

# RECOGNITIONAL JUSTICE FOR IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS

by

MARY BAXTER

(Under the Direction of Karen Watkins)

## ABSTRACT

Immigration is a complex phenomenon that continues to increase and impact countries and individuals on a global scale. Transnationalism provides a framework for understanding immigration as a fluidity of identity between countries, including knowledge one acquires in various contexts. There is not a break between the identity and knowledge an individual gains in one country when immigrating to a new country. There can be, however, barriers to knowledge mobility between contexts, particularly to the knowledge of immigrant professionals. These individuals earned post-secondary education and training in their home countries but are often unable to practice in their fields once they immigrate to another country. This dissertation explores this topic through three, journal-ready articles within a theoretical framework of recognition theory. In Chapter One, I offer a detailed introduction of the topic, describing the problem, establishing the framework, and explaining the purpose of the dissertation. Chapter Two is an integrative literature review on the topic. In this review, I explored the topic from a global level, synthesizing key themes from the literature to create a conceptual framework. Chapter Three is a narrative inquiry study exploring the learning journey and experiences of nonrecognition for immigrant professionals in the United States using critical events and creative nonfiction methodology to present the findings through a composite story. The story

demonstrated nonrecognition as humiliating and stimulating, overcoming nonrecognition through learning, and the learning journey as lifelong. Chapter Four is a policy analysis exploring trends of recognition in occupational licensing policies in the U.S. in a mixed methods study. I used descriptive statistics for quantitative analysis and critical discourse analysis for qualitative analysis and found a trend towards recognition of immigrant professional knowledge dominated by discourses of neoliberalism and the workplace. In Chapter Five, I conclude the dissertation by summarizing the previous chapters, making connections across the three articles, and offering implications for future research on this topic.

INDEX WORDS:      Recognition, Immigrant integration, Mobility of knowledge,  
Transnationalism, Immigrant professionals, Adult learning

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my dad, “the professor.”

Dad taught me to love learning. He always had a book in hand and a quote or story ready for every occasion. When asked what a word meant, he would tell me to look it up in the massive dictionary shelved among the well-worn books in our living room. Before watching the movie *Apollo 13*, he had me research the event and write a short report. Dad often edited my papers throughout the years as I worked on diplomas and degrees, and he acted as my intellectual and spiritual sounding board. It was largely his influence that led me to embark on this doctoral journey.

Love you and miss you, dad.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Vignettes of Immigrant Professionals**

*The sun streamed into my office as Wilonja (pseudonym) sat opposite me, eyes reddened from working the night shift, impeccably dressed in his finest white suit. A former teacher from Democratic Republic of Congo, he is now a refugee in the U.S. working at a poultry processing plant. He had recently entered our English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program and was eager to return to teaching. We discussed his few options, all of which included returning to college. When discovering the arduous pathway of relicensing in the U.S., which would potentially take years to complete, he gave up on his dream of teaching and decided to seek other career opportunities.*

*On another afternoon, I sat with Dmytro (pseudonym), a man in his 20s, youth still aflame in his eyes despite his flight from Ukraine after the war with Russia broke out and threatened his life. Full of energy and determination, he shared about his work as a lawyer before immigrating, work that he loved and in which he had invested heavily. He asked how he could practice again within the legal field once he finished improving his English in our program. I did not have a ready answer for him, envisioning the red tape and regulations surrounding the legal realm and how a law degree earned in Ukraine would not have value in the United States.*

*Then there was Afsaneh (pseudonym), a young Iranian woman who fled persecution due to her beliefs and was trying to gain stability in the United States. A former technology specialist in Iran, she was struggling to pass the entrance exam to college that would allow her to take*

*computer programming classes with the hopes of becoming eligible to work in her field again. Despite tutoring and several attempts, she remained a few points shy of obtaining the necessary score and gave up in discouragement and frustration.*

These stories highlight a hidden but significant problem present in the United States. Many of our immigrant neighbors arrive with extensive knowledge and skills but face barriers to having them recognized and put to use in the U.S., their new home country. This study seeks to bring this problem to the forefront by contributing to the literature on immigrant integration in the U.S. through recognition and mobility of knowledge.

### **Background of the Study**

Immigration is a major phenomenon around the world impacting individuals, governments, countries, and economies. Approximately 281 million people are estimated to live outside their home country, including labor migrants, international students, professionals, and refugees and asylum seekers (Alfred, 2004; OHCHR, 2022). A significant number of these individuals are involuntary migrants. As of mid-2023, there were 110 million people forcibly displaced, up from 89.3 million people in 2021 (UNHCR, 2024; UNHCR, 2021). Of this number, 36.4 million are refugees who experience forced migration and displacement due to adverse circumstances such as war or persecution (UNHCR, 2024). These migrants receive refugee status upon fleeing their country to a nearby country and are given the opportunity to resettle in a third, receiving country such as the United States, Germany, or Canada. Asylum seekers, of whom there are 6.1 million worldwide, also flee danger but seek asylum once they enter a receiving country rather than receiving special designation before migrating (UNHCR, 2024). The United States has been known as a refugee-receiving country since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980, having received more than 3.2 million refugees since that time (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The U.S. is also the country with the largest international population

(Migration Policy Institute, 2020), with 13.6 percent of its population as foreign-born in 2019 (OECD, 2022).

My own community of Clarkston, Georgia has 49.4 percent of its population as foreign-born (United States Census Bureau, 2021). Many of our residents are refugees given that we have four refugee resettlement agencies located nearby. My workplace at an adult basic education program is located squarely amidst this diversity, and our services include free English language classes, high school equivalency classes, and career pathway training programs. Our ESOL program is fully attended by immigrant students, and our High School Equivalency (HSE) program also serves a large percentage of immigrants. As a result of working so closely with the U.S. immigrant population, I have seen firsthand many of the issues affecting them, including that of nonrecognition of international credentials and knowledge obtained in another country.

### **Immigrant Professionals in the United States**

Amidst this growing population of immigrants are immigrant professionals like the individuals in the stories shared above, those who obtain a post-secondary or professional education in a foreign country, typically their country of origin, and then immigrate to the U.S. There are more than 12 million immigrant professionals in the United States as of 2019 (Batalova & Fix, 2021). Individuals within this category may include internationally educated physicians and other healthcare professionals, engineers, teachers, and scientists.

While many immigrant professionals are voluntary migrants who choose to immigrate to the United States, there are also involuntary migrants, those forcibly displaced by war, persecution, or other uncontrollable circumstances. This includes refugees, humanitarian parolees, and asylum seekers. These immigrants do not choose to move to another country to practice their profession but instead are faced with finding ways to reenter their profession upon

arrival in their new country. Of the immigrant professionals in this category, 44 percent are underemployed, the highest level of underemployment across all immigrant statuses (Batalova & Fix, 2019).

### **Transnationalism and Mobility of Knowledge**

When considering this population and the phenomenon of immigration and border crossing, it is useful to do so through the concepts of transnationalism and mobility of knowledge. Within a global context of steadily escalating movement across borders, immigration is no longer viewed as a phenomenon in which an immigrant simply moves from one country to the next, leaving behind the old for the new. Instead, immigration is increasingly understood through transnationalism, which acknowledges that even when moving between countries there is not a clean break between the home country and the host country. Rather, there remains an interconnectedness between the immigrant, the home country, and the new country (Guo, 2015). This interconnectedness creates a new identity for the immigrant upon integration into a new country, one that is influenced by multiple countries and cultures. Immigrants who practice this transnationalism, therefore, “draw upon and create fluid and multiple identities grounded both in their society of origin and in their host societies” (Schiller et al., 1992, p. 11). These identities can develop in relation to family, work, and educational contexts, among others, and include the identity of knowledge gained in those various contexts.

In light of transnationalism, knowledge takes on mobility. Instead of being left behind in the home country along with all else related to that place, as a traditional view of immigration would explain, it is instead a fluid component of identity that crosses national contexts, prior knowledge shifting into the new context and influencing new knowledge. According to Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert (2022), “the consequences of movements across borders can be examined

and understood as a phenomenon in which new knowledge, experiences, languages, and perspectives are introduced into existing social constellations, and as a result are rearranged and inevitably changed” (p. xiv). For immigrant professionals acquiring new knowledge in the new country, this can signify a process of learning and integration in the host country that incorporates prior knowledge and experiences from the home country into new experiences and knowledge. To facilitate this, however, knowledge mobility must occur that allows it to cross borders and have an *exchange value* in the new context (Andersson & Fejes, 2010, p. 203). This exchange can take place within formal contexts such as education and the workplace and within informal contexts such as community and daily life. For mobility of knowledge to take place, recognition of this prior knowledge must occur in the new country, positioning recognition theory as a relevant theoretical framework for exploring the phenomenon.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Recognition theory is grounded in the assumption that recognition is a fundamental human need and is central to leading the good life (Goksel, 2018; Fraser & Honneth, 2003). According to this theoretical perspective, a person can only achieve self-realization through mutual recognition between individuals and between individuals and the state, institutions, and/or organizations. Recognition theory is derived from Hegel’s concept of mutual recognition as a means of obtaining self-determination. From this perspective, individuals cannot achieve self-determination on their own but require the recognition of others to validate the self. This perspective has been revived and further developed in recent works by philosophers such as Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Charles Taylor.

Recognition theory does not only provide insight into basic human needs. As a new paradigm for critical social theory stemming from the Frankfurt School, it also offers insight into the causes of social suffering and conflict that drive struggles for social emancipation (Smith,

2012). These social struggles form against the humiliation and disrespect resulting from a lack of full recognition (Smith, 2012). In this sense, recognition theory is not about obtaining an end goal (Goksel, 2018; Schweiger, 2021). Rather, it is a normative theory that evaluates the current state of society, revealing instances of nonrecognition that provoke specific groups suffering from this injustice to engage in struggles for recognition.

Because of its emphasis on justice and social struggle for emancipation, recognition theory offers ways to appraise the complex phenomenon of migration in today's society and promote justice for immigrant groups. Schweiger (2021) suggested it does this by examining the suffering present in the lives of migrants related to misrecognition or nonrecognition and how this occurs at the individual, group, societal, and political levels. This scrutiny is necessary because "recognition is a precondition for social integration" (Joergensen, 2021, p. 145) in how it allows the immigrant to feel welcomed, esteemed, and respected (Hirvonen, 2021). Goksel (2018) developed a comprehensive framework for understanding immigrant integration through the lens of recognition. She explained integration is different from assimilation in how it allows the migrant to maintain a sense of the original, differing cultural identity while becoming a full member of the new society. She argued "if recognition is a basic human desire, we can conclude that recognition of immigrant identities, skills, and abilities is essential for the self-realization and integration of immigrants" (p. 44). This includes the recognition of immigrant knowledge that is acquired in another country before immigrating to the U.S.

In contrast to recognition leading to integration through which prior learning, skills, and identity are recognized and accepted in a just society, misrecognition or nonrecognition presents a barrier to the integration of immigrants. One of the ways it does this is by impeding mobility of knowledge. Within the U.S., there are power structures present in governmental policies and

regulations, accrediting bodies, organizations, and institutions that serve to discredit prior knowledge and inhibit mobility (Bauder, 2005; Chamakalayil & Riegel, 2016; Webb et al., 2021). This leads to the central problem this dissertation addresses.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the United States having a strong tradition of immigration, nonrecognition can act as an inhibitor of integration for many immigrants who arrive in this country. For immigrant professionals, this is manifest in how they often face barriers to fully contributing their expertise and re-entering their chosen career field or furthering their education because their knowledge, having been gained in another country, is misrecognized or unrecognized in the face of almost insurmountable U.S. policies and regulations. In other words, knowledge, which should form a fluid part of an immigrant's identity through transnationalism, loses its mobility between countries. The repercussions of this denial of recognition can lead to negative outcomes such as underemployment (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Ng & Shan, 2010) and limited access to additional educational opportunities (Chamakalayil & Riegel, 2016). At a deeper level, nonrecognition silences immigrant voices and denies them decision-making power (Goksel, 2018; Marcelo, 2021), leads to humiliation and disrespect as aspects of immigrant identities are not recognized and valued (Smith, 2012), and ultimately prevents the individual affected from achieving full self-realization and participation in society. These repercussions demonstrate how misrecognition or nonrecognition is a form of injustice towards immigrants. The promotion of recognition through recognition theory, in contrast, is committed to seeking societal good through continual development of a society in which individuals increasingly recognize each other (Goksel, 2018). An increase in recognition for immigrant groups is needed not only to achieve justice for immigrants but also to bring about a more just society within the United States.

In the existing research on unemployment and underemployment of immigrant professionals in the United States, studies primarily examine the individual or economic impact through theories such as human capital theory or person-job fit theory (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). In this sense, the focus remains on the individual and group dynamics and affective responses to the injustice or perceived injustice by the immigrant. These theories do not allow for an exploration of the cause of the injustice and the power dynamics present in systems and institutions that perpetuate the issue. In contrast, recognition theory has the potential to address all of the aspects of this issue, including economic implications, power dynamics related to institutional processes, differences across borders, and challenges to integration. This is one gap this dissertation fills.

Another gap this dissertation fills is the lack of research within the U.S. context. There are few empirical studies addressing this issue in the U.S. despite the large immigration population present in its borders. It is important to attend to this gap because the United States is the largest immigrant-receiving country in the world (Migration Policy Institute, 2020), suggesting that this issue may be a large, unaddressed problem affecting the U.S. immigrant population. It is also important because it will explore how U.S.-specific policies, organizations, and institutions inform the issue and impact the immigrant population present in this context, one that is key given that the U.S. has more immigrants than any other country in the world (Conner & Lopez, 2016).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this dissertation is to understand how misrecognition and nonrecognition impacts immigrant integration and knowledge mobility and the forms it takes within the U.S. It also presents suggestions for moving U.S. society towards greater recognition of immigrants and

advancing justice. This is accomplished through three journal-ready manuscripts that explore this topic at a global, national, and individual level. This format is appropriate given the complexity of the issue across these various spheres, because it allows me to examine it from multiple angles to develop a more extensive yet nuanced understanding.

The first article is a literature review. The literature review provides a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature on this topic and key themes I drew from the literature. It reviews articles that address barriers faced by immigrant professionals as they attempt to use their international education and credentials. The focus is not on one particular immigrant group, such as refugees or labor migrants, but all immigrant statuses are included due to the limited amount of research. Articles were selected representing a variety of immigrant-receiving countries, such as Germany and Canada, the reason for which is twofold. First, there is insufficient research on this topic in the U.S. to generate a comprehensive literature review. Second, capturing the issue globally provides a broad perspective within which to situate the remaining articles. The literature review reveals several gaps in the research I address in the second two articles.

The second article draws the discussion down to the individual level of the topic by collecting individual immigrant stories through narrative inquiry and analyzing the data using critical event and creative nonfiction methodology. This article explores the topic at a more intimate level, inviting immigrants to share their stories of nonrecognition in the U.S. The study centers on immigrant professionals who are involuntary migrants, those who did not actively choose to immigrate but now find themselves facing misrecognition or nonrecognition of their knowledge and expertise in the new country. The study examines how a lack of recognition

impacts mobility of knowledge and learning in the context of the new host country through themes drawn from participants' stories.

The third article is a policy analysis. The issue presented above is multi-layered, enacted not only at the level of the individual immigrant but also at the level of governmental and organizational policies and regulations. The policy analysis manuscript brings the discussion from the global level of the literature review to a national level by analyzing the trend of regulatory policies related to occupational licensing in the United States and how they may pose a barrier to the mobility of knowledge. The article also makes recommendations for additional policy change based on the trends. This aligns with the goals of recognition theory as a critical theory that is concerned with addressing problems in society and proposing solutions for justice-oriented change.

### **Significance of the Study**

Achieving mutual recognition allows for self-realization, participation, and the good life while misrecognition or nonrecognition leads to humility and disrespect (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Goksel, 2018). Recognition theory argues that “although other ideas such as freedom, equality and community may have a role to play, it is the idea of recognition which holds the key to determining the nature of justice...it seeks to show how a society should be organized so that everyone enjoys the recognition which is due to them” (Thompson, 2006, p. 9). It is therefore crucial to identify ways in which a denial of recognition hinders immigrant integration and participation and explore solutions for addressing this problem. This dissertation adds to the literature of recognition theory by presenting forms of misrecognition or nonrecognition specific to immigrants in the United States and seeking justice by voicing their stories of these experiences and their need for recognition as a mechanism for full participation and integration

in society. It is unique in how it accomplishes this at multiple levels – a global overview, a policy and governmental view, and a view from the individuals who experience it. It also assists to elevate the problem in the United States along with other organizations and scholars who are beginning to champion this issue and call for action. This is important, particularly because there is limited research on how this problem plays out in the U.S. context.

Another significance of this dissertation is it provides insight into mobility of knowledge between countries (Andersson & Fejes, 2010) through transnationalism and how recognition can serve as the gatekeeper for the integration of prior knowledge in the new country. It contributes to the literature on adult learning by highlighting barriers to learning for immigrant professionals and how full recognition and participation might increase learning. This contribution is important to Learning, Leadership, and Organizational Development (LLOD) given that learning is a central tenant of the field. If nonrecognition presents a barrier to learning for immigrants in a new country, it is a prerogative of scholars in LLOD to raise awareness and propose solutions that foster learning for this population. The study also integrates recognition theory into the LLOD literature as a valuable theoretical framework through which to explore learning and just remedies for barriers to learning. Finally, it contributes to the field in the way it highlights concerns for leaders about what barriers adult immigrants, who are learners and employees in our institutions and organizations, might face through nonrecognition and ways we can seek recognition.

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CHAPTER 2

RECOGNITION OF IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS' PRIOR LEARNING: AN  
INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baxter, M. 2025. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. 44:2, 206-224.  
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### **Abstract**

Amidst increasing immigration, immigrant knowledge can encounter barriers to recognition in the host country. Immigrant professionals in particular often experience nonrecognition of their international credentials and expertise. Using the SALSA methodology, this article presents an integrative review of the literature on the recognition of immigrant professionals' prior knowledge. I selected eleven articles (1) directly addressing issues of immigrants and prior knowledge or recognition (2) published in a peer-reviewed journal (3) empirically-based (4) published in the last 20 years (2003 – 2023). In addition to empirical articles, I selected 17 conceptual articles and two books that met measures (1), (2), and (4) or contributed significantly to the topic. I synthesised the articles by identifying key themes of transnationalism, mobility of knowledge, and recognition. I found that within a transnational framework, recognitional justice allows for mobility of immigrant knowledge, facilitating lifelong learning. Conversely, nonrecognition halts mobility of knowledge at the bordered knowledge of the host country, producing devaluation and underemployment. Recognition and nonrecognition are primarily determined by policies and processes established by societal structures that either allow for or erect barriers to the acceptance of prior knowledge. Implications for future research include adding empirical studies from the United States and exploring the role of governments, institutions, and policies in perpetuating this problem.

**Keywords:** immigrant professionals, recognition, lifelong learning, underemployment

## Introduction

In my work at an adult English language program in the United States, I regularly encounter individuals who have specialised skills or education from their home country, but who have difficulty receiving recognition for these skills in the U.S. This includes a dentist from Cuba working in retail, an Oxford graduate from Afghanistan struggling to find relevant work, and an IT specialist from Venezuela forced to enroll in a U.S.-based IT program. These individuals must work outside their fields, often in entry-level jobs, or recredential in the U.S. because the U.S. does not accept the credentials from their home country. The prior competencies or education of these individuals is unrecognised and/or devalued in their new country, posing significant problems for both the immigrant and the U.S. (Bauder, 2003; Mattoo, Neagu, & Özden, 2005). The term *immigrant professional* is often used to describe these immigrants with a professional background, that is, with post-secondary education and/or work experience in a field requiring professional knowledge and credentials (Guo, 2009; Ng & Shan, 2010; Slade, 2012).

This issue is not specific to the U.S. It is a global issue many countries have begun to examine and study. In fact, most of the literature is generated from countries such as Canada, Germany, and Sweden (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Bauder, 2005; Guo, 2009). Various articles have been published on this topic, including conceptual articles, policy briefs, and empirical studies. This paper will provide an integrative review of important literature using the following research question: how is recognition of prior learning experienced by immigrant professionals in immigrant-receiving countries? In the review, I synthesise the results into a theoretical framework and central themes and identify gaps the literature does not address.

During the review process, I identified several key themes and theories related to the topic which informed the framework I constructed. The theoretical and conceptual framework examines the mobility of knowledge within a transnational context through the lens of recognition theory. For this review, knowledge, or prior learning, refers to the education and/or credentials of immigrant professionals earned in their home country before immigrating to the United States. Within the framework of recognition theory, recognitional justice allows for mobility of knowledge that moves in an upward trajectory, facilitating lifelong learning. Nonrecognition draws mobility of knowledge into a downward trajectory that is halted at the bordered knowledge of the new country, leading to devaluation and underemployment. This framework is illustrated in the figure below and explained throughout this review by presenting an analysis and synthesis of the included literature.

