

2017

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### Recommended Citation

Chaumba, Josphine (2017) "Career Development Wellbeing and Coping Strategies of Zimbabwean Immigrants in the United States," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3853>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol44/iss1/4>

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# Career Development, Well-being and Coping-Strategies of Zimbabwean Immigrants in the United States: A Research Note

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*This study combined quantitative and qualitative data to understand perceptions of career development, life satisfaction, and strategies for enhancing career development among Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States. Participants completed a survey on their perceptions of career development in the United States. Twelve participants selected from those who had completed the survey participated in in-depth interviews that asked about their life experiences. Spearman's rho correlations revealed inverse relationships between career development difficulties and life satisfaction and time in the United States. Qualitative results revealed specific strategies that participants used to build their careers. Implications for practice are also suggested.*

*Key words: career development, coping strategies, Zimbabwean immigrants*

Career development is critical for successful employment integration among immigrant populations. A career results when the jobs someone holds in their life span become connected (Hansen & Leuty, 2006), such as through the transfer of previous experience and credentials. While several theories have been proposed to understand career development, such as social cognitive career theory and social learning theory of career decision making, career development among immigrant populations may not conform to these theories because of career disruptions that immigrants encounter in the new country (Hansen & Leuty, 2006). For instance, research with African immigrants in Canada suggested that career development barriers such as failure to transfer previous experience and qualifications, as well as discrimination have forced

African immigrants to take on "survival employment" or any job that is available to meet their daily needs (Creese & Wiebe, 2012, p. 61). Of particular concern is that survival jobs may negate the career development processes because these jobs do not align with one's previous work and qualifications, contributing to the problem of underemployment.

For instance, in spite of possessing work permits, highly skilled immigrants who had received their green cards in 1996 were unable to convert their prior experience and skills into comparable jobs in the United States, and more than 75% of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean ended up in lower-skilled jobs than what they had in the country of origin (Redstone Akresh, 2006). Today, underemployment remains one of the key threats to successful career development among immigrants (Batalova, Fix, & Creticos, 2008; Lysenko & Wang, 2015; Zong & Batalova, 2016). About 1.8 million college-educated immigrants representing about 23% of college-educated immigrants were underemployed between 2012 and 2014 versus 18% of college-educated natives (Zong & Batalova, 2016). The problem of underemployment can be salient for African and Latin American immigrants. Analyses of pooled data from the 2005 and 2006 American Community Survey indicated that about 33% of skilled Africans were employed in low-skilled jobs second to Latin Americans with 44% (Batalova et al., 2008). Given the importance of employment in successful immigrant integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), amid the gloomy statistics on African immigrants, research that seeks to understand intersections of career development and mental health experiences of immigrants from particular African countries is needed (Stebbleton, 2012). Research on immigrant underemployment is needed to strengthen the social work knowledge base and to guide advocacy efforts (Valtonen, 2016).

This study examined perceptions of career development and well-being of Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States. For the purposes of this research, career development was defined as experiences and activities that immigrants engaged in to achieve desired occupational goals (McDonald & Hite, 2015). There is no unitary definition of the concept of well-being, although scholars agree that well-being may entail subjective self-evaluation by an individual of whether or not

their positive emotions outweigh negative emotions and satisfaction with life (Charlemagne-Badal, Lee, Butler, & Fraser, 2015). Three research questions were central to this study:

1. How do Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States perceive their career development?
2. What is the relationship between perceptions of career development and wellbeing?
3. What strategies have Zimbabweans used to enhance career development in the new country?

An estimated 19,000 Zimbabweans were in the United States in 2013 (Gambino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014). Drawing from American Community Survey 2009, Zimbabweans were among the most highly-educated African immigrant groups in the United States, with 58% reporting a bachelor's degree or higher (McCabe, 2011). In addition, they were also active in the labor force, with Zimbabwean women among those reporting above-average rates at 76% compared to women from other African countries (McCabe, 2011). The United States Census 2000 showed that 59.1% of Zimbabwean immigrants were employed in professional occupations, 7.9% were in service occupations and 11.8% were in production, craft and repair occupations (Marrow, 2007). Although evidence from the United States Census suggests that Zimbabweans have good educational and occupational positions, the processes which Zimbabwean immigrants use to attain continuity in their careers from the country of origin or to begin a new career path in the United States have not been explored.

