A BMRC RESEARCH DIGEST
Spring 2021

BMRC IRMU

Discovering Destination Cities:

The Role of City Objects in generating Migrants' Resilience

Toronto as a sanctuary city.

What you need to know

Global destination cities attract large numbers of skilled migrants. The city context has most commonly been studied in relation to migrant housing and settlement; yet the role of destination cities in migrant resilience remains little understood. We analyzed migrant narratives of settlement and integration in relation to local city objects. These objects are knowledge tools (i.e. ranging from concrete ones such as maps and signs to more abstract ones like local educational programs and policies), and are meant to coordinate activities among different groups and improve information seeking.

What is this research about?

Skilled migrants enact major work and life transitions in the context of the destination city. This research seeks to unpack the relationships between migrant resilience and belongingness and how it may be assisted by the city context (i.e., local objects in particular). By interviewing well integrated skilled migrants, we learn about the role of city objects in facilitating or impeding migrant career and resilience. We identify how through 1) object exploration, 2) expansion and 3) creation of new objects, migrants are integrated in functional vs. more holistic ways.

How was the research carried out?

We interviewed 38 respondents: 15 women and 23 men, between the ages of 30 to 60, and with the average length of residence in Canada of 19 years. Respondents were part of the Canadian Immigrant Award winners (2009 – 2017); they were professional migrants, identified as 'successful' in their adaptation and integration in Canada. We explored the existing database and bios to gain basic understanding of migrant career trajectories in the new city. This exploratory phase allowed us to further explore relevant issues in our semi-structured interviews focusing on how destination city objects served in migrant settlement and career re-establishment.

What have we learned from the research?

We found that in settling and career re-establishment, city objects were explored, expanded, and created by newcomers in several different ways. As migrants interacted with sometimes familiar and other times completely new and unique objects, these allowed them to learn and collaborate with different groups in the city, and ultimately how to become integrated. Migrant-city connections are therefore much broader and more complex than simply facilitating our daily routines.
Based on the origin-destination city comparisons, migrants explored the destination city, sought to create new relationships, and assigned new meanings to those objects they encountered locally. For example, certain city elements such as corporate headquarters in skyscrapers located in the city center, traditionally seen as symbols of power and influence, were associated with better career opportunities. We also found that migrants did not just explore city objects (i.e., by walking/seeking information, learning the city know-how), but rather they expanded their meaning and adapted them to fit their immediate settlement and career needs (i.e., combined training programs and volunteering). Finally, migrants also engaged in the creation of new objects, often meant to assist, and promote resilience of future migrants. Our study found that migrants created a variety of new objects: from websites and community newspapers to directories and new charitable organizations.
Migrant-city interactions also lead to new social connections, therefore affecting how migrants integrated into local communities. These local connections increased their sense of resilience and established a new sense of belonging to the destination city. Engaging with the destination city context and its communities for some meant creating just enough resilience to function effectively and satisfy personal needs, while others had a much more holistic view of integration, as embracing and giving back to the local society.

How can you use this research?

This research can inspire and offer actionable advice to policy makers, settlement sector, and urban planners among others; it provides new knowledge on the role of city objects in migrant-city relationships and their impact on migrant resilience. The study provides evidence for how interactions within a destination city and its objects can rebuild migrant resilience as well as foster integration. Our findings inform better integration practices, which are of utmost importance for many destination cities, their inhabitants, and local organizations. Thus, migrants must be supported in coping and connecting to the destination city, fostering increased desire to solve career and settlement challenges by accessing existing objects and by creating new ones.

Who is leading this research?

The research was conducted by, Dr. Jelena Zikic: Associate Professor, Graduate Program Director, School of HRM, York University, jelenaz@yorku.ca and Viktoriya Voloshyna, PhD. Candidate, School of HRM, York University, voloshyn@yorku.ca

Learn more

Zikic, J., & Voloshyna, V. (2020, June 16). As city life is restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic, new residents find creative ways to manage. The Conversation.
Zikic, J. & Voloshyna V. (2021). Discovering host cities: The role of boundary objects in migrants' careers and integration. Academy of Management Discoveries.