### **Theoretical framework**

As explained, recognition theory forms the main theoretical framework for this review. Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser both make strong contributions to conceptualizing a theory of recognition, although they do so from different perspectives. In Honneth's view, individuals need to experience an acceptance of identity in the family, state, and civil society in order to act with agency, and that identity formation requires the presence of recognition for full development (Honneth, 2004; Webb et al., 2021). Honneth tied this concept into social justice, stating social equality is the enabling of identity formation and self-realization for all its members. He explained recognition as having three social components: love, equal treatment in law, and equal treatment regarding social esteem. From a social justice lens, Honneth argued this means individuals have the right for recognition of their needs, recognition of legal equality, and recognition of their contributions to society, respectively. Honneth (2004) understood

recognition as important for the well-being of society as well, stating this well-being is ‘measured according to the degree of its ability to secure conditions of mutual recognition in which personal identity formation, and hence individual self-realization, can proceed sufficiently well’ (p. 354).

Fraser moves away from the psychological focus of Honneth’s conceptualization of recognition so as to avoid placing the responsibility on the individual (Garrett, 2010). Instead, she argued institutionalised patterns need to be examined because injustice is created when there is no acknowledgement of the policies that create differences around individuals’ opportunities (Webb et al., 2021). For Fraser, the issue of recognition is not one of self-realization, but of justice. She argued recognitional justice is the equal right to seek social esteem under equal opportunity, without institutionalised patterns that downgrade others. Fraser referred to this as ‘parity of participation’ in which all members of society interact as peers (Fraser, 1998, p. 5). For her, recognition plays a part in achieving this parity, but not recognition alone. Fraser contended equal distribution is just as important as recognition in achieving parity of participation.

Fraser (1995) proposed developing a critical theory of recognition in which social equality and cultural recognition support rather than contradict each other. Fraser categorised injustice into two categories: socioeconomic injustice and cultural injustice. She defined socioeconomic injustice as including issues of exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation. That of economic marginalization is particularly salient for immigrants, who are often relegated to underpaid or undesirable work within the U.S. economy (Bauder, 2003, 2005; Ng & Shan, 2010). Cultural injustice, according to Fraser, includes cultural domination, disrespect, and nonrecognition. Nonrecognition is again particularly salient regarding the issue of immigrant professionals and will be discussed later in this review. Further, Fraser argued

socioeconomic and cultural injustices are not only interwoven but reinforce each other. She stated ‘cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalised in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture’ (1995, pp. 72-73). The remedy, according to Fraser, is recognition for cultural injustice and redistribution for socioeconomic injustice.

Oliver (2015) problematised recognition theory by arguing while recognition does benefit marginalised individuals, it still maintains a sense that recognition is bestowed upon one group by another group, reinforcing unequal power dynamics. Oliver also argued mutual recognition can never be fully obtained, and there is a danger in thinking of it as a goal to be reached rather than a process in which society must continually engage. She added this must be done by giving attention to the ways in which we do not recognise others or, in other words, paying attention to nonrecognition.

Garrett (2010) also criticised recognition theorists, stating ‘they fail to acknowledge that the state, primarily intent on maintaining patterns and processes aiding and sustaining capital accumulation, can be a substantial source of oppression and hardship in itself’ (p. 1527). He suggested the state contributes to (mis)recognition by attaching categories and labels to certain groups and by building and consolidating difference. The second category is particularly relevant to the immigrant professional whose knowledge is construed as different and devalued by governmental, organizational, or institutional policies, as will be discussed in the section on nonrecognition.

Despite its critiques, the concept of recognition and recognition theory is increasingly found in research on knowledge mobility and credentialing barriers for immigrant professionals within a new host country. It is a relevant lens with which to view the issue because it

conceptualises the need for recognition for identity formation and the well-being of individuals and society and the harms of nonrecognition as injustice. For these reasons, and because it appeared often in the literature review results, I used recognition theory for my theoretical framework as I synthesised themes for this review.

### **Literature review methodology**

According to Torraco (2005), an integrative literature review is one that reviews and synthesises literature on a specific topic, integrating a variety of research as a means to generate a new framework or perspective. To accomplish this, I conducted a search of the literature to analyze the topic of immigrant professionals and recognition of prior learning using the SALSA framework of Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis (Grant & Booth, 2009). I did not have a clear theoretical framework established before beginning, so I initiated my search with a very broad set of parameters to allow for a comprehensive exploration. I identified the following key search terms to use: *immigrant*, *prior learning recognition*, *migration*, *education*, and *credentials*. I combined these terms in various ways to yield different results, such as *immigrant credentials* or *migration* and *education*. I used the search engines Google Scholar, EBSCO, and JSTOR. Throughout the review process, I gradually refined and focused my topic as I encountered broader concepts such as *transnationalism*, *recognition*, and *mobility of knowledge*. I conducted new searches based on these concepts and found additional articles that incorporated them into the problem of immigrant professionals facing barriers to recognition of learning. I selected these search terms because I was most interested in literature related to learning and knowledge recognition, not necessarily the specific effects of recognition or nonrecognition, which were subsequent findings from the search. While this yielded relevant literature, this narrow focus also presents a limitation of the study, which is discussed in the conclusion.

The appraisal measures I used for selecting articles were: (1) included immigrants as the population studied and/or recognition of prior knowledge or credentials as the primary topic (2) published in a peer-reviewed journal (3) empirical (4) published in the last 20 years (2003 – 2023). In addition to empirical articles, I selected conceptual articles and books that met appraisal measures (1), (2), and (4) or contributed significantly to the topic by following one or more of the concepts or frameworks that emerged during my initial search, such as transnationalism. After sorting through hundreds of results yielded through the search terms, I selected 72 articles and book chapters that met the above criteria and conducted a more detailed perusal of these articles and chapters. Upon reviewing the reference lists for these articles, I identified six more articles to add to my collection for this review. A final article published during the writing phase was later added for a total of 79 articles and chapters.

In the final appraisal process, I narrowed everything to the material most relevant to the topic and emerging theoretical framework. I chose to primarily include articles that focus on immigrant professionals in alignment with my initial topic of interest but also included articles related to immigrants that followed one or more of the concepts or frameworks that emerged during my initial search. These emerging concepts included transnationalism, mobility of knowledge, and recognition. As a result, this literature review analyzes and synthesises 11 empirical articles, 17 theoretical or conceptual articles, and two books (see Table 1). The books were included because they provided insights into recognition theory and adult learning theory by leading scholars in those fields.

For the synthesis process, I conducted thematic analysis using techniques recommended by Ryan and Bernard (2003). I followed repetitions across the literature to generate initial themes, and as the theoretical framework of recognition theory emerged, I began using theory-

based material to inform my synthesis. As I conducted an initial reading of the literature, I identified the main themes of transnationalism, mobility of knowledge, and recognition and the articles that referenced these themes. Upon a second, closer reading, I identified sub-themes related to recognition and nonrecognition, primarily based on data and findings from the empirical articles. I organised these themes and sub-themes into a visual model (see Figure 1) and then wrote a narrative of each theme backed by the relevant literature.

Finally, in the analysis phase, I summarised the themes I identified throughout this literature review. I also considered potential gaps in the research synthesised for this review and highlighted why this is an important topic of study. This analysis is presented in the conclusion of the review.

### **Synthesis of key themes**

From the articles reviewed, as described above, the concepts and theoretical themes that emerged related to the topic are transnationalism, mobility of knowledge, and recognition theory. The articles are analyzed and situated within these categories, and some are represented within more than one category because they encompass more than one theme. A table of the articles presented in this review is included at the end of this section to provide an overview of each article and its framework, methodology, data, and findings (see Table 1).

**Table 2.1. Overview of the review results, sorted by year.**

| <b>Author(s)</b> | <b>Year</b> | <b>Type</b>  | <b>Purpose (P) and/or Research Questions (Q)</b> | <b>Methodology</b> | <b>Sample</b> | <b>Location</b> | <b>Findings and/or Contributing Concept</b> |
|------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Schiller et al.  | 1992        | Conceptual   |                                                  |                    |               |                 | Transnationalism                            |
| Taylor, C.       | 1994        | Book chapter |                                                  |                    |               |                 | Recognition theory                          |
| Fraser, N.       | 1995        | Conceptual   |                                                  |                    |               |                 | Recognition theory                          |
| Kearney, M.      | 1995        | Conceptual   |                                                  |                    |               |                 | Transnationalism                            |

|                            |      |            |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------|------|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Fraser, N.                 | 1998 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | Recognition theory                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Bauder, H.                 | 2003 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | Devaluation of immigrant knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Honneth, A.                | 2004 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | Recognition theory                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Bauder, H.                 | 2005 | Empirical  | P: Examine processes of credential devaluation of migrants from Eastern Europe | Qualitative interviews, on average 70 minutes in length | 24 NGO administrators, government officials, settlement counselors, and employers hiring immigrants | Germany | Devaluation of immigrant labor results from nonrecognition of foreign credentials<br><br>Credential non-recognition is justified by government regulations<br><br>Government institutions play a role in devaluation of immigrant labor<br><br>Devaluation of labor affects migrants in the upper sections of the labor market where work is more regulated |
| Robertson, S. L.           | 2006 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | Mobility of knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Andersson, P., & Osman, A. | 2008 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | (Non)recognition of immigrant knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Andersson, P., & Guo, S.   | 2009 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | (Non)recognition of immigrant knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Guo, S.                    | 2009 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | (Non)recognition of immigrant knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Andersson, P., & Fejes, A. | 2010 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | Mobility of knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Garrett, P. M.             | 2010 | Conceptual |                                                                                |                                                         |                                                                                                     |         | Recognition theory                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Gibb, T., & Hamdon, E.     | 2010 | Empirical  | Q1: How do staff and                                                           | Interviews                                              | 21 women: staff, students,                                                                          | Canada  | Q1: Issues of immigrant                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

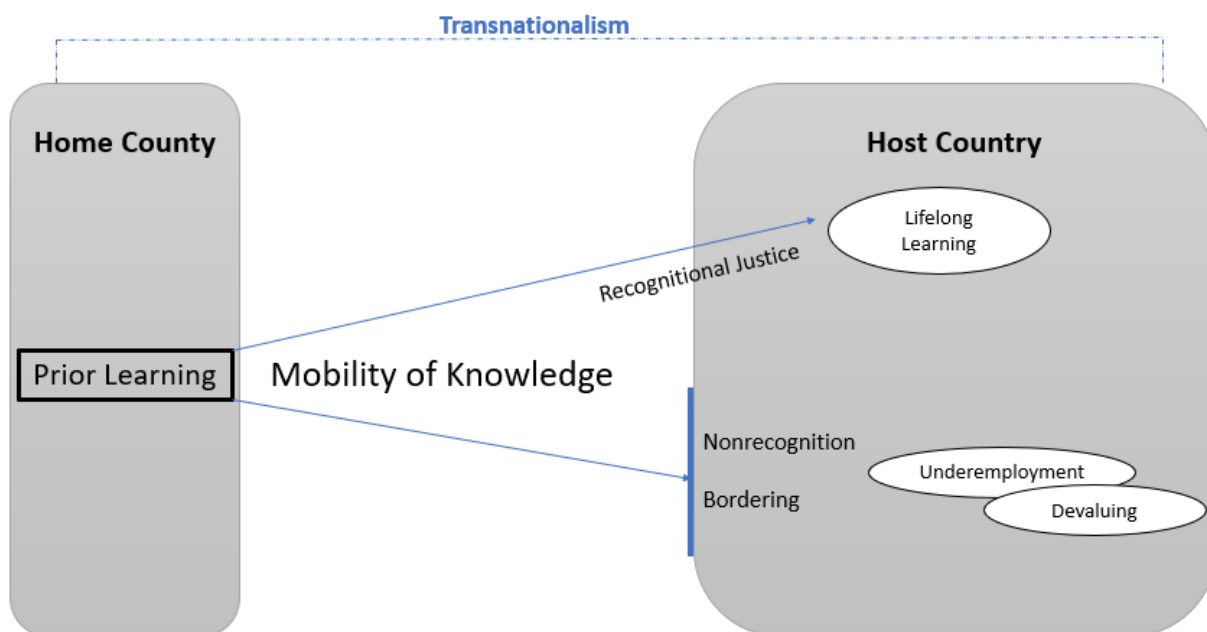
|                                |      |                   |                                                                                                                             |                                                                                    |                                                                                       |        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------|------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                |      |                   | students of ISOs understand the recredentialing issue?<br><br>Q2: How do they respond intellectually and practically to it? | Document analysis<br><br>Observations                                              | and volunteers of ISOs (including learners or former learners)                        |        | unemployment and underemployment are an absence of recognitional justice<br><br>Q1: Bordering of knowledge as symbolic/cultural injustice<br><br>Q2: Resistance against policies and practices that protect and patrol invisible borders of professional and credentialed knowledge |
| Guo, S.                        | 2010 | Conceptual        |                                                                                                                             |                                                                                    |                                                                                       |        | Transnationalism<br><br>Lifelong education                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Ng, R., & Shan, H.             | 2010 | Empirical         | Q1: How do individuals orient themselves to the [lifelong learning] discourse when they participate in the labor market?    | Life history interviews<br><br>Institutional ethnography                           | 21 Chinese women: skilled professional immigrants under 40 years old                  | Canada | Q1: Credentialism<br><br>Gendered and racialised construction of Chinese women<br><br>Age, gender, and familial relations intersect with lifelong learning to shape career (re)orientation                                                                                          |
| Mckee-Ryan, F. M. & Harvey, J. | 2011 | Literature review |                                                                                                                             |                                                                                    |                                                                                       |        | Underemployment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Slade, B.                      | 2012 | Empirical         | Q1. Why do immigrant professionals experience difficulty finding appropriate                                                | Institutional ethnography and arts-based research' interviews and textual analysis | 6 skilled immigrants and 8 employees familiar with policy guiding employment programs | Canada | Q1: Adult ed programs are accessible and popular, but the curriculum and structure do not meet needs of adult immigrants                                                                                                                                                            |

|                                      |      |            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                         |                                                                                       |                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------|------|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                      |      |            | employment in Canada?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                         |                                                                                       |                       | Programs are instead shaped by ruling relationships                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Guo, S.                              | 2015 | Conceptual |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                         |                                                                                       |                       | Transnationalism<br><br>Adult education                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Oliver, K.                           | 2015 | Conceptual |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                         |                                                                                       |                       | Recognition theory                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Blain, M., Fortin, S., & Alvarez, F. | 2016 | Empirical  | Q1: What is the professional future of immigrant physicians in Quebec?<br><br>P: Document the complex processes at work in pathways to professional integration                                                                                                                      | Anthropological study from interactionist approach<br><br>Semi-structured interviews based on professional life stories | 15 women and 16 men, aged 33 – 55, from diverse countries, all from the medical field | Canada                | Q1: Recruited immigrants who achieve recognition easily<br><br>Immigrants who face an uphill battle<br><br>Immigrants who change careers                                                                                                                                  |
| Chamakalayil, L., & Riegel, C.       | 2016 | Empirical  | Q1: How do young people handle opportunities and boundaries in transnational space?<br><br>Q2: How do societal and institutional possibilities as well as boundaries become visible in biography and how are they dealt with in hegemonial power structures and social conditions of | Case study<br><br>Documentary method                                                                                    | 1 young woman's case pulled from a larger research project                            | Germany<br><br>Turkey | Q1. Handling of prerequisites and scope of possibilities described as ambivalent, changing between recalcitrance and helplessness<br><br>Q2: Need to gain awareness of destandardization of biographies and power distributions to counter national centrism in education |

|                                |      |            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                          |                                                                                       |               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------|------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                |      |            | inclusion and exclusion?                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                          |                                                                                       |               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Lane, A., & Lee, D.            | 2018 | Empirical  | Q1: What are the lived experiences of highly skilled immigrants undergoing career transition in the United States?                                                                                                                                   | Phenomenological case studies                            | 2 skilled immigrants, one psychologist and one physician                              | United States | Q1: Skilled immigrants in the U.S. experienced a lack of voice, loss of community, frustration with U.S. education and regulatory systems, and pride in vocation                                                                                                  |
| Merriam, S., & Baumgartner, L. | 2020 | Book       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                          |                                                                                       |               | Lifelong learning<br>Adult education                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Shan, H.                       | 2020 | Empirical  | Q1. How do immigrant engineers contribute to the transfer and transformation of knowledge and practices in the engineering profession?<br><br>Q2. What social practices facilitate immigrants' professional learning and knowledge transfer process? | Narrative case studies                                   | 22 immigrant engineers                                                                | Canada        | Q1: Immigrants assemble knowledge, mobilise the capacity of learning to learn, and negotiate being and becoming<br><br>Q2: Knowledge transfer occurs through access to epistemic and boundary objects, reception of peer professionals, and rise of (niche) needs |
| Jurkova, S. & Guo, S.          | 2021 | Conceptual |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                          |                                                                                       |               | Transnationalism<br>Lifelong learning                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Liu, J., & Guo, S.             | 2021 | Empirical  | Q1. What are immigrants' experiences of lifelong learning in labor market integration?                                                                                                                                                               | Life history interviews<br><br>Institutional ethnography | 18 immigrant settlement workers: 30 – 60 years old, from 10 different countries, with | Canada        | Q1: Racialised complexities of credential regime; experiences of recredentialing; volunteering and informal learning                                                                                                                                              |

|                                                                                |      |           |                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                         |                                                                      |           |                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                |      |           | Q2. How do race, class, and gender intersect in shaping immigrant experiences of transition to work as lifelong process? |                                                                                                         | a variety of degrees and professional backgrounds                    |           | Q2: Institutional relations are intrinsic to intersections of race, class, and gender, perpetuating labor market inequality                                                                             |
| Webb, S., Dunwoodie, K., Wilkinson, J., Macaulay, L., Reimer, K., & Kaukko, M. | 2021 | Empirical | Q1: How are refugee students experiencing their degree study?                                                            | Narrative inquiry<br><br>Longitudinal study of students obtaining a bachelor's degree<br><br>Interviews | 16 refugee or asylum-seeking background students from 7 universities | Australia | Q1: Continuing misrecognition: barriers and concerns<br><br>Emerging socio-cultural (recognitive) recognition: identity and belonging<br><br>Growing parity of participation: connectedness and support |
| Oshodi, D.                                                                     | 2023 | Empirical | P: Present the stories of asylum seekers participating in adult learning centers in Italy                                | Narrative inquiry                                                                                       | 3 asylum seekers                                                     | Italy     | Valorisation of certificates<br><br>Appropriateness of teaching methods<br><br>Recognition of prior learning                                                                                            |

**Figure 2.1. Synthesis of key themes.**



### ***Transnationalism***

In a globalised era, immigration continues to increase. Overall, approximately 281 million people are estimated to live outside their home country, which includes all categories of migrants (OHCHR, 2022). Worldwide, there were 89.3 million people forcibly displaced in 2021, and an estimated 117 million as of 2023 (UNHCR, 2021; UNHCR 2024). Of this number, 27.1 million are refugees who experience forced migration and displacement due to adverse circumstances such as war or persecution (UNHCR, 2021). These migrants receive special designation when they flee their country and are given the opportunity to resettle in a receiving country such as the United States, Germany, or Canada. Asylum seekers, of whom there are 6.1 million worldwide as of 2023, also flee danger, but without the special designation given to refugees (UNHCR, 2024). Instead, they seek asylum once they enter a receiving country. Much of migration flows from less developed countries to more advanced industrial countries, such as Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) member nations (Guo,

2015). As a result, as of 2022, one in ten people across all OECD member nations are foreign-born (OECD, 2022b). The United States, one of the OECD member nations, had 13.6% of its population as foreign-born in 2019 (OECD, 2022a). In the midst of this increase in migration, scholars studying immigrants and immigration have begun to observe the phenomenon of transnationalism.

Transnationalism recognises there is not a clear break from context when an immigrant leaves his or her home country for a new one. Rather, there exists an interconnectedness between the immigrant, the home country, and the new country (Guo, 2015). One way this can be observed is when considering identity. Immigrants who practice this transnationalism ‘draw upon and create fluid and multiple identities grounded both in their society of origin and in their host societies’ (Schiller et al., 1992, p. 11). These identities can develop in relation to family, work, and educational contexts, among others. Transnationalism recognises immigrants do not discard one identity for a new one when immigrating to a new country, but rather maintain multiple identities that form out of participating in multiple contexts, identities which often overlap and are classified as *both-and-and* rather than *either-or* (Kearney, 1995, p. 558). These multiple identities include knowledge gained within these various contexts and communities.

In regard to knowledge and transnationalism, immigrants are learners who ‘bring knowledge from their own cultures to the process of learning and develop relationships and interactions across cultures’ (Jurkova & Guo, 2021, p. 794). Learning and knowledge is not left behind when an individual migrates to a new country. Instead, prior learning influences and informs participation in the new culture while still interacting with the previous culture. Those engaged in transnationalism therefore are impacted by the identities, including professional

identities, and learning that occur across national borders. This broad context therefore serves as the backdrop for the other themes identified in the literature.

