

# **Immigrants' Satisfaction With Regional Employment: A Human Agency Perspective**

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*Attracting and retaining immigrant workers is a challenge in Canadian regions, where many employers face labor shortages. Based on an agency framework, this study explores immigrants' satisfaction with settling in a region and how they have engaged, are engaging, or plan to engage in strategies to improve their work and life satisfaction. The results of focus group discussions and interviews with 41 immigrants enable us to classify them in a two-by-two table: satisfied, unsatisfied, work-oriented, and community-oriented. As agents, immigrants develop two broad strategies that impact their satisfaction: cognitive and behavioral. Our results put forward several benefits for employees, employers, communities, and society.*

*Keywords: immigrant workers, human agency, job satisfaction, focus group*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Developed countries face a labor shortage caused by population aging, globalization, and lower birth rates. In response, countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have adopted policies to attract migrants, leading to increased immigration worldwide (OECD, 2020). In the 2000s, Canada and the United States started developing specific governmental programs inviting immigrants to settle in regions outside metropolitan centers (Lachapelle et al., 2023; Bove & Elia, 2017; St-Amour & Ledent, 2010). As a result, urban-rural migration is becoming more common (Rishworth et al., 2023; Garcia & Schmalzbauer, 2017; Ramos et al., 2020).

Such a move toward regions involves a high level of human agency (Elder, 1994) and significant personal and financial investments, constraints, and limitations for immigrants and their families (Vatz-Laaroussi et al., 2010; Carter et al., 2008). Immigrants' challenges are considerable, especially in regions where isolation can be acute and induces high psychological risk (Hernandez & Bigatti, 2010). Employers in a region must favor immigrants' satisfaction with working and living in a rural context (Ramos et al., 2017) to attract, integrate, and retain them (Bouarbat & Boulet, 2010). Investigating immigrants' satisfaction might reveal the factors contributing to successful regionalization. This study innovates by

exploring immigrants' satisfaction with their opportunities or experiences in a region and how they engage their human agency to improve their work and life satisfaction when living in semi-urban and rural regions.

The study results offer various contributions. From a theoretical point of view, the human agency framework adopted may help understand the experience of immigrants. Too little attention has been paid to immigrants' agency regarding their capabilities, aspirations, and well-being (Al Ariss, 2010; Bonfanti, 2014; Gong et al., 2011). Immigrants' job satisfaction is rarely the primary focus of research (Ko et al., 2015; Neto et al., 2018; Wang & Jing, 2018), and neither are issues of how to enhance their satisfaction (Kifle et al., 2016) and the mechanisms through which they regulate it (Cabaj, 2008). From a methodological perspective, this study innovates by focusing on immigrants in regions that have not attracted enough attention (Ramos et al., 2017) and by relying on focus groups, whereas most prior studies use a survey design (Kifle et al., 2016; Kushnirovich & Sherman, 2018). From an individual and managerial point of view, the study results may help immigrants prepare and settle in regions (St-Amour & Ledent, 2010), reducing their turnover and labor shortage (Boudarbat & Boulet, 2010).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Life satisfaction corresponds to a subjective assessment of the quality of life (Pavot & Diener, 2008) through which individuals compare their reality with a referent that can be someone else, their model, or aspirations and identify discrepancies between their wants and needs (Diener et al., 1985; Frank & Hou, 2018; Rapkin & Schwartz, 2004; Shin & Johnson, 1978). Satisfaction studies reveal various positive job-related outcomes: performance, motivation, citizenship behavior, lower turnover, etc. (Avey et al., 2011). This section first reviews the literature on obstacles to immigrant life and job satisfaction and the barriers specific to those settled in regions. Second, studies on how immigrants can use their human agency to overcome obstacles to their satisfaction, mainly when working in non-metropolitan areas, are presented.

### **Obstacles to Immigrants' Life Satisfaction: Evidence for Those Settled in Regions**

In the years following their arrival in a new country, most immigrants find their professional status downgraded and their talents underutilized (Arcand et al., 2009; Bell et al., 2014; Boudarbat & Cousineau, 2010). They often face challenges that lead them to accept jobs unrelated to their competence, expertise, and education, and they earn less than their native counterparts (Picot & Sweetman, 2005). Researchers usually explain such a downgrading of immigrants' professional status or underutilization of their talents by many factors: linguistic barriers, discrimination, lack of expertise, and undervaluation of their skills, diplomas, qualifications, work experience, or certifications obtained abroad (Frank & Hou, 2018; Syed & Ozbilgin, 2019; Groutsis et al., 2020).

Once their job search is completed, immigrant workers often express lower job satisfaction than natives because of the many challenges they face in the workplace (Arpino & de Valk, 2018; Kifle et al., 2016; Leslie, 2019). George et al. (2005) identify three major challenging requirement adjustments: acculturative stress (cultural adaptation, lack of recognition), economic uncertainty (structural challenges, underemployment), and ethnic discrimination (prejudice, social difficulties). Zikic et al. (2010) show that immigrants with high qualifications face many struggles, such as staying motivated, managing their identity, developing local knowledge, building their social network, and developing their careers. Hakak et al. (2010) list the major challenges faced by Latinos in Canada as language, discrimination, networks, and culture.

