient characteristics of the A–E groups could be described as follows.

The low-aspiration-low-engagement group

The low-aspiration-low-engagement group (LALE) situation is tinged with disappointment. There is an acceptance of the host system but as Neufeld et al. (2006) point out, these individuals could experience a sense of being neglected, overlooked or disregarded by their environment. This could be the result of being overwhelmed by circumstances. Original dreams and wishes are likely to have been discarded. Low contentment and an almost wistful sense of accepting one's lot could characterise their engagement.

The high-aspiration-low-engagement group

The high-aspiration-low-engagement group (HALE) situation depicts an overriding sense of anger and frustration. Criticality and a tendency to blame the system is common. Aspirations are high but could be unrealistic. It must be noted however that this group has not given up personal advancement. However, while the vigour described by Schaufeli et al. (2002) is present, the dedication required to overcome barriers described by these authors may not be persistent enough.

The high-aspiration-high-engagement group

The high-aspiration-high engagement group (HAHE) appears to be the “ideal group. Their aspirations are realistic and their engagement is sound. Rather than being a reason to complain, failure is a spur to try again. Information seeking and linking opportunities for personal advancement is common. This said, it is also important to note that the bidirectional process of evaluation occurring between the person and the environment (Neufeld et al., 2006), is tilted such that anxiety results from the need to maintain what has been achieved and to continue to move ahead.

The low-aspiration-high-engagement group

The low-aspiration-high engagement group (LAHE) is an interesting group. Engagement and contentment do seem to be high, while aspiration for personal success is low. Motivation seems to stem from working for the welfare of others. Interestingly, the frequency of responses of acceptance of the host culture is low with this group. This could point to an instrumental form of engagement (Brown, 1987). Thus, although engagement is present, there could be an underlying sense of disaffection where engagement is exercised only in so far as it is required for progress.

With this, Study 2 drew to a close and the central objective of creating the cultural preparedness model of aspiration and engagement was completed. It must be reiterated that the purpose of this exercise is not to box people into categories! It is unlikely that any individual would fall purely into any one A–E category. In fact, not all responses could be exclusively allocated to a single A–E type. Trust, for example, is a response that occurred in almost equal frequency both with the HAHE and LAHE groups. Anxiety in different shades characterised all the groups. It is important therefore that a given response is holistically interpreted along with the client's other responses.

Table 2. Mapping the aspiration-engagement set to the aspiration-engagement matrix.

A-E theme	LALE	HALE	HAHE	LAHE
<i>Perception of the System:</i> attitudes toward and judgements of the host environment based on personal experiences of the host system	accepts the system but has grown indifferent and sceptical; feels let down by the system; feels requirements are overwhelming	critical of the system; does not align with the requirements of the system; does not trust the system	trusts the system; has learned how to align with and benefit from the system	trusts the system; is willing to contribute as a member
<i>Failure experiences:</i> the lack of success in obtaining what one desires despite effort	attributes failure to personal failings; given up	anger; frustration; unable to understand reasons for failure; attributes failure to flaws in the system; takes shortcuts to beat the system and circumvent failure (rule breaking)	learns from failure; tries again; anxious not to fail again; experiences stress and strain related to maintaining what has been achieved	acceptance; shifted priorities from self to others
<i>Motivation to engage with the system:</i> the quality of desire and energy to engage with activities and tasks set by the system and the interest and energy directed toward attaining goals using the provisions made by the system	low and indifferent; disappointed after trying hard; low motivation because of poor health/trauma	high but unrealistic expectations; easily bored; dissatisfied with present level of success	high but realistic expectations; moving toward further development; but also experiencing stress because of the need to achieve	positively involved with family, community and social events
<i>Integration and adjustment:</i> experiencing a state of satisfaction and is at ease with one's situation having effectively combined aspects of the host culture with aspects of the own culture	low contentment; feels: I don't think I will ever make it	feels unrecognised and blocked; high sense of alienation from the system	feels content because of successes; satisfaction with the freedom to follow one's culture; accepts the host system	high contentment as a result of personal contribution to others' achievements
<i>Opportunity Awareness and Planning:</i> knowledge of chances available for advancement and preparing oneself in accordance with the system to benefit from these opportunities	is aware but shows low energy to engage with opportunities; not systematic when planning; poor preparation; has a long term view but low interest affects persistence	struggles to link opportunities to personal development; interested in opportunities for which personal suitability is low; plans but gives up easily; has a short term view; poor preparation	high awareness and able to plan appropriately; can identify sources of opportunities; plans effectively; makes long term plans; seeks information; shows persistence	high awareness of sources of opportunities and able to plan appropriately on behalf of others
<i>Qualifications, Credentials and Recognition of Past Experience:</i> evaluation and recognition of immigrants' qualifications, credentials and prior experience by regulatory bodies in the host country	feeling that solutions are too complicated/expensive/take too long to actualise; unable to go through the process of re-certification; unable to allocate time for re-qualifying given the need to earn	feels earlier accomplishments not valued; unwilling for recertification; frustrated by educational requirements	willing to start afresh; has engaged in re-qualifying; able to make adaptations	may not possess the necessary credentials but has adjusted

