



## A Qualitative Exploration of Career Identity Development among "Dependent" Immigrant Women: Preliminary Findings

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### Acknowledgment

This study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2015) awarded to the first author. The authors intend to submit for future publication a full paper detailing study findings and a proposed model of immigrant women's career identity development.

This research brief is based on a study completed by the first author for her MA thesis. To access the complete thesis, readers are encouraged to visit the following link: <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/37223>

### Abstract

The purpose of the study was to understand the process of career identity development among women immigrants arriving as applicants with dependent status. Past research has shown that most dependent applicants under the economic class of immigrants are women and constitute a group of skilled individuals capable of contributing positively to Canada's economy. However, women arriving to Canada on a dependent visa have largely been

ignored within immigrant literature. Exploring their career-related experiences upon immigration may assist in understanding career identity development within pre- and post-migration contexts. A qualitative inquiry, inspired by a grounded theory methodology, was carried out to identify themes relevant to immigrant women's career identity development and their possible interactions. Six study participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews conducted with each participant were analyzed using thematic analysis. Eight themes were generated, illuminating gender-specific experiences of women immigrants during their career journey. The findings may provide useful information to career counsellors who play a key role in helping immigrant women navigate through career transitions in a new country.

A gendered pattern of migration exists whereby men migrate to places in search of work and their partners "follow them" (Inglis, 2003; Spitze, 1984). In a Canadian context, the person ap-

plying for immigration is referred to as principal applicant and the accompanying spouse is referred to as dependent applicant—eighty percent of which are women (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2013). While women face challenges to furthering their career in a host country due to the intersectionality of race, gender, and immigration (Adsera & Chiswick, 2007), their dependent status adds yet another barrier. Previous research has shown that immigrant women can face poorer employment outcomes, regardless of being highly skilled and having held professional roles in their home countries (Banerjee & Phan, 2015; Purkayastha, 2005). Moreover the family investment hypothesis (Cobb-Clark & Crossley, 2004) and gender-role theory suggest that women, upon migrating, often invest in ways that will maximize the family's overall well-being—such as supporting the spouse who is the designated primary earner, engaging in "survival jobs" to supplement family income, or prioritizing family needs such as childcare—over personal goals (Branden, 2014; Iredale, 2005). The result is "compromised careers" upon migration

(Suto, 2009, p. 421).

Still yet, a negative stereotype seems reflected in labels characterizing dependent applicants as "tied-movers" (Banerjee & Phan, 2015) or "trailing spouses" (Cooke, 2001) that often fails to consider the inner strength and coping resources immigrant women utilize during their career transition (Koert, Borgen, & Amundson, 2011). Likewise, the literature focuses predominantly on the challenges rather than helpful factors in immigrants' career transitions (Vojdanijahromi, 2016). This disparity may cloud a thicker account of immigrant women's career development over time that includes both *what* challenging and facilitating experiences might shape career identity and *how*.

Despite nurturing dreams of pursuing career goals upon migration and holding promise of successful career integration, abrupt disruption of seemingly smooth career trajectories due to migration can lead many women to question their career identity (De Silva, 2010)—a phenomenon that remains under-researched. A primary objective of this qualitative study was to give voice to a marginalized section of the immigrant population by exploring challenging and facilitating experiences of immigrant women with dependent status as they relate to career identity development (CID). For the purpose of this study, we refer to career identity as a "structure of meanings in which the individual links his [sic] own motivation, interests and competencies with

acceptable career roles" (Meijers, 1998, p. 191).

### Method

While previous researchers have proposed theories to understand the career development concerns of immigrant and refugee population (e.g., Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008), there appears to be no existing conceptual framework to explain the CID of immigrant women. A qualitative lens using a grounded theory inspired methodology was deemed appropriate for this study to better understand how dependent women develop career identity upon immigration. Though the purpose of this methodology was not to generate a theory of CID, it allowed for: (a) a more constructivist approach to forefront the under-represented career-related experiences of immigrant women; (b) unveiling process-oriented responses (Creswell, Hanson, Piano, & Morales, 2007) in terms of *how* career identity may develop in an immigration context; and (c) identifying themes related to immigrant women's CID and possible connections between those themes.

Using purposive and snowball sampling, six female spouses of principal applicants under the economic class of immigrants were recruited for study participation. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Career-related experiences pre- and post-migration were captured for each participant during an audio-recorded

semi-structured interview of approximately one hour. Within the grounded theory inspired methodology, data in the form of transcribed interviews were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase method of thematic analysis to generate themes. Trustworthiness efforts included member checks, auditing, reflective journaling, and providing contextual information of the participants and researcher.

### Results

While we do not conceptualize CID as a linear process, the eight themes generated appeared sequentially linked and offer a sense of how career identity developed over time in response to migratory demands. Not all themes were reflected in each participant's career experience, as participants described a different career trajectory depending on life stage, education level, and barriers/supports. The eight themes presented in Table 2, along with a representative participant verbatim, illuminate experiences related to CID.