Although prior studies show how immigrants cope with the challenges they face in the workplace, none specifically focus on immigrants who have experience working in regions or consider working in regions to find a job and pursue their careers. This gap is paradoxical since, when it comes to regional immigrant workers, the five main dimensions of overqualification or underemployment are particularly prevalent (Vatz-Laaroussi, 2011: 1) having a higher formal education than necessary for the job, 2) being involuntarily employed outside of one's field of expertise, 3) having higher-level skills and experience than the job requires, 4) involuntarily working part-time or under non-permanent contracts, and 5) having lower wages than previous or comparable jobs. Other challenges include immigrants' negative perceptions of life

in small cities and rural areas (Community Immigrant Retention in Rural Ontario, 2011). They also feel uncertainty regarding work perspectives in regions where they struggle to find a job that corresponds to their expectations (Dioh & Racine, 2017; Natale et al., 2019). Additionally, ethnocultural diversity tends to diminish the farther people move from urban areas (Lee & Sharp, 2017). Moving to a region is more likely to expose immigrants and their children to discrimination among local citizens (Vatz-Laaroussi, 2011; Zahl-Thanem & Haugen, 2019).

### **The Agency Perspective: Coping With Obstacles to Life Satisfaction**

The human agency framework (Bandura, 2006) presumes individuals have power over their environment. A migration decision involves necessary proactivity (Gong et al., 2011). Immigrants, as agents, can influence their life circumstances by being intentional, forethoughtful, self-reflective, and self-reactive (Misiorowska et al., 2019).

However, migration research fails to include migrants as actors who have an impact (Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). Their capabilities, aspirations, power of adaptation, professional barriers, mental health, and well-being are too often seen as secondary (Al Ariss, 2010; Bonfanti, 2014; Gong et al., 2011). Few authors consider that structural elements and individual agency play a role in their success (Van Laer & Janssens, 2017). Some identify immigrants' actions as micro-emancipations (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007), breaking away from the challenges they face by adopting the theory of resistance (Thomas & Davies, 2005). This theory considers workers as agents and highlights the positive side of agency as productive (Mumby, 2005).

Some researchers have examined how immigrants negotiate favorable work conditions despite their vulnerable situation (Pio & Essers, 2014). Others have investigated their stressors and how immigrants overcome challenges through problem-solving, emotion-regulating, and appraisal-oriented coping strategies (Aycan & Berry, 1996; Datta et al., 2007; Weishaar, 2010). For example, immigrants can enter their new job market by obtaining local qualifications (Banerjee & Verma, 2011). Downie et al. (2004) show that immigrants internalize multiple cultural identities with a higher level of psychological functioning in the host society, thus enhancing their well-being.

Asylum seekers are a particular category of immigrants who look at improved well-being in the first years in their new country (Paniagua et al., 2021). They are often allowed to go to rural areas for jobs through public policy incentives and programs. However, refugees' long-term integration and well-being depend on the challenging task of building social ties with a homogeneous population (Glorius et al., 2020). In all cases, non-native employees must demonstrate strong agency and proactivity to fight against the challenges they encounter (Zikic, 2015) or develop social and professional attachments (Halvorsen et al., 2015). However, immigrants often hesitate to use mental health resources or support (Hernandez & Bigatti, 2010) because their native culture might not be open to mental illness (Whitley et al., 2006).

Finally, studies show that immigrants' life satisfaction in regions depends on a combination of factors that facilitate building a new stable life: professional and social opportunities, access to schools and health services, efficient integration services, and access to housing and property (Vatz-Laaroussi et al., 2010). Immigrants' satisfaction in non-metropolitan areas also depends on their sense of community, safety, and the city itself (Ramos et al., 2020), and their participation in their community influences their life satisfaction (Ramos et al., 2017). Wang and Ning (2016) identify four areas of critical requirements for immigrant integration in Shanghai's urban villages: social, financial, psychological, and cultural integration. This study continues this research strand and investigates how immigrants have used, are using, or think they will use their human agency to be satisfied in their jobs and lives when settling in regions.

## **METHOD**

We investigated the issue of immigrants' satisfaction from their perspective (Pratt et al., 2020). We conducted focus groups with immigrants to obtain a broader perspective from different individuals, and we encouraged participants to share their stories, views, attitudes, resistance, beliefs, and interests and validate their perceptions with other participants (Leclerc et al., 2011). The group discussion setting was reassuring and secure; they could feel understood, given the presence of different people in a similar situation.

We recruited participants through online invitations and calls. Forty-one immigrants, all born outside Canada, participated in seven focus groups. There were two one-on-one interviews when immigrants who had signed up for a group discussion could not participate in the latter. The group discussions took place in 2018 at a university in Montreal and agencies for immigrant integration in four regions in the province of Quebec. Participants signed a consent form and received reasonably small incentives or rewards (e.g., gift cards for grocery shopping) as a reimbursement for their time and the costs incurred in attending the meeting, as some participants traveled as far as 40 km to come to the meeting point. Using a semi-structured interview grid, we investigated immigrants' satisfaction by asking them to express their thoughts directly.

