

**Doing Migration in Adulthood**  
**Learning to Engage With the Canadian Experience Discourse**  
**Doing Migration à l'âge adulte**  
**Apprendre à s'engager dans le discours sur l'expérience**  
**canadienne**

Michael Bernhard

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Article abstract

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DISCOURSE

Michael Bernhard

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# DOING MIGRATION IN ADULthood: LEARNING TO ENGAGE WITH THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE DISCOURSE

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## Abstract

*Among the well-documented challenges faced by certain newcomers to Canada is the possession of Canadian experience (CE) as a prerequisite for successful entry into the labour market. Building on discussions that highlight the exclusionary functions of the CE discourse, this paper employs Dewey's concept of active and passive experience and applies a doing migration framework in order to study how individuals interact with this discourse. Empirically, this paper draws on narrative interviews conducted with individuals with tertiary education who moved to Canada in adulthood. Using the documentary method, I identify three modes of engagement with CE discourse as replay and readjust, reset and move forward, and research and pro-act. Results illuminate the various forms of engagement, highlighting active, passive, and relational dimensions of doing migration. Concluding, I argue that such relational perspective has implications for adult education and the approaches taken to support individuals as they settle into life in Canada, as well as for theoretical perspectives on learning.*

## Résumé

*Parmi les défis bien établis auxquels font face certaines personnes nouvellement arrivées au Canada figure la possession d'expériences canadiennes (EC) comme condition préalable à l'intégration au marché du travail. S'appuyant sur des discussions qui soulignent les fonctions d'exclusion du discours des EC, le présent article mobilise le concept de Dewey sur les expériences actives et passives et applique un cadre de performance de la migration afin d'étudier les interactions des individus avec ce discours. De façon empirique, cet article se penche sur les entretiens narratifs menés auprès de personnes ayant suivi des études supérieures et déménagé au Canada à l'âge adulte. Selon la méthode documentaire, j'ai identifié trois modes permettant d'aborder le discours des EC : reprise et réajustement; remise et avancement; recherche et proactivité. Les résultats jettent de la lumière sur les diverses formes d'interaction en soulignant les dimensions actives, passives et relationnelles de la performance de la migration. Pour conclure, je soutiens que de telles perspectives relationnelles ont*

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*des répercussions sur l'éducation des adultes et les approches adoptées pour soutenir les individus lorsqu'ils fondent une vie au Canada, ainsi que sur les perspectives théoriques de l'apprentissage.*

## **Keywords**

*Canadian experience, migration, doing migration, doing transitions, adult education, Dewey*

The movement of people into new geographical spaces is commonly accompanied by the need to learn and to reconstruct biographies. This paper explores a particular aspect of individuals' experience with the ambivalent Canadian immigration system. Whereas Canada is widely seen as a country of immigration, there is a range of systemic barriers, challenges, and exclusionary mechanisms that individuals encounter as they arrive in this country (Bernhard, 2022, 2023; Liu & Guo, 2021; Nohl et al., 2014; Shan, 2017). One such challenge is the discourse on so-called Canadian experience (CE), which certain newcomers are expected to possess in order to gain adequate access to the labour market. The exclusionary effects of CE have been well-documented (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Chatterjee, 2015; Ku et al., 2018; Sakamoto et al., 2010), but less is known about *how* individuals engage and cope with CE as a rule to be understood and a challenge to be dealt with. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how individuals interact with the CE discourse.

In a presentation and discussion of empirical data from biographical narrative interviews with adults who moved to Canada, it is not only the individuals' forms of meaning making and their interpretations of their migration experience that are of interest, but also the activities, interactions, and relationships that turn mobile individuals into migrants. The CE discourse affects this doing of migration: it represents a new rulebook that adults encounter and deal with by taking different life course decisions and shifting their biographical narratives.

To explore the engagement with this rulebook, this article begins with a review of literature on the CE discourse. I will then share the theoretical framework of this study as doing transitions and doing migration. After outlining the methodological approach, I will reconstruct distinct forms of engagement and coping with the ambivalent migration experiences that become visible from a doing migration perspective. Finally, I will discuss the findings with an eye on the relational interplay between individuals' biographies and migration discourses that configure the learning demands confronting transnationally mobile adults—in the dialectic between a barely escapable imposition and an opportunity space for human flourishing.

