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## Highly Skilled First-Generation Immigrant Kenyan Women's Lived Experiences With Workplace Integration Strategies in California

Lily Quietie Otieno  
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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Lily Quietie Otieno

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Walden University  
2026

Abstract

Highly Skilled First-Generation Immigrant Kenyan Women's Lived Experiences With

Workplace Integration Strategies in California

by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2023

MSc, California State University, Fullerton, 2002

BA, Egerton University, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

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## Abstract

Unlocking the potential of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women in the workplace is critical in an era of globalization and multiculturalism. The social problem is that organizations face challenges integrating highly skilled first-generation immigrant women into the U.S. workforce due to a limited understanding of effective workplace integration strategies. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California. The study was grounded in Graen and Uhl-Bien's leader-member exchange theory and Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to understand how leadership relationships and intersecting identities shaped workplace experiences. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 10 highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women employed in California. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling to achieve data saturation. Six themes emerged from the interpretative phenomenological analysis: (a) workplace integration experiences, (b) strategies and processes, (c) identity negotiation, (d) challenges and barriers, (e) coping and navigation, and (f) leader dynamics and relationships. Findings indicated that workplace integration was a relational and identity-mediated process shaped by access to leadership, structural constraints, and adaptive strategies. The implications for positive social change include the potential for organizational leaders to adopt relational leadership practices, implement identity-aware processes, and strengthen supportive integration structures that foster equitable inclusion, meaningful engagement, and sustained participation among highly skilled immigrant women.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my late mother, whose unwavering belief in the power of education shaped the very foundation of who I am today. She instilled in my brothers and me the value of hard work and the importance of standing together. Though her sacrifices were often quiet, they echo loudly in my achievements. I know you are smiling down on me, proud and fulfilled. To my late father, your love was always evident, and I carry that love with me as I pass it on to my family.

I also dedicate this work to my late brothers, Bruce and Leco, whose influence, love, and encouragement have been etched into every step of this journey. Bruce was ahead of his time, brilliant, wise, and generous beyond measure. His love for me was evident in both words and actions. He made time to visit and check on me, and whatever he had, he shared without hesitation. Leco, with his sharp wit and unwavering belief in me, would often say that I would be the first in our family to reach the sign that says, “No school ahead,” and now, I am here. Your words gave me the fuel to pursue this journey.

To my husband, thank you for being my steadfast supporter, prayer partner, and encourager. You have walked with me every step of the way. To my children, thank you for your patience and understanding, for encouraging me, and for giving me more reasons to push forward. This is our achievement.

To my brother Mike, my voice of reason and daily motivator, you always know how to lift my spirit and remind me of what is possible, even in the face of challenges. Your words and belief in me made a lasting impact on this journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### Introduction

Integrating highly skilled first-generation immigrant women into the workforce has become increasingly important in an era marked by globalization and multiculturalism. The United States is home to more than 23 million immigrant women (American Immigration Council, 2023a), who comprise approximately 16% of the U.S. women's labor force. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicated that labor force participation rates for both foreign-born and native-born women increased in 2023, with participation among foreign-born women rising by 1.1 percentage points and native-born women's increasing by 0.4 percentage points (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). These trends demonstrate the growing demographic and economic presence of immigrant women in the U.S. workforce and underscore the importance of examining how highly skilled first-generation immigrant women experienced and navigated workplace integration.

Highly skilled immigrants, individuals with post-secondary education or specialized professional experience, represent valuable contributors to host countries. However, prior research indicated that long-term integration often lacked systematic support because of political divisions and the absence of comprehensive national immigration and workforce integration policies (Batalova, 2024; Czaika & De Haas, 2014; Das et al., 2020; Dean, 2018; Givens et al., 2021; Kearney et al., 2024; Richwine, 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Targeted skill immigration has accounted for approximately 40–50% of U.S. immigration

flows, reflecting efforts to address skill shortages and support economic growth and innovation (American Immigration Council, 2023a; Das et al., 2020; Raihan et al., 2023). California alone is home to more than 10.4 million immigrants, representing approximately 23% of the total immigrant population in the United States (Mejia et al., 2024). Together, these demographic trends underscored the need to examine how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women experienced the workplace.

Immigrants' workplace integration involves a process of mutual accommodation between immigrants and host-country organizations. Mutual accommodation is crucial for social cohesion and national economics. Nevertheless, prior studies have reported that highly skilled immigrants frequently encountered workplace integration challenges, including cultural bias, discrimination, unfamiliar norms, language barriers, and the devaluation of foreign credentials and professional experiences (Ertorer et al., 2022; Lazarova et al., 2023; Raihan et al., 2023; Riaño, 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). Although recent research has contributed to a multilevel understanding of immigrants' workplace integration (Farashah & Blomquist, 2022), limited research explored the lived experiences of highly skilled immigrant women in California. Addressing this gap informed organizational practices and leadership approaches to promote more equitable and inclusive workforce integration.

This chapter provides the study background and presents the problem statement, purpose of the study, and research question. The chapter includes a description of the conceptual framework and nature of the study, definitions of key terms, and an outline of the study's assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations. The chapter also addresses

the significance of the study, including contributions to theory, implications for professional practice, and relevance to positive social change, and concludes with a chapter summary.

### **Background**

Throughout history, the movement of people across borders has influenced the cultural and economic conditions of nations worldwide. The United States has long served as a destination for immigrants seeking new opportunities and a better life (Batalova, 2024). Women immigrants constituted a significant and diverse population in the United States, contributing across multiple sectors of the economy (Batalova et al., 2020). There were more than 23 million immigrant women in the United States, accounting for approximately 14% of the female population (American Immigration Council, 2023a). Of these, one-third held a bachelor's degree or greater. Data from the American Immigration Council (2023a) indicated that women immigrants were highly likely to be employed in the health care and social assistance industries (23.3%), followed by professional services (13.3%) and hospitality (9.7%). These data reflected the economic participation of immigrant women within the U.S. labor market.

The integration of immigrant workers into the workforce has remained a complex issue that affects both employees and employers. Inadequate leader-member exchange and ineffective diversity management have negatively affected immigrant employees' sense of inclusion at work, job satisfaction, well-being, and organizational retention (Vito & Sethi, 2020). Additionally, managers reported significant challenges in facilitating the integration of immigrant workers into the workforce (Vasic et al., 2023). These

challenges were identified across several areas, including recruitment, socialization, workplace integration, training and development, operational activities, and the fostering of innovation (Vasic et al., 2023). Addressing these issues has been necessary for developing inclusive and supportive work environments.

The complexities of integrating immigrant workers into the workforce was further influenced by intersecting factors such as race, gender, and immigration status. These factors often compounded the challenges faced by immigrants. Immigrant women have encountered unique obstacles in accessing professional networks and career advancement opportunities compared to their native-born counterparts (Nardon et al., 2021). Despite these hurdles, recent data indicated that 43% of newly arrived families and diversity-based immigrants hold college degrees, exceeding the 29% figure among native-born Americans (Batalova, 2024). Nonetheless, immigration has involved logistical and social challenges for both the immigrants and host countries (Farashah & Blomquist, 2022; Martone et al., 2014). These conditions affected workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women. Addressing these multifaceted challenges has been essential to fostering workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in California.

Given the importance of this population to the American labor market, there has been a growing need to develop supportive organizational policies and inclusive practices that support the integration and advancement of immigrant women across industries (Brell et al., 2020). Prioritizing the integration of immigrants into the labor market was identified as an important component of current and future workplace initiatives (Ortlieb

& Knappert, 2023; Primecz et al., 2023; Schieckoff & Sprengholz, 2021). However, organizational responses to these challenges remained inconsistent. Addressing these barriers and leveraging the talents and perspectives of immigrant women can lead to enriched work environments.

Existing research has explored the challenges and factors shaping the workplace integration of immigrants; however, the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation women with workplace integration strategies in California remained underexplored (Ham, 2020; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023; Vito & Sethi, 2020). Foreign-born women often experienced difficulties integrating into the workplace despite their skills and qualifications. These challenges were associated with barriers, including cultural norms, discriminatory practices, language difficulties, and limited access to social networks or support (Nwabah & Heitner, 2009). Despite the study's focus on the lived experiences of Nigerian women in Texas, those findings did not address the workplace integration experiences of highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan women in California.

Although the barriers to integration have been well-documented, there was a notable gap in research on effective targeted interventions for specific immigrant subgroups. This gap highlighted the need for a comprehensive understanding of workplace integration strategies that were inclusive and tailored to specific populations (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). To address this gap, this study focused on a specific group of first-generation Kenyan immigrant women within California's diverse and multicultural environment. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the

lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California.

This research explored the challenges, experiences, and integration strategies of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California. Understanding the workplace experiences of first-generation Kenyan women in California contributed to the broader discourse on skilled immigration (Ertorer et al., 2022). Immigrant women provided unique perspectives, cultural backgrounds, and experiences that enriched workplace environments (Oliinyk et al., 2021). Additionally, the findings may inform policies designed to better integrate immigrant women into the workforce, such as language training, cultural orientation, mentorship programs, or efforts to address workplace discrimination (Ertorer et al., 2022). Lastly, the implications extend to global immigration and labor mobility by enhancing understanding of how skilled immigrants have navigated professional environments in new countries and contributed to transnational networks and economies.

### **Problem Statement**

The social problem is that workplace integration encompasses a multifaceted process involving mutual adaptation between employees and employers. Key elements of this integration were defined as skill recognition, career development, social inclusion, and overall well-being (Khattab et al., 2020; Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Despite a growing body of research on immigrant women, organizations have continued to experience challenges in integrating highly skilled first-generation immigrant women into the U.S. workforce due to a limited

understanding of workplace integration strategies for this population. Several studies have explored the challenges and factors influencing workplace integration of immigrants; however, they did not explicitly address strategies to facilitate workplace integration (Ham, 2020; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023; Vito & Sethi, 2020). The distinctive regional context introduced a new dimension to the study of workplace integration strategies for highly-skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California.

The integration of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women into the workplace remained a critical aspect of contemporary society within globalized and diverse labor markets. Immigrants, particularly those with university or post-secondary training and experience in related fields, have frequently encountered difficulties integrating into workplaces (Dean, 2018; Raihan et al., 2023; Richwine, 2022; Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). These challenges included labor market access, career development, cultural norms, workplace expectations, language barriers, and the limited recognition of foreign credentials (Barker, 2018; Ertorer et al., 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Understanding these challenges has been necessary for developing effective strategies to support the successful integration of this demographic into the workplace.

Achieving full workplace equity for immigrant women involved navigating a complex web of industry-specific nuances, managerial challenges, and intersectional barriers. Scholars have investigated the experiences, challenges, and successes of immigrant women across various sectors, including healthcare (Ham, 2020), education

(Olow, 2021), and business (Ogomaka, 2019), yet highly skilled immigrant women remain underexplored. Ineffective diversity management and poor leader-member exchange have negatively affected immigrant workers' sense of inclusion, well-being, and retention, particularly during periods of organizational change (Vito & Sethi, 2020). Managers also reported specific hurdles when facilitating the integration of these workers, including difficulties across recruitment, socialization, training, operations, and innovation (Vasic et al., 2023). Furthermore, intersectional factors like race and gender compounded these issues specifically; immigrant women experienced unique barriers to professional networking and career advancement that their native-born counterparts do not experience (Nardon et al., 2022). Addressing these multifaceted challenges required a concerted effort from policymakers, organizations, and the community as a whole to implement targeted strategies that promote integration of immigrant women in the workplace.

Consequently, despite the identification of these multifaceted barriers, there remained a scarcity of research on effective leadership strategies specifically designed to address the integration of highly skilled immigrant women. Data indicated that 43% of newly-arrived families and diversity-based immigrants possessed college degrees, surpassing the 29% figure among native-born Americans (American Immigration Council, 2023a). Nonetheless, immigration posed logistical and social challenges for both immigrants and host countries (Farashah & Blomquist, 2022). Despite the economic significance of immigrant workers and their contributions to the nation's growth and development, workplace integration remained an unresolved challenge within many U.S.

organizations (American Immigration Council, 2023a). However, the integration of immigrants remained a pivotal yet complex issue within the framework of workplace integration.

This population is of significant importance in the American labor market. Consequently, there is a growing need to develop supportive organizational policies and inclusive practices that foster the integration and advancement of immigrant women across industries (Brell et al., 2020). Prioritizing the integration of immigrants into the labor market was identified as an important step in current and future workplace initiatives (Ortlieb & Knappert, 2023; Primecz et al., 2023; Schieckoff & Sprengholz, 2021). However, empirical evidence suggested that organizational responses to these challenges remained inconsistent. Research on the lived experiences of immigrant workers increased, yet unlike the extensive reviews conducted on expatriate workers, there remained a gap in understanding the lived experiences of a specific cultural and gender group (Kenyan immigrant women) in a uniquely multicultural context (Ertorer et al., 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Multiple researchers explored the challenges and factors influencing the workplace integration of immigrants (Ham, 2020; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023; Vito & Sethi, 2020). However, the existing literature did not specifically address the experiences of highly skilled first-generation women regarding workplace integration strategies.

The integration of immigrant women into the workforce varied across cultural and geographical contexts. For instance, evidence indicated that foreign-born Nigerian women in Texas faced challenges in workplace assimilation despite their skills and

qualifications (Nwabah & Heitner, 2009). These challenges were associated with cultural norms, language barriers, discriminatory practices, unfamiliarity with legal and institutional frameworks, and a lack of local social networks and support (Nwabah & Heitner, 2009). While these findings focused on Nigerian women in Texas, similar challenges were expected to affect highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California. Therefore, the specific research problem addressed in this study was the limited understanding of the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women regarding workplace integration strategies in California.

To address this gap, this study focused on a specific demographic within California's diverse and multicultural population to generate insights that could inform the development of more inclusive and effective integration policies and practices. This gap called for a more comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of workplace integration strategies (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). Addressing this gap in the literature was essential to developing workplace integration strategies that were inclusive and tailored to the unique needs and challenges faced by highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in California.

This study was needed to understand the experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California with workplace integration strategies. The exploration of these women's experiences highlighted the contributions of immigrant women to the social and economic development of California and the United States (Oliinyk et al., 2021). Exploring the experiences of first-generation Kenyan women in California workplaces provided valuable insights into the broader discourse on workplace

integration. Additionally, the findings could inform policies to promote the integration of immigrant women into the workforce (Mejia et al., 2024), including the development of targeted programs for language training, cultural orientation, mentorship, or initiatives to address workplace discrimination. Lastly, the implications were global, offering a deeper understanding of how skilled immigrants have navigated professional environments in new countries and contributed to transnational networks and economies.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study, grounded in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), was to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California. The problem addressed by this study was the limited understanding of the unique experiences, challenges, successes, and strategies used by highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women as they navigate their professional environments in California. While there has been extensive research on the workplace integration of immigrants in host countries, there remains a notable gap in research focusing specifically on highly skilled first-generation immigrant women in California, a state characterized by demographic diversity, significant economic activity, and ranked as the sixth-largest economy in the world (Joffe, 2023). The intent behind this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore participants' accounts, adaptations, and interactions within the California workplace. The study was designed to provide a rich, in-depth understanding of the integration experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women by

examining the opportunities and obstacles they encountered as they sought to establish themselves professionally within unfamiliar environments.

The phenomenon of interest in this qualitative phenomenological study was workplace integration strategies for highly skilled first-generation immigrants, with specific attention to the intersection of multiple social identities and workplace dynamics. The research explored how workplace integration strategies were influenced by multiple intersecting identities, including immigrant status, gender, race, and professional qualifications, and how these factors shaped organizational relationship dynamics. The lived experiences of this demographic with workplace integration were the central phenomenon under investigation. The study explored how participants navigated workplace relationships and managed multiple intersecting identities, including cultural, national, and professional networks. Integration strategies identified in the literature included mentorship and support programs, language training initiatives, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Desa, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2024; Omanović & Langley, 2023). These strategies have been implemented at organizational, local, regional, and national levels in collaboration with relevant stakeholders (Nguyen et al., 2024; Omanović & Langley, 2023). Addressing barriers to workplace integration associated with improved economic participation, social inclusion, and well-being among immigrant populations.

This qualitative phenomenological study also explored the relationship dynamics at work, with specific attention to interpersonal interactions and power relationships informed by leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. The study generated insights

intended to inform inclusive workplace policies and support mechanisms for immigrant professionals with intersecting identities across varied organizational contexts. The study employed semistructured interviews and an IPA data analysis approach to produce context-specific insights that contributed to an enhanced understanding of the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California. The findings of this study are intended to inform organizational policies, professional practices, and interventions aimed at advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in California by documenting and centering the perspectives of a historically underrepresented population.

### **Research Question**

RQ: What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The concepts that grounded this study were workplace integration strategies, multiple identities, first-generation highly skilled immigrants, and high-quality leader-member relationships. These concepts constituted the phenomenon of interest and served as the conceptual foundation for this qualitative phenomenological study. This framework served as a contextual lens for understanding the complexities of immigrant integration in the workplace. The study drew on existing literature to establish a foundation that guided the research design, data collection, and analysis. Workplace integration strategies were defined as organizational and relational approaches that facilitated employees' integration into host-country workplaces (Lai et al., 2017). Successful integration included formal programs such as mentorship initiatives, language

training workshops, cultural sensitivity training, and DEI policies (Desa, 2009; Lovin et al., 2021). These integration initiatives could be implemented at the organizational, local, regional, and national levels in collaboration with relevant stakeholders. Prior literature indicated that addressing barriers to workplace engagement was associated with improved economic participation, social inclusion, and well-being among immigrant women.

The second concept was multiple intersecting social identities. Participants were described as complex and multidimensional because of intersecting factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and socioeconomic background (Crenshaw, 1989). In this study, immigrant women navigated multiple identities within the workplace, including those associated with gender, race, age, immigrant status, and professional identity (Haseki et al., 2021). These intersections influenced how immigrant women perceived themselves and how they were perceived by others, thereby shaping their experiences and interactions at work. Another aspect related to multiple identities was that the population under investigation consisted of first-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants were defined as individuals born outside the host country who later immigrated (Ham, 2020). The participants in this study were Kenyan-born women residing in California who were employed at the time of the study and had at least 5 years of professional experience.

Another concept was that of highly skilled immigrants, defined as individuals with tertiary or post-secondary education, specialized expertise and qualifications in a particular field, and whose skills were in demand in the labor market. A highly skilled

migrant was an individual with tertiary (university-level) education (Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Participants represented professional backgrounds across sectors such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), healthcare, finance, and management (Ertorer et al., 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Prior research has indicated that highly skilled women experienced workplace integration challenges due to gender discrimination, stereotypes, isolation, work-life balance issues, implicit biases in hiring and promotion, and the lack of women role models and visibility in leadership roles (Arredondo et al., 2022; Ertorer et al., 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). These professional qualifications and social conditions have influenced workforce integration processes, interactions, and career trajectories (Vasic et al., 2023). Emphasis was placed on first-generation immigrants, who have faced greater cultural and logistical barriers to integration than second-generation immigrants. These challenges have hindered professional experiences and workplace integration.

The framework also incorporated the concept of the quality of the relationship between leader-member in the workplace. This concept was drawn from Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. In the framework of this study, LMX referred to the interpersonal relationships between immigrant women and their supervisors or coworkers in the workplace. Prior research demonstrated that the quality of LMX relationships varied based on perceived similarity related to factors such as race and gender (Ariani & Feriyanto, 2024; Bakar & McCann, 2014). These relational dynamics contributed to differential access to support information and opportunities

within organizations. High-quality LMX relationships were associated with higher job satisfaction, professional development, and workplace integration, whereas lower-quality exchanges were associated with reduced engagement and limited advancement opportunities. The LMX dynamics were noted to have led to the formation of "in-groups" that received preferential treatment. At the same time, employees from backgrounds that differed from those of their leaders and coworkers experienced lower-quality LMX relationships due to perceived dissimilarities with their leaders and coworkers (Bakar & McCann, 2014). Therefore, raising awareness of and understanding these factors was crucial to building an inclusive workplace in which all employees could succeed.

This study explored the quality of leader-member exchanges among immigrant women in California workplaces, offering insights into their interactions with supervisors and coworkers. Strong LMX relationships, where leaders showed fairness, open communication, and personalized attention to each team member, improved job satisfaction, supported professional growth, and helped immigrant women integrate into the organizational culture (Tanjung, 2020). On the other hand, negative or low-quality LMX relationships led to feelings of alienation, lower job engagement, and fewer career development opportunities.

Intersectionality theory provided an additional theoretical foundation for the conceptual framework. Intersectionality was used to conceptualize how overlapping social identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and socioeconomic background, interacted to shape participants' workplace experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). This theoretical perspective supported the analysis of how experiences of marginalization

and privilege were interconnected rather than additive, influencing perceptions, interactions, and access to opportunities for first-generation Kenyan immigrant women. Intersectionality aligned with the qualitative phenomenological approach and the study's research question, which focused on participants' lived experiences within intersecting systems of identity and power.

The logical connections between the framework components were grounded in the alignment between LMX and intersectionality theories, both of which emphasized individuals' subjective experiences and relational context (Smith et al., 2009). The conceptual framework linked workplace integration strategies, multiple identities, immigration status, professional skills, and leader-member relationships to examine how these elements collectively shaped participants' lived experience.

The framework highlighted the dynamic interactions and interdependencies among these concepts, emphasizing the roles of organizational policies, cultural norms, and interpersonal dynamics in facilitating or hindering immigrant women's successful integration into the workforce. Workplace integration strategies depended on negotiating multiple identities and the quality of leader-member relationships among immigrant women. Effective integration strategies enhanced identity affirmation and positive interpersonal dynamics at work, ultimately contributing to immigrant women's professional well-being and career advancement.

Furthermore, integrating LMX theory with intersectionality theory provided a framework for examining the relationships and experiences that influenced workplace integration. Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX theoretical perspective described how

leaders formed a unique relationship with each team member (Hirvi et al., 2021). LMX principles underscored that the quality of the exchange between leaders and their followers reflected the essence of the relationship (Bakar & McCann, 2014). The intersection of ethnic and gender similarities between supervisors and subordinates was positively associated with high-quality leader-member exchange relationships, suggesting that perceived similarities predicted high-quality workplace relationships (Bakar & McCann, 2014). This dual approach enabled a richer understanding of leader-member relationships, including the multiple intersecting identities at work and their impact on the integration process for highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan women in California.

The conceptual framework guided the qualitative phenomenological study design, informed the development of the research question, and shaped the construction of the semistructured interview questions and follow-up prompts. Interview questions were designed to elicit participants' descriptions of workplace interaction experiences, relational dynamics with supervisors and coworkers, and the influence of intersecting identities. The framework also informed the IPA by providing concepts for examining patterns across participants' narratives. This alignment ensured conceptual consistency between the framework, research question, data collection, and analysis approach.

### **Nature of the Study**

Examining the depth of specific lived experiences required a methodological approach aligned with the interpretative understanding of meaning-making within specific social and cultural contexts. This research employed a qualitative IPA approach grounded in an interpretative research paradigm, drawing on the philosophical

foundations of phenomenological hermeneutics and idiographic commitment (Smith, 2004). The selection of IPA was appropriate because the study focused on understanding how individuals made sense of their lived experiences rather than measuring or predicting outcomes. I adopted Martin Heidegger's approach to IPA, which extended Edmund Husserl's descriptive phenomenology by emphasizing interpretation and contextual meaning (Annells, 1996). Heidegger's concept of "being in the world" was used to frame participants' experiences as inseparable from their social, cultural, and organizational environments. Prior literature indicated that human understanding and behavior were shaped by embedded practices across personal, relational, and cultural dimensions (Annells, 1996). This Heideggerian approach provided a philosophical foundation for interpreting participants' understandings of workplace integration in their lived contexts.

For first-generation immigrant women in a new work environment, the process of workplace integration was characterized as complex and ambiguous. The IPA approach supported examination of participants' interpretations, coping mechanisms, and strategies used to navigate workplace integration challenges (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith, 2017). Cultural and contextual factors were recognized as influential in shaping participants' workplace experiences. Using IPA enabled a systematic analysis of participants' subjective meanings and contextual interpretations without attributing agency to abstract systems or processes.

IPA was used to focus on how individuals interpreted and made sense of experiences in their everyday worlds, emphasizing participants' perspectives. Participants shared insights into how they interpreted and made sense of events in their world,

revealing their distinctive perspectives (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Smith & Nizza, 2022). This approach was participant-centric, allowing participants to express themselves authentically and to identify points of convergence and divergence within the themes of everyday experiences (Smith, 2004; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Additionally, reflexivity was incorporated throughout the research process to account for the interpretative nature of qualitative inquiry and the researcher's role in meaning-making (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Employing the IPA methodology yielded a more holistic understanding of participants' environments, their individual experiences, and the subjective meanings they attributed to workplace integration strategies.

Participant selection began with a purposive sample of four homogeneous participants who met the predetermined criteria: first-generation, highly skilled Kenyan women with at least 5 years of experience and currently employed in California. This initial group served as a foundational cohort, which was subsequently expanded through snowball sampling to achieve data saturation and diversity (Larkin et al., 2021; Noon, 2018; Raifman et al., 2022). The inclusion and exclusion criteria centered on predetermined criteria for women who were first-generation Kenyan immigrants, had obtained a tertiary education (highly skilled), had been employed for at least 5 years, and were currently working in California. Information power guided the sample size determination, consistent with IPA methodology (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Data saturation was determined when additional interviews yielded no new themes or insights relevant to the research question (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Thus, all aspects of an individual's experience were thoroughly explored.

Data were collected through semistructured in-depth interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' workplace integration experiences, leader-member relations, and identity negotiation processes. Interview questions and follow-up prompts were developed based on the conceptual framework and research question. Data were analyzed using IPA, involving iterative reading, coding, theme development, and cross-participant analysis to identify shared and divergent meanings across participants' narratives (Smith et al., 2009). The analytic process supported the systematic interpretation of participants' lived experiences and ensured alignment among the study design, the research question, and the analytic approach.

When researching sensitive topics, several ethical considerations had to be carefully addressed. One key ethical consideration was the risk that participants might disclose personal and distressing experiences during the interviews, with implications for themselves and others (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I obtained informed consent from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the potential risks and benefits. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time. Participants were assured that all data collected would be anonymized and their identities would not be revealed in any published materials (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Any quotes or excerpts used were presented in a way that prevented identification. Electronic data was password-protected and stored in a secure location per Walden University requirements. I also conducted member checking (debriefing) with the participants to address any concerns and ensure that the interpretations were accurately represented and understood.

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California. The study explored the various integration paths they undertook and sought to understand the influence of leader-member relationships and intersecting identities in this process. The concepts grounding this study included workplace integration strategies, multiple identities, first-generation highly skilled immigrants, and high-quality work relationships. This framework offered a perspective for understanding the complexities of immigrant integration in the workplace.

### **Definitions**

*First-generation immigrant:* An individual not born in the host country but who later obtained citizenship or permanent residency (Yousef et al., 2022). In this study, the term referred to individuals who had attained U.S. citizenship or permanent residency but held a different citizenship at birth. The main participants of this study were first-generation immigrants from Kenya to the United States.

*Highly skilled immigrant:* The descriptor “highly skilled” immigrant referred to foreign-born individuals who had graduated from a tertiary or post-secondary education and had experience in any related field before immigrating to the United States (Dean, 2018; Raihan et al., 2023; Richwine, 2022; Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Such individuals combined education, training, and experience and demonstrated proficiency in their respective areas. The highly skilled immigrant women included executives, senior managers, nurses, teachers, lawyers, marketing agents, government workers, and those in specialized trades or comparable professions. Central to the

research was understanding the experiences of highly skilled immigrant women who migrated to California from Kenya with a tertiary education or higher in a related field.

*Immigrants/foreign-born:* These terms were frequently used interchangeably and referred to individuals residing in a country other than that of birth, regardless of citizenship (Basso & Peri, 2020). Immigrants were those who immigrated to the host country and obtained citizenship within their lifetimes.

*Intersectionality:* Intersectionality referred to the interconnectedness of social categorizations, including gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and nationality, in relation to a specific individual or group (Crenshaw, 1989). These categorizations were regarded as overlapping, creating a system of disadvantage, privilege, social inequalities, or discrimination (Schieckoff & Sprengholz, 2021). For this study, intersectionality was defined as the gender, race, immigration status, and skill/education level of these women in the workplace. Intersectionality highlighted that disadvantages or privileges associated with these dimensions could occur at different points along the immigration and integration trajectory.

*Leader-Member Exchange:* Leader-member exchange are dyadic relationships developed from the workplace interactions between a supervisor and a subordinate (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Personality, race, and gender had an impact on these interactions, with leaders often forming stronger connections with employees they perceived to be similar to themselves. Research indicated that personality and cultural differences played crucial roles in developing high-quality LMX relationships, potentially impacting workplace integration for diverse employees (Ariani & Feriyanto, 2024; Bakar

& McCann, 2014). High-quality LMX interactions were generally characterized by trust, respect, and shared obligation, while poor-quality interactions were more transactional.

*Lived experiences:* A lived experience referred to a person's subjective encounter with a particular event, situation, or phenomenon that went beyond mere occurrence. It encompassed the profound impact and lasting significance that the experience imprinted on a person's consciousness and future trajectory (Frechette et al., 2020; Smith & Nizza, 2022). This concept emphasized that experiencing created a unique and enduring impression, shaping one's perceptions, beliefs, and understanding of the world. Lived experiences were not simply passive occurrences but active engagements that promoted personal growth, identity creation, and the cultivation of one's worldview (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). They often carried emotional weight and could influence future decisions and behaviors, making them integral to an individual's narrative and sense of self (Frechette et al., 2020; Smith & Nizza). As Husserl (1970) noted, these experiences were central to phenomenological inquiry, since these events provided a window into the core of human thinking and perception. In the context of this study, lived experiences referred to the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration in California.

*Workplace integration:* Integration was frequently associated with immigrants' assimilation into the host society. Assimilation was the dynamic and ongoing relationship between an organization and employee, where the individual learned the workplace expectations and norms (Miller, 2018). Essers and Benschop (2009) identified four elements of assimilation: cultural (e.g., language, norms), structural (e.g., education,

labor market), social (native-immigrant friendships), and identity (feeling of belonging). Workplace integration or adaptation was the process by which highly skilled first-generation immigrant women became integrated into the host nation's workplace through four assimilation elements: cultural, structural, social, and identity (Essers & Benschop, 2009). For this study, workplace integration was synonymous with workplace adaptation

### **Assumptions**

Several key assumptions were identified in developing this study's approach. First, the premise was that participants' self-reports were truthful and reflected their actual experiences. An ontological assumption was that reality was variable and subjective, depending on participants' interpretations (Culbertson, 1981). To understand participants' lived experiences and perspectives on workplace integration strategies, the approach depended on the honesty of participants' narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Smith & Nizza, 2022). This assumption was critical because it acknowledged that participants held diverse perspectives and interpretations of reality. Recognizing reality as multiple and socially constructed was necessary because participants' experiences were shaped by personal histories, social contexts, cultural backgrounds, and interpretative processes.

Second, within a social constructivist interpretivism paradigm, it was assumed that knowledge was best understood through empathetic inquiry into participants' lived experiences. This paradigm recognized that reality was subjective and shaped by how individuals made sense of their worlds (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith & Nizza, 2022). This assumption was necessary because the qualitative interpretative phenomenological

approach (IPA) required active engagement with participants' meaning-making rather than detached observation (Larkin et al., 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022). This perspective aligned with the position that social realities did not exist independently of human interpretation and understanding (Schwandt, 2014). Adopting this assumption supported an in-depth exploration of participants' expectations as situated within cultural, social, and personal contexts (Patton, 2015) to foster a richer, more nuanced exploration of the realities of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women immigrants and their workplace integration strategies in California.

Third, the study was based on a value-laden axiological assumption in which the research findings were influenced by both the participants' and researchers' values and experiences. Study participants were highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women working in California. I recognized that, as a highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan immigrant woman, my experiences and values may have influenced data interpretation and theme development. This assumption was necessary because qualitative research involved subjectivity, and complete objectivity was not assumed to be attainable (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The reflexive process was incorporated to ensure that the influence of values and positionality was acknowledged and critically explored. By acknowledging my influence in the research, I demonstrated transparency and commitment to the research approach.

Fourth, it was assumed that interpretative analysis was suitable for developing a comprehensive understanding of participants' lived experiences of workplace integration. This assumption was necessary because IPA involved examining subjective experiences

and required attention to reflexivity during interpretation (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Acknowledging my role in interpretative analysis was necessary to address issues related to positionality and potential influence on findings.

Finally, it was assumed that the study's findings could inform organizational practice related to workplace integration. This assumption was based on the premise that participants possessed experiential knowledge relevant to workplace integration processes. Although the study was context-specific to California, it was assumed that insights gained may be applicable to similar demographic groups in comparable organizational settings. This assumption was necessary to support the relevance of the study for professional practice and policy discussions while maintaining appropriate contextual boundaries.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Researchers value the inherent freedom to examine social issues. A well-defined scope enabled researchers to maintain a manageable, focused approach, thereby improving transparency and accountability. Delimitations delineated the boundaries of the study, including the research question, objectives, theoretical positions, and the relevant study population (Akanle et al., 2020; Coker, 22; Simon & Goes, 2013). Therefore, in my study, the roles of scope, limitations, and delimitations in addressing research problems within academic constraints helped ensure the relevance of my research and upheld academic standards.

### *Scope*

The study's purpose guided the scope of this research. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California. Therefore, the target population comprised highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women immigrants residing in California who were currently employed and had at least 5 years of experience. The recognition of rapidly growing immigrant population prompted the decision to examine this demographic group. In addition, the defined scope enabled a focused exploration of a specific demographic group within a particular context, thereby contributing to the existing literature on immigrant workplace experiences.

### *Delimitations*

In my research, I defined delimitations as the specific parameters I established to narrow the study's scope. These parameters included inclusion and exclusion criteria, which helped focus the investigation and determined what would and would not be explored (Akanle et al., 2020; Coker, 2022; Simon & Goes, 2013). I controlled these delimitations to ensure the study remained manageable and feasible within the resources and constraints I faced. For this study, I applied predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria: I focused on first-generation Kenyan immigrant women who arrived in the United States after completing tertiary education (highly skilled), had been employed for at least 5 years, and were currently working in California. I excluded second-generation immigrants, non-Kenyan highly skilled first-generation immigrants, first-generation immigrant men, first-generation Kenyan immigrants with less than 5 years of work

experience, and those not employed in California at the time. Additionally, while I considered relevant, specific theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory, they were not included within the scope of my study.

The study findings might not apply universally to all immigrant groups or geographical contexts. A detailed examination of workplace integration experiences among selected demographic groups resulted in rich narratives that could offer transferable insights to similar populations in different settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Larkin et al., 2021). Although rooted in California, the outcomes may offer valuable perspectives applicable to regions with comparable demographic diversity and workforce dynamics (Patton, 2015). Additionally, I acknowledge that key terms, such as workplace integration, had narrow definitions (Hajro et al., 2017). Alternative definitions of workplace integration also existed, such as acculturation and assimilation.

### **Limitations**

This study was subject to several limitations that were taken into account when interpreting the findings. Acknowledging these limitations was crucial for maintaining transparency regarding the research process. Furthermore, establishing this transparency is essential for enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Addressing trustworthiness increased the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Despite efforts to ensure rigorous methodology and analysis, several factors influenced the outcomes. First, the small sample size may have impacted the transferability and dependability of the results (Akanle et al., 2020; Coker, 2022; Simon

& Goes, 2013). The specific demographics restricted the transferability of the findings to broader populations or different sectors (Hays & McKibben, 2021). This limitation was addressed by using the snowballing effect until saturation was reached. Saturation was achieved when no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews, indicating that the data collected was sufficient to comprehensively understand the phenomenon of interest (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). The rigorous application of saturation criteria effectively mitigated the constraints of the small sample size, thereby upholding the credibility and qualitative dependability of the research outcomes.