Participants and their family were *on board the Canadian dream* in hopes of experiencing an enhanced quality of life and growth opportunities related to career. In *coming to terms with "dependent" status*, participants responded to the notion of applying as a dependent applicant while immigration efforts were taking hold beyond just an idea. Based on Canada's point system for screening visa applications, participants started reflecting on

Table 1

*A Summary of Demographic Information of Participants*

Pseudonym	Years in Canada	Age	Country emigrated from	Number of children (age)	Pre-migration		Post-migration	
					Education	Employment (years)	Education	Employment (years)
Yasmin	1.5	25	Bangladesh	NA	Bachelor's degree (Business Administration)	None	In progress	None
Sarah	6	36	United Kingdom	2 (7, 4)	Diploma (Customer Relationship), Diploma (Beauty & Hairstyling)	Billing analyst (6), Worked at pub (part-time), Hairstylist (5)	None	Freelance hairstylist (5), Cleaning services provider (3), Sales associate (5 months)
Chandi	8	40	Ireland	1 (6)	Doctoral degree (International Relations)	Research assistant- USA (1), Policy analyst and researcher (1)	None	Independent researcher (7-8)
Jamie	12	40+	China	2 (-)	Bachelor's degree (Accounting)	Accountant – (4-5), Assistant manager (1)	Diploma (Early Childhood Education)	Early childhood educator (5), Activity animator (1), Chef (6 months)
Swati	13	43	India	2 (15, 12)	Master's degree (English)	Teacher (2), Telemarket associate (7-8 months), Assistant - boutique (2)	Diploma (Early Childhood Education)	Early childhood educator (1.5), Sales associate (3), Home daycare (8)
Adina	16	50+	France	2 (25, 16)	Diploma (Accounting)	Accountant, (10), Sales associate (8)	Diploma (Early Childhood Education)	Early childhood educator (1), Montessori school (5), Restaurant business (5)

Table 2

*Themes and a Representative Participant Verbatim*

Theme	Participant Verbatim
On board the Canadian dream	Here [in Canada] you have a chance. [It] doesn't matter where you are from. Doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman. Doesn't matter if you are handicap. Doesn't matter you know the colour of your skin. You have a chance...you can work. You can make money. They are not closing the door on your face. (Aduna) <sup>1</sup>
Coming to terms with "dependent" status	The realization that my education hadn't been to the level of my husband's type thing. And there is definitely a realization of...of a little bit of self-worth where that's not quite as you know when you go and fill everything out... you realize that this information is now so important, you know. (Sarah)
Maintaining equilibrium	It was emotionally like a lot of ups and downs because I used to struggle with so many things. I had to go to work. I mean I had to study. I had to do my assignments on time. I had to look after my own kids. I had to look after day care kids you know... Emotionally it was a lot of things going on. And then in between my in-laws would come here to visit us. Then family being here...ya family obligations. (Swati)
Tipping point	It was hard for me too because I used to work till late nights—9, 10 o'clock coming back home and we would hardly see each other, me and my husband...ya, because of the timings. And he would take care of my girl in the evening and I would go for my job... And then I decided let me do something for my, MY [laying emphasis] career. What I wanted to do you know? And that's how I started looking for options of a career in teaching. (Swati)
Grieving the loss of preferred career trajectory	So it has definitely been a disappointment... Let's say right now where I am at is not where I imagined I would be when I was 20 in terms of my career, you know. That's a little bit of a grieving process for me, to be honest. (Chandi)
Taking agency	When you want to do something about yourself you have to look for the information. The information will never [knocks twice on table] knock on your door and say "Hello, I am the information. You know you have to do that." No, you have to look for it. (Aduna)
Redirecting one's career path	I always wanted to be doing something with kids. So teaching especially little kids, not even like older ones [laughing]. Ya elementary school. Teaching was one of my main passion in the beginning, since the beginning so, ya, the wait was nice that I could continue here as an ECE [Early Childhood Education]. (Swati)
Emergence of a strengthened career identity	If you depend on a man, you depend to a system, you are not free... You have to earn your own money. As a woman, don't depend to anyone, even if you LOVE [laying emphasis] your husband, you love your family. I am sorry, you have to have your own independency, you know, you have to have your own freedom. Then you can say NO. (Aduna)

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used to maintain participant anonymity.

