

International migration, cross-cultural interaction, and the development of personal wisdom

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Abstract

Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with Romanian immigrants in Ontario, Canada, conducted between 2014 and 2018, this article explores how the experiences acquired by the Romanian immigrants through migration and multicultural intercourse facilitate the development of personal wisdom. We show how our research participants perceived these geographical processes of migration and place-based multiethnic cohabitation to account for their growing wiser than their earlier selves. Specifically, we organize the description of these perceptions into three interrelated themes: (1) changes in perspective, (2) the learning of new things, and (3) the role of place in fostering wisdom. Against this background, the article also highlights the boundary conditions within which these processes may or may not foster the development of wisdom, acknowledging that not all migratory and multicultural experiences lead to prosocial and adaptive outcomes. Our discussion of these boundary conditions with the research participants coalesced into five recurrent themes: (1) adaptation to the new environment and social system, (2) the role of the host environment as a boundary condition, (3) the problem of unmet expectations, (4) the magnitude of the cultural shocks, and (5) the language barrier. Bearing the complex politics of these boundary conditions in mind, we argue that the experience of international migration and subsequent cross-cultural interaction can be usefully understood as a 'fertile ground' for the flourishing of personal wisdom, which itself can act as an individual and collective resource for cohabitation in multicultural settings.

Keywords: personal wisdom, cultural politics, multiculturalism, Canada, in-depth interviews, Romanian immigrants

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1. Introduction

This article examines how the experiences acquired by Romanian immigrants in Ontario, Canada, through the conjoined processes of international migration and subsequent cross-cultural interaction are beneficial to fostering personal growth and wisdom. In a globalized world characterized by reciprocated exchanges between countries, international migration possibly has the greatest likelihood to cause enduring cultural impacts. As shown by Erten, van den Berg and Weissing (2018: 1), ‘migration between human populations can affect the cultural repertoire of both immigrant and resident (host) groups in a number of ways. In some cases, immigrants adopt cultural variants that are present in the resident population’. The World Bank’s Migration and Remittances Factbook of 2016, for instance, estimated that 250 million people, representing 3.4 per cent of the world population, live outside their countries of nationality or birth (Ratha et al. 2016).

Even though migration has been explored from multiple perspectives, one area that remains understudied is the relationship among international migration, cross-cultural interaction, and the development of personal wisdom. Historically, the concept of wisdom has been studied systematically primarily by psychologists and philosophers (Grossmann, 2017; Sternberg and Glück, 2019). In popular culture, wisdom is often used interchangeably with intelligence and knowledge (Glück et al., 2009). This lay practice notwithstanding, wisdom is defined by Baltes and Staudinger (1993: 76) very specifically, as ‘an expert knowledge system in the fundamental pragmatics of life, permitting exceptional insight, judgment and advice involving complex and uncertain matters of the human condition’. Sternberg (2004), on the contrary, defined wisdom as the ‘application of intelligence, creativity and knowledge to the common good by balancing intrapersonal (one’s own), interpersonal (others’) and extrapersonal (institutional or other larger) interests over the long and short terms, through the mediation of values, so as to adapt to, shape, and select environments’ (Sternberg, 2004: 287). The underpinning commonality in these definitions of wisdom is that it involves the amalgamation of superior knowledge, creativity, and intelligence. As Raileanu (2017: 1) states, ‘the concept of wisdom encompasses various forms of intelligence while also being related to abstract concepts such as spirituality’. This article deploys the concept of wisdom to mean a ‘general mental capacity of integrating intelligence with morality, which is acquired by experience and practice’ (Fengyan and Hong 2012: 67). This mental capacity, we argue, can be fostered through the experience of international migration and cross-cultural interaction.

In recent times, human geographers interested in migration have begun to explore the utility of the concept of wisdom for their discipline (Simandan 2011). This reflection has taken the form of how being wise can be related to being critical and, by extension, to the very questioning of received wisdom. It has resulted in an empirical research program dedicated to analyzing geographical processes through which one may become wiser than one’s earlier self (Raileanu 2017; see also Simandan 2010, 2011, 2013a,b, 2016, 2017, 2018a,b,c,d, 2019a,b,c,d for prior geographical conceptualizations of wisdom and subjectivity). One such geographical process is international migration. This is because, as one moves from one culture to another, one finds oneself in a different environment with its attendant cross-cultural interactions.

In this article, we argue that one may become wiser than one's old self by the sheer exposure to the diversity that ensues from the process of migration. Metaphorically speaking, the breathing space created in one's life because of international migration 'allows one to sniff the scent of wisdom' (Simandan 2013b: 393). We offer, in other words, a more geographical view on the development of wisdom. In so doing, we highlight how international migration and cross-cultural interaction catalyze the growth of personal wisdom (Section 4) as well as the boundary conditions of this set of processes (Section 5). The next section will situate this empirical research within the broader contexts of (1) Romanian immigration to Canada and (2) the growing literature on the politics of urban diversity in migrant cities.

2. Context

2.1 Romanian immigration to Canada

Out of the 21 million inhabitants of Romania, 3 million are estimated to be living abroad and primarily in Europe (Culic 2010: 347). However, unlike the Romanian immigrants in Canada, these are primarily seasonal workers or workers employed on temporary work permits. A dichotomy between the pre-1989 and post-1989 patterns of Romanian emigration can be observed. This distinction is marked by a political regime change in the form of the 1989 'Romanian Revolution', when the Communist dictatorship of Ceausescu was replaced with liberal democracy. During the Communist Regime (1945–89) emigrants from Romania left for mostly Germany, Israel, and Hungary (Culic 2010: 347). Direct immigration to Canada during this time period was almost impossible due to government restrictions. Romanians in Canada prior to 1989 were mostly the result of post-World War II diaspora (political refugees) or late-19th-century farming initiatives (Patterson 1985: 393–5).