Second, I considered my own bias as a researcher, recognizing that I am a highly skilled first-generation Kenyan-born woman working in California. To address this bias, I practiced rigorous reflexivity and transparently documented my positionality throughout the study (Baldwin et al., 2022). Acknowledging personal biases and employing strategies such as recoding all sessions and conducting follow-up reviews (member checking) with participants can help confirm understanding and interpretation, thereby reducing bias (Holmes, 2020). I therefore used member checking to validate my interpretations and minimize my personal biases.

Another limitation was selection bias. Using purposive sampling for participant selection may have introduced volunteer bias (Campbell et al., 2020). Participants may have differed in characteristics or experiences from those who did not volunteer, potentially biasing the data (Millard et al., 2023). I minimized issues related to this limitation by using explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, following the approach outlined by Campbell et al. (2020). The inclusion and exclusion criteria followed

predetermined criteria of first-generation Kenyan women immigrants who came to the United States after obtaining a tertiary education, had been employed for at least 5 years, and were currently working in California.

Finally, a limitation of this study was the potential for recall bias as participants' accounts relied on recollection of past events. Recall bias may have occurred due to difficulties in remembering past experiences, including fading memory, selective recall, and influence from emotions, hindsight, and current knowledge (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Khare and Vedel (2019) indicated that participants might have found it hard to remember experiences from several years earlier. I employed multiple methods, including semistructured interviews, observations, time-bound questions, and prompts, to minimize recall bias (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Noble & Heale, 2019). I used these strategies to help participants recall information more accurately and reduce recall bias.

## **Significance**

### **Significance to Practice**

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study were relevant to professional practice. This research documented the challenges and opportunities experienced by highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan-born women in professional settings, particularly regarding leadership practices, communication styles, hierarchical expectations, and implicit workplace norms. The results provided information relevant to organizational strategies and policies to improve workplace integration for this group across various sectors. Insights into effective workplace integration strategies may guide

organizational practices, fostering more inclusive and supportive work environments (Jones et al., 2020). Additionally, the focus on immigrant women's perspectives provided information relevant to the refinement of immigration-related organizational practices to better support the integration of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women (Iskhakova & Ott, 2020). Practical implications also extended to employee development programs, which may benefit from incorporating targeted resources and support systems aligned with the integration needs of immigrant women (Iskhakova & Ott, 2020). Moreover, the findings may support structured knowledge-sharing initiatives across organizations, enabling comparisons of practices used to support diverse employees. Organizations could exchange best practices and lessons learned from supporting the integration of diverse employees, leading to collective organizational learning within and beyond their industries.

Understanding the lived experiences of first-generation Kenyan immigrant women may enhance cultural competence among leaders and employees. Increased awareness of the challenges faced by diverse employees may support integration and professional development initiatives (Kirmayer, 2012; Lai et al., 2017; Tharenou & Kulik, 2020). The findings identified organizational barriers and facilitators to the workplace integration of first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in California. This information may inform organizational training efforts aimed at improving leadership practices and workplace support mechanisms (Tharenou & Kulik, 2020). This knowledge may inform targeted talent development initiatives to leverage these skills. Moreover,

understanding successful integration strategies could help retain diverse talent within organizations.

### **Significance to Theory**

This study contributed to extant literature and expanded knowledge of workplace integration strategies for multi-marginalized populations. Existing research had primarily focused on broader immigrant populations or specific aspects of integration (Ertorer et al., 2022; Lai et al., 2017; Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023), leaving a gap in empirical understanding of the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan-born women in California with successful workplace integration strategies. The focus on this demographic added specificity to the prior literature on workplace integration (Ilie, 2019). The application of IPA to this population and regional context contributed to theoretical understandings of workplace integration and immigrant experiences (Jones et al., 2020). This approach explored intersectionality involving gender, race, immigration status, and workplace integration, thereby extending existing theoretical perspectives (Ilie, 2019; Iskhakova & Ott, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Stewart & Johnson, 2009). By focusing on the lived experiences of this group, the research supported refinement of a conceptual framework for workplace integration strategies, emphasizing the importance of approaches that account for culture, race, gender, and professional identity.

Furthermore, examination of LMX and intersectionality theories, using qualitative IPA, contributed to conceptual understanding of leader-member exchanges, multiple social identities, workplace integration, and immigrant experiences. The study explored

the relationships among workplace integration strategies, cultural dynamics, and individual experiences within diverse organizational contexts. Theoretical contributions from this research may inform future studies on immigrant integration, identity negotiation, and workplace dynamics in multicultural settings, supporting a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in immigrant professional experiences.

### **Significance to Social Change**

This study has potential relevance for positive social change by providing evidence related to stereotypes, biases, and barriers that impede workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women in California. The findings may inform the development of targeted initiatives, such as culturally responsive orientation programs, mentorship and networking opportunities, professional development workshops, and cultural intelligence (CQ) training. The study's findings may inform the development of workplace engagement strategies for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women.

At both the regional and national levels, the results of this study may inform policy and legislative decisions to facilitate workplace integration. For example, the results may provide evidence relevant to policies addressing recognition of foreign credentials and organizational resources that support workplace integration, including structured onboarding processes and culturally informed leadership practices.

Beyond organizational settings, the implications of this study extend to broader systemic considerations related to the inclusion of highly skilled first-generation

immigrant women in professional sectors (Jones et al., 2020). Addressing structural and policy barriers to workplace engagement remains relevant to efforts to advance equity and workforce inclusion. These considerations are associated with improved professional participants and well-being among immigrant populations with potential implications for individuals, organizations, and communities.

### **Summary and Transition**

This chapter introduced the study on the workplace integration experiences of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women in California. This chapter established the importance of integration in increasingly diverse professional environments and identified a gap in the prior literature regarding the limited empirical understanding of how this population experiences and navigates integration processes. The research problem centered on the lack of qualitative insight into participants' lived experiences with workplace integration, particularly within an organizational context shaped by leadership dynamics and intersecting social identities. The purpose of the study, research question, and significance were described to clarify the study's focus and establish its scholarly and practical relevance.

The chapter also described the conceptual framework that guided the study, integrating workplace integration processes, intersecting identities, first-generation immigration status, highly skilled professional status, and the quality of leader-member exchange relationships. The framework was informed by Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) leader-member exchange (LMX) theory and Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory to support an interpretative understanding of how relational and structural factors jointly

shape workplace integration. Chapter 1 also presented the qualitative IPA used to explore participants' lived experiences. Key methodological elements, including the nature of the study, assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, ethical considerations, and potential contributions to theory, organizational practices, and positive social change, were addressed.

Chapter 2 expands on this foundation by reviewing and synthesizing relevant scholarly literature on the workplace integration experiences of highly-skilled first-generation immigrant women. The literature review explored empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and prior findings on leadership practices, workplace integration strategies, and intersecting identities to situate the present study within existing research and further refine the conceptual framework.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

In today's globalized world, workplace integration presents both an organizational challenge and an opportunity to leverage immigrants' diverse talents and influence the future of work. Immigrant women have encountered numerous obstacles due to social, cultural, national, geographic, and workplace expectations that influence their integration into host country workplaces, especially when compared to their White male and female counterparts (Ertorer et al., 2022; Khattab et al., 2020; Stahl & Maznevski, 2021; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Strategies for integrating first-generation highly skilled immigrant women with intersectional identities into the workplace has remained underexplored (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023a; Ewers et al., 2022). Despite the significant presence of this demographic within the American workforce.

The underlying social problem was that workplace integration was a multifaceted process requiring mutual adaptation between employees and employers. Key components of integration included skill recognition, career development, social inclusion, and overall well-being (Khattab et al., 2020; Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Despite a growing body of research on immigrant women, organizations have continued to experience challenges integrating highly skilled first-generation immigrant women into the U.S. workforce due to a limited understanding of effective workplace integration strategies for this population. Prior studies provided valuable insights into the challenges and factors influencing immigrant workplace

integration, but did not explicitly examine strategies that facilitate such integration (Ham, 2020; Kuknor et al., 2023; Vasic et al., 2023; Vito & Sethi, 2020). The distinctive regional context of this study introduced a new dimension to the study of workplace integration strategies, enabling exploration of the experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California.

The specific research problem addressed in this study is the need for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women regarding workplace integration strategies in California. Workplace integration was a challenge that has often been more pronounced for this population than for their White male and female counterparts (Ertorer et al., 2022; Stahl & Maznevski, 2021; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California. The existing literature underscored the importance of this research problem by highlighting a growing interest in the lived experiences of first-generation Kenyan women and the challenges they faced.

This chapter was organized as follows: first, the literature search strategy used to identify relevant peer-reviewed journals and recent studies from online databases was presented. Next, the existing literature on the conceptual frameworks that grounded the study was reviewed. Then I reviewed the primary theories that informed leader-member relationships, particularly when a member held multiple intersecting identities. Additionally, I introduced key concepts relevant to the study, including workplace integration strategies, high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships,

intersecting social identities, and the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation immigrants in California. Overall, this chapter provided a synthesis of the major themes identified in the literature and clarified how this study addressed an existing gap in the literature.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I created a literature search strategy to find relevant peer-reviewed journals and recent studies from online databases. The search terms I used included highly skilled, *first-generation immigrant, Kenyan women, employees, lived experiences, workplace integration, California, qualitative research, leader-member exchange, intersectionality, workplace integration strategies, migrant integration, barriers to workplace integration, immigrants' coping strategies, perceptions, attitudes, and perspectives of immigrants.* The databases I accessed included ERIC, ProQuest, JSTOR, EBSCO, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis, PubMed, Elsevier, Google Scholar, and the Walden University Library. In each database, I combined two or more search terms using Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR," and applied quotation marks around key phrases to narrow the search. I also used multi-database searches to cover a broad range of disciplines. When possible, I selected the "peer-reviewed scholarly" option and deselected the "full-text" option. Additionally, I conducted citation chaining through Google Scholar, accessed via the Walden Library, to connect with the institution's databases. Finally, I verified the peer-reviewed status of articles through Ulrich's Periodicals Directory via Walden University.

From an initial pool of approximately 800 plus articles across all databases, I eliminated duplicates and evaluated relevance by reviewing titles and abstracts. This process resulted in the identification of 395 sources related to workplace integration strategies and first-generation immigrant women. The literature review includes 335 references, all of which are cited in this study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Examining the complexities of workplace integration required a multi-theoretical lens that accounted for both the quality of the interpersonal exchanges and the compounding influence of multiple social identities. Accordingly, the study's main concepts, leader-member exchanges, intersectional identities, and lived experiences, were drawn from Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) leader-member exchange (LMX) and Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theories, in conjunction with IPA. LMX theory provided insights into how these women developed relationships with their leaders and colleagues (Bakar & McCann, 2014; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). Intersectionality theory illuminated how intersecting identities, such as gender, race, immigration status, and professional background, shaped these relationships and workplace integration (Grzanka et al., 2023; Ikhsano & Jakarudi, 2020; Johnson & Fournillier, 2023). Integrating these theoretical perspectives enabled a comprehensive examination of the multidimensional factors shaping workplace integration experiences. Together, these frameworks served as the analytical lens for the literature review and informed the interpretation of findings on workplace integration strategies among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women.

## **Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory**

The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) framework focused on the distinct exchange relationships that leaders established and nurtured with team members in the workplace. LMX theory emerged from the vertical dyad linkage framework proposed by Dansereau et al. (1975) and later advanced by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995). The model emphasized the quality of interactions between supervisors and subordinates (Bakar & McCann, 2014; Olaniyan, 2020; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). LMX is a relationship-oriented leadership theory that examines how leaders and employees interact (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Graen & Wakabayashi, 1994; Liden & Graen, 1980; Setiawan, 2020). According to LMX theorists, leaders established individualized interactions with each employee based on "currencies of exchange," such as trust, loyalty, and professional regard (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Lu et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020). These currencies occurred in varying degrees and combinations to influence positive outcomes, including improved performance and workplace opportunities.

### ***Factors that Influence LMX Relationships***

Factors such as personality, race, and gender influenced the quality of LMX relationships in the workplace. Leaders often developed stronger, higher-quality relationships with employees who shared similar interpersonal characteristics, such as personality, values, and demographics (Ariani & Feriyanto, 2024; Bakar & McCann, 2014; Buengeler et al., 2021; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021; Yang et al., 2023). Additionally, employees in the "in-group," those with preferential LMX relationships,

tended to gain greater trust, respect, and support (Buengeler et al., 2021), which played a crucial role in shaping early interactions between supervisors and employees, impacting resource allocation (Bakar & McCann, 2014; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021; Yang et al., 2023) and the integration process for highly skilled immigrant women in the workplace.

However, Ariani and Feriyanto (2024) argued that cultural differences significantly influence the formation of these high-quality relationships. Employees from diverse cultural backgrounds perceived their leaders' characteristics as dissimilar, resulting in lower-quality LMX relationships (Yang et al., 2023). Consequently, employees from different backgrounds viewed workplace integration strategies differently depending on the quality of their LMX relationships (Yang et al., 2023). A meta-analysis by Van Dyne et al. (2020) found that the positive effects of LMX, such as organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, justice perceptions, and turnover intentions, were stronger in Western, individualistic cultures than in Asian, collectivistic cultures. The benefits of high-quality LMX relationships were less evident among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women from collectivistic backgrounds working in a more individualistic organizational setting. For this group, cultural differences with leaders, who were often non-immigrants, led to lower perceived similarity, hindering the development of strong LMX relationships, particularly during early workplace integration.

### ***LMX Research***

Recent studies on LMX have increasingly focused on specific workplaces and professional fields. Research on LMX has shifted from serving primarily as a theoretical

framework to functioning as a practical explanation of how leadership affects employees' attitudes and performance in the workplace (Scandura & Meuser, 2022). The transition reflected a recognition that LMX, while important for understanding leadership dynamics, served more as a mechanism for explaining how leadership influenced outcomes rather than as a comprehensive theory of leadership itself (Gottfredson & Aguinis, 2017; Scandura & Meuser, 2022). This shift emphasized the importance of relational processes in leadership and underscored the need for more rigorous theoretical development in the field (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Gottfredson et al., 2020). LMX research has been criticized for lacking clear theoretical foundations and definitional consensus, with scholars arguing that the accumulation of empirical data alone did not constitute conceptual development or theory building (Sutton & Staw, 1995; Whetten, 1989). Workplaces operated under varying rules, cultures, and climates that defined appropriate behaviors, making cross-comparisons challenging. The importance of examining LMX relationships from a broad perspective that incorporates diverse experiences has been emphasized in the literature, particularly given that LMX dynamics were fluid and influenced by intersecting social identities in the workplace (Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). The quality of the employee's LMX relationship remained a critical factor in facilitating positive workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women.

### ***LMX Application***

The application of LMX theory in diverse workplace settings has been extensively studied. High-quality LMX relationships positively affected team performance and reduced turnover in diverse teams (Nishii & Mayer, 2009). Similarly,

inclusive leadership practices, which aligned with high-quality LMX relationships, enhanced employee belonging and job performance for the “in-group” (Northouse, 2021; Randel et al., 2018). Studies have shown that high-quality LMX relationships positively influence job satisfaction, organizational commitment, employee performance, creativity, and innovation (Aggarwal et al., 2020; Ji et al., 2023; Zuleima & Alvarado, 2022). The theory has been particularly valuable for examining the workplace experiences of diverse employees, with research indicating that LMX quality affects individuals across demographic backgrounds.

Highly skilled first-generation immigrant women from Kenya, as members of a minority group, often encountered challenges in forming high-quality LMX relationships due to differences in cultural background, gender, and immigrant status. Perceived dissimilarities led to lower-quality exchanges, which negatively impacted job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and overall workplace integration (Chrobot-Mason et al., 2016; Fitzsimmons et al., 2020; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Omilion-Hodges & Ptacek, 2021). However, LMX theory was used to identify strategies to address these disparities, emphasizing leaders' role in fostering equitable, high-quality relationships among team members. Leader training is essential for fostering strong LMX relationships across diverse work environments (Scandura & Lankau, 1996). These theoretical insights informed the study's analytical focus by guiding the examination of how leadership practices influenced participants' workplace experiences.

My research has built upon previous findings, including the impact of demographic similarities and differences on LMX quality and the role of inclusive

leadership practices in enhancing employee belongingness and performance. By focusing on a specific demographic group, this study contributed to a more refined understanding of LMX dynamics across diverse workplace settings, offering insights into how to develop high-quality working relationships despite perceived differences. Integration was further justified by the distinct challenges faced by highly skilled first-generation Kenyan-born women as multiply marginalized individuals who often faced out-group statuses at work, which hindered workplace integration. High-quality LMX relationships could mitigate these challenges by fostering trust, respect, and mutual obligation between leaders and members and by facilitating a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

### ***LMX Alignment***

The concept of LMX aligned with the research question by highlighting the significance of LMX relationships in facilitating workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women. The findings identified positive outcomes associated with high-quality LMX relationships that benefited from employees, leaders, and organizations (Güteryüz et al., 2024; Hammouri et al., 2022; Manelkar et al., 2022; March et al., 2023; Mustafa et al., 2023; Proby, 2022; Yang et al., 2023). LMX theory emphasized the individualized nature of leader-member interactions, acknowledging the variability in relationship quality and the significant impact on both individuals and organizational outcomes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). LMX theory provided a framework for examining how leader-member dynamics influenced the workplace integration of multiple marginalized, highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan-born women. The

framework aligned with the study's purpose by exploring how supportive, trust-based relationships with leaders can reduce exclusion and address resource limitations, enhancing professional experiences and contributions. Additionally, the theory informed the research question by emphasizing the pivotal role of high-quality LMX relationships in creating more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

### **Intersectionality Theory**

To complement the relational focus of the LMX theory, intersectionality theory provided a framework for examining how multiple social identities and systems of power converge to shape individual experiences. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the theory explored how overlapping social identities created unique patterns of discrimination and privilege. Widely applied in sociology, cultural anthropology, and psychology, intersectionality theory has reshaped the understanding of social inequalities and the complexities of individual experiences within society (Collins & Guo, 2021). The experiences of Black women in American society could not be fully explained by focusing on racism or sexism alone but required an analysis of the interplay between these factors (Crenshaw, 1989; Özsoy, 2022). Emerging from critical legal studies and feminist thought, the theory addressed the limitations of single-axis frameworks in explaining social inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989; Grzanka et al., 2023; Özsoy, 2022). Intersectional theory provided a valuable lens for examining the nuanced experiences of highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in relation to workplace integration strategies.

Although Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality," the concept was built from earlier critiques of mainstream feminism by Black, Chicana, and lesbian feminists who felt excluded from the women's movement in the United States (Collins, 1990; Hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1984). Intersectionality theory was used to illustrate how connected systems and structures of power create unique lived experiences influenced by multiple forms of inequity or disadvantage (Christoffersen & McCabe, 2024). The framework was subsequently applied to various social categorizations, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Ikhsano & Jakarudi, 2020; Johnson & Fournillier, 2023; Ortner, 2003). The analytical lens was beneficial for understanding the experiences of Kenyan immigrant women, who may have encountered intersecting forms of discrimination based on race, gender, and immigrant status, which revealed complex patterns of disadvantage and privilege.

### ***Intersectionality Research***

The concept of intersectionality, though relatively new in terminology, was built on earlier sociological frameworks that addressed the complexity of social stratification. Max Weber, a pioneering sociologist of the early 20th century, described social class as comprising three interrelated dimensions: wealth, prestige, and power (Brennan, 2020). This early recognition of layered social factors provided a foundation for a more detailed understanding of identity and social position. Contemporary sociological frameworks have expanded on these ideas to address the intersections of social identities. These developments have continued to shape modern approaches to understanding the multifaceted nature of social inequality.

Historically, sociology and anthropology often reviewed race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and sexual orientation as separate categories, neglecting how these elements interact to shape individual experiences. Early research frequently treated social groups, such as African Americans or women, as homogenous, relying on assumed dominant identities (Chance, 2020; Norris, 2023). Such reductionist approaches overlooked the diversity within groups and the complexities of social life. Contemporary scholars have emphasized the need to incorporate variables such as religion, gender, social class, immigration, and age to highlight variations within groups previously viewed as uniform (Collins, 2022). This perspective challenged outdated notions of culture as a fixed, singular entity and emphasized cultural diversity and dynamism (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Norris, 2023). This broader perspective promoted a deeper understanding of diversity and challenged simplistic categorizations of social groups.

Modern cultural anthropology characterizes culture as a dynamic process shaped by individuals and constantly evolving through socialization. This perspective rejected the idea of culture as static or confined solely to groups, instead emphasizing its fluidity and contested nature (Collins & Guo, 2021). Academic discussions on intersectionality now explore race, ethnicity, gender, immigration, social class, and sexual orientation as interconnected elements shaping cultural identities and experiences of privilege or oppression. These insights encouraged a rethinking of cultural dynamics as flexible and multidimensional. The "prism of difference," which conceptualizes intersectionality in terms of gender, race, class, and sexuality, moved beyond binary categorizations to

include a broader spectrum of social relations influenced by factors like nationality and age (Evans-Winters, 2021; Grzanka et al., 2023; Haskins, 2020; Sparks, 2023; Zinn et al., 2016). In addition, the "matrix of domination" was developed to describe how systems of power operated across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains, shaping social positions and interactions (Anderson, 2021; Collins, 1990, 2022). Collectively, these frameworks offered valuable tools for analyzing the interconnected effects of power and inequality across diverse social contexts.

Intersectionality theory provided a framework for analyzing the complex workplace experiences of diverse individuals. This theoretical lens was used to identify intersections of identity and lived experiences. The framework was applied to understand how professional, immigrant =gender, and racial identities intersected for highly skilled immigrant women, producing both opportunities and challenges within workplace contexts.

### ***Intersectionality Application***

Intersectionality has been used as a framework for analyzing immigrant experiences in workplace settings. Particularly, experiences were influenced by investigating the influence of gender, race, and native language on workplace outcomes for immigrants (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020). Earnings and career advancement across immigrant groups and their descendants were quantified, revealing an approximately \$10,000 annual pay gap between the most and least advantaged groups. Societal power structures were reviewed in relation to workplace culture, human resources, and organizational roles. Findings indicated that employees holding multiple disadvantaged

identities often experienced adverse outcomes, such as limited career mobility for Black men and challenging working conditions for Hispanic immigrant women (Thatcher et al., 2023). On the other hand, White immigrant women benefited from racial privileges that mitigated disadvantages associated with gender and immigrant status (Berghs & Dyson, 2022; McBride & Rodriguez, 2024). Analyzing these findings highlighted how intersecting identities shaped workplace experiences and outcomes for immigrant workers.

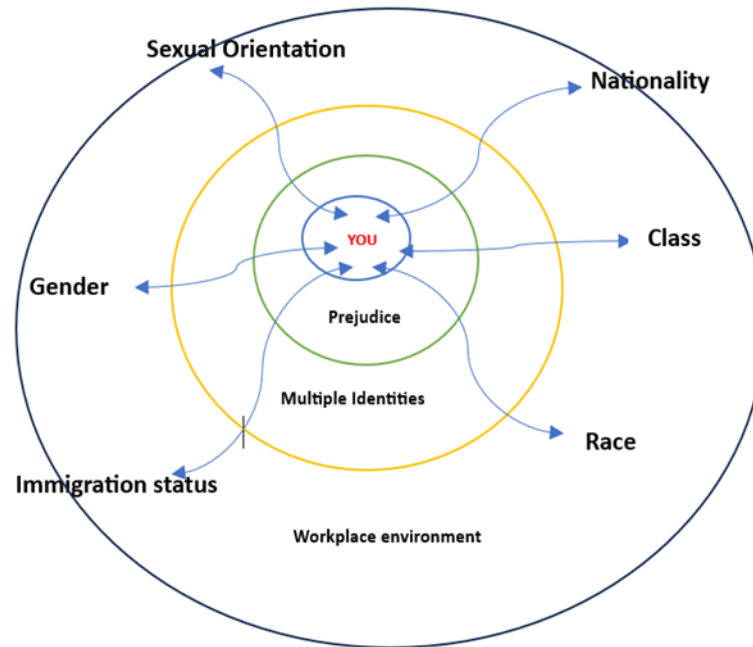
To build inclusive work environments, managers must actively combat discrimination, stereotyping, and incivility through initiatives that account for employees' complex identities and backgrounds. Gender and racial biases were understood as contributors to economic inequities, with evidence indicating that gendered racism manifested through prejudices held by employers, coworkers, customers, and communities (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020; Kim, 2020; Opara et al., 2020). These intersecting prejudices highlighted some of the complexities faced by highly skilled first-generation immigrant Kenyan women with workplace integration.

### ***Intersectionality Alignment***

The study explored the lived experiences of first-generation immigrant women, using intersectionality theory as a framework to analyze how identities, power structures, and cultural influences interact to shape Kenyan women's workplace integration. The analysis went beyond simple categories, examining how discrimination and privilege were interconnected rather than separated, which influenced overall perceptions (Barker, 2019; Jain, 2021). This framework was helpful for understanding the detailed dynamics

of workplace integration strategies for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women (Collins & Guo, 2021). By applying intersectionality theory, the study offered a broad view of the various challenges faced by immigrant women.

The use of intersectionality theory was essential for understanding the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women regarding workplace integration. Applying an intersectional perspective allowed for a deeper analysis of the experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California, informing the development of more effective strategies for their workplace integration (Fitzsimmons et al., 2020). The theory served as a solid framework for examining how workplace norms and value systems impacted the integration experiences of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women (Crenshaw, 1989; Grzanka et al., 2023). The approach was intended to generate practical insights to guide organizational policies and practices that promote equity and inclusion. The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the intersectionality framework as applied to workplace integration, highlighting identity factors, power structures, and cultural influences, and their effects on workplace norms, values, and strategies for integrating highly skilled first-generation immigrant women.

**Figure 1***Intersectionality at Work*

Understanding the complexity of workplace integration among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women required consideration of both interpersonal dynamics and structural inequalities. LMX and intersectionality theories were intentionally integrated because together they addressed the relational and structural dimensions of participants' workplace integration experiences. LMX theory focused on the quality of interpersonal relationships between leaders and members, offering insight into how access, support, recognition, and professional opportunities were shaped through daily workplace interactions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Intersectionality theory complemented this perspective by accounting for how multiple, intersecting social identities such as gender, race, immigration status, and professional background structured power relations

within interactions and influenced how leadership exchanges were experienced (Collins & Guo, 2021; Crenshaw, 1989). Together, these theories established a foundation for examining workplace integration as both a relational and identity-structured process.

Both theories align with IPA through their shared emphasis on subjective experiences and meaning-making (MacLeod, 2019; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The IPA provided a methodological framework for examining how participants interpreted their workplace experiences. At the same time, LMX and intersectionality offered complementary lenses for understanding these interpretations at the interpersonal and systemic levels. This alignment ensured that the methodological approach was consistent with the theory.

Applying LMX theory revealed that perceived differences in race, gender, and immigration status influenced the quality of leader-member relationships and integration outcomes (Aggarwal et al., 2020). Intersectionality theory contextualized these relational dynamics by highlighting how overlapping identity-based inequities shaped access to leadership support, visibility, and professional inclusion. IPA facilitated an in-depth exploration of how participants interpreted and navigated these dynamics over time, generating detailed accounts of their professional experiences (MacLeod, 2019; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). The combined lens supported a nuanced interpretation of participants' lived experiences. The integration of LMX theory, intersectionality theory, and IPA strengthened analytical rigor by linking individual meaning-making to broader relational and structural processes within the workplace. Together, these perspectives

supported a comprehensive examination of workplace integration among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

Workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation immigrants involved a complex process of mutual adaptation between employees and organizations. This comprehensive dynamic encompassed critical elements such as skill recognition, career development, social inclusion, and overall well-being (Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Highly skilled immigrants have encountered numerous challenges in realizing their potential relative to their qualifications and expertise (Arnita, 2022; Farashah & Blomquist, 2022; Okafor & Kalu, 2023). Many organizations lacked a thorough understanding of effective strategies for integrating this group, which led to the underutilization of these employees and a phenomenon known as "brain waste," where the skills and qualifications of highly educated immigrants remained underappreciated (Barker, 2020; Batalova et al., 2020; Elo et al., 2020; Ham, 2020; Kuknor et al., 2023). This issue has been even more pronounced for first-generation immigrant women, who often faced additional challenges such as gender discrimination, structural barriers, limited language skills, lack of insider cultural knowledge, and fewer opportunities to build social networks (Elo et al., 2020; Fitzsimmons et al., 2020; Nowicka, 2024; Vito & Sethi, 2020). The complexities of immigrant integration regarding career growth, team performance, and leadership have garnered increasing attention.

Researchers emphasized the critical importance of addressing the specific challenges that highly skilled first-generation immigrant women faced during integration process (Ertorer et al., 2022; Ocampo et al., 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). Yet, despite these challenges, the unique experiences of this particular demographic remained significantly underexplored. The substantial economic contributions of foreign-born female professionals were often overshadowed by the systemic challenges they faced in integrating into the labor market.

Immigrant women, especially first-generation immigrants, have faced significant obstacles in workforce integration despite their important contributions to the U.S. economy (American Immigration Council, 2022; Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). Over 23 million immigrant women were part of the U.S. labor force, playing crucial roles across various industries and boosting economic growth (American Immigration Council, 2023a). However, they encountered barriers related to social, cultural, national, geographical, and workplace expectations (Johnsen et al., 2022; Ruiz & Ravitch, 2023). These obstacles included language barriers, unfamiliar workplace norms, discrimination, and struggles with work-life balance, which were often exacerbated by limited access to immediate social support (Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023; Nwabah & Heitner, 2009; Opute et al., 2021). Workplace integration issues extended beyond job-specific factors.

Arnita (2022) highlighted challenges such as cultural differences, language proficiency, discrimination, and recognition of foreign credentials. Additional difficulties in accessing community support and navigating socio-legal systems created a complex

problem that affected career opportunities, team dynamics, and overall economic productivity (Ertorer et al., 2022; Ocampo et al., 2022). Overcoming these barriers required targeted policies and workplace practices aimed at addressing the unique challenges faced by immigrant women, improving their integration, and supporting economic growth.

Achieving true equity in the modern labor market necessitated a shift from isolated interventions to holistic, multi-stakeholder partnerships designed to dismantle systemic obstacles. Establishing collaborative efforts involving supportive institutions, businesses, community service agencies, and immigrant workers was recommended to address challenges and advance DEI goals (Selvanandan & Reid, 2021). These efforts aimed to create inclusive workplace practices that supported the integration of immigrant women into broader social and economic systems (Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Strategies designed to facilitate workplace integration for highly skilled, first-generation immigrants, particularly women, should account for regional contexts and cultural backgrounds. The success of immigrant workplace integration often depended on the support provided by workplace leaders in overcoming barriers.

Leaders who fostered strong leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships with immigrant women offered mentorship, championed fair treatment, and addressed cultural and communication gaps. These actions helped reduce issues related to language barriers, unfamiliar workplace norms, and discrimination, leading to a more inclusive and equitable environment (Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023; Opute et al., 2021). Factors such as immigration status, gender, and race influenced immigrant women's workplace

experiences, potentially intensifying challenges like balancing work and personal life, accessing social support, and having foreign qualifications recognized (Arnita, 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019). Understanding the specific challenges faced by highly skilled Kenyan immigrant women could inform targeted strategies to improve their workplace integration and professional experiences.

### **Immigration in the United States of America**

Immigration has long been a divisive issue in the United States. The United States offers a wide variety of immigrant visa categories, including family-based, employment-based, adoption, special immigrant classifications, and diversity visas (U.S. Department of State, 2024a). After the decline of the COVID-19 pandemic and the relaxation of restrictive immigration policies under the Trump administration, legal immigration significantly increased. For example, the State Department issued 10.4 million temporary visas in 2023, exceeding the 8.7 million issued in 2019 (U.S. Department of State, 2024a). Additionally, 969,000 immigrants were naturalized that year, marking the highest annual total since the Great Depression (Batalova, 2024). Holding nearly 20% of the global migrant population, the United States, which made up only about 5% of the world's population, hosted the largest number of immigrants worldwide (Batalova, 2024; Klobucista et al., 2022). Immigrants accounted for about 14% of the U.S. population at that time, with women and girls representing 51.3% of the foreign-born population (American Immigration Council, 2023b). Data indicated that immigrants, especially women, played an important role in shaping the social and economic fabric of the United States.

Highly educated immigrant women constituted a crucial part of the U.S. workforce, but many faced challenges in fully leveraging their skills and education. Over 23 million immigrant women lived in the United States, with one-third holding at least a bachelor's degree (American Immigration Council, 2023a). Despite these qualifications, immigrant women often encountered barriers such as discrimination (Batalova, 2024) and underemployment (American Immigration Council, 2023a; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023a). Unauthorized immigrants, who made up about 4.5% of the U.S. workforce, included a significant number of women, many of whom faced restrictions that limited their legal work eligibility (Costa, 2023; Millet, 2022). Immigrant women represented 16% of the U.S. female labor force, working across various industries. However, they consistently earned less than their male and United States-born counterparts (American Immigration Council, 2023a). Foreign-born workers were overrepresented in service and production jobs, often facing systemic barriers to access higher-skilled positions (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023a). The underutilization of highly skilled immigrant women in the workforce was a missed opportunity for economic growth and social integration (Barker, 2019; Cokadar, 2022). The challenges faced by immigrant women highlighted the importance of targeted efforts to unlock their full potential and reduce disparities in the workforce.

Systemic barriers, including challenges related to gender, immigration status, and race, have often intersected to hinder immigrant women's full integration into the labor market. These barriers were worsened by limited recognition of foreign qualifications, work-life balance, and restricted access to support networks (Arnita, 2022; Gabrielli &

Impicciatore, 2021; Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023). The increasing rates of immigration in the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 2024) highlighted the need for effective workplace integration strategies. Addressing the underemployment of highly educated immigrant women required comprehensive approaches that considered the intersectionality of their experiences, recognized foreign credentials, and fought workplace discrimination through systemic measures. Overcoming these barriers was crucial for creating equitable opportunities and utilizing the diverse talents of immigrant women in the workforce.

Successive presidential administrations significantly shaped the evolution of U.S. immigration policy. During the first Trump administration, policies focused on reducing both legal and illegal immigration through executive orders and strict border controls (Klobucista et al., 2022). Conversely, the Biden administration attempted to reverse some of these policies but faced logistical challenges due to a surge in immigration. The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported an increase in border encounters from just over 400,000 in fiscal year 2020 to 1.6 million in fiscal year 2021 (Gramlich & Scheller, 2021), thereby making it harder to balance security and humanitarian concerns. Congressional inaction stalled comprehensive immigration reform, leading to fragmented policies and reliance on executive actions (Hu & Jiang, 2024; Klobucista et al., 2022). The differing strategies of these administrations revealed the complexity of managing immigration policies amid fluctuating political priorities and operational challenges.

The unpredictability of the United States' immigration policy, characterized by administrative changes and legislative stagnation, has created uncertainty for both

immigrants and employers. Although foreign-born workers accounted for 17.4% of the U.S. labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023b), reliance on temporary or disputed policies failed to address the systemic challenges that hindered immigrants' integration into the workforce. A more stable and comprehensive immigration policy framework is crucial for leveraging immigrants' economic contributions, addressing security concerns, and meeting humanitarian obligations. A long-term, cohesive approach to immigration reform can offer the stability and clarity needed for individuals, businesses, and communities to succeed.

Developing fair workplace integration strategies for immigrant women requires employers to consider the diversity of their backgrounds and experiences within the broader policy context. Such efforts could have helped close the gap between their qualifications and employment outcomes, fostering a more inclusive and fair U.S. labor market. By aligning workplace practices with wider policy objectives, organizations could play a vital role in empowering immigrant women and maximizing their economic contributions.

### **African Immigrants in the United States**

African immigration patterns are connected to broader trends of globalization and increased interconnectivity between Africa and the United States of America. The number of African Immigrants in the United States has grown rapidly over the past few decades (Hamilton, 2020). African immigrants to the United States account for 6% of foreign-born immigrants and 0.7% of the U.S. population (Gichane et al., 2023; Tamir, 2022). African arrivals increased dramatically from approximately 460 per year between

1861 and 1961 to nearly 60,000 per year between 2000 and 2005 (Corra, 2023). Between 2019 and 2000, the Black African immigrant population grew by 246%, rising from approximately 600,000 to 2.3 million (Tamir & Anderson, 2022). Consequently, African immigrants constitute 42% of the total foreign-born Black population, a significant jump from the 23% recorded at the turn of the millennium (Tamir & Anderson, 2022). The increased flow of African immigrants has significantly contributed to their socio-economic mobility in the United States, with many African immigrants securing high-skilled positions that align with the host country's workforce needs (Corra, 2023; Hamilton, 2020). This demographic shift underscores the growing importance of African immigrants in shaping the Black diaspora within the United States and their increasing representation in critical workforce sectors.