## Review of the Literature

The career development process among African immigrants was described by Stebelton (2012) as one that is characterized by a high level of uncertainty because of the barriers that are encountered in the new country. One of the major challenges to career development is underemployment (Batalova et al., 2008). Even though underemployment might

be viewed as a temporary situation experienced during the transition to the new country by immigrant populations, its consequences may be profound, impacting family and social relationships (Lysenko & Wang, 2015). Research has established that underemployment negatively affects mental health (Chen, Smith, & Mustard, 2010; Dean & Wilson, 2009; George, Chaze, Fuller-Thomson, & Brennenstuhl, 2012; Kennedy & Chen, 2012; Premji & Shakya, 2016). In a study of 309 internationally trained engineers, George, Chaze, Fuller-Thomson and Brennenstuhl (2012) found that 36% of participants who did not have engineering jobs reported dissatisfaction with life compared to 22% of those that had jobs in the engineering field. Even more concerning is how this negative impact also affects family members, because individual career development experiences of immigrants are sometimes enmeshed with the individual's personal and social life (Chen, 2008).

In another study, Premji and Shakya (2016) interviewed 30 immigrant women who were struggling to get stable employment that matched their education and/or experience and found that problems of underemployment and unemployment affected participants' physical and mental health, as well as that of their families. While existing research has provided useful insights into the employment-related challenges faced by immigrants in general, experiences of immigrants from specific countries is limited, as well as research on the strategies immigrants use to rebuild their careers in the new country. This study will address this gap by documenting experiences of Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States.

Studies with Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States and other destinations such as the United Kingdom and Canada reveal experiences of underemployment (Bloch, 2006; Chaumba, 2015; McGregor, 2007). In a survey of 280 Zimbabweans in Canada who were mostly refugees, 35% reported working in jobs that were not congruent with their experience and qualifications (Crush, Chikanda, & Maswikwa, 2012). Other research has documented the usefulness of social capital for career development and general integration among Zimbabwean immigrants (Chaumba, 2015; Tinarwo, 2014). Zimbabweans have also retrained and obtained certifications to further their career development. For instance, Crush

et al. (2012) found that 40% of Zimbabweans in their study had to re-train and get certified in order to advance their career options. Premji and Shakya (2016) observed that facing underemployment or unemployment led to the intensification of job search strategies among immigrant women in their study. It is important to note that instead of succumbing to hopelessness due to persistent unemployment or underemployment, some immigrants find new ways of enhancing their career development prospects. However, literature on the perceptions of career development and strategies that Zimbabweans in the United States have used to succeed is limited. This study attempted to close this gap by examining existing data on employment related experiences of Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States.

## Methods

### *Research Design and Data Source*

Data used in this study are a part of a larger study on social capital and employment outcomes of Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States. The study included a triangulation mixed-methods research design with qualitative and quantitative data collected parallel to each other and merged during interpretation to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the integration experiences of Zimbabwean immigrants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The quantitative part was comprised of a survey that asked participants about their social capital and employment in the United States. Twelve participants selected from those who had completed the survey participated in in-depth interviews that asked about social resources that they found helpful. Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, data were collected between February to June 2009 from adult Zimbabwean immigrants. The survey asked participants about their general integration experiences, social capital, and employment-related questions.

### *Key Variables and Measures*

Variables of interest to this research were perceptions of career development, well-being, and coping strategies. Perceptions of career development were assessed using two

main measures. The first measure was the Occupational Adjustment Subscale of the Demands of Immigration Scale by Aroian (2003). This assesses career-related stressors encountered during settlement on a Likert Scale with 1 indicating 'not at all' and 6 'very much.' The Demands of Immigration Scale has been used to understand experiences of immigrant nurses (Ma, Quinn Griffin, Capitulo, & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Victorino Beechinor, & Fitzpatrick, 2008).

A second measure of perceptions of career development was a question that asked respondents to rate 1 = not suitable, 2 = somewhat unsuitable, 3 = moderately suitable, 4 = somewhat suitable, and 5 = suitable for the question, "How suitable is your current employment situation given your educational background and previous work experience?" This question was asked for both the first job in the United States and the current job at the time of the survey.