### ***Mobility of knowledge***

Within the scope of immigration and transnationalism, mobility of individuals across borders and countries is a given. However, as Andersson and Fejes (2010) noted, ‘this mobility of people also involves mobility of knowledge’ (p. 201). They explained this transfer is one of place and time, that is, related to context. Immigrants gain prior knowledge and learning in the context of their home country, but moving to a receiving country places them and their knowledge in a different context. Andersson and Fejes described the mobility of knowledge in this case as having an *exchange value*, one that is between workplaces, formal contexts such as education, or informal contexts such as daily life (p. 203). They also distinguished between equivalency and similarity, stating an equivalency of knowledge between contexts is difficult to recognise while similarity of knowledge between contexts is easier to recognise. These ideas are significant for the issues of mobility not simply of credentials or experience, but of actual knowledge.

Anderson and Fejes (2010) acknowledged, based on their study of Sweden’s statistics and policies regarding recognition of prior learning, as well as data from previous studies, transferring knowledge across contexts is challenging and prior learning of immigrants may not have exchange value in a new context. They demonstrated when knowledge learned in one context is assessed and evaluated in a new context, disparities exist between the knowledge contexts, and assessors of knowledge have power to make decisions about what knowledge is valid and what is devalued.

Additional empirical studies explore mobility of knowledge as it relates to transnationalism, primarily acknowledging the difficulties of achieving knowledge mobility between national contexts. In a case study of a young woman with educational and migration experiences in Germany and Turkey, Chamakalayil and Riegel (2016) found transnational spaces caused ambiguity in educational contexts as the participant faced challenges in moving knowledge between educational systems in Germany and educational systems in Turkey. The participant moved several times between Germany and Turkey, but in each situation found herself facing barriers to have the learning from the other country recognised. They suggested ‘education systems need to be shaped taking into consideration national and international contexts of social inequality’ (p. 133). Webb et al. (2021) examined the experiences of Australian university students with a refugee background by conducting a longitudinal study on 16 refugee university students from seven different universities and asking how those students experienced their degree of study. They found ‘few higher education institutions fully acknowledge the educational capital and transnational understandings that students from refugee backgrounds develop through navigating precarious mobilities’ (p. 876). They also found, along with economic and legal issues, a dissonance existed for the students between the prior learning from their home country and university study which impeded their sense of belonging in higher education. Both of these studies indicate there are institutional barriers impeding the mobility of knowledge.

Despite these questions around the ability to facilitate mobility of knowledge, one study offers a view on the mobility of knowledge that demonstrates ways in which it is possible and even achieved. In a study of the transfer of knowledge of immigrant engineers in Canada, Shan (2020) conducted a narrative case study of 22 participants, asking how immigrant professionals

contribute to the transfer and transformation of knowledge practices in the engineering profession and what social practices facilitate knowledge transfer. Shan challenged traditional ideas of knowledge transfer as ‘the transport of knowledge as a thing across place’ (p. 394), suggesting instead transfer of knowledge contains more fluid concepts such as assembling codified knowledge in the new work context, mobilizing the ability to learn within a new context, and negotiating identity in a new place. Additionally, all participants in the study were proud of their ability to learn, and Shan noted ‘it is often their capacity of learning that served to lubricate the process of transfer’ (p. 390). These findings indicate that mobility of knowledge can occur, and that the immigrant’s commitment to learning plays a role in achieving it.

As evidenced by these studies, it is important to consider the role of institutions, organizations, and policies with regard to knowledge mobility and the power structures that are in place promoting or discouraging that mobility, in addition to considering the immigrant learner. Robertson (2006) contributed to this conversation by troubling how certain social forms, including the monoculture of knowledge and rigor of knowledge which upholds modern science and high culture, waste knowledge and experience by privileging some entities and disqualifying others in a global setting. She stated this can be illustrated in how knowledge is instrumentalised and commodified through various organizations and agreements that occur globally. Robertson suggested imagining a ‘global array of knowledges’ in which possibilities of alternate and new knowledges are included in the knowledge framework (p. 315).

Therefore, while immigrants have the potential to transfer knowledge from the former context to a new context as *boundary spanners* and *knowledge spillover agents* (Shan, 2020, p. 383), the mobility of that knowledge can also present a challenge. This challenge is ultimately one of recognition. Knowledge is not lost when an individual migrates and participates in

transnational spaces. Rather, it is either recognised or faces nonrecognition, especially when considering knowledge gained in the home country and moved into the context of the receiving country. Recognition theory is therefore a relevant theoretical lens through which to examine mobility of knowledge through transnational spaces.

### ***Recognition theory***

As explained previously, transnationalism involves the negotiation of multiple identities. Recognition theory as proposed by Honneth would promote the full identity formation, including the professional identity, and self-realization of an immigrant member in the receiving country. Also, Honneth (2004) stated individuals must not only experience recognition for personal autonomy, but also regarding their needs and, in the case of this issue, their capabilities. Immigrants have capabilities earned through learning and experience in their home country that deserve recognition in the new country. Adding Fraser's concept of recognitional justice can address the issues of both cultural and socioeconomic injustice, which immigrant professionals often face when attempting to enter their career field in a new country.

***Recognition of immigrant knowledge.*** Several empirical articles drew on recognition theory and how this impacts immigrant knowledge mobility and inclusion. For example, Webb et al. (2021) used the framework of recognition in their study, explaining the use of this framework:

means exploring how institutional practices might construct or frame some types of students and social backgrounds as the norm and others as different, deficient or inferior, thereby creating divisions in the allocation of or access to university resources and students' sense of belonging and right to participate. (pp. 877-878)

They found that to achieve a parity of participation and social justice, there needs to be recognition at the legal, material, economic, and socio-cultural levels as well as a development of

supports to encourage parity participation of students. While this study focuses on university students, the findings are relevant to immigrant professionals facing a similar recognition barrier of prior knowledge.

Gibb and Hamdon (2010) used Fraser's theory of recognitional justice in their study of immigrant women in Canada, stating it allows them to shift away from an analysis of the bodies of immigrant women to focus more on the economic and political structures and discourses, or those of power, that determine what is considered valid knowledge. They stated Fraser's argument:

facilitates the interrogation of the ideologies, systems, and structures that regulate the conversion of symbolic knowledge (e.g. credentials) into a commodity and which, within the current structure, often results in the alienation of immigrants from their knowledge and prevents them from benefitting from it. (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010, p. 196)

This idea connects with that of mobility of knowledge, arguing not only can immigrants face barriers to mobility of their knowledge to a new country but can experience a complete separation from that knowledge. They addressed it by proposing four elements that would contribute to justice in this area: policies would have a critical recognition orientation, policies would focus on social rather than individual change, the protection of norms would be absent, and policies would promote recognition as an act of justice and lack of recognition as injustice.

Oshodi (2023) also used recognition theory as the theoretical framework for a study that explored the experiences of three asylum seekers in Italy. Oshodi argued recognition theory provides insights into immigrant learning and integration. It does this by stressing the need for approval of the characteristics, abilities, and contributions of immigrants through recognition. Findings from the study demonstrated the importance of acknowledging the prior learning and

expertise of immigrants as a means to make them feel recognised and to prevent them from having to start over.

Despite the need for recognition when building identity and social well-being, there are few examples of it being achieved. Of the empirical studies analyzed for this review, only one included positive findings of immigrants achieving recognition for prior learning. In an empirical study, Blain et al. (2017) explored the professional future of foreign-trained physicians in Quebec. They problematised a human capital approach to the issue of transferring knowledge and credentials and used a theoretical framework of organizational society and sociology of health. The methodology was an anthropological study conducted from an interactionist approach that included semi-structured interviews based on the professional life stories of participants. The sample included 15 women and 16 men for a total of 31 participants. They ranged in age from 33 to 55 and were from a variety of countries. They shared in common a medical professional background from their home country. Findings revealed there are a variety of future outcomes for immigrant physicians in Canada, including recognition. However, of the 31 participants, only five achieved recognition for their skills and obtained employment commensurate with their education and experience. For three of these participants, the recognition process took approximately two years, demonstrating that the process can be long and arduous.

*Recognition as lifelong learning.* The concept of lifelong learning can be applied in situations where recognition occurs. Lifelong learning is more expansive than simply formal learning that occurs in a school. Instead, it includes nonformal, informal, and self-directed learning, as well as acknowledging the ongoing process of learning (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). It can be a

helpful concept when considering transnationalism and mobility of knowledge because it can encompass the learning that happens both in the home country and the receiving country.

Andersson and Fejes (2010) connected lifelong learning with recognition in the discussion section of their article. They suggested a recognition of prior learning policy that situates the immigrant in a new community of practice in which prior learning is recognised and integrated into learning, facilitating lifelong learning. They stated this discourse of lifelong learning could be a useful way of discussing the challenges of mobility of knowledge.

In a conceptual paper, Guo (2010) furthered the idea by contextualizing lifelong learning and recognition within a transnational setting and proposing the concept of *transnational lifelong learning for recognitive justice and pluralist citizenship*. For Guo, this concept combines freedom of mobility with equal membership in society, multiple ways of belonging across national borders, and acknowledgement of Fraser's model of redistribution and recognition. It adds new facets to the idea of lifelong learning that is significant for immigrant learners who occupy transnational spaces and various knowledge contexts. He similarly suggested lifelong learning is a way to frame recognition and the achievement of mobility of knowledge between countries and contexts.

Conversely, Ng and Shan (2010) critiqued lifelong learning in their empirical study of Chinese immigrant women in Canada. They argued lifelong learning has taken on an ideology of neo-liberalism in which learners are responsible for their own learning and lifelong learning is focused on vocationalism. Using the voice of participants, they sought to reframe lifelong learning as an individual, natural phenomenon in which individuals pursue learning opportunities. They recommended policy changes that allow for recognition of foreign

credentials and work experiences as a way to address inequalities in employment and education and promote lifelong learning and shift it away from neoliberal tenants.

Lui and Guo (2021) further critiqued current perceptions of lifelong learning, similarly arguing it has become a neoliberal term that now serves as a barrier. They argued it prioritises the dominant values and norms of the receiving country because immigrants are encouraged to pursue employability-focused lifelong learning that does not lead to recognition but rather values the knowledge and skills of the country over the immigrant. They proposed decolonizing lifelong learning in a process that questions Western knowledge and instead promotes cultural knowledge that has been traditionally marginalised.

As these examples show, not only is lifelong learning a concept that could be compatible with ideas of recognition, but it could also be seen as a positive outcome of recognition because when achieving recognition, immigrants do not face a break in the learning process or a barrier to the mobility of their knowledge. They do not have to ‘start over’ but can instead continue in a forward trajectory of learning that encompasses all learning experiences, even those acquired in a different country. However, in order for lifelong learning to be seen as an outcome of recognition, it needs to be as a critique of neoliberal conceptualizations of the concept and instead value forms of knowledge other than the majority.

***Nonrecognition of immigrant knowledge.*** In contrast to obtaining recognition, theorists also raise issues of its lack or misrepresentation, describing it in terms of nonrecognition, misrecognition, and (mis)recognition. For the purpose of this review, I will focus on the term nonrecognition, understanding it as a complete lack of recognition. In his essay on the politics of recognition, Charles Taylor (1994) argued one’s identity is shaped by recognition, and:

A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994, p. 25)

For Taylor, recognition is an essential need for human beings and nonrecognition is hurtful to identity and individuals. Similarly, Honneth (2004) argued a lack of recognition can be damaging to an individual's identity formation.

In addition to the individual level, nonrecognition presents an opposite paradigm to recognitional justice on a societal level. Fraser (1998) described nonrecognition as individuals being denied full status as partners in social interactions due to institutional patterns that devalue their distinctive characteristics. She argued this prevents them from participating as full members of society.

Regarding immigrants, in contrast to recognitional justice through which prior learning is recognised and accepted, nonrecognition presents a barrier to their knowledge mobility. Many power structures inherent in governmental policies, accrediting bodies, and institutions serve to discredit prior knowledge and inhibit mobility (Bauder, 2005; Chamakalayil & Riegel, 2016; Webb et al., 2021). This can occur through formal processes such as recognition of prior learning assessments in which certain knowledge is privileged and immigrant knowledge, viewed as different, is devalued and unrecognised (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Andersson & Guo, 2009; Andersson & Osman, 2008).

Finally, scholars consistently observed knowledge transfer is more likely to be misrecognised along lines of race and country of origin (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Liu & Guo,

2021; Ng & Shan, 2010). Their studies showed that immigrants from a different race or a non-Western country often experience greater devaluation of foreign credentials and higher rates of underemployment. This points again to the inherent power structures that prioritise specific racial groups and knowledge, especially those from White, European backgrounds, over others that are perceived as different.

The effects of nonrecognition on immigrants have been demonstrated in various empirical studies. It is a way of defining the barriers to recognition of prior learning and mobility of knowledge. The empirical findings on the results of recognition were sparse, as shown above, but the findings on the results of nonrecognition were the main focus of most articles. Several themes emerged in these studies in relation to nonrecognition. I divided these themes into three categories, proposing nonrecognition is made manifest in devaluation, underemployment, and bordering.

*Nonrecognition as devaluation.* Nonrecognition of immigrant learning and experience can lead to a sense of devaluation, or an underestimation of the worth of that background. Guo (2015) argued of the issues studied by international adult education scholars, the concerns around the devaluation of immigrants' prior learning and experience is one of the most important. He stated 'the deficit model of difference leads to conflation of "difference" and "deficiency," as well as a belief that the knowledge of immigrant professionals, particularly those from developing countries, is incompatible and inferior, and hence, invalid' (pp. 11-12).

Bauder (2005) is one of the scholars concerned with the issue of devaluation as a result of nonrecognition and conducted a study with the purpose of exploring devaluation of immigrant labor in Germany. Bauder did not refer to recognition theory or other concepts explored in this review when looking at nonrecognition. Instead, he used the concept of institutionalised cultural

capital as a main framework. He did, however, address nonrecognition in relation to devaluation. He argued institutional capital, not human capital, is what gives or denies access to occupations and therefore devalues immigrant labor. The study was conducted in Berlin where 2.7 percent of *Spätaussiedler*, ethnic German migrants from Eastern Europe, have resettled. Bauder conducted interviews with 24 non-government administrators, government officials, settlement counselors, and employers hiring this specific immigrant population. His findings suggested the nonrecognition of foreign credentials leads to devaluation, and this nonrecognition is justified and perpetuated by government institutions and policies. One of the contributions his study makes is to examine the issue from a government and policy level and its subsequent effects on the skills and learning of immigrants with international credentials. It is also one of the earliest studies giving attention to this issue and its implications for individuals and societies.

Ng and Shan (2010) had similar findings regarding devaluation. However, like Bauder, they did not rely upon a specific theoretical framework but rather a concept. They built their study around the concept of lifelong learning as an ideological frame in which they argued lifelong learning has devolved into a discourse of supporting the global economy and expecting individuals to take up their own responsibility for learning while simultaneously becoming products that bolster the market and minimise costs to the state and organizations. Their research question focused on this discourse, asking how immigrants orient themselves to it as they participate in the labor market. Ng and Shan used life history interviews and institutional ethnography for their methodology. Their sample included 21 Chinese immigrant women in Canada who were working professionals in China before immigrating to Canada. The women surveyed were all under 40 years old. They demonstrated the issue of credentialing affected the choice of Chinese women immigrants in Canada regarding decisions about careers and training,

and many immigrants accepted the dismissal and devaluation of their credentials without even questioning it or expecting recognition.

Another finding on devaluation is a study conducted in Canada by Liu and Guo (2021), who explored the immigrant experience of lifelong learning in labor market integration and the influence of race, gender, and class on those experiences. Using institutional ethnography as the methodology, the researchers conducted life history interviews with 18 immigrant settlement workers. These individuals ranged in age from 30 to 60 years old and were from a variety of countries and professional backgrounds. In the results of this study, Liu and Guo found the immigrant participants experienced devaluation of their prior learning and work experiences, often in relation to their race. If they had darker skin, for example, they often experienced greater devaluation. This finding demonstrates institutional relations perpetuate labor market inequality by devaluing skills along gender, class, and racial lines. It offers an important understanding of how immigrants of certain racial and cultural backgrounds, particularly those from non-Western or less developed countries, may experience greater degrees of devaluation than immigrants from Western, more developed countries.

Finally, in the only empirical study in this review representing the U.S. context, Lane and Lee (2018) presented two case studies of immigrant professionals who had migrated to the United States. One participant was a psychologist trained in South America and the other was a physician specialist from East Asia. Both had worked several years in their field before migrating to the U.S. and both were participating in recredentialing programs in order to be able to practice in their field because their foreign credentials were not recognised. These individuals similarly experienced devaluation due to the U.S. system, and ‘the discounted education and

professional experience were experienced as sources of negative emotions, frustration, and disappointment' (p. 322).

*Nonrecognition as underemployment.* Underemployment is a manifestation of nonrecognition that closely aligns with devaluation. When an individual faces nonrecognition and devaluation, underemployment in low-paying and low-skill jobs not commensurate with his or her background and education can be a result. Underemployment can have adverse effects, such as negative attitudes and feelings of devaluation or employee withdrawal (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011).

When faced with nonrecognition, a majority of immigrants change careers entirely. For example, returning to the study by Blain et al (2017), 16 out of the 31 medical professionals with foreign degrees had chosen a different career at the time of the interviews, demonstrating nonrecognition was more common among immigrants than recognition. For these participants, 'the arduousness, the complexity, and the advice received from institutional representatives...or from people in their social network dashed all hopes of being able to become a physician in Quebec' (Blain et al., 2017, p. 239).

Primarily, however, these career changes lead to underemployment, as other studies show. Gibb and Hamdon (2010), for example, conducted an empirical study of immigrant service organizations (ISO) in Canada that contributes further to this topic. They asked how the staff and students of ISOs understood and responded to the issue of recredentialing, or having to retrain in order to obtain professional employment. Unlike Bauder (2005), they incorporated recognition by using Nancy Fraser's ideas of redistributive and recognitional forms of justice; however, this framework is used to discuss findings towards the end of the article rather than to initially situate the study. Data collection included document analysis, observations, and

interviews with 21 women, all staff, students, or volunteers of the ISOs. Of the sample collected, all women but one were immigrant women. While the inclusion of ISO staff led to an organizational perspective in this study, it is primarily done through the lens of the immigrant experience due to identifies of staff as immigrants. Gibb and Hamdon found the immigrant women interviewed experienced underemployment due to nonrecognition. Not only that, but the women also perceived their underemployment as an absence of recognitional justice, seeing the influence of the social systems and policies that enforced nonrecognition.

Returning to the study from Ng and Shan (2010), in addition to devaluation, their findings revealed training programs appearing neutral actually serve to perpetuate gendered and racialised segregation in the Canadian labor market, which was demonstrated in how the women interviewed were funneled into low-paying occupations. This finding highlighted how gender, age, and financial circumstances also guided the decisions of immigrant women towards an orientation of a gendered, racialised labor market in which the women maintained the status quo by accepting employment not commensurate with their expertise and education. As with findings regarding devaluation, nonrecognition as underemployment can be greater for immigrants of certain racial and cultural backgrounds.

*Nonrecognition as bordering.* Another way nonrecognition can occur is in the process of knowledge bordering. This refers to specific policies which ‘are about protecting and patrolling the invisible borders of professional and credentialed knowledge’ (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010, p. 195). While maintaining quality and standards within a profession is important for the integrity and rigor of that profession, too often the accrediting bodies of professions or the systems and policies at an organizational or institutional level are inflexible in their acceptance of what is considered true and valuable knowledge (Robertson, 2006). Instead, certain knowledge is

prioritised over others, particularly knowledge that is based in Western traditions (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Liu & Guo, 2021; Robertson, 2006).

While only specifically named in the study by Gibb and Hamdon (2010), the concept of bordering is an important factor with the issue of nonrecognition. Bordering was another finding from their study of Chinese women immigrants in Canada. In addition to underemployment, the women experienced bordering of their knowledge, which meant the lines being drawn around what was considered legitimate professional knowledge did not encompass their international credentials. In addition to experiencing this bordering, they also had difficulty understanding where the borders lay and what was accepted within those borders. Their response was a struggle to resist an absence from the Canadian cultural and professional context due to the borders placed around professional and credential knowledge. They did so by critiquing the systems that established these borders and erected barriers against their knowledge.

The bordering described by Gibb and Hamdon occurred within immigrant service organizations (ISOs), which in Canada are adult education programs offering English language instruction and employment preparation as well as cultural orientation to immigrants in the new country. They argued ‘education and re-education has become commodified as a means through which immigrants pay to gain access to professional and skilled labour jobs’ (p. 186), demonstrating how these programs can be a means of bordering when they offer retraining as the only way for an immigrant to reenter a profession. They acknowledged, however, these sites can become places for recognitional justice by supporting immigrants’ resistance to nonrecognition.

Slade (2012) also examined immigrant experiences in adult basic education programs in Canada, using interviews of immigrant professionals to construct a reader’s theater script within an institutional ethnography framework. She found these programs, which offer high school

credit and Canadian work experience to immigrants already skilled in a profession, did little to meet the needs of these students. In fact, none of the students participating in the program found work in their field upon completion. Instead, the programs financially benefited school boards while keeping immigrants out of their professional fields. This provides another picture of bordering, although Slade did not use this term in the article. However, both Slade and Gibb and Hamdon (2010) raised concerns about the education programs designed to help immigrants but actually border knowledge and perpetuate nonrecognition rather than open pathways into bordered knowledge, as they are supposed to do.