A specific mix of immigration policies and political uncertainty led to a steady increase in the number of African immigrants moving to North America. The migration of African immigrants to the United States has been influenced by multiple factors, including United States immigration policy changes and political instability in African nations (Corra, 2023). The United States Immigration Act and the Diversity Visa Lottery Program played critical roles in attracting skilled African immigrants and increasing the inflow of highly educated, qualified individuals (Corra, 2023; Hamilton, 2020). A significant portion of African immigrants, mainly from countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia, achieved legal residency through employment or educational credentials, highlighting the program's emphasis on skilled immigration (Corra, 2023; Hamilton, 2020). Additional factors driving immigration from African countries to the United States

include economic opportunities, educational pursuits, political stability, and family reunification (Gichane et al., 2023; Tamir, 2022). Consequently, these factors have created a unique immigrant community characterized by high levels of education and a strong focus on career development.

African immigrants significantly contributed to the socio-economic advancement of the United States, with many entering high-skilled jobs. that the growing influx of Black immigrants, mainly from African countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia, reshaped Black America's demographic and socioeconomic landscape, with many African immigrants achieving legal residency through employment-based programs (Hamilton, 2020). Moreover, the growing diversity in sending countries reflected a broader shift in global immigration patterns, signaling increased representation from Central, East, and West Africa (Corra, 2023). Overall, the increase in African immigration to the United States, driven by policy changes and skill-based visa programs, created new opportunities for African immigrants, enhancing both the U.S. labor force and the socio-economic mobility of African communities.

The decision to migrate was often influenced by a variety of factors, particularly for African immigrants seeking new opportunities. For many, the pursuit of financial stability and access to high-quality educational opportunities was a primary motivator. Economic hardships in many African countries, such as high unemployment and limited access to quality jobs, drive individuals to seek opportunities abroad (Tamir, 2022). Economic push factors are pivotal in African immigration, with many immigrants viewing the United States as a land of opportunity for achieving upward mobility

(Gichane et al., 2023). The economic disparity between African nations and the United States served as a significant motivator, promoting Africans to seek better employment prospects and improve their living conditions.

Educational attainment also played a crucial role in immigrants' success in the U.S. job market. Higher educational levels among immigrants from Nigeria (64% with a bachelor's degree or higher) and South Africa (58%), with Cameroonians (52%), Kenyans (49%), and Ghanaians (42%), following closely behind, contributed significantly to their success (Tamir, 2022). Educational opportunities are a significant pull factor as many African students view the United States as a top destination for higher education, particularly for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Corra, 2023). This motivation was reinforced by the fact that many African immigrants arrive on student visas and remain in the United States after completing their studies (Tamir, 2022). The U.S. educational system, coupled with potential employment after graduation, made it an attractive destination for African students seeking academic and career advancement.

Overall, the patterns of African immigration to the United States have been shaped by economic, political, family reunification, and educational factors (Gichane et al., 2023; Tamir, 2022). As the African immigrant population increased, these factors remained central to understanding the dynamics of African migration to the United States. This ongoing trend highlighted the multifaceted nature of immigration decisions and the enduring appeal of the United States as a destination for those seeking new opportunities.

## **African Women Immigrants in the United States**

African immigrant women in the United States represent a growing, highly skilled population whose immigration experiences are shaped by multiple social, economic, and educational factors. Many African immigrant women relocated to the United States for educational, economic, or family reunification (Corley & Sabri, 2021; Gichane et al., 2023). A significant number also sought refuge from conflict, political instability, or gender-based persecution in their home countries. Education was a prominent motivator, with many women migrating for advanced studies, resulting in relatively high educational attainment among African immigrant women in the United States (Gichane et al., 2023). Evidence indicated that African immigrant women contributed significantly to the U.S. workforce, particularly in healthcare, education, and the services industry (Nwabah & Heitner, 2009). Despite often holding high levels of education, these women faced barriers such as underemployment, wage disparities, and difficulties with credential recognition, which hindered their full economic integration. Understanding these challenges was crucial for developing strategies that support their successful integration and maximize their contributions in the workplace.

The journey of African immigrant women in the United States involved navigating a complex landscape of identity and cultural adaptation. These women often faced overlapping identities related to race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, sex, and immigration status (Corra, 2023). These intersecting identities created challenges in cultural dynamics and required balancing the preservation of their African heritage with adapting to American social norms. Cultural identity played a crucial role, as these

women encountered difficulties in maintaining traditional roles while adjusting to a more individualistic and often more gender-equal society in the United States (Corley & Sabri, 2021). Many African women continued to embrace their traditional roles as mothers and caregivers after arriving, reflecting collectivist cultural norms that prioritized family connection, group orientation, respect, and obedience (Opiri & Otundo, 2021). Cultural focus on the participants' well-being contrasts with the individualistic values common in American society, where personal autonomy has often been prioritized. Understanding these dynamics was essential to understanding the unique experiences of African immigrant women as they navigated life in a new country.

The economic experiences of African immigrant women in the United States revealed significant insights into their labor market outcomes. An analysis of U.S. Census data revealed that African immigrant women tended to fare better in the U.S. labor market than many other groups (Corra, 2023). Unlike their male counterparts, these women experienced higher net earnings than all other groups of women, including native-born, non-Hispanic white women, reflecting a complex interplay of factors, including gendered perceptions of race and women's distinct pathways to employment and economic participation (Corra, 2023; Hamilton, 2020). Societal attitudes, cultural norms, and structural barriers affected men and women immigrants differently, contributing to different economic outcomes (Tamir & Anderson, 2022). Understanding these nuanced dynamics required a comprehensive examination of the intersections among gender, race, and immigration status, as well as an analysis of the specific challenges and opportunities encountered by African women immigrants in the U.S. labor

market (Hamilton, 2020; Tamir, 2022). Given the complex interplay of factors affecting highly skilled first-generation immigrant women in the workforce, this study offered an opportunity to understand the unique experiences of Kenyan women with workplace integration. Shedding light on the broader implications for policy and support systems aimed at facilitating successful integration for immigrant women.

### ***Kenyan Immigrants in the United States***

Understanding the experiences of Kenyan immigrants in the United States required situating them within the broader demographic and socioeconomic trends. The Kenyan-born immigrant population increased by 348% between 2019 and 2020, making Kenyans one of the fastest-growing Black immigrant groups (Tamir & Anderson, 2022). Growth rate among Kenyan immigrants exceeded that of other major African source countries, including Ethiopia (300%), Somalia (205%), and Nigeria and Ghana (both nearly 200%). The largest African immigrant populations, including Kenyans, were concentrated in California, New York, Texas, Maryland, and Virginia (Tamir & Anderson, 2022). Such demographic expansion highlighted the importance of examining workplace integration experiences among highly skilled Kenyan women, particularly in states with substantial Kenyan immigrant populations, including California.

Kenyan migration to the United States was influenced by educational, economic, political, and family factors, reflecting both broader African migration patterns and Kenya's unique context (Gichane et al., 2023; Tamir, 2022). Kenyan immigrants had among the highest levels of educational attainment among African groups, with 49% of Kenyans in the United States classified as highly educated (Tamir, 2022). Educational

attachment enabled access to skilled employment opportunities and played a crucial role in labor market success (Gichane et al., 2023). The U.S. labor market rewarded specialized skills and advanced education, particularly in sectors such as technology, healthcare, and engineering, which allowed immigrants from countries with strong education systems, such as Kenya, to secure professional positions (Corra, 2023). In contrast, immigrants from conflict-affected nations such as Somalia and Sudan were often limited to low-wage or unskilled jobs (Corra, 2023; Gichane et al., 2023). These patterns highlighted the influence of education and economic motivation on professional integration and emphasized the need to explore workplace integration strategies among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women. Understanding these factors was crucial for developing effective support systems and policies that facilitated workplace integration.

Political factors also influenced Kenyan immigration. Although Kenya generally maintained greater stability than other African nations, periods of political unrest and corruption, such as the post-election violence of 2007-2008, contributed to spikes in emigration (Gichane et al., 2023; Tamir, 2022). More broadly, political instability and conflict in African nations, including Somalia, Sudan, and Eritrea, drove waves of immigration, particularly among refugees and asylum seekers (Gichane et al., 2023; Tamir, 2022). These political push factors, combined with economic and educational drivers, have shaped the complex motivations for Kenyan migration.

Family reunification was another important factor influencing African immigration to the United States. Many immigrants relocated to join relatives, supported

by family-sponsored visa policies and immigration laws that allowed established immigrants to sponsor family members for admission (Batalova, 2024; Gichane et al., 2023). This process often created a chain migration effect, facilitating subsequent arrivals and shaping community networks that supported integration in the United States. Ultimately, family reunification continues to play a crucial role in maintaining and strengthening immigrant communities.

### **Kenyan Immigrant Women in the United States**

Understanding the workplace integration experiences of Kenyan immigrant women required situating them within broader demographic, educational, and labor market patterns in the United States. Approximately 157,000 Kenyan immigrants and their families resided in the United States; of these, 76,000 were women (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Kenyan immigrant women demonstrated workforce participation rates that exceeded the national average, indicating substantial engagement in the U.S labor market (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Kenyan diaspora households reported median annual incomes of approximately \$11,000 higher than the national median, and nearly 40% of Kenyans in the United States owned homes (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). These indicators reflected substantial human capital and economic participation, while also signaling the importance of examining how such credentials and stability translated into workplace outcomes.

However, structural and social inequalities shaped how these advantages were experienced within professional environments. Despite these indicators of educational attainment and economic stability, Kenyan-born women experienced intersecting forms

of disadvantage related to gender, race, and immigration status, which shaped their workplace experiences (Gichane et al., 2023; Liebig & Tronstad, 2018; Okeke-Ihejirika et al., 2019). These structural barriers influenced access to opportunities, recognition, and advancement, underscoring the importance of examining the lived experiences of highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in workplace integration strategies in California.

### **Immigrants in California**

As a primary gateway for global migration, California has served as a home to a complex immigrant population that has contributed to both demographic change and the development of high-skilled labor sectors. California, a state with a long-standing history of immigration, remained a key player in the U.S. immigration landscape despite recent demographic shifts and policy challenges (Lawrence & Cummins, 2023; Le & Pastor, 2023; Selby, 2018). These conditions reflected California's continued role as a central destination for immigrants across multiple historical periods and policy environments. Nearly half of California's population was foreign-born, a third of the workforce consisted of immigrants, and almost half of the state's children had at least one immigrant parent (Le & Pastor, 2023; Mejia et al., 2024). These demographic patterns demonstrated the extent to which immigration shaped family structures, labor markets, and community composition across the state. Additionally, nearly 2 million foreign-born residents in California held college degrees, making significant contributions to high-skill sectors such as technology and healthcare (Batalova, 2024). This concentration of

educated immigrants underscored the importance of immigrant labor to California's innovation-driven economy.

To place the California immigrant demographic profile within a broader national context, comparable educational patterns were observed across the nation. National data indicated that more than one-third of immigrant women aged 25 and older held a bachelor's degree or higher (American Immigration Council, 2023a). While immigrants in California were more likely than United States-born individuals to have advanced degrees, they were also more likely to lack a high school diploma (American Immigration Council, 2023a; Batalova & Fix, 2017). This educational polarization underscored both the structural opportunities available to highly educated immigrants and the persistent barriers faced by low-skilled immigrants within the same labor market. For highly skilled immigrants, these conditions shaped access to professional networks, leadership relationships, and advancement opportunities. These conditions reinforced the need for differentiated workplace integration strategies that accounted for varied educational and professional backgrounds.

### ***Shifts in the Labor Market***

California's evolving economic structure reshaped workforce demands and altered pathways for immigrant employment and integration. Over the past three decades, California's industrial landscape shifted from manufacturing toward service and technology sectors, which increasingly required a highly skilled workforce (Le & Pastor, 2023). The transition contributed to a labor market divide between high-demand professional roles and more unstable, lower-paying jobs for less-skilled workers.

Consequently, California's immigrant population became increasingly represented across both high-skill and low-skill sectors, while continuing to encounter persistent challenges related to workplace integration (Batalova, 2024; Mejia et al., 2024). Labor market projections indicated that the state's emphasis on skill-based immigration could raise the proportion of highly skilled immigrants from approximately 11% to as high as 57%, potentially adding approximately 1.1 million immigrants annually and exceeding national trends (Mejia et al., 2024). Such labor market dynamics highlighted the importance of examining workplace integration strategies that address structural inequities while promoting the effective utilization of immigrant talent in California's economy (American Immigration Council, 2022; Hayes, 2023; Le & Pastor, 2023). Conditions within California's labor market also created an empirical basis for examining how workplace integration efforts influenced professional access, advancement, and retention among immigrant workers. Situating workplace integration within these broader economic shifts provided the necessary context for analyzing how highly skilled Kenyan immigrants navigated professional integration and career development within California workplaces.

California's aging population further underscored the importance of workplace integration. Projections indicated a notable increase in residents aged 65 and older by 2060, intensifying labor demand in key industries such as healthcare and caregiving (Le & Pastor, 2023). Immigrants already comprised 45.2% of healthcare providers, 39.2% of STEM professionals, and 38.9% of entrepreneurs in the state (Mejia et al., 2024). As a substantial component of California's workforce, immigrants contributed not only to

sustaining essential industries but also to broader economic growth. Workplace integration efforts, therefore, required attention to systemic inequalities and the alignment of opportunities with immigrants' skills, credentials, and professional capacity.

The evolving demographic landscape in California reflected broader national trends in immigration patterns and policies. The U.S. Department of State (2024b) reported that California consistently ranks among the top states for immigrant visa applications, despite a decline in the state's share of the national immigrant population. Despite this decline, California continued to maintain a significant immigrant population (Le & Pastor, 2023). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023a), foreign-born workers in California comprised 32.8% of the state's labor force, a proportion substantially higher than the national average of 17.4%. These trends underscored the importance of immigration in shaping California's demographic and economic landscape.

Policy orientations supportive of immigrant inclusion were reflected in several statewide initiatives. For example, California implemented programs such as Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) and California Green Zones to improve environmental health in immigrant communities while supporting local economic development (Lim & Fahnestock, 2024). State-level support for immigrant entrepreneurship was also documented, including accounts of Mexican families who transitioned from migrant farm labor to winery ownership (Linn, 2022). At the same time, California's immigration environment was shaped by historical political challenges. Legislative efforts such as Proposition 187 and the Sensenbrenner Bill influenced public discourse on immigration, though these measures didn't eliminate the states' appeal to the

immigrant population (Bobadilla, 2023; Brown, 2022). The high proportion of foreign-born workers in California's labor force, nearly twice the national average, reinforced the central role of immigrants to the state's economy (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023a). California's experience navigating change provided important context, and examining immigrant integration processes, particularly among highly skilled first-generation immigrant women. Such conditions underscored the importance of examining workplace integration strategies capable of addressing persistent inequities within a diverse and evolving labor market.

### ***Immigration Trends in California***

California's immigration landscape provided a distinct context for understanding workplace integration among highly skilled first-generation immigrants. The state's diverse population and progressive policy environment positioned California as a focal point of immigration debates, with policymakers addressing economic security and humanitarian debates (Klobucista et al., 2022). These macro-level conditions shaped the organizational and institutional context in which workplace integration occurred.

Workforce integration, however, remained complex and uneven. Misconceptions regarding immigrants' impact on crime rates and public resources persisted despite empirical evidence to the contrary (Helbling & Meierrieks, 2022). Public perceptions and policy discourse influenced organizational inclusion practices and shaped how immigrant employees were viewed within professional settings. Ongoing debates regarding pressure on public services such as education, healthcare, and social services continued to inform political and organizational decision-making (Alesina & Tabellini, 2024; Mayda et al.,

2022). Such conditions reflected structural constraints that affected access to opportunities and integration.

California's demographic and economic environment added further complexity to workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women. Economic demand and social dynamics jointly shaped integration trajectories (Le & Pastor, 2023; Mejia et al., 2024). Although workforce diversity and demand for skilled labor created potential opportunities, challenges related to recognition, advancement, and inclusion remained evident. Workplace integration, defined as processes involving skill recognition, career mobility, social inclusion, and professional well-being, was shaped by California's specific economic and social context (Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). These conditions contributed to structural and organizational barriers that complicated the professional integration.

Fiscal pressures and economic constraints further hindered the implementation of effective integration strategies. As California continued to attract a substantial proportion of the nation's immigrants, due to economic opportunity and policy orientation, the need for context-specific integration approaches became increasingly apparent. Integration strategies required consideration of diverse educational backgrounds, professional credentials, and systemic barriers experienced by highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women, whose experiences were shaped by both individual qualifications and systemic barriers.

California's unique economic, social, and demographic context provided a critical setting for examining how highly skilled first-generation immigrant women

navigated workplace integration. The concentration of immigrant workers, the evolving labor market, and sectoral diversity underscored the relevance of examining workplace integration within this regional context. A research gap emerged, indicating the need for focused examination into workplace integration strategies for highly skilled immigrant women, particularly those from Kenya (Le & Pastor, 2023; Mejia et al., 2024).

Integration efforts required attention to both general challenges faced by immigrant professionals and socio-economic factors specific to California's dynamic environment (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). Understanding these gaps was crucial to developing targeted policies and organizational strategies to support equitable integration and maximize the contributions of highly skilled immigrant women.

Given the broader challenges immigrant women faced in the U.S. labor market, the regional context further underscored the necessity of research on effective integration strategies (American Immigration Council, 2023a). California's role as a hub of immigrant diversity, combined with its sociocultural characteristics, provided a relevant context for examining the interplay among the policy environment, organizational practices, and immigrant experiences (Armita, 2022). Barriers emerged from interconnected factors, including policy debates, legal frameworks, and societal attitudes. Despite documented economic contributions, highly skilled immigrants have continued to encounter workplace integration challenges, underscoring the need for targeted integration strategies.

### *Integration Strategies in California*

California implemented multiple policy and programmatic approaches to address challenges related to workplace integration and improve outcomes for immigrant workers. State and regional efforts included collecting and analyzing data to evaluate the economic contributions of immigrants, including undocumented workers (Le & Pastor, 2023; Sánchez, 2018). Community-based initiatives, such as the Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative (CVIIC), offered resources and support designed to facilitate integration into local communities and labor markets (CVIIC, n.d.). These approaches reflected coordinated efforts to promote inclusion and support immigrant participation in the workforce and broader society.

Legal reforms also contributed to workforce integration outcomes for immigrants. Legalization and labor protections were presented as mechanisms to strengthen fair labor standards (Costa, 2024). Prior research indicated that recognition of immigrants' economic and social contributions was associated with improved integration outcomes (Nardon et al., 2021). The California Values Act (SB54) included provisions that supported access to legal recourse for immigrant workers pursuing labor-violation claims, thereby reinforcing labor market participants among foreign workers. (Brown, 2022; Costa, 2024). Notably, the California Values Act (SB 54) included provisions to ensure that immigrant workers could access justice when pursuing labor-violation claims (Costa, 2024). These legal measures significantly supported the labor market integration of foreign-born workers.

Despite these efforts, immigration policies have remained a contested issue. Some public and political discourse framed immigrants as competitors to native-born workers, raising concerns regarding job displacement and wage suppression. However, empirical research demonstrated minimal negative labor market effects and showed that immigration contributed to economic growth through expanded labor supply and consumer demand (Alesina & Tabellini, 2024; Nowrasteh, 2021). Skill-based immigration policies were associated with differential effects, benefiting some labor segments while posing challenges for highly skilled immigrants navigating credentialing and authorization processes (Oliinyk et al., 2021; Piyapromdee, 2021). Overall, immigrants were found to contribute positively impact to national and regional economic development.

Public critics of immigration, particularly those focused on undocumented status, introduced additional bureaucratic and social barriers for highly skilled immigrants. Such conditions were associated with heightened scrutiny, delayed work authorization, and extended labor-market entry processes, even among credentialed professionals (Arnita, 2022). These constraints limited skilled immigrants' ability to fully apply their qualifications and professional expertise.

Systemic barriers affecting qualified foreign-born professionals represented both an equity concern and an economic inefficiency. Addressing obstacles encountered by highly skilled immigrant women, including legal constraints and persistent societal misconceptions, presented opportunities to more effectively utilize their expertise within California's economy (Arnita, 2022). Integration-oriented strategies that emphasized

equitable labor practices, workplace inclusion, and employer education on immigrant talent were presented as mechanisms to improve workforce participation. Such approaches supported the development of a more inclusive and productive labor market benefiting both immigrant professionals and the broader economy.

### **The Integration Process**

Understanding immigrant integration required examination of how multiple dimensions of work, education, social engagement, and cultural adaptation interacted to shape outcomes for highly skilled immigrants. Integration was conceptualized as a multidimensional process encompassing employment, education, health, civil rights, social welfare, and family dynamics, which collectively shaped immigrant inclusion within the host societies (De Coninck & Solano, 2023). Key dimensions of immigrant integration included language acquisition, cultural understanding, education and employment, social interaction, and civic engagement (Ertorer et al., 2022; Givens et al., 2021). Integration processes extended beyond economic participation and were associated with identity formation, sense of belonging, and overall well-being (Nakphong et al., 2022; Wachter & Fleischmann, 2018). Successful integration was defined in the literature as participation in social and economic systems alongside meaningful contribution within host communities (De Coninck & Solano, 2023; Ertorer et al., 2022; World Bank Group, 2023). Despite ongoing debates over definition and measurement (Spencer, 2022), prior research has identified barriers and facilitators of integration, underscoring the relevance of workplace integration as a central component of immigrant integration.

Examination of workplace integration required attention to both structured organizational processes and individual readiness for adjustment. Existing models of workplace integration describe sequential phases, including anticipatory, socialization, accommodation, and adaptation phases (Grosskopf et al., 2024). Career adaptability and CQ were identified as key factors supporting integration with documented association to work outcomes and psychological well-being (Ocampo et al., 2022; Raihan et al., 2023). Disparities in employment access and professional recognition were associated with adverse mental health outcomes and constrained social interaction in professional settings, highlighting the need for targeted organizational supports and integration strategies.

Factors facilitating or constraining integration reflected shared responsibilities across individuals and organizations. Barriers such as discrimination, language challenges, or limited education and effective communication were consistently associated with integration challenges (Covell & Rolle Sands, 2021; Ocampo et al., 2022). Addressing these barriers was essential for improving integration outcomes.

Prior findings indicated that successful workplace integration depended on individual adaptability alongside organizational practices that promoted inclusion and equity (Covell & Rolle Sands, 2021; Nakphong et al., 2022). This conceptualization of the integration provided the analytical foundation for applying leader-member exchange and intersectionality frameworks, enabling examination of how relational dynamics and intersecting social identities shaped workplace experiences for highly skilled first-generation Kayena women. Within this framework, organizational programs and

initiatives tailored to immigrant integration were positioned as mechanisms for supporting equitable workplace experiences.

### ***The Role of Language***

Language proficiency in the workplace was essential for effectively navigating professional environments and avoiding perceptions of professional incompetence. Language served both as a means of communication and as a vital link to acquiring and sharing knowledge through social interaction with one's environment, extending to societal power dynamics (Kamau et al., 2023; Schieckoff & Sprengholz, 2021). Lack of proficiency in the dominant language was identified as a barrier that hindered immigrants' access to economic opportunities, social resources, and participation in the host country's power structures (Aning, 2023). Language also functioned as a socio-cultural resource for social interaction and cultural expression (Badal et al., 2021). Ultimately, language skills play a crucial role in shaping individuals' integration and success within society.

The socio-cultural aspect of language was crucial for immigrants' integration into diverse workplace environments, as effective communication not only signified professional competence but also served as a gateway to social inclusion and participation in organizational power structures. Consequently, mastering the local language offered immigrant workers access to various formal and informal communication channels, information networks, and decision-making processes, enabling them to actively participate in social bonding within organizations (Aning, 2023).

Therefore, enhancing language skills was a priority for both individuals and organizations focused on building a more inclusive and productive work environment.

### ***Foreign Qualifications***

Immigrant women also encountered challenges when their qualifications went unrecognized, which resulted in underemployment and job dissatisfaction. Recognizing prior learning was a key strategy for facilitating workplace integration for immigrants (International Labor Organization, 2023; Vasic et al., 2023). This process involved recognizing higher-level academic qualifications and other diplomas (Andersson, 2021; Sommer, 2021) by “identifying, documenting, assessing and certifying formal, informal and non-formal learning outcomes against standards used in formal education and training” (International Labor Organization, 2023, p. 23). Such recognition allowed immigrants to earn qualifications and credits without undergoing additional formal education or training in their host country (Andersson, 2021; Raihan et al., 2023; Sommer, 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). Overall, these measures aimed to improve employment prospects and support successful integration into the workforce.

Equally important was the recognition of foreign qualifications and skills, which depended on the education systems of the home and host countries and on their comparison in terms of content and quality (International Labor Organization, 2023; Raihan et al., 2023). Learning outcomes were evaluated to award equivalent diplomas or certificates, helping employers assess an immigrant’s competencies more accurately. Public employment services (PESs) typically initiated this process when approached by potential applicants or referred by agencies working with migrants (Andersson, 2021;

International Labor Organization, 2023). While PESs did not directly evaluate skills, they referred applicants to official agencies or assisted with application preparation. For specific requests from foreign employers, PESs might have provided expert assessments via external contractors (International Labor Organization, 2023). If jobseekers' skills were not certified, employment agencies might have conducted assessments if available. Credential evaluation services played a vital role in bridging this gap by translating foreign qualifications into the local context, thereby enabling employers to assess immigrants' capabilities accurately.

### ***Employment and Career Benefits***

Employment plays a crucial role in helping immigrants integrate socially into a new society. One of the main reasons for immigration has been the pursuit of formal employment and career growth. Employment offered immigrants financial stability and acted as a gateway to engaging with society and feeling included (De Coninck & Solano, 2023), fostering social cohesion and mutual understanding with host communities (Bakker & Van Vliet, 2022; Fejes et al., 2022). This facilitated interaction with local residents, helped build social networks, and supported the socio-economic development of the host country (Huang et al., 2021; International Organization for Migration, 2024; Nardon et al., 2021). Ertorer et al. (2022) also noted that employment provided a sense of purpose, self-worth, and empowerment. Moreover, immigrants often participated in intensive training programs focused on technical and soft skills to improve their adaptability in new work environments (Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). Employed

immigrants were better equipped to engage with local communities, create social networks, and contribute positively to the socio-economic progress of the host society.

Additionally, career development programs such as mentorship and networking were vital in addressing gaps in workplace integration strategies. Mentorship initiatives tailored to immigrants' specific needs offered valuable support and practical guidance to overcome systemic barriers and foster self-advocacy, resulting in increased confidence, higher job satisfaction, and improved career prospects (Johnsen et al., 2022; Kuang, 2023; Kuknor et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024; Selvanandan & Reid, 2021). These programs should match mentees with mentors who understand their unique backgrounds and provide advice on career advancement, cultural adaptation, and professional growth.

Networking opportunities have also created platforms for immigrants to connect with peers, industry leaders, and potential employers (Crawford et al., 2023; Vasic et al., 2023). For instance, Kenyan diaspora networks in California offered valuable resources and support for newcomers, helping them navigate integration challenges, connect with professionals, share job openings, and discuss common issues and solutions (Crawford et al., 2023). Social support extended beyond professional connections to include emotional and social backing, making individuals feel more connected and less isolated in their new environment (Kurtuluş et al., 2023). Building strong community ties significantly boosted integration by fostering a sense of belonging and identity. These networks provided spaces to share experiences, discuss challenges, and access resources vital for career growth.

### ***Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion***

Social inclusion efforts for immigrant women focused on providing access to essential services, education, and employment opportunities through civic participation, social capital, empowerment, and settlement programs (Ham, 2020). Social inclusion was not only about policies but also about building a community within the workplace where diverse voices were heard and appreciated (Ham, 2020), and social inclusion was paramount for creating environments of value and acceptance (Brell et al., 2020; Ham, 2020). Implementing cultural competency training for both employees and employers may have further broken down cultural stereotypes and biases (Vito & Sethi, 2020). These initiatives collectively fostered more inclusive and equitable workplaces for immigrant women.

DEI initiatives also provided various benefits to both employees and organizations. A workforce that valued diversity and inclusion not only improved decision-making, sparked innovation, and increased employee engagement and retention but also enhanced the overall employee experience (Baum, 2021; Kiradoo, 2022). Implementing effective DEI practices helped organizations attract and retain top talent from underrepresented groups, boosting their reputations (Taras et al., 2021). Green and Hand (2024) reported that companies with high racial and ethnic diversity were 35% more likely to achieve financial returns above their national industry medians. Additionally, Minkin (2023) found that 56% of employed adults in the United States believed that prioritizing DEI benefited fairness in hiring, pay, and promotions. Embedding a commitment to diversity as a core company value was central to DEI

efforts (Baum, 2021; Kiradoo, 2022; Minkin, 2023). This approach fostered a more innovative and productive workforce and strengthened connections with the diverse communities a company served.

DEI initiatives also aimed to address systemic discrimination and bias, offering training to help employees recognize and combat discrimination (Baum, 2021; Kiradoo, 2022; Pompper & Ertem-Eray, 2024). These programs often included language classes, skills training, and mentorship initiatives to support immigrants in integrating into the workforce and society, and to create supportive networks (Kuang, 2023). Furthermore, DEI efforts frequently focused on creating supportive environments for individuals with intersecting identities (Pompper & Ertem-Eray, 2024). Promoting such initiatives involved ensuring that employees' diverse voices and perspectives were included in decision-making, encouraging cultural understanding, and driving organizational success through a variety of viewpoints and experiences. Taken together, prior studies indicated that federal rollbacks of DEI infrastructure disproportionately affected immigrant women, whose workplace engagement often depended on organizational investments in mentorship, cultural responsiveness, and inclusive leadership. When such initiatives were constrained or politicized, responsibility for adaptation shifted from institutions to individuals, increasing reliance on personal resilience rather than systemic support.

### ***Cultural Intelligence***

Success in a globally diverse work environment demands a specialized form of intelligence that enables individuals to bridge the gap between distinct cultural frameworks. While current strategies addressed several integration challenges, research

on CQ was lacking for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women (Li, 2020; Livermore, 2021; Thomas & Inkson, 2020). CQ encompassed understanding cultural differences, adapting communication styles, and developing empathy toward diverse perspectives (Li, 2020; Lovin et al., 2021; Van Dyne et al., 2020). CQ also helped explain why some individuals excelled more than others in international settings.

The conceptual architecture of CQ is best understood not as a singular trait, but as a composite of four distinct yet interrelated psychological dimensions. Based on Sternberg and Detterman's (1986) multi-facet framework of intelligence, CQ is a four-dimensional construct encompassing metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral dimensions. Metacognitive CQ involved processes through which individuals acquired and interpreted cultural knowledge, enabling them to navigate intercultural experiences effectively (Li, 2020; Thomas & Inkson, 2020; Triandis & Brislin, 2020). Cognitive CQ referred to an individual's understanding of the similarities and differences between their own culture and others (Thomas & Inkson, 2020; Triandis & Brislin, 2020). Together, metacognitive and cognitive CQ influenced a person's ability to recognize cultural patterns.

The practical application of CQ relies heavily on the dynamic interplay between an individual's internal drive and their external adaptability. Motivational CQ was an individual's desire to experience other cultures and their confidence in effectively interacting in such settings (Li, 2020; Van Dyne et al., 2020). Lastly, behavioral CQ was the capacity to appropriately adapt behavior in line with cognitive insights and motivation (Van Dyne et al., 2020). CQ required not just knowing how to act, but also the

perseverance to continue trying. CQ critically enabled leaders in multicultural organizations to bridge cultural gaps, build relationships, embrace cultural diversity, and leverage diverse perspectives and talents within their teams (Lovin et al., 2021; Thomas & Inkson, 2020). A leader's CQ significantly influenced organizational performance (Nosratabadi et al., 2020) by navigating diverse cultural contexts effectively and adeptly managing cultural conflicts, ensuring smoother operations and fostering a more harmonious workplace (Li, 2020; Livermore, 2021; Van Dyne et al., 2020). The possession of these specific capabilities differentiates leaders who merely survive in diverse environments from those who actively harness differences to drive organizational success.

Despite the importance of CQ, many integration programs failed to prioritize CQ, focusing instead on technical skills and credential recognition. Without targeted CQ training, many immigrant women struggled to assert themselves and self-advocate (Kuknor et al., 2023). For Kenyan immigrant women, high CQ could have enhanced workplace interactions, reduced misunderstandings, and improved collaboration with colleagues from different backgrounds. D. C. Thomas and Inkson (2020) suggested that CQ training should be an integral part of organizational development to help employees understand and respect cultural differences and to enhance employees' cultural awareness and adaptability.

In labor market research and economics, the integration of male workers was typically prioritized, which limited research on the integration of female workers. The labor market integration of immigrant women was perceived as “subservient” to that of

their male peers (Schieckoff & Sprengholz, 2021). This perception not only neglected immigrant women in research but also hindered the adoption of gender-specific perspectives in analyzing the labor-market performance of immigrants. Furthermore, the representation of foreign-born women as invisible dependents led to their exclusion from research efforts, limiting understanding of their unique experiences in labor market integration. When immigrant women were included in studies, gender was often considered just one of many variables in the model, and even in studies focusing solely on women, researchers frequently used models originally developed for men, overlooking the significant differences in the experiences of immigrant women, including their labor market integration, compared to their male counterparts (Schieckoff & Sprengholz, 2021). Although research has become increasingly intersectional over the past two decades, the detailed examination of labor market integration patterns specific to women immigrants has remained a slow work in progress.

The concept of workplace integration was crucial for understanding the contributions of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women within workplaces; however, integration strategies, particularly for highly skilled immigrant women, required improvement. Extant literature has explored various integration strategies, such as employment mentorship programs, cultural sensitivity training, and flexible work arrangements (Ertorer et al., 2022; Johnsen et al., 2022; Kuang, 2023; Lai et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2024; Selvanandan & Reid, 2021). This literature review indicated that social, cultural, and organizational factors influenced workplace integration. While some called for universal panaceas, which, while ideal, seemed unattainable, others emphasized

the need for tailored approaches to meet the unique needs of various populations. The concept of workplace integration aligned with the research question because this dissertation emphasized the meaningfulness of exploring workplace integration for Kenyan women. The various studies reviewed provided insights into practical strategies for workplace integration that were tailored to the unique experiences of this demographic group.

### **The High-Quality LMX Relationships and Workplace Integration of Highly Skilled First-Generation Immigrant Women**

High-quality LMX relationships shaped workplace integration and professional experiences for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women by influencing access to resources, mentorship, and organizational support. LMX theory provided a framework for analyzing leadership dynamics through individualized relationships between leaders and subordinates. Leaders and followers mutually shaped their roles, and leadership practices varied across team members rather than being applied uniformly (Bakar & McCann, 2014; Olaniyan, 2020; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2021). These findings highlighted the importance of personalized leadership approaches in diverse organizational contexts.

Developmental models, including vertical dyad linkages, leadership-making, and team-making, have illustrated how relationships evolve over time, influencing organizational dynamics and workplace integration (Coleman & Donoher, 2022; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). High-quality LMX relationships affected integration by providing differential treatment that shaped access to resources,

mentorships, and inclusion for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women. Poor-quality LMX relationships were associated with isolation and hindered professional integration (Güteryüz et al., 2024; Hammouri et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2021; Manelkar et al., 2022; March et al., 2023; Mustafa et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Yasin et al., 2023). Overall, LMX relationships structured both opportunities and barriers that shaped participants' workplace experiences.