During data analysis, job suitability was further divided into two variables, namely first job suitability and current job suitability. The second variable, well-being, was assessed with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The scale is widely used in national surveys of well-being (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013). The third variable, coping strategies, was explored using data from the qualitative interviews. Interview transcripts were read to identify attitudes and behaviors that were used or developed to minimize career development challenges (Swanson & Fouad, 1999).

### *Data Analysis*

Quantitative data analysis included descriptive statistics of single variables using frequencies and percentages to understand perceptions of career development among Zimbabwean immigrants. Additional percentages were obtained from descriptive statistics computed using Wilcoxon signed-rank test to compare suitability of first job in the United States and the job at the time of the survey. Second, Spearman's Rho correlations were conducted to examine associations between a composite score of items from the occupational adjustment subscale of the Demands of Immigration Scale and satisfaction with life with current job and time in the United States as a control variable. All analyses were performed using SPSS, and

an alpha level of .05 was used as a criterion for statistical significance. In addition, qualitative data analysis was performed using inductive analysis to explore coping strategies that were used by Zimbabwean immigrants to aid with career development. Adopting the steps outlined by Thomas (2006), line-by-line coding of statements reflecting attitudes and behaviors used or developed to address career development challenges were identified. These were later grouped into main themes to capture strategies viewed as important for career development by the study sample.

### *Results*

Participants for the survey were 103 Zimbabwean immigrants. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 75 years, with an average of 37 years. The length of time in the United States ranged from 0 to 30 years ( $M = 8.9$  years) with 83% of the participants having been in the United States for more than 5 years. Regarding educational attainment, approximately 64% had earned at least a Bachelor's degree, and 11.7% had only completed high school. The gender distribution was almost equal, with 50.5% female and 49.5% male. About 88% of the participants ( $n = 91$ ) were employed at the time of the survey. Table 1 shows a summary of perceptions of career development that were reported by the study participants.

Table 1. Participants' Perceptions of Career Development in the United States

Perception of Career Development	Percent	
	Yes	No
Lower Work Status	55	45
Disadvantaged	53	47
Qualifications not Accepted	51	49
Unsuitable First Job	53	47
Unsuitable Current Job	19	81

To compare suitability rankings for first and current jobs, descriptive statistics from a Wilcoxon signed-ranks test showed



that, whereas 14% of the participants perceived the suitability of their current job as lower than that of their first job in the United States, 49% ranked their current job as more suitable than their first job, and 36% of the participants reported the same level of suitability for current and first job. Spearman rank-order correlations were conducted to determine the relationship among composite scores of items from the occupational adjustment subscale of the Demands of Immigration Scale and satisfaction with life, and time in the United States. A two-tailed test of significance indicated there was a significant negative relationship between the occupational adjustment subscale score and satisfaction with life  $r_s(90) = -.44$ ,  $p < .05$ , suggesting that individuals who perceived greater difficulty with their career adjustment reported lower satisfaction with life. However, significant negative correlation was also observed between time in the United States and the occupational adjustment subscale score  $r_s(90) = -.24$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , suggesting that negative perceptions of career adjustment decreased with more time in the United States. Furthermore, a significant positive correlation was observed for time in the United States and satisfaction with life  $r_s(90) = .27$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Overall, the quantitative results suggest that Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States are experiencing notable career development over time in spite of initial challenges. Qualitative results shed light onto some of the strategies that participants used to promote career development. Following inductive analysis of qualitative data, the main strategies that Zimbabweans have used to attain successful career development in the United States included going back to school for further education or to train in second careers, obtaining relevant certifications, and seeking information from fellow Zimbabweans that have made it in the desired profession.

The first strategy was going back to school to obtain American degrees. Of the 12 interviewees, seven had gone back to school in the United States for graduate degrees or an undergraduate or two-year degree in a new field of training. After years of working in jobs that did not match work experience and qualifications, Farai stated, "I said, how am I going to further myself? I said, let me go back to school." Because of visa limitations, Manu could not work, so he furthered his

education, and "After the school (getting an advanced degree in the United States)... I got a job and went back to the hotels (career field from country of origin)."