## **Conclusion**

As explained above, several key themes emerged from this integrative literature review conducted about immigrant professionals facing barriers to recognition in the receiving country. Transnationalism provides a broad context within which to view this issue, demonstrating the multiple identities immigrants form as they navigate across borders and occupy transnational spaces. This movement and multiplicity also involve knowledge. Just as immigrants physically cross borders and enter new spaces, building multiple identities, so their knowledge moves with them, causing a mobility of knowledge. However, mobility of knowledge is dependent upon recognition. Recognition and nonrecognition are primarily determined by policies and processes established by governments, institutions, and organizations. These determine the mobility of immigrant knowledge by either allowing for the acceptance of prior learning through recognition or erecting barriers and borders to that knowledge through nonrecognition.

Recognitional justice allows for mobility of knowledge that moves in an upward trajectory. This movement has the potential to facilitate lifelong learning by allowing the continuation of learning across spaces rather than creating a break in learning and requiring

immigrants to start over or let go of their prior learning. Nonrecognition, on the other hand, draws mobility of knowledge into a downward trajectory that is halted at the bordered knowledge of the new country or profession. Devaluation and underemployment are a result of nonrecognition, often along racial and national lines, negatively impacting the individual and society.

This review highlights studies and articles that are contributors to the topic of prior learning recognition of immigrant professionals. There are, however, limitations to acknowledge. The focus of the review and the search terms I used yielded important literature on the topic but may have overlooked other key literature. For example, using search terms related to barriers and nonrecognition could have resulted in additional studies on the topic. An area of further research is to include more search terms for an expanded review of the literature. Another area for future research is to review or add to the literature from the U.S. Except for one study, the empirical studies included in this review are all conducted outside of the United States, most notably in Canada and Germany, but also in Australia and Italy. For this review, I found very few empirical studies addressing this issue in the U.S. context, despite the large immigration population present in its borders. Expanding the search terms may result in additional U.S.-based empirical literature. This is important because the United States is the largest immigrant receiving country in the world (Migration Policy Institute, 2020), suggesting this issue may be a large, unaddressed problem affecting the U.S. immigrant population.

The problem of nonrecognition and immigrant integration into the host country is one that solicits further inquiry and research. It is an issue that presents many challenges, for ‘while the immigrant body is here, many must begin the long process of letting go of, bracketing or grieving the denial of their knowledges, professional histories, and hard-won skills’ (Gibb &

Hamdon, 2010, p. 194). There is much still to understand about the immigrant experiences of this issue as well as the roles of institutions, organizations, and policies, particularly in the U.S. context. However, based on this review, there is also opportunity to move forward by strengthening strategies of recognition and integration of immigrants into receiving societies.

Maitra and Guo (2019) suggest a “multiculturalism of knowledge” that includes and responds to immigrant values and backgrounds and recognises multiple systems of knowledge (p. 13). They argue “it is morally and economically urgent for government organisations, professional associations, educational institutions and prior learning assessment agencies to dismantle barriers and adopt an inclusive framework that fully embraces all human knowledge and experiences” (p. 14). This approach would allow for greater mobility of knowledge between transnational contexts and increased recognition of immigrant knowledge in immigrant-receiving countries. Immigrant knowledge, including that of immigrant professionals, is important to individual identity and can contribute value to society. Returning to recognition theory, because recognition is a central human desire, the recognition of the identities, knowledge, and skills of immigrants is necessary for their self-realization and integration (Goksel, 2018). This movement toward recognition of our immigrant neighbors can ultimately lead to more just and inclusive societies globally.

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### CHAPTER 3

## “LEARNING IS MY STRENGTH”: RECOGNIZING THE TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING JOURNEY OF IMMIGRANT PROFESSIONALS IN THE UNITED STATES<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Baxter, M. Submitted to *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, 04/11/25.

### **Abstract**

Immigration continues to increase across the globe as transnationalism leads to a fluidity of identity and knowledge across borders. However, knowledge can often face devaluation as it moves to a new context and dominant knowledge is privileged over other knowledges. Knowledge devaluation occurs for immigrant professionals in the United States who experience nonrecognition of their international credentials and misrecognition of their identity. This denial of recognition leads to the injustices of underemployment and limited integration and participation in the new society. Within a framework of recognition theory, this study explores experiences of nonrecognition and the impact on the learning journey of immigrant professionals in the U.S. using a narrative inquiry approach. I interviewed eight participants, all refugees who have lived in the U.S. from three months to 30 years. To analyze the data, I blended critical events analysis and creative nonfiction and wrote a narrative to represent the findings. I found immigrant professionals in the U.S. experience nonrecognition as humiliating and motivating, seek to overcome misrecognition by participating in learning activities, and perceive their learning journey as lifelong, regardless of barriers erected against their knowledge. Implications for adult education include incorporating prior knowledge of immigrant students into curriculum, facilitating communities of practice and career pathways, offering guidance to navigate complex educational systems, and advocating for systematic changes to decrease injustices caused by nonrecognition.

**Keywords:** nonrecognition, immigrant professionals, narrative inquiry, adult education, lifelong learning

In an era of transnationalism, immigration has become a phenomenon of fluidity, with an interconnectedness between cultures and countries as people migrate (Guo, 2015). The fluidity of movement generates a fluidity of identity, with immigrants forming multiple identities influenced by the country of origin and the host country (Schiller et al., 1992). The ever-increasing rate of immigration globally catalyzes this transnationalism. Approximately 281 million people are estimated to live outside their home country (OHCHR, 2022), including an estimated 117 million forcibly displaced due to circumstances such as war or persecution (UNHCR 2024). The fluidity of people and identity initiates a “mobility of knowledge,” shifting knowledge from one context to another as borders are crossed (Andersson & Fejes, 2010, p. 201).

This study explores how nonrecognition impacts this mobility of knowledge and the learning journey of immigrant professionals in the United States. I first provide background on the topic, including literature on immigrant knowledge and establishing a critical theoretical framework through recognition theory. I then present the methodology for this narrative inquiry study, which uses critical events analysis and a creative nonfiction narrative to represent the findings. I conclude by making recommendations for promoting recognition and mobility of immigrant knowledge to build a more democratic, just society.

### **Immigrant Knowledge and Identity**

When immigrating to a new country, immigrants may experience barriers to knowledge mobility, because their prior learning does not have exchange value in the new context and therefore goes unrecognized (Andersson and Fejes, 2010; Guo, 2015). This is due to disparities which may exist between the knowledge contexts and systems, erecting barriers to using prior knowledge in the new country (Chamakalayil & Riegel, 2016; Webb et al., 2021). When

comparing the different contexts and assessing the validity of prior knowledge in the new context, some forms of knowledge may be privileged and others disqualified (Robertson, 2006). This dissonance between contexts and the privileging of certain forms of knowledge leads to a devaluation of other, nondominant knowledge by viewing it as inferior and invalid (Guo, 2015).

One such example of devaluation is towards the knowledge of immigrant professionals in the U.S., those who obtain post-secondary education or training in their home country before immigrating. There are more than 12 million immigrant professionals in the United States as of 2019 (Batalova & Fix, 2021). Individuals within this category may include internationally educated physicians, engineers, teachers, and scientists. The education and expertise from their home countries, built over years, even decades, is devalued in the new context of the U.S. More than a skillset, this knowledge is identity forming. Appiah (2001) states “we develop our identities dialectically with our capacities and circumstances, because the latter are in part the product of what our identities lead us to do” (p. 271). Identity is tied to the knowledge we possess and leads us to fit our lives into specific patterns which then fit into larger stories of shared identity (Appiah, 2001). A devaluation of this knowledge, as experienced by immigrant professionals, is a devaluation of identity and an injustice that produces feelings of frustration, negativity, and disappointment (Lane & Lee, 2018).

### **Recognition Theory**

Issues of knowledge mobility and identity devaluation can be explored using the framework of recognition theory, a normative political theory that positions recognition as central to achieving self-realization and the good life (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Goksel, 2018). A critical social theory stemming from the Frankfurt School, recognition theory provides insight into social struggles and suffering as well as possibilities for social emancipation (Smith, 2012).

According to this theoretical perspective, a person achieves self-realization through mutual recognition, which occurs between individuals and between individuals and the state, institutions, and/or organizations. This mutuality is central to allowing one to be a successful individual in society (Pinkard, 2012) in how it helps an individual to realize full potential when receiving recognition for all areas of the self and one's contributions - one's full identity.

Regarding the lives of immigrants, Goksel (2018) argued "if recognition is a basic human desire, we can conclude that recognition of immigrant identities, skills, and abilities is essential for the self-realization and integration of immigrants" (p. 44).

### **Mis/nonrecognition of Immigrant Knowledge**

Immigrants may experience a complete lack of acknowledgement of their characteristics, contributions, and abilities through nonrecognition. These important aspects of their identity are instead devalued in the context of the host country (Oshodi, 2023). For immigrant professionals, nonrecognition is manifest in their inability to use prior knowledge in the new sociocultural context. Immigrants may also experience misrecognition, a lack of acknowledgement that aligns with their self-identity. Both nonrecognition and misrecognition evoke low self-esteem and humiliation (Oshodi, 2023; Smith 2012). Margalit (1997) defined humiliation as treating people as nonhuman. When dealing with identity and what makes us who we are, misrecognition of identity denies aspects of our humanity. A decent, just society is one that eliminates this inequality leading to humiliation (Margalit, 1997). Nonrecognition and misrecognition, however, perpetuate injustices and humiliation in society.

One injustice of nonrecognition is underemployment. Some immigrant professionals decide to change careers in the face of nonrecognition (Blaine et al., 2017), but many immigrant professionals are funneled into low-paying, entry-level jobs not commensurate with their

education and expertise (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010). This nonrecognition of immigrant knowledge and experience can increase across gender, class, and racial lines, such as for immigrants who are women, with darker skin or from the Global South or East (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Liu & Guo, 2021; Ng & Shan, 2010; Oshodi, 2023). In this way, immigrants from certain continents, such as Africa or South America, or racial minorities may be misrecognized to a greater degree than immigrants with cultural and racial backgrounds akin to those of the dominant groups in the U.S.

Another injustice of nonrecognition is its impact on the newcomer's integration and engagement with learning in the new country. First, it does not acknowledge the existing knowledge an immigrant possesses, potentially blocking that knowledge from being woven into the development of new knowledge in the host country. Second, it prevents complete participation as immigrants are misrecognized. If members of society face misrecognition of some aspects of their identity, this injustice prevents them from being able to contribute to society in meaningful ways. They are not viewed as full cultural members of the host country but as lesser, peripheral members. "Learning is an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" and takes place in communities with others (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 31). Without full participation and full cultural membership, integration and learning may be inhibited due to limited access to communities of practice and experts of the knowledge immigrants are seeking to acquire. Adult immigrants have extensive new knowledges to acquire when they enter the U.S. Learning needs may include English language learning, cultural knowledge, and employment and systems knowledge – essentially, learning how to become participators in and contributors to the new society. For adult immigrant learners and particularly immigrant professionals, nonrecognition and devaluation of prior knowledge inhibits this integration and participation in a sociocultural context.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Few empirical studies have been conducted on how the injustice of non/misrecognition affect the learning of immigrant professionals. Oshodi (2023) explored the stories of asylum seekers in adult education programs in Italy, finding participants believed formal education necessary to success in Italy and desired teaching that was more responsive to their needs. In a study on immigrant professionals in Canada, Slade (2012) found adult education programs were accessible but of little value to participants and did not lead to better employment opportunities. Webb et al. (2021) studied asylum-seeking students in Australian universities and found they experienced a continued lack of recognition of their right to access higher education and disadvantages to fully engaging in learning activities. Lui and Guo (2021) found immigrant professional women who experienced a lack of recognition of prior knowledge engaged in formal adult education or informal learning, but only as a means of complying with dominant norms and values of Canada, the host country. Finally, in a study from the U.S., Lane and Lee (2018) found immigrant professionals were frustrated with the unfair educational system, recredentialing process, and reschooling required as a result of nonrecognition.

While these studies present education as a response to nonrecognition, they do not explore the overall learning journey of immigrant professionals and how this impacts their integration into the host country. Only Oshodi (2023) and Webb et al. (2021) focused on involuntary immigrants, and the study from Lane and Lee (2018) is the only study conducted in the United States, despite the U.S. being the largest immigrant-receiving country in the world (Migration Policy Institute, 2020) and a refugee-receiving country since the Refugee Act of 1980. While little research has been conducted on the topic of immigrant professionals in the U.S., even less research has been conducted to examine how this issue affects learning choices

and engagement of immigrant professionals in adult education programs. This study addresses this gap by exploring how immigrant professionals understand their learning journey and participate in adult education in the midst of experiencing various forms of non/misrecognition.

The following research questions will address this purpose:

1. How do immigrant professionals story their global learning journey within a recognitional framework and sociocultural context?
2. How does non/misrecognition of immigrant professionals' prior experience and education impact their sociocultural participation in new learning activities in U.S.-based adult education programs?

### **Methodology**

In this study, I used narrative inquiry as the methodology for answering the research questions. Donald Polkinghorne (1988), one of the early scholars who promoted the use of narrative in research, argued narrative is the primary source by which humans make experience meaningful. He stated “narrative meaning is focused on those rudimentary aspects of experience that concern human actions or events that affect human beings” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 6), emphasizing the deep significance of narrative in the human experience and the making of meaning.

One of the benefits of using narrative inquiry is the pervasiveness of stories and the relatability of meaning-making through storytelling, making it a natural form of interaction with participants. The pervasiveness of using stories to create meaning can make it appropriate for immigrant professionals because they already engage in storytelling both inside and outside of the classroom as an instinctive form of communication. Storytelling can be an effective tool when working with immigrants of different cultures because “narrative is an ancient practice of

human culture” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 34) and therefore can transcend Western-centric culture and practices, something that may be more difficult within methods such as surveys or observations. This is relevant because more than 50 percent of immigrants in the U.S. are from non-Western countries (Ward & Batalova, 2023).

Another reason narrative inquiry is appropriate to use with immigrant professionals is its emphasis on the full story through plot and temporality. Plot is central to narrative in how actions and events contribute to the whole (Polkinghorne, 1988; Reissman, 2008). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) described temporality as another central feature of narrative as a means to ground the story. Through plot and temporality, narrative inquiry attends to the entirety rather than to individual components. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) stated, “narrative inquirers do not describe an event, person, or object as such, but rather describe them with a past, a present, and a future” (p. 479). For immigrants, they not only have experiences in the U.S., but their overarching journey includes a part of life in their home country. Narrative could be a means of capturing this arc of a storyline from one country to another. Additionally, immigrants, particularly refugees, can face fragmentation in multiple aspects of their lives through displacement, separation from friends and loved ones, loss of belongings and place, loss of identity, feelings that they do not belong in the new country, and a separation from their home culture and language (Falicov, 2002; Webb et al., 2021; Whitley, 2022). Narrative can act as a counterbalance to this fragmentation in how it incorporates all events into a whole.

Finally, narrative can accomplish empowerment by amplifying voices of the participants and providing space for them to describe their experiences of nonrecognition. Nonrecognition is a form of silencing, limiting participation and preventing immigrant professionals from using their full identity, knowledge, and abilities. This study examined what individuals experiencing

nonrecognition are feeling, thinking, and how they are responding. It will break the silence and increase participation by allowing them to speak directly to the issue and contribute to the discussion of it. This act helps to counter nonrecognition and begin the work towards recognition.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

As Johnson and Parry (2015) state, “self-awareness of researcher subjectivity is paramount when endeavoring to understand the complexity of social issues” (p. 45). Due to the sensitivity of studying immigrants facing the injustices of nonrecognition and misrecognition, subjectivity is an important part of the process of conducting a study. I approach this study as a U.S.-born, white woman. I empathize with adult immigrants, having learned a foreign language as an adult and lived abroad for a semester. I am bilingual and have spent time with various Latino communities. However, I recognize the experience of studying abroad, during which I knew I would return to my home country and native language, as well as my experience with immigrant communities as a bilingual, is not the same as the immigrant experience.

I have worked for more than 15 years with immigrants in various capacities, which has made me sympathetic to their experiences and more aware of the challenges they face when resettling in the United States. Most recently, I have worked in the field of adult basic education for more than six years primarily supporting English language and career pathway teachers and developing and implementing programs to serve students. Teachers and program staff often refer students to me who are immigrant professionals seeking guidance on how to resume their careers. It is through these conversations over the years that I have become increasingly aware of the many barriers that exist for these students, including occupational licensing regulations, financial constraints, and nonrecognition of credentials. I therefore do not approach the topic

neutrally. I am frustrated by the barriers faced by these immigrant students, and I want to bring attention to the issue in order to bring about a more just society for them. These experiences influence my perspective on this topic and my work as a researcher.

Finally, I acknowledge that while the systems and structures in place in the U.S. society often result in nonrecognition of immigrant knowledge and credentials, my own knowledge is recognized and leveraged without difficulty. I have bachelor's and master's degrees from reputable U.S. universities and am currently pursuing a doctoral degree. My knowledge and education are recognized as assets in society. This same system that privileges my knowledge and education as part of the dominant group discredits immigrant knowledge and education received in another country.

### **Study Participants**

This study was approved by the ethics committee at my institution, and participants gave written informed consent to participate. Participants included eight immigrant professionals with post-secondary degrees obtained in their home country before immigrating to the U.S. as refugees. The professions represented were engineering, teaching, public health, dentistry, and public law. Seven participants were from the Middle East and one from Southern Europe, and their time in the U.S. ranged from three months to 30 years.

For the study, I focused on involuntary immigrants both because they did not choose to experience displacement or seek to use their knowledge in a new country and because they constitute the highest percentage of unemployed or underemployed immigrant professionals in the United States at 44 percent (Batalova & Fix, 2019). I used criterion sampling (deMarrais, 2004), selecting participants based on the following parameters: (a) professionals with post-secondary degree from their home country, (b) in the U.S. as a refugee or humanitarian parolee,

(c) proficiency in English, (d) 18 years or older, and (e) currently or previously enrolled in adult education. I recruited participants by networking within my local community, one of the main refugee resettlement areas in Georgia, and asking for suggestions of participants. Contacts within various immigrant-serving organizations helped me to identify a majority of the participants for this study.

### **Data Collection**

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews as a means to collect data to answer the research questions. I used an interview guide that included questions about critical events related to experiences of learning and nonrecognition (see Table 1). I conducted one interview with each participant. Interviews lasted between 42 minutes and 83 minutes and were held on Zoom both for convenience for the participants and for cultural sensitivity since most participants were male with cultural norms limiting close contact between men and women. I recorded the audio of each interview and transcribed them for data analysis.

As I conducted the interviews and throughout the analysis process, I maintained a reflexivity journal. I used the journal to record my responses and thoughts after conducting interviews, during the transcription process, and as I analyzed the data. I did this as a means to facilitate a continuous, critical reflection about the research process (Johnson & Parry, 2016). It helped me to notice my reactions throughout each research situation and adapt in ways that were responsive to participant dignity, autonomy, and privacy (Lahman, 2018).

**Table 3.1**

#### *Interview Guide*

| <b>Interview Questions</b>                         | <b>Probing Questions</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| To start, please tell me about where you are from. |                          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>What is your educational background?</p> <p>What was your work experience in your home country?</p> <p>How long have you lived in the United States?</p> <p>Tell me about your experience immigrating to the United States.</p> <p>I've spoken to many immigrants who are unable to work in their area of experience or education. Tell me about your experience.</p> <p>Tell me about a time when you did not get recognition in the U.S. for your education or experience from your home country.</p> <p>How do you see your overall learning journey?</p> <p>Is there anything else you would like to share with me as we finish?</p> | <p>What were your reasons for choosing to study___?</p> <p>Tell me about your learning experience in your country.</p> <p>How long did you do that work?</p> <p>What were some positive experiences?</p> <p>What were negative experiences?</p> <p>What were some difficulties you faced when you first arrived?</p> <p>What attempts did you make to stay in your field?</p> <p>What have been some barriers?</p> <p>What work are you doing now?</p> <p>What were your reasons for choosing your current job?</p> <p>Who was involved in this experience?</p> <p>How did you feel as a result?</p> <p>What did you do when this happened?</p> <p>How has this impacted you?</p> <p>How has this changed or affected your learning in the U.S?</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Data Analysis

For the data analysis process, I combined two methods: critical events analysis and creative nonfiction. Critical events analysis provided a method for analyzing large amounts of

narrative data by directing my focus to specific, meaningful sections of the data. Creative nonfiction served as a way for me to synthesize the data and represent the findings in my study.