High-quality LMX relationships promoted inclusive workplace environments and enhanced employee outcomes. These relationships positively influenced job satisfaction, well-being, work-life balance, organizational commitment, innovation, performance, and overall outcomes (Furtado & Sobral, 2023; Gu et al., 2015; Ham, 2020; Hirvi et al., 2021; Idris et al., 2021; Tahir et al., 2023; Tanjung & Wahdiniwaty, 2020). Leaders who supported professional development, reduced communication barriers, and facilitated workplace integration had better outcomes.

Additionally, leaders who applied culturally aware practices and ensured fairness enhanced organizational commitment and retention while supporting integration (Ertorer et al., 2022; Ham, 2020). Negative LMX relationships exacerbated workplace exclusion, emphasizing the need for deliberate strategies to foster equitable exchanges and inclusion. Leaders contributed to inclusion efforts by encouraging open communication and securing organizational commitment (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). These strategies not only improved employees' sense of inclusion and well-being but also enhanced job satisfaction, retention, and professional success

Understanding the factors that influence LMX is essential for fostering inclusive and effective organizational relationships. Demographic differences and social categorization shape LMX quality and integration outcomes. In-group members, perceived as similar in race, gender, or immigration status, experienced higher-quality relationships, whereas out-group members faced marginalization (Ariani & Feriyanto, 2024; Buengeler et al., 2021; Matta et al., 2015). Language, cultural norms, and shared experiences reinforced in-group formation, potentially creating exclusionary cliques (Akay & Ahmadi, 2022; Cigarini et al., 2020; Coleman & Donoher, 2022). Differences in leaders' perceptions of resource allocation or task prioritization also influenced relationship differentiation, thereby affecting employee engagement, satisfaction, and career development (Kang et al., 2023; March et al., 2023). Psychological contract fulfillment further shaped LMX quality, with mutual expectations of support, recognition, and career opportunities influencing trust and organizational commitment (Hammouri et al., 2022; Keevy et al., 2020). Recognizing these factors highlighted the importance of intentional leadership practices in promoting equitable and supportive work environments.

Effective communication strategies, cultural competency training, and mentoring programs mitigated these barriers, supported integration, and enhanced professional success for culturally diverse employees (Arshad et al., 2024; Ertorer et al., 2022; Harb et al., 2021). Overall, participants' experiences demonstrated the critical role of high-quality LMX relationships, highlighting the need for leaders to actively develop strategies that address demographic differences and foster stronger, culturally aware workplace

relationships. Emphasizing these approaches may lead to more inclusive and productive organizational environments.

### ***LMX Controversy and Avenues for Future Research***

The literature on LMX relationships revealed both theoretical and practical controversies, highlighting opportunities for future research. LMX theory evolved from a conceptual framework based on role theory to one informed by social exchange and socio-cognitive approaches emphasizing the influence of cognitive, social, and contextual factors on LMX relationships (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018; Liden et al., 1997; Scandura & Meuser, 2022; Wayne et al., 1997). Although LMX theory dominated leadership research, the conceptual ambiguities regarding the mechanisms of exchange versus the development of high-quality relationships persisted, and traditional models often overlooked the impact of intersecting identities on LMX quality (Matta et al., 2015; Wilson & Cunliffe, 2022). Consequently, future research continued to explore these unresolved issues and expand the understanding of LMX dynamics.

As a result, uncertainty persisted about how leadership dynamics operate within culturally and demographically complex organizational environments. This shift underscored the importance of context, as workplaces operated under diverse rules, cultures, and climates that dictated appropriate behavior. Despite these advances, the literature provided limited insights into how LMX relationships evolved over time for employees with multiple marginalized social identities. Further research is needed to clarify how these contextual factors affect LMX relationships.

High-quality LMX relationships were particularly relevant for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women who faced multiple layers of marginalization in the workplace. The fluidity and adaptability emphasized by LMX theory were crucial for effective leadership and integration (Hirvi et al., 2021). Yet gaps remained in understanding how LMX relationships evolved over time, across organizational contexts, and for marginalized groups, including those defined by marginalized race, gender, and immigrant status (Gottfredson et al., 2020; Scandura & Meuser, 2022). Thus, while the benefits of high-quality LMX relationships were well documented, less was known about how such relationships were formed, sustained, or constrained for immigrant women navigating intersecting social identities. This gap underscored the need to examine LMX relationships through the lived experiences of marginalized professionals in a specific organizational context and beyond single-axis leadership models.

Future research should further explore how contextual, demographic, and social factors jointly influence LMX relationships and workplace outcomes. Integrating diverse experience and organizational environment could provide a more comprehensive understanding of LMX theory and its impact on employee performance, inclusion, and professional integration. Such insights are essential for developing leadership strategies that effectively support the integration of highly skilled immigrant workers in the workplace. While this study focused on the lived experiences of immigrant women from Kenya working in California, further research is needed to explore differences in the experiences of other marginalized groups.

### ***Intersectionality Theory Controversy and Avenues for Future Research***

Intersectionality theory provided a framework for understanding how overlapping social identities shaped workplace experiences and the integration of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women immigrants. The theory emphasized that gender, race, nationality, and immigrant status intersect to produce unique advantages and barriers within organizational contexts (Cole, 2009; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). These intersections influenced access to opportunities, perceptions of competence, inclusion, and career progression, highlighting the need for workplace strategies that accounted for multiple interacting dimensions of identity (Kelly et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2019). However, existing studies often addressed these identities independently, limiting understanding of how their interaction influenced leadership relationships and professional inclusion. For participants, intersectionality helped explain the compounded challenges faced as women, immigrants, and members of minority racial or cultural groups navigating professional environments in California.

Intersectionality challenged the single-axis approaches to workplace integration and revealed systemic inequalities embedded in organizational structures. Overlapping forms of oppression and privilege affected professional access and outcomes, including mentorship, promotion, and recognition (Bolzani et al., 2021; Carbado & Harris, 2019; Woods et al., 2022). Cultural stereotypes, gender expectations, and biases regarding immigrant status reinforced barriers to inclusion and limit the effectiveness of traditional integration strategies (Gearity et al., 2020). Intersectionality revealed the need for policies and organizational practices to address power imbalances, create equitable opportunities,

and recognize the diverse contributions of employees with multiple marginalized identities.

Despite advances, controversy and research gaps have persisted regarding the practical application of intersectionality in the workplace. Debates included hierarchical interpretations of oppression, the challenge of measuring intersecting identities, and the potential for resistance by individuals or groups who are perceived as receiving special treatment (Gearity et al., 2020). These debates contributed to the inconsistent application of intersectionality in organizational and leadership research, particularly in the workplace. Future research could examine how combinations of gender, race, immigrant status, and professional expertise influence career trajectories, experiences of discrimination, and organizational outcomes (Kelly et al., 2021). For highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women, understanding these intersections was essential for identifying targeted interventions, informing mentorship programs, and developing inclusive leadership strategies that address these unique challenges and promote better integration.

Collectively, intersectionality theory emphasized the importance of examining multiple interacting identities to fully understand workplace integration. By analyzing the compounded effects of gender, race, and immigrant status, the framework provided a lens for interpreting participants' experiences and complemented insights from LMX theory. Integrating intersectionality with LMX perspectives enabled a comprehensive understanding of how leadership relationships and social identity dynamics jointly

influenced integration experiences and professional success for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women.

Additional empirical research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and interventions aimed at addressing the intersecting oppression faced by highly skilled first-generation immigrant women in social, economic, and professional contexts (Kelly et al., 2021). Consequently, limited evidence exists on how approaches informed by intersectionality could guide equitable workplace integration strategies or leadership development efforts. These limitations highlight the need for context-specific research. This study explored how social identities and systems of oppression intersected for this group; however, future research could develop a more detailed understanding of the social dynamics that inform strategies, policies, and leadership practices.

### **Lived Experiences of Highly Skilled First-Generation Immigrant Women**

Lived experiences referred to the personal perceptions and daily realities of individuals influenced by their backgrounds and identities (Li, 2020). For highly skilled first-generation immigrant women, these experiences included challenges, obstacles, achievements, and coping mechanisms encountered in the workplace (Farashah & Blomquist, 2022). In qualitative research, understanding these experiences involved collecting their narratives about adaptation, cultural integration, career development, and systemic barriers (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Farashah & Blomquist, 2022). This approach was crucial for developing workplace integration strategies that address the specific circumstances and needs of these women. Immigrants experienced diverse challenges as they adapted to host countries.

Despite educational advancement for immigrant women, their workplace challenges affected their integration and professional growth. These challenges included discrimination, gender norms, work-life imbalance, language barriers, gender pay gaps, unfamiliarity with workplace expectations and unspoken customs, lack of social support, cultural differences, and the non-recognition of foreign credentials and qualifications (Arnita, 2022; Banerjee et al., 2021; Bredtmann & Otten, 2023; Ewers et al., 2022; Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023). These factors negatively impacted their career development and led to the underutilization of skills or the loss of talent.

### ***Factors Influencing Immigrant Experiences***

Gender was a key factor shaping immigrants' experiences in their host countries. Wandschneider et al. (2022) confirmed that workplace integration was influenced by gender, race, and immigrant status. For example, immigrant women faced notable wage gaps compared to their less-marginalized or non-marginalized peers (Dostie et al., 2023; Syed, 2022). Additionally, immigrant women encountered difficulties adjusting to a new cultural environment because of differences in gender roles, family structures, and societal expectations.

Traditionally, women were primarily seen as wives, mothers, and homemakers (Bredtmann & Otten, 2023). With immigration, women assumed new responsibilities and power dynamics that affected their experiences in the host country. Chavez et al. (2023) observed that these gendered aspects created complications in balancing family duties, cultural expectations, and workplace demands. Consequently, immigrant women often struggled to integrate successfully into the workplace. Cultural norms and workplace

practices in the host country also hindered smooth workplace integration. Factors such as cultural differences, communication styles, hierarchical structures, recognition of qualifications and experience (or the lack thereof), flexibility and adaptability, and biases all influenced immigrants' workplace experiences (Ertorer et al., 2022; Mannes et al., 2023). Collectively, these intersecting dynamics position workplace integration not as a discrete transition, but as a complex process shaped by the interplay of gender, culture, and organizational structures.

Moreover, differences in communication styles and language often challenged immigrants' ability to communicate effectively, follow instructions, and participate in casual workplace conversations (Morris, 2023). Cultural differences in non-verbal cues like facial expressions and body language sometimes led to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Socializing and networking played vital roles in workplace culture. Immigrants often found it difficult to navigate these informal networks, which impacted their sense of belonging. Østbakken et al. (2023) identified that workplaces frequently had hierarchies and power structures unfamiliar to immigrants. These dynamics not only caused segregation and social isolation but also affected employees' confidence in asserting themselves in the workplace.

In some cultures, workers were discouraged from speaking up or disagreeing with superiors, which hampered their integration in workplaces that valued open communication. Preconceived notions and stereotypes about immigrants also affected workplace interactions and newcomers' integration into professional settings. Negative assumptions about language proficiency, qualifications, and cultural differences fostered

biases among colleagues and employers (Švejdarová, 2024). These biases sometimes took the form of microaggressions or exclusion, making integration more difficult.

Foreign qualifications and experience were often seen as inferior or incomparable to those from the host country (Tan & Cebulla, 2023). This skepticism diminished the perceived value of immigrants' skills and knowledge. Moreover, verifying and recognizing credentials from an immigrant's home country was often a lengthy and complex process. Employers frequently lacked familiarity with foreign education systems and professional standards, which could lead to disregarding foreign qualifications. This directly affected immigrants' access to roles that matched their skills and experience (Farashah & Blomquist, 2022). Credentialing biases not only limited career growth but also caused missed opportunities for society and businesses to benefit from diverse talents (Farashah & Blomquist, 2022). Thereby creating a cycle of disadvantage that impacted immigrants' earnings and job satisfaction.

Additional barriers included restrictions on work eligibility in the United States based on visa and sponsorship requirements, although these were not inherently discriminatory (González, 2020). While such restrictions could delay entry into the workforce, highly skilled immigrants generally found it easier to obtain a green card (Chishti et al., 2021). Overall, these challenges significantly influenced the integration process for immigrant workers in host countries.

### ***Why Highly Skilled First-Generation Immigrant Women from Kenya?***

I chose to research highly skilled first-generation immigrant women from Kenya who had been working in California because research on how race, gender, immigration

status, and other social categories interacted and affected women in the workplace was limited (Jain, 2021). Additionally, the Kenyan immigrant population in the United States had grown rapidly, underscoring the need to develop effective workplace integration strategies for this group.

A trend toward gender parity among African immigrants in the United States. This shift reflected an increase in women migrating independently for work, education, or as heads of households (Corra, 2023). The evolving demographic composition called for a detailed analysis of the unique experiences, challenges, and contributions of African women immigrants in workplace settings.

While there was extensive literature on immigration, much of it tended to focus on broader economic impacts, policies, or issues faced by immigrant men. Women, particularly highly skilled first-generation immigrants, experienced unique challenges that were not adequately addressed in the literature. Insights into the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women from Kenya could have informed and can still inform policies and practices aimed at improving their integration and well-being.

Issues such as workplace discrimination, access to professional networks, credential recognition, and identity development were critical areas that affected their professional and personal success. The concept was also relevant for understanding how these women developed their personal and professional identities in a new cultural context through cultural adaptation, career progression, and social integration (Thomas et al., 2021). Understanding their fluid and sometimes overlapping experiences might have

helped policymakers and practitioners develop more targeted and effective support mechanisms to address workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women.

The concept of highly skilled immigrants aligned with the research question and IPA in the present study. The research question sought to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled immigrants in California. IPA, known for its focus on individual experiences and meaning-making, was particularly suited to unravel the complexities of highly skilled first-generation immigrant women from Kenya's integration processes (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Further, the selection of highly skilled immigrants was justified by their increasing significance in global immigration trends and their critical role in addressing skill shortages and fostering economic development. Understanding the integration dynamics of highly skilled immigrants was essential not only for social cohesion but also for maximizing their contributions to local economies. Given that this group was understudied, the present research generated new knowledge on the complexities of immigrant integration, thereby contributing to the academic literature and informing policy frameworks.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the richness of existing research, notable gaps persisted in understanding specific workplace integration strategies for highly skilled first-generation immigrant women in California. Previous studies explored the experiences and challenges faced by immigrant women with workplace integration (Ertorer et al., 2022; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023) but failed to

explore the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California. Moreover, the literature did not study this group in California, which may have presented unique characteristics and challenges for the study population. This gap called for a more comprehensive understanding of workplace integration (Stahl & Maznevski, 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). Addressing this gap was essential for the development of workplace integration strategies that were not only inclusive but also tailored to the unique needs and challenges faced by highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in California.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Workplace integration posed significant challenges for multiple marginalized individuals, including highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California. The integration process encompasses mutual adaptation between employees and employers, recognition of skills, career development, social inclusion, and consideration of overall well-being (Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Despite research on immigrant women, a lack of focus on specific workplace integration strategies for this demographic represented a critical gap.

In Chapter 2, I demonstrated how existing studies address immigrant workplace challenges but rarely explore the unique experiences of highly skilled Kenyan women in California, a state with distinctive economic and social dynamics (Harb et al., 2021; Kuknor et al., 2023; Vasic et al., 2023; Vito & Sethi, 2020). Addressing this gap was essential to developing effective strategies tailored to the unique challenges faced by highly skilled Kenyan women in California's distinct economic and social landscape.

Research indicates that workplace integration for highly skilled immigrant women is influenced by factors such as cultural differences, discrimination, leadership practices, intersectional identities, social support, and skill recognition (Akay & Ahmadi, 2022; Ertorer et al., 2022; Ham, 2020; Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Morris, 2023; Ngoubene-Atioky et al., 2020; Riaño, 2021). Collectively, these factors inform policies and interventions that support more inclusive and equitable workplace environments.

High-quality LMX relationships that accommodate cultural diversity play a crucial role in fostering professional growth and inclusion (Szymanski & Kalra, 2021). In this study, these factors interacted in complex ways, creating unique opportunities and challenges for this population. Understanding these factors provided a foundation for creating more inclusive and equitable workplaces that supported professional success for immigrant women.

Strategies for immigrant women's workplace integration involve navigating language barriers, cultural norms, systemic biases, and inequitable professional dynamics. These strategies include mentorship, networking, leveraging cultural capital, and advocating for equitable policies. High-quality LMX relationships, characterized by trust and open communication, were instrumental in enhancing their sense of belonging and professional well-being. Intersectionality, encompassing race, gender, immigrant status, and educational background, serves as a critical framework for understanding the interconnected dimensions of identity and their impact on workplace experiences (Ngoubene-Atioky et al., 2020; Riaño, 2021). These strategies and frameworks highlight

the importance of addressing systemic challenges to create supportive environments for immigrant women.

The chosen qualitative IPA approach facilitated a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of highly skilled Kenyan women, considering cultural contexts, intersectional identities, and organizational dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). This methodology enables a nuanced understanding of leadership practices and workplace integration strategies, addresses gaps identified in existing research. By synthesizing theoretical frameworks such as LMX and intersectionality, this study provides insights for organizational leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to improve workplace integration. This approach supported a comprehensive examination of workplace integration dynamics and contributed to understanding challenges experienced by Kenyan immigrant women. The study addressed gaps in the literature by focusing on the experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women within California's context.

In Chapter 3, I present the chosen research design and methodology. I also detail participant recruitment strategies, data collection, and data analysis methods. Chapter 3 further provides a comprehensive framework to address the research question and extend knowledge of workplace integration strategies.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative, IPA study was to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California. The social problem was that workplace integration encompasses a multifaceted process involving mutual adaptation between employees and employers, encompassing elements such as skill recognition, career development, social inclusion, and overall well-being (Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Despite a growing body of research on immigrant women, organizations continue to face challenges in integrating highly skilled first-generation immigrant women into the U.S. workforce due to a limited understanding of workplace integration strategies for this population. Ham (2020), Kuknor and Bhattacharya (2022), Vasic et al. (2023), and Vito and Sethi (2020) provided valuable insights on challenges and factors influencing the workplace integration of immigrants. However, they did not explicitly address the strategies to facilitate workplace integration.

The distinctive regional context introduced a new dimension to studying workplace integration strategies for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California. The specific research problem addressed through this study was the need for a greater understanding of the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women immigrants with workplace integration strategies in California.

Chapter 3 describes the research design and provides the rationale for selecting a qualitative IPA. Then the chapter details the research paradigm, methodology, and the

role of the researcher. Procedures related to participant recruitment, sampling criteria, data collection, and data analysis are presented. This chapter also addresses ethical considerations and strategies used to establish trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, and concludes with a summary of the methodological approach.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Research Question: What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California?

#### **Central Concepts**

The central concepts that grounded this study were workplace integration strategies, multiple intersecting identities, highly skilled immigrants, LMX and high-quality relations, and LMX and intersectionality. Workplace integration was a multifaceted process involving the mutual adaptation of employees and employers. The process includes skill recognition, career development, social inclusion, and overall well-being (Raihan et al., 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Workplace integration entails building effective working relationships, fostering a sense of belonging, adapting to cultural environments, and addressing challenges and opportunities within workplace settings.

#### ***Workplace Integration Strategies***

Successful integration into the workplace requires tailored approaches and interventions. Workplace integration strategies are the approaches and practices organizations use to help new employees, particularly immigrants, assimilate into their

work environment and organizational culture (Ham, 2020). Workplace integration or adaptation refers to how highly skilled first-generation immigrant women become socially, culturally, and structurally integrated or fit into the host country's workplaces.

### ***Multiple Intersecting Social Identities in the Workplace***

Multiple intersecting social identities play a critical role in fostering high-quality workplace relationships. The concept of intersectionality has reframed the understanding of social inequalities and the complexities of life experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Fitzsimmons et al., 2020; Thatcher et al., 2023). For highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California, intersectionality shapes their workplace relationships and integration strategies. For this study, multiple intersecting social identities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and immigration status, were conceptualized as influencing workplace integration experiences.

### ***Highly Skilled Immigrants***

Education and skills play a critical role in immigration. Highly skilled refers to individuals who have completed tertiary or post-secondary education and have experience in a related field (Dean, 2018; Raihan et al., 2023; Richwine, 2022; Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). Highly skilled workers typically possess bachelor's degrees, certifications, or extensive on-the-job experience, and they were sought after in fields such as science, engineering, medicine, information technology, finance, research, and the arts (O'Connell & McKinnon, 2021). Their skills and expertise are in high demand, and play crucial roles in innovation, leadership, and economic development within their industries.

### ***LMX and High-Quality Relationships***

The quality of the relationship between the leader and subordinates influences workplace dynamics. LMX refers to the quality of the relationships between leaders and their subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These exchanges encompass mutual interactions, trust, support, and the overall dynamics that influence the working relationship, team cohesion, and employee engagement. For this study, LMXs referred to the dyadic relationship developed from the workplace interactions between the supervisor and the study population.

### ***LMX and Intersectionality***

The interconnectedness of leader-member exchanges and multiple marginalized identities creates a complex interplay for highly skilled first-generation immigrants. These concepts are linked through Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX theory and Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory. LMX theory posits that leaders established unique relationships with each team member (Hirvi et al., 2023), with the quality of these relationships serving as a central component of the leader-member dynamic (Bakar & McCann, 2014). In the context of this study, racial and gender similarities between supervisors and subordinates were found to positively influence the quality of leader-member exchange relationships (Bakar & McCann, 2014; Nelson & Piatak, 2021). Thus, perceived similarities are likely to predict stronger workplace relationships.

## **Research Tradition**

I followed a qualitative IPA research tradition. IPA is grounded in the philosophical foundations of phenomenological hermeneutics and idiographic commitment (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). From early 20th-century European philosophy, phenomenology focuses on how meaning is formed through embodied perceptions (Smith, 2017; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). As a philosophical method, IPA seeks to understand the core of human experiences and the meanings individuals attach to them (Moustakas, 1994). This approach reveals underlying assumptions about how lived experiences are understood.

Building on Husserl's phenomenology, I adopted Heidegger's approach, which emphasizes the concept of being in the world, the interconnectedness between individuals and their environment, where human understanding and behavior are shaped by personal and cultural practices (Annells, 1996; Smith, 2017). IPA requires active researcher involvement in accessing participants' lived experiences while recognizing the influence of the researcher's perceptions. IPA combines an empathic hermeneutic understanding from the participant's viewpoint with a questioning hermeneutic or making sense of how participants made sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). The ideographic nature of IPA calls for a small, homogenous sample, allowing for a detailed, participant-centric analysis that emphasizes authentic expression (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The goal was to identify converging and diverging themes within participants' experiences (Smith, 2004). Thereby supporting the systematic identification of recurring patterns prior to interpretative analysis.

### **Research Tradition Rationale**

I employed the qualitative IPA approach to address the research question. IPA is suitable for this study because it offers a deep understanding of participants' lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and the idiographic tradition, IPA was used to explore the complex reality of workplace integration among highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in California. This approach aligned with the qualitative research paradigm, which seeks to explore and understand the complexity of human experiences (Flick, 2021). The core of IPA is used to examine how participants interpret and make sense of their lived experiences.

Using the IPA analytical approach, I analyzed the data to understand how participants interpreted their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). The process combined descriptive and interpretative elements, going beyond simple description to uncover the meanings and significance of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA emphasizes how individuals make sense of their lives and construct meaning, considering both what they say and the context of their personal stories (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The goal was to capture each participant's unique perspective and make sense of their worlds.

IPA encourages researchers to reflect on their role in the research process, recognizing how their perspectives and interpretations may influence the analysis of results. The analysis accounted for the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts that shaped how people experienced and interpreted their lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The flexibility of IPA enables researchers to incorporate insights from their

personal experiences, thereby contributing to an interpretative narrative across the entire dataset. In IPA, the researcher seeks to articulate their understanding of the phenomenon without setting aside their perspectives, thereby fostering a connection with participants (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). I used in-depth interviews to gather rich and detailed data that offered deep insights into participants' lived experiences.

IPA was selected because it closely aligned with the research question. The rationale for choosing IPA was grounded on its ability to explore individuals' complex, subjective experiences and uncover the deeper meanings they attribute to those experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By focusing on lived experiences, IPA allows researchers to thoroughly examine participants' emotions, perceptions and personal interpretations, providing a comprehensive understanding of how individuals navigate and interpret their worlds (Moustakas, 1994). This was particularly important when studying first generation women immigrant in a new work environment, as unique cultural, social, and personal challenges often shaped their experiences.

Furthermore, IPA is well-suited to this research because it emphasizes understanding individuals' personal and contextual experiences rather than making broad generalizations. Using IPA, enabled me to explore how first-generation women immigrants created meaning around workplace integration, a process likely influenced by cultural background, gender and immigrant status. This approach was valuable for uncovering the coping strategies, mechanisms, and internal processes these first-generation immigrant women, used to navigate their new work environments. Additionally, IPA provides a framework for capturing the essence of participants'

experiences, offering rich, detailed insights into how they interpreted challenges, managed cultural transitions, and ultimately adapted to their workplace (Moustakas, 1994). Given the complexity of workplace integration for immigrants, this phenomenological approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how personal and environmental factors shaped these experiences. Finally this method aligned with the study's focus on cultural and contextual influences, recognizing that cultural identities and social background significantly shaped the workplace experiences of first generation women immigrants.

IPA is a participant-centered methodology that emphasizes participants' voices and perspectives. This approach positions participants as co-creators of knowledge, valuing their contributions and lived experiences to gain insights into both "what" they experienced and "how" they experienced it (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Alternative qualitative approaches, including narrative research, case study, ethnography, and grounded theory, were considered but were less aligned with the study's focus. These approaches may not fully capture the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and immigration status within the context of quality relationships at work. Case study research, for example, often examines bounded systems or specific organizational contexts (Hennink et al., 2020), which may limit applicability to broader experiential patterns among highly skilled first-generation immigrant women.

Selecting the most appropriate research design required a critical evaluation of alternative qualitative frameworks to ensure distinct alignment with the study's phenomenological goals. Grounded theory focuses on theory generation and may identify

patterns in social processes (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). However, grounded theory focuses on identifying general patterns rather than providing an in-depth exploration of individual experiences. Consequently, it was not suitable for investigating the lived experiences of the study population. Ethnography is closely related to phenomenology. While ethnography offers rich insights into cultural practices and social interactions, it does not prioritize the individual's subjective experiences and personal meanings of their lived experiences in the workplace (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Ultimately, IPA was most appropriate because it revealed how individual thoughts and feelings shaped how people create meaning and expressed their experiences, in ways other methodologies could not achieve.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as a researcher involved engaging with participants' narratives to interpret their meaning. This process included understanding participants' sense-making while also recognizing my role as a co-creator of participants' meaning, a concept known as the double hermeneutic (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). The first order of interpretation involved participants describing their own experiences, and the second involved the researcher interpreting participants' accounts to understand deeper meanings, patterns, and connections within and across participants (Smith, 2004; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, I actively worked to understand and interpret the participants' lived experiences. IPA is rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, emphasizing idiographic approaches that focus on the subjective meanings individuals assign to their experiences and how they make sense of their world (Smith,

2004; Smith & Fieldsend, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). My role as a researcher influenced how data were collected and interpreted. Ongoing reflexivity, methodological transparency, and careful attention to participant voices were essential to ensure trustworthiness throughout the research process. This required deliberate attention to ethical responsibility and positional awareness in engaging with and interpreting participants' narratives.

### **Researcher's Personal and Professional Relationships**

Maintaining objectivity in research can be challenging. Given the interpretative nature of IPA, my role as a researcher required careful consideration of my personal and professional relationships with participants. I followed the research design methodology to maintain objectivity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Given the nature of the study, participant selection began with a purposive sample of four homogeneous participants (Larkin et al., 2021; Noon, 2018), drawn from predetermined criteria: first-generation highly skilled Kenyan women with at least 5 years of experience and currently employed in California. This pool of participants was expanded using snowball sampling to ensure data diversity and saturation (Raifman et al., 2022). The initial seed participants were carefully reviewed to ensure no prior personal or professional relationships existed.

As a researcher, I brought a personal connection to this study as a Kenyan immigrant with ties to the community. To ensure the integrity of the research, I did not interview relatives or friends, thereby maintaining a clear boundary between personal and professional spheres. Furthermore, I did not hold supervisory, instructional, or authoritative roles over the participants or have any personal or professional relationships

that could influence the research outcomes. Such separation helped to ensure that there was no inherent power imbalance that could impact participants' openness or the authenticity of their responses (Moriña, 2021). Establishing this impartial stance is crucial in IPA, as adhering to the process fosters a trusting environment in which participants felt safe to share their lived experiences authentically (Moriña, 2021). By avoiding previous relationships that could suggest authority or influence, I prioritized the rigor and credibility of the research findings. Establishing this independence ensured that the study stayed focused on capturing the participants' authentic perspectives and experiences. Ultimately, these efforts strengthened the study's trustworthiness and deepened the understanding of the participants' narratives.

### **Researcher Biases and Conflict of Interest**

Biases and conflicts of interest could have shaped how data were collected, interpreted, and presented, potentially affecting the study's trustworthiness. In IPA, researchers are expected to recognize and address biases and power dynamics, especially when supervisory or instructor relationships involve positions of authority with participants (Johnson et al., 2020; Simbeck, 2024). Biases may have arisen from the participant selection process, potentially introducing volunteer bias. Participants in a particular study may have had distinct characteristics or experiences relative to non-volunteers, potentially introducing bias into the data (Millard et al., 2023). Another form of bias may have been participants' difficulty recalling their past experiences accurately. Participants might have struggled to recall past experiences, particularly those that

occurred several years earlier (Khare & Vedel, 2019). This could have led to recall bias, in which memories of events were incomplete or distorted over time.

Given the nuanced nature of IPA, which emphasizes understanding participants' subjective experiences and the meanings they attribute to their lived experiences, acknowledging and managing these biases and power dynamics were essential to maintaining the study's credibility. Autonomy and confidentiality were critical ethical considerations addressed through informed consent (Simbeck, 2024). Additionally, reflecting on the researcher's positionality, reflexivity, and potential conflicts of interest was essential to address power imbalances between the researcher and participants (Johnson et al., 2020; Öz & Timur, 2023). Ensuring these ethical and methodological considerations were addressed not only enhanced the integrity of the research but also fostered a more authentic and respectful engagement with participants.

### **Managing Researcher Biases**

Biases may occur at any phase of the research, but they were managed through member checking and reflexivity. Managing researcher biases was critical for ensuring the credibility and dependability of the study's findings (Smith et al., 2009). Researcher reflexivity involves considering how researchers' backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives may influence the interpretation and reporting of findings. I mitigated potential bias by maintaining awareness of my own biases (Holmes, 2020) and by using the Zoom transcript feature, which recorded and time-stamped participants' words verbatim. Member checking also confirmed participants' understanding and interpretation of their experiences, addressing issues of credibility and dependability.

To address biases stemming from my positionality, I maintained a reflexive journal to document thoughts and decisions, which helped identify and address biases as they arose. This practice emphasized focusing on participants' experiences rather than my interpretations (Johnson et al., 2020; Öz & Timur, 2023). The reflexive notes served as a reminder that the focus remained on the participants' experiences rather than my interpretations. While I did not hold formal authority over participants, I acknowledged potential power dynamics arising from factors such as educational background or perceived expertise. I established rapport and communicated, transparently emphasizing participants' expertise in their own experiences.

I conducted semistructured interviews in a supportive manner, encouraging participants to lead the conversations. By avoiding preconceived notions and using open-ended questions, I allowed participants to share freely. Member checking also enabled participants to review and provide feedback on interpretations, ensuring findings accurately reflected their experiences and minimizing my preconceptions (Smith, 2011). Together, these methods contributed to a balanced representation of participants' lived experiences, crucial for the integrity of IPA research (Smith, 2004, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). By combining reflexive practices and member checking, I prioritized managing biases, ensuring credible outcomes that reflected participants' authentic experiences.

### **Researcher Ethics**

Research ethics required a wide range of considerations. These considerations included power differentials, conflicts of interest, and potential biases. One common ethical concern in social research is social desirability bias, which can arise from

perceived power imbalances between research participants (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Social desirability refers to the tendency to present oneself in ways that align with social expectations (Bispo Júnior, 2022). To address these ethical considerations, I took deliberate steps to minimize power imbalances and reduce the influence of social desirability bias. This included fostering a respectful, non-judgmental interview environment and emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers. I also addressed potential conflicts of interest and ensured participants' privacy and confidentiality throughout the study.

Informed consent was a fundamental ethical requirement in research involving human participants. Prior to participation, research participants were fully informed about the nature, purpose, risks, and benefits of the study (Millum & Bromwich, 2021). Informed consent is grounded in principles of autonomy, respect, and transparency, ensuring that participation in the research is voluntary and free from coercion or deception. Accordingly, written consent was obtained, confidentiality was maintained, and participants' rights were protected throughout the research process. Additionally, no incentives were offered to participants in order to avoid coercion or undue influence, thereby further supporting ethical integrity in the research process.

### **Methodology**

My study used a qualitative IPA approach. Since this study involved human subjects, I upheld the integrity of the study by adhering to the ethical procedures for participant selection, instrumentation, and data analysis. This section describes the research methodology, including the participant selection process (sampling criteria,

recruitment, study scope, and sample size), instrumentation, data collection plan, data analysis, and procedures for ensuring the study's trustworthiness. The section also includes the process through which ethical approval was obtained and how informed consent was secured from all participants to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The population for this study consisted of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California. In IPA, participant selection is critical to capturing rich, thick, detailed accounts of lived experiences. I employed purposive and snowballing sampling methods to select study participants who possessed direct lived experience of the phenomenon under study (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Purposive sampling enables the intentional selection of individuals most likely to provide meaningful, experience-rich data aligned with the research question, while snowball sampling facilitates access to a hard-to-reach population through trusted community networks (Campbell et al., 2020; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I began with a seed sample of four participants (Larkin et al., 2021; Noon, 2018) identified through the Kenyan WhatsApp group (Appendix D) diaspora members.

The snowballing process continued until I reached 10 participants (Smith, 2004; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The final sample size of 10 participants aligned with IPA methodological guidance, which recommends small, homogeneous samples typically ranging from 6-12 participants to support idiographic depth and analytic rigor (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Ten participants provided sufficient breadth to identify shared experiential patterns while preserving the depth necessary for detailed analysis.

Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no substantively new themes or meanings emerged across successive interviews (Saunders et al., 2018). The sampling process continued and ensured the selection of participants whose characteristics aligned directly with the research question and phenomenological focus. Purposive sampling supported methodological rigor by prioritizing participants capable of providing detailed and relevant experiential narratives (Annells, 1996; Campbell et al., 2020). This selection aligned with the phenomenological tradition.

The participants were required to meet strict inclusion criteria: they had to be first-generation Kenyan immigrants, possess a tertiary education (qualifying them as highly skilled), have at least 5 years of work experience, live in California, and be currently employed. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to organizational environments to reflect meaningfully on workplace integration experiences, challenges, and strategies (Mwita, 2022). The use of homogeneous criteria was intentional, as IPA studies benefit from a more focused group, thereby enabling in-depth exploration of personal experiences (Noon, 2018; Smith, 2004). Homogeneity facilitated the selection of participants who could provide helpful information.

Participants were recruited from three Kenyan community WhatsApp groups (Appendix D). Prospective candidates were identified through these groups. Participants were recruited through the distribution of a recruitment flyer (Appendix C) posted to the Kenyan diaspora WhatsApp groups. These groups had a total of 1192 members (Appendix D). The group criteria were Kenyan diaspora community members, and

posting my flyer with the study inclusion criteria helped recruit at least four initial seed participants (Larkin et al., 2021; Noon, 2018). Interested participants responded by scanning a QR code from the flyer or via WhatsApp Messenger. Initial volunteers were screened to confirm eligibility based on the inclusion criteria. Once the initial group of four was established, these participants were invited to refer additional eligible candidates to the study pool through snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling involved asking initial participants to recommend others who met the same inclusion criteria, thereby enabling broader participation while maintaining the study's focus (Alase, 2017; Saunders et al., 2018; Smith, 2004). Referrals were screened to ensure they met the study's inclusion criteria, thereby maintaining focus on participants who could provide rich, thick data (Pandey & Pandey, 2021; Smith, 2004). Maintaining strict inclusion criteria increased the credibility of the findings. The snowballing process also generated referrals to an additional diaspora group, Kenyan Women in California (KWICA). Following flyer distribution within this group, additional interested individuals were screened for eligibility and included as appropriate. Together, purposive and snowball sampling enabled access to a specialized population while maintaining methodological coherence. Homogeneous inclusion criteria ensured experiential alignment, purposive recruitment supported analytic depth, and snowball referrals leveraged community trust to broaden participation. Sample size was guided by IPA conventions and finalized when saturation was reached, ensuring that findings reflected both individual meaning-making and shared lived experiences across participants.

