

Creating Canada's Cultural Potluck: Immigrant Culinary Entrepreneurs' Experiences of Integration in the National Capital Region

Lilly Neang | MA Migration & Diaspora Studies, Carleton University



Introduction

This paper **reimagines the Canadian cultural mosaic as a 'cultural potluck'** wherein Canada's vibrant array of immigrant-owned culinary establishments serve as a compelling arena for examining integration.



Drawing on semi-structured interviews and surveys with immigrant culinary entrepreneurs in the National Capital Region, this research adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to better understand integration in a manner that highlights the agency, passion, and self-determination that newcomers exercise in their own settlement journeys.

The findings from this research will demonstrate how culinary entrepreneurship impacts integration across economic, social, political, cultural, and psychological dimensions.

This work dually highlights the invaluable contributions that immigrant-owned businesses make to our country, while also serving as credible evidence to encourage stakeholders to offer programs that better support immigrants' entrepreneurial spirits.

This research is being conducted as a thesis project under the supervision of Dr. Laura Madokoro.

Objective

A review of the current literature on immigrant integration reveals two critical gaps:

- overemphasis on state-regulated policies and programs being the most important facilitators of integration
- pressure to immediately secure employment results in entrepreneurship being overlooked as a prosperous and sustainable pathway to integration

These shortcomings indicate that current conceptualizations of integration are overly paternalistic and fail to recognize how integration is not solely dependent on the state, but rather is driven by an immigrant's agency and aspiration.

As such, this study seeks to answer the following question:



To what extent does pursuing a career in culinary entrepreneurship impact an immigrant's integration in Canada?

Methodology

Underpinning this research is a foundational belief that integration is:

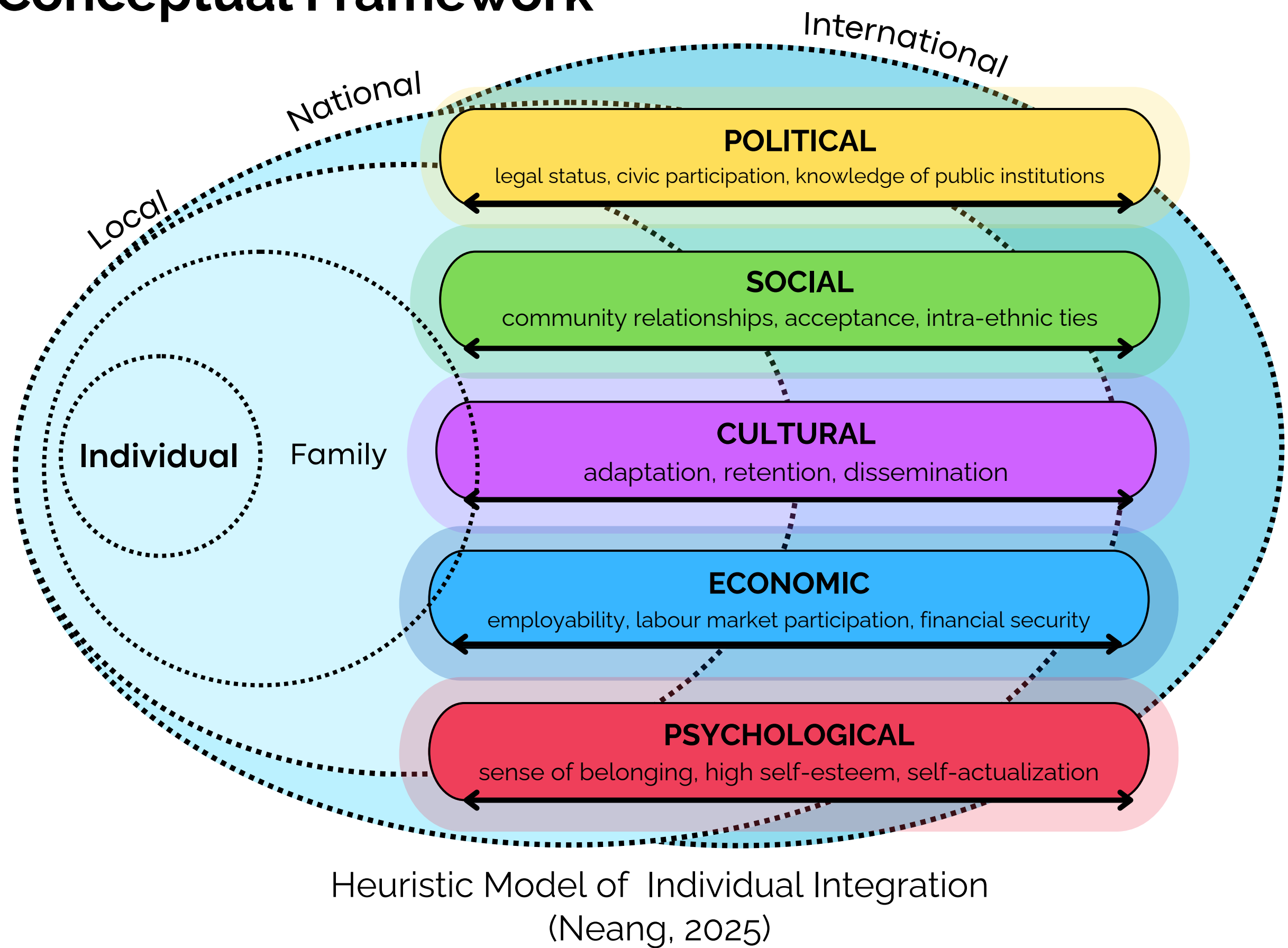
- multifaceted
- multidirectional
- multigenerational