The post-1989 era has seen a drastic increase in Romanian migrant cohorts entering Canada. The yearly arrival peaked in 2002 with 5,688 individuals (Culic 2010). This peak has not been reached since this time and the yearly arrivals have been decreasing due to Romania becoming a member of the European Union in January 2007. The differences between the two broad generational categories are however still relevant as the community is, to a certain extent, divided between members of the two groups. Other disjointed generational patterns can also be observed. The most significant is the apparent lack of community spatial cohesion in major Canadian urban areas and the tendency in some cases to self-identify as 'bicultural' or 'assimilated'. Taken together, the small literature on Romanian immigrants to Canada shows that they are far from being a homogenous group (Culic 2010, 2012; Paraschivescu 2011, Stoilescu 2014). Paraschivescu (2011), for instance, argues that pre-1989 migrants to Canada are far less likely to have affective or even material ties to Romania compared to post-1989 migrants. Furthermore, the aforementioned literature, despite being limited to only a few sources, suggests the existence of a process of self-development or ontogenesis through migration. As we hope to demonstrate in a forthcoming related analysis, this process is necessarily gendered (for investigations of the complex relationship between gender and migration, see Donato et al. 2006; Silvey 2006; Kraler et al. 2011; Lutz 2018; Palmary et al. 2010; Pessar and Mahler 2003). Wisdom is not

explicitly discussed, but various positive aspects of transnationalism or biculturalism hint toward some of the wisdom theories relevant to our research interest. The province of Ontario serves as a regional focus for our empirical work because almost half of the Romanian community in Canada lives there: at the most recent census, of the total of 238,000 Canadian respondents who chose 'Romanian' as their ethnic origin, more than 98,000 lived in Ontario (including 26,000 in Toronto alone; [Statistics Canada 2016](#)). The highly urbanized and multicultural setting of the province also offers the perfect environment for experiencing cross-cultural encounters.

2.2 The politics of urban diversity in migrant cities

Diversity in migrant cities has been on the international agenda for many reasons. Diversity, which according to [Galinsky et al. \(2015\)](#) encompasses heterogeneity in the race, gender, cultural disposition, sexual orientation, and other equally significant axes of social difference, is an important feature of many successful societies. Championing the course of diversity is more than a moral issue, to include practicality as evidence abounds that, there are several diversity gains for associations, communities, and nations.

[Ye \(2017\)](#) argues that much of the contemporary work on urban diversity remains focused on western European contexts including the UK and immigrant countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Expanding the sites for empirical and theoretical investigation brings to the fore the multiplicity of analytical tools and conceptual frameworks available to researchers. Ye argues for more research on the structural component of managing diversity, while noting that research on copresence has a long history in urban studies, with an analysis of contact with people (subjects) unlike ourselves. The new diversities emerging from migration enrich and make the dynamics of urban community complex, resulting in a renewal of interest in the likelihood of an intercultural encounter ([Ye 2017](#)). The awareness arising from the growing social multiformity emanating from migration in today's global city has inspired research on coexistence, urban citizenship, and contact with different people. Geographical knowledge on the social and cultural dimensions of globalizing cities has shown several 'contact zones' influenced by local-transnational encounters, which are dependent on factors such as nationality, religion, race, legal status, gender, and sexuality ([Ye 2017](#)). The metaphor 'mongrel city' and the term 'multiplex city' as coined by [Sandercock \(2003\)](#) and [Amin and Graham \(1997\)](#), respectively, are being increasingly used to describe the diversified and pluralized nature of the contemporary global city ([Ye 2017](#)).

The literature on the politics of urban diversity in migrant cities encompasses the geographies of befriending, belonging, and intercultural encounter. [Askins \(2016\)](#), drawing on the encounters between refugees and asylum seekers and more settled residents in a befriending scheme in Newcastle, UK, develops the useful notion of the 'emotional citizenry'. The emotional citizenry is a process that is grounded in the complexities of places, lives, and feelings, that goes beyond any fixed status of citizenship to be attained in a formal political setting ([Askins 2016](#)). There has been a significant amount of scholarship on issues of belonging, identity, and space in the social sciences, with contested understandings of the relationships between place, displacement, migration, and group formation. Much of this literature has focused on the racialization of migration, the exclusion of the

marginalized groups from the public realms, and struggle over citizenship. A growing body of research has centered on the emotionality of belonging by drawing on Probyn's (1996) concept of belonging, which emphasizes the emotional and embodied sense of being in a 'place' and being 'secure' (Askins 2016).

With respect to building personal safety and gaining recognition, Askins (2016) identifies belonging to be complex, active, and emotional; emerging through the befriending system as people, directly and indirectly, try to make meaning out of, and secure their place in, the world. This, according to Askins, is evidenced in diverse forms. On the part of refugees and asylum seekers, belonging is an emotional aspect of daily life in quite particular ways: fears of claim refusal and deportation, sense of exclusion from conventional society, marginalization in employment, and incidents of racism in the immediate environment. To overcome such exclusion and marginalization, and to ensure personal safety, refugees and asylum seekers draw on formal and informal networks of practices (Askins 2016).