### ***Critical Event Analysis***

The purpose of critical event analysis is to focus on and capture the various critical events that can be found in the stories of individuals' experiences (Mertova & Webster, 2020). When analyzing the copious amounts of data generated from a full story or narrative, it can be difficult to determine what is meaningful and significant. Critical event analysis provides a compass for choosing certain events as focal points of analysis. Mertova and Webster (2020) stated "because events are critical parts of people's lives, using them as a main focus for research provides a valuable and insightful tool for getting at the core of what is important in that research" (p. 58). A critical event can be positive or negative in nature, but the central feature is that it impacts the narrator in such a way that initiates a change in the narrator's worldview (Mertova & Webster, 2020).

In addition to critical events, data can be categorized into like events and other events. Like events are those that are similar to critical events in how they repeat the context and sequence of the critical event but are not as unique (Mertova & Webster, 2020). They are used to confirm the critical event or to broaden issues that are present in critical events (Mertova, 2013). An event can be categorized as an other event if it is an event that occurs at the same place and time as critical and like events but is more incidental in nature. These events can provide additional background information which may relate to the issues found in critical and like events. To accomplish this analysis method, I identified critical events highlighted by participants and centered my analysis on these events and how they were experienced by participants.

### ***Creative Nonfiction***

To analyze and synthesize the data, I used creative nonfiction. According to Sass et al. (2021), “creative nonfiction is a technique for analyzing and writing narratives grounded in real-life experiences” (p. 2). It is an arts-based research method that can contribute to knowledge and serve as a method of inquiry or analysis and is considered an approach that is narrative in nature (Levine-Rasky, 2019). In addition to serving as a data analysis technique, using creative fiction can establish a deeper connection to the reader due to its evocative language and storytelling (Sass et al., 2021; Whitley, 2022), appeal to a broader audience, including those who may not relate to academic jargon (Orr et al., 2021; Smith, 2013; Whitley, 2022), and engage participants more effectively as they see their stories told in the data (Blodgett et al., 2011). A benefit to using creative nonfiction when working with immigrants is that, like narrative inquiry, it can appeal to non-Western ways of thinking and writing.

### ***Analysis Process***

I developed my analysis (see Figure 1) using the processes of Sass et al. (2021) and Smith (2013). The first step was to identify critical events around which to center the narratives. I identified the events based on the impact of the event on the participants and the commonality of events across participants. Using the transcripts, I highlighted critical events related to nonrecognition, learning, and the immigration experience. I then highlighted key emotions or ideas related to those events. After conducting this initial review, I reviewed the transcripts a second time, focusing on the highlighted sections and cross-checking critical events and ideas to ensure I was consistent in my coding process across the transcripts. I did this by reviewing the data event by event rather than transcript by transcript. I made some small adjustments to how I initially coded events based on this second review. Through this process, I built thematic

assertions across the data by comparing the critical events to my theoretical framework (Watkins et al., 2022).

For step two, I italicized key words or phrases that were central ideas to the events highlighted. This gave me direct participant quotes related to the identified events that I then pulled from the transcripts and organized into a narrative progression in step three. For building the narrative progression, I organized participant quotes into the categories of (a) learning in the home country, (b) immigrating to the U.S., (c) trying to re-enter a career, (d) finding work in the U.S., and (e) learning in the U.S. This was the narrative progression present in all interviews, which was influenced by the direction of the interview questions. I developed various plots based on the quotes and themes in these categories which were used to create the final narrative.

For step four, I built composite characters to best represent the participants while maintaining anonymity. Since the majority of participants were from the Middle East, I gave all narrative characters that background. For time in the U.S., I used averages of participant time to create characters with short, medium, and long periods in the U.S. For names, I searched for culturally appropriate names that also had meanings corresponding to the topic, meanings such as knowledge, seeker, and wise.

Finally, for steps five and six, I wrote the creative nonfiction narrative using an iterative process of writing and checking the story against the data and theoretical framework. I started with key quotes and plots that had central themes answering my research questions. I used direct participant quotes to build the plots, dialogue, and character thoughts, blending various participant responses into the narrative. To maintain integrity of the data, all character dialogue or thoughts are drawn directly from participants' words with some smoothing for readability. The settings were those experienced by participants and shared in their interviews, and I

incorporated creative details about those settings based on my own experience at immigrant-serving organizations or touring manufacturing facilities. I sent the completed stories to another scholar for evaluation and to the participants for member checking.

**Figure 3.1**

*Analysis Process*



**Data Representation: Creative Nonfiction Composite Narrative**

Through the process described above, I wrote the following creative nonfiction narrative to represent the data. The narrative is a story of three different characters and their experiences of nonrecognition and learning. Rather than directly following the narrative progression, I built the story around three main themes, which I explore in the discussion section.

**Learning Journeys of Immigrant Professionals**

The ceiling soared overhead as Farzana entered the massive facility, tucking aside her hijab as she inserted the bright orange earplugs into her ears. Steel equipment faded into gray walls punctuated by hazard signs in red and yellow. Farzana and the other employees adhered to the yellow walking paths emblazoned on the gray concrete floors as they navigated to their stations.

Farzana took her place on the line, and the machine next to her began spitting out wrapped muffins, slowly at first but quickly increasing speed. Its whirring filled her ears despite the earplugs. Keeping her head down, Farzana separated out muffins without a plastic sleeve, feeling humiliation as she mechanically swiped them to the side of the belt while the wrapped muffins continued down the line. In Afghanistan, her hands had administered injections,

examined sick patients, prescribed medications. Here in the U.S., they no longer felt useful. She appreciated this work at the factory, knowing it had to be done and supported her family, but it was the wrong spot for her and felt like slavery. The pressure of stress and anxiety welled up in her chest.

“Why is this happening?” she wondered. “Why is my destiny like this? I can’t use my education. What is going to happen to my family?” She pushed two unwrapped muffins to the side, feeling rejected and neglected.

While ruminating on these thoughts, Farzana started at the sudden appearance of Jim at her elbow. Although he had supervised her for several weeks, he still never called her by name. He stood next to her, arms crossed over his button-down polo with the company logo embroidered in blue and gold. He surveyed her work for several seconds, then caught her eye and gave her a thumbs up before moving on to the next line worker. Shock coursed through her at the offensive gesture. No one would dare use that rude hand signal in Afghanistan. The gesture was too much for her at that moment, after all she had struggled with that day. Farzana felt her difference, and these experiences were killing her self-confidence. She knew if something changed in her country, she would go back so she could do the work she loved again. It was one of the main things she missed about Afghanistan.

“I just want to be useful and help people again, but my new community is not benefiting from my knowledge and experience. It is a waste,” she whispered, and her voice was drowned out by the roar of the machinery.

\*\*\*\*\*

Farzana sat with her brother, Irfan, and their case worker, Talib, at a folding table that wobbled slightly whenever one of them leaned against it, the edges chipped with use. Faded,

mismatched chairs stood around the table at various distances as if they had been vacated suddenly. Irfan's young children raced each other across the room while the oldest one sat at the table with the adults, coloring bright figures onto a white page.

Letting out a deep sigh, Farzana handed her phone to Talib so he could read the new email. The words on the screen still filled her vision: *We were impressed with your C.V. and qualifications. Regretfully, however, we cannot go further with you. We have a lot of good candidates and went with someone else.*

"I even told them I would volunteer, so they could decide if they wanted to hire me. They still rejected me," she said. She picked up a green crayon abandoned by one of the children and toyed with it. "I feel for these employers, because they do not have any knowledge about Afghanistan, where my experience is. But they will not accept my degree. If I could just get an interview, I am sure I could convince them." She looked up, and her dark eyes brightened with hope.

Talib handed her phone back to her, shaking his head. Farzana had only been in the U.S. for three months. Irfan had been here almost four years, and he knew more about the challenges. Talib turned his gaze to Irfan, who gently fingered the credential evaluations of his bachelor's and master's degrees from Afghanistan and his long C.V. spread across the table.

"Learning is my strength," Talib told them, then paused. "Even though I had to start from zero when I came here."

"I don't understand," Irfan replied. "How is learning a strength when they don't accept our education here?" A frown creased his forehead, and he absentmindedly stroked his black beard. "I used to work in different international and national organizations in Afghanistan, rule

of law projects with the Supreme Court, and the justice and judicial sector for 13 years. I did many things, and I had a lot of achievements there.”

Talib nodded. “For me too,” he answered. “I wanted to be a doctor in Iraq. I took the exams, and medical school was my first choice. Engineering was my second choice. I passed for engineering but not for medicine, so I started engineering. When I finished, I liked it and was learning so much.”

He thought about all he had learned in school and on various work projects, knowledge gradually building on itself like the construction of his projects.

“It gives me satisfaction,” he continued, leaning back in his chair. “When a doctor does something, it is gone, but the mark of engineering will be there for generations. We had many projects that helped the people, until the war and instability.”

The whistling of bombs and the constant sight of guns flitted like ghosts through his mind. He watched the children playing tag around the bookshelves stacked with dictionaries in various languages and citizenship materials with illustrations of the U.S. flag and Statue of Liberty.

“It is not a good experience, is it?” he said. “I pray that no one loses their country. Those were very horrible moments after we were forced to leave. Suddenly, we lost our identity, our confidence, everything. Family, friends, community, plans, work, everything started from zero. It was a huge shock.”

Silence thickened the air after this comment, interrupted only by the laughter of the children and the creaking of chairs.

Talib finally went on. “I have been in the U.S. now for 18 years,” he said. “Like you, they didn’t accept my education and experience, so I cannot work in my field. That still haunts me,

but what I learned in Iraq was not wasted. It is a base and helps me to study and work here. Learning is a part of living, and you have to be open for more learning and more learning all the time. You can look forward to the future, and learning will give you good opportunities here.”

Farzana nodded, saying “Everything here is so new, so different, and we feel very tired from it. I am studying the books and online materials, and I am regularly visiting the public library to update myself on what is here and the differences of the job markets. Despite my efforts, I have not found a solution. What can we do?”

“For now, you can work in the factory to catch up and save money,” Talib answered. “Education is for everyone. You make changes through study, and you can get a better situation and achieve your goal. It will help to find a good job.”

Talib stood and walked over to one of the shelves, shoulders slightly stooped as he leaned down and selected a few papers from tall piles that threatened to spill onto the floor. He straightened and turned back to them, holding out the papers as he returned to his seat. “There is a community college that could give you a certificate,” he said, pointing to a couple of flyers. “And here is information about FAFSA for financial aid,” he said, picking up the brochure and opening it.

Farzana and Irfan exchanged glances and began scooping up the papers to look at them more closely.

“It is difficult to go to school and continue to support my family,” Irfan said after a moment, “but I want to push myself and try hard to learn and improve. Studying is really the only way for me to get a good job in the U.S., since my credentials are not accepted in the professional workplace. I need to continue learning, both through education and experience.”

Farzana nodded in agreement, eyes fixed on a paper with bold, blue letters announcing a short-term phlebotomy training program. As the conversation progressed, she tried to redirect the hopelessness from the factory and start working on herself. She needed time, and she needed to be patient with herself as she tried to learn everything. Farzana knew other immigrants who had given up. She didn't want to give up. She would fight and keep her dignity. She would use her current humiliation as a stimulant to learn.

### **Discussion**

The use of this creative nonfiction narrative to illustrate findings for this study maintains the integrity of the full story of participants while engaging the reader emotionally and intellectually. It offers a unique way to explore the learning journey and impact of nonrecognition for immigrant professionals. The story I wrote from the data follows three main themes: nonrecognition is humiliating and motivating, overcoming misrecognition by participation in learning, and the learning journey is lifelong. In this section, I provide a discussion of these findings within the framework of recognition theory.

#### **Nonrecognition is Humiliating and Motivating**

Consistent with the research, the story of Farzana highlights an experience of nonrecognition that was a pattern across participants. As explained earlier, when many immigrant professionals arrive in the United States, they are placed in entry-level jobs that are a drastic mismatch from their previous careers. This injustice of underemployment is due to a rejection of the education and experience of their home countries by educational institutions, employers, and occupational regulatory bodies. For participants in this study, there was no clear, easy process for them to re-enter their careers or even find a pathway for doing so, and the pressure to begin working and earning a living often forced them into low-paying, low-skill jobs.

When describing the experience of being assigned a job at a warehouse, one participant called it a form of slavery:

I was like, what? Like, this is so far away from me. I came from desk, and then, you know? I-I really appreciate until now, I appreciate workers, but it's just like, you put some-someone in a wrong spot at that time, like...and then I was, that was just slavery...And then I get back, try to push myself to finish because my family, my siblings, say like, okay, well, I went to work so I cannot just give up. And then I went back after 30 minutes, like, I was like, no, hell no.

Participants also viewed underemployment as a form of waste, as explained by this participant quote:

If you find, you could not find a job in according to your experience, and you have to, you have to do the any job. Uh, uh, and if you do any job to support your family, then there is waste of your experience, there is waste of your education, and you have to be in very difficult time.

This injustice of underemployment caused feelings of humiliation for most participants, confirming recognition theory and its concept of humiliation being a result of misrecognition when individuals are disrespected and kept from achieving full participation in society (Smith, 2012). Immigrant professionals seek participation as their full selves, which includes their career. When they are prevented from using the knowledge and skills from that career for the benefit of themselves and society, they experience humiliation, anxiety, and stress like Farzana in the story. When describing how this impacts refugees, one participant stated, “when they start to support their families with the work that is not matching their experiences, then there is suffering, there is stress, there is, uh, uh, anxiety for them.” Another participant described it as “humiliating.”

Underemployment was a reason many participants felt stuck within the humiliation of misrecognition.

Despite feeling humiliation in the face of misrecognition, several participants refused to allow this to be their only experience. In addition to humiliating, they perceived misrecognition as motivating. The same participant who used the word “humiliating” to describe the experience said in response, “it’s actually stimulated me. It didn’t impact me in negative way. I had a hard time, I had, but at the same time, I said, I have to fight. I-I’m not going to giving up.” It compelled them to find ways to counter the misrecognition they experienced in their lives by finding other opportunities, including learning opportunities in adult education. Within the framework of recognition theory, this can be understood as the struggle for recognition by those humiliated by misrecognition or nonrecognition. For immigrant professionals, this struggle can take the form of learning, as it did in the case of many participants. Learning became a tool that empowered them to struggle against misrecognition and seek full recognition of their identities and participation as contributing members of society.

### **Overcoming Misrecognition by Participation in Learning**

The struggle of immigrant professionals is one based on the hope of learning, which is referenced in the stories of Farzana and Irfan. As one participant stated about misrecognition and learning, “so, uh, I feel hopeless, But, after a while, uh, I thought, um, maybe they are right. Maybe I don’t have that-those qualification. But I can do it. I can study. I-I don’t want to give up.” Participation in learning activities, particularly formal adult education, can serve as a source of struggle against misrecognition in the lives of immigrant professionals in the U.S. This is perhaps due to how participation in new learning activities can offer a new network of support

and knowledge related to careers that would receive recognition in the new context. As one participant explained:

I, uh, found that, uh, if you want to have a good job without, uh, ha-studying something in the U.S., it is a kind of, uh, hard...But if you study something here in the colleges, university or even, uh, in the, uh, community colleges, associate degree, it will help you to find a good job.

Participants had either engaged in a variety of educational opportunities or were seeking them at the time of the study with the hope of gaining recognition. These activities included attending college or credit classes, enrolling in short-term career training programs, or taking English classes. Instead of requiring recognition to participate in learning, participants believed learning was a means to achieve recognition and move beyond a sense of hopelessness.

This understanding of learning and recognition offers a unique perspective on recognition theory. It assigns agency to immigrant professionals facing nonrecognition and offers learning as a vehicle in the struggle for recognition. It demonstrates how immigrant professionals are not passive, waiting for recognition to be given, but are actively pursuing alternate means of recognition even as they experience humiliation. Formal education, specifically, was often seen by participants as the only way to succeed in the U.S. when facing nonrecognition, a finding similar to Oshodi's (2023) study from Italy. When speaking about refugees and immigrant professionals like himself, a participant explained, "they want a better life, and better life without education? And that's a not like, that doesn't happen."

Andersson and Fejes (2010) suggested a lack of recognition of prior knowledge could be addressed by integrating immigrants into a new community of practice. Adult education can offer a pathway into a community of practice, participation, and ultimately recognition. Within

adult education, “prior learning could be recognized and integrated with the learning process, which takes place as a result of being in a new practice” (Andersson & Fejes, 2010, p. 216). This allows for the mobility and integration of prior knowledge, as it moves with the immigrant from one context to another, into the learning taking place in a new context that is culturally and socially situated.

To participate in these new learning opportunities as an act of recognition, however, agency is not enough. Participants consistently observed that immigrant professionals must receive support from individuals of power who can help them navigate the confusion of the educational system in the U.S. For example, a participant stated “like education is high value...Um, so, yeah, that’s what I think mainly again, like, refugees, when they come, they’re confused, they need mentor-mentorship, um, and they need to understand the system of education.” A participant who was a recent arrival in the U.S. said, “but still, I need help from someone to know, because everything is not possible to search for by yourself.” When describing attempts to find an opportunity that matched his experience, another participant stated, “despite many efforts, um, I could not find any solution.” Participants also felt a conflict between wanting to pursue educational opportunities and the need to support their families. Three of the participants with the longest tenure in the U.S. started but were unable to complete various college or training programs due to cost, time commitment, and family obligations.

### **The Learning Journey is Lifelong**

Participants described the immigration experience as forcing them to start over or face completely new situations in most areas of their lives, including their career and education. One participant described the immigration experience as making a 180 degree turn due to the extreme differences between countries and cultures. Many participants discussed how these differences

were like beginning again or starting a new journey. “Start from zero” was an exact phrase used by three participants. As one explained:

you have the experience of 20 years, but when you come here, it everything is zero, and you have to start from zero. And in this age, in-in this stage of the life, uh, it’s really difficult to start again from the zero.

This experience of starting over encompassed most components of participants’ identity, including cultural identity, work identity, and the identity they held within their communities of origin.

Despite the stark differences between their home country and the U.S., including differences in culture and educational systems, there remained one aspect of their identity in which participants did not experience starting over. Participants did not perceive immigrating to the U.S. as a restart to their learner identity. Instead, they viewed starting from zero in the other areas of their lives as a continued part of the learning process, and they believed their prior learning still had relevance in the U.S. and informed their present and future learning activities. This learning process continued even in the face of experiencing nonrecognition of prior knowledge and the challenges of immigration. As one participant explained when speaking about prior learning, “yeah, uh, it was very good for me. It was a base for me, the basic learning everywhere is, uh, I think, the same.”

Immigrant professionals in this study regarded their learning journey as a lifelong process that spanned countries, educational systems, and cultures, supporting a concept of mobility of knowledge and transnationalism. One participant described learning as a natural aspect of life:

Uh, I mean, I see just as a part of living. If you want to succeed, if you want to, uh, have an inner happiness, you have to work, you have to, uh, provide, you have to, uh, improve yourself. You have to be open for more learning and more learning all the time.

While institutional or career knowledge might face barriers to recognition in a new country, it does not negate the knowledge of learning or the learning process. This is demonstrated in Talib's perspective in the narrative. Even though his education and career experience were unrecognized in the United States, his learning was not wasted. Instead, he values his ability to learn as a means to grow and gain new opportunities in his new country.

Within the framework of recognition theory, this finding demonstrates that immigrant professionals experience nonrecognition of formal education and experiences, often requiring them to start from zero in those areas and to perceive their education as being wasted. Intrinsically, however, the process of learning for those individuals continues uninterrupted despite that nonrecognition. In the midst of life challenges and barriers, immigrant professionals demonstrate resiliency and a commitment to learning as essential to living life well. For these individuals, lifelong learning is an asset, even learning that was forced as a result of having to start over, and it is not halted by misrecognition or nonrecognition. As one participant stated, "I'm looking forward to the future, I think, mmm, learning, uh, and parentheses I want to say that learning is my one strength, that I love it, and because of that, I like to study here."

### **Implications**

Immigrant professionals often experience misrecognition of identity or nonrecognition of their prior education and experiences when they immigrate to the United States, leading to humiliation. Despite this, immigrants see themselves as lifelong learners. They story their learning as a necessary and opportunistic process that continues despite the shock of

immigration, starting from zero, and experiencing nonrecognition. This learning serves as a strong base for new learning experiences in the U.S. through adult education, but participation in those experiences requires support and guidance if they are to fully engage in and benefit from them.

Critical events analysis provided a method to highlight how nonrecognition was experienced by participants and what they perceive as crucial learning experiences. Creative nonfiction was an analysis method that retained the story and full narrative of participants and gave voice to their stories in ways accessible to them. Participants gave positive feedback about the stories and how they captured their experiences. One participant even offered to reveal his identity so the truth would be shared and the situation changed and improved.

There were limitations to this study that lead to suggestions for future studies. Seven of the eight participants were from the Middle East, and all participants were Caucasian or Asian. Immigrant professionals from other countries or races may have different experiences of nonrecognition and perceptions of their learning journey. Immigrants who are Black, for example, may experience greater misrecognition due to their race. Additionally, the careers of dentistry, public health, law, computer engineering, civil engineering, teaching, and geology were represented in this study, but many other professional careers were left out. An area of future research is to focus on immigrant professionals from a single career field or across the full range of professional careers, which might impact the experiences of nonrecognition and learning.