(Continued)

Table 2. Continued.

A–E theme	LALE	HALE	HAHE	LAHE
<i>View of the Future:</i> thoughts and ideas about what is likely to happen in the future	bleak view of future; feels it's too late; working just for livelihood/survival needs of the present	unrealistic view of future; has a short-term view and wants quick results	has clarity about the future; is invested in long-term plans	has a positive long- term view of the future in relation to others

Note: LALE: low aspiration-low engagement; HALE: high aspiration-low engagement; HAHE: high aspiration-high engagement; LAHE: low aspiration-high engagement.

Discussion

This work has developed a cultural preparedness model of aspiration and engagement through a phenomenological analysis of a wide variety of case material. A limitation of this work could be its lack of reference to how individual differences emanating from personality features, gender and socioeconomic status influence the manner in which the A–E process plays out. This is worthy of further exploration through other studies. Further, with the objective of grounding this work on lived experience, hermeneutic interpretation has been used as the primary tool of analysis. The word hermeneutic comes from Hermes, the inventor of language and speech, an interpreter of the gods. Hermes also is the archetype of the trickster and is often portrayed as a liar and a thief (Graves, 1955)! While this is stated here in lighter vein, it also flags for our attention the limitations one must be aware of when working with text and verbal material. These limitations are clearly articulated in Eastern epistemologies. Mimamsa (Sanskrit for reflection and critical investigation) rests upon a hermeneutics that describes the reliability of various modalities of knowing (Hiriyanna, 1993). The work reported in this paper rests on the mimamsa modality of *upamana*: vicarious learning about a phenomenon through someone else's description of their experience of the phenomenon. *Upamana* is categorised by mimamsa as the least reliable modality since it requires a high capacity for attention on the listener's side and true memories on the side of the speaker. Also, interpretation of words and text could be strongly mediated by cultural filters. It is essential that the limitations of drawing conclusions from a re-processing of the original experience are kept in mind.

Having acknowledged these limitations attention is drawn to the strong possibility that the equilibrium in cultural preparation status created through enculturation is disturbed by acculturative demands resulting from immigration. This disturbance could be further augmented by the higher likelihood of immigrants' aspirations being politicised (for better or for worse) than those of natives. The paper proposes the A–E model as a starting point from which to understand this disturbance. The A–E interaction is a dynamic one. Circumstances, experiences, opportunity structures and personal characteristics could cause a person to move from one A–E position to another. Vignette 1 (Study 1) for example shows that this person was initially at the HAHE position but succumbed to the stress and strain that characterises this group and slipped to the LALE position. By contrast, Vignette 9 (Study 1) shows a movement from the LALE status to the HAHE position because of the support received from the system. Central to this argument, therefore, is the notion of movement towards an equilibrium. The enculturated equilibrium with which the immigrant arrived perhaps can never be regained. The cultural preparedness model of aspiration and engagement could perhaps provide clues that guidance and counselling workers could use to help immigrants re-establish their lives by discovering a new equilibrium.