There has been an upsurge in migration flows across a range of geographical spaces and cities play an important role in shaping these flows across and within countries. The increment in migration flows cuts across different geographical spaces and is propelled by demand-driven and supply-driven factors. In light of this background, Nicholls and Uitermark (2016) adopt the concept of 'counter-publics' from Nancy Fraser to examine the significant roles played by cities in the political formation of immigrants. They show migrant cities to perform important functions. First, they serve as a point of call or contact for newcomers in their struggle for recognition and equality when they migrate to a different country. Second, new immigrants, when confronted with limitations and obstacles, tend to rely on their own ethnic networks and social capital to pool resources, gain access to information, and in the process, develop different identities in the destination communities. 'Counter publics', Nicholls and Uitermark argue, is a useful concept for analyzing the production of exclusion because it has geographical embeddedness. They identify three main processes that affect the formation of immigrants' groups and counter-publics in cities. First, cities enable the institutions spawning oppositional subjectivities. In addition, competition with hegemonic adversaries helps build strong symbolic and social boundaries and bonded collective identities. Finally, cities offer a range of networks and groups to reinforce and support the immigrant counter-publics (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). 'Pull effects' are created as cities and neighborhoods with strong institutions attract people for 'support and protection' (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016: 882). The pull effects eventually make these cities and neighborhoods an attractive space for the immigrants' cultural and social lives. The counter-public that emerges from this hub or space becomes part of a network that connects cities and transcends national boundaries. Nicholls and Uitermark show that there are different processes that produce subaltern counter-publics versus the dominant public sphere. They thus emphasize how language and conversations that make some discourses valid and with the potency to produce a counter-public may produce the exact contrary effect in the dominant public sphere. A strong counter-public allows the marginalized group to enter the public sphere, but this entrance places them into an unequal position, often ridden with hostile terms of engagements (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016).

Moore (2016) focuses on transnational identities of Taiwanese professionals in two global cities—London and Toronto. Given that our empirical research involved interviewing immigrants from Ontario, Canada (including Toronto), we found his work helpful for contextualizing our own. While the Taiwanese professionals in London identified themselves as on the move, their counterparts in Toronto identified themselves as permanent settlers. This shows the difference that context and geographical location make in how immigrants portray their identities. This is remarkable because despite being from the same background (Taiwanese), the context of a different location (Toronto and London), profoundly shapes their self-identity. Moore's work follows in the footsteps of several scholars who have explored transnationalism, location, and identity from different perspectives such as the examination of return Chinese migrants (Teo 2011), the trajectory-based study of Singaporean elites in London (Ho 2011), the ethnic diversity in global cities (Bell and de Shalit 2011), the evaluation of hierarchies among global cities (Derudder and Taylor 2005; Neal 2007), transnational urbanism as an uneven, complex process (Smith 2005), and interactions among different groups in the same city (Harvey 2008; Yeoh and Wills 2005). The findings from the study show that Taiwanese professionals' community in London identified themselves as transnationals with binary ties with British and Taiwanese culture (Moore 2016). This identity is conspicuously manifested in the hoisting of flags and symbols of both countries at community events. The transnational identity developed by Taiwanese professionals in London was leveraged as a medium for developing business connections between Taiwan and the UK. Taiwanese professionals' community in Toronto, on the contrary, has a rather different transnational identity. They identified themselves more with Taiwan culture than being associated with Canada (Moore 2016).

The recent literature on international migration and the politics of urban diversity in migrant cities has also developed in the direction of a fine-grained analysis of the specific gains and losses induced by diversity. This more recent direction directly speaks to our preoccupation with the boundary conditions that constrain whether immigrants become wiser than their earlier selves (see Section 5). Galinsky et al. (2015) illustrate this trend, as they offer an in-depth perspective on (1) diversity from the angle of communal or group diversity versus diversity acquired by individuals, (2) ways of removing obstacles that limit the extent of diversity in organizational settings, and (3) a description of multiculturalism and perspective taking as ways of managing diversity without provoking resistance. They identify two forms of diversity, each with their inherent benefits. These are group diversity and individually-inherent diversity. They note that homogeneous groups are more likely to have narrow mindedness whereas groups with diversity are often oriented toward innovation and effective decision-making in the context of competition and cooperation (Galinsky et al. 2015). Two main reasons are adduced for the diversity benefits associated with innovation and decision-making. First, different viewpoints to choose from are at the disposal of a diverse group, and, second, the makeup of the diverse group (minority and majority) makes it process the information more thoughtfully and precisely. There is experimental evidence in that regard. For example, diverse juries with diverse ethnic backgrounds make fewer inaccurate statements when compared to homogeneous juries (Galinsky et al. 2015).

First introduced in 2005, the concept of super-diversity (Vertovec 2005, 2007) has brought together many of the foregoing debates and, thereby, has cast in a sharper analytical focus the nexus between migration, urban politics, and social difference. Reflecting a decade later on how the concept has been deployed in the social sciences, Meissner and Vertovec (2015: 541) noted that:

Many utilizing the term have referred only to ‘more ethnicities’ rather than to the term’s fuller, original intention of recognizing multidimensional shifts in migration patterns. These entail a worldwide diversification of migration channels, differentiations of legal statuses, diverging patterns of gender and age, and variance in migrants’ human capital.

The foregoing literature provides a useful context for our own investigation into how the heightened exposure to diversity may foster the personal growth of immigrants and their subjective sense of having become wiser than their earlier premigration selves. In what follows, we briefly describe the qualitative research methodology and the empirical data on which this article is based (Section 3). We then turn to examine the beneficial roles of migration and cross-cultural interaction to developing personal wisdom by outlining three interrelated themes: changes in perspective, the learning of new things, and the role of place in fostering personal growth (Section 4). We also provide a counterpoint to this focus on benefits, by reflecting on the boundary conditions constraining whether the experiences gained from international migration and the subsequent cross-cultural interaction may foster personal wisdom (Section 5).

3. Methods

Drawing on qualitative data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out between 2014 and 2018, this article discusses how the experiences of international migration and cross-cultural interaction lived by Romanian immigrants in Ontario, Canada, have made them become wiser than their earlier selves. The choice of this community emerged from three considerations: (1) it is necessary that the immigrants all come from one country to enable a detailed consideration of the sociospatial characteristics of their preimmigrant lives and subjectivities; (2) Romanian immigrants in Canada are very well educated (with at least two-thirds estimated to have attended some form of postsecondary education; (Culic 2010, 2012), which means that they possess the cognitive skills and cultural capital required to provide thoughtful reflections on their migratory experience; and (3) to date, no wisdom scholar has researched this ethnic group, specifically.

