

## Chapter 62

# Foreign Education, Underemployment, and Wellness: Lived Experiences of African Immigrants in the USA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Although the number of African immigrants in the United States has steadily increased, there remains a gap in understanding their lived experiences in the context of employment and wellness. Using qualitative method, this study investigated underemployment and wellness among six foreign-educated African immigrants. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss three themes that emerged from this study. Study design utilized was grounded theory. Participants in this study held professional jobs before relocating to the US. Results suggest that despite excitement of migrating to the US, African immigrants experience myriad life events from the time they land until when they settle down. Yet, the adaptation mechanisms reported include social networking and social support. Thus, three themes that emerged from this study are occupational, emotional, and social wellness. From the findings, the authors developed underemployment versus wellness conceptual framework that can be used for future studies.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent studies (PEW Research Center, 2020) show that more than 13.6% (40 million) people living in the United States were born in another country. Evidence shows that the immigrant population in the United States is very diverse with every country represented. Notwithstanding, 27% of the immigrants are permanent residents. However, despite this representation, the same is not reflected in employment. A recent study exploring employment in the USA found that majority of African immigrants are underemployed (Tesfai, 2017). On account of this, underemployment is a situation in which individuals get employed in workplaces they are overqualified (Caicedo, van Gameraen, & Amuedo-Dorantes, 2018). Thus, it is when individuals whose academic qualifications, experience, skills, and knowledge exceed what they need for the jobs they are doing.

Authors for this study identified a gap in understanding African immigrants' lived experiences in the context of underemployment. More specifically, the study sought to understand African Immigrant feelings about employment opportunities and effects on their life. Therefore, the objective of this chapter is to present research findings from a qualitative study done with African immigrants exploring their lived experiences in the context of underemployment and wellness.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Underemployment**

Batalova, Fix, and Bachmeier (2016) define underemployment as workplaces that highly skilled persons work in low-skilled jobs requiring moderate or less on-the-job training. Low skilled jobs typically require a high school diploma or less, for example, personal-care aides, housekeepers, and truck drivers. Research findings show that 40% of African immigrants and 36% of the US born white population aged 25-40 have at least a bachelor's degree (Tesfai, 2017). But with regard to employment, African immigrants are disproportionality underemployed and continue to be part of the population segment that is significantly underemployed (Hailu, Mendoza, Lahman, & Richard, 2012). Whereas US experienced significant decrease in underemployment between 2010 and 2019, there still exists disparity based on race and country of birth (Batalova et al., 2016; Nunn, Parsons, & Shambaugh, 2019). In a recent annual report, America's Health Rankings (2019) revealed 11.6% and 6.1% underemployment rate among black adults and white adults, consequently. It has also been suggested that African Immigrants experience more occupational segregation than other races (Tesfai, & Thomas, 2020).

Despite the fact that academic credentials are supposed to help secure employment opportunities, this has not always been the case with African immigrants. Highly skilled immigrants often find it hard to transfer their knowledge from home country to the United States (Batalova et al., 2016). A qualitative study with immigrants describes frustration felt by African immigrants when their foreign education and work experience fail to help them secure descent jobs (Baran, Valcea, Porter, & Gallagher, 2018). Evidence shows that of the total number of unemployed people in the USA, foreign born and educated immigrants account for 60% (Batalova et al., 2016). Consequently, immigrants experience perceived broken promises and pleasant surprises.

Studies show that there many factors that account for this unemployment. It is appalling that immigrants are discriminated based on accent, rather than looking at the skills and qualifications required

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