This study offers implications for adult education programs and suggestions for addressing systemic barriers leading to nonrecognition and misrecognition. As a narrative inquiry study, with a small sample of participants, the purpose of the study was not to achieve

generalizability of findings, but there is some transferability when exploring issues faced by immigrant professionals. Adult basic education (ABE) programs are often an entry point for new immigrants arriving in the U.S. due to the offering of English language and civics classes, many of which are free (Kallenbach & Nash, 2020). Immigrants often choose these programs as a step towards learning the knowledge needed for the new host country. Learning opportunities pursued by immigrant students in these programs include English language acquisition, U.S. culture and civics, and career pathway programs.

Career pathways are increasingly being offered by ABE programs across the United States as a way to improve economic and educational opportunities for foundational skills learners (Bragg et al., 2007). In doing so, they can serve as a means to increase participation for adult immigrant learners by including them as members of a community related to specific careers or industries. Students in these programs have the opportunity to learn from experts in the field and move closer to full participation as they gain the skills needed for the career they are studying and pursuing. This can be especially true for immigrant professionals who have faced additional barriers of participation due to their prior learning and skills being devalued and unrecognized. These “highly-educated language learners often seek a curriculum that prepares them with the academic or career-related language that prepares them quickly for higher education and training, recertification, or jobs in their field” (Kallenbach & Nash, 2020, p. 120).

These programs are not the ultimate solution, however, as they are often the means of starting over and perpetuating the current system of injustice. Adult education programs can seek to develop pathways and curricula that incorporates prior knowledge of immigrant professionals. Program staff and instructors can familiarize themselves with the recredentialing system and steps immigrant professionals might take to access their careers again so they are able to guide

immigrant professionals through the process. Finally, systemic changes are needed, from occupational licensing policies to higher education. Appiah (2001) argued leading our lives well is “reason for the state to sustain the materials for making a life, among them the infrastructure that gives sense to our social identities” (p. 274). This includes working against the unjust barriers of misrecognition and nonrecognition. When sharing his opinion on immigrant professionals working entry-level jobs, one participant stated, “and yes, that makes them survive first year, but that like, the long run, and we can do better. We can do it differently.” Instead of inhibiting knowledge mobility, policies and education should open doors for transnational lifelong learners to continue their learning journey.

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## CHAPTER 4

### RECOGNITION OF IMMIGRANT KNOWLEDGE IN U.S. OCCUPATIONAL LICENSING POLICIES: A MIXED METHODS STUDY<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Baxter, M. Submitted to *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 11/27/24.

### **Abstract**

The immigrant population in the United States includes immigrant professionals, those who receive post-secondary education in their home country before immigrating to the U.S. These professionals often experience underemployment and limited economic integration because they face barriers to using their international credentials and education, including barriers of occupational licensing policies. While the intent of occupational licensing is to preserve the welfare of the public, it can restrict recognition of immigrant knowledge due to demanding regulations or recertification requirements and its protectionism of Western knowledge. In this study, I explored what occupational licensing policy initiatives and discourses indicate about recognition of international credentials and knowledge mobility for immigrant professionals using a complementary mixed methods approach within a framework of recognition theory. The data I used for this study was collected from the World Education Services (WES) U.S. Policy Tracker and included policies from 2012 – 2023. I used descriptive statistics to conduct a quantitative analysis of data across occupations and regions in the U.S. I also conducted a qualitative analysis of four policies, one from each region, using critical discourse analysis. I found the movement of occupational licensing policies is towards greater recognition of immigrant knowledge, but this movement is dominated by discourses of neoliberalism and the workforce over ideologies of recognition. Implications include discursive strategies to offset power imbalances and acknowledge systemic barriers, amplifying immigrants' voices by involving them in decision making, and pursuing policies justified by recognition of immigrant contributions over those justified by serving the U.S. economy.

**Keywords:** immigrant professionals, occupational licensing, recognition, economic integration

The U.S. has the largest international population in its borders in the world (Migration Policy Institute, 2020), with 13.6 percent of its population as foreign-born in 2019 (OECD, 2022). Included in the immigrant population of the United States are immigrant professionals, those who obtain a post-secondary or professional education in another country, typically their country of origin, before immigrating to the U.S. There are more than 12 million immigrant professionals in the United States as of 2019 (Batalova & Fix, 2021). Individuals within this category are often highly skilled and may include internationally educated healthcare professionals, teachers, architects, engineers, and lawyers. These immigrant professionals, however, are often unable to contribute their skills to the U.S. workforce.

Immigrants are influential in the U.S. economy, forming 17% of the workforce, or 28.6 million people, in 2021 (Ward & Batalova, 2023). Despite this, they largely experience underemployment (Hosoda, 2016). Of the U.S. immigrants who are categorized as immigrant professionals, 24% are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed than their U.S.-born counterparts, and that percentage increases to 55% for those with emerging English proficiency and is also higher for those admitted for humanitarian reasons such as refugees and asylees (Batalova & Fix, 2021). Underemployment can have adverse effects, such as negative attitudes and feelings of devaluation or employee withdrawal (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011). It is also an indicator of limited economic integration. Economic integration of immigrants can be defined as the degree to which immigrants have economic equality with U.S.-born individuals, as evidenced by higher participation in the job market, low unemployment rates, and quality jobs with sustaining income (Van Tubergen, 2006).

For immigrant professionals found in immigrant-receiving countries, this underemployment and limited economic integration is often a result of nonrecognition of their

international credentials and education (Blain et al., 2017). Nonrecognition occurs when the full identity and contributions of an individual are not acknowledged, and it can force skilled immigrants into lower-paying and lower-skilled jobs (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Ng & Shan, 2010) and lead to a sense of devaluation (Bauder, 2005; Guo, 2015; Lane & Lee, 2018; Liu & Guo, 2021). Within the U.S., occupational licensing policies can be a major determinate of the degree of economic integration for immigrant professionals in how those policies facilitate or inhibit recognition.

In this research study, I examined the representation of immigrant professionals and prevalent discourses in occupational licensing policies that might contribute to recognition or nonrecognition of immigrant skills and knowledge in U.S. society. In the first section, I review the literature on U.S. occupational licensing policies and immigrant economic integration and establish a theoretical framework of recognition theory. In the methodology section, I present an analysis of occupational licensing policies from 2012 – 2023 using descriptive statistics and critical discourse analysis within a complementary mixed methods design. This approach allowed me to accomplish a more comprehensive search for recognition in policy due to the iterative quantitative and qualitative means of analysis. Also in the methodology section, I review findings from the analysis, which include trends towards recognition, representation of immigrants, justification and persuasion, topics of discourse, discursive ideologies, and discursive intersectionality and intertextuality. In the final sections, I offer a discussion of movement towards recognition and discourses superseding recognition within policies and conclude by presenting recommendations for increasing recognition of immigrant knowledge through various policy changes.

## **U.S. Occupational Licensing Policy**

Policy studies can reveal the discourses, ideologies, and impacts of government regulation on various aspects of U.S. society. Increasingly, scholars are analyzing policies affecting the lives of immigrants, such as immigration policy (Monogan, 2019; Reich, 2019; Stobb et al., 2023) and educational policy (Callahan et al., 2022; Harklau, 1998; Harklau & Yang, 2020). In addition to immigration and educational policies, there is a field of policy that is less apparent in its influence on immigrant lives and integration but no less impactful – that of occupational licensing policies.

Occupational licensing, which refers to governmental regulation of an occupation that serves to balance an individual's opportunity to participate in the economy with the welfare of the public, specifically as it relates to health and safety (Maxey & Medlock, 2021), has become mandatory for many professions around the world, including in the United States. Licensure is the most restrictive and regulated form of occupational oversight, with policies generated and enforced by government bodies (Maxey & Medlock, 2021). In the United States, occupational licensing policies have been enacted at the state level since the 1889 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that states have the right to regulate healthcare professionals to protect public health and safety from incapable or unqualified professionals. Since that ruling, state governments have enacted extensive occupational licensing policies to protect the public, and regulatory boards provide oversight of professions based on those policies. Licensed occupations constitute approximately 25% of the U.S. workforce (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020).

As a human construct designed to build in protections for the public, these policies are also used for gatekeeping. Licensing, typically in correlation with a regulatory board, protects professionals from unwanted competition, awards prestige to the profession, and gives

professionals control of the profession through state policies and regulations (Allensworth, 2025). This control includes determining who is included in the profession and who is left out. Licensing can have a disproportionately negative impact on immigrants due to licensing laws requiring citizenship or passing a written exam in English, requiring immigrants to pay costs that might duplicate what they have already done, or requiring additional training or education because international credentials do not fulfill U.S. licensing requirements (Allensworth, 2025; The White House, 2015).

This last category and its potential impact on immigrant professionals' access to the U.S. labor market for increased economic integration is the focus of this policy analysis. While maintaining quality and standards within a profession is important for the integrity of the profession and for public health and safety, too often the professional regulations and policies are inflexible in their acceptance of what knowledge is valued (Robertson, 2006). The policies create a form of protectionism (Peterson et al, 2014) through which certain knowledge is prioritized over others, particularly knowledge that is based in Western traditions (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010; Liu & Guo, 2021; Robertson, 2006). In this sense, occupational licensing can be considered as a process of knowledge bordering – specific policies which “are about protecting and patrolling the invisible borders of professional and credentialed knowledge” (Gibb & Hamdon, 2010, p. 195). This bordering presents a challenge to immigrant professionals because it values the knowledge and education of native-born workers over that of immigrants and limits mobility of knowledge and skills across borders (Peterson et al., 2014, p. 61). It accomplishes this by using rules that “dictate the ease with which migrants can enter the labor market for their specialized skills” (Peterson et al., 2014, p. 48).

There are a limited number of empirical studies exploring the impact of occupational licensing policies on the economic integration of immigrants within the U.S. Two such studies examine the impact of licensing policies on undocumented immigrants and how they improve employment and wage outcomes for this population (Brown, 2023; Chung, 2023). In another empirical study on licensing policies enacted between 1994 and 2012, Redbird and Escamilla-Garcia (2020) found occupational licensing policies can actually improve an immigrant's economic integration, as immigrants are more likely to be included in regulated occupations and there are structures put in place by the policies, such as education, counseling, and networking, that assist immigrants with entry into the workforce. Conversely, Peterson et al. (2013) found occupational licensing requirements presented protectionist barriers to immigrant professionals seeking to reenter the workforce as physicians. This was demonstrated in how states with heavier restrictions, which protected incumbent physicians from outside competition, received fewer immigrant physicians. Finally, Cassidy and Dacass (2021) found immigrants are significantly less likely to obtain a professional license when compared with U.S.-born workers.

These studies provide insight into the effect of occupational licensing policies on immigrants and their economic integration into the U.S. What they do not address, however, is the use of policy to increase or decrease recognition of immigrant professional knowledge within the U.S. system, which can also impact economic integration by determining whether immigrants are allowed to work in a career commensurate with their prior education. They also do not explore the discourses present in the policies themselves. In this study, I addressed this gap using a framework of recognition theory, a critical lens through which to examine the issue, and found an increase in recognizing immigrant professional knowledge as well as discourses of neoliberalism that supersede discourses of recognition. These findings were demonstrated

through discursive strategies of generacization, functionalization, and impersonalization, persuasion and justification, topics of discourse, discursive ideology, and discursive intersectionality and intertextuality.

### **Theoretical Framework and Research Questions**

Recognition theory is derived from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's concept of mutual recognition as central to achieving self-determination. The theory:

draws its normative orientation from the rights and duties implicit in all forms of human relationship – nurturing, working, and deliberating – insofar as these are necessary for realizing two complementary aspects of human fulfillment: free agency, on the one side, and psychological integrity (which depends on persons being accorded respect, care, and esteem for their humanity and individuality) on the other. (Ingram, 2021, p. 32)

Recently, philosophers such as Axel Honneth have taken up recognition as central to human self-realization and obtainment of the good life. Honneth, in his conceptualization of recognition theory, described three spheres of life in which recognition is needed to accomplish this, that of love (family), respect (law), and esteem (achievement) (Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

While each sphere is important to self-realization, the sphere of esteem is particularly relevant to a policy analysis of occupational licensing in the U.S., because it is in the work environment where immigrant professionals often face nonrecognition. Recognition in the sphere of esteem is about recognizing individual contributions to society, such as in the workplace, and how those contributions can be valuable to the community. The workplace is one of the areas of society in which the contributions of individuals is most visible, given the prevalence and necessity of work both for individuals and society (Hirvonen, 2021). In fact, “work is not just action that is necessary for the production of useful goods and services; it is also the primary

social means by which individuals develop their talents and abilities” and is therefore a crucial means of achieving self-esteem and social worth, both conditions of self-realization (Smith, 2012, p. 93).

Hirvonen (2021) argued immigrants are particularly impacted by recognition or lack of it in the sphere of esteem and work. He stated:

immigrants can easily fall outside of the relevant forms of social statuses and outside the potential to achieve them. Often this comes in the institutional form of not having one’s capabilities (e.g., professional skills and degrees) acknowledge in the new context – especially not in the manner they were acknowledged in the original context. (p. 201)

As explained above, this is an extensive problem in the U.S. with regard to immigrant professionals. A common experience for immigrant professionals is not having their capabilities acknowledged in the U.S. due to regulatory restrictions on international credentials and education. This form of nonrecognition can constrain the economic integration of immigrant professionals because it does not allow them to enter the labor market at their level of professionalism or commensurate with their education and experience. Instead, immigrant professionals experience unemployment or underemployment leading to low self-esteem and stigmatization, features of nonrecognition and injustice (Hirvonen, 2021).

Recognition theory suggests these injustices are based on interpretations of the achievement principle by the dominant group (Goksel, 2018). This occurs in how the dominant group decides how individuals can contribute and what is considered valuable. The achievement principle by Honneth can be a way to examine injustice towards immigrants whose skills are unrecognized, especially because the state or organizations are responsible for evaluating those

skills or contributions. It does this by advocating for recognition of all contributions, not just those determined by the dominant group.

When given a just position in the labor market through recognition, immigrants are able to fully participate in society through economic integration. Smith (2012) argued justice in this sphere is based not on rewards received for various achievements, but rather on individuals being given equal opportunities to develop skills that match their abilities and allow them to pursue their chosen career. For immigrant professionals, this means recognition of internationally-obtained education and capabilities by the state, non-state organizations, corporations, and regulatory bodies. In the sphere of esteem, justice can be obtained by expanding “the sphere of esteem to various kinds of contributions so that it enables and supports healthy socially achieved self-esteem for as many as possible, without fear of collective denigration” (Hiroven, 2021, p. 204). Accepting the contributions of immigrant professionals from their prior education, training, or experience in other countries will both lead to greater self-esteem and self-realization for the immigrant and benefit the host country by filling a workforce need.

Using this theoretical framework, the study used mixed methods to achieve complementarity, which provides a more complete view of a phenomenon by answering different research questions and therefore providing a more holistic understanding of it. The following research questions guided this policy study:

### **Mixed Methods**

What do policy initiatives and discourse indicate about recognition of international credentials and mobility of knowledge for immigrant professionals?

### ***Quantitative***

What are the policy initiatives to address professional occupational licensing barriers for immigrant professionals in the United States from 2012 to 2023?

### ***Qualitative***

How are immigrant professionals and ideologies represented in the discourse of occupational licensing policies?

The review of the literature, theoretical framework, and research questions described above set the foundation for this policy analysis. In the next section, I describe the mixed methods methodology used to answer these questions along with the subsequent study findings.

## **Methodology**

In this study, I implemented a concurrent QUAL + quan design in which both strands are used to answer the research questions in a complementary approach, with the priority given to the qualitative strand (Plano Clark & Ivankova, 2016). To accomplish this, I analyzed quantitative and qualitative data concurrently and independently and then merged the results to produce more comprehensive findings. Additionally, I used a transformative mixed methods approach to this study, grounding my analysis in the social justice theoretical framework of recognition theory to reveal social justice issues around occupational licensing policies.

### **Data Collection**

The data I used for this study are U.S. occupational licensing policies from 2012 – 2023 using the World Education Services (WES) U.S. Policy Tracker (World Education Services, 2024). According to the WES website, the WES U.S. Policy Tracker “monitors state and federal policies that create pathways to employment and educational opportunity for immigrants, refugees, and other displaced people in the United States” (World Education Services, 2024, para

1). By using this data, the policies included in this analysis are those that were implemented specifically to remedy licensing and regulatory barriers faced by immigrant professionals. Regarding data sourcing for the policies, the WES website states that data are collected using the Quorum Legislative Tracking Software (World Education Services, 2024). This prevents exploration and validation of how policies are identified or selected for inclusion in the tracker. Despite this, it offers a useful source of data for this study because of its focus on policies specifically impacting immigrants and immigrant professionals.

### **Quantitative Analysis (quan)**

Through quantitative analysis, I used descriptive statistics to provide a broad overview of the policy changes from 2012 to 2023. These statistics included tracking the number of policies over each year, the regions with the highest and lowest policy changes, and the primary occupations around which policy changes were implemented.

### **Qualitative Analysis (QUAL)**

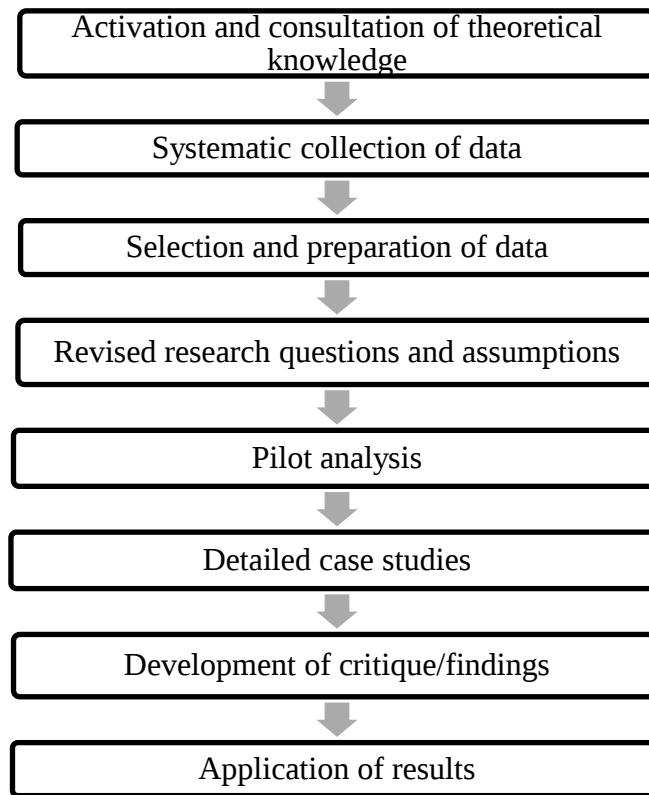
For the QUAL strand, I used critical discourse analysis (CDA). Discourse is both language used in speech or writing and a social act that is not isolated from the context in which it was created. CDA is a critical research methodology that “combines detailed analysis of texts with theoretically informed accounts of the phenomena under investigation, in order to identify the processes by which language (re)produces social practices and helps privilege certain ways of doing, thinking, and being over others.” (Mulderigg et al., 2019, p. 1). CDA understands texts as “sites of struggle” that demonstrate how different discourses and ideologies compete for dominance (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 10). Often, this competition for dominance causes unequal power relations. In this sense, CDA is a methodology that attempts to understand the

implications of discourse in relations of power, especially as it is made manifest through language (Janks, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

CDA, as a critical methodology, is not only concerned with the problem but also with emancipation from dominant structures (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In line with critical theory, it reveals the interests of dominant groups and seeks to free individuals from this dominance and bring about justice in society. It does so by exposing the often covert ideologies present in discourse that are harmful to some groups in society. These features make CDA a relevant methodology to use with recognition theory and allow for an exploration of policy language for discourses related to recognition and the sphere of esteem.

### ***Critical Discourse Analysis Process***

For the CDA portion of this analysis, I relied heavily on Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) process for conducting CDA using a discourse-historical approach, which "critically analyses the language use of those in power who have the means and opportunities to improve conditions" (p. 88). I chose this method because of its clear explanation of steps for conducting this analysis and its potential for capturing how dominant groups, such as lawmakers, decide what is recognized and valued and how this is demonstrated in the language of policy. This analysis method moves recursively between theory and data, allowing me to analyze the policy texts within a framework of recognition theory. Reisigl and Wodak (2009) described eight steps to the analysis process (see Figure 1), and the following section is a detailed description of how this study used these steps to conduct analysis.

**Figure 4.1***CDA Process From Reisigl and Wodak (2009)*

**Step 1: Activation and consultation of theoretical knowledge** – This step involves exploring the literature related to recognition theory and immigrant professionals. The theoretical knowledge I obtained through reviewing literature on this topic is provided at the beginning of this paper. The theoretical foundation for this study is recognition theory and the sphere of esteem.

**Step 2: Systematic collection of data and information related to context** – Reisigl and Wodak (2009) listed a variety of criteria to be considered when accomplishing this step, including political units, periods of time, actors, discourses, and fields of political action. For political units, I collected data across states from the WES U.S. Policy Tracker. For periods of time, I included policies from 2012 to 2023 because this is the time frame included in the WES U.S.