The study aimed to capture the participants’ lived experiences and self-reflections about the relationship between international migration, cross-cultural interaction, and the growth of personal wisdom. The analysis is based on data from 30 participants; both males and females Romanian immigrants in Ontario. The interviews were conducted in Romanian and English, depending on the choice of language by the participants and mostly done in the participants’ home. The interviews conducted in Romanian were later translated to English. In adhering to the ethical principles of anonymity and confidentiality, we redacted out identifying information from the interview transcripts.

The article employs ‘framework analysis’, that is, a methodological process of ‘sifting, charting and sorting material according to key issues and themes’ (Ritchie and Spencer 1994: 177). Framework analysis comprises five key stages: *familiarization*, *identification of thematic frameworks* (by carefully and recursively reading through the interview dataset), *indexing* (i.e. sifting of interview data, categorizing quotes, and inferring comparisons between cases), *charting* (i.e. the sorting out of quotes out from their original context and reorganizing them under suitable themes), and *mapping and interpretation* (i.e. pulling together the key attributes of the data by interpreting the dataset as a complete whole; see Ritchie and Spencer 1994).

In the remainder, the analysis and interpretation of the interview data are organized into two complementary parts. The first part describes how Romanian immigrants perceived their migration from Romania to Canada and the subsequent cross-cultural interaction at their destination. It highlights pathways or processes through which these experiences have been conducive to the development of the immigrants’ personal wisdom. The second part contextualizes these pathways and processes, by outlining their boundary conditions.

4. The roles of migration and cross-cultural interaction in the development of personal wisdom

As Simandan (2013b) has shown, international migration provides an opening for personal wisdom to flourish. In line with this perspective, the participants were asked to comment on how and why they consider their migration from Romania to Canada, as well as their cross-cultural interaction in Ontario, to be helpful for the growth of personal wisdom. This problematic is timely and worth investigating because it provides an empirical basis to the theory that articulates geography and wisdom by proposing that geographical processes in general and international migration, in particular, contribute to personal growth (Kutor, 2019, Simandan, 2002, 2013b; Raileanu 2017). From the recursive and open-ended coding of the interview data, we structure the ensuing discussion into three interrelated but distinct themes: (1) changes in perspective, (2) the learning of new things, and (3) the role of place in fostering wisdom.

4.1 Changes in perspective

One of the recurring themes on how migration and cross-cultural interaction are considered by Romanian immigrants to foster the development of personal wisdom is that the two processes offer the participants different perspectives to one’s earlier perspective or way of seeing the world. It has emerged from the data analysis that the Romanian immigrants in Ontario, Canada considered their migration trajectory and the multicultural environment they found themselves in, as beneficial to wisdom development. The participants emphasized that the joint processes of migration and cross-cultural interaction have offered them new perspectives into real-life situations as well as a more encompassing worldview. This new perspective, they stressed, was not possible without their migration to Canada and the encounters they experienced in a multicultural

environment. To illustrate, one participant stated that ‘through this move, I began to see things differently. I realized that now I see things to be better. This change of perspective does not have anything to do with positive or negative experiences but rather experiences in general’. This assertion was reinforced in different formulations by several of the other participants, who alluded to the fact that both positive and negative experiences, one way, or the other, contribute to one’s wisdom. There is, however, no guarantee that as one goes through positive or negative experiences, one necessarily becomes wiser. Rather, the outcome of the process depends on the characteristics and the specific circumstances of each individual. Some can become wiser in the midst of negative experiences whereas others can become more foolish with a positive experience. The participants also contended that new perspectives about life situations enrich one’s mental repertoire and promote personal wisdom because one sees things through a different lens by virtue of the conjoined geographical processes of migration and multicultural cohabitation. This change in perspective, they argued, would not have been possible without their interaction with people of different cultures in the highly heterogeneous environment of urban Canada. As one middle-aged man stated in relation to migration and cross-cultural interaction:

It opens your mind. You have daily encounters with people from other parts of the world, other societies and ways of thinking. This matters to your life experience and understanding. Yes, and I say . . . this . . . because dynamism and changes create a certain energy that leads to wisdom. This happens even if you do not realize that you are wiser. I believe that migration and leaving your environment behind gives you a different type of energy and strength. This is different from someone that was born in a village and never left. It is an extraordinarily great place to develop wisdom. You have access to everything you could ever want in this world. From all communities in the world to all museums. . . and I was most impressed when I came to Canada by seeing the Metropolitan Library. To go there and have free access to so many books and information was amazing before the invention of the internet. There were even newspapers from Romania. Everything was accessible. I was left very impressed.

These reflections are indicative of an immigrant with high levels of cultural capital, and, thereby, are representative of the high level of education and socioeconomic status characterizing the majority of our interviewees, as well as the Romanian community in Ontario, in general. We agree, in this context, with Umut Erel’s critique of the typical deployment of the concept of cultural capital in migration studies and warn against a simplistic equation of one’s cultural capital with the cognitive skills and resources they ‘brought’ with them from their home country. In Erel’s own words (Erel 2010: 642):

Research often treated migrants’ cultural capital as reified and ethnically bounded, assuming they bring a set of cultural resources from the country of origin to the country of migration that either fit or do not fit. Critiquing such ‘rucksack approaches’, I argue that migration results in new ways of producing and reproducing (mobilizing, enacting, validating) cultural capital that builds on, rather than simply mirrors, power relations of either the country of origin or the country of migration. Migrants create mechanisms of validation for their cultural capital, negotiating both ethnic majority and migrant institutions and networks. Migration-specific cultural capital (re-)produces intra-migrant differentiations of

gender, ethnicity and class, in the process creating modes of validation alternative to national capital.