### **Sample**

Of the 41 immigrants, half were women (n=21). Most of them (n=32) had work experience in a semi-urban or rural area, and the other nine were settled in an urban setting but looked actively at possibilities in regions. Although our invitation solicited immigrants living in a region or having experience working in a region, nine immigrants came forward without satisfying these criteria. They wanted to share their perceptions and hear the views of other immigrants on the subject. We retained them because we realized that their presence helped promote rich discussions. Participants mainly belonged to the category of economic migrants who came to Canada to settle and work. One was in the country as a refugee, and two went through a study visa.

Participants were from Africa (18), Europe (11), South and Central America (9), and Asia (3). They came from four different administrative regions in Quebec but mainly from Montréal. In all, they had work experience in seven different Quebec regions. About half had lived in another non-native country before coming to Canada, and on average, they immigrated at the age of 32; the youngest was then 24, and the oldest was 59. Age distribution showed that 18 participants were aged between 31 and 40, 10 between 41 and 50, 9 between 21 and 30, and 4 were above 50. The 36 participants who completed the demographic details had lived in Quebec for eight years on average; the most recent arrival had arrived within the previous two months, and one had lived in Quebec for over 30 years. They worked in various occupations: consulting, accounting, entrepreneurial work, administration, industrial work, construction, education, and social work. Some of the most frequent job titles they gave were counselor, consultant, factory worker, office worker, computer worker, and customer service representative.

### **Data Analysis**

We recorded all focus group discussions and wrote down observation notes after each meeting, which enabled us to understand the participants' regional context (e.g., distance, road conditions, and services available). We used a mix of deductive and inductive content analysis (Thomas, 2006) to attribute meanings to the phenomenon of immigrant integration from the perspective of those who experience it, while the existing literature inspired our code and categories. The process began with attributing a code to each concept representing a theme or idea close to the participant's vocabulary. First-order codes included emotions, language barriers, local work experience, and support from an external agency. We aggregated these codes as we progressed in the coding process, combining redundant ones and dropping others that did not appear often or seemed irrelevant. Afterward, we organized the data using the methodology of data structure to shape our narrative and present our evidence (Gioia et al., 2013).

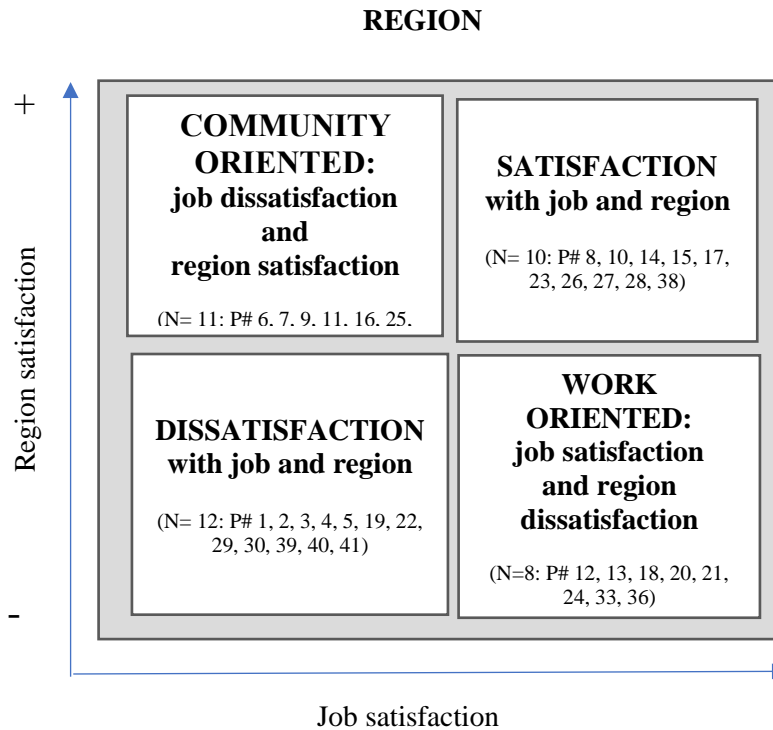
## **RESULTS**

This section first presents a typology illustrating the different job and regional community satisfaction combinations participants expressed. Next, we describe the two broad strategies they have adopted, are applying, or plan to adopt to increase their job and life satisfaction in regions.

### Immigrants' Satisfaction Profiles

The data analysis shows four immigrant population profiles based on two dimensions: satisfied vs. unsatisfied and work-oriented vs. community-oriented (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**  
**TYOLOGY OF IMMIGRANTS'S SATISFACTION PROFILES REGARDING**  
**WORKING IN A REGION**



#### *Satisfied Immigrants: Satisfaction With Both Work and Community*

Satisfied immigrants overcome most challenges related to their jobs and region and display high global satisfaction. Their integration is typically functional as they have built a network, made friends, and are comfortable in their daily lives in the region. Even if they started with a job below their expectations, they have met this challenge and found satisfaction with their life.