## **The Canadian Experience Discourse**

Contrasting with the image of Canada as a country open to immigrants, there is evidence of systematic exclusion of and discrimination against mobile individuals categorized as “migrants” (Simmons, 2010). Among such challenges are the non-recognition of previous education and professional degrees (Guo & Shan, 2013), language and communication issues (Gibb, 2008), the discounting of skills and cultural capital<sup>1</sup> (Nohl et al., 2014; Reitz, 2007),

1 Cultural capital is understood in this context as the previously accumulated knowledge, skills, and certifications (Bourdieu, 1979).

precarious employment (Hande et al., 2020), and racism (Perry, 2012; Simmons, 2010). These challenges, and the ways in which migrants deal with them, have biographically been found to be closely tied to participation in adult education programs (Bağcı, 2019) and have led to proposals to reimagine immigrant education as a “distributed pedagogy of difference” (Shan, 2015), in which differences are to underpin a strength-based curriculum and serve to advance practice (p. 13). Of interest in this paper is the engagement with one particular nexus of challenges, the discourse on CE, which becomes salient in several ways:

First, it represents a canon of tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966)—localized to the Canadian context—to be acquired. Exploring the contradictions between the stated need for skilled immigrants in Canada and their well-documented labour market challenges, Sakamoto et al. (2010) observed a broad array of conceptual understandings of CE, with its hard dimensions (technical capabilities) and soft dimensions (communication skills). As a result, the authors proposed the use of *tacit knowledge*, which “affords us a more sophisticated understanding of Canadian experience, this elusive yet persistent requirement that skilled immigrants face before accessing successful employment. We can then ask whether tacit knowledge in Canadian experience is really necessary” (p. 150).

Second, the discourse on Canadian experience can be understood as a strategy for neoliberal nation building. Building on the work of Ahmed and Wingard, Bhuyan et al. (2017) argued that branding CE “fuels a national identity as willing to accommodate immigrant others, yet requiring the exclusion of ‘other-others’ for the good of the economy” (p. 51). As a result, the brand of CE “serves to re-envision Canada’s White policy within a neoliberal context by relying on the capacity of immigrant others to embody traits of Whiteness in a neoliberal era: self-sufficiency, autonomy, flexibility and utility in the market place” (p. 60).

Finally, CE may act as a smokescreen for racist practices, allowing for “racism without racists” (Ku et al., 2018, p. 291), and may lead to racialized discourse of skills (Chatterjee, 2015). Racialized groups continue to face challenges and discrimination in the Canadian labour market (Simmons, 2010, 160). Yet, as Ku et al. (2018) observed, “Canadian democratic and multicultural values and structures are considered incompatible with racism, rendering the existence of racism suspect or dismissing it altogether” (p. 295). Against this de-racialized backdrop in which race is not to be a category, the discourse of Canadian experience

does not just privatize the language and histories of racism, it steers us, the public, towards viewing immigrant difficulties as individual deficits, explainable by their “foreign” credentials, their lack of preparedness, their low status in Canadian social hierarchy to begin with, their lack of culturally appropriate repertoire and soft skills. In this way, immigrantness (not race) marks them as lesser or inferior... CE naturalizes the hierarchy of people that leads to precarious immigrant access to the labour market and ultimately citizenship and belonging. (Ku et al., 2018, p. 305)

The focus on immigrant deficits—the lack of Canadian experience and localized (soft) skills—permits the state to reconcile its historically openly racially framed admission criteria with an increasing reliance on immigrant labour (Chatterjee, 2016, p. iii).

The discourse on CE is thus a powerful force in the lives of those who enter Canada. Looking at this discourse from a *doing migration* perspective brings into focus particular

ways of turning mobile individuals into migrants, as well as the individual ways of engaging and coping with the associated challenges.

### **Doing Transitions and Migration**

This paper studies the movement to and engagement with new spaces from a *doing transitions* perspective. Drawing on praxeological traditions, this approach asserts “that transitions are shaped and produced through social practices,...emerge and are constantly reproduced and transformed through the interrelation of discourses, institutional regulation..., as well as individual processes of learning, education and coping” (Walther et al., 2022, p. 5). Transitions are thus not presupposed, but rather the very process of *bringing about* and *shaping* transitions through social practices are of concern.

While analytically one can discern levels of individual coping, institutional regulation, or discursive framing of transitions, it is the *relational interplay* between those domains that results in the doing of transitions. Discourses “articulate the conditions under which experiences are referred to as ‘transitions’; make attributions about the causes and consequences (especially ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ transitions); and assign responsibility to people for transition outcomes” (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 236). Institutions, following Settersten et al., can in turn “be viewed as expressions of social discourses, playing roles in regulating and processing transitions—setting expectations, routines, requirements, and procedures” (p. 236). Finally, transitions play out at the individual level, where expected pathways interact with biographies. Here, “individuals become subjects in a double sense: they are subjected under these expectations, but also turn into subjects, enfolding agency in new ways” (p. 236). This ambivalence of being subjected to normative expectations regarding migration pathways, yet finding agency to chart new courses, will be of particular interest in this paper.