Policy Tracker. For actors, I reviewed each policy for terms and content specifically related to immigrant professionals as well as other actors represented. For discourses, I included discourses about immigrant knowledge recognition and occupational licensing. For fields of political action, I only included policies that passed and became legislation.

**Step 3: Selection and Preparation of Data** - I used the WES Policy Tracker as the data for this study. I accessed the tracker through the WES website in April 2024 and downloaded a spreadsheet of the policies included, which totaled 179 policies. I removed 64 bills with a status other than “enacted” because I only wanted to analyze policies that were passed into law. Under the category of policy issue, I removed 14 policies related to creating Offices of New Americans and offering in-state tuition for refugees because neither category related to occupational licensing. I also removed two federal policies because this study focused only on state policies. Finally, after reviewing a downloaded copy of each policy document, I removed three duplicates and seven policies that did not relate to the topic. The remaining 89 policies were used as the data for this study.

To select policies for critical discourse analysis, I categorized each policy by region using the U.S. Census Bureau regional map, which includes four regions: Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. I did this both to narrow the data set down to a small number for the CDA analysis and to explore regional differences between policies. I sorted through the policies and selected one from each region for CDA using the following guidelines: (a) language representing dominant ideologies, such as the workforce or integration, (b) direct references to immigrant professionals, (c) arguments for the policy change. A majority of policies were specific to internationally trained professionals, but only a few addressed immigrants specifically. I focused on these policies due to their emphasis on and recognition of immigrants, the population of

interest for this study. Internationally trained professionals as named in policy could also include professionals who obtain work visas for the U.S. but who are not immigrants or individuals who are U.S. born but receive an international education. I also favored policies that enacted change over policies that created a task force (i.e., committees created to examine the issues in a state). In the South, however, I found that a policy creating a task force was the only policy making explicit reference to immigrants, so it was included in the analysis. This narrowed my search to eight policies (see Table 1).

**Table 4.1**

*Occupational Licensing Policies Specific to Immigrant Professionals*

| <b>U.S. Region</b> | <b>State, Policy Name, Year</b>                  |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Midwest</b>     | <b>Minnesota, SF-1458, 2015</b>                  |
| <b>Northeast</b>   | Vermont, H-533, 2019                             |
|                    | <b>Maine, LD-1685, 2019</b>                      |
| <b>South</b>       | <b>Maryland, HB-625, 2022</b>                    |
| <b>West</b>        | Oregon, SB-855, 2019                             |
|                    | <b>California, ACR-50, 2019 (pilot analysis)</b> |
|                    | California, AB-2113, 2020                        |
|                    | <b>Colorado, SB-22-140, 2022</b>                 |

*Note.* Policies selected for CDA in are denoted in bold.

For the Northeast, I chose Maine LD-1685 over Vermont H-533 because it specifically addresses credentialing barriers for immigrant professionals while the Vermont policy makes a short reference to it. For the West, I chose Colorado SB-22-140 because it has specific measures for reducing barriers and explicitly addresses immigrant professionals. Oregon SB-855 is a call

for professional boards to implement methods to address barriers for immigrant professionals but does not enact specific change. California ACR-2113 is short and only addresses expediting the licensing process without great detail or reason. California ACR-50 is also short and, while providing extensive justification, does not have specifics about how to remove barriers. Because of its detail, however, I chose it as the policy for pilot analysis.

**Step 4: Revised Research Questions and Assumptions** - After reviewing the selected policies, I refined my qualitative research questions and assumptions.

**Qualitative:**

1. What actors participate in the discourse? How are immigrant professionals represented as actors? *(I assume actors are represented differently in the discourse)*
2. How are policy changes validated and justified? How are readers persuaded? *(I assume policies are justified using neoliberal/capitalistic/workplace ideologies)*
3. What are the main topics in the discourse? How are these topics presented? *(I assume a variety of topics and representations will be present in the various discourses)*
4. What ideologies are present, both explicit and implicit? *(I assume neoliberal ideologies and immigrant integration ideologies)*
5. How do the discourses intersect and relate? *(I assume there are interdiscursive connections between policies)*

**Step 5: Pilot Analysis** - To conduct the pilot analysis, I used the CDA questions to create a table following Reisgil and Wodak's (2009) method. After analyzing the document and creating the table with discursive strategies, I used the information from the table to answer the questions recommended by Reisgil and Wodak (2009). Upon completion of the pilot analysis, I shared the analysis process and results with two scholars familiar with CDA for feedback.

**Step 6: Detailed Case Studies** – After validating the CDA process through the pilot analysis, I conducted detailed analysis of the four policies listed above. I created a table for each policy that examined the discursive strategies of nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and mitigation and intensification. I then answered the research questions for each policy based on these discursive strategies. Finally, I examined the intersections of discursive strategies across the four policies.

### **Step 7: Development of Critique/Findings**

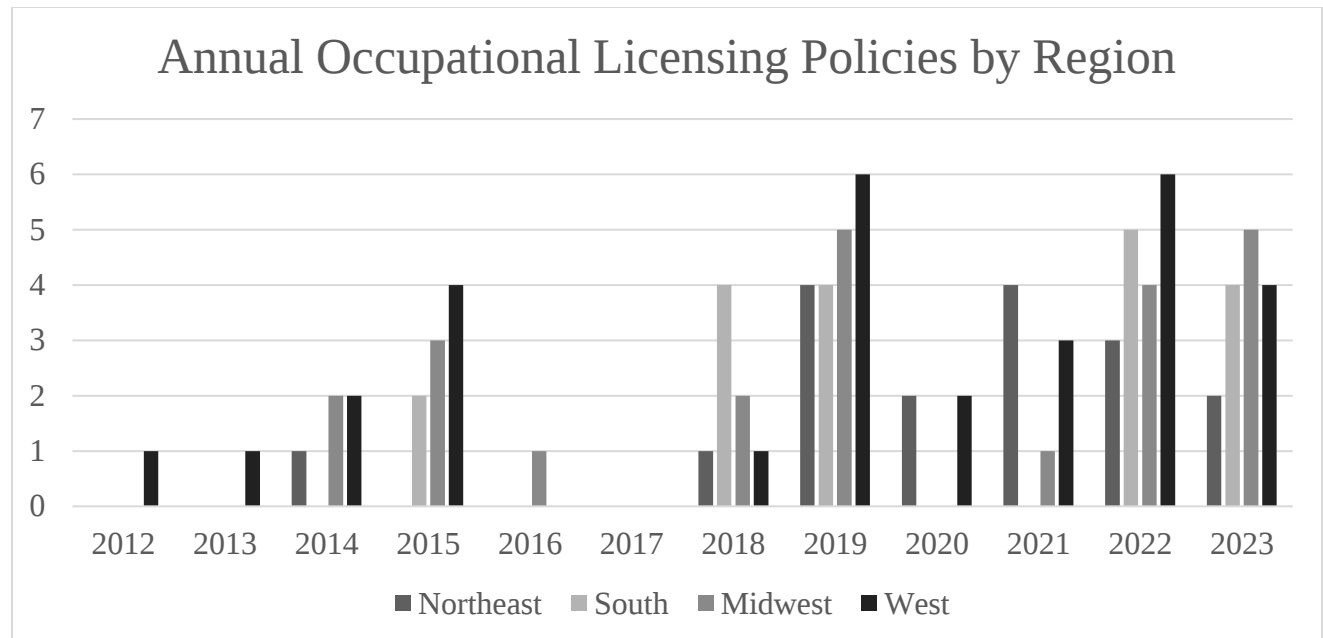
To develop the findings for this study, I worked iteratively between quantitative and qualitative data to answer the overarching mixed methods research question. For example, as I worked on the tables examining discursive strategies in the four selected policies (QUAL), I also created figures and tables to represent the entire data set (quan). This process follows the complementary approach to mixed methods, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of the data. Findings (QUAL + quan) demonstrate an increased movement towards recognition dominated by discourses of power and workplace ideologies.

### ***Trends Towards Recognition of Immigrant Professionals***

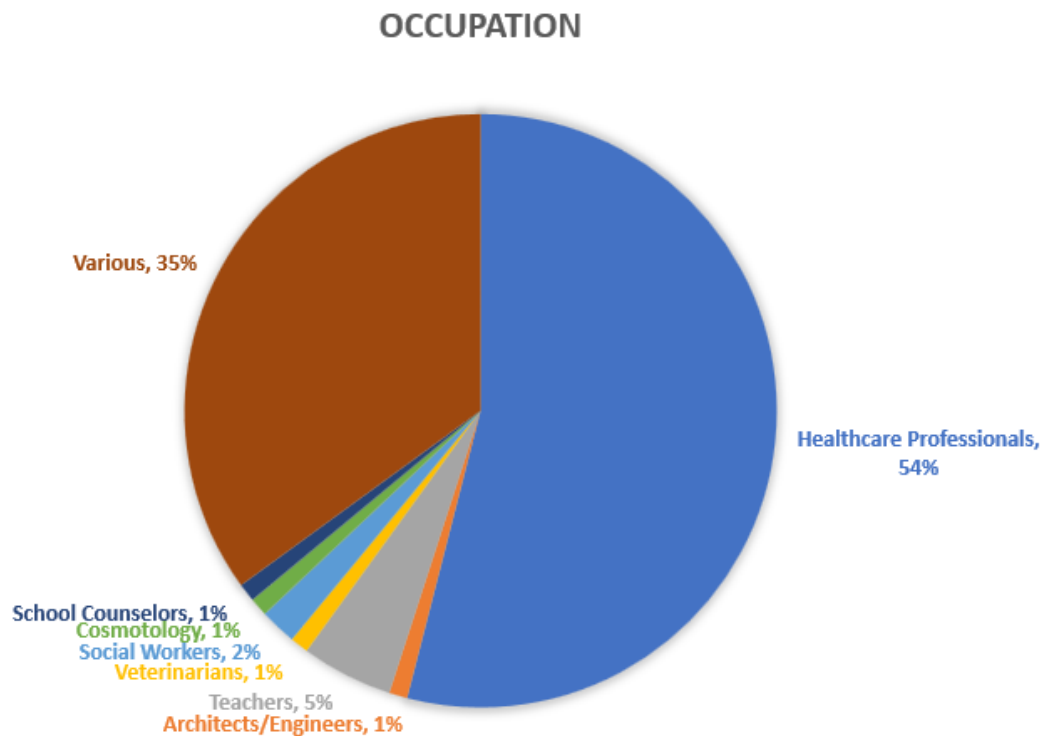
Overall, quantitative data revealed an increase in policies recognizing immigrant professionals based on the number of occupational licensing policies from 2012 to 2023, an increase that was present across regions (see Figure 2). As this figure demonstrates, there was a gradual increase in the number of policies from 2012-2015, a drop in 2016 and 2017, and an increase again from 2018 – 2023, with the greatest number of policies being enacted in 2019 (N=19), 2022 (N=18), and 2023 (N=15). The West enacted policies most consistently across the four regions, while the South did not begin enacting policies until 2015. This aligns with the West being considered politically progressive and the South politically conservative.

Additionally, the West had the most policies (N=30) while the Northeast had the least number of policies (N=17). This may be due in part to the Northeast having the smallest number of states in its region (the Northeast includes nine states while the South includes 16 states, the most of all regions).

**Figure 4.2**



Of the policies enacted from 2012 – 2023, the primary occupation represented in the policy changes was healthcare (N=48), with various occupations (N=31) as the second largest category (see Figure 3). Policies that represented various occupations were often policies related to documentation or licensing processes that were applicable across multiple professions. These two categories constituted 89 percent of the policies and by far outnumbered the other categories, which included teachers and social workers. While this quantitative data revealed an overarching perspective, the critical discourse analysis revealed the nuances of policy discourse, the ideologies driving the discourse, and the justification for these policy changes.

**Figure 4.3***Policies by Occupation****Representation of Immigrants***

Across the four policies, immigrants are represented with genericization, described in terms such as *immigrant*, *English language learner*, *asylum seekers/asylees*, and *refugees*. The use of these terms both serves to specify these policies are directed to immigrants and to represent them as a generic type instead of as specific individuals (Machin & Mayr, 2012), which can create a divide between groups. The Maine, Minnesota, and Maryland policies use the term *foreign* to describe the country of origin, education, or immigrant, which again creates a divide and can lead to an othering of the immigrant group. The Colorado policy, conversely, uses the term *New American*, a complex representation that can imply both inclusion and erasure. Policy makers may intentionally use this term as a means to break down the divide between

groups and imply immigrants are newly “one of us.” However, while some immigrants perceive these labels as ones of inclusion, others perceive labels like *new American* as a term of segregation and cultural erasure (Finkelshteyn & Nimako, 2024). When examined from a lens of recognition theory, the use of these terms can limit recognition of immigrants in how they do not acknowledge the full complexity of the immigrant identity but instead serve to segregate or erase that identity.

In addition to genericization, immigrants are often represented in positions of lesser power within the policy discourse. In the Maine and Minnesota policies, for example, they are *awaiting*, entering into an agreement as recipients, or applying as candidates, all positions of need and dependency upon other social actors who have positions of power. This power is ascribed through the discursive strategies of impersonalization, which hides individuals and puts weight behind impersonal entities, and functionalization, which depicts individuals as the work they do (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For example, Minnesota and Maryland policies include the *Commissioner* as a social actor (functionalization) and the Maine policy includes the *Authority* (impersonalization) as a social actor. The use of these titles automatically assigns power, and the material processes assigned to these actors also demonstrate power - processes such as *administer*, *disburse*, *determine*, and *facilitate*.

### ***Justification and Persuasion***

The policies employ common strategies to justify the policy changes and persuade the readers. The primary argument across policies is one of opportunity both for the immigrant and for the state. Policies are described as giving resources, training, or decreasing barriers for immigrants who need to access the workforce, while employers will have their workforce shortage needs met through the immigrant population. Readers are persuaded through the use of

modalities that convey absolute certainty, demonstrating a firm commitment to the policy on the part of the policy makers and the state, as well as through intensification strategies that demonstrate an essential need for the policy, particularly for the state and its citizens (see Table 2).

**Table 4.2**

*Justification Strategies in Occupational Licensing Policies*

| <b>Policy</b>                    | <b>Justification</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>Persuasion Strategy</b>                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Maine, LD-1685, 2019</b>      | <p>Immigrants <i>need assistance in paying for eligible costs that will improve their work readiness</i></p> <p>Recognition in the U.S. is costly</p>                                                                                                                             | Modality: <i>will, must, shall</i>                                                                                         |
| <b>Colorado, SB-22-140, 2022</b> | <p><i>Opportunities for employers to integrate New Americans and ELLs into workforce and talent pipelines</i></p> <p>Immigrants deserve training and employment (<i>equitable opportunities</i>) and employers deserve an increased workforce (<i>harnessing the talents</i>)</p> | Intensification: <i>looming workforce shortage, eliminate language barriers</i>                                            |
| <b>Minnesota, SF-1458, 2015</b>  | <p><i>Barriers to practice exist for immigrants</i></p> <p><i>Increasing access to primary care in rural and underserved areas</i></p>                                                                                                                                            | Modality: <i>shall</i>                                                                                                     |
| <b>Maryland, HB-625, 2022</b>    | <p>Important to the <i>safety</i> of Maryland due to the <i>health care workforce shortage</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                | Intensification: <i>crisis, emergency measure, necessary for the immediate preservation of the public health or safety</i> |

Note. Direct language from the policies highlighted in italics.

### ***Topics of Discourse***

When examining the main topics of discourse, there are again commonalities across the four policies. These topics include barriers to immigrant workforce integration, programs, pathways, and strategies to address these barriers, and the workforce system across the state. In particular, there is a dichotomy between barriers and pathways/solutions. Barriers represent the reasons why immigrants are not participating in the workforce at their level of skill and training. They are represented as external, passive influences such as language or transportation barriers described in the Colorado policy and barriers of professional requirements as described in the Minnesota and Maryland policies. While this passivity within the discourse can deflect the role of governments and regulatory bodies in the erecting of barriers, it does acknowledge there are barriers present in the current system. In contrast, pathways and programs are described as active solutions to barriers and are the work of the *Commissioner, Authority*, or other body on behalf of immigrants.

### ***Discursive Ideologies***

The discourse-historical approach of CDA is interested in ways language can reproduce or mediate ideology, a “one-sided perspective or world view composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes, and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific social group” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 104). In examining the ideologies present in these four policies, I found an overarching ideology that encompasses each one – the ideology of neoliberalism with an emphasis on the workforce. Themes of workforce shortages, workforce entry, employment, and employers are woven throughout the policies. This ideology is consistent with the purposes of occupational licensing policies, given how these policies provide oversight for certain professionals in the workforce or those seeking to enter the workforce. While

appropriate to the field, however, this ideology can prioritize the needs of the workforce over the needs of individual immigrants. For example, the Colorado policy describes immigrants as an “untapped talent pool that can meet the demands of employers,” (Senate Bill 22-140, p. 2), positing a neoliberal ideology that commodifies immigrants and their skills for the benefit of the workforce and employers.

While the neoliberal ideology is the most forceful across policies, there are implicit references to an ideology of recognition in the policies from Maine, Minnesota, and Maryland in how they acknowledge immigrant skills, credentials, education, and/or training. The Colorado policy moves beyond this limited form of recognition and lists integration as a primary ideology. In this policy, integration is defined as “a dynamic, two-way process in which immigrants and New Americans and the receiving community work together to build secure, vibrant, and cohesive communities without having to forego their own cultural identity” (Senate Bill 22-140, p. 17). This definition aligns with the goals of recognition theory, which seeks self-realization through recognition leading to full participation in society. However, while still present, the ideologies of equity, integration, and recognition are often overshadowed by the dominant ideology of neoliberalism.

### ***Discursive Intersectionality and Intertextuality***

The analysis thus far demonstrates how these discourses intersect and relate. There are similar discursive strategies, such as genericization, impersonalization, intensification, and justification. The topics are also similar in all policies, revealing the importance placed on barriers and pathways and the theme of the workforce. While neoliberalism is the strongest ideology present across these occupational licensing policy discourses, there is a thread of

recognition, particularly in the Colorado policy in its use of integration as ideology and attempts at inclusion by recognition of immigrants as *New Americans*.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of conducting a complementary mixed methods policy study was to gain a deeper understanding of initiatives and discourses of occupational licensing policies and recognition of immigrant credentials and knowledge. By conducting quantitative and qualitative research concurrently, I found macro- and micro-level answers to this question, both explicit and implicit.

### **Movement Towards Recognition**

As demonstrated in the quantitative analysis findings, an increasing number of occupational licensing policies were enacted between 2012 – 2023 to recognize immigrant skills and credentials. This increase is consistent across all four regions of the U.S. – Northeast, Midwest, South, and West – with some variation. Only one policy was enacted in 2012 while 15 policies were enacted in 2023, a significant increase within a span of 11 years. This increase over time demonstrates an interest from policy makers to address barriers to the economic integration of immigrants and an attempt to recognize these individuals for their potential contributions to the workforce. This is especially salient for the healthcare sector, which constituted 54% of all policies analyzed for this study. One reason for the large number of policies related to healthcare could be due to how highly regulated the field is. Another factor could be the continued high demand for healthcare workers across the country (Batalova, 2020).

The qualitative analysis also revealed some trends towards recognition. For example, in each policy I analyzed using CDA, there was an acknowledgement of the skills, credentials, education, training, and/or talents of immigrant professionals in the U.S., which aligns with

recognition in the sphere of esteem. Each policy worked towards decreasing barriers erected against the use of these skills and knowledge in various ways and increasing mobility of knowledge, from providing loans to assist with the costs of recredentialing and evaluating documents (Maine), creating a task force to examine the issue (Colorado and Maryland), or establishing programs to assist immigrant professionals (Colorado and Minnesota).

Another example of movement towards recognition in the policy discourses is acts of inclusion and participation, an important feature of recognition. In the Colorado policy, for example, the task force membership is required to include three immigrant professionals. This gives immigrant professionals participation in the decision-making process of addressing the barriers they face and also includes their voice and experiences as important to the discussion. The Colorado policy describes immigrants as *New Americans*, a term of inclusivity and societal participation as immigrants are recognized as equal members of U.S. society, but potentially a term of erasure as the full complexity of immigrant identity and culture is absorbed into identity as an American.

### **Discourses Superseding Recognition**

Despite the movement towards recognition as described in the section above, there remain influences in the discourse that work against recognition. These discourses were present across policies through interdiscursivity. One of these influences is the discourse of power. Recognition theory seeks to reveal and rectify unequal power relations in society, but this is not accomplished in the policies because there remain unequal relations of power throughout the discourses. In each policy, immigrants are in positions of lesser power, and the policies do not work to raise immigrants to positions of greater power. Instead, immigrants remain on the receiving end of the change enacted by policy. Only in the Colorado policy, as described above,

are they given power as decision makers, but this is in collaboration with the traditional holders of power, such as leaders in government. Other social actors in the policies are described from their positions of power through functionalization or hidden behind entities through impersonalization, and they maintain that power through the enactment of the new policy. Policies therefore prioritize and perpetuate systems of power without much effort to realign them.