## **Data Saturation**

Qualitative data collection ends when the researcher has gathered all the relevant information. Data saturation in qualitative research occurs when further data collection no longer reveals new themes or insights, indicating that the sample was sufficient to address the research question (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). In IPA, smaller samples are often sufficient because the focus is on detailed, in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. IPA methodology prioritizes depth over breadth, enabling a richer understanding of each participant's lived experiences (Smith, 2004; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The sample size of 10 was chosen because the group was homogeneous, sharing similar characteristics, contexts, and experiences (Smith, 2004; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The insights generated tended to converge quickly, reducing the need for a large sample. Interviews were continued until all 10 participants were interviewed.

Saturation was continually assessed throughout the data collection by monitoring whether new participants contributed novel insights or merely reinforced existing themes. Since no new themes emerged after 8 participants were interviewed, the sample of 10 was sufficient. Data saturation is closely linked to information power, a concept that suggests that the more specific a study's criteria are, the more meaningful conclusions can be drawn with fewer participants (Malterud et al., 2021). This concept is particularly relevant in IPA research, where smaller samples are often sufficient due to the in-depth exploration of participants' experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Because this study employed an IPA methodology, a smaller sample

was sufficient (Smith, 2004; Smith & Nizza, 2022; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). This combination of purposive and snowball sampling facilitated access to a group that was diverse yet homogenous, maintaining a clear focus on the research question. Ultimately, my study reached data saturation because no new themes emerged from the data collected from the 10 participants. This saturation indicated that the sample was adequate to fully explore the research question, ensuring that the findings were both credible and comprehensive.

### **Instrumentation**

For this research, in-depth, semistructured interviews were used as the primary method of data collection. Semistructured interviews are well-suited to IPA because they enable participants to provide detailed first-person accounts of their lived experiences while supporting the methodology's idiographic and phenomenological orientation (Smith et al., 2009). Using IPA enabled participants to describe, in their own words, how they made sense of their workplace integration experiences as highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan women.

I developed a semistructured interview protocol that served as the primary data collection instrument for this study. The protocol was designed to elicit rich descriptions of the workplace integration experiences among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with the flexibility to explore emergent meanings as they arose during interviews. This design aligned with IPA's emphasis on depth, nuance, and participant-led narration (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). The flexible structure allowed participants to shape the interview's direction based on what they perceived as most significant in their

experiences. The primary goal of these interviews was to explore the factors influencing the successful integration of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women into their workplaces, including both their strategies and the impact of their social identity.

To ensure clarity and relevance and to align with the research objectives, the interview questions were validated by my committee, who were familiar with both the research topic and qualitative data collection methods. My committee reviewed the questions for comprehensibility, cultural sensitivity, and conceptual alignment with the research objectives. This committee validation process strengthened the credibility and appropriateness of the interview protocol. The interview protocol consisted of predetermined, open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect deeply on their experiences and interpretations.

The interview questions were accompanied by follow-up probes designed to elicit depth, reflection, and interpretation. (Braaten et al., 2020). These probes allowed participants to expand on emotionally significant experiences and clarify the meanings they ascribed to workplace interactions. For example, questions such as “In your experience, what specific strategies or processes were used during your workplace integration?” and “How has your identity as a highly skilled first-generation Kenyan woman affected your workplace integration?” allowed participants to express meaning rather than provide surface-level descriptions (Alase, 2017; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). This questioning strategy ensured that data collected directly addressed the research question and aligned with IPA's phenomenological focus.

The interview guide was developed as a data collection instrument to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for additional probes. The interview guide (Appendix A) was informed by the literature on workplace integration processes, workplace integration strategies, identity, and leadership dynamics. The interview guide functioned as a scaffold rather than a script, preserving the openness required for IPA research (Braaten et al., 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). The balance between structure and openness was central to IPA, allowing participants' meaning-making processes to remain foregrounded.

Demographic data were collected using part one of the interview guide, which functioned as a brief demographic questionnaire. Part one of the interview guide gathered information on participants' age, educational background, employment status, and length of time in the United States. These data were used to contextualize participants' experiences rather than to draw comparative or generalizable conclusions, consistent with IPA's idiographic focus. All interviews were conducted individually via Zoom and were audio- and video-recorded, thereby constituting additional data-collection instruments. Zoom was selected for its accessibility and capacity to capture high-quality recordings suitable for verbatim transcription. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using Zoom's transcription feature, producing textual transcripts that served as the primary source for analysis (Gray et al., 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The use of audio-video recordings ensured a complete and accurate record of participants' verbal and nonverbal communication.

Verbatim transcripts are essential in IPA, as they preserve participants' language, pauses, and expressions, enabling detailed interpretative engagement with the data. Recording and transcribing interviews ensured a complete and accurate record of the conversation, ensuring that all verbal responses were documented and time-stamped. The verbatim transcripts provided a detailed textual dataset that was systematically analyzed to identify themes and patterns in the participants' responses, which was crucial for maintaining data integrity and enabling in-depth analysis of participants' language and expressions (Larkin et al., 2021; Noon, 2018). These transcripts formed the foundation for identifying experiential themes and meaning-making patterns.

Additionally, I maintained a reflexive journal by taking notes before and during each interview. These notes included written observations and reflections to capture immediate impressions and contextual details that the recordings might not have fully represented (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These notes provided valuable insights into the interview dynamics, the participants' emotional tone, and the overall atmosphere of the interaction, which informed how the data was interpreted (Flick, 2021). These observations contextualized verbal responses and provided additional layers of understanding essential for holistic analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). During the interviews, attention was paid to participants' body language, facial expressions, and engagement levels. Nonverbal communication provided insights into participants' emotional states and reactions, which may not be explicitly verbalized but influenced their responses (De Villiers et al., 2022; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Noting these cues

enhanced the depth of analysis by providing richer context for the verbal data and supported interpretation the subtleties of participants' experiences and perspectives.

The combination of semistructured interviews, verbatim transcripts, demographic questionnaires, audio and video recordings, and reflexive notes provided sufficient and robust data to address the research question. Data collection and preliminary analysis occurred concurrently, allowing for iterative refinement of interview probes and deeper exploration of emerging experiential themes. The iterative process ensured that the instrument captured both shared and acknowledged aspects of participants' workplace integration experiences.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Data for this study were collected from first-generation Kenyan women residing and working in California. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling. The initial recruitment was conducted via three Kenyan Community WhatsApp groups (Appendix D), which serve as social and professional networks for the Kenyan diaspora. These community-based platforms provided access to individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria and fostered trust-based engagement within the population.

A flyer (Appendix C) was posted in these groups, outlining the study's objectives, procedures, voluntary nature, and eligibility criteria. Targeting these platforms ensured direct access to potential participants who self-identified as first-generation Kenyan women immigrants, had a tertiary education (classified as highly skilled), possessed at least 5 years of work experience in California, and were currently employed. This

recruitment strategy aligned with IPA's emphasis on identifying participants with direct lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. Once the flyer (Appendix C) was disseminated, interested individuals were instructed to respond via a QR code embedded on the flyer, which linked directly to a Google Form, or via WhatsApp messaging. The Google form collected their contact information for the study. Initial contact was made to confirm eligibility and to provide additional study details.

Individuals who did not meet the eligibility criteria received a thank-you message and no further contact was made. This process ensured ethical recruitment guidelines and clear participant boundaries.

Snowball sampling was implemented by asking the four seed participants to refer other eligible individuals. Snowball sampling was particularly effective when engaging hard-to-reach populations whose participation relies on trust and social networks (Mwita, 2022; Raifman et al., 2022). This approach led to referrals to KWICA, the Kenyan Women in California diaspora social network, which yielded additional participants who met the study's criteria. Snowball sampling increased recruitment reach while maintaining alignment with qualitative methodological standards. Eligible participants received an informed consent form electronically, and after providing signed informed consent, were scheduled for individual interviews conducted remotely via Zoom. This platform enabled participants to engage from locations of their choosing, increasing comfort and participation. Zoom was selected for its accessibility, ease of use, and ability to support high-quality audio and video recordings (Gray et al., 2020). Participants who

did not meet the eligibility criteria received a thank-you note and no further participation occurred.

Each qualified participant completed one semistructured interview, with the possibility of a follow-up interview for clarification or elaboration. Interviews were initially planned to last 60-90 minutes; however, actual durations ranged from 25 to 220 minutes, reflecting the variability in participants' depth of reflection and engagement. This variation is consistent with IPA's flexible participant-led approach. Allowing individuals to share experience at their own pace. Given the semistructured nature of the interview, the interview flow remained flexible, allowing participants to elaborate on their experience that they perceived as most meaningful (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This flexibility supported IPA's focus on experiential depth and sense-making.

Participants were informed in advance that a follow-up interview might be requested for clarification of emerging interpretations; however, no follow up interviews were conducted, as the depth and quality of the data were sufficient for analysis. Conducting interviews via Zoom reduced participants' burden while enhancing analytical rigor. All interviews were conducted using a semistructured interview guide and a brief demographic questionnaire to ensure consistency across data collection events. Interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed, using Zoom recording features with participant consent. Technical preparation included sending secure meeting links, confirming interview times, and addressing potential connectivity issues prior to each session (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Gray et al., 2020). This preparation ensured high-quality recordings, minimized data loss, and enhanced data security.

At the beginning of each session, I reviewed the study's purpose and confirmed participant understanding of the focus on their lived experiences of workplace integration (Larkin et al., 2021; Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, I reviewed the study protocols, including the voluntary nature of participation, assurances of confidentiality, and the use of data recording and storage in accordance with Walden University protocols. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Rapport building was essential in qualitative interviewing; therefore, I engaged participants in brief introductory dialogue to establish comfort and openness prior to beginning the formal interview (Smith et al., 2009). Establishing rapport was critical for eliciting detailed, reflective accounts of the lived experiences of first-generation Kenyan women regarding workplace integration strategies.

During the interviews, I maintained a reflexive notebook to document immediate reflections. Notes were taken to document my observations of non-verbal cues and contextual details that might not have been captured in the recordings (Flick, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These notes served as a supplementary data source and supported interpretative analysis. Transcripts, recordings, and notes were securely stored in accordance with Walden University data protection protocols. This process ensured data integrity and participant confidentiality throughout the study. Upon completion of each interview, I conducted a debriefing that included summarizing key discussion points, inviting participants to clarify or expand their responses, and addressing any questions they had about the study (Macdiarmid et al., 2020). Participants were thanked using a standardized closing statement (Appendix B). Confidentiality procedures were reiterated,

including anonymization of all identifying information in reports and publications, as outlined in the informed consent form.

Member checking was conducted immediately after each interview by summarizing key points and inviting participants to confirm or clarify my understanding. Participants were also invited to review interpretative summaries to ensure accuracy and faithful representation of their perspectives. Participants were exited from the study once experiential sufficiency was achieved and no additional interviews were required (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). Upon completion of data analysis, participants received a summary of the emergent themes and were invited to provide feedback or comments. Participants' feedback was incorporated where appropriate to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

For this study, the data analysis plan was based on IPA, a qualitative research methodological framework designed to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. IPA is particularly suited for studies that focus on understanding participants' subjective interpretations of their personal and social worlds (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This analytical approach aligned with the study's central research question, which explored how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women make sense of their workplace integration experience. IPA aligns with the research focused on lived experiences and meaning-making within specific contexts.

IPAs follows an idiographic and hermeneutic-analytic process. The idiographic focus emphasizes the detailed examination of each participant's experience before

proceeding to cross-participant analysis (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). This approach enabled in-depth analysis of individual participants' narratives, consistent with the study's focus on lived experiences. The hermeneutics process involves the researcher interpreting how participants made sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The double hermeneutic process guided the interpretation, enabling a layered and interpretative understanding of the participant's lived experiences.

The first step involved immersing myself in the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. This initial line-by-line review laid the groundwork for the entire analysis (Emery & Anderman, 2020). Through this thorough process, I closely engaged with the transcripts to understand the participants' accounts, paying attention to the specific words and expressions they used to share their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Interview transcripts served as the primary data source for the central question, while reflexive observation notes served as supplementary data. During this stage, I took preliminary notes and observations to capture early impressions and points of analytical interest. These notes were informal but helped me become more familiar with the data. Attention was given to participant language expressions and meanings related to workplace integration. This careful immersion laid the foundation for systematic, inductive coding in the next step, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' authentic voices.

The second step involved inductive coding of the data to ensure a systematic data review. Coding was conducted manually by the researcher and supported through qualitative data management software. This process required a close examination of each

data type collected, including interview transcripts and observation notes, to determine how they addressed the research question and reflected participants' subjective experiences of workplace integration (Tracy, 2024). Given the focus on participants' lived experiences of workplace integration, the analysis aimed to identify and code segments that revealed their subjective experiences and perceptions. This deliberate alignment between the data and the research question was critical to ensuring that the analysis remained focused and aligned with the study's objectives (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Tracy, 2024). Codes were descriptive in nature and closely tied to participants' language. The first coding cycle ensured IPA's idiographic commitment and preserved the meaning's grounding in each participant's account before moving toward abstraction (Saldaña, 2021; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The data review was methodical and intentional, ensuring that every aspect of the study's objective was addressed. These initial codes served as the analytical building blocks that informed the development of emergent themes in the subsequent step.

The third step focused on identifying emergent themes using an inductive approach. This approach, which allowed the themes to emerge from the data rather than being predetermined, enabled a detailed and flexible analysis that captured complexities and nuances (Larkin et al., 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Coding was conducted across three dimensions: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. Descriptive coding involved identifying and labeling data as explicitly stated. Linguistics coding examined how things were said, such as tone and pauses, and conceptual interpretations extended beyond the surface to explore underlying meanings and interpretations of the data (Larkin et al.,

2021; Naeem et al., 2024; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Saldaña, 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022). By focusing on keywords and the contexts in which they appeared, themes emerged naturally, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in the data without being influenced by preexisting theories or my assumptions. At this stage, related initial codes were grouped into conceptual clusters based on shared meaning (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These clusters were then refined into sub-themes, which represented more patterns within each participant's account. This multi-layered coding approach reflected established IPA analytical conventions (Larkin et al., 2021). Sub-themes were subsequently synthesized into emergent themes that capture second-order interpretation while maintaining a clear connection to the original data (Smith & Nizza., 2022). Once emergent themes were identified within individual participants, the analysis proceeded to examine patterns across participants.

The fourth step involved examining all themes across participants to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. These patterns served as the foundational building blocks of the analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Discrepant or divergent cases were intentionally retained and analyzed to enhance interpretative depth rather than eliminated, consistent with IPA methodological rigor (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This involved comparing and contrasting different parts of the data, looking for similarities and differences in how participants described their experiences. The step maintained an idiographic approach by respecting each case's individuality while exploring shared experiences that connected participants. The resulting thematic patterns required reflexive engagement to understand how interpretations were shaped during the analysis.

The fifth step in the analysis was the reflexive engagement throughout the analytical process. I used a reflexive journal to reflect on emergent themes in relation to my personal experiences and knowledge (Emery & Anderman, 2020). This reflexivity was essential in phenomenological research, as it allowed the researcher to remain aware of their biases and preconceptions while engaging with the data. The goal was not to impose preexisting theories or assumptions on the data, but to allow the themes to emerge organically through careful, thoughtful analysis (Öz & Timur, 2023). The reflexive process involved continually questioning and re-evaluating emerging themes, considering how my background and perspective might influence data interpretation (Öz & Timur, 2023). A reflexive journal and analytical memos were maintained to document positionality, assumptions and interpretative decisions. This reflexive practice ensured that the analysis remained authentic to the participants' experiences and maintained transparency and accountability in the interpretative process. Reflexive insights informed the final stage of analysis, which involved integrating themes within the study's conceptual framework.

The sixth and final step of the analysis involved constructing a thematic integration and linking the emergent themes with the study's conceptual framework. This framework provided an organized representation of the themes and their connections to the research question (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Themes were interpreted through the lens of LMX and intersectionality, which highlighted how participants navigated workplace integration strategies in California. To enhance the study's trustworthiness and depth, triangulation was employed to integrate supplementary

observational data (Patton, 2015; Smith & Nizza, 2022). This method ensured that the findings were robust by cross-verifying information from multiple sources and enhancing validation and interpretation. This integrative process prepared the findings for presentation and interpretation in Chapter 4.

A double hermeneutic was employed throughout the data analysis. Participants engaged in meaning-making as they described their lived experiences, and I interpreted how participants understood those experiences. This approach allowed for deep engagement with the data while acknowledging my role in the meaning-making process (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Öz & Timur, 2023; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The first order of interpretation involved participants making sense of their own lived experiences. The second order of interpretation concerned how the participants made sense of these experiences. This interpretative layering strengthened the analytical process and ensured alignment with IPA philosophical foundations (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Öz & Timur, 2023; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The framework also situated the findings within the broader context of the phenomenon under study, drawing on the literature presented in Chapter 2 to contextualize the results. This comprehensive approach ensured that the IPA data analysis plan was rigorous and systematically explored participants' lived experiences while effectively integrating the findings within the conceptual framework.

In qualitative data analysis, organizing data is critical for managing large volumes of information and ensuring analytic rigor. I used qualitative data management software to support the systematic coding and thematic analysis of the data (Allsop et al., 2022). Specifically, I used MAXQDA to import, organize, and manage transcripts generated

during the research process (Paulus, 2023). The software facilitates data exploration through advanced search and query functions that support the identification of patterns, relationships, and themes across participants (Paulus, 2023). Throughout the analysis, I maintained control over the data, using the software as a data-management and organizational tool rather than as a substitute for interpretive analysis.

To analyze the demographic data collected from the interview participants, I used Excel to perform a detailed analysis. For categorical data, such as age ranges, industry, education level, and language fluency, I calculated the frequency and percentage for each category. This provided a clear understanding of how participants were distributed across different demographic variables. For example, for age, I tallied the number of participants in each age range (e.g., 18-24, 25-34) and calculated the percentage in each category, which helped illustrate the sample's demographic profile. In Excel, I used the COUNTIF function to calculate frequencies and applied simple formulas to determine the percentage for each category by dividing each frequency by the total number of participants.

For ordinal data, such as the number of years participants had been working in the United States, I followed a similar approach by calculating the frequency and percentage of responses in each range. These frequencies were useful for understanding the experience level of participants, such as how many had been in the workforce for more than 10 years, and so on. In Excel, I used pivot tables to aggregate and analyze this data efficiently.

For the open-ended questions, such as "What is your current role?" or "What industry are you currently employed in?" I categorized the responses into predefined

groups, such as healthcare, education, business, and technology. These categories were tallied to show the distribution of industries in which participants worked. This approach provided a clear overview of the sectors represented in the sample. I used Excel's text functions to categorize these responses and created summary tables to display the findings. Finally, I used Excel's graphing features to create bar charts and pie charts for visual representation of the data, which supported effective communications of the findings. Through this process, Excel enabled systematic and efficient analysis of the demographic data, ensuring that all relevant information was clearly presented and was easy to interpret.

### **Discrepant Cases**

A fundamental component of qualitative analysis involves the careful examination of discrepant cases, in which a participant's narrative diverged from prevailing themes. These instances provide critical insights into the complexity and diversity of the lived experience, thereby enriching the overall depth of the study (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Characteristics of discrepant cases were identified and incorporated into the analysis in several ways. Specifically, discrepant cases were reviewed through comparison with dominant themes to assess how and why these experiences differed across participants. This process ensured that divergent perspectives were not overlooked but instead contributed to a more nuanced interpretation of the findings.

First, I acknowledged the variability they introduced into the overall dataset (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Second, I reviewed the findings in detail to understand the

factors contributing to the deviations. This process involved revisiting interview transcripts, reviewing contextual details, and considering individual circumstances that could explain the unique aspects of these cases. Third, I conducted a systematic comparison of established themes and patterns to identify areas of divergence (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). This comparative analysis clarified how some participants' experiences differed from the broader trends identified in the study. Additionally, discrepant cases led to the identification of new themes or perspectives not initially apparent in the data. In such cases, I reevaluated the coding framework to include these additional themes.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, various approaches are used to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings. Each strategy was designed to ensure rigor, trustworthiness, and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Shufutinsky, 2020). According to Schwandt et al. (2007), trustworthiness and authenticity are essential for maintaining neutrality, balance, and fairness in qualitative studies. This involved focusing on the scientific concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Schwandt et al., 2007, p. 12). Addressing each component ensured the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Credibility**

Credibility was ensured through a rigorous design, supported by triangulation and the development of trust and rapport with participants. Triangulation involved the use of multiple data sources, including member checking and observational notes, to strengthen the credibility of the findings (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Carter et al., 2014; Noble &

Heale, 2019; Shufutinsky, 2020). Rapport building was essential and was achieved through ongoing engagement with participants, which facilitated the collection of rich and meaningful data (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Consistent patterns across data sources increased confidence in the findings. Data collection included semistructured interviews, participant observation, and nonverbal cues (Adler, 2022; Denzin, 1978). Analyzing descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual interpretations allowed for cross-validation and deeper exploration of the phenomenon (Adler, 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Data collection continued until no new themes emerged, ensuring the findings fully addressed the research question (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Reflexivity was crucial for maintaining credibility and involved active reflection on potential biases and subjectivity to prevent my influence during data collection, analysis, or interpretation (Shufutinsky, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). A reflexive journal was maintained to document my thoughts, decisions, and interactions throughout the study, enhancing transparency and credibility.

### **Transferability**

The value of a qualitative study depends on how well its findings can be applied to other settings. Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings can be applied to other contexts, settings, and populations (Adler, 2022; Findley et al., 2021; Shah, 2025; Smith et al., 2009). Achieving transferability involved providing sufficient contextual detail to allow others to determine the applicability of findings across settings (Shah, 2025). To support transferability, I provided detailed accounts of the research context, participant demographics, and cultural dynamics observed during the study.

These descriptions were intended to support readers in assessing applicability to other settings or populations (Findley et al., 2021). The study included participants across industries, age groups, work experience, and family contexts, thereby enhancing the potential relevance of findings. I also documented inclusion and exclusion criteria, enabling readers to understand the context in which findings were derived and to assess applicability elsewhere. Throughout the research process, I maintained a reflexive journal to document decisions, and observations. This journal supported transparency and contributed to transferability by enabling comparison between data and interpretations (Findley et al., 2021; Shah, 2025). These practices collectively enhanced the study's transferability by enabling other researchers to assess the potential relevance of its findings across contexts.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of research findings over time. In qualitative research, dependability can be established through audit trails, triangulation, reflexivity, debriefing, and transparent reporting (Ahmed, 2024; Armour & Williams, 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I used MAXQDA software to organize and manage the data and maintained detailed audit trails documenting coding decisions, memos, and data analysis steps (Ahmed, 2024; Armour & Williams, 2022; Shah, 2025). This systematic documentation was crucial for ensuring transparency and traceability. Dependability was further supported through member checking and cross-validation of findings (Ahmed, 2024; Shah, 2025). Additional procedures included documenting decisions, actions, and changes throughout the research process, as well as maintaining

systematic records of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Debriefing was conducted through consultation with a qualitative researcher at Walden University which provided feedback and alternative perspectives that strengthened the analysis and conclusions (Ahmed, 2024; Armour & Williams, 2022). This process enhanced the dependability of the study by ensuring that interpretations were critically examined and grounded in the data.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent to which findings are grounded in the data and supported by evidence. Confirmability focuses on the objectivity and neutrality of the research, ensuring that no influence stems from the researcher's biases, preferences, or preconceived notions (Ahmed, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024). To achieve confirmability, participants were engaged throughout the research process to ensure their voices and perspectives were accurately represented. The Zoom transcription feature was used to capture participants' words verbatim with time stamps, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' data rather than researcher interpretation.

Participants were invited to review and confirm emergent themes to ensure alignment with their lived experiences. Member checking was to enhance credibility and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Following data collection, participants reviewed summaries of the initial interpretations and final themes, confirming that the data findings were rooted in their perspectives (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Shenton, 2004). Integrating participants' viewpoints strengthened the confirmability of the research findings. Additionally, maintaining reflexivity involved acknowledging and critically examining

my own biases, assumptions, and values that may have influenced the research process and findings (Ahmed, 20224; Nguyen et al., 2024). By reflecting on my own subjectivities, I promoted transparency and mitigated potential biases, thereby enhancing the study's confirmability.

### **Ethical Procedures**

When conducting research on sensitive topics such as the lived experiences of first-generation immigrant women with workplace integration and career advancement, several ethical considerations had to be carefully addressed. Before conducting the study, institutional permissions and Institutional Review Board (IRB #07-30-25-1125846) approvals were obtained in accordance with Walden University requirements. The research protocol was submitted to the IRB for ethical review and approval. In qualitative research, the most important ethical considerations include informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, harm, and power and privilege (Moriña, 2021). Informed consent involves providing participants with comprehensive information about the research and ensuring voluntary participation (Moriña, 2021). Adherence to these protocols was not merely procedural, but reflected a commitment to safeguarding the rights and dignity of a vulnerable population throughout the research process.

Participants were recruited from three Kenyan community WhatsApp groups (Appendix D). I contacted prospective candidates by posting the flyer (See Appendix C) in Kenyan diaspora WhatsApp groups. These WhatsApp groups had a total of 1192 members (See Appendix D). The group criterion was Kenyan diaspora community members, and posting my flyer, which included the study inclusion criteria, resulted in

the recruitment of at least 10 participants (Larkin et al., 2021; Noon, 2018). Volunteer participants responded by scanning a QR code on the flyer or via WhatsApp.

Throughout the data collection process, ethics were a paramount priority. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained before each interview, ensuring that participants fully understood how their data would be used

### ***Informed Consent***

An informed consent letter detailing the study objective, the specific method to be employed, and any potential risks associated with participation was provided to the participants. Equally important, participants were granted the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. I obtained informed consent from all participants, clearly explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the potential risks and benefits. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time. Participants were assured that all data collected would be anonymized and that their identities would not be revealed in any published materials (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Any quotes or excerpts used were presented in a manner that prevented identification. Per Walden University requirements, electronic data were password-protected, stored on encrypted devices and will be retained securely for 5 years. I also debriefed participants to address any concerns they may have had and ensured that interpretations were accurately represented and understood (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). All these processes ensured that the research process was aligned.

### ***Confidentiality and Privacy***

Confidentiality and privacy were significant ethical considerations that required careful attention. Data protection measures were implemented to safeguard participants' personal information and ensure that all data were stored securely. Researchers are required to refrain from revealing identities or identifiable information in research outputs (Moriña, 2021). Lastly, I considered power dynamics and privilege and acknowledged the need to remain vigilant regarding my positionality and potential biases that may have influenced the research process and outcomes (Moriña (2021). Most importantly, I recognized the potential for exploitative relationships during the interview process and ensured that participants' rights, dignity, and well-being were respected and protected throughout the interview.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I reviewed the research design and methodology, including the rationale for selecting an IPA approach. The chapter also addressed key methodology components, including participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment procedures, participation criteria, and data collection strategies. I discussed the data analysis plan and addressed issues of trustworthiness and the ethical considerations related to the data collection process. Chapter 4, presents the study's results, including the research setting, participants' demographics, data collection, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this qualitative IPA study. The study explored the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women regarding workplace integration strategies in California. The guiding research question was: What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California?

Chapter 4 is organized into four integrated sections. The first section describes the research setting and the aggregated participants' demographics. The second section discusses the data collection procedures and analytic process used to generate emergent and cross-participant themes, along with procedures implemented to establish trustworthiness. The third section presents the results of the idiographic and cross-participant analysis, including patterns of convergence and divergence. The final section provides an interpretative response to the research question, followed by a summary of the findings.

### **Research Settings**

All interviews were conducted via Zoom because it provided an accessible platform for participants. To protect participants' privacy and avoid external interruptions, interviews were conducted from my home office setting. I used Zoom's transcription service, with participants' permission, to record and transcribe interviews. I collected data during the summer of 2025, a period in which issues related to immigration

enforcement and labor migration were prominent in the United States (Driesen, 2025; Nagel, 2025). Initially, 30 Kenyan women expressed interest in participating; 11 completed the consent form and met the study criteria.

Interviews continued until data saturation was reached. Saturation was defined as the point at which additional interviews yielded no new experiential meanings, interpretive insights, or nuances relevant to the research question. Saturation was achieved after the eighth participant interview. To confirm saturation, two additional interviews were conducted. After the tenth interview, no significant new themes, patterns, or dimensions of meaning emerged. Therefore, recruitment and data collection concluded with 10 participants, as the data were considered sufficient to thoroughly explore the phenomenon under study.

Each interview began with a brief explanation of the study's purpose and the collection of demographic data, followed by semistructured interview questions. When participants responded comprehensively to specific questions, some prompts were omitted. Interview durations ranged from 25 minutes to over 200 minutes depending on participant availability and level of engagement. In alignment with IPA principles, participants were invited to review summaries of their interview responses, an aspect of the member-checking process that contributed to the credibility and accuracy of the study results.

### **Demographics**

Understanding the demographics of study participants was essential for contextualizing their experiences and insights. The study involved 10 highly skilled first-

generation immigrant Kenyan women working across various fields. Participants differed in age, experience, educational background, and domestic responsibilities, providing a broad view of workplace integration strategies while also sharing common characteristics that demonstrated their resilience and adaptability. This diversity provided a broad perspective on workplace integration while also highlighting shared similarities.

Participant demographics were important given the inclusion criteria. Of the 10 participants, five (50%) were aged 45-54, three (30%) were aged 35-44, and two (20%) were 55 or older, reflecting a sample largely composed of mid-to-late career professionals. The age distribution provided insights into the varying perspectives and experiences related to workplace integration across different stages of professional and personal development, underscoring the breadth of expertise and perspective each age group brought to the study.

Regarding professional experience, six participants (60%) reported more than 15 years of work experience, while four participants (40%) reported 10 years or fewer. Specifically, one participant (10%) reported 5 years of experience, two participants (20%) reported 6-10 years of experience, and one participant (10%) reported 10 years of experience. Healthcare was the most represented profession, with five participants (50%) employed as nurses or in supervisory healthcare roles. The remaining participants worked across education, energy, and nonprofit leadership, automotive, and state service sectors.

Educational attainment was high across the sample. Seven participants (70%) held master's degrees, two (20%) held bachelor's degrees, and one (10%) held a high school diploma. Regarding family status, five participants (50%) were married, and five (50%)

were single or divorced. Nine participants (90%) had dependents, whereas one participant (10%) had no dependents. Collectively, the sample represented a diverse yet professionally experienced group of mid-to-late career women whose backgrounds informed varied perspectives on workplace integration.

To further contextualize demographic characteristics, a mid-career professional composite was constructed to represent participants in professional roles primarily in healthcare and education. Participants within this composite typically held master's degree and reported more than 15 years of workforce experience. They balanced professional responsibilities with family obligations and often served as primary caregivers and financial contributors within their households. Participants reported navigating workplace environments that required ongoing integration to organizational norms, communication styles, and leadership expectations. Although professionally competent, they described the need for sustained effort to establish credibility and secure advancement opportunities. Workplace integration strategies included mentorship, continuous professional development, and reliance on faith-based or community support systems to manage workplace stressors.

A second composite was developed to represent participants working in leadership, project management, or administrative roles across non-profits, energy, automotive, and state service sectors. Participants included in this composite were typically aged 35-44 or over 55 and held advanced education, most commonly master's degrees. They reported moderate to extensive professional experience and worked in environments with limited representation of immigrant women. Participants identified

self-advocacy, networking, and strategic relationship-building as important for workplace integration. They described balancing professional identity with cultural expectations while managing parenting or extended family responsibilities. Despite structural barriers, participants engaged in intentional career planning and continued pursuit of leadership opportunities. These demographic characteristics highlighted the diversity and complexity of participants' backgrounds, which were central to understanding their workplace integration experiences. The collective participant profiles provided a foundation for interpreting the findings. The next section describes the data collection procedures used in this study and the processes through which these data were gathered and analyzed.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was initiated following Walden's IRB approval (IRB #07-30-25-1125846). Recruitment was conducted through four Kenyan diaspora WhatsApp groups used for community networking among Kenyans living in California (LWITU, Wakenya Wa SoCali, KenyanAds Post Everything, and KWICA). A recruitment flyer outlining the study purpose and eligibility criteria was distributed within these groups.

Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to recruit participants. An initial group of four seed participants was identified, followed by additional recruitment through participant referrals, resulting in a final sample of 10 participants. Interviewing continued until data saturation was achieved, defined as the point at which no new themes or meaningful variations emerged across interviews. Saturation was reached after the eighth interview and confirmed through two additional interviews. The final two

interviews reiterated previously identified patterns, supporting the conclusion that data saturation was achieved. Analysis of these final interviews revealed a repetition of previously identified patterns, indicating that no substantially new insights emerged. Achieving data saturation ensured that the depth and breadth of participants' lived experiences were thoroughly explored. The use of the snowball sampling method facilitated recruitment within this closely connected community during a period in which the social and political climate surrounding immigration was unfavorable.

Semistructured interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. The length of interviews ranged from approximately 25 minutes to more than 200 minutes. Researcher observation notes were also documented to provide contextual information. All the participants were interviewed after completing a short demographic survey. Anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms and participant identifiers (RP1-RP10). One interview (RP0) was excluded from analysis due to the absence of an audio transcription.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis followed the IPA methodological framework, which enables a deep exploration of participants' lived experiences. This method involved a series of systematic steps designed to transform raw interview data into meaningful insights (Smith et al., 2009). This approach enabled an inductive progression from raw interview data to a nuanced understanding of participants' workplace integration experiences. The initial step involved immersion in the raw interview data through multiple readings, followed by the development of detailed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes.

These notes facilitated an inductive progression from initial codes to the development of connections among these codes, yielding emergent themes. Subsequently, these themes were reviewed to identify patterns across participants, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences. This inductive and interpretive process ensured that analytic insights remained grounded in participants' sense-making (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The analytic process prioritized idiographic engagement with individual participants' narratives before moving to cross-participant interpretation, consistent with IPA's phenomenological and hermeneutic commitments. The study focused on how participants made sense of their workplace integration experiences. The following steps describe the process used to analyze data collected from 10 semistructured interviews.

The first step, data immersion, involved thorough engagement with the data through reading and rereading the interview transcripts, as described in Chapter 3. This step was essential step for developing a comprehensive understanding of participants lived experiences. Each transcript was reviewed multiple times, both in full and line by line, to establish familiarity with the content, tone, and context of participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2009). During this process, attention was given to the specific words, expressions, and pauses used by participants when discussing workplace integration strategies and challenges. Initial notes were recorded following IPA conventions; descriptive notes (what was said), linguistic notes (how it was said), and conceptual notes (early interpretations of meaning) (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). This step laid the groundwork for more detailed analysis by organizing the data into meaningful units that reflected the participants' experiences.

The second step involved developing initial coding of participants' statements. These codes were descriptive and captured specific elements of participants' statements. These codes were primarily descriptive and experiential, capturing specific elements of participants' accounts without imposing higher-order interpretations prematurely (Tracy, 2024). Following immersion, a systematic review of all data sources, including interview transcripts and observation notes, was conducted to identify segments that revealed participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of the workplace interactions.

Each transcript was reviewed line by line, and codes were assigned to segments that reflected key experiential elements related to workplace integration. Codes were continually refined to ensure alignment with the research question and the study's focus on the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies. For example, RP1 stated, "The accent... they don't understand. When I ask questions two or three times .... looks like I don't know my job." This statement was coded as "language barriers" and "perceived competence," reflecting how communication challenges influenced perceptions of professional ability. Similarly, RP5 noted, "Patients often resisted care, questioning my competence." This response was coded as "competence questioned" and "patient interaction challenges." These codes captured participants' experiences of doubt, resistance, and professional vulnerability.