The movement across national boundaries can be explored as a particular form of doing transition. Following the *doing* approach, migration is in this study conceptualized as a socially embedded performative act, which is reflected in practices, interactions, and relationships, rather than only a result of political, institutional, discursive, and individual meaning attributions. This duplicity of active and passive sides of doing migration can also be understood pragmatically as “simultaneous doings and sufferings”(Dewey, 1917/2011, p. 113). Passively, individuals are shaped through “all social practices that, being linked to specific categorizations and narratives of belonging, membership and deservingness (i.e., discursive knowledge), turn mobile (and often also immobile) individuals into ‘migrants’” (Amelina, 2020, p. 2). Actively, individuals engage with their experience and conduct “experiments in varying the course of events; our active tryings are trials and tests of ourselves”(Dewey, 1917/2011, p. 113). The key tenet of a doing migration perspective is to not objectify migration through its study, but rather to focus on the performative and relational modes of *producing*, *shaping*, and *coping with* transitions into new geographic spaces. This includes taking into account the agency of individuals as they engage with challenges and navigate the transition.

The combined perspectives of doing transition and doing migration are the theoretical framework for my reconstruction of individuals’ engagement with the CE discourse.

## Engaging and Coping With the New Rulebook

Against the discursive background of CE, the doing migration at the individual level is of interest, along with the traces left in biographies through the various forms of engagement with the ambivalent migration experience and the exploration of opportunity spaces. In analyzing and presenting the qualitative data, not only will the individual forms of meaning making and interpretation of their migration experience be in focus, but also the activities, interactions, and relationships that result from the interplay between the CE discourse and individual experience and subjectivation. I will first describe the methods chosen for data gathering and analysis, then present findings, before discussing analysis and empirical data.

### *Method*

This paper draws on the findings of a larger, ongoing study examining learning during transitions in adulthood in the context of inter- and transnational mobility in the Canadian context. The data were gathered through biographical-narrative interviews (Chase, 2018; Schütze, 1983) and analyzed through the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2014; Nohl, 2010), which has been used to study phases of transformative learning (Nohl, 2015), migration and participation in adult education (Bağcı, 2019), and the transition experiences of immigrants into the labour markets of Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Turkey (Nohl et al., 2014; Nohl & Ofner, 2010).

### **Data and Sample**

Data were gathered through biographical-narrative interviews (Chase, 2018; Schütze, 1983) with 20 participants between February and August 2021. The participants were individuals who moved to Canada in adulthood. As this study is interested in processes after arrival and in the (non)transfer of previously acquired skills and experiences, participants were selected based on their having moved to Canada three or more years earlier, and on their having obtained post-secondary education outside Canada before their initial arrival.

I recruited study participants through iterative opportunity and snowball sampling, assisted by organizations that employed or worked with migrants, with the goal of including participants from different countries of origin, genders, and occupations. At the time of the interview, research participants were between 27 and 62 years of age (median 46) and had arrived in Canada between 3 and 21 years earlier (median 13).

Interviews were conducted following the approach to narrative interviews outlined by Schütze (1983), encouraging participants to “speak off the cuff about a part of their everyday life that is of interest to the researchers, be it their entire life story or just their working life” (Nohl, 2010, p. 196). Interview participants were asked to narrate their story through this prompt: “To begin, could you please tell me your life story. I will listen and make some notes and I will not interrupt you until you have finished. Please take as much time as you feel necessary and tell me all the details you remember that, in your opinion, are connected to your living in Canada.” After the initial narrations, I asked follow-up questions regarding topics raised by the interview participants (immanent questions). Following that, I asked questions from the interview guide that had not yet been addressed (extrinsic questions). In this approach, according to Schütze (2014), the “narrative drives and constraints...propel the narrator (a) to go into details, (b) to close the gestalt, and (c) to assess the relevancies



and to condense" (p. 229), which result in a dense account of the participant's biographical experience.

### **Analysis: Documentary Method**

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and interpreted following the qualitative approach of the documentary method (DM). The DM builds on work by Mannheim (1936/1982), was further developed for group discussions by Bohnsack (2010, 2014), and expanded for the analysis of interviews by Nohl (2010). DM originated in Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, which distinguishes between communicative, reflexive, or theoretical knowledge, and practical, incorporated, or conjunctive knowledge (Mannheim, 1936/1982). This latter implicit knowledge gives structured orientation to action and aligns with Michael Polanyi's term "tacit knowledge" (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 100). DM distinguishes "intentional expressive meaning" on the one hand, and "documentary meaning" on the other hand (Nohl, 2010, p. 201), analogous to theoretical and atheoretical knowledge. As it is grounded in the common actions and experiences of the "conjunctive experience" (Mannheim, 1936/1982), the atheoretical knowledge connects people (Nohl, 2010, p. 202).

