

Creating a welcoming and supportive environment helps immigrants better integrate, researcher says

January 8 2024, by Marina M. Doucerain



Credit: Norbert Kundrak from Pexels

Over the coming few years, hundreds of thousands of people are expected to come to Canada to work, study and settle. This year, the

federal government has set a target of welcoming [485,000 new permanent residents](#).

While many of those people come to Canada with hopes of establishing new and better lives, integrating and finding one's way around a new country can often be challenging.

Imagine moving to another country and rebuilding your life from scratch. Typically, this means learning the language as well as new social norms and expectations, finding accommodation and a job, making new friends and generally trying to make sense of who you are in a new environment.

[More than 281 million people living in a country other than their country of birth](#) are contending with these challenges.

A core idea in [cross-cultural psychology](#) is that immigrants who integrate more successfully in their new society end up with better mental well-being.

Is it the case, though? Or is it the other way around? Does arriving with greater emotional well-being help migrants integrate?

My research focuses on relations between people from different cultural backgrounds and how immigrants acquire a new culture. Colleagues and I recently published the [findings of a longitudinal study conducted in Canada](#). Our results provide a long-awaited answer to that question.

What comes first?

Since the 1970s, cross-cultural psychology research has tried to understand which migrants do well, which ones struggle and why? The answer to these questions is crucial. Poor psychological health can be

devastating for people, but it is also extremely costly for societies—[an estimated 2.5 trillion dollars cost to the world economy per year.](#)

A [focal point](#) in cross-cultural psychology is the so-called "[integration hypothesis.](#)" This is the idea that migrants who become bicultural, adopting the new culture while maintaining engagement with their own heritage, will do better psychologically than those who don't. Many studies have shown that [participants who score high on biculturalism questionnaires also score high on emotional well-being questionnaires.](#)

Yet, the question remains. What comes first, [integration](#) or emotional well-being? Knowing this is essential to develop targeted and effective interventions. The answer even has political relevance as immigration and integration are polarizing topics and [increasingly central to election platforms.](#)

Unfortunately, existing research does not settle the issue because most studies are cross-sectional. That is, researchers ask integration and well-being questions at the same time. That doesn't allow us to know how things unfold over time. So the [hypothesis](#) that integration leads to [psychological health](#) remains just that, a hypothesis.

The opposite is also just as plausible. Integration is mentally costly. [Navigating a new cultural environment without well-rehearsed habits to guide oneself is arduous.](#) Reconciling more or less compatible cultural repertoires daily takes a lot of effort. Successfully pulling off this biculturalism challenge may well depend on psychological resources at one's disposal.

Clinically, one can expect emotional well-being issues to have consequences for curiosity, attention, cognitive effort, social confidence and so on—all factors necessary to adopt new cultural ways. In short, an alternative "mental resources hypothesis," where greater emotional well-

being is a resource leading to integration, is as plausible as the widely touted integration hypothesis.

Our study

So, which hypothesis best fits immigrants' reality? The integration hypothesis, or the mental resources hypothesis? To properly shed light on the issue, we need longitudinal studies, where we ask integration and well-being questions repeatedly over time.

This is exactly what we did with my colleagues Andrew Ryder and Tomas Jurcik at Concordia University, and Catherine Amiot at Université du Québec à Montréal. We recruited [international students](#) who had just arrived in Montréal and followed them during their first year in the country.

Why international students? Because their arrival is synchronized with the academic year, which allowed us to enlist their participation in our study at the very beginning of their integration journey. This is essential to ensure that their answers don't reflect post-immigration changes that had already happened.

We asked them questions about their integration and their emotional well-being four times throughout the [academic year](#). We used well-validated self-report questionnaires. Participants rated how much they agreed with statements such as, "It is important for me to develop Canadian cultural practices" or "I felt depressed." We then tested whether integration at a given time lead to later emotional well-being, or vice versa.

What we found

[Our results are clear](#). We found that immigrants who arrived with greater emotional well-being reported greater integration later on compared to those with lower emotional well-being. There was no evidence for the reverse direction: that integration leads to later emotional well-being.

What does this mean for Canadian governments and institutions? To help immigrants integrate well, receiving countries need to provide proper emotional support early on. Given the societal cost of failed integration, this initial support is critical.

For governments, this means allocating sufficient resources to immigrant assistance programs. For organizations working with immigrants, this means considering and providing psychological support in addition to practical skills-, work- and housing-related resources. And last but not least, for ordinary citizens, this means extending a welcoming and helping hand. Often, even just a friendly interaction can go a long way.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Creating a welcoming and supportive environment helps immigrants better integrate, researcher says (2024, January 8) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-environment-immigrants.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.