**Table 1***Examples of Initial Codes Derived From Participant Statements*

Participant	Statement	Initial codes
RP1	“The accent... they don’t understand. When I ask questions two or three times .... looks like I don’t know my job.”	Language barriers, perceived competence
RP5	“Patients often resisted care, questioning my competence,”	Competence questioned. Patient interaction challenges

The third step involved identifying emergent themes through an inductive approach and interpretative process. At this stage, initial codes were examined for patterns, relationships, and meaning (Larkin et al., 2021; Naeem et al., 2024). Consistent with IPA, the analysis focused on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual dimensions, considering both the content of participants' narratives and the contexts in which meanings were constructed (Larkin et al., 2021; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Codes were clustered into sub-themes that reflected recurring experiential processes. For instance, codes related to language barriers, accent, and learning workplace norms were grouped under the sub-theme communication style and tone, which contributed to the themes of leader dynamics and relationships. These themes captured how communication practices affected participants' interaction with supervisors and colleagues.

Similarly, codes such as “competence questioned” and “patient interaction challenges” converged into the sub-theme professional identity and adjustment

challenges, reflecting struggles related to credibility, confidence, and professional legitimacy. These sub-themes informed themes related to workplace integration, challenges, and barriers.

Table 2 presents the progression from initial codes to sub-themes and themes identified through data analysis. Table 2 illustrates how participants' verbatim accounts were systematically organized and interpreted to capture patterned meanings related to workplace integration. Initial codes derived from descriptive and experiential coding were clustered into sub-themes that reflected shared processes across participants' narratives, and were subsequently synthesized into themes. This structure demonstrated the inductive nature of the analysis and provided transparency in how participants lived experiences informed the development of themes. These themes then served as the basis for cross-participant analysis described in Step 4, where patterns of convergence and divergence across participants were reviewed. This progression from codes to themes ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participant narratives while supporting interpretative meaning-making consistent with IPA.

**Table 2***Example of Codes, Clusters, Sub-Themes, and Themes*

Code	Clusters	Sub-themes	Themes
Language barrier	Communication and language barrier	Communication style and tone; learning workplace culture; adjustment challenges	Leader dynamics and relationships; workplace integration; challenges and barriers
Competence questioned	Professional credibility and evaluation	Professional identity and adjustment challenges	Leader dynamics and relationships: challenges and barriers
Patient interaction challenges	Work role performance challenges	Professional identity and adjustment challenges	Leader dynamics and relationships: challenges and barriers
Recognition from leadership	Organizational support and advancement structures	Employer and colleague support; limited promotion and leadership pathways	Workplace integration: challenges and barriers

In the fourth step of the analysis, themes were examined across participants to identify patterns of convergence and divergence. This stage involved comparing and contrasting participants' accounts to explore both shared meanings and differences, consistent with IPA's idiographic and analytical approaches (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Through this comparative process, the analysis moved beyond individual cases to developing a more integrated understanding of participants' collective experiences. Attention was given not only to recurring patterns but also to negative and divergent cases, ensuring analytical rigor (Smith & Nizza, 2022). A key area of convergence was the role of leadership recognition in shaping participants' sense of belonging. Several participants emphasized that leadership support influenced their sense of acceptance and

professional value in the workplace. For example, RP2 stated, “Yeah, you don’t get favor. It’s hard to find favor with a charge nurse...unless the charge nurse is from Africa. Most of the time, you don’t stand a good chance of being part of the group.” This account highlighted the sub-themes of “cultural similarities.” This account reflected the sub-theme of cultural similarities, illustrating how shared cultural backgrounds shaped participants' perceptions of inclusion and belonging. Meanwhile, RP6 noted that she felt "like I truly belong here" when her hard work was validated by her leaders, highlighting how leadership recognition influenced workplace integration and sense of belonging.

Despite these shared experiences, divergence was evident in how participants navigated cultural interactions. While some participants described cultural similarities as facilitating integration, others reported ongoing challenges related to cultural misunderstanding and adaptation. For instance, RP9 explained, “Culturally, how we interact was a learning curve. We don’t look at them straight in the eye. Over here, if you don’t do that, they think there's something shady.” This account demonstrated how differences in communication norms contributed to misunderstanding and feelings of isolation. In contrast, RP8 described a more supportive experience, where her manager was open to learning about her cultural background rather than seeing that difference as a negative, which suggested that leadership practices and organizational context mitigated cultural barriers.

Additional divergence emerged in participants' experiences of professional identity and exclusion. For example, RP5 shared that “Patients often resisted care, questioning my competence,” indicating that professional integration was shaped by the

intersection of professional role expectations and racialized perceptions that shaped workplace integration. This experience highlighted the intersectionality of race and professional identity in shaping participants' integration experiences. In contrast, RP7 described challenges with her coworkers, noting that she was "sometimes not invited to meetings" that others were, linking social exclusion to perceived difference and further illustrating how identity factors influenced access to professional networks and decision-making spaces.

Overall, this cross-participant analysis revealed that recognition and leadership support were consistently important for fostering belonging; participants' experiences of workplace integration varied depending on cultural interactions, leadership practices, and intersecting identity factors. By examining both shared and divergent experiences, this step provided a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigated their professional environments and how organizational cultural contexts shaped those experiences. These findings informed subsequent interpretation of strategies to enhance workplace integration and inclusive leadership practices.

The fifth step, consistent with IPA's interpretative and reflexive orientation, involved ongoing reflexivity throughout the analytic process to examine how my personality, experiences, and assumptions may have shaped interpretation (Emery & Anderman, 2020). Reflexivity was crucial for maintaining awareness of potential biases and preconceptions during engagement with data. The reflexive process involved continually questioning and re-evaluating themes to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' experiences rather than being shaped by prior assumptions

(Öz & Timur, 2023). This reflection ensured that the findings were robust and reflective of participants' perspectives. For example, during analysis of the theme “communication challenges,” I initially interpreted language barriers as primarily technical or skill-based issues, a perspective influenced by my background in linguistics. However, upon reflection, I realized that this perspective may overlook the emotional and identity-related dimensions of participants' language barriers. For instance, RP1’s statement, “The accent...they don’t understand. When I ask questions two or three times, it looks like I don’t know my job,” revealed not only communication difficulties but also a perceived threat to professional identity and competence.

In another instance, when examining RP7's experience of exclusion from meetings. I initially considered “organizational culture” as the primary factor. Reflecting on my experience of workplace dynamics, I questioned whether my perspective was oversimplifying the situation. By revisiting the data with fresh eyes, I acknowledged the intersecting influences of sub-themes of “social identity: and “organizational Culture” that RP7 faced, which broadened my understanding of the themes. These reflexive exercises helped ensure that the themes reflected the participants' authentic experiences and were not constrained by my initial interpretations or biases. Through these ongoing dialogues with the data, I maintained an open mind, allowing the participants' voices to remain central throughout the analyses.

The sixth and final step involved integrating themes into a coherent interpretative account and situating the findings within the study’s conceptual framework. At this stage, the focus shifted from detailed case-by-case analysis to a structured thematic narrative

that balanced idiographic depth with cross-participant analysis, allowing both convergence and divergence to be meaningfully represented (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Themes were refined and organized to demonstrate logical relationships while preserving the contextual richness of each participant's accounts. Verbatim excerpts were purposefully selected to illustrate each theme, providing transparency and grounding interpretations firmly in participants' voices. These excerpts were accompanied by analytic commentary that moved beyond description to interpretation, aligning with IPA's double hermeneutics, in which participants make sense of their experiences, and the researcher interprets that sense-making. Throughout this stage, interpretations were continually checked against participants' meanings to ensure consistency. Attention was given to both shared experiences and points of divergence, recognizing variation. This approach allowed the findings to reflect the complexity and nuance while avoiding overgeneralization.

Finally, the analytics narrative was situated within a relevant theoretical framework and literature, demonstrating how the findings extended and refined existing understandings. This synthesis strengthened the analytical rigor of the study and clarified the research contribution. Interpreted through the lenses of LMX and intersectionality, the findings illuminated how participants navigated the workplace integration strategies in California (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Observational data were incorporated as part of the triangulation strategy to enhance the study's trustworthiness (Patton, 2015). This integrative process strengthened the study's analytical rigor and clarified theoretical contribution while maintaining alignment with IPA's interpretative

and reflexive commitments. This final stage ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participant narratives while reflecting a systematic interpretative meaning-making process consistent with IPA.

### **Discrepant Cases**

During the analysis, some participants' accounts diverged from the dominant patterns. These accounts were not excluded but instead were examined as important variations that contributed to a deeper interpretative understanding of participants' lived experiences (Smith, 2009). In IPA, attention to such divergence supports a more nuanced analysis by capturing both convergence and variation across participants' narratives. The following examples illustrate discrepant cases: RP4 described immediate recognition of her credentials due to prior experience in another U.S. state. This account highlighted how prior U.S.-based experience influenced perceptions of professional legitimacy, suggesting that geographic mobility shaped how credentials were interpreted within workplace contexts. Similarly, RP7 exported strong managerial mentorship despite also encountering gender and racial barriers. This account contrasted with broader patterns in which participants described limited supervisor recognition. The RP7 narrative illustrated how supportive leadership relationships mediated workplace integration experiences, demonstrating that leadership dynamics could mitigate structural relational challenges.

These divergent participant accounts were analyzed in relation to emergent themes to examine whether they extended or refined interpretative understanding. Rather than weakening the thematic structure, these discrepant accounts contributed to a more complex representation of workplace integration by highlighting the roles of mentorship,

recognition of prior experience and leadership engagement. This interpretative engagement aligned with existing literature emphasizing the influence of organizational dynamics and relational process on workplace experience (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By incorporating both convergent and divergent accounts, the analysis provided a more comprehensive understanding of workplace integration as a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by leadership practices, organizational environments and intersecting identity factors.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was addressed through strategies that promoted credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through sustained engagement with participants, rapport-building, and member checking. Reflexive notes were recorded after each interview to record the initial impressions and the researcher's assumptions. Participants were invited to provide feedback on summaries of the emerging themes, thereby supporting interpretative accuracy and strengthening credibility by ensuring that participants' meanings were appropriately represented.

Transferability was supported by providing rich, contextualized descriptions of participants' experiences, demographic information, and research contexts (Shah, 2025; Smith et al., 2009). Detailed contextual narratives of the participant accounts were provided in the research's findings section, enabling the reader to determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts and settings (Adler, 2022; Findley et al., 2021). These descriptions supported the interpretive engagement with participants' sense-making within comparable professional and cultural environments.

Dependability was addressed through systematic data management and documentation using MAXQDA. The software supported the maintenance of detailed audit trails of coding and analytic decisions. Coding decisions, analytic memos, and interpretative steps were documented throughout the analysis. The use of a codebook (Appendix E) and the triangulation of interview and observational data supported consistency across analytic stages and strengthened the research process's dependability.

Confirmability was addressed by grounding interpretations in participants' narratives and maintaining reflexivity throughout the analysis. The analytic process involved first-order interpretation, which focused on the participants' words and meanings, followed by second-order interpretation to examine underlying patterns of sense-making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Reflexive documentation and member checking were used to support analytic rigor and methodological transparency, ensuring that interpretations remained anchored in participants' lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022) rather than in the researchers' assumptions.

### **Study Results**

Cross-participant results derived from data analysis are presented in this section, with an emphasis on shared meaning-making among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women as they navigated workplace integration in California. Interpretative patterns identified within each idiographic account were subsequently analyzed across participants to identify points of convergence and divergence. Consistent with IPA's phenomenological and interpretative commitments (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022), the analytic movement from individual sense-making to shared experiential

structures supported an integrated understanding of how workplace integration was collectively experienced, interpreted, and negotiated. By focusing on both convergence and divergence, the analysis identified shared psychological, relational, and sociocultural processes while retaining contextual variation across participants' narratives (Smith, 2011). Cross participants' interpretative patterns are presented rather than isolated individual accounts, consistent with IPA's idiographic process. Building on these cross-participant patterns, the following thematic sections present an interpretative description of how each theme operated within participants' lived experiences, supported by selective excerpts that are grounded in the data.

### **Cross Participant Interpretative Patterns and Themes**

Collectively, cross-participant interpretation indicated that workplace integration was experienced as an adaptive and relational process shaped by identity negotiation, credential recognition, leadership relations, and access to social support. Participants' accounts indicated that integration was not experienced as a linear process but as an ongoing effort to establish professional legitimacy while navigating intersecting cultural, racial, and gender expectations. Consistent with IPA, convergent patterns were interpreted as shared meaning structures that cut across individual narratives while remaining grounded in participants' lived sense-making (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). These processes influenced participants' visibility, legitimacy, and opportunities, revealing navigation as a continuous effort to reconstruct professional standing while managing intersecting cultural, racial, and gender expectations.

To support interpretation, Table 3 presents the cross-participant interpretative themes and meaning structures derived from comparative meaning-making across participants' accounts. Six interrelated interpretative themes emerged through cross-participant interpretation: Workplace integration experiences; Strategies and processes; Identity negotiation; Challenges and barriers; Coping and navigation; and Leader dynamics and relationships. These themes did not operate independently; rather, they reflected overlapping meaning structures that together explained how participants experienced and responded to workplace integration.

**Table 3***Cross-Participant Interpretative Themes and Shared Meaning*

Interpretative themes	Shared meaning across participants	Contribution to the central phenomenon
Workplace integration experiences	Integration was experienced as ongoing relational sense-making rather than a discrete transition	Established integration as continuous legitimacy work.
Strategies & processes	Participants engaged in continuous reinvention through education, networking, and career shifts.	Demonstrated agency adaptation under constrained recognition.
Identity negotiation	Participants recalibrated cultural, racial, gendered, and professional identities to manage visibility and belonging	Explained how intersectionality shaped legitimacy and access.
Challenges and barriers	Structural and interpersonal constraints delayed recognition and advancement	Identified systemic conditions shaping integration.
Coping and navigation	Faith, community, education, and advocacy sustained emotional regulation and motivation	Showed how participants preserved dignity amid uncertainty.
Leader dynamics and relationships	Leader-member exchange mediated learning, recognition, and access to opportunities.	Revealed leadership as relational gatekeeper of integration.

Across participants' accounts, identity negotiation carried significant interpretive weight, as participants repeatedly returned to questions of belonging, credibility, and how they were perceived within professional spaces. Leader dynamics, strategies, and processes also held strong interpretive importance, reflecting how integration was mediated through relationships and purposeful action. Challenges and barriers were not

experienced as isolated events but were embedded within participants' meaning-making as conditions that required sustained adaptation. Coping and navigation illustrated how participants preserved dignity and motivation amid uncertainty, often through faith, community, and avoidance. Building on these convergent meaning structures, the following cross-participant interpretation indicated how these themes collectively shaped participants' lived experiences of workplace integration within organizational contexts.

### **Theme 1: Workplace Integration Experiences**

The study results indicated that integration into the workplace for first-generation immigrant professionals in California was a complex and ongoing process. Participants reflected that support from employers and colleagues was a crucial factor, providing guidance and encouragement during the transition to a new work environment. Many participants experienced adjustment challenges, reflecting difficulties adapting to new professional norms and expectations. Learning the intricacies of workplace culture was critical for understanding unwritten norms associated with professional success. Additionally, the broader political environment influenced participants' experiences and access to opportunities.

Participants described how integration involved a trial-and-error process with limited guidance. RP5 described a "hidden curriculum" in education, referring to unspoken expectations that required explicit learning and were essential for professional effectiveness. Similarly, RP10 reported that formal training in her role was insufficient and was delivered in a rushed manner. RP10's experience highlighted the challenges faced when effective communication was lacking during training processes. The agitation

expressed by the trainer in response to the participants' questions indicated a potential gap in understanding and support needed, which could hinder effective learning and integration into a new system. This situation underscored the importance of fostering an environment where questions were encouraged and trainers were patient, as this could significantly impact the confidence and competence of new employees. In contrast, RP3 described a positive onboarding experience, noting that a supervisor from Colombia provided consistent support and knowledge sharing. Although positive experiences were reported, they were less frequent, as most participants described workplace integration as challenging and often constrained by the need to adapt to unfamiliar systems and attend supplementary training.

The workplace environment influenced integration outcomes, particularly in relation to whether coworkers and supervisors fostered inclusive or exclusive conditions. The participant stories reflected how race, language, and professional support intersect with perceived lack of support and implicit biases, exacerbating challenges for newcomers and individuals from diverse backgrounds. RP4 stated, "I did not feel super supported," while RP7 mentioned feeling "left out" at times. Many participants offered strategies for improved integration, primarily grounded in reflection rather than direct experience. These included volunteering for group projects, attending social and work-related events, participating in workplace community activities, and performing job-related tasks.

These sentiments reflected the intricate realities of adapting to new organizational and social norms while navigating unfamiliar professional settings. Support from

coworkers and supervisors emerged as a critical factor for successful integration, with participants emphasizing the importance of understanding multicultural team dynamics and cultural barriers. For instance, RP3 benefited from having a Colombian supervisor who was also an immigrant. RP4 described her mentor as someone who was always willing to help, share knowledge, and guide her. Conversely, many participants faced adjustment issues related to accent bias, cultural differences, and policy limitations. RP2, working in healthcare, highlighted difficulties with racism and miscommunication, particularly when working with dementia patients. Politics and regulations, especially concerning visas and credential recognition, also impacted experiences. Despite these challenges, most participants demonstrated strong self-directed adaptation and proactive learning of workplace norms. Overall, integration was characterized as a continuous and active process involving negotiation of belonging, competence, and visibility rather than a singular event.

## **Theme 2: Strategies and Processes**

The results of intentional actions and relational support that participants employed to facilitate workplace integration highlighted the complex interplay of individual determination and social support mechanisms that were pivotal. Strategies such as self-directed efforts, including obtaining additional education and building resilience, as well as collective support mechanisms like mentorship, networking, and community engagement, demonstrated participants' adaptive approaches in navigating complex professional environments to overcome barriers and gain a sense of achievement.

RP1 and RP7's decisions to enroll in community college courses illustrated a proactive strategy for workplace integration through additional education. By taking these classes, RP1 and RP7 sought not only to enhance their professional knowledge and skills but also to bridge gaps in understanding specific to their fields through additional degrees. This approach reflected a broader effort to align their qualifications with industry standards and expectations. Similarly, RP2 and RP6 illustrated the critical role of education in facilitating workplace integration and career advancement, with RP2 noting that "If you wanted to grow [professionally], you needed to go back to school, too." By pursuing relevant educational programs, both participants sought alignment with U.S. standards. This alignment was crucial for gaining credibility and ensuring that their skills were recognized and valued by employers. RP6's progression from CNA to LVN, with the goal of becoming an RN, underscored the importance of setting clear incremental goals. Each educational achievement served as a stepping stone towards greater professional opportunities, demonstrating the value of a structured approach to career development. This pursuit of additional education empowered participants to overcome systemic barriers and to integrate successfully into the workforce.

Participants reported adapting their behaviors to blend in, viewing integration as an ongoing process. As RP4 stated, "I personally chose... for me, it was a strategy. I didn't... I decided not to have a specialty, just to be in, uh, in all these specialties and gather up as many skills as possible." This approach highlighted the importance of versatility and adaptability as key strategies for professional integration. RP3 highlighted the importance of peer support in navigating her challenging workload. She mentioned,

I talked to a few...um...nurse, you know. Some of them are from the Kenyan community, some were from here...not all of them were bad, but some of them were able to work with you, and you know [how to] guide you.

This strategy of building supportive relationships within the workplace provided her with a network of allies who could offer advice and share their experiences. These connections were crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and mitigating feelings of isolation. Despite the difficulties, RP3's approach enabled her to navigate the complexities of her professional environment effectively and was eventually promoted to a supervisor.

Faith and cultural identity acted as resilience resources, motivating persistence despite systemic barriers. However, the undervaluation of skills and credentials forced participants to restart their careers despite prior expertise. To succeed, they returned to school to upgrade their credentials and licenses. For example, RP1 strategically invested in their professional development by aiming to meet the requirements and expectations of their chosen field, stating, "So, just enrolling in the community college and doing, like, a... Anatomy and Physiology class. That helped me." As such, the training not only provided technical knowledge but also fostered a deeper understanding of their professional identity and greater confidence in their abilities. Similarly, RP4 highlighted the importance of attending additional training not only for personal growth but also to demonstrate competencies to colleagues, attending optional trainings frequently "to be on top of my game. I wanted to be as competent as [possible]." This approach highlighted a dual purpose: not only did it demonstrate personal commitment to continuous learning, but it also increased visibility and demonstrated her competence to colleagues and

supervisors. This proactive approach can be seen as a means of building credibility and establishing a professional reputation in the workplace.

Mentorship was considered essential but often unavailable, prompting women to rely on peer support. "I tended to gravitate towards people who were also immigrants in one way, shape, or form, because I felt that they understood my lived experience" (RP8). Self-initiated learning was a proactive response to the undervaluation of their prior qualifications. Strong community ties created culturally safe support systems, filling workplace inclusion gaps. Authenticity and self-directed decision-making were emphasized for first-generation immigrant women starting new jobs. For example, RP7 chose to return to school to acquire relevant both field-specific knowledge and a cultural awareness similar to what her colleagues had gained in American schools. Participants recommended embracing one's identity and approaching new experiences with openness and no preconceived notions, encouraging decisions aligned with personal values and goals rather than external pressures. Knowing when to accept or decline opportunities was seen as vital for personal growth and independence.

Integration was seen as a balance between openness and purpose, with an emphasis on following independent paths. Participants discussed various strategies they used to overcome professional and social challenges. They most commonly relied on self-initiated efforts, such as pursuing further education and demonstrating resilience. These personal initiatives were often complemented by seeking mentorship and peer support, which provided additional guidance and encouragement. Networking and engaging with the community also played a significant role in helping participants build

connections and access to opportunities. Furthermore, involvement in broader community activities contributed to their sense of belonging and integration. Overall strategies highlighted the importance of both individual determination and community engagement in the integration process. These findings illustrated how individuals maneuvered organizational and cultural contexts through personal agency and social networks. For those motivated by self-drive, geographic mobility was crucial for career progression; one participant noted: "I was seeking opportunities. I was moving toward the Bay Area because that's where the financial opportunities were" (RP10). This highlighted a proactive approach to relocating geographically and advancing professionally. Conversely, participants acknowledged limitations within their social networks in their ethnic communities. As RP10 stated:

Some people from where we came from didn't want to... associate with you if you hung around here, and when you called them for help, they sent you to the wrong place. Sometimes you didn't even have a car, and they wouldn't help.

This contrast between individual strategies and community dynamics reveals the complex interplay between personal agency and social support systems. While participants actively sought opportunities for growth and integration, they also faced challenges in accessing reliable support for their ethnic communities. This underscored the necessity of resilience and resourcefulness to overcome both structural and social barriers.

### **Theme 3: Identity Negotiation**

The theme of identity negotiation emerged as a significant topic, especially for Kenyan immigrants navigating the complexities of the U.S. workplace. This theme

encompassed both challenges and opportunities as participants sought to preserve their cultural heritage while adjusting to new social and professional environments. For these immigrants, identity was not fixed but a dynamic interaction of personal, cultural, and professional aspects. It was influenced by various factors, such as identity misclassification, balancing cultural identity with professional roles, the experience of being an African immigrant in the U.S. workplace, and the nuances of gendered experiences. Each factor presented distinct hurdles and opportunities for growth, highlighting the multifaceted nature of identity in a multicultural setting. By examining these factors, I developed a deeper understanding of how Kenyan immigrants manage their social identities, seeking authenticity, belonging, and credibility in U.S. workplaces. This exploration underscored the resilience and adaptability needed to thrive in complex work environments.

Identity misclassification often led to feelings of misunderstanding and marginalization as participants navigated workplaces where their cultural backgrounds were misinterpreted or overlooked. RP9's experience illuminated the complexities of identity misclassification, especially in the context of inter-group dynamics among Black individuals. Her interactions with African Americans were initially marked by suspicion. RP9 explained, "African Americans I worked with... considered us to be like a threat, until they got to know you." She noted that this sense of threat took at least 6 months to overcome, illustrating the time and effort required to dispel initial misjudgments. Once trust was established, relationships often transformed into friendships, highlighting the potential to overcome stereotypes through sustained interaction. RP9 also described how

White colleagues treated her differently after hearing her accent, perceiving her as distinct from African Americans. She said, "Once they hear the accent, they think you're different." This differentiation sometimes led to tensions, as it was perceived by African American colleagues as preferential treatment. RP9 observed, "That also aggravates the Black people, because they think yeah, you are... [being] treated better than we are." This dynamic highlighted how identity misclassification based on accent and perceived differences can worsen existing racial tensions. These experiences underscored the importance of understanding how language and cultural perceptions influence workplace integration, often requiring time and effort to navigate and resolve. Her experiences served as a reminder of the need to foster understanding and communication to bridge cultural divides and challenge misclassifications.

Balancing cultural identity with professional roles added another layer of complexity as participants tried to maintain their heritage while adapting to new professional expectations. As RP6 reflected, "I ended up having to change careers to feed the kids," highlighting the sacrifices and adjustments involved in this balancing act. Being an African immigrant in the U.S. workplace further complicated identity negotiation, as participants faced stereotypes and biases while trying to assert their professional competence. RP9 noted, "I am nervous about the group because it is 99.9% with African Americans," emphasizing the complex dynamics that can exist between African immigrants and African Americans, often stemming from historical and cultural misunderstandings.

Additionally, the gendered experience played a crucial role in influencing how participants were perceived and how they navigated their careers. RP10 encountered dismissive attitudes and harmful remarks, such as when others questioned her career choices and suggested that certain roles were not meant for immigrants. This was further compounded by the cultural expectation that immigrants should confine themselves to certain industries, as RP10 noted, “Administrative jobs...belong to people who are born here, and who are from here” Together, these elements underscored the dynamic and multifaceted nature of identity negotiation as individuals worked to harmonize their cultural, professional and personal lives within diverse and often challenging environments.

Participants illustrated how gendered expectations intersected with cultural identity, shaping dual responsibilities at work and home. RP6 mentioned the culture shock and transition involved in adjusting to American workplaces, stating, “it was all in your mind, that's how you were raised, it was like hardwired. You came here, it took you a minute [to adjust], you know?” The tension between maintaining one's ethnic identity and assimilating into mainstream workplace cultures was reflected in these categories. To conform to perceived professional norms, most participants felt pressured to code-switch, alter their communication styles, or conceal cultural markers. Participants felt both vulnerable and invisible. Said RP10, “African Americans I worked with, they considered us to be, like a threat, [...] You were threatened, and... and they would not be pleasant.” Her account showed that being a Black immigrant woman in the U.S. workplace did not automatically connect her with African American colleagues. Instead, her foreignness

was seen as a threat, highlighting how intergroup dynamics were influenced by cultural backgrounds, language cues, and perceived social status. RP10's feelings of vulnerability and encounters with unfriendliness underscored the emotional toll of navigating mistrust rooted in miscommunication and unfamiliarity and demonstrated how cultural differences and foreignness were often misunderstood or marginalized. However, her eventual acceptance suggested that visibility and belonging were conditional and could be earned but only through prolonged exposure and relational acceptance. This revealed how intersectionality complicated the way immigrant women navigated layered processes of racial identity, diverging from typical workplace cultural experiences and assumptions.

Participants identified their accents and linguistic backgrounds as sources of bias, leading to microaggressions and feelings of incompetence. RP7 explained that "sometimes you couldn't express yourself the way you wanted because you feared they might not understand your accent or your background." This showed how cultural and linguistic adaptation served as strategies for acceptance and survival. Experiences of covert exclusion and racialized assumptions were also linked to being African in a predominantly Western professional setting. RP1 likewise noted communication barriers with colleagues, including difficulty parsing her accent. "The accent for one...they're like, they don't understand what you're saying." This experience highlighted a common barrier in which language differences can unintentionally lead to misunderstandings and misjudgments about an individual's abilities. For women bearing the burdens of both racialized and gendered expectations, these misclassifications and biased experiences felt even more overwhelming. RP6 reflected, "The fallacy of a single narrative always stayed

with me. People often assume one story about disabilities, like autism, without knowing the diverse experiences.” She emphasized the difficulty of relying on a single narrative and pointed out the effect of stereotypes by sharing stories of successful individuals with disabilities: "I was constantly reflecting on my own life choices and the labels that had shaped my journey.” She encouraged questioning societal assumptions and used her personal reflections and multiple identities to challenge stereotypes in advocating for herself and others. The theme of identity negotiation for Kenyan immigrants in the U.S. workplace revealed a complex process of managing authenticity, belonging, and credibility amidst societal labels and stereotypes. These findings highlighted the importance of fostering understanding and communication to bridge cultural gaps, challenge misclassification, and support the evolving identities of immigrant professionals that shape the workplace experiences of first-generation Kenyan immigrants. The resilience and adaptability demonstrated by these participants provide valuable insights into the broader implications of integrating first-generation immigrants into the workplace.

#### **Theme 4: Challenges and Barriers**

Theme 4, Challenges and Barriers, revealed systemic and interpersonal obstacles that first-generation Kenyan women faced in the U.S. workplace. Participants encountered structural limitations, restricted pathways to leadership opportunities, discrimination, microaggressions, and the devaluation of foreign credentials. These barriers significantly hindered their sense of access, legitimacy, and professional development. The analysis identified how these challenges impacted immigrant

integration as participants struggled to establish themselves in their professional environments. Overall, the results underscored the complex realities immigrants encountered navigating a landscape with both overt and subtle forms of exclusion that hindered their progress and undermined confidence.

Participants frequently faced structural obstacles that hindered their career advancement. RP3 shared, "Even with a master's degree and years of teaching back home, they told me to start as an assistant because my experience didn't count here," illustrating how institutions devalue foreign credentials a common barrier that forces highly skilled immigrants into roles below their expertise. Overqualification was prevalent, as these barriers diminished the worth of foreign credentials, leading to psychological effects such as shame and feelings of worthlessness. RP6's similar experience highlighted the structural barriers many immigrants encounter when trying to transfer their professional credentials to the United States. Despite being qualified as a lawyer in Kenya. RP6 faced significant challenges in pursuing her legal career due to the lack of recognition of her foreign qualifications. She noted, "They wouldn't take it as is," indicating that even though her qualification was verified, she still needed to complete additional American legal education to sit for the bar exam. This process exposed systemic issues in which foreign credentials were often undervalued or dismissed, compelling first-generation Kenyan immigrants to repeat parts of their education or start over. These barriers not only restricted career progression but also caused psychological effects such as shame and worthlessness as participants struggled to reconcile their qualifications with the roles they were offered.

The pathways to leadership and promotion appeared limited for many participants, regardless of their qualifications and efforts. Leadership roles seemed unattainable, leading to occupational stagnation. Participants often remained in low-quality LMX relationships lacking trust and opportunities for career advancement. RP8 expressed that the, “Ability to move up became an issue” despite meeting and exceeding all qualifications, illuminating systemic barriers to career progression. She noted that the decision-makers felt she “was not ready,” a perception that was not aligned with any formal career path or qualification requirements. This highlighted the arbitrary and potentially biased criteria used to evaluate her readiness for promotion, which was demoralizing and stifling to employees who were qualified and eager to advance. RP8 also experienced “a lot of resistance” regarding her ideas and contributions, which made her feel stifled. This resistance suggests a lack of appreciation for diverse perspectives and an organizational culture that may not value or recognize the contributions of all employees. Such an environment led to disengagement and a lack of motivation among employees who felt undervalued for several participants. RP8’s experience highlighted several critical barriers in the workplace, including communication issues, arbitrary advancement criteria, resistance to diverse ideas, and inadequate leadership support. Her narrative underscored the need for organizations to foster open communication, establish clear and fair advancement criteria, and provide constructive feedback to support employee growth. Addressing these issues is essential for creating an inclusive and supportive work environment. RP5 described “constantly...being watched or judged differently, sometimes it’s the look, sometimes it’s the tone.” Such experiences impacted

promotional opportunities and daily interactions, eroding self-confidence and sense of belonging. Leadership roles often seemed unattainable despite effort and merit, causing occupational stagnation.

Discrimination and microaggressions were pervasive; participants described subtle yet ongoing forms of exclusion that hindered their progress and undermined their confidence. RP3 described a situation in which colleagues were used as “spies,” creating tension, as part of perceived as an effort to undermine her confidence and credibility. These actions indicate a hostile work environment where subtle forms of discrimination and manipulation are used to destabilize an individual's standing. This behavior led to feelings of isolation, self-doubt, and decreased personal felt competence. Her focus on resilience and self-validation nonetheless showed when she said, “I keep proving myself. You know my work speaks for itself.” This highlights a common strategy among first-generation immigrant women, where excellence and a strong work ethic are used to counter negative perceptions and biases. RP5 expressed feeling constantly monitored and adjudged through looks and tone “constantly [...] being watched or judged differently. Sometimes it's the look, sometimes it's the tone.” These types of microaggressions were experienced by many participants, affecting their sense of belonging and daily interactions and eroding confidence. The persistent nature of these experiences underscores the emotional toll of navigating a workplace full of discrimination and prejudice.

Overall, these findings revealed that structural and interpersonal barriers intersected with race, gender, immigration status, and professional identity, increasing

challenges. Limited promotion prospects indicated that many participants remained in low-quality LMX relationships, characterized by a lack of trust, support, and career development opportunities. Additionally, exclusion from meetings and informal networks hindered relationship-building, which is vital for upward mobility in the workplace. These findings highlight the urgent need for workplace policies and practices that recognize and value the diverse backgrounds and contributions of immigrant professionals. By fostering an environment that promotes open communication, fair advancement opportunities, and constructive feedback, organizations can better harness the potential of highly skilled immigrants. Addressing these barriers will not only create a dynamic and diverse workforce but also enable first-generation immigrants to succeed and contribute meaningfully to their organizations.

### **Theme 5: Coping and Navigation**

Theme 5, Coping and Navigation, revealed that participants used various strategies to maintain their emotional, cultural, and professional well-being in complex work environments. Participants often relied on religion, education, cultural values, and community ties. Participants employed various adaptation techniques and advocacy strategies, reflecting internal efforts to preserve their dignity despite systemic challenges.

Participants emphasized the importance of resilience and various coping strategies for maintaining motivation and managing work-related challenges. The most common approach was adaptation, in which participants modified their behaviors and attitudes to better align with their work environments. Many highlighted the significance of inner strength and personal beliefs in staying motivated and overcoming difficulties. Their

methods for tackling these obstacles varied, including building strategic relationships, engaging in advocacy, and leveraging their expertise to educate and influence colleagues.

A common tactic among first-generation Kenyan women in the workplace was to seek out and build connections with others who shared similar experiences. The tendency to connect with fellow immigrants underscored the importance of shared understanding and solidarity when navigating a new environment. RP3 connected with a Colombian supervisor, RP8 with an Afghan, and RP5 with an Armenian colleague. RP5 noted, “I actually connected with another colleague of mine, she is Armenian...I said...you can relate to me.” This relationship provided valuable insights into workplace dynamics, supported participants through mentorship and trust, and helped them avoid potential pitfalls. RP8 stated that “I tended to gravitate towards people who were also immigrants in one way, shape, or form, because I felt that they understood my lived experience.” A support network was vital for individuals who felt isolated and misunderstood due to cultural or linguistic differences. By connecting with others who had faced similar challenges, participants found empathy, guidance, and encouragement. These shared understandings fostered a sense of belonging and community, where participants exchanged insights and strategies for addressing discrimination or misunderstanding. As RP5 mentioned, having someone to “give me the ins and outs” made a significant difference in adapting to and succeeding within a new organizational culture. Additionally, by seeking mentors who shared minority experiences, they effectively built support systems that facilitated adaptation and reduced challenges. This approach helped

participants feel more connected and supported, strengthening their resilience and ability to thrive in sometimes challenging work environments.