Applied to the reconstructive analysis of interviews, DM presupposes that "what is communicated verbally and explicitly in interview texts is not the only element of significance to the empirical analysis, but that it is above all necessary to reconstruct the meaning that underlies and is implied" (Nohl, 2010, p. 200). Thus, I interpreted not only *what* was being said but also reflected on *how* it was being said.

Following this approach, I first identified thematically dense passages through initial coding, and summarized topics and contents of the narrations—the formulating interpretation of *what* is being said. In a second step—the reflective interpretation—I reconstructed the ways in which participants engaged with the topics of their experience, in particular around labour market access and Canadian experience. To identify the "modus operandi" (Bohnsack, 2014, p. 221) through which the problems are being perceived and solved, I focused on *how* the life stories were narrated. Here, practices of narration, such as positive or negative images—so-called counter-horizons—point to participants' implicit knowledge and frames of orientation. I first conducted this analysis within individual cases, then comparatively across cases along the different forms of shaping one's own life praxis in relation to the norms conveyed through the CE discourse. The dimensions of this comparison are the communicative knowledge, referring to the way in which the CE discourse is perceived and articulated; the tacit knowledge, referring to the logic of practices in engaging with this discourse; and the results of this process of engagement.

### **Results**

In analyzing the empirical material, the aim is to reconstruct and contrast distinct patterns of individuals' engagement with the CE discourse through their experiences, meaning making, activities, and relations. Here, Dewey's view of experience as both something to be passively undergone as well as something that is actively shaped becomes pertinent again: this ambivalence of "simultaneous doings and sufferings" (Dewey, 1917/2011, p. 113), along with the consequences, are of particular interest. Correspondingly, there are elements of the requirements of CE being rather passively experienced and migration *being done* to the individuals. This was manifested through the non-recognition or devaluation of



experience, even if obtained in so-called Western countries. At the same time, individuals actively interpreted this discourse in terms of their own biography, frames of orientation, and prior experience. Here, migration appears as *being done by*. Certain practices and actions emerged in which individuals endeavoured to vary the course of events, leading to effects and consequences, such as learning and new images of self. Often, CE appears as something oblique and needing to be engaged with. This engagement is closely linked with learning and the acquisition of knowledge and competencies: On the one hand, individual learning is the result of dealing with CE. On the other hand, it is the social (non)recognition of prior knowledge and experience that makes obtaining CE necessary.

In comparing different logics of practice in the data, I could identify three distinct modes of dealing with CE. The first mode, *replay and readjust*, is marked by repeated setbacks, frustrations, and—seemingly—resignation. The second mode, *reset and move forward*, is marked by a lowering of aspirations and an alignment of future life course decisions with the need to acquire CE. The third mode, *research and pro-act*, is characterized by a focus on understanding how Canada functions to take advantage of that knowledge.

Analysis of the 20 interviews indicated relevance of CE for 12 participants. Among those, the replay and readjust mode can be identified in two, reset and move forward in six, and research and pro-act in four participants. I will next describe these forms of engaging with CE in detail, using one anchor case for each form.

### Replay and Readjust

This mode is marked by repeated setbacks, frustrations, and—seemingly—resignation. As a common experience, individuals must settle for “survival jobs,” which are often “hated” and well below the individuals’ levels of qualification. Yet, despite the often-repeated devaluation of experience and education, individuals learn the rules of the game and “press on,” even if they have to return to start several times.

This form of engagement can be found in the case of Jamila,<sup>2</sup> who first moved from eastern Africa to Canada in the early 2000s. From there she moved to work in the United Kingdom for several years and then returned to Canada. In talking about the challenges of returning to Canada from the UK, she said that for a second time she felt like a newcomer, without recognition of the skills and experience gained in the UK.

Going beyond passively experiencing those setbacks, however, Jamila actively engaged with the situation, interpreted the experience, and acted within her range of limited options. In the end, she settled for a role that she disliked, thereby gaining Canadian experience and references, which could then later attest to her experience. Initially expecting it to be easy to take up work when moving between Western countries, Jamila encountered major challenges. Her work experience in the UK was neither recognized nor understood in Canada, challenging her distinction of developed—Canada and the UK—and developing countries. As a result of her engagement with the CE discourse, her perspectives on her own opportunity space have changed, but so too have frames of mind regarding the valuation of different countries:

Coming back here it felt like the Canadians wanted you to have their Canadian something. Yes, when you tell them they're like “oh okay yeah great you've worked in UK”...I've done it in UK, some of them don't