One of the specific ways in which migration and cross-cultural interaction are deemed by the participants to be conducive to wisdom is the broadening of horizons (see also [Culic 2010, 2012](#); [Marcu 2015, 2016, 2017](#)). Some of the interviewees argued that their migration to Canada, coupled with the multicultural environment they found themselves in, has significantly and positively impacted their cognitive horizons. This broadening of horizons, according to them, helped to challenge certain ‘taken for granted lifestyle and stereotypes’ that were part of them when they came to Canada. As stated by one of the participants, ‘there are people who assimilate to Canada and there also those that stick with their own cultures and rules. And I would say that [migrating to Canada and cross-cultural interaction] have broadened my horizons but it was more so because of the individual[s] I have interacted with and not the culture itself’. This claim presupposes that while one lives in a multicultural environment which is good in itself, the ability to become wiser than one’s earlier self is to a large extent a function of the varying levels of cultural capital of the specific people one interacts with, and not necessarily the general cultural milieu. This observation also echoes the recent call in the migration and cultural capital literature to move beyond static, uni-directional, and unidimensional understandings, to . . .

. . .focus on how migrants’ temporal and spatial journeys are shaped by and in turn shape their opportunities to mobilize resources and convert them into capitals. These processes depend on migrants’ social positioning, including their gender, class, ethnic and national positioning, as well as citizenship status, and how this is articulated in relation to different fields in different spatial and temporal contexts ([Erel and Ryan 2019](#): 246).

Change in perspective and the broadening of one’s horizon, as emphasized by the participants, are, therefore, compelling. This recurrent theme is consistent with one of the factors identified by [Walsh \(2015](#); see also [Walsh 2011](#)) as a key ingredient of wisdom: a (broader and deeper) sense of perspective.

4.2 Learning of new things

Another recurring theme is that migration and cross-cultural interaction afford the Romanian immigrants in Ontario, Canada, the opportunity to learn new things, which eventually translates into them becoming wiser than their earlier selves. It has emerged from the interview analysis that migration and living in a multicultural environment like urban Canada provide an opportunity to learn new things in life. Coming into contact with people from a heterogeneous cultural background makes one to adopt, and adapt to, new ways of life, to learn new things, and to forgo past prejudices and ways of life that are not deemed appropriate in a multicultural environment. These new ways of life not only contribute to personal development and harmonious living but also foster wisdom. As one participant emphasized:

One’s wisdom is increased through interacting with as many cultures as possible and speaking with many cultures as possible. There’s been a study conducted on that and a person that knows how to speak a different language is a wiser person.

It is because it has been proven that each half of the brain is lit by neurons in a different way when one is capable of speaking multiple languages. And by interacting with as many cultures as possible, definitely, your wisdom broadens. It is because of the big percentage of different cultures living, studying, working and being able to connect with each other on a daily basis. This makes someone grow in terms of wisdom.

Of particular interest in this quote is the participant's choice to use the abstraction 'culture' as a shorthand for encountering specific individuals with diverse backgrounds, in specific places (e.g. [Wilson 2017](#)). To be sure, the reification of 'culture' occurs not only among 'lay' people, but also in academic circles, despite repeated scholarly attempts to expose this practice as highly problematic (e.g. [Adams and Markus 2001](#); see also [Baumann 1996](#)).

There was also an acknowledgment from several interviewees that another dimension through which migration and cross-cultural interaction make one learn new things, is that these two processes change oneself as an individual in terms of prevailing patterns of thinking. One becomes more accommodative, tolerant, and accepting than one's earlier selves because of these processes and the experiences they afford. As one woman explained, from her experience, 'the fact that you came here and met other people and culture[s] changes you. It makes you wiser, more contemplative and more patient. The people are different, and you have to accept them and behave nicely. You can't discriminate, you can't judge people by skin colour or religion'.

The above quotation speaks to a point made by another participant, that 'we (Romanian) as we lived under communism, did not have contact with other races. People say that we are racist, but we can't be racist if we never met someone of a different race before. Now with migration, I have seen many people and understand them differently. Multiculturalism helps'. The point made seems at first glance perplexing, because Romania has always had ethnic minorities (Roma, Hungarians, Germans, Serbians, etc.), and even during the Communist regime there was a presence of international migrants (Syrians, Lebanese, and Jordanian) in the country's big cities ([Cretan, Turnock and Woudstra 2008](#); [Engebriksen 2007](#)). However, the perplexity dissolves itself once we remember that in Romanian popular discourse there are three major 'races' (Whites, Blacks, and Asians) and that Black and Asian populations are much more prevalent in Canada than in Romania. This demographic fact invites a surreptitious 'contrast effect' between 'racially-diverse Canada' and the (alleged) 'racially-homogenous Romania' (on country stereotypes, see also the review by [Herz and Diamantopoulos 2013](#)).

Migration and cross-cultural interaction help reshape people's habitual ways of thinking and worldviews. Without migrating from Romania to Canada, the foregoing participants felt that they would not have been able to fully experience different cultures because of the closed system they lived in Romania, which limited the extent to which they could interact with people other than their own nationals (cf. [Marcu 2015, 2016, 2017](#)).

In explicating how the processes of migration and multicultural intercourse have contributed to wisdom through the act of learning new things, the participants in the study emphasized that coming into contact with different people and cultures and listening to their lived experiences and stories made them learn new things in life, which cumulatively broadened their perspectives and made them look at life situations differently. These

diverse lived experiences, stories, and points of views they are exposed to, through the spatial and social processes of international migration and cross-cultural interaction enrich their knowledge and make them wiser. As noted by one participant:

Meeting people and especially meeting people from different cultures and countries and [being] able to communicate with them and hear a different point of view and perspectives got me to new ideas. It helped me look at things differently. There are so many ideas you can get from them that you can use to build up your knowledge and become wiser. Although I might not realize this, there are definitely ways in which how I am built now, and my thinking is based on my experiences through life.