Participants also emphasized the importance of education, with most participants reporting that they had to obtain additional education. RP3 emphasized that her strong educational background from Kenya gave her confidence; she stated, “I thank God for the training I had back home in Kenya because it really facilitated my quick settling in.” Despite facing skepticism about her qualifications, she felt it was her “responsibility to work extra, extra hard to prove myself.” This commitment to excellence helped many participants demonstrate their capabilities and overcome initial biases. RP5 also leveraged her expertise to educate others and fill in knowledge gaps. She took the opportunity to teach others, saying, “I teach part-time at the university on behavior management,” and often had to remind her colleagues of foundational knowledge they lacked. Despite initial underestimation, as in when she said, “they assume that what I'm gonna say is a refresher. Well, what I'm trying to tell them is things that I know their credential, or their degree, [had] not covered, and there may be more questions,” she consistently demonstrated the value of her knowledge. This commitment to lifelong learning helped several of these participants remain current in their field and demonstrated their dedication to professional growth. The ability to adapt by building alliances and education highlighted the proactive measures taken to navigate and ultimately transform challenging work environments. These participants underscored the importance of support systems and the role of education in fostering workplace understanding and inclusion.

Faith and spirituality emerged as powerful adaptation strategies for many first-generation Kenyan women navigating the challenges of the workplace. These personal beliefs and cultural practices offered a wellspring of support, resilience, and hope during difficult times. Faith provided a sense of grounding and perspective that helped participants cope with stress and adversity. For RP10, the act of prayer was a direct line to strength and solace; she stated, “I went down on my knees, prayed to God, and said, 'Please, God.’” This expression of faith indicated a reliance on spiritual practices to seek guidance and reassurance when faced with challenges. Similarly, RP1 highlighted the centrality of faith in her life by stating, “So, my faith in God.” This simple yet profound declaration underscored that faith was a constant source of comfort and motivation, helping participants remain focused and hopeful even when external circumstances were challenging. RP9's reliance on faith during a difficult period illustrated faith's role in providing emotional support. “I was feeling so bad, I was like, oh my God.” This expression not only demonstrated reliance on faith in times of distress but also highlighted how spirituality helped participants find meaning and resilience in the face of hardship. For many, faith and spirituality were not just personal beliefs but were integral parts of their cultural identity and daily life. In the workplace, these beliefs fostered resilience by offering a sense of purpose and connection to something greater than oneself. This spiritual grounding was particularly important for navigating complex interpersonal dynamics and overcoming professional challenges. By turning to faith, participants found the strength to persist, advocate for themselves, and maintain a

positive outlook, all of which contributed to their overall resilience and success in the workplace.

In addition to adaptation, some participants engaged in resistance and advocacy, standing up for themselves and others in the face of adversity. RP2 stated, “Don’t feel ashamed, take leadership, do the work now. If it’s not right. say it.” RP2 in this quote highlighted the necessity of immediate action and vocalizing one's needs and rights as essential components of professional integrity and personal empowerment. The RP2’s perspective was particularly significant in the broader context of advocacy, not just for oneself but also for others as well, she emphasized that the act of speaking up and taking charge was not solely for personal gain but also for the benefit of “another woman, your babies, and another immigrant.” This collectivist mindset transformed individual actions into a form of leadership that inspired and supported a wider community.

Additionally, as stated by RP3, the act of speaking up despite fears of job insecurity aligned with a deeper sense of advocacy rooted in personal and communal values. She mentioned, “There are times when I had to speak up for me. But I was afraid, I was gonna lose my job, because I did not know my rights at that time.” This statement highlighted the tension between the need for self-advocacy and the fear of potential repercussions, a challenge that immigrants navigated with faith and a supportive community.

The theme of coping and navigation revealed a rich array of strategies that participants employed to maintain their emotional, cultural, and professional well-being in a challenging work environment. Reliance on religion, cultural values, and community

ties emerged as central pillars of support. These elements not only provided a sense of stability but also empowered participants to adapt and advocate for themselves and others. Participants like RP10 and RP1 emphasized how faith and spirituality served as vital sources of resilience, enabling them to face adversity with renewed strength and determination. The stories of RP2 and RP3 further illustrated the dynamic interplay between personal resilience and advocacy. RP2's focus on leadership and voicing rights reflected a broader commitment to not only personal empowerment but also the empowerment of others within the community.

Meanwhile, RP3's experience navigating the fear of job loss highlighted the courage needed to stand up for oneself, especially when rights and protections were not fully understood. Overall, these findings underscored the multifaceted nature of coping strategies, where personal beliefs, cultural identity, and community support contributed to a strong framework for resilience. Faith and religion offered a moral and emotional compass that empowered participants to advocate for themselves and others, even amid uncertainty and fear. By embracing these strategies, participants could preserve their dignity and integrity despite systemic challenges. This theme highlighted the crucial role of faith, community, and advocacy in helping individuals navigate and transform their work environments, ultimately fostering a more inclusive workplace.

### **Theme 6: Leader Dynamics and Relationships**

Theme 6, Leader Dynamics and Relationships, explored how leadership interactions significantly influenced participants' professional experiences and sense of belonging. This theme explored how the relationships with supervisors, communication

styles, and support for career development either promoted or hindered successful workplace integration, especially for first-generation Kenyan women. Factors such as cultural and demographic similarities, recognition of extra-role contributions, and leadership's impact on job satisfaction and performance illustrate the complex dynamics of the workplace (Valenzuela et al., 2020). Understanding these interactions revealed how leadership could both empower and challenge employees, underscoring the importance of culturally sensitive and inclusive practices that foster a supportive work environment.

Participants associated trust and recognition from leaders with a sense of belonging, emphasizing validation as vital for workplace integration. Mentors who were willing to teach or assist provided support, RP2 commented, "If you didn't know something, they could tell you, oh, you could come to the office, then we could teach you, or we could come to wherever you were, then we could teach you." This willingness to engage and educate increased the role of leaders as facilitators of knowledge and integration, offering a safety net that boosted confidence and belonging among employees. RP3's experience with a supportive supervisor highlighted how trust and recognition fostered a strong sense of belonging and job satisfaction, saying that she felt so supported that she invited her supervisor to her wedding. RP3 stated, "Felt, she supported me so much that even when I was getting married, I did invite her to my wedding." RP3's story underscored the need for leaders to create an environment where efforts are acknowledged and valued. Leaders who actively engaged in mentorship and recognized employee contributions not only improved individual job satisfaction but also

promoted a cohesive and supportive workplace culture. This dynamic fostered a sense of belonging and confidence among employees, emphasizing the vital role of leadership in validating and integrating diverse talents within organizations.

In-group and out-group dynamics, often rooted in cultural differences, significantly affected interpersonal relationships and workplace cohesion. These dynamics were influenced by whether participants shared characteristics or lacked them, shaping how they connected and interacted. RP8 observed, “I tended to gravitate toward people who were also immigrants in one way, shape, or form, because I felt that they understood my lived experience.” Connecting with fellow immigrants provided RP8 a sense of belonging and validation that was absent in interactions with individuals from different backgrounds. This behavior underscored the importance of empathy and shared understanding in developing strong workplace relationships. RP1 observed, “They hadn't traveled, or they didn't know about Africa, or they didn't know Africans, so they hadn't worked with Africans before. They were used to working with Filipino nurses.” This statement highlighted a significant gap in cultural awareness and familiarity with different immigrant groups, which inadvertently led to exclusion and bias in the workplace.

The lack of exposure to diverse cultures and experiences led to misunderstandings and, at times, stereotypes that affected how participants were perceived and treated in the workplace. This observation pointed to the need for cultural training and awareness programs to bridge these gaps, thereby fostering a more inclusive and respectful

workplace. By increasing cultural competence, workplaces could enhance mutual understanding and collaboration among diverse groups.

The interaction between leaders and employees influenced career progression and job satisfaction. Despite challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and coping strategies, highlighting the importance of adaptability for success. Many believed promotions were based on timing or perceived readiness rather than merit. For instance, RP9 stated, "The ability to move up became an issue because they felt I was not ready." Such perceptions suggested subjective biases impacted career advancement, discouraging employees who felt undervalued.

Recognition was often delayed and conditional, shaping perceptions of advancement and reducing motivation. This emphasized the need for fair, transparent evaluation processes based on actual contributions and potential. Conversely, positive relationships with culturally empathetic supervisors benefited employees. RP8's experience with a non-native supervisor facilitated her integration and improved her workplace experience. She said, "Fantastic supervisors I've had, but she was not fully American [she was from] Afghanistan." This interaction illustrated how culturally empathetic leaders could significantly impact employees.

Leaders sharing similar cultural backgrounds or possessing deep understanding provided better support and mentorship. Such leaders were more equipped to recognize and address employees' unique challenges, fostering an inclusive environment. This improved employees' sense of belonging and motivation, ultimately supporting their professional success. Inconsistent communication sometimes undermined motivation, as

RP8 observed: "It is not what they are saying, but how they are saying it, and someone can be rejected even when they believe they are acting nicely" This comment revealed the nuanced nature of communication where tone and delivery can have profound impact on how messages are received, potentially leading to feelings of rejection despite positive intentions.

Unfair promotion processes and mentorship barriers also impeded growth. RP2 shared, "I've been putting in extra effort for years in the hopes of getting promoted, but it never happens. They say I'm doing well, but that's about it." This frustration reflected a disconnect between effort and reward, which can undermine motivation and loyalty. RP4 abruptly left her job, stating, "I've told them I'm not showing up tomorrow. HR reached out, but I wasn't interested in suing. I told them my experience and just left." These examples demonstrate how unmet expectations and invisible added labor can erode motivation and well-being, leading to drastic decisions like job departure.

Despite these issues, participants appreciated leaders who acknowledged their contributions and offered genuine feedback. Theme 6 emphasizes that leadership, communication, recognition, and fairness are vital for immigrant employees' job satisfaction and retention. The quality of interactions with supervisors was a key factor in gaining support, recognition, and career opportunities. Conversely, when cultural differences or demographic similarities were ignored, participants often felt excluded from informal networks or overlooked for promotions. These elements, when coupled with culturally sensitive leadership, could transform workplace dynamics, thereby creating an environment where first-generation immigrant employees feel valued and

empowered to contribute fully. Conversely, the absence of these components led to feelings of exclusion, undervaluation, and stunted career growth, as highlighted by experiences of bias and lack of support. Their experiences with leadership were influenced not only by their job performance but also by perceptions and responses related to their race, gender, and cultural background.

The dual role of leadership as both a potential barrier and a facilitator of successful workplace integration calls for leaders to adopt inclusive practices that recognize and celebrate cultural differences, ensuring that all employees are seen, heard, and given equal opportunities to thrive. By integrating these insights, organizations can enhance both internal morale and external reputation, paving the way for a more inclusive workplace. These experiences highlighted the critical role leaders played in not just managing teams but actively contributing to their professional growth and emotional well-being. By prioritizing encouragement and validation, leaders effectively enhanced both individual and organizational success.

Alongside the thematic analysis, Figure 2 (Word Cloud) offers a visual representation of the most common words and phrases in participants' narratives. This visualization adds an extra layer of insight by showing the frequency and importance of words that resonated with participants.



credentials” highlighted ongoing systemic challenges. Overall, the word cloud offered a visual summary that complements the thematic analysis, providing a broader perspective on how first-generation Kenyan women navigated their careers. The word cloud enhanced the narrative by highlighting the complex interplay between personal agency, professional growth, and systemic obstacles.

### **Convergent and Divergent Experiences**

Several themes demonstrated convergence across participants, reflecting common challenges and strategies related to workplace integration. Participants from diverse career backgrounds, family histories, and immigration histories described common challenges related to credential recognition and the need to build professional credibility within U.S. workplaces. These experiences often required resilience, strategic adaptation, and continuous learning, and were closely tied to participants' efforts to establish a sense of belonging and professional legitimacy (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Participants also described challenges related to balancing professional responsibilities, family roles, and cultural identity. These shared experiences reflected underlying psychological and relational processes associated with belonging, recognition, and professional validation, which were often perceived as unacknowledged within the organizational context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). These convergent themes provide a foundation for understanding how participants navigated workplace integration, thus highlighting the interplay between professional challenges, personal identity, and adaptive strategies.

### ***Credentials, Past Experience, and Qualification Recognition***

Seven of the 10 participants experienced difficulties obtaining credential validation, prior experience, and qualifications in their work, leaving them feeling that their prior education and experience were undervalued. Immigration acted as both a geographical shift and an identity upheaval; participants like RP1 faced challenges in professional recognition: “Where I work, a lot of the patients ask where you graduated from? So when you say that you're a foreign graduate, you know, there's a little pullback.” RP1's experience highlighted the implicit biases and preconceived notions people hold about educational institutions. The “pullback” of RP1's sense underscores the social preference for local, well-known universities, which can foster a sense of inadequacy and alienation among foreign graduates seeking recognition. This sentiment was echoed by RP7, who noted, “The main challenge is that the education I had from Kenya is not recognized at the same level.” This statement underscored the challenge of equivalency in educational qualifications. RP7's experience reflected the broader issue of undervalued international credentials, which can hinder professional validation and contribute to feelings of marginalization.

RP6 and RP8 demonstrated resilience by transitioning into different career paths. RP6 shared, “I went to school for one thing, and I transitioned, and I'm doing something totally different.” For example, RP8 explained, “I had to move away from HR roles and do more administrative stuff just to get a job.” RP9 shared, “I came here with my bachelor's already in education, but I did not go into teaching because I need extra qualifications.” These experiences highlighted how immigration acts both as a

geographical shift and an identity upheaval. Similarly, RP3 expressed frustration with those automatically thinking she was a nurse assistant rather than being fully qualified at a higher level, saying “They thought I didn't know anything in nursing...they thought I was automatically a certified nurse assistant, nothing wrong with that, but because ...I think because of [my] skin color and tone, I was bracketed in that area.” RP3’s experience exemplified not only the devaluation of foreign qualifications but also the intersection of racial biases with professional perceptions. This dual-layered bias against both foreign credentials and skin color exacerbated the challenges faced by immigrants in achieving recognition and quality in the workplace. RP3’s insights suggested a pervasive issue of racial profiling, where assumptions about capability and role are influenced by racial identity, further complicating the pursuit of professional legitimacy and growth. RP10 expressed disillusionment over unrecognized qualifications, referring to having felt naive about how she had assumed her credentials would be recognized so that she could gain a job in the field, quickly stating, “thinking that everybody’s gonna take my credentials and give me a job immediately.” This reflected the systemic undervaluing of foreign credentials and the cultural gaps between these women's countries of origin and U.S. standards.

Participants often encountered a disconnect with organizational leaders, impacting their career progress, self-efficacy, and professional respect, and leading to a need for recertification, additional education, and starting over at entry-level roles after years of experience, something experienced by five (50%) of the ten participants. Demonstrating agency and self-determination, participants actively applied resilience and reinvention as

adaptive responses. Many regained control by acquiring new skills and credentials, such as additional training and education, as in RP9's pursuit of computer training. RP6 became an LVN, and RP7 going back to community college. Self-motivation and strategic mobility were noted by the participants as having been essential for career growth, with RP10 encouraging others to "fly high" rather than remain stagnant. RP2 specifically emphasized the importance of nurturing others' inherent potential and strength in others to foster community empowerment and create a ripple effect of support. Continuous learning, perseverance, faith, and community support emerged as crucial coping mechanisms emphasizing resilience as both a relational and cultural trait.

Ultimately, participants showcased their ability to redefine success by returning to education, pursuing new careers, or acquiring new skills despite institutional barriers. Resilience, characterized by emotional regulation, resourcefulness, and strategic actions, served as a mechanism for coping with and resisting systemic devaluation. Their endurance and adaptation highlighted their ability to turn crises into growth, making resilience a vital aspect of their professional identities.

### ***Work, Family, and Identity Balance***

Participants faced difficulties in balancing professional ambitions with family responsibilities and cultural expectations. Five (50%) of the 10 participants highlighted the delicate act that many immigrants face when juggling work, family responsibilities, and identity. RP2's narratives focused on the difficulty of balancing work as a certified nursing assistant (CNA) with the demands of nursing school. RP2 shared, "First semester, I was doing CNA, and then it dropped my grades." She noted that the heavy

workload and clinical requirements led to a drop in her academic performance, illustrating the struggle to allocate time and energy effectively between professional duties and educational commitments. However, personal relationships could also pose challenges. RP6's experience highlighted the emotional and practical challenges of balancing personal relationships with professional aspirations, noting that her marriage was a "setback" in her life and hindered her personal and professional growth. RP6 reflected on her marriage as a significant step back. Her statement, "if I had known, I would not have stayed in my marriage as long as I did." Suggesting a sense of hindsight clarity about the impact of her relationship on her personal journey. RP6's narrative sheds light on the challenges of managing personal and professional obligations without adequate support systems, as she and her husband had to decide which days each would work and which would stay home. The need to decide "who's going to work today, who's not going to work" reflected a shared struggle to maintain employment while addressing family needs, illustrating a lack of stability with work-life balance. RP6's experience pointed to the need for employers to recognize and accommodate the diverse needs of their workforce. Providing flexible work options can enhance employee satisfaction, reduce turnover, and foster a more inclusive work environment.

RP9 and RP8 discussed the role of family in the integration process. RP9 stated, "I had my sister who was here, and I had to ask her all these questions," While RP8 stated, "I was very fortunate about that, uh, my husband is American." Both RP8 and RP9 underscored the importance of familial or spousal support in navigating work-life balance, which highlighted the need for support in balancing professional and personal

responsibilities. RP10 described the isolation faced within a restricted family environment and contrasted to the freedom found in community engagement and support. She noted her partner, “Never let me interact with other people,” but she later found empowerment by joining women’s groups like KWICA. This shift highlighted the balance between reclaiming her identity and pursuing professional aspirations.

The narratives of the participants (50%) collectively provided a nuanced understanding of the challenges and strategies involved in balancing work, life, and identity, particularly within the context of immigration. Each participant's story highlighted the unique aspects of this balance, yet common themes emerged that reflected broader experiences of first-generation immigrants. The cross-participant reflections revealed that achieving work-life balance and identity was a multifaceted process influenced by personal, family, and community support. These narratives illustrated the resilience and adaptability required to navigate the complexities of professional and personal life in a new cultural context. Support systems played a vital role in helping individuals manage these challenges. Support systems, whether through family, community, or a spouse, were a considerable factor affecting the emotional and practical support needed to balance work, life, and identity effectively. Ultimately, these stories underscored the importance of empathy, understanding, and support from both personal and organizations in facilitating successful integration and personal fulfillment.

Finally, three interconnected themes, professional aspirations and reinvention, balancing family responsibilities, and identity, were identified across all participants. These shared experiences suggested that career success for first-generation immigrant

women in California depended not only on skills but also on cultural adaptability, emotional resilience, and relational support. Participants faced the necessity to redefine their professional identities upon immigrating. This often involved pursuing new educational opportunities, changing career paths or adapting existing skills to fit the local job market. The theme of reinvention underscored the importance of flexibility and a willingness to learn as key components of professional success. The narratives also highlighted the critical role of family in shaping career and personal decisions. Participants frequently had to juggle work demands with family obligations, which included caring for children or supporting extended family members. This balancing act required effective time management and prioritization as well as leveraging family support systems. The success of first-generation immigrants was intricately linked to their ability to adapt, reinvent and build supportive networks. These insights highlighted the diverse factors contributing to successful workplace integration in California.

### *Divergent Experiences*

Although convergence characterized most participants' integration experiences, several accounts reflected variations that offered additional interpretative insights. These discrepant experiences did not contradict broader patterns but illustrated how localized relational contexts altered the pace and meaning of integration. Two of the 10 participants (20%) described relatively supportive supervisory environments. One participant received professional recognition that boosted their confidence and sense of belonging, while another experienced consistent, step-by-step onboarding and guidance from a close supervisor. These relational supports helped facilitate smoother adjustment and skill

development. These experiences contrasted with the more common experiences of limited guidance, delayed recognition, and self-directed adaptation.

Participants' diverse workplace experiences offered valuable insights into professional recognition and support. RP4 reflected on her previous role, noting, "I was a good nurse, really, because I was a float nurse." Everybody knew me, and I learned a lot of skills." Her story highlighted how professional recognition shapes personal and professional identity. As a float nurse, her skills were acknowledged and celebrated, with colleagues calling her "the queen of blood transfusion" (RP4), which boosted her confidence and sense of belonging. RP7 described receiving supportive supervision, saying,

I think there was a little bit more support. I had a supervisor who was very close with me. They would tell me what to do, what not to do, and showed me the onboarding on the computer... they worked with me step by step.

RP7's experience underscored the importance of strong leadership and supportive supervisory relationships at work. The supervisor's involvement and guidance helped lay a solid foundation for her professional growth and integration. This support likely boosted her confidence and skills, helping her handle challenges more effectively. Clear communication and mentorship from supervisors can greatly improve employee satisfaction and productivity, highlighting the value of leadership that offers hands-on support, especially for immigrant women. These examples showed how workplace dynamics can impact employee experiences differently. While RP4 emphasized the

importance of credential recognition, RP7's story demonstrated how supportive leadership and personalized guidance help with adaptation.

While many experiences were shared, participants also described important variations in how workplace integration unfolded. Divergence emerged in relation to leadership practices, cultural interactions, and organizational culture. Some participants experienced leadership recognition and support, whereas others described limited access to professional networks or decision-making spaces contributing to feelings of isolation (Smith et al., 2009). RP4's onboarding was exceptional, with thorough training that facilitated skill development and gradual integration. RP4 described the experience as "amazing," reflecting a comprehensive structure and approach to workplace integration. "The onboarding was amazing. I was a resident nurse for a whole year." Additionally, RP7, working in the deli, received supportive supervision and clear guidance from a close supervisor, which helped her transition smoothly and boosted her confidence. "I think there was a little bit more support. I had a supervisor who was very close with me." These varying experiences underscored how sector and job roles influenced integration, with supportive supervision playing a key role. Despite facing structural barriers, participants demonstrated resilience, influenced by personal backgrounds, emotional and social networks. The key differences emerged across industries and roles, emotional resilience, and mentorship opportunities.

Cultural interactions further illustrated divergence. While some participants described cultural similarities as a supporting integration, others reported persistent challenges related to communication norms, cultural misunderstanding, and adaptation.

RP7 reported persistent challenges related to communication norms, cultural misunderstandings, and adaptation. RP7 shared, “It would be so funny for them, but for me, being in the midst of them, I wouldn’t understand the joke, I wouldn't get it. So I would just sit there and be quiet, sometimes just...get busy with my work.” This experience highlighted the isolation that can result from not having common cultural references, even in seemingly inclusive environments. These differences highlighted how organizational culture and leadership approaches shaped participants' experience differently, even within similar professional environments (Smith, 2011). Despite these divergent experiences, common strategies across participants revolved around emotional resilience, the role of social networks, and the impact of mentorship in the workplace integration.

*Emotional Resilience.* Participants' emotional reactions to immigration and professional adjustments produced a range of results, primarily shaped by their access to psychological and spiritual coping skills. Some individuals experienced rejection intensely, losing their sense of identity, as exemplified by RP10’s heartfelt admission: "I sat in my room and cried a lot." This experience underscored the deep disillusionment and sadness many immigrants encountered when their qualifications and experience were not recognized. For RP10, transitioning from a respected professional in Kenya to feeling unwanted in a new environment led to self-doubt and psychological distress. Participants also found that career recognition was often delayed and conditional, which influenced their perceptions of integration prospects and diminished confidence. Conversely,

RP1 “my faith in God” and RP3 “ I thank God for the training...” religious connections allowed for resilience by drawing on faith, gratitude, and community support.

Their ability to interpret challenges spiritually or socially provided emotional stability. For instance, RP1 and RP10 frequently attributed faith as a crucial support that maintained hope and purpose amid doubts. These emotional outcomes indicated that structural factors served as primary barriers, while individual cultural and socio-economic resources influenced internal coping mechanisms. An intersectional analysis revealed that emotional resilience varied among participants and was influenced by factors such as class, spirituality, cultural background, and social support. Those with strong community or religious ties often turned adversity into opportunity, while those without these support networks often perceived rejection as a personal failure. This dynamic created an emotionally delicate experience, where shared struggles led to a wide range of psychological effects and outcomes. The delicate emotional experiences underscored the complexity of first-generation immigrants' experiences, which are deeply intertwined with personal and structural factors that shape emotional well-being. The ability to draw on spiritual or community resources provided a buffer against systemic challenges, although not everyone had access to them. Therefore, recognizing the intersectionality of these influences can lead to a more tailored and effective support systems as beneficial in fostering emotional resilience.

***Role of Social Networks and Mentorship.*** The analysis revealed that access to social networks and mentorship significantly enhanced participants' resilience in adapting to the new work environment. These women often faced unique challenges as they

adapted to the new environments and work settings, making the support from mentors and community networks invaluable. Mentorship provided essential guidance and support that significantly impacted career trajectories. RP3, for example described her supportive supervisor as a pivotal figure in her life event: “I felt supported so much [...] she was there for me, she was there 100% for me” This reflected how effective mentorship can create a strong bond and provide emotional support enhancing both job satisfaction, sense of belonging and personal well-being. RP2 also highlighted the practical benefits of mentorship, noting that her mentors were accessible and willing to provide hands on training. “If you don’t know something, they could tell you, oh, you can come to the office, then we can teach you.” Her narrative emphasized the importance of mentors who are approachable and ready to assist in real-time. By maintaining hands-on support and maintaining an open-door policy for learning, supervisors and mentors created an environment where employees felt valued and equipped to succeed. This approach not only enhanced individual growth but also contributed to a more dynamic and effective workplace culture.

Informal networks, such as women’s groups and cultural groups also played a crucial role in providing support and fostering workplace integration. RP9 participated in a women’s group both on WhatsApp and Facebook demonstrating the importance of cultural and community connections. RP7 and RP3 also emphasized the importance of these networks in creating a sense of belonging and shared experiences. RP7 mentioned being part of women’s groups which offered emotional support and community, stating, “I have a lot of women [...] some members of women’s group.” These groups served as a

safe space for sharing challenges and celebrating successes which helped these women navigate the complexities of workplace integration.

RP9 and RP7 shared the importance of joining formal affinity groups at work. RP9 stated, “Groups. Like, at work, as I said, we have a Black group, which has been formed... I... I am nervous about the group...” Her cautious engagement in this group highlighted the complexities of navigating professional networks, particularly in contexts where there may be underlying tensions of cultural difference. Her awareness of potential issues between African Americans and Africans within the group indicated a nuanced understanding of racial and cultural dynamics in the workplace. RP9’s experience also reflected the intersectionality of her identity as both an immigrant and a member of the African community. Her involvement in these groups required balancing her Kenyan identity with broader racial and cultural identities in the United States. This dual navigation was challenging, underscoring the need for first-generation immigrants to carefully navigate social dynamics while leveraging available networks for both emotional and professional growth. RP7’s experience with professional affinity groups specifically business resource groups added a valuable dimension on social networks and mentorship. This group served as a formal network that provided both community and professional development opportunities. RP7 mentioned that within this group, small mentorship programs were available, allowing individuals to be paired with mentors who were aligned with their professional growth goals. RP7 stated” We have something called business resource groups. So these are groups of people who have similar background. So withing those small groups. They always have like mentorship programs.” This setup

provided targeted support and guidance, helping employees navigate career paths and develop skills in a context that is culturally and personally relevant. These mentorship opportunities are tailored to the unique challenges and aspirations of their members. To maximize the impact of these groups, organizations should consider integrating them formally during onboarding to ensure immigrants join them, and this approach can also enhance workplace integration.

However, barriers such as fear of appearing incompetent deterred some from seeking mentorship. RP8 expressed this concern, stating, “The fear of not being seen as competent. I haven’t actively...sought out any mentors because of that.” This hesitation underscored a need for workplace cultures that encourage open communication and normalize seeking help as a strength rather than a weakness. Additionally, the lack of representation in leadership roles made it difficult for first-generation Keyna woman to find relatable mentors, further demonstrating the importance of diversity and inclusion initiatives within organizations.

Participants with family-based mentorship, such as RP2 and RP8 experienced smoother transitions thanks to guidance and emotional support, which facilitated their workplace integration. RP2 stated, “The only thing you hear, uh, apply for this job, apply for this job...” Though she felt the pressure from her family to apply for jobs, RP2 noted that she had a family who had shared experiences and provided encouragement and insights into navigating the complexities of the job market. Family support made a difference, giving RP2 greater confidence to navigate the workplace and her new environment. RP8’s statement offered rich insights into the interplay between personal

agency and family support in professional success. She acknowledged the crucial role her husband played in providing guidance and practical advice, such as helping her with interview preparation and offering tips. RP8 stated that “So you know my husband can kind of, you know, talk me through it, or help me with an interview, and you know give me tips, etc.” Both RP2 and RP8 had a deep understanding of what was required to succeed professionally, coupled with the confidence that comes from recognizing personal contribution and abilities to the process. These experiences highlighted the importance of community and family in helping first-generation Kenyan immigrant women overcome the barriers they face with workplace integration.

The availability of mentorship influenced perceptions of belonging and opportunities, often shaped by social and cultural similarities with leaders and colleagues. Participants who shared traits with their supervisors reported stronger relationships, validation, and mentorship, which aided their integration into the workplace. Conversely, differences in appearance or cultural background sometimes led to prejudice, strained relations, and limited career advancement. The experiences with supervisors varied: some received positive mentorship, while others faced negative or absent leadership, resulting in feelings of exclusion. For example, RP8 pointed out the lack of standout supervisors and poor leadership experiences. Feelings of invisibility (RP2) and perceptions of being outsiders (RP1), often due to skin color (RP4) or cultural markers, further hindered professional growth. These results highlighted the complex, intersectional nature of identity negotiation among skilled immigrant women, demonstrating that each case was unique and shaped by context, opportunities, and personal meaning. For first generation

Kenyan women social networks and mentorship were vital components of successful integration. These support systems provided both practical and emotional resources that helped navigate new work environments and overcome barriers. By fostering both formal and informal mentorship opportunities, organizations can better support the integration and success of first-generation immigrant employees.

The discrepant cases highlighted how culturally responsive supervision and hands-on mentorships temporarily buffered systems' barriers. However, such support was not consistently available across participants, reinforcing the central finding that leading relationships significantly shaped integration trajectories. Together, these narratives revealed the complex links between recognition, support, and professional identity, shaping the overall workplace experience. Taken together, the cross-participant analysis demonstrated that workplace integration among highly skilled first-generation immigrant Kenyan women involved both shared and variable experiences. Convergent patterns reflected common challenges related to professional credibility, identity negotiation, and belonging, while divergent experiences highlighted the influence of leadership practices, cultural interaction, and organizational contexts. Interpretative engagement with both convergence and divergence narratives supported understanding of how participants made sense of workplace integration within complex social and professional environments, consistent with IPA's emphasis on meaning-making and contextual interpretation (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Overall, workplace integration was experienced as a dynamic, relational, and identity-laden process rather than a

uniform transition into employment, with participants negotiating similar structural challenges while making meaning of those experiences in contextually distinct ways.

### **Interpretative Response to the Research Question**

The research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women regarding workplace integration strategies in California? The results indicated that highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women experienced workplace integration as an ongoing and relational process rather than a discrete transition into employment. Participants understood integration as continuous identity work involving credential revalidation, professional reinvention, and negotiation of belonging within unfamiliar organizational and cultural contexts. Their experiences reflected persistent efforts to reconstruct professional legitimacy as they navigated intersecting racial, gender, and immigrant identities.

Participants described entering the California workplace with established education and professional experience, yet frequently encountered credential devaluation that required recertification, additional education, or occupational shifts. These disruptions altered previously secure professional trajectories and necessitated adaptive strategies to regain footing in the workforce. Integration was therefore experienced as both professional and psychological, marked by cycles of loss, adjustment, and rebuilding.

Across participants, strategic adaptation was achieved through continuous learning, skill acquisition, and relational engagement. Workplace integration was supported by self-directed education, networking, and selective alignment with

colleagues who shared immigrant-to-minority experiences. Family, community, and faith-based resources provided emotional regulation and motivation, functioning as stabilizing forces amid uncertainty. Participants also relied on advocacy and self-determination to navigate exclusion and limited pathways for advancement.

Identity negotiation emerged as a central part of participants' lived experiences. Participants described managing accent bias, recognizing assumptions, and navigating emerging expectations while balancing cultural authenticity with professional acceptance. Integration required ongoing clarification of how they presented themselves, communicated, and participated in workplace relationships. These identity negotiations shaped access to visibility, credibility, and opportunities.

Leadership relations further influenced integration trajectories. Supportive supervisors facilitated confidence and learning, while inconsistent guidance and subjective advancement processes intensified reliance on personal resilience and external support networks. Participants interpreted leadership dynamics as pivotal to whether integration was experienced as developmentally or self-managed.

Collectively, participants experienced workplace integration as a process characterized by resilience, reinvention, and relational navigation within structurally uneven environments. Professional success depended not only on technical competence but also on emotional endurance, cultural adaptability, and access to supportive relationships. The lived experiences of highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan women reflected sustained meaning-making as they reconstructed professional identity and belonging while navigating systemic constraints in California workplaces.

### Summary

In Chapter 4, I described the research setting, participant demographics, and the procedures for data collection and analysis. Data analysis was conducted using IPA with the assistance of MAXQDA software. This structured methodology facilitated the transition from reading and rereading, inductive coding, the identification of cross-participant interpretative patterns, and reflexive dialogue centered on understanding how participants interpreted their workplace integration experiences. To support trustworthiness, strategies such as member checking, rapport building, thick descriptions, and the maintenance of an audit trail were employed. The co-constructive nature of IPA was acknowledged, contributing to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research outcomes.

This study explored the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California. The research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California? Analysis of 10 participant narratives indicated that workplace integration was experienced as a complex, ongoing, and relational process shaped by identity negotiation, credential recognition, leadership interaction, and structural conditions. Participants described navigating new professional environments while preserving aspects of their cultural identity, often relying on personal agency, resilience, and strategic support systems. Together, these findings addressed the research question by clarifying how participants experienced

workplace integration through ongoing identity negotiation, credential reconstruction, relational navigation, and adaptive coping.

In response to the research question, workplace integration was experienced as an ongoing process of sense-making shaped by professional reinvention, identity negotiation, leadership relationships, structural constraints, and relational coping. Participants described strategies to reconstruct professional credibility and stability. Identity negotiation involved balancing cultural preservation with workplace expectations while navigating intersecting racial, gender, immigrant, and professional identities. Structural conditions, including discrimination, communication challenges, and the devaluation of foreign credentials, constrained integration and required sustained adaptation.

Participants relied on faith, community, and relational support to regulate emotion and sustain motivation amid uncertainty. Leadership dynamics influenced access to recognition, opportunity, and belonging. Supportive supervisors facilitated learning and confidence, whereas inconsistent leadership increased reliance on self-directed strategies. Family networks, mentorships, and community connections functioned as stabilizing resources that supported emotional well-being and professional development and growth.

Collectively, workplace integration was interpreted as an institutional and relational experience rather than a discrete transition into employment. Integration was understood as continuous identity work requiring emotional endurance, cultural adaptation, and relational navigation within uneven organizational contexts. Through self-advocacy, professional development, mentorship, and reliance on faith-based and

community resources, participants reconstructed legitimacy and preserved dignity while navigating systemic constraints. These lived experiences addressed the research question and illustrated how workplace integration strategies were interpreted through ongoing adaptation, resilience, and relational meaning-making.

Overall, Chapter 4 provided an interpretation of how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women experienced workplace integration in California. These findings extend understanding of immigrant women's workplace experiences and contribute to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, thereby strengthening the body of knowledge on immigrant women's workplace experiences and advancing scholarly conversations on immigrants, identity, leadership, and integration.

In Chapter 5, these findings are interpreted through the theoretical lenses of leader-member exchange and intersectionality, linking participants' experiences to leadership dynamics, power relations, and identity-based inequalities. Chapter 5 also addresses the study's limitations, implications for leadership practice and workplace integration, recommendations for future research, and potential for positive social change. Finally, the chapter concludes with a synthesis of key findings and contributions to understanding workplace integration among immigrant women professionals.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

Chapter 5 presents an interpretative engagement with the findings derived from this IPA study, which explored how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women made sense of their approaches to workplace integration in California. The study addressed a gap in the literature concerning how this population navigated professional adaptation, belonging, and advancement within California organizational contexts.

The research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California? Across participants, workplace integration was experienced as an ongoing, relational, and identity-laden process characterized by credential reconstruction, identity negotiation, leadership-mediated access, and adaptive coping within structurally uneven environments.