Notes on contributor

Gideon Arulmani, Director, The Promise Foundation, India, is a clinical psychologist interested in culture and counselling. His Cultural Preparation Process Model has informed career intervention designing in many developing countries. He is Trustee of the Indian Association for Career and Livelihood Planning, Vice President of the IAEVG, a visiting professor and an international consultant to multilateral agencies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Arulmani, G. (2014). The cultural preparation process model and career development. In G. Arulmani, A. J. Bakshi, F. T. L. Leong, & A. G. Watts (Eds.), *Handbook of career development: International perspectives* (pp. 81–104). New York, NY: Springer International.
- Arulmani, G. (2015). The question is the answer: The cultural preparedness approach to assessment for career guidance. In M. McMahon, & M. Watson (Eds.), *Career assessment: Qualitative approaches* (pp. 207–218). Melbourne: Sense Publishers.
- Arulmani, G. (2016). Contexts and circumstances: The cultural preparation process approach to career development. In M. McMahon (Ed.), *Career counselling: Constructivist approaches (2nd ed.)* (pp. 79–90). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Arulmani, G., Van Laar, D., & Easton, S. (2003). The influence of career beliefs and socioeconomic status on the career decision-making of high school students in India. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 3*, 193–204.
- Aspiration. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary* (11th ed). Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aspiration>.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52*(52), 1–26.
- Brown, P. (1987). *Schooling ordinary kids*. London: Tavistock.
- Carling, J., & Collins, F. (2018). Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(6), 909–926.
- Collins, F. L. (2018). Desire as a theory for migration studies: Temporality, assemblage and becoming in the narratives of migrants. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(6), 964–980.
- Engage. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (11th ed)*. Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/engage>.
- Fouad, N. A., & Byars-Winston, A. M. (2005). Cultural context of career choice: Meta-analysis of race/ethnicity differences. *Career Development Quarterly, 53*, 223–233.
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press.
- Graves, R. (1955). *The Greek Myths*. London: Penguin.
- Heidegger, M. (1927/1996). *Being and time* (J. Stambaugh, Trans.). Albany: University of New York Press. (Original work published in 1927).
- Hiriyanna, M. (1993). *Outlines of Indian philosophy*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Husserl, E. (1913/1931). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology*. New York, NY: Humanities Press. (Original work published 1913).
- Macdonald, R., & Marsh, J. (2004). Missing school: Educational engagement, youth transitions, and social exclusion. *Youth & Society, 36*(2), 143–162.
- Meyer, F. (2018). Navigating aspirations and expectations: Adolescents' considerations of outmigration from rural eastern Germany. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(6), 1032–1049.
- Neault, R. A., & Pickerell, D. A. (2011). Career engagement: Bridging career counseling and employee engagement. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 48*, 185–188.
- Neufeld, J. E., Rasmussen, H. N., Lopez, S. J., Ryder, J. A., Magyar-Moe, J. L., Ford, A. I., et al. (2006). The engagement model of person-environment interaction. *The Counseling Psychologist, 34*(2), 245–259.
- Nutefall, J. E., & Ryder, P. M. (2010). The serendipitous research process. *Journal of Academic Librarianship, 36*(3), 228–234.
- OECD. (2014). *Finding the way: A discussion of the Swedish migrant integration system*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- The Promise Foundation. (2010). *Interventions for youth development and potential realisation: An overview*. Bangalore: The Promise Foundation.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Martínez, I. M., Pinto, A. M., Salanova, M., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). Burnout and engagement in university students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 33*(5), 464–481.
- Schoon, I., & Parsons, S. (2002). Teenage aspirations for future careers and occupational outcomes. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 60*, 262–288.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- TIEDI. (2011). *Continuity of employment for immigrants during the first four years in Canada (TIEDI Analytical Report 24)*. Toronto: Toronto Immigrant Employment Data Initiative.
- Van Hear, N., Oliver Bakewell, O., & Long, K. (2018). Push-pull plus: Reconsidering the drivers of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(6), 927–944.