*At first, it wasn't easy. Two months to find work is not a lot. We are starting to be well settled here. I have a job that I like, with a fun team and excellent work conditions. (P28, current regional)*

*We moved here without even finding a job first (...). My husband always wanted to try working for a restaurant, and he did that. I worked in my field at first in tourism. (P17, current regional)*

*I am on two boards of directors and have professionally, personally, and socially enjoyed myself here over the past ten years. (P23, current regional)*

Immigrants belonging to this profile accumulate experience in the region and recall overcoming language and cultural barriers when they first settled. One participant explained that the issue was not so

much learning French as adjusting to the subtleties of the culture, with different ways of behaving and communicating. The language barrier compounds these cultural challenges:

*You have to adapt and learn the language of the country. I did that out of love for my region. (P14, current regional). Sometimes, I use words that people don't understand. Some words are similar and don't have the same meaning. (P15, current regional)*

Satisfied immigrants are actively making their lives more pleasant by taking lessons and making friends with locals, a genuine effort that has enabled them to be integrated into their workplace and community. Many immigrants in this profile have also overcome structural obstacles (e.g., lack of transportation). When they first settled, they used carpooling, biking, and taxis, but these were time-consuming and costly transportation methods that prevented them from integrating:

*I used to run after the bus, and if I didn't catch it, I had to wait hours for the next one. (P15, current regional)*

They found alternative solutions, such as buying a car or becoming more familiar with the public transport system, thus becoming independent and enjoying the opportunities their region offers.

*If you are looking for bars or activities every night, you need to get out of Val-David or Sainte-Agathe and go to Montreal. If you are looking for a quiet and easy-going life where you can let your children walk home from school without worry, you come to Val-David or Sainte-Agathe. (...) When we got here, we told ourselves it was like a small French town (...), and this is the place for us. (P17, current regional)*

#### *Work-Oriented Immigrants: Satisfaction With Work and Dissatisfaction With Their Community*

Work-oriented immigrants are satisfied with their jobs rather than with their region, but they are willing to put up with it for the work they have found. These immigrants are those who came to start their careers or to improve their compensation. One participant expressed no attachment to the region, although he does not dislike it. He is there for work and has found a place to live that enables him to travel to his work outside Montreal while his wife commutes to Montreal to work.

*Now, my job corresponds to my master-level studies. I like to develop things. I can go further. My boss was nice. I like the job and my coworkers. So, my wife and I settled halfway. We see each other at night. (P13, current regional)*

*I worked in [a town near Montreal], and the conditions were poor. The salary was bad (...). I heard about the [regionalization program]: they offered competitive salaries and paid for accommodation and support for three months. (P18, current regional)*

*I wouldn't say no if I ever get an exciting career opportunity. I work a lot, but I have always liked that; I work overtime, but not so much that it damages my social or family life. (P24, current regional)*

Their work relations appear difficult, and they say that their supervisors or colleagues saw them as outsiders and left them on their own to be integrated into their jobs, organizations, and communities.

*They're going to say: oh, him? He's a foreigner. Will he fit in with my team? He is African, and he won't be good. They are not used to it (...). For them, you are an outsider. (P20, current regional)*

*I was left alone and had to rely only on myself, even for work. Maybe it's because they [local citizens] don't have enough immigrants here. They are not used to working with us, showing us how to do the work, and providing us with information. (P13, current regional)*

They mentioned their challenges before coming to the locality or the stress that prevented them from moving to a region. Some regional communities have started welcoming immigrants only recently, and people know little about their cultures. These immigrants found that regions lacked services and pointed out, for instance, the reduced availability of international food. Immigrants who were successful at building networks expressed being more satisfied but clearly stated that it is better to make connections in a larger city:

*"If we go to Sherbrooke, we buy all the [ethnic] food we need in cans for 3-4 months"*  
(P18, current regional).

#### *Community-Oriented Immigrants: Dissatisfaction With Work and Satisfaction With Their Community*

These immigrants express lower job satisfaction, but they enjoy their community life. Their struggles to find a job are attributed to the employers rather than the region because they have usually taken advantage of the regional employment agencies and services. Participants suggested that employers in the private sector should use standardized processes to include visible minorities with fair selection criteria, as in the public sector. Some participants said they had to lie in their CVs. Even though changing information in the CV might be a strategy to overcome employment challenges, it can be viewed as an indicator of the lack of recognition from employers, leading to lower job satisfaction.

*It was very far from Montreal. Seven hours. I didn't know how I would do it, but I was ready to go. They said they withdrew the position (...). I felt like they didn't want to hire me because I am black. I sent an email saying thank you for allowing me to defend my application and good luck. (...) We are lucky the government is giving us this opportunity (...) If you obtain the concourse passing score, whether or not you're an immigrant, you are going to the next round of interviews. (P35, ex regional)*

*It is tough to find a job. I sent my CV to various companies. They didn't call for 3-4 months. I sent out the same CV, but I changed my name. Instead of using [home country university], I wrote [local university]. I got called back and had seven interviews in the same week. That's our reality. (P25, current regional)*

Whether their job dissatisfaction is due to unemployment or underemployment, these immigrants say they are not working to their full potential. They also complain about their impoverished working conditions, such as only night shifts or weekends. However, participants working in Montreal also express this form of underemployment; for them, a solution could be to take a job in the region.