The process of integration spans across various realms of an immigrant's identity, it occurs in an ever-changing flux of progress, and it does not have a definite end point.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach supports my intention to not only understand *what* integration is, but *how* culinary entrepreneurs experience the integration process as a result of their profession. The emphasis on an interpretivist epistemology complements my understanding of integration as a highly subjective process, and aligns with the existing literature's position that there is no universal definition for integration because of how varied it is in reality.

Conceptual Framework



Methods

A combination of semi-structured interviews and surveys are employed for this study.

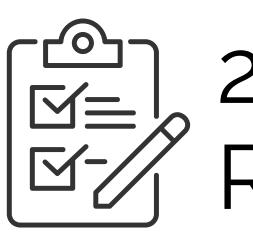
Research participants will be selected based on the following criteria:

- Immigration to Canada from any country after 1988
- Opened a culinary business (restaurant, café, food truck, catering business, etc.) within 10 years of arrival
- Current ownership of a culinary establishment in the National Capital Region that sells/serves cuisine that is inspired by their country of origin or regional culture

Data Collection



10-15 Interviewees



25-30 Survey Respondents

Sample Questions

- Was it always your intention to open a culinary business in Canada, or did you pursue other career options?
- Why did you pick this specific cuisine for your restaurant?
- In what ways, if at all, has your business been shaped by family influences?
- How has owning a culinary business connected you to your community?
- What did you learn while pursuing a career as a culinary entrepreneur?

While this research is still ongoing, the working argument is that culinary entrepreneurship serves as a positive facilitator of immigrant integration in Canada. As a self-employed profession, pursuing a career in culinary entrepreneurship uniquely offers immigrants the opportunity to exercise greater agency and achieve self-fulfillment, all whilst meeting the traditional, state-driven expectations of integration.

By innovating, creating, and sharing food with their receiving society, immigrant culinary entrepreneurs are able to contribute to the local economy, build relationships with members of their community, express their cultural identity, and most importantly, enjoy a sense of accomplishment and belonging.

Future Research

In a climate where newcomers feel compelled to subjugate themselves to demeaning, monotonous, or unfulfilling employment as a means of integrating into a new society, this research supports a more hopeful future for newcomers in Canada.

Beyond the National Capital Region



While this research is focused in our nation's capital, it has the potential to expand beyond this scope and be applied in diverse foodscapes worldwide.