2 Names of persons, places, and organizations are pseudonyms.

even understand what that means, so, what working in UK means. It's like "why do you not understand that?" It's UK, it's a—it's a developed country, it's like Canada, but they don't and so they don't appreciate it. So that—that was like a shocker. (Jamila, ll. 972–982)

Here, Jamila encountered the heterogeneity of Western developed countries. The positive counter-horizon of a seamless transition from the British to the Canadian labour market was not realistic in her experience. Instead, upon her return "the Canadians wanted you to have their Canadian something." The choice of the expression *something* can be interpreted as a perceived arbitrariness of the requirement for Canadian experience. Although her possession of a Canadian education was helpful in her transition from the UK to Canada, she found the non-recognition of professional experience to be "a shocker."

To further improve her employment prospects beyond her current, disliked job, Jamila pursued volunteer work, for which she needed to receive some training. Narrating a situation in which she had to wait 45 minutes for a bus on a cold winter evening, Jamila reflected on the actions she had to take:

It was really hard. This is a person who was driving, now I have been reduced back to using a bus. Uhm, these things I must do because I know volunteer—I can quote that as a Canadian experience. And I'm struggling here finding a job because it's my UK experience, Canadians are not really liking it for some reason, so now I must start doing things that, I'm gonna start, you know, adding on to my resumé to say UK this UK that. That is why I was doing that volunteer work position, so it has to be done. It's a struggle because now I'm having to use a bus. (Jamila, ll. 719–727)

The challenge of waiting in "freezing weather" is contrasted by Jamila describing herself in the third person singular as someone who has driven a car but has now been degraded "back to using a bus." In a background argument, she elaborates on her own theory of why she "must do" all these unpleasant things: the non-recognition of her professional experience in the UK. Although Jamila already had Canadian citizenship at that time, she refers to *Canadians* as a group separate from herself. While Jamila took action and moved forward, volunteer work appeared to be less voluntary and rather a requirement "that has to be done" to acquire Canadian work experience.

In this form of engagement with CE, Jamila had to repeatedly adjust her horizons of possibilities and to recognize that her previous migration experience was of only limited value. Against this backdrop of challenges and recurring setbacks, she learned how to independently "press on" in this seemingly Sisyphean task of fulfilling her aspirations.

### Reset and Move Forward

A similar, though more strategic means of engagement with the CE discourse can be described as *reset and move forward*. Here, and in contrast to the previous form of coping, aspirations are lowered and future life course decisions aligned with the need to acquire CE. Although this does not preclude disappointment, the reduced expectations appear to open a way out of a repeated *replay and readjust*. Such was the case for Lishan, who was in her early 50s, was born in eastern Africa, and moved to Canada in the mid-2000s. Although Lishan no longer considered herself a new immigrant and saw Canada as her

home, she felt in certain respects “shortchanged.” She had met the expectations placed on her, gained Canadian work experience, and obtained Canadian qualifications, yet she had not succeeded in finding employment commensurate with her skills.

Lishan talked about receiving a job offer unrelated to her professional training while she and her family were preparing to relocate within Canada to be closer to her husband’s workplace:

So over that weekend my husband and I talked about it, we talked about it... This was an opportunity that I had found, we won’t guarantee that I’d find a job even if we move to Oakville straight away, so we were going to take that job. We agreed, “Let’s at least take this that has come and then maybe after you’ve gotten your Canadian experience, the fam—(laughs) famous or infamous Canadian experience for a year or two, then we can think of moving.” (Lishan, ll. 434–439)

In contrast to Jamila, who problematized the exclusionary dimensions of CE, here the engagement with the “famous or infamous” CE affected big life course decisions to be made. Already having internalized the importance of possessing CE, Lishan and her husband agreed to postpone the family move in order to fulfill this requirement. Whereas Jamila was reduced to volunteering and working a job she hated, Lishan took a job unrelated to her field. At first, CE appeared as solely something to be “gotten” to be able to move on. While narrating further, however, Lishan, referred to the impact that developing this CE had on her understanding of and learning about Canada:

So I took the job at Open Doors, and it’s one of the best that I would say that I could have happen. My job at Open Doors really allowed me to see and understand Canadian life. Like I have always said, if I had gone straight into a cubicle job somewhere, I’d probably have met very few people, probably just been dealing with a lot of papers a lot of the time. But I’ve found for me that job at Open Doors really helped me to understand Canadian life in a really profound way. (Lishan, ll. 440–445)

Contrasting this initial job with the negative counter-horizon of a “cubicle job,” Lishan credited her understanding of Canadian life to this experience. For her, the meaning of CE thus expanded beyond being an imposed requirement to being a useful means of learning. The rather external interpretation of CE as something to possess reappeared when Lishan shared her experience of repeated rejection in the labour market despite having Canadian education and some Canadian experience:

And in a sense, there are times when—I’m no longer a new Canadian immigrant. I’d say Canada is home now for me, but there is still a sense in which you still feel shortchanged, is that you feel like you did everything that you’re supposed to have done, you have Canadian experience. For me it’s over seven years, I have a Canadian qualification now. (Lishan, ll. 616–620)

Lishan began the description of her situation with the relativizing expression “in a sense” and “there are times when” before she interrupted herself to insert that she was “no longer a new Canadian immigrant...Canada is home now for me.” This self-conception of being

settled was, in a certain way, contrasted by Lishan feeling disadvantaged, unfairly treated, and "shortchanged." She adhered to the rules of the game, gained CE and qualifications, and yet could not find suitable gainful employment. As a result, she could not get away from an ascribed migrant identity, and her arrival was not complete. This experience of disadvantage was generalized as being shared by others, which is documented by the repeated use of general "you."

Here, the engagement with CE was marked by an acknowledgement of its importance and a willingness to proactively align major life course decisions, such as the family move, with the need to acquire CE as a qualification. In addition, CE became meaningful as a way to understand "Canadian life," which was the "best...that could have happened." Yet possessing CE appeared to be necessary but not sufficient for her labour market success in light of other barriers. As a result, Lishan continued to steadily move forward in search of the position she really wanted, despite having played by the rules of the game and acquired CE.

### Research and Pro-act

A more functionalistic approach to dealing with CE can be termed *research and pro-act*, which is characterized by excelling at knowing the rules and playing the game. Here, the focus is less on adjusting expectations and more on understanding how Canada functions in order to take advantage of that knowledge. For Dacian, who was in his early 50s, was born in Eastern Europe, trained as a lawyer, and moved to Canada in 2015, this meant lots of research and networking. Unlike Lishan, who also had a professional degree but gave up pursuing a career in her field, Dacian "of course" still had a career in law as his goal and "just wanted to use [his] time efficiently." Contrasting with Jamila, who was repeatedly "shocked" and "surprised" by the way things worked, Dacian positioned himself as "realistic" and approached CE as a project to study, understand, and engage with systematically.

Based on my experience with the different job search strategies, I decided to use online job search and in-person job search, including cold calls, and just attending different employers on spot...And this is how I got my first job in Canada working in restaurants. Which gave me a really unique experience. Of course, was big difference from my work in Eastern Europe. I was building the foundation. (Dacian, ll. 41–50)

Drawing on his existing biographical experience, Dacian strategically triangulated various job search strategies and seemingly without much trouble landed his first job in a restaurant. Not working in his field was not problematic for Dacian, as the job was a "unique experience" and provided the "foundation" for further steps. Like Lishan, Dacian appeared to have accepted the importance of obtaining CE. Further, he took courses toward his professional goal and enjoyed researching the system, which he found "very interesting." Unlike Jamila, who repeatedly expressed surprise about the non-recognition of her foreign experience, Dacian not only took this as a given but learned strategies to reduce the opacity of CE. He "researched the community," learned that "networking is something very Canadian," and used this knowledge to his advantage. There were, however, setbacks in Dacian's quest to understand and navigate the Canadian system while he was working in a new position as a law clerk:

On 5 September I received notice of termination of my employment, which was very good shock...obviously, they were not happy with me.

But this lack of transparency that for almost two—two months, they didn't share this with me...So I didn't know what was the problem, the accent? the lack of experience? So they gave me very—very little explanations. But also, I already—but they let me stay two more weeks. They said, "We'll give you good reference, you can stay two more weeks." So it was not question of my personality, that I did something wrong. So after my last workday, was good shock for the family. After my last workday, of course, I immediately resumed my networking. I don't have time to lose. I refreshed my contacts, I started to look for another job. (Dacian, ll. 112–127)

Being unexpectedly laid off from his position as a law clerk irritated Dacian's mode of engaging with CE. Against the positive counter-horizon of being told what he did wrong and understanding "what can be changed," the "lack of transparency" left him without a "real assessment" beyond the sense of the employer not being happy with him. Externalizing this challenge as an expression of the more closed nature of the Canadian culture, he "immediately" pivoted to again strategically pursue employment through networking.

In sum, this form of engagement with the CE discourse is marked by a strategic pursuit of employment, studying the system, and learning the tools to deploy. Dacian recognized that the non-recognition of foreign experience can have exclusionary effects and consequently approached his job search methodically, including settling for a restaurant job to build a "foundation." CE had meaning for him as an object to be studied and rules to be known in order to "know where you're going." As a result, Dacian considered networking to be something particularly Canadian and embraced it as part of his job search strategy.