*I did a certificate upon my arrival to learn more about the laws and regulations in Canada. I finished it within a year, but now, they ask for local job experience when I look for work. So, I work as an assistant with autistic children. I have been doing this for two months. It's not fun, but you must have something. (P35, ex regional)*

*Some employers will say to your face that they only need staff for the night shift in logistics. I find that's discriminatory. They only hire beginners for night shifts. (P32, current regional)*

*So now I want to find a job outside Montreal because I am not using my full potential. It is like I have ten skills and only use one. (P37, future regional)*

In this profile, immigrants complain about their job conditions but are sad to quit their region or consider leaving it for better work conditions that meet their expectations. They highlight the advantages of being in regions: less waiting for doctors' appointments, a family-friendly environment, being close to nature, living and networking in a smaller city, and being able to afford a house are among the main elements that justify their stay in a region. One participant mentioned that she was moving to a bigger city for financial reasons, a place where she could find a higher-paying job, but she was sorry to have to leave the region:

*Now that I speak French better, I am looking for something else. (P25, current regional)*

*I have decided to leave [regional city]. I'm going tomorrow. It is unfortunate. I chose this town because I left my hometown [city] with 10 million inhabitants. (...) I wanted to live where everything is close by, with a high quality of life. Unfortunately, I have a school loan for two master's degrees that I need to pay off. It's almost \$30,000. That is pushing me to move on. I have to do it. (P11, current regional)*

#### *Unsatisfied Immigrants: Dissatisfaction With Both Job and Community*

Unsatisfied immigrants face many challenges in their jobs, regions, or communities. They are willing to move to find a job or quit and return to Montreal without looking for a job first. They are disappointed because of the difficulties in finding work, mainly work that suits their requirements. Distances took a toll on job seekers as many traveled many times through the recruitment process of regional firms.

*I used to travel to regions for interviews. Once, I even had to go all the way to Toronto. But I won't do that anymore. It's time-consuming and costly. (...) It's a huge investment. You come back here [in Montreal] and are frustrated because you tried hard (...). You need a car. Without that, it's unbearable. (P1, ex regional)*

*I couldn't find a job in Montreal. So, I was forced to look for work here. But I didn't find any job. I sent in my CV. I wanted to teach. I didn't even get an answer. I ended up working in a supermarket (...) I needed to work. (P5, current regional)*

*We had issues with HR [human resources]. Trouble started. I had to leave and return to Montreal. (...) Now, I work with an agency. (P3, ex regional)*

However, the challenges of finding a job, including underemployment, are not the only problems. They also must face the lack of support for integration into the jobs and often find they are left to themselves on the job:

*You usually get one week of training when you start a new job. I didn't have any support. The team was undergoing big changes. Many of the people working with me began to do this simultaneously. Everyone else is busy. (P1, ex regional)*

*I can't tell you how many problems I had working at the factory. When I would get off the job, it took me at least 20 minutes in my car to pull myself together each day. It's not the case anymore. (P19, current regional)*

Other issues related to the regions, such as social and geographical isolation, lead to immigrants' dissatisfaction with the region. The need to have a driver's license and a car in the area causes many challenges for immigrants who often come from countries without these requirements. They also need to adjust to loneliness. For example, they are limited to a smaller social circle because an area might be far



from Montreal. After migrating, an immigrant’s social capital decreases when they move from their home country to a region with no social network, which appears even worse in the winter.

*I don’t drive. It’s difficult because I’m alone here and I’m scared. I don’t know how to integrate into a small town. (P2, future regional)*

*I liked Saint-Hyacinthe because they had public transportation (...) In Val d’Or, there was nothing. (P41, ex regional)*

*When I came to Sherbrooke, my entire family, brother, and friends were all in Montreal. It’s like my wings have been cut. I feel like I’m trapped here. (P5, current regional)*

### Immigrants’ Satisfaction Strategies

This section focuses on how immigrants confront barriers to their satisfaction in regional employment. Table 1 shows the two categories of strategies identified — behavioral and cognitive – grouping five agency approaches.

**TABLE 1**  
**IMMIGRANTS’ STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THEIR SATISFACTION**  
**WITH THEIR JOB AND THEIR REGION**

Strategies	Approaches	Description
<b>Cognitive strategies:</b> changing one’s perception of the situation	<b>Comparison</b>	Identifying the discrepancy between what they receive in a region and their home country, big cities, etc. <i>Examples: Having less competition to access higher jobs, benefiting from quieter surroundings, etc.</i>
	<b>Reassessment</b>	Focusing on what they liked the most to cope with the negative aspects. <i>Examples: emphasizing the social aspects of the job, seeing the job as a developmental opportunity, etc.</i>
<b>Behavioral strategies:</b> exploring concrete actions that would improve the situation	<b>Building social networks</b>	Relying on social networks to cope with dissatisfaction or enhance satisfaction. <i>Examples: Asking friends and family to join, becoming involved in the community, etc.</i>
	<b>Self-development</b>	Engaging in activities or making conscious efforts to learn new skills or obtain a recognized diploma <i>Examples: Signing up for a university program, doing an internship, learning French, etc.</i>
	<b>Voluntary quitting</b>	Looking for a way of leaving their current employer or the region. <i>Examples: Asking their networks for job opportunities, online job searching, etc.</i>

#### *Cognitive Strategies*

Some immigrants used cognitive strategies to confront barriers to their satisfaction in regional employment. These strategies involve changing one’s perception of a situation by putting elements of dissatisfaction or satisfaction into perspective through comparison or reassessment.