their career-related potential vis-à-vis their partners' despite either being on a promising career track or having an established career back home. Upon arrival in Canada, some participants furthered their education or accessed language services to improve their English or French; however, to ensure a smooth transition for their families, all participants did whatever was required of them to fulfill family needs toward *maintaining equilibrium*. This included securing a temporary job for economic survival, engaging in childcare responsibilities, and investing in their spouses' career advancement. After completely immersing themselves in achieving harmony within the family, participants one day found themselves reflecting on their career. With the passing of years, some participants began to identify what they felt they had lost with respect to their careers while performing roles related to being a mother and wife. This marked a *tipping point* towards revisiting their career goals to see what might best fit with their individual circumstances. During this revisiting, participants noticed a discrepancy between what they aspired to in terms of a career pre-migration versus what actually unfolded post-migration. For some participants, *grieving the loss* of their preferred career trajectory allowed acceptance of their new work-life reality, which in turn paved the way for meaningful action towards re-establishing their preferred career. By *taking agency* in terms of adopting a positive attitude

and openness to new experiences, participants engaged in *redirecting their career path* by either finding parallels with previously cherished career goals or discovering their calling. Eventually, *the emergence of a strengthened career identity* became noticeable compared to the perhaps fragmented career identity during the initial years of settlement in Canada. Here participants described obtaining meaningfulness by fulfilling some of the values they cherished within a career. However, few participants believed that a strengthened career identity represented a final destination, but rather a step in a long series of future endeavors for career growth.

### Discussion

Eight themes related to CID were generated, which shed light on how participants perceived their career-related interests and potential in terms of career roles acceptable to them. According to participants, career identity in the context of immigration can be impacted as early as the pre-migratory decision with their spouse regarding who among them will apply as the principal applicant versus dependent applicant. Couples mutually elected husbands as best-suited for the immigration application process because of perceived higher human capital (Sandell, 1977), ostensibly positioning wives as "followers" to host destinations despite their professional skills and economic potential (Inglis, 2003). Participants in this

study speak of how, in hindsight, their "dependent" status seemed to cast a shadow on their own potential for a professional career in Canada.

The theme of maintaining equilibrium is well represented in the literature, where the dependent applicant—most often the woman—takes on a role of "family organizer" (Suto, 2009, p. 422) intended to shield the family from the transitional challenges of immigration and buttress the spouse's career prospects. While this theme supports the gender-role perspective and family investment hypothesis (Cobb-Clark & Crossley, 2004), it seems to be at a cost for the dependent women who experience downward career mobility regardless of their professional backgrounds (Banerjee & Phan, 2015).

Many participants experienced a discrepancy between what they aspired for versus what they experienced upon migration (e.g., devaluation of their foreign credentials, financial and time constraints related to re-training and/or education, language issues, perceived discriminatory hiring practices). Losing a once cherished career direction and changing occupational fields altogether confirms previous research showing that immigrants are often unable to access their pre-migration occupation (Bauder, 2003). However, participants in this study also spoke of a process of mourning that can accompany significant career change or loss.

At the same time, participants identified some facilitative experiences that furthered their

careers. For example, they adopted a positive attitude, flexibility, and persistence (Amundson, Yeung, Sun, Chan, & Cheng, 2011); were surrounded by supportive family members, friends, and colleagues (Vadjani-jahromi, 2016); and had access to government and community resources (Koert et al., 2011) related to funding education and free language classes. Utilization of available resources helped participants rekindle their sense of agency, which in turn helped them put their careers back on track. By acknowledging their changed work reality coupled with agentic control, participants described renegotiating their career identity in the host country (Chen, 2008) by either pursuing careers close to their cherished goals or finding their passion through happenstance.

Applying a grounded theory inspired approach in the present study, we came to appreciate CID as a dynamic process whereby career identity is never lost but instead may be threatened, weakened, or fragmented upon migration, only to be reconstructed after a period of grief through agency, optimism, and openness to new experiences. This unfolding is supported by a constructivist perspective where identity formation is viewed as a life-long process—restructured and revised in response to self-relevant life experiences (Berzonsky, 1989).

### Limitations, Contributions, and Future Research

This study's findings may not be generalizable to all immigrant women, but they do offer insight into CID and contribute to the scarce literature available on those migrating with dependent status. Within a counselling context, the themes related to CID may provide useful information to career counsellors who play a crucial role in helping immigrant women process and navigate career transitions in a new country. Other implications include conceptualizing CID as a process rather than a destination, exploring the term "dependent" status with clients, and normalizing various experiences related to CID, such as grieving and maintaining equilibrium. In addition to credentialing issues common to most professional immigrants, immigrant women may experience gender-based responsibilities within the family that have implications for their career transition as a dependent applicant (Banerjee & Phan, 2015). Given that the immigration policy of Canada is tailored to meet the economic needs of the country, it would seem counterproductive to focus on only one-half of the economic class. We heed Iredale's (2005) caution that in order to fully utilize the skills of women coming to Canada, special attention needs to be directed towards "immigration policies to ensure that they are not only gender neutral but more importantly that they are gender sensitive to the needs and special circumstanc-

es of women" (p. 165). While this study unveiled themes and suggests temporality between them, a full-fledged grounded theory study with a larger sample size could generate a substantial theory related to CID among immigrant women arriving as dependents.

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