### ***Discussion: The Doings and Sufferings of Migration***

Each mode of engagement with the CE discourse varies in the degree to which the experience is actively shaped or being passively subjected to—or according to Dewey, in the "doings and sufferings." From the perspective of the individual, the passive aspects can be understood as migration being done *to* in contrast to the active shaping of migration as being done *by*.

#### **Migration Being "Done To"**

In order to conceptualize and theorize the migration being done *to*, researchers can draw on the doing migration framework developed by Amelina (2020). This perspective understands migration as a performative act and brings into focus the question of how mobile (and sometimes immobile) individuals are turned into migrants through social categorization, categorical differentiation, and routines of inclusion and exclusion against a particular discursive background (pp. 2–3). Amelina argued that "the social production of migration is initiated by social *categorisation processes that draw a distinction between 'migrants' and 'nonmigrants'*" (p. 2, italics in original). Here, the requirement of possessing CE acts as a delineator between autochthonous people and newcomers. Categorical distinctions into "desirable" or "undesirable" migrants are then made through "discursive processes of categorisation" (p. 3), which in the case of the CE discourse means distinguishing those who have Canadian work experience (in-group), those who do not (others), and those who will never be able to obtain Canadian experience (other-others).

These categorical distinctions of desirability can then find expression in the image of “designer immigrants” (Simmons, 2010, p. 85) and “designer migrant workers” (McLaughlin, 2010). For individuals engaging with the CE discourse, this means that—often to their surprise and counter to an ostensibly skills-based immigration system—they are subjected to a devaluation of their previously acquired skills and experiences. Routinised practices such as “performative narratives of belonging and membership [have] concrete hierarchizing effects on individuals’ life opportunities” (Amelina, 2020, p. 3), which—as we have seen in the empirical material—often means a requirement to reduce aspirations and expectations. Ultimately, according to Amelina, the social orders of migration manifest themselves through subjectivation processes resulting from particular interactional routines, or “specific framings and (performative) knowledge patterns” (p. 3).

In the analysis of the data, the migration being done to was manifested through the non-recognition or devaluation of experience, even that obtained in Western countries. The resulting exclusion from positions in society was associated with being “reduced back” to using a bus and taking jobs one “hates,” as well as an obliqueness and opacity of the rules of CE.

### **Migration Being “Done By”**

Understanding how mobile individuals are performatively being turned into migrants helps us see the contingent character of migration as well as the underlying processes. Solely focusing on the “social production of migration” (Amelina, 2020, p. 2), however, would render invisible the individuals’ active interpretations of discourses in terms of their own biographies, their meaning making and agency, as well as the learning and changed self-images that arise from this active engagement.

Individuals who I interviewed positioned themselves in relation to the CE discourse by drawing on their biographical resources, employing and shifting their frames of reference. They also engaged in practices to negotiate—and sometimes even subvert—the requirements of CE. The interpretation of CE often involved an incorporation into existing “habits of mind” (Dewey, 1910, p. 75), framing this requirement as an obstacle to surmount, as a guidepost in life course decisions, and as a window into Canadian life, something to be studied and a prompt to network, or something to be observed with curiosity. Individuals “pressed on” rather than simply subjecting themselves to the mechanisms of migration being done *to* them. As a result, expectations and self-world relationships changed, orientations shifted, a deeper understanding of workplace culture and Canadian life was acquired, and new practices were formed that connected with and supplanted previous ones.

The active doing of migration can be articulated differently in the various forms of engagement with CE. In “replay and readjust,” doing migration is persistence in the face of repeated and seemingly unjust setbacks, while “reset and move forward” is marked by an active reassessment of opportunities, acceptance, and alignment of life course decisions. In “research and pro-act,” what comes into focus is excelling at knowing the rules, playing the game, and perhaps even outsmarting the locals.

### **Doing Migration Relationally**

Taken together, the active *doing by* and more passive *doing to* aspects of migration form a relational configuration through which the transition is being shaped, interpreted, and dealt with.



First, relationally thinking of migration at an individual level brings into view the co-constitutive character of becoming a migrant: Individuals often experience incomplete and incongruent transitions, no longer self-identifying as newcomers, but being treated as such. Rather than being or ceasing to be a migrant, one can speak of a relational “becoming with” (Haraway, 2008) through the entanglement of self with others and with discourses. Against the backdrop of the CE discourse, the questioning and reconstruction of self-concepts come into view, providing both a requirement to reassess what biographical resources can be drawn upon, but also an opportunity space to redefine past experiences.