**Comparison Strategy.** This strategy entails identifying the discrepancy between what immigrants had and what they wanted, helping them close the gap. When satisfied with both work and the region, immigrants compared their situation with what they would have in their home country. With such a

favorable comparison, there was no talk of leaving. However, unsatisfied immigrants who also used this strategy realized their situation was worse than the position they could have elsewhere. Often, this comparison came with thoughts of leaving or quitting their job, the region, or the country.

*I am not sure I would have had the same quality of life in my country. (P23, current regional)*

*I was accomplished in my home country. I left it all behind. And then you get here, and they don't trust your diploma. (P34, future regional)*

*I would make as much money in my home country, but starting over scares me because I won't have enough money to survive. (P4, current regional)*

Immigrants also used a comparison to improve their job satisfaction. By comparing their situation in the region and what they would have in Montreal, these participants listed various pros or cons of living in regions regarding different aspects: job content, cost of living, QOL, living with people not from their country, etc.

*I would have a higher salary in Montreal, but the gas and insurance are cheaper here. Housing is more affordable. On a financial note, we are winning. (P20, current regional)*  
*If I were in Montreal, there would be too many people from my country, which doesn't attract me. (P28, current regional)*

*I would have more opportunities and a higher salary in France or larger cities. But the rent is more expensive. I chose to settle for a higher quality of life rather than being successful in my career. (P17, current regional)*

*For family life, it's ideal here. You have a place to rest; you have the views. We have a higher quality of life compared to others. (P9, current regional)*

For others, working in regions gave them more work opportunities because they had less competition. One of the participants said that his capacity stood out in his region:

*People think I am lucky to be a team leader. It's not by chance; it's part of my capacity to adapt and adjust to what the company needs. In my job, all moved quickly, and we had to make an effort. People here are not as quick as in Montreal. (P19, current regional)*

**Reassessment Strategy.** Some immigrants seemed to focus on aspects they liked the most in their region or their job to cope with the negative factors. “*My health balance is more important than money*” (P31, current regional). One participant said she had first settled for a job that was beneath her expectations because she feared being far from Montreal as she loved the city. After accepting a job she enjoyed in the region, she switched to a work orientation. After working in the region, she used reassessment as a cognitive strategy to justify why she left her beloved city. Similarly, another participant explained that moving to a region led her to focus more on the job.

*It's either losing your career or living the good life in Montreal. For me, my career was more important. I used to be a career-oriented woman in my country. (P38, ex regional)*

*There isn't even a restaurant because there is no separation between work and life. But it was compensated with other advantages. (P1, ex regional)*

Participants used this strategy to regain satisfaction when the job was challenging. By placing more emphasis on having a job than having all their experience or diplomas recognized, they shifted their focus on the positive aspects such as acquiring experience in the host country, developing themselves, work-family considerations, etc.

*I have to move past what they said that offended me. I tell myself I am here for my goal, for a reason, for work. (P19, current regional)*

*They only credited half of my professional experience, even though I have always worked in this field. (P28, current regional)*

*What my job is allowing me to do is develop my competencies. I am working in a new field, in which I started studying. It enables me to put into practice what I learned in school. I'm satisfied with that. [even if the job is paying less and her ego is affected] (P7, current regional)*

*I looked for work in my field [tourism], and it was too much. I had to send my children to daycare on Saturdays! So, I went back to accounting. (P17, current regional)*

### *Behavioral Strategies*

Some immigrants used behavioral strategies to confront barriers to satisfaction in regional employment. These strategies include using social networks, self-developing, and quitting skills strategies.

**Building Social Networks.** This strategy entails relying on social networks to cope with dissatisfaction or to enhance satisfaction. It involves asking for help, inviting relatives to settle in the region, or going there to join friends. Many immigrants say that what led them to move abroad, or from one city to another, was often the presence of family members or friends in the region. Nevertheless, invitations from relatives do not necessarily mean they will adapt to life in the region.

*My sister and brother-in-law are currently learning French. They would like to live here in the Laurentians with their children to get a fresh start. (P15, current regional)*

*To tell you the truth, my wife convinced me to come here because her friend was in Canada, and they talked on the phone. She said Canada is beautiful. (P4, current regional)*

*I have come to this region because one of my friends worked here. (P18, current regional)  
I invited my brother; he is a dentist. He would like to live in Sainte-Agathe or Val David (...). The [financial] security I have from my employer. If I didn't have that, I could not have gotten my brother and parents to join me here. (P17, current regional)*

*My counselor told me: You make the decision that will be right for you. She didn't try to convince me to stay because she had difficulty integrating into this city even though her husband was native from there. (P35, ex regional)*

Immigrants with low job satisfaction cope with it through social strategies. They also share their expertise with others and encourage them through their adaptation process.