Another influence working against recognition is the discourse of neoliberalism. The justification for policies and their enactment is primarily for the benefit of the economy, the workforce, and employers who face a worker shortage, and persuasion is conveyed with modalities of absolutes and certainty. The secondary, less promoted justification is for equitable opportunities. This emphasis on the workforce undermines some of the goals of recognition theory. While it does acknowledge the contributions an immigrant professional can make towards society, it does not promote full self-esteem or self-realization of the individual but instead promotes the health and welfare of the economy as the primary goal. In this sense, recognition is for the purpose of serving the American economy and workforce, not for the purpose of addressing nonrecognition and the limited participation of individuals.

Ultimately, these competing discourses of recognition and neoliberalism are the “sites of struggle” that fight for dominance (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 10). While within this struggle there is an increased recognition of immigrant professionals’ knowledge and the need to facilitate knowledge mobility between contexts, there remains a lack of full recognition for immigrants as participating, contributing members of society, valued not only for what they contribute to the workforce but as self-realized individuals. Instead, the neoliberal discourse claims dominance over recognition.

## Conclusion

As an in-depth analysis of occupational licensing policies around immigrant knowledge within a recognition theory framework, this study has several implications for the field of economic integration for immigrant professionals. First, it provides policy makers with an analysis of how discursive strategies inform the role of social actors within policies. Genericization, for example, shapes perceptions and reception of immigrants in our communities, even in policies written to improve immigrant economic integration experiences. Using *new American* rather than *foreign-trained immigrant*, for example, offers a drastically different perception of an immigrant professional's place within a state's society and economy. Caution is needed with this term, however, due to its potential for erasure of immigrant identity. The discursive strategies of functionalization and impersonalization distribute power and authority to government leaders, policy makers, and entities, and topics of discourse related to barriers hide how entities and social structures contribute to these barriers. Language representing people cannot be neutral (Machin & Mayr, 2012), and these discursive strategies are typical, perhaps required, of policy writing due to their official nature. However, policy writers can consider changes to offset the effect of these discursive strategies and take ownership of contributing to the problem. Acknowledging systemic barriers and adding topics of discourse aligned with pathways and solutions, for example, involves powerful social actors in the problem and promotes concrete change for immigrant professionals.

Second, this study demonstrates what might be written into policies so they promote the recognition over the commodification of immigrants. Including immigrant professionals in the decision-making process can work towards recognition by assigning power to immigrants. It amplifies their voice and allows them to contribute to decisions affecting their own lives as full,

recognized participators rather than being passive beneficiaries of policy decisions. I recommend future policies include immigrants when decisions are being made and policy written. This can begin the work of balancing unequal power relations both in discourse and policy actions.

Third, policy makers can continue to initiate policy change that supports immigrant professionals, with a special focus on policies that are justified not by neoliberalism and service to the U.S. economy and workforce but by the full participation and economic integration of immigrants into U.S. society. This can lead to a more recognitional ideology within occupational licensing policies. It is important to note how neoliberal justification can lead to increased policy changes because it may be more palatable to both political parties in the U.S. In this sense, neoliberal claims can still bring about policy changes that recognize immigrant contributions and decrease barriers to participation, and this is better than no policy change at all. Nevertheless, implications from this study can provide policy makers with specific examples of how to work towards recognitional justice within occupational licensing policies and how to be more intentional and cognizant of these discourses as they draft policies.

Along with these implications, there are opportunities for further research on this topic. A limitation of this study was its focus on policy and not the individual aspect of economic integration. It does not account for variations among immigrant professionals such as occupation, economic sectors, language proficiency, gender, race, or social networks, all of which might impact economic integration in addition to policy changes. Additional research is needed to explore the effect of these variations. There is also an opportunity to conduct a critical discourse analysis on documents and records outside of the policies themselves, potentially reinforcing existing or revealing new discourses. Finally, the exploration of immigrant integration within a

framework of recognition theory can be extended to other policy or research studies to continue the exploration of barriers to recognition and efforts towards recognition.

As a result of the analysis, I recommend increased efforts to not only recognize immigrant skills and contributions but to reframe the discourse and justification for these efforts to support recognition of immigrants with the goals of increased participation, self-esteem, and self-realization. This study indicates that U.S. occupational licensing policies are moving towards recognition for the benefit of immigrant professionals as they increase in number and enact change to facilitate greater economic integration. These policy initiatives can continue to improve to encompass all aspects of recognition and build a society where equal participation and social justice is extended to all members.

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## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

Numerous barriers are erected against immigrant professionals in the United States, individuals who obtain post-secondary education and career expertise in another country before immigrating to the U.S. These professionals build a knowledge base and experience that is subsequently devalued within the new context of the U.S. due to systems and policies that do not recognize or validate this knowledge and experience. Instead of a fluidity of identity through transnationalism, knowledge and career identity is often halted at the bordered knowledge in the U.S., leading to injustices of underemployment, devaluation of credentials, and misrecognition of this aspect of individual identity. It is a problem that is not widely addressed in the literature, politics, or organizations, but it can affect more than 12 million individuals across the United States and can prevent them from benefiting from their education and skills and using those capabilities for the benefit of the overall society in various fields of practice, including healthcare and public health, engineering, law, and education (Batalova & Fix, 2021).

This dissertation responds to these injustices in two ways. First, it provides a deep, holistic exploration of the topic using a variety of data, drawing from the literature, statistics, participant stories, and personal knowledge from my own field of practice in adult basic education. It presents the issue within a framework of recognition theory, positing the root problem is one of a denial of recognition of the identity of immigrant professionals at an individual and societal level. This act of misrecognition or nonrecognition prevents flourishing and full participation as members of society. Second, this dissertation provides suggestions for

addressing these injustices. Recognition must go beyond individuals recognizing each other and be built into state policies, organizations, and adult education programs. Just as the exploration of this topic was conducted using multiple sources, so must the solutions be enacted across multiple sectors at the local, state, and national level.

In this concluding chapter, I provide a summary of each manuscript included in this dissertation, its methodology, and its findings. I describe how the manuscripts complement each other to provide a coherent intellectual effort on the topic. I explain the contributions the dissertation research makes to the field of Learning, Leadership, and Organizational Development (LLOD) in the areas of theory, policy, and practice. Finally, I offer implications for future research and suggestions for moving towards recognition as it relates to this topic of study.

### **Summary of Chapters**

This dissertation is presented in the format of three, journal-ready manuscripts in lieu of the traditional five-chapter format. The intention behind this decision was to accomplish a broader and deeper investigation of the topic. Therefore, each manuscript included in this dissertation research offers a unique perspective on the topic of recognizing immigrant professional knowledge and identities in society, particularly in the sectors of education, politics, and employment. The extent to which they do this in each sector varies, but they all remain consistent with the overall topic.

The first manuscript is a detailed overview of the topic through an integrative literature review. An integrated approach allowed me to synthesize research that was both empirical and conceptual for a more comprehensive exploration of the overall topic. This was important because, as I began an exploration of this topic, I did not yet have a theoretical framework or an idea of the primary concepts related to this topic. Conducting a literature review as my first

manuscript established a strong foundation for the remainder of the dissertation work. For this manuscript, I used the SALSA framework for my methodology, which stands for Search, Appraisal, Synthesis, and Analysis (Grant & Booth, 2009). In synthesizing the literature, I identified the key themes of transnationalism, mobility of knowledge, and recognition. I found that within a transnational framework, recognition allows for mobility of immigrant knowledge, facilitating lifelong learning. Alternatively, nonrecognition halts mobility of knowledge at the bordered knowledge of the host country, causing devaluation and underemployment. This concept subsequently guided the research and writing of the two remaining manuscripts.

The second and third manuscripts provide practical perspectives of the topic. The second manuscript is a narrative analysis exploring the impact of the topic on the lives of individual immigrant professionals. The study included eight participants, all involuntary immigrants with refugee status who were professionals in their home countries. Professions included engineering, healthcare, journalism, law, and education, and the participants were unable to enter these fields upon arrival in the United States. Using critical events inquiry and creative nonfiction, I found nonrecognition was humiliating and stimulating, participation in learning was a way to overcome nonrecognition, and participants viewed their learning journey as lifelong. The findings demonstrated resiliency in the face of misrecognition and nonrecognition, especially with regard to the learning journey, but the experiences of a denial of recognition still had adverse effects on participants.

The third manuscript is a policy analysis. In this manuscript, I explored what occupational licensing policy trends and discourses indicate about recognition of international credentials and knowledge mobility for immigrant professionals. I used a complementary mixed

methods approach to analyze data collected from the World Education Services (WES) U.S. Policy Tracker and included policies from 2012 to 2023. Using descriptive statistics, I conducted a quantitative analysis of data trends across occupations and regions in the U.S. Concurrently, using critical discourse analysis, I conducted a qualitative analysis of four policies, one from each region. I found the trend of occupational licensing policies is towards greater recognition of immigrant knowledge, but this trend is dominated by discourses of neoliberalism and the workforce over discourses of recognition and integration. These findings reveal the current state of this topic and ways policies can be improved to increase recognition.

As indicated in the descriptions above, each manuscript is a separate, stand-alone work. One manuscript has been published, and two manuscripts have been submitted and are under review. I prepared the dissertation in this format so as to facilitate the dissemination of the research to a broad audience. The dissertation itself is an act of recognition, and publication is an important component of promoting recognition for immigrant professionals by raising awareness of the topic and adding to the literature.

### **Dissertation Coherence**

Despite the three different manuscripts, they are brought together as a cohesive whole in this dissertation that represents a single intellectual effort on the topic of recognizing the knowledge and skills of immigrant professionals. All manuscripts include the central themes of mobility of knowledge, recognition theory, and immigrant integration. Additional common themes across at least two manuscripts are positive themes of lifelong learning and transnationalism and negative themes of devaluation and underemployment. These themes ground the manuscripts in a unified understanding of the topic and theoretical framework. In this way, I used the work of each manuscript to build upon and inform the direction of the others.

This was particularly the case of the first manuscript, as I explained above. As an integrative literature review of the topic, it provided a basis for conceptualizing the remaining two manuscripts. Returning to the conceptual framework I developed for the review (see Figure 2.1), this framework was confirmed across all manuscripts. In addition to being present in the literature, it is present in the narrative study in how participants faced barriers to knowledge mobility through bordering leading to devaluation but sought recognition through learning. It is present in the policy analysis, which presents U.S. occupational licensing policies as a form of bordering and suggests ways for increasing recognition.

The manuscripts also exhibit coherence in how they explore the same topic from various perspectives and methodologies. The first manuscript takes a global perspective, examining the literature from various immigrant-receiving countries and how recognition of immigrant professional knowledge is facilitated or halted across the world. This high-level view allowed me to develop a conceptual framework to explain the phenomenon that was included in the first manuscript and guided the research of the remaining two manuscripts (see Figure 2.1).

The second manuscript draws the research down to the individual level. By using narrative inquiry, I highlighted the experiences of immigrant professionals as told by them and wrote a creative nonfiction narrative that offered a personal, empathetic perspective of how immigrant professionals story their learning journey and perceive misrecognition or nonrecognition. The individual perspective from the viewpoint of immigrant professionals is paramount, given how they are the ones directly impacted by the injustices due to a denial of recognition. This manuscript included these stories within a framework of recognition, identity, and mobility of knowledge, continuing the themes developed in the first manuscript as they became evident in the findings.

The third manuscript offers a national perspective, demonstrating how nonrecognition is enacted through occupational licensing policies at the same time there is an increased trend in recognizing immigrant knowledge through new policies. U.S. occupational licensing policies at the state level can have a significant impact on decreasing knowledge bordering and allowing for greater mobility of knowledge in a transnational context. Recognition of immigrant professionals in the U.S. cannot occur without the support of state governments, which maintain power over decisions of who receives licensing to practice within regulated occupations. For this reason, a state-level analysis on the topic is a valuable inclusion in the literature.

A final characteristic of coherence is the organization of the manuscripts within the dissertation. The chapters flow from introducing and describing the topic in the first manuscript, exploring the personal impact of the issue in the second manuscript, and generating suggestions for moving forward through policy changes in the third manuscript. This progression leads the reader through a process of understanding the topic globally, individually, and nationally. Each manuscript offers different solutions to the issue through either education or policy changes, which are ultimately contributions to further our field of research and practice.

### **Contributions to Theory, Practice, and Policy in LLOD**

This dissertation makes a significant contribution to the field of LLOD. All manuscripts contribute to theory in LLOD through their common theoretical framework. Recognition theory is a normative political theory that has also been used in the social sciences (Smith, 2012). However, within the LLOD literature such as research on adult learning, human resource development, leadership, or organizational development, the integration of recognition theory is limited to a few examples (Fleming, 2016; Sandberg, 2016). The use of recognition theory for this dissertation confirms recognition theory as a viable and relevant framework through which

to explore various issues within the field of LLOD, including learning and development. Each manuscript takes a different angle of recognition theory, demonstrating how versatile and applicable it is. As a critical theory, it can be incorporated into the LLOD literature as a means to identify injustices due to misrecognition or nonrecognition in society, including within organizations, and to promote full participation, identity, and flourishing for all members of society.

In addition to contributing to theory, research findings from this dissertation both confirmed prior empirical studies on the topic and added new findings. In the second manuscript, through narrative inquiry, findings confirmed recognition theory's understanding of the injustice of mis/nonrecognition as humiliating (Smith, 2012). It also confirmed Oshodi's (2023) finding that immigrant professionals seek formal education opportunities as a means to counter nonrecognition. While confirming findings from prior studies, this study adds to the empirical research on this topic by offering a new finding. It demonstrates how immigrant professionals view their learning journey as an uninterrupted, valuable process. For these participants, learning does not start over in the host country but instead maintains relevance and contributes to present and future learning activities. In the third manuscript, through policy analysis, findings on the discourse of neoliberalism reinforce findings from Ng and Shan's (2010) empirical study that similarly found discourses of neoliberalism, although the study was not related to policy. Findings also show that while occupational policies are often a means by which governments and regulatory bodies create protectionist barriers against immigrant professionals (Bauder, 2005; Peterson et al., 2014), there is a trend in U.S. occupational licensing policies towards increasing recognition of immigrant professionals and their skills, education, and potential contributions. This finding is a new contribution to the empirical literature.

The main contributions to practice offered by this dissertation are in the field of adult education and workplace organizations. The manuscripts are each a call to change practices so as to better accomplish recognition of prior learning for immigrant learners and employees. This is especially present in the first and second manuscript. In the first manuscript, for example, there is a call for a “multiculturalism of knowledge” that recognizes multiple systems of knowledge, including the knowledge of immigrant professionals (Maitra & Guo, 2019, p. 13). This can be implemented in educational institutions and workplaces as a means to decrease injustices faced by immigrants. Practicing this “multiculturalism of knowledge” might include educational institutions more readily accepting international credentials, developing new ways to acknowledge both education and experience obtained in another country, and allowing it to be applied to an educational pathway. Within the workplace, employers can treat immigrant professional education and expertise as valid forms of knowledge within U.S. systems rather than prioritizing dominant forms of knowledge that are U.S. based. In the second manuscript, I focus on practice within adult education systems. For adult basic education programs, practice can include creating programs specifically designed to meet the unique needs of immigrant professionals by offering consistent guidance through U.S. systems and advocating for immigrants and recognition of their knowledge in education and the workplace. It can also include creating career pathway programs and curriculum that incorporate the prior knowledge of immigrant professionals.

Finally, the third manuscript makes contributions to policy in LLOD as it relates to the workplace. Since the manuscript is a policy analysis, it directly explores the state of current policies around this topic and presents suggestions for policy changes for a more inclusive, recognizing society. I demonstrate how policy discourse shapes our perception of immigrants

and their role in society and call for more integrative, receptive language within policy to increase full recognition of immigrants as members of U.S. society instead of othering and marginalizing them. I also recommend including immigrants in policy decision making, in particular with policies that directly impact them, and continuing the trend of implementing policies that support immigrant professionals and the integration of their skills and knowledge in occupational sectors in the U.S.

In its entirety, this dissertation adds to the LLOD literature by addressing learning and change, which are central tenets of the field, around the topic of recognizing immigrant knowledge. Findings indicate how immigrant learning is continuous across cultural contexts, educational systems, and countries. LLOD practitioners and scholars can work towards facilitating this lifelong learning by recognizing prior knowledge within new learning environments and addressing systemic factors that might halt or slow prior knowledge being integrated with new knowledge. It also reveals areas needing change within education and the workplace. If organizations and institutions are to be responsive to immigrant professionals' needs and begin to recognize them and their diverse systems of knowledge, change must be enacted within these systems. Current systems do not accommodate or facilitate a mobility of knowledge in a transnational setting. Only through organizational, institutional, and policy change will recognition of immigrant professionals be realized.

### **Implications for Future Research**

While providing a multifaceted understanding of the topic through the three manuscripts, this dissertation has limitations which pave the way for future research directions on this topic. From an overall perspective, there are significant differences in professional education and training from country to country, and these differences can impact the barriers faced by

immigrant professionals in the U.S. and integration into their field of practice. An exploration of the impact of these differences was beyond the scope of this dissertation but is an opportunity for future research. From a more detailed perspective, each manuscript had its own unique limitations. In the first manuscript, as an integrative literature review, I synthesized existing literature and offered a new conceptual framework for understanding the topic. The literature review was limited, however, in its format of an integrative review. An area of further research is to conduct a full, systematic review of the literature on the topic of immigrant professionals and include new empirical research that has been published since the writing of that manuscript.

At the end of the first manuscript, I issue a call for more empirical research on the topic in the U.S., given how the U.S. is the largest immigrant-receiving country in the world (Migration Policy Institute, 2020). The second and third manuscripts initiate an answer to this call. Both manuscripts are new, empirical research that is specific to the U.S. context and add to the limited research found in the U.S. However, there is a continued need for additional research to be conducted in this context, even as the political landscape and rhetoric around immigration shifts and becomes more divisive. Immigrants in the United States makes up 13.6 percent of the overall population, and research on this topic leading to changes in policy and practice is necessary to facilitate full integration and participation of immigrants into the broader society (OECD, 2022).

Additional research in the areas of policy include expanding the data set for occupational licensing policies beyond the time frame I used for my data set. Incorporating analysis of documents, records, and news related to the implementation of policy is another area of additional research and has potential to deepen the understanding of discourses and outside

influences shaping policy. There is also an opportunity to explore policies of immigrant integration beyond occupational licensing policies.

Finally, more research exploring the experiences of immigrant professionals in the U.S. is needed because of the importance of amplifying the voice of the individual. My study conducted through narrative inquiry used a small group of participants, most of whom were from a similar part of the world. Research that includes immigrants from a variety of countries and backgrounds can reveal issues of recognition that might be specific to certain populations, races, or cultural contexts. There is also opportunity to explore the experiences of immigrants with specific occupational skills or within a specific sector, or to explore issues of recognition specific to education or to the workplace.

### **Conclusion**

The ultimate purpose of this dissertation is to highlight forms of injustice towards immigrant professionals in the United States, injustices that on a fundamental level are caused by misrecognition and nonrecognition. The consequences of the injustices of misrecognition and nonrecognition are in how they prevent immigrant professionals from achieving full self-realization or living out their full identity in society due to parts of those identities being developed in a transnational context. Knowledge, skills, and education go unrecognized, and predominant forms of knowledge such as those from Western societies or even certain professions are continually favored over other, nondominant forms of knowledge. As a result, immigrant professionals are unable to use those capabilities for their good and the good of society.

Through this dissertation, I seek to promote recognition of immigrant professionals in the U.S. and a “multiculturalism of knowledge” that does not privilege dominant forms of

knowledge over others. Instead of halting the mobility of knowledge, we have the opportunity to facilitate mobility of knowledge so it is integrated into new knowledge in the U.S., adding value both to the individual and society. This process of recognition, which is ongoing, can lead the U.S. to a more decent society where individuals, including immigrants, can live out their full identities and participate in society as contributing members in all aspects, including with skills obtained in a different culture and context.

This dissertation also lends voice to our immigrant neighbors who are frustrated with and humiliated by current systems that encourage misrecognition or nonrecognition over recognition. If we are to upend the injustices caused by a denial of recognition, we must realign structures of power, giving agency and voice to those who are silenced by a lack of recognition. The narrative stories in particular are written using participant words with the goal of breaking their forced silence and recognizing their potential. Immigrant professionals must also be included in the decision-making process of policy and educational changes as another means to reassign power to those most affected by current, unjust structures.

One of my values is seeking the flourishing of all. This dissertation is an effort to live out that value. Having been made aware of an area where immigrant members of our society are prevented from flourishing and leading a life in a society that fully acknowledges and facilitates the use of their capabilities, it was important to me to develop research that reveals the often-hidden injustices towards this population that has limited voice and power. Moving forward, the opportunity is for our society to work towards recognition by implementing new policies, practices, and furthering research around this topic, not for our own accolades as scholars, but to empower and enable our immigrant neighbors to join us in participating and flourishing in society for the good of all.

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