Second, the engagement with the CE discourse is a shared experience as a heterogeneous group of individuals encounters and has to deal with the same rulebook, however oblique and opaque it may be. In this process, individuals position themselves, and some are able to deconstruct aspects of the CE discourse, deal with it, and perhaps even subvert it. While otherness is being (re)produced through the CE discourse, outsiders may form a community of experience, sharing a similar conjunctive knowledge of how to interpret and act on the demands placed on them. Some feel the lack of support from family and immediate community, and others deliberately employ networking strategies to compensate for their initial lack of social capital, understood as the ability to mobilize the resources of a group (Bourdieu, 1980). Through this shared experience of challenges, the issues no longer are markers of individual deficiency but prompt participation in social networks and learning in the community how to move forward. Put differently, the potential to obtain CE constructs one group of “others” who are relatively privileged compared to the “other-others” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 106), who are not even considered for political membership and participation.

Third, the localized valuation of prior experience points to the relational character of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979), such as education, competencies, and experience. Rather than seeing those as assets to be brought into the labour market, they may be thought of as “cultural credit” that is subject to validation, re-valuation, and often outright negation (Nohl et al., 2014, 9).

Such a relational perspective on doing migration can be understood as actively putting into relation the individual experience, interpretation, and practices. This is manifested through new circumstances in life, image of self, and social positioning. Put differently,

a relational perspective on transitions [such as migration] is therefore poised to account for and reveal the practical and institutional consequences of dominant discourses such as activation, lifelong learning, or optimization. However, the transformative character of transitions also applies to transitions themselves, as they are constantly reconsidered, reproduced, and modified, and constantly enacted and reenacted. (Settersten et al., 2022, p. 240)

This relational doing migration takes into account both the various forms of subjectivation as migrant, as well as the forms in which individuals react and pro-act to interpret and engage with the rulebook. The ability to participate in practices, or “play-ability” (Alkemeyer & Buschmann, 2017), is thus a result of the interaction of dominant discourses with the different modes of engagement.



### ***Limitations and Further Research***

An inherent limitation of narrative interviews is the indirect access to practices and orientations through research participants' recollections. The DM aims to address this by reconstructing the implicit knowledge and patterns of orientation underlying the practices (Bohnsack et al., 2010, p. 20). However, further research, including ethnographic and longitudinal studies into the engagement with and learning from the CE discourse would be fruitful.

The focus of this study was the investigation of different ways of dealing with the CE discourse. Although I identified and described three modes by using exemplary interviews, it is conceivable that an individual could engage different modes at different stages in their migration pathway. How these modes interact, and how they might appear at different times, was not the focus of this study and requires further research.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I focused on the engagement of individuals with CE as a rule to be understood and as a challenge to be dealt with. Through reconstructive analysis of interview data, I identified three modes of active engagement and coping with the challenges associated with the requirement to acquire CE. These are replay and readjust, reset and move forward, and research and pro-act. Following Dewey's (1917/2011) argument that each experience is marked by "simultaneous doings and sufferings" (p. 113), one can speak of migration actively *being done by* and migration passively *being done to*. While engaging with the rulebook of CE, individuals draw on their biographical resources, find different ways of playing the game, and thus actively modulate the effects and consequences of the rules. A relational perspective on doing migration thus keeps in view the ambivalence between seemingly inescapable impositions and spaces for agency and opportunity.

These findings have implications for the adult education praxis of supporting internationally mobile individuals in their journeys: Recognizing the spaces for agency may help counter the often prevalent over-institutionalized ways of dealing with challenges (Chatterjee, 2019). This means that a better understanding of the different expressions of agency identified in migration "being done by" might serve as impetus for supporting the development of resilience in the "replay and readjust" mode; for guiding the active reassessment of opportunities, acceptance, and alignment of life course decisions in the "reset and move forward" mode; and for providing information about intricate aspects of the labour market in the "research and proact" mode. Taking the ambivalences of migration being done to and done by, along with the modes of engaging with CE, into account may also aid in rethinking immigrant training and education, as proposed by Shan (2015), by developing a strength-based curriculum, advancing practices, and experimenting deliberately with socio-cultural and socio-material power and order (p. 10). For the development of a strength-based curriculum, this implies that the identified modes and biographical resources of engaging with CE differentiate how "immigrants are positioned as active in the transfer, translation, and transformation of knowledge and practices across differences" (p. 11). Beyond the transmission of competencies and hard and soft skills, individuals may need support in dealing with the ambivalences and inner tensions through the creation of spaces for reflection and biographical learning (Bernhard, 2022, 2023). With regard to theory development, these findings offer a more nuanced perspective on ways

in which individuals learn during migratory transitions—not as fixed learning types, but rather as different modes of engaging with challenges.

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