*I can tell you I have friends from everywhere. That helped me tolerate all the delays and hiccups regarding my career. (P41, ex regional)*

*You have to build your network in this city. Everything is about the network. It's the same for him; his friend called to offer him work. (P24, current regional)*

*Networking was key to my professional integration here because I was in a less well-known field. (P6, current regional)*

The most satisfied immigrants are willing to help others integrate, participate in the regional effort to attract the workforce, and encourage anybody to look at regional employment opportunities through their work and personal network. These immigrants are involved in social activities organized by their employers or the community. They do not hesitate to volunteer to build a personal network or advance their careers.

*My company has a committee for newcomers to help with immigrant integration. They organize monthly activities to help us discover the region and Quebec culture. The last time I went, we tried poutine and went to the sugar shack. (P24, current regional)*

*I participated in a fair as a volunteer, and that is where I got my job. Then, when I did freelance, I found work through the network I had built with my Toastmasters association. (P16, current regional)*

*My goal was to meet people to integrate. I worked as a volunteer in non-profits, and I traveled a lot. (...) These volunteer activities helped me integrate. (P28, current regional)*

**Self-Development.** This strategy was used to increase work success and improve regional integration. Many immigrants mentioned returning to school, obtaining a diploma, or following a program to work in Québec. Some insisted that receiving a local education was the best thing they could have done to get a job they liked or in their specialization. Many admitted being unsatisfied with the content of their current job and salary level, and they view going back to school as the best way to improve their career. Most immigrants also developed interpersonal skills through networking, language skills through classes and friends, and professional competencies through their work experience and studies.

*I was ready to start at the bottom of the ladder, but they didn't trust me. That's what led me to go back to school. (P34, future regional)*

*I think going to university helped a lot. That is where I got my first job experience. It's not the same for everyone, but I had my first experiences in my area of expertise. (P12, current regional)*

*I have a marketing diploma. I couldn't find work in my field in Montréal, so I came to Sherbrooke to go back to school. Now, I work part-time, but it's not in my field. (P11, current regional)*

*I did the online francization training program, and then I thought I lacked practice, so I went to CEGEP [graduate level] to get another course. I was accepted into the Level 3 French course. Then, I did my certification for my studies to be recognized here. It was hard to find work. (P15, current regional)*

*I didn't want to go to night classes at [city's name] CEGEP, so I said okay, I would be doing a nice little diploma in [small school] near my place. After 6-7 months, I had my equivalency. I had the skills. (P17, current regional)*

*I will go back to school in a field I enjoy. I wouldn't say I liked the work because it didn't fit with my competencies. After all, I studied in a high school technical program in my country. They consider it a high school diploma. I want to get my diploma to have a salary representing my education level. (P25, current regional)*

Some participants believe that their personal development might require keeping quiet and listening to learn how to do things, the unspoken norms that are culturally implicit and that they need to know. Other participants believe employers should help them give more information at the cultural or norms levels. They can also learn and adapt some of their attitudes or behaviors when possible.

*You have to be able to sell yourself. The employer doesn't care about the diploma. You have to remember what job you want. Maybe you will have to go a little lower. (P36, current regional)*

*It's unlike in our country, where you can say you have done everything. You have seen it all. Here, you have to be humble in your interview. That is what I have learned; you have to tone it down. (P23, current regional)*

*I learned something: I look at the other person, and if I see something is not working, I ask the question again differently to make sure I am heard, and she gets what I mean. (P16, current regional)*

*You are the only [nationality]. Who you are is a problem. Once you get the job, how do you deal with your personality? If you have the right tools, you are informed and can do something about it. (P29, current regional)*

**Voluntary Quitting.** Immigrants with lower job satisfaction were searching for ways to leave their current employer or the region. This strategy involves considering job opportunities in the area, elsewhere in Quebec or Canada, or another country, or even returning to their home country.

*There was a job opening in the region, but it was not my area of expertise (...) So, I worked there, and at some point, I returned to school to get a master's in career counseling. (P6, current regional)*

*I was just happy to have found a job. I didn't realize the extent of things (...). Now, I would move to a city for a job, but only if it was a certain size. (P1, ex regional)*

*I feel like I am the only one unhappy in this group. (...) I will immediately come if there is a job opening in this organization. (...) I would go anywhere if they offered me a job (...) I am open to all opportunities. (P5, current regional)*

A quitting strategy entails an immigrant seeking employment elsewhere. Many participants who were the most satisfied with the region said that they would be open to, but not searching for, an opportunity elsewhere if the QOL were similar. One participant played with the idea but concluded against it. Another participant said it would have to be very appealing, not too far from this region, to make her move. Hence, a satisfied employee is less likely to quit and is not actively using leaving as a behavioral strategy.

*If tomorrow someone offers me a job in Vancouver, I am going. But would I provoke it? I don't think so. (P23, current regional)*

*I have a job that I like (...) It would have to be something huge to make us tilt over and change. I consider that my employer does everything necessary for me to stay here. (P28, current regional)*

*If I had one true piece of advice, it is not to move to the region in the first month. Try it out and see if you like it first. (P1, current regional)*

*I like this place and would love to stay in this region, but if I have another opportunity as a career counselor... I need to have a stable job. And we can't forget the salary. (P7, current regional)*

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explores immigrants' satisfaction with settling in a region and how they have engaged, are engaging, or plan to engage their human agency to enhance their work and life satisfaction. Results first identify four profiles of immigrants' satisfaction based on two dimensions: satisfied vs. unsatisfied and work-oriented vs. community-oriented. It appears that immigrants' satisfaction in one dimension does not apply to the other by a spillover effect. Whereas previous studies have mainly explored job satisfaction, this study confirms that community satisfaction is also needed to retain employees in the regions. Second, findings confirm that immigrants act as agents developing two broad strategies – cognitive and behavioral—that impact their overall satisfaction. This result is congruent with the three stress-coping mechanisms among immigrants identified by Weishaar (2010): problem-solving, emotion-regulating, and appraisal-oriented strategies.