The second strategy was to obtain licensure certification in the field of study. After going back to start a new field in nursing, Revai reported that she went on to get certified as a registered nurse. Others were working towards getting certified; as Tau stated, "I need to have one more additional computer certification ... that will give me an edge." One participant who had already completed a bachelor's degree in the U.S. and worked for a number of years summed up the importance of going a back to school and obtaining licensure:

For me, what I have learned based on my least useful practices is ... not to take short cuts but stay on a tried and trusted path ... if you have something stable like a good education, a good bachelors, masters or PhD, or if you are in training or vocational [school], finish your certification, and keep accumulating those certifications. (Anesu)

The third strategy for career development was to consult with others who had succeeded in the desired field of practice for tips on how to transfer qualifications or for job recommendations. After several applications without securing a job, Shingai recalled how he landed his first job in his field of training. "I met another geologist whom I talked to in person ... and he helped me start working as a professional geologist."

Chipo learned about the process of seeking degree equivalency and accreditation from a fellow Zimbabwean who had successfully completed the process and was now working in the same profession she had back home without retraining: "It was when I met this lady ... she helped me to understand what you are supposed to do to teach here: take your transcripts, have them evaluated, go to Georgia Professional Standards Commission and everything."

In sum, Zimbabweans in this study reported several strategies that helped them to rebuild their careers in the new country.

## Discussion and Implications

### *How do Zimbabwean Immigrants in the United States Perceive their Career Development?*

Similar to their counterparts in Canada, Zimbabwean immigrants in this study reported experiencing underemployment, though at a higher rate of 55% versus the 35% reported in the study by Crush et al. (2012). The difference could be due to policies that guide immigrant integration in the two countries, as well as that the Canadian sample was composed of mostly refugees, while the United States sample was predominantly immigrants. In addition, whereas 53% of the study participants rated their first job as unsuitable, only 19% reported their current job as unsuitable, suggesting a possible reduction in unsuitable jobs overtime. This might be consistent with the observation by Lysenko and Wang (2015), who stated that underemployment might be a temporary situation, which is however likely to negatively affect family and social relationships.

### *What is the Relationship between Perceptions of Career Development and Well-being?*

Consistent with findings from other immigrant populations (Dean & Wilson, 2009; George et al., 2012; Premji & Shakya, 2016), Spearman rank-order correlations revealed that individuals who perceived greater difficulty with their career adjustment reported lower satisfaction with life. However, increased time in the United States was associated with increased levels of satisfaction with life and, on the other hand, negatively associated with perceptions of difficulties with career development. A main implication from this finding relates to the need to consider mental health variables and referrals to treatment, if needed, when working with individuals that are underemployed, as suggested by Stebleton (2012). One way of promoting positive well-being is by encouraging immigrants to share their past and present career-related experiences to explore their preferred future path (Kennedy & Chen, 2012), instead of molding them into a one-size-fits-all approach or encouraging them to take up any job that is available (Creese & Wiebe, 2012).

*What Strategies have Zimbabweans used to Enhance Career Development in the New Country?*

Zimbabweans in this study sample used several strategies to enhance their career development. Going back to school to retrain and seeking certification were strategies that were also reported by Zimbabweans in Canada (Crush et al., 2012). The final strategy reported by this sample involved learning from others who had reestablished on how to navigate the United States system for degree evaluations and certifications. This might point to the importance of bridging social capital among Zimbabwean immigrants, as reported by Chaumba (2015) and Tinarwo (2014). Interventions that promote the building and maintenance of bridging ties might benefit Zimbabwean immigrants with their career development.

Although the study provides useful information on career development experiences of Zimbabwean immigrants, it has several limitations. A major limitation is that data from a larger study that had limited information on well-being and participants' experiences was used. Future qualitative studies may gather detailed career development narratives of study participants that may uncover additional facets of these experiences.

## Conclusion

This research examined perceptions of career development, life satisfaction, and strategies for career development among Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States. Quantitative results quantified perceptions of career adjustment challenges of Zimbabwean immigrants in the United States and revealed their negative association with life satisfaction, as well as how time in the United States may moderate both perceptions and life satisfaction. Qualitative findings revealed specific strategies that could explain how Zimbabweans overcome some of the earlier challenges to build comparable careers over time that included going back to school for further education, securing relevant certifications, and developing networks with fellow Zimbabweans that had made it in the desired profession. Thus, the integration of qualitative and quantitative data unveiled the different dimensions of participants' career adjustment processes. Practitioners and researchers working with immigrant populations can play an important role in making

the interconnections of career development challenges, well-being and coping strategies known to expand the knowledge base and guide interventions.

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