4.3 Role of place in the development of personal wisdom

While there was a widespread and consistent acknowledgment among the participants that migration and cross-cultural interaction can catalyze the growth of personal wisdom, strangely enough, despite recognizing the role of place in this process, some of the participants noted that wisdom can be developed anywhere. When asked the question 'is Toronto a good place to develop wisdom?' one of the participants responded by saying 'yes, why not. There are no wars here and you have more freedom but you can develop wisdom anywhere in my opinion. The countries that are more civilized do help this development'. Interestingly enough, one other participant also stated that developing wisdom should not be dependent on a specific place. According to the participant, 'I think any place should be a good place to develop wisdom. It depends on you and your connections and what you are doing'. This participant emphasized the element of networks, which has to do with one's ability to connect meaningfully in a multicultural environment. These assertions about the irrelevance of a specific place are contrary to the responses given by other participants to the same question. Though these responses are interesting, they raise the question: Is it the case that a country devoid of multicultural environments offers the same affordances for an individual to become wiser than one's earlier self? Answering this question calls for a comparative study between multicultural and nonmulticultural cities or countries (1) on how individuals may or may not become wiser in such contrasting environments and (2) on the different 'flavours' of wisdom that might be developed. This notwithstanding, the geographical process of migration, coupled with interactions with different people on a daily basis was generally deemed by the participants to result in open-mindedness, personal growth, and wisdom. This empirical theme corroborates Galinsky et al.'s (2015) discussion of living in homogenous versus heterogeneous groups (see also Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Galinsky et al. 2006; Leung et al. 2008; Nguyen and Benet-Martínez 2013). They emphasized that the former have the tendency to promote narrow mindedness whereas the latter are more likely to encourage a more open-minded stance toward social difference. These themes have also been central to the flourishing geographical literature on place-based encounter (Valentine 2008; for a more recent review, see Wilson 2017). This literature emphasizes that just as place shapes the nature of encounters therein, so, too, the encounters taking place in a particular context continuously make and remake that place, as a function of uneven distributions of power and

contingently intersecting and interacting axes of social difference (see also [Pastore and Ponzo 2016](#)).

5. Boundary conditions to the development of personal wisdom through cross-cultural experience

Not all migratory and multicultural experiences foster the growth of wisdom and of pro-social, adaptive behaviors. The persistence of social conflict and hostility within and between various migrant communities makes the problematic of the boundary conditions for the development of wisdom worth investigating (see also [Nassar 2009](#); [Brandt et al. 2015](#); [Bergh et al. 2016](#); [Ramos et al. 2016](#); [Sparkman, Eidelman and Blanchar 2016](#); [Crawford 2017](#): 109–25; [Sparkman and Blanchar 2017](#); [Hodson et al. 2018](#); [Novis-Deutsch 2018](#)). The participants were asked a simple question: What would be the conditions or experiences that affect an immigrant in a way in which they are unable to become wiser? The responses to this question suggested that there are certain conditions and factors that are favorable to one's becoming wiser than one's earlier self. As a counterpoint to this observation, however, the participants emphasized that these conditions and factors are not homogenous and universal but rather depend on individual disposition, mentality, and expectations. The five recurrent themes pertaining to boundary conditions that emerged from the interview data are: (1) adaptation to the new environment and social system, (2) the role of the host environment as a boundary condition, (3) unmet expectations, (4) cultural shocks as a boundary condition, and (5) the language barrier as a boundary condition.

5.1 Adaptation to the new environment and social system

Migrating from a totally different country with its unique culture can make life very challenging in the destination country. As emphasized by one of the participants, 'if you migrate, you need to adapt to the rules and laws of the country. Some came from different culture and were unable to adapt and integrate to life here'. Another participant also noted that adaptation in the face of challenges makes one wiser. For this participant, though it was difficult and sometimes daunting, the experiences he acquired through the challenging periods made him wiser. The participant was quick to add that 'you create the challenge for yourself because you want to live in these places'. He further pointed out from his personal experience that these conditions influence wisdom positively because 'I went through traumatic events and began to understand their value. I began to understand a lot. I matured from these. They help you see things from a different perspective. There are others that find depression from them, but those that are strong become wiser'. This observation is interesting because there may be a tendency for those who migrated on their own accord to willingly accept these challenges and eventually become wiser when compared to those who are forced to migrate. This differential outcome may occur because the voluntary migrants see their migratory trajectory as an emancipation from the push factors that sent them to the destination country, and therefore, they may be more likely to become resilient to the adaptive challenges raised by migration. We offer the foregoing

thoughts with the proviso that they should be refined by seeing voluntary and forced migration not as a dichotomy, but as a ‘continuum of experience’ (Erdal and Oeppen 2018: 981) that calls for the corresponding ‘analytical need to relate evaluations of voluntariness to available alternatives’ (Erdal and Oeppen 2018: 981; see also Pastore 2015).

In addition, there is an element of a ‘survival and self-selection’ effect in the sense that the immigrants who ‘failed to adapt’ are more likely to have returned to the country of origin and hence were less likely to be included in the sample. Thus, the sample is inherently biased in favor of those who have ‘successfully adapted’ (we are aware that the language of failed versus successful adaptation is problematic, as it risks reproducing dominant public discourses; see also Cresswell 2010; Brickell and Datta 2011; Mendoza and Morén-Alegret 2013; Kuo 2014; Carling and Schewel 2018; Simandan 2019a,b). This brings to the fore the role played by individual agency in decision-making related to whether to migrate or not. How the inability or unwillingness to adapt makes one likely to return to one’s home country is concisely illustrated by one of the participants (cf. Steinmann 2018). According to them:

I know a few families that came here, and they couldn’t adapt and went back to Romania because they didn’t like this. [It] depends on how they are there [back in Romania]. I know a family, they came to my cousin, and they couldn’t get back their job from before. So, for them I think it is better to be there than here. Yea, fear to be alone or far away from home. So, they lived isolated and didn’t interact with community. Every day they felt alone, and this is why they decided to go back.