The cognitive strategies emerging from immigrants' statements involve changing their perceptions of their situation by putting elements of (dis)satisfaction into perspective through comparison or reassessment. Immigrants compare their satisfaction with work and the region with what they could have achieved in their country of origin or elsewhere. Such a strategy has been confirmed in a recent study showing that first-generation immigrants rely heavily on comparisons (e.g., salary) to assess their satisfaction compared to second-generation immigrants (Shen & Kogan, 2020). Other immigrants, faced with their current situation, re-evaluate or rationalize their choices. In this study, community-oriented and job-oriented participants seemed to rely more on emphasizing the positive sides of one domain (either work or personal or community lives) to counterbalance the negative facets in the other.

The behavioral strategies immigrants adopt include building social networks, self-developing, and quitting, as agency approaches are based upon concrete and observable actions. Prior studies have shown that immigrants who are unsatisfied with their jobs tend to look at options other than leaving (Boudarbat & Cousineau, 2010). Our findings also align with the attachment model of immigrant retention (Halvorsen et al., 2015), positing that the more attached immigrants are to the people at work and outside work, the more likely they are to stay.

Those cognitive and behavioral strategies are consistent with the various assumptions of prior turnover models (Holtom et al., 2008). For example, a cognitive turnover model (Mobley, 1977) explains how, by evaluating their job and considering their satisfaction level, individuals express intentions to quit, assess the costs and benefits of leaving, and consider other options. However, job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001) posits that individuals' decisions to quit or stay also explain their relationships with others, the perceived fit with the job and the community, and the sacrifices involved in quitting their employer.

Immigrants' behavioral strategies in regions also appear aligned with social determination theory (Deci et al., 2017), which posits that personal and work context characteristics impact the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Immigrants' need for autonomy refers to their freedom of choice to adapt or not their behaviors in their life domains and give meaning to their preferences. Second, the need for competence corresponds to immigrants' needs to master the required skills to perform their duties and to feel confident, productive, and competent when carrying out their daily activities, including reaching their goals in their life domains. Third, the need for relatedness involves the immigrants' desire to experience a feeling of mutual connectedness, a sense of belonging and care for others, and the feeling that others reciprocate their care.

### **Practical Implications**

Our results can help attract, integrate, and retain immigrant workers in regions. Employers, governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, coworkers, and citizens should recognize how important it is to help immigrants in various ways. Employers should be more proactive in assessing their immigrant

employees' satisfaction and answering their needs (autonomy, relatedness, competence) with their jobs, organizations, regions, and communities. Employers located in the regions need to assess their working conditions and what the community provides to the immigrant workers. To do so, they could schedule follow-up meetings in the first few months after hiring an immigrant. For example, by investing in social activities, employers create contacts that contribute to immigrants' satisfaction and retention.

Moreover, by understanding how immigrants use cognitive strategies to improve their well-being, employers can better communicate and extol the benefits of working with their firm, often a small firm, and within a region, often in a small city. Managers also need to communicate the benefits for immigrants of seeking help when they lack knowledge or experience in order to access a broader range of expertise, develop interpersonal alliances or networks, and learn the culture. Our findings indicate that a difficult context and lack of support from colleagues and managers can generate disappointment and issues of trust among immigrants. Proximity managers should help immigrants cope with uncertain situations and stress by providing formal discussion opportunities where the collective experience among immigrants is shared. In short, the city and employers should proactively promote a societal and organizational culture that relies on collectivism or interdependence.

### **Limitations and Research Avenues**

Recruiting participants for the focus group presented unexpected challenges. A larger sample would have allowed us to better capture the differences between regions, between medium-sized and small cities, and to consider the impact of individual characteristics such as generation, gender, income, education level, etc. (Li & Ru, 2022; Shen & Hogan, 2020). Moreover, we conducted the focus groups in French while some immigrant participants were still learning the language and were probably less likely to express all they would have liked or to follow the group discussion fully. Our findings need to be validated by further longitudinal and multilevel studies to be validated and generalized. It would be worth investigating immigrants' behavioral strategies for gaining resources (help-seeking, networking, self-development) through COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989). In addition, it would be worth investigating immigrants' satisfaction through the concept of "individual action propensity", which might be action or thinking-oriented (Vera et al., 2014).

In summary, as immigration raises important issues for individuals and organizations, researchers should focus more on immigrant workers' satisfaction (Frank & Hou, 2018). We used agency theory to explore how immigrants face obstacles reducing their job satisfaction and community satisfaction in regions by using various cognitive or behavioral strategies. The study results can help attract, integrate, and retain immigrant workers in regions and their jobs to benefit employees, employers, communities, and society.

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