We notice in this quote how the unspecified abstraction ‘community’ is implicitly framed in a positive manner, as a solution to the problem of immigrants’ loneliness. This framing, however, needs to be qualified and contextualized within the broader academic literature concerned with deconstructing the ‘romance of the community’ (Joseph 2002; see also Ye 2019), and pointing out its nefarious potential in generating social exclusion, stereotyping, marginalization, and ill-being.

5.2 The role of the host environment as a boundary condition

The host environment is inherently endowed to make and unmake migrants’ identities in varieties of ways. This fact, our participants argued, is important because if the host environment is hostile, unaccommodating, troublesome, unwelcoming, discriminating, and secluding, the immigrants will not succeed and will thereby fail to grow wiser (cf. Ellis and Stam 2018; Gravelle 2018; Ray and Preston, 2014; Valentine et al., 2015; Vang and Chang, 2019). Notwithstanding the foregoing, the participants emphasized that the specifics of the host environment vary from one location to another. According to one of the participants,

If I came to [small Ontario town] straight away, we probably might not have made it. We might have not [acquired] wisdom coming to Canada because we would have felt victimized, segregated, unwelcomed. We probably would not succeed, they probably would not have good jobs like the way they have now. So . . . the situations in which you might not succeed and might not [acquire] wisdom from your migration involve this hopeless attitude. Which again, it might be environmentally made hopeless for you.

The host environment could be a catalyst to the development of wisdom and at the same time an obstruction to it. Several of the participants believed nonetheless that individuals with strong personality traits (grit, persistence, and determination) can succeed and become wiser even in those hostile, prejudiced, and segregated environments. This belief, however, is at odds with [Berry et al.'s \(2006\)](#) finding that isolation from the host communities and their cultural practices has an unfavorable effect on the immigrants' well-being.

5.3 Unmet expectations

Immigrants, irrespective of their country of origin, have a number of life expectations to meet in their destination country. Whereas having an expectation prior to embarking on a migration journey is normal, the problem stems from the fact that the expectations are based on conjecture and guesswork ([Schilling 2018](#)). Unmet expectations in the host country constitute an important boundary condition in not acquiring wisdom and building resentment in its stead. According to the participants, the nonrecognition of one's academic credentials and work experiences by the Canadian system is one particularly painful form these unmet expectations can take. As was stressed by one interviewee:

If you were a banker or economist in Romania and you expect the same thing at the point where you land in Canada. . . . You have to change your perspective and start from the bottom. You are starting from zero. If you were a lawyer in Romania, you cannot be the same thing in Canada or have the same job attribute here. There is a combination of luck and circumstance. So, it matters what type of person they were in Romania, what they did in Romania and their expectations upon arrival to life in Canada.

In a related vein of thought, one participant argued that those who migrated with economic motives and were later confronted with a different reality altogether did not grow wiser because of the bad experience from their downward socioeconomic trajectory. Commenting further, the participants noted that when immigrants conceptualize migration to be an amazing experience, they 'plan from the very beginning that they will move back to their home country to use their new-found wealth to live an amazing life. When the reality isn't like that, they don't get any wisdom. They don't actually get any experiences because they live in a sort of bubble'. These negative experiences could culminate into resentment against the host country for not recognizing one's credentials since they had higher status and were better employed with the same credentials back in their home country. This can be the case of an engineer or a doctor who has to start over as a taxi driver ([Hussain 2018](#)), or the case of an international student who feels rejected and disappointed because her quest for a part-time job in Canada is undermined by the frequent requirement of prior Canadian working experience. The overarching effect is that resentment, humiliation, bitterness, and disappointment undermine the openness required for the flourishing of wisdom and adaptive behaviors.

5.4 Cultural shocks as a boundary condition

Cultural shock, generally conceived of as disorientation in one's feelings, attitude, and behavior as a result of one's immersion in a different environment, is often associated with migration or any movement that results in a separation from one's immediate family structure. Adler (1975) believed that cultural shock has an inherent potential for cultural learning and personal development. Our study suggested, however, that *the magnitude* of the cultural shocks experienced by immigrants plays a critical role in whether personal wisdom develops or not. According to the participants, those who were strong enough to cope with, and adapt to, the cultural shock, are more likely to grow wiser than those who were overwhelmed by the cultural shock to the point of eventually deciding to return to Romania. According to one interviewee, 'back home in Romania, family was everything. In Canada it is not the same. Shock like that can contribute to wisdom. For some people it might be better to go back because the [culture] shock was too big for them. So, I don't know if they become wiser or foolish'. Commenting on the magnitude of the cultural shock further, another participant expressed surprise when learning about people who wanted to go back to their home country. However, this participant was quick to add that she 'cannot know their experiences. They cannot feel okay here. They did not get a chance to have friends or family around'. Whereas cultural shock is usually considered to be a negative phenomenon, as emphasized by several of the participants, it can equally be a source of individual development, learning of new things, and growth of wisdom. It is this inherent ambiguity that renders it a boundary condition worthy of further investigation in different migration contexts, and with different methodologies.

5.5 The language barrier as a boundary condition

Language is an important factor in the integration process of immigrants in their new environment. Consequently, it has ramifications for how one is able to integrate in the host society. The interviewees considered the language barrier as one of the boundary conditions constraining the potential development of personal wisdom. The argument was made that those who were able to communicate in the spoken languages of Canada (English and French), depending on the province the immigrants found themselves in, were able to interact with people and integrate meaningfully. However, those who were not able to communicate in English or French were left isolated and, in the process, became frustrated. Relating to the language barrier, one participant stated that:

I know family friends that are coming here that don't speak the language and don't drive and it [is] really hard to interact with someone and they just stay in the house. And it is really hard to be this limited and they become angry and frustrated. They are a bomb on the shelf ready to explode. They don't become wiser, they even lose something that they knew three months ago like smiling when you have a friend come over. You are just angry with the situation that you are in because you are stuck somewhere.

The language barrier has the potency to handicap the integration process in the host community. To the extent that one is unable to communicate in the official language(s) of the host community (in this context, either English or French), one finds herself excluded from the

rest of the community. This exclusion undermines the social, economic, and cultural integration of the immigrants who come to the host country with a different culture and language. There also seems to be a relationship between the severity of the language barrier and unemployment and/or underemployment. Immigrants who can speak the official language(s) of the host community have much better chances of finding and securing employment than those who do not. The foregoing notwithstanding, the language barrier as an obstacle to the integration process can be overcome. However, this depends on personal motivation and on the rationale for migration. Children who migrated with their parents have the better chance of overcoming this obstacle to integration. This is because they have the opportunity to enroll in school, immerse themselves in the cultural setting of the school environment, and in the process learn the official language(s) of the host community. Even though the adult immigrants also have somewhat similar opportunities to enroll in schools to learn the official language, this depends on the rationale for their migration. Those with a motive to succeed career-wise in the host community will go the extra mile to learn the language and overcome this barrier to integration. On the contrary, the older age migrants who join their relatives in Canada under the 'Visa for Parents and Grandparents' Program are less likely to be motivated to learn the language and integrate into the larger host community. This is because they are old and dependent on their children for support and/or they are retired and thus feel no immediate need or pressing motivation to learn the official language.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Worldwide, migrant cities (including Toronto) are experiencing a growth in various forms of social conflict and criminal activity, a phenomenon that places the issue of how people could and should cohabit with each other at the forefront of the international agenda (Muggah 2014). It is by speaking directly to this very timely issue that our article is significant to the interdisciplinary fields of migration studies and ethnic studies. Its empirical focus on the relationship between international migration, cross-cultural interaction, and the growth of personal wisdom, opens up new research questions and highlights the potential theoretical and practical usefulness of paying attention to (1) migration as a catalyst to wisdom and (2) wisdom as an individual and collective resource for successful cohabitation in multicultural settings.

Our empirical research indicated that Romanian immigrants in Ontario identified their migration and cross-cultural interactions to be highly beneficial to their becoming wiser than their earlier selves. This supports prior work on learning wisdom through geographical dislocations that shows how the opening space created through international migration enables personal growth (Simandan 2013b). Our study suggests that changes in perspective, the learning of new things, as well as changes in one's prevalent patterns of thinking are specific manifestations of how the process of migration, coupled with cross-cultural interaction in the destination environment makes one wiser than one's earlier self. These themes emerging from the interview data support prior hypotheses that international migration and its associated cross-cultural interactions (1) enrich a person's horizon and (2) promote 'growing awareness of the relativity of values; heightened sense of perspective; a sharpened questioning of received wisdom; better understanding of life's

contingencies; [and] a broader repertoire of procedural knowledge for dealing with life's knotty problems' (Simandan 2013b: 392). There seems to be a perceived positive relationship between migration and becoming wise whereby 'people who avoid traveling or [migrating] are to some extent believed to lack the experience needed to reach the ... stage of being identified as a wise individual' (Raileanu 2017: 67). This assertion resonates with how our research participants understood their migration and cross-cultural interactions as useful for growing wiser than their earlier selves.

The study also revealed that adaptation to the new environment and social system, the role of the host environment, unmet expectations, cultural shocks, and the language barrier were often deemed by our interviewees as the most important boundary conditions that constrain the potential for the flourishing of wisdom. The participants noted that these structural boundary conditions interact with 'luck', and with individual differences in attitude, personality, ability, and character, to explain the wide spectrum of outcomes of migration trajectories. The findings suggest that those who are able to adapt to their destination environment become wiser in the process, whereas those who give up and go back to their home country are often locked in negative emotions such as resentment, disappointment, frustration, and bitterness, which may undermine the open attitude required for wisdom to flourish. The participants also pointed out that those who migrated by choice are often better off adapting than the forced migrants who were compelled to migrate. Our research indicates that the destination environment plays an important role in shaping and reshaping one's prospects of becoming wiser or more foolish. Hostile, homogenous, exclusionary, and xenophobic environments are generally deemed by our participants as not favorable for immigrants to become wiser. However, the study suggests that there are some exceptions where individuals with strong determination and persistence can surmount the challenges posed by the hostile environment, succeed and become wiser in the process in spite of the unfavorable *milieu*. Even though we concur, there are many immigrants who succeed and become wiser even in hostile environments through the assistance they get from a small but critical subset of the host community (from information centers or from countrymen and women or from benevolent persons). As Nicholls and Uitermark (2016) have shown, new immigrants tend to rely on their own ethnic networks and social capital to pool resources, gain access to information, and develop new identities in the process when confronted with limitations and impediments. Last but not least, unmet expectation(s) are perceived by our interviewees as one of the most significant boundary conditions to the growth of wisdom through migration and in its wake. The inability to meet the expected outcomes of migrating is viewed by our research participants as undermining one's quest to becoming wise. Bearing these boundary conditions in mind, our empirical research suggests that place-specific experiences acquired through international migration and subsequent cross-cultural interaction can be usefully understood as a 'fertile ground' for the flourishing of personal wisdom, which itself can act as an individual and collective resource for cohabitation in multicultural settings.

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