This chapter builds on those findings by situating shared experiential meanings within the theoretical lenses of LMX and intersectionality, which were used to interpret how relational quality and intersecting identities structured participants' lived experiences of workplace integration. The purpose of this chapter is to interpret how identity negotiation, credential recognition, leadership relationships, and structural conditions shaped participants' lived experiences of workplace integration. Chapter 5 presents the theoretical interpretation of the findings through the lens of LMX and intersectionality, followed by a discussion of study limitations, implications for leadership practice and

workplace integration, recommendations for future research, potential contributions to positive social change, and concluding reflections.

### **Phenomenological Summary of Cross-Participant Findings**

In direct response to the research question, "What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace engagement strategies in California?", participants experienced workplace integration as an ongoing, relational, and identity-laden process rather than a discrete transition into employment.

Across participants' lived experiences, integration was seen as requiring continuous professional reinvention through credential rebuilding, additional education, and ongoing skill development. Prior professional experiences were often undervalued, which led to the need to re-establish credibility within informal organizational settings. These disruptions later affected previously stable career paths and demanded adaptive strategies to regain professional footing. Identity negotiation functioned as a central meaning structure within participants' sense-making processes. Participants described navigating accent bias, racialized assumptions, gendered expectations, and immigrant identity while balancing cultural preservation with workplace norms. Belonging was experienced as conditional, requiring ongoing management of visibility and performance signaling. Professional legitimacy was therefore negotiated not only through competence but also through how participants were perceived within workplace relationships.

Leadership relationships shaped integration trajectories. Participants described that supportive supervision and culturally responsive leadership facilitated learning, confidence, and access to opportunities, whereas inconsistent guidance and subjective

advancement processes intensified reliance on self-directed strategies. Participants interpreted leadership interactions as influencing recognition, belonging, and career progression. Participants relied on relational and cultural resources to sustain emotional well-being and professional momentum. Faith, family, community networks, and peer mentorship were described as stabilizing supports amid structural barriers. Coping involved emotional regulation, advocacy, and strategic relationships-building, which supported preservation of dignity despite experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and credential devaluation. Although these phenomenological patterns were widely shared, limited variation was evident. A small number of participants described more affirming onboarding and supervisory support, illustrating how localized leadership practices mediated the pace and quality of integration.

Collectively, cross-participant interpretations indicated that participants experience workplace integration as resilience-driven professional reconstruction within structurally uneven environments. Professional advancement depended not only on technical competence but also on emotional resilience, identity negotiation, and access to supportive relationships. These shared experiential meanings arose from the interpretative engagement that follows, in which leader-member exchange and intersectionality are applied to deepen understanding of how power, identity, and relational dynamics shaped participants' lived experiences of workplace integration.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This IPA study explored the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women as they navigate workplace integration in California. In direct

response to the research question, the findings indicated that workplace integration was experienced not as a discrete transition into employment but as an ongoing process of resilience-driven professional reconstruction shaped by leadership relations, identity negotiation, and structural constraints within organizational contexts.

Across participants, a shared lived experience emerged in which workplace integration was experienced as an ongoing, relational, and identity-laden process rather than a discrete transition into employment. In direct response to the research question, “What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women with workplace integration strategies in California?” participants described workplace integration as a sustained process of professional rebuilding shaped by credential revalidation, identity negotiation, leadership relationships, and organizational constraints. Professional legitimacy did not occur automatically upon entry to the workplace; rather, it required ongoing negotiation within organizational contexts structured by intersecting systems of power (Crenshaw, 1991). From an interpretative phenomenological perspective, these experiences indicated how participants interpreted workplace inclusion, recognition, and opportunity within relational organizational environments (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Participants consistently described workplace integration as an evolving process of meaning making through which competence, belonging, and professional identity were repeatedly constructed and reconstructed over time (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Integration involved navigating credential devaluation, adapting to implicit workplace expectations, and seeking relational access to information, mentorship, and opportunities (Brell et al., 2020; Raihan

et al., 2023). These patterns indicated that workplace integration functioned as a continuous process of professional reconstruction rather than a singular transition into employment. The shared central phenomenon among participants was workplace integration as a resilience-driven professional reconstruction process in which legitimacy, belonging, and professional identity were continually renegotiated within organizational systems.

While this central phenomenon appeared across participants, a small number of outlier experiences were also identified. A few participants described more supportive onboarding processes and stronger supervisory relationships that facilitated earlier recognition and smoother organizational entry. These experiences contrasted with the majority of participants, whose integration trajectories were characterized by uncertainty, limited relational access, and the need to repeatedly demonstrate professional competence. Taken together, these shared and divergent experiences revealed that workplace integration functioned as a relationally mediated and structurally constrained process of professional reconstruction, in which leadership relationships, credential recognition, and identity negotiation shaped participants' sense of legitimacy, belonging, and career progression. These variations clarified how relational workplace dynamics influenced the pace and stability of participants' workplace integration trajectories.

The findings both confirmed and extended existing literature on immigrant workplace integration. Consistent with prior research, participants described systemic challenges related to credential recognition, implicit bias, and inequitable access to advancement, which constrained professional progress and undermined a sense of

belonging (Barker, 2018; Farashah & Blomquist, 2022; Tan & Cebulla, 2023). Foreign-acquired qualifications were frequently perceived as undervalued or non-equivalent in host-country labor markets (Andersson, 2021; Arnita, 2022; Sommer, 2021). Credential devaluation extended beyond an administrative barrier and disrupted professional identity, requiring repeated demonstrations of competence and legitimacy (Brell et al., 2020; Raihan et al., 2023). Within this study, participants described navigating these constraints through ongoing adjustments to professional positioning and identity.

Participants described heightened performance expectations, persistent self-monitoring, and pressure to exceed formal role requirements in order to gain credibility. Such experiential patterns aligned with research demonstrating that immigrant women encountered increased scrutiny shaped by gender, race, and immigration status (Arredondo et al., 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; Nardon et al., 2021). From an IPA perspective, these demands were described through participants' interpretation of their workplace experiences rather than solely as abstract structural forces alone (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Daily workplace interactions served as contexts in which belonging, credibility, and identity were negotiated.

Consistent with prior research, participants pursued additional education, retraining, and certification to re-establish professional credibility (Brell et al., 2020; Raihan et al., 2023). Some participants accepted roles below their prior levels of responsibility as strategic entry points into the labor market. These strategies confirmed findings that highly educated immigrants often engage in occupational downgrading to regain access to the labor market and rebuild their career paths (Ertorer et al., 2022; Van

Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). Participants also described emotional and identity-related effects of these decisions. Participants described experiences of invisibility, delayed professional self-recognition, and recurring perceptions of “starting over.” Labor market re-entry, therefore, involved not only structural repositioning but also sustained reinterpretation of competence and professional worth over time.

Leadership relationships appeared as a central relational context shaping integration trajectories. Consistent with LMX theory, participants' experiences varied based on the perceived quality of their relationships with supervisors (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Higher-quality exchanges were associated with clearer expectations, access to feedback, informal knowledge, development opportunities, and psychological safety, whereas low-quality exchanges were experienced as marginalization, emotional exhaustion, and limited professional growth (Nardon et al., 2021; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). These findings refined LMX literature by demonstrating that leadership relationships were interpreted through intersecting identities. Interpretations of leadership support, recognition, inclusion, and exclusion were shaped simultaneously by gender, race, immigration status, and cultural background (Arredondo et al., 2022; Crenshaw, 1991). These relational dynamics contributed to differences in how participants described their workplace integration experiences.

Intersectionality theory provided an interpretative lens for understanding these layered experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Participants described how behaviors and characteristics such as assertiveness, visibility, and communication style were evaluated differently depending on identity positioning (Vasic et al., 2023). Identity negotiation,

therefore, operated as an ongoing dimension of workplace integration rather than a temporary adjustment. Professional legitimacy was continually negotiated within systems structured by intersecting power relations. These interpretations illustrated how identity positioning influenced workplace evaluation and opportunities for advancement.

Importantly, the findings highlighted that leadership behaviors perceived as neutral or as supportive of dominant-group employees were sometimes experienced by immigrant women as ambiguous, conditional, or exclusionary, reinforcing patterns of differential access within organizational systems (Arredondo et al., 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). Overall, these findings indicated that leadership relationships varied with intersecting identities, shaping how inclusion, legitimacy, and opportunity were constructed in everyday workplace interactions.

Across themes, workplace integration appeared as relationally mediated and structurally constrained. Professional competence alone did not secure belonging or advancement. Integration varied across the interactions among credential recognition, identity negotiations, leadership quality, and access to relational support. Participants described engaging in strategic adaptation, including continued education, networking, mentorship seeking, and faith-based meaning-making to sustain professional continuity amid uneven organizational support (Kuang, 2023; Raihan et al., 2023). Faith and culturally grounded support systems functioned as stabilizing resources that complemented formal workplace strategies. Emotional regulation practices were described as deliberate responses to perceived stereotyping and evaluation risks, aligning with research on emotional labor among racialized professionals (Arredondo et al., 2022;

Noble & Heale, 2019). Over time, these strategies were experienced as protective yet demanding, reflecting the cumulative emotional labor associated with sustained self-monitoring.

Taken together, the six interpretative themes indicated that workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women involved resilience-driven professional reconstruction within structurally uneven environments. Integration required continuous sense-making related to identity, legitimacy, and belonging within organizational systems shaped by intersecting inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991; Smith & Nizza, 2022). These findings provided a clearer understanding of how participants navigated workplace integration within relational and structural constraints. These interpretations provide the foundation for the theoretical discussion that leader-member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) are used to further illuminate how relational quality and intersecting identities structured participants' lived experiences of workplace integration.

### **Theme 1: Workplace Integration Experiences**

Consistent with the shared central phenomenon identified in this study, the workplace integration experience reflected an ongoing, resilience-driven professional reconstruction for highly skilled, first-generation Kenyan immigrant women in California. Participants experienced workplace integration as an ongoing, relational process rather than a discrete transition. Participants made sense of integration as involving continuous negotiations of legitimacy, autonomy, and belonging across organizational contexts and role expectations. Rather than describing movement through

predictable or sequential stages, participants interpreted integration as iterative and contingent upon the quality of relationships, access to support, and organizational responsiveness (Grosskopf et al., 2024). Understanding integration as a lived and meaning-making process provided a framework for interpreting how participants navigated their workplaces expectations over time.

A central aspect of the integration process involved participants' interpretations of implicit workplace norms that were rarely made explicit during onboarding. Participants described uncertainty regarding expectations, communication styles, and performance standards, often relying on observation and trial-and-error learning. From an IPA perspective, participants actively interpreted gaps in guidance as signals of unbelonging and perceived incompetence, rather than merely procedural oversights. These experiences aligned with prior research describing the “hidden curriculum” of the professional workplace, in which immigrants were expected to decode unspoken norms without formal guidance (Ertorer et al., 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). The absence of explicit onboarding support was interpreted as increasing vulnerability and self-doubt, particularly when errors were experienced as personal shortcomings rather than manifestations of cultural unfamiliarity.

The quality of supervisory mutual support emerged as central to participants' interpretations of workplace integration. Supportive supervisors were experienced as accessible cultural interpreters who clarified expectations and affirmed professional contributions. Within the LMX framework, these relationships reflected high-quality exchanges characterized by trust, respect, and access to developmental resources (Graen

& Uhl-Bien, 1995). In contrast, participants who interpreted their supervisory relationships as low-quality described limited feedback, emotional fatigue, and exclusion from informal knowledge networks as indicators of marginal positioning. These interpretations increased reliance on self-directed learning and adaptive self-management, reinforcing how leadership relationships shaped cultural learning, perceived inclusion, and the ongoing negotiation of organizational membership.

Cultural adaptation was further interpreted through contrasts between participants' familiar collectivist workplace norms and the individualist expectations prevalent in California workplaces. Prior research indicated that the effects of high-quality leader-member exchange, such as organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, perceptions of justice, and turnover intentions, were more pronounced in individualistic cultures (Van Dyne et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2023). Participants in the present study interpreted the benefits of high-quality LMX relationships as less consistent, particularly when cultural values emphasized humility, relational interdependence, and collective achievement, which conflicted with expectations for visibility and self-promotion. Participants described learning to engage in self-promotion as a strategic necessity, even when it conflicted with deeply held cultural values. Cultural dissimilarity between participants and supervisors, who were often non-immigrants, was interpreted as limiting perceived similarity, which constrained the early development of strong LMX relationships during workplace integration.

The process of identity negotiation involved participants' ongoing efforts to demonstrate competence while avoiding the reinforcement of negative stereotypes

associated with race, gender, and immigrant status. Participants interpreted expectations regarding confidence, assertiveness, and communication by recognizing how their identities were read within organizational hierarchies. Intersectionality provided a critical interpretative lens for understanding these experiences, as behaviors perceived as confident or proactive when enacted by members of dominant groups were sometimes interpreted as inappropriate, aggressive, or excessive when enacted by Kenyan immigrant women (Arredondo et al., 2022; Crenshaw, 1991). These participants' accounts aligned with prior research on the racialized and gendered evaluations of workplace behavior, which documented differential interpretation of identical actions based on social positioning (Nardon et al., 2021; Vasic et al., 2023) while extending this literature by foregrounding immigration status as an intersecting dimension shaping interpretations of competence, professionalism, and legitimacy. From an IPA perspective, these dynamics were internalized and actively interpreted, influencing participants' self-preservation, emotional regulation, and sense of belonging within organizational contexts.

Structural and political constraints were also interpreted as shaping integration experiences. Challenges related to credential recognition, licensing requirements, and immigration-related restrictions were experienced as limiting access to roles commensurate with participants' expertise. Some participants described repeated cycles of retraining or occupational downgrading, which they interpreted as reinforcing feelings of perpetual newcomer status, regardless of tenure or performance. Participants' narratives aligned with the literature on deskilling and labor market segmentation among

skilled immigrants (Brell et al., 2020; Raihan et al., 2023), while extending prior work by highlighting the psychological burden of prolonged conditional inclusion.

Collectively, Theme 1 Workplace Integration Experiences demonstrated that workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women was interpreted as relationally mediated, identity-laden, and structurally constrained. Successful integration required more than individual competence; it depended on access to high-quality leader-member relationships and culturally responsive organizational practices. Through an intersectional lens, integration emerged as an ongoing negotiation shaped by overlapping systems of power rather than a finite adjustment phase.

From an integrative perspective, participants' interpretations of workplace integration reflected the joint influence of relational quality and intersecting identities; access to guidance, clarity, and inclusion depended not only on individual competence but on the extent to which LMX was experienced as supportive within identity-staged organizational contexts. Intersectionality shaped how participants' race, gender, and immigration status influenced visibility and legitimacy, while LMX illuminated how leadership relationships mediated access to learning and belonging. Together, these dynamics positioned the workplace integration as a relational, negotiated, individualized adjustment process.

## **Theme 2: Strategies and Processes**

Consistent with the central phenomenon identified in this study, strategies and processes reflected how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women navigated workplace integration as an ongoing process of professional reconstruction. Participants

described strategy use as iterative, intentional, and responsive, evolving in relation to uncertainty, shifting workplace expectations, and uneven access to organizational resources. From an IPA perspective, these strategies were not only instrumental actions but also forms of meaning-making and identity work that supported participants' ongoing efforts to sustain professional legitimacy and continuity within changing organizational contexts (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). These interpretative orientations provided the foundation for examining the specific strategies participants employed to sustain professional engagement and navigate workplace integration challenges over time.

A prominent strategy involved self-directed investment in learning, including credentialing, skill expansion, and deliberate professional adaptability. Participants interpreted these learning efforts as necessary responses to perceived credential devaluation and constrained advancement pathways, rather than as reflections of insufficient competence. Participants' narratives confirmed prior research on over-credentialing and intensified efforts among highly skilled immigrants seeking recognition in the labor market (Ertorer et al., 2022; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). The present findings extended this literature by clarifying that additional training was not merely a temporary workaround; participants often interpreted these actions as long-term investments in mobility, employability, and resilience, even in conditions where credential recognition and advancement pathways were perceived as uncertain (Raihan et al., 2023). These interpretations led to further strategic engagement with

relational resources, particularly networking and mentorship, as participants sought alternative pathways to professional visibility and advancement.

Networking and relationship building functioned as strategic processes through which participants sought access to informal knowledge, guidance, and opportunity structures that were not consistently available through formal organizational channels. Prior literature highlighted the importance of social capital in immigrant workforce integration (Nardon et al., 2021; Raihan et al., 2023). Participants accounts in this study refined this understanding by demonstrating that participants frequently combined multiple network types, such as professional, community-based, faith-based, and intercultural networks, rather than relying exclusively on ethnic networks. These efforts were interpreted as relational labor that required ongoing attention to trust, reciprocity, and power, suggesting that networking involved both opportunity-seeking and risk management within professional environments.

Mentorship emerged as a strategic process pursued even when formal mentorship structures were limited or absent. Participants described seeking guidance through informal pathways, including peers, experienced colleagues, and professional contacts outside formal reporting lines. Interpreted through LMX theory, these patterns suggested that variability in access to supervisory support shaped strategy selection. When leader-member relationships were experienced as supportive, developmental access was more readily available. When leader-member exchanges were interpreted as constrained or low quality, participants more frequently described compensatory strategies, including peer consultation and seeking external mentorship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Van Riemsdijk

& Basford, 2022). These findings offered contextual insight into how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women navigated uneven relational access within organizational hierarchies.

An emergent and distinctive nuance involved the role of faith and culturally rooted belief systems as strategic resources for workplace navigation. Participants described faith-aligned practices as supporting emotional regulation, meaning-making, perseverance, and ethical grounding, particularly during periods of prolonged uncertainty. Chapter 2 emphasized institutional mechanisms such as mentorship programs, onboarding, and credential recognition initiatives as integration supports (Kuang, 2023; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). The present findings extended that body of work by indicating that extra-organizational resources, particularly faith and culturally grounded supports, functioned as stabilizing infrastructures that complemented professional strategies rather than replacing cultural support systems. This dimension was less centrally foregrounded in Chapter 2 and represents a nuanced contribution rooted in participants' lived experiences.

Overall, Theme 2 Strategies and Processes demonstrated that workplace integration was sustained through coordinated strategies, including learning investments, networking, seeking mentorship, and culturally grounded supports, enacted under intersecting pressures related to gender, race, and immigration status (Crenshaw, 1991). These strategies reflected agency and intentionality while simultaneously revealing the extent to which intervention required persistent self-management in response to structural constraints and uneven relational access.

From an integrative perspective, strategy selection reflected the joint influence of leader-member exchange and intersecting identities. When high-quality LMX was limited, participants increasingly relied on self-directed learning, external mentorship, and community networks to compensate for the lack of developmental support. Intersectionality further shaped how risk and visibility were interpreted across racialized, gendered, and immigrant positioning. In this way, strategies functioned not only as professional tools but also as adaptive responses to structurally mediated relational conditions, positioning the workplace as an actively negotiated process rather than an individually driven adjustment.

### **Theme 3: Identity Negotiation**

Participants described identity negotiation as an ongoing, interpretative component of workplace integration, in which participants actively monitored and recalibrated visible and audible identity markers such as race, accent, gender, nationality, and cultural styles within professional environments often shaped by dominant California workplace norms. Participants described integration as extending beyond task performance to include continuous assessment of how identity cues shaped perceptions of competence, fit, and legitimacy. From an IPA perspective, participants engaged in meaning-making processes, interpreting workplace interactions through the lens of identity-based evaluation and its consequences for access and belonging (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These interpretations illustrated how identity positioning influenced participants' ongoing assessments of safety, legitimacy, and opportunity within workplace interactions. These interpretations provided a foundation for examining how identity

negotiations informed participants' strategic decisions, relational behaviors, and career trajectories across organizational contexts.

The findings affirmed existing literature indicating that immigrant professionals often experience scrutiny tied to identity and perceived differences, shaping everyday workplace interactions and judgments of competence (Nardon et al., 2021; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). Participants accounts in this study extended prior literature by illustrating that identity negotiation involved ongoing interpretative monitoring of how participants were perceived across workplace interactions. Participants described learning when cultural identity was read as a strength and when difference intensified evaluation. Participants described continually interpreting how the visibility of identity shaped professional credibility. These interpretations reflected participants efforts to balance authenticity with perceived expectations of professional acceptance.

Intersectionality provided a critical interpretative lens for understanding how identity markers were evaluated simultaneously rather than independently. Participants reported that similar workplace behaviors were interpreted differently depending on whom they interacted with, reinforcing prior research on racialized, gendered double standards in professional settings (Arredondo et al., 2022; Vasic et al., 2023). The findings refined this literature by illustrating how immigrant status compounded interpretative risk, requiring participants to continuously calibrate accent visibility, assertiveness, and emotional expression in response to anticipated evaluation across intersecting identities. These identity negotiations were experienced as emotionally

demanding, shaping participants' sense of safety, authenticity, and belonging within organizational hierarchies.

Overall, Theme 3 Identity Negotiation challenged the assumption that integration naturally stabilized with tenure or performance. Instead, identity negotiation persisted across career stages, reflecting continual navigation of intersecting power relations in which professional legitimacy required continued negotiation within systems structured by intersectional power relations (Crenshaw, 1991). Identity negotiations also influenced career decision-making. Several participants described shifts in roles, specialties, or sectors that were interpreted not only as responses to structural constraints such as credential recognition and licensing but also as strategic decisions aimed at reducing sustained identity-based scrutiny and preserving psychological well-being. This interpretation added nuance to existing discussions of downward mobility and occupational repositioning among highly skilled immigrants, suggesting that career movement reflected intentional self-preservation and a quest for legitimacy rather than solely structural displacement (Ertorer et al., 2022; Weinar & Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2020). These findings highlight that immigrant agency played a key role in how individuals navigate and reshape their career paths.

From an integrative perspective, identity negotiation unfolded within relational contexts shaped by LMX quality. Supportive leadership reduced interpretative ambiguity surrounding identity, while constrained leader relationships intensified self-monitoring and vigilance. Intersectionality further structured how participants' race, gender, and immigration status shaped perceptions of legitimacy, positioning identity negotiation as a

relational, mediated, and structurally conditioned dimension of workplace integration rather than as an individual adaptation challenge alone. These interpretations reinforced how identity negotiations functioned as a central mechanism through which workplace integration was continuously interpreted and navigated.

#### **Theme 4: Challenges and Barriers**

Participants described challenges and barriers as structural influences that shape workplace integration trajectories. Participants described barriers as persistent and cumulative, affecting career mobility and an ongoing sense of legitimacy. From an interpretative frame, these barriers were understood as formative conditions shaping participants' sense of professional positioning, opportunity boundaries, and organizational membership.

Consistent with the literature from Chapter 2, credential non-recognition and skepticism toward foreign experience were interpreted as prominent constraints, often prompting repeated certification efforts, retraining, or acceptance of roles below prior levels of responsibility (Brell et al., 2020; International Labor Organization, 2023; Raihan et al., 2023; Sommer, 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). These findings extended prior research by illustrating how credential devaluation functioned simultaneously as a structured barrier and an identity-disrupting signal requiring participants to repeatedly demonstrate competence despite sustained performance.

Participants also described racialized, gendered, and immigration-related barriers that constrained access to informal networks, developmental assignments, and advancement pathways. These experiences aligned with prior research on micro-level

exclusion and differential evaluation (Arredondo et al., 2022; Vasic et al., 2023).

Participants interpreted these patterns as producing cumulative disadvantage through reduced visibility and prolonged pressure to overperform.

Broader labor stratification further compounded these challenges. Participants described licensing regulations and immigration-related constraints as influencing both mobility and risk exposure, aligning with research showing that immigrants face limitations in professional labor markets (Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). From the participants perspectives, these structural constraints limited perceived options for challenging unfair treatment or seeking mobility, due to perceived risks linked to employment instability, sponsorship dependence, or delayed credential recognition, which reinforced prolonged conditional inclusion.

Viewed through an IPA lens, Theme 4 Challenges and Barriers showed how these obstacles formed the structural backdrop against which all subsequent meaning-making occurred. Intersectionality theory clarified how disadvantage is experienced across race, gender, and immigration status, producing individualized patterns of discrimination that could not be reduced to a single identity category (Crenshaw, 1991). Participant interpretations in this study extended intersectionality-informed workplace integration literature by demonstrating how cumulative barriers shaped not only access to opportunity but also internal perceptions of belonging, professional value, and self-worth. From an IPA perspective, these barriers were interpreted in terms of both relational and structural dimensions. Credential devaluation and systemic constraints limited access to high-quality leader-member exchanges, while intersecting identities increased exposure

to scrutiny and exclusion. Participants interpreted how institutional barriers and leadership dynamics interacted, reinforcing unequal opportunity structures.

Intersectionality clarified how disadvantage accumulates across identity positions, while LMX illuminated how constrained relational access amplified the effects of these barriers on integration trajectories. Collectively, these structural and relational barriers increased the emotional and psychological demands of workplace integration. As participants experienced prolonged conditional inclusion, limited mobility, and identity-based scrutiny, they increasingly relied on personal, cultural, and relational resources to sustain professional engagement. These experiences provided the foundation for how participants coped with and navigated these cumulative pressures through meaning-based practices. These interpretations illustrated how structural constraints and relational dynamics jointly influenced participants' expectations of workplace engagement.

### **Theme 5: Coping and Navigation**

Participants described coping and navigation as central processes for sustaining psychological well-being in demanding, uncertain, and at times exclusionary workplace contexts. Participants described coping as continuous and deliberate rather than episodic, involving intentional regulation of emotion, expectations, and professionalism over time. From an IPA perspective, coping was understood not as passive endurance but as an active, meaning-making form of agency through which participants sought to preserve dignity and purpose while navigating persistent demands for adaptation.

Faith emerged as a central interpretative resource. Participants described faith-based practices as aiding emotional regulation and ethical grounding, while also offering

a framework for understanding hardships and uncertainty. Chapter 2 discussed social support and community ties as important to integration (Crawford et al., 2023; Kurtuluş et al., 2023), whereas much of the workplace integration literature often emphasized formal organizational support and skill-based interventions (Kuang, 2023). Participants accounts in this study indicated that faith functioned as a stabilizing interpretative resource that supported perseverance and professional engagement during periods of prolonged uncertainty. This interpretation was specific to the participants in this study and may not extend beyond the study sample.

Relational support outside the workplace also served as an informal infrastructure for advice, validation, and strategic guidance. Relational support aligned with social capital literature on immigrant adaptation and the importance of networks for information and support (Nardon et al., 2021; Vasic et al., 2023). The findings refined that body of work by showing that networks functioned not only as emotional buffers but also as decision-making supports that influenced career planning, strategy, and persistence when organizational guidance was limited.

Participants described deliberate emotional regulation strategies aimed at maintaining professionalism and minimizing exposure to stereotyping. These experiences aligned with existing research on emotional labor among racialized professionals (Arredondo et al., 2022) and extended that research by demonstrating that emotional restraint serves as a conscious risk-management practice linked to concerns about job security, evaluation, and belonging. Over time, these coping strategies were experienced

as protective yet demanding, with participants reporting fatigue and ongoing hyper-vigilance within workplace environments.

While Theme 4, Challenges and Barriers, described the structural conditions of integration, Theme 5, Coping and Navigation, illustrated how participants responded psychologically and relationally to those conditions. Overall, Theme 5 positioned coping and navigation as an active process for preservation and resistance, shaped by intersecting identities and uneven access to supportive leadership. Coping practices reflected participants' responses to sustained relational uncertainty and identity-based risk. When leadership support was inconsistent, participants increasingly relied on faith, emotional regulation, and external networks to stabilize professional engagement. Intersectionality shaped the emotional labor required to maintain legitimacy, while LMX clarified how limited supervisory support intensified reliance on internal and community-based coping resources. Participants' interpretations illustrated how coping functioned as a mechanism for sustaining professional engagement within relationally mediated and structurally constrained environments.

#### **Theme 6: Leader Dynamics and Relationships**

Participants interpreted leader dynamics and relationship quality as central influences on workplace integration confidence and advancement. Participants described leadership not as a distant organizational function but as a relational gateway, through which access to informal knowledge, visibility, and development opportunities was enabled or constrained. Within an interpretative framework, leadership relationships operated as amplifiers: supportive leadership reduced uncertainty and facilitated learning,

whereas exclusionary or distant leadership intensified marginalization and increased the burden of self- navigation.

Consistent with LMX theory, high-quality leader-member exchanges were associated with clearer role expectations, constructive feedback, developmental access, and psychological safety (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Participants' narratives in this study aligned with existing literature linking higher-quality LMX relationships to job satisfaction, performance, and advancement (Nardon et al., 2021; Van Riemsdijk & Basford, 2022). Participants interpreted supportive leadership behaviors as mechanisms that reduced ambiguity surrounding expectations and increased confidence in navigating workplace norms.

Participants described how low-quality leader relationships were transactional, procedurally rigid, and/or emotionally distant, characterized by limited guidance and feedback. Such conditions reinforced peripheral membership, even when technical competence and tenure were well established. These patterns aligned with the literature on informal gatekeeping and the role of unwritten rules in professional integration (Ertorer et al., 2022). The findings refined this literature by demonstrating that leadership in action, including the absence of guidance, silence in response to inequity, and limited relational engagement, functioned as exclusionary mechanisms, prolonging the process of integration and increasing reliance on compensatory strategies such as overachievement, self-monitoring, and external support.

Intersectionality provided a critical interpretative lens for understanding how leadership behaviors were perceived and how risk was experienced in LMX interactions.

Participants suggested that race, gender, and immigration status shaped interpretations of assertiveness, communication style, and emotional expression. Prior literature documented bias in evaluation and differential interpretations of behavior for racialized women (Arredondo et al., 2022; Vasic et al., 20230). The present findings extended this literature by demonstrating that leadership relationships mediated the impact of these biases. Leaders who actively clarified expectations, provided fair feedback, and fostered psychological safety reduced interpretative ambiguity and supported more authentic professional participation, whereas disengaged leadership amplified identity-based risks.

Theme 6 Leader Dynamics and Relationships demonstrated that leadership functioned as the primary relational mechanism through which structural barriers (Theme 4) were either mitigated or intensified, and coping demands (Theme 5) were either reduced or amplified. Professional competence alone didn't secure integration; the outcome reflected the combined influence of relational quality (LMX) and identity linked to power dynamics.

Leadership relationships, therefore, shaped how workplace integration unfolded across participants' professional trajectories. Intersectionality explained differential evaluation of behavior, while LMX clarified how proximity to leadership shaped access to learning, recognition, and advancement. Together, these frameworks demonstrated that leadership operated within identity-stratified systems, producing unequal integration trajectories. Taken together, Theme 6 Leader Dynamics and Relationships established leadership as the relational gateway through which inclusion and exclusion were enacted in practice. LMX operated within structurally uneven contexts shaped by race, gender,

and immigration status, positioning leadership interactions as the primary nexus where workplace integration was either supported or constrained.

Across all six themes, workplace integration for highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women was experienced as resilience-driven professional reconstruction shaped by the interaction of relational quality and intersecting identities. Professional competence alone didn't secure belonging or advancement; rather, integration unfolded through the co-construction of leadership relationships, organizational structures, and identity-linked power dynamics, producing differentiated integration trajectories across participants and career stages.

Participants described navigating implicit workplace norms, identity-based evaluation, and structural constraints while employing strategies such as continuous skill development, networking, seeking mentorship, and faith-based meaning-making to sustain professional continuity. Leadership relationships emerged as central to integration outcomes, with high-quality LMX reducing uncertainty and expanding developmental access, whereas disengaged leadership intensified marginalization and reliance on compensatory coping strategies.

Collectively, these interpretations addressed the research question by demonstrating that workplace integration is a co-constructed process influenced by leadership practices and organizational systems, rather than individual effort alone. Consistent with IPA, these interpretations stayed grounded in participants' lived experiences while providing insight into how workplace integration was understood and discussed within specific organizational settings.

Viewed collectively through an IPA lens, the six themes revealed workplace integration as a lived experience of continual interpretations, adaptation, and professional reconstruction. Participants did not describe integration as a completed stage of employment but as an evolving process shaped by relational leadership dynamics, structural constraints, and identity-based evaluation within organizational contexts. Through ongoing interpretation or workplace signals, participants assessed belonging, legitimacy, and opportunity while adjusting strategies to maintain professional continuity. These experiences illustrated how workplace integration unfolded through the interaction of relational access, identity positioning, and institutional structures, reinforcing the central phenomenon of resilience-driven professional reconstruction. Taken together, these interpretations illuminate how workplace integration was experienced as an ongoing process of professional reconstruction shaped by relational leadership dynamics, structured constraints, and identity-based evaluation within organizational contexts. These findings suggest that workplace integration for highly skilled immigrant women cannot be understood solely as an individual adjustment process but must be examined as a relational and structurally mediated phenomenon that unfolds through everyday workplace interactions and leadership relationships.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several limitations were taken into account when interpreting the findings. Recognizing these limitations enhanced interpretative rigor, idiographic depth, and experiential grounding in IPA. (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith &

Nizza, 2022). Addressing these limitations strengthened the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Despite the depth, richness, and idiographic focus of the data, multiple methodological and contextual factors influenced the scope and interpretation of the findings. First, the small purposive sample limited transferability. Within the idiographic parameters of interpretative phenomenological analysis, data saturation was achieved. Purposive and snowball sampling began with four seed participants and expanded through participant referrals, resulting in a final sample of ten highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women employed in California. Although data saturation was achieved, the available population was not fully exhausted. Additional eligible participants were known to exist but were not included because the participants did not respond to the request to complete the consent form. Although small samples are consistent with the epistemological and methodological commitments of IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022), the demographic specificity and geographic concentration restricted applicability to broader immigrant populations or different regional contexts.

Workplace integration experiences may vary substantially across geographic regions, industries, organizational cultures, and state-level policy environments (Akanle et al., 2020; Coker, 2022; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Hays & McKibben, 2021; Simon & Goes, 2013; Smith et al., 2009) Experiences situated in urban California workplaces may not reflect conditions in rural or more socially conservative settings. Accordingly, the

findings offered analytical rather than statistical transferability, relying on thick description to enable readers to determine relevance to other contexts.

Second, credibility-related limitations stemmed from reliance on self-reported narratives gathered through interviews. While in-depth interviews are vital to IPA (Adler, 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022), self-reported data were vulnerable to recall bias, selective memory, social desirability, and differences in participants' comfort with sharing sensitive experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Retrospective stories may have underestimated the severity of workplace microaggressions due to emotional distance, reinterpretation over time, or normalization of repeated experiences (Khare & Vedel, 2019). Similarly, focus on resilience, perseverance, and professional competency might have reflected social desirability, possibly minimizing expressions of vulnerability or uncertainty (Noble & Heale, 2019). Positive portrayals of organizational inclusivity might also have concealed subtle or normalized forms of exclusion that were harder to describe (Ahmed, 2024). These factors were incorporated into the interpretative process and led to cautious engagement with participant narratives.

Third, selection bias posed a limitation due to the use of purposive and voluntary sampling methods. Participants who volunteered may have differed in motivation, confidence, or workplace experience from those who did not volunteer, potentially introducing bias (Campbell et al., 2020; Millard et al., 2023). This limitation was mitigated through the application of explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring participants met predetermined conditions: first-generation Kenyan women immigrants

who arrived in the US after completing tertiary education, had at least 5 years of professional work experience, and were currently employed in California. While these criteria strengthened consistency and relevance, they also narrowed the range of the perspectives represented.

Fourth, my positionality represented a limitation affecting confirmability. As a highly skilled first-generation Kenyan born and employed in California, my shared sociocultural and professional characteristics with participants, which may have influenced interpretation. In IPA, subjectivity is acknowledged and managed rather than eliminated (Baldwin et al., 2022; Holmes, 2020). Reflexive strategies were used throughout the study, including positionality disclosure, reflexive journaling, iterative coding, and member checking. These strategies helped ensure interpretative transparency and minimized the influence of assumptions and data interpretation.

Lastly, recall biases constituted an additional credibility-related limitation. Participants were asked to reflect on past workplace experiences, distortions related to fading memory, selective recall, emotional interpretation, hindsight, and evolving self-understanding may have influenced narratives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Recalling experiences from several years earlier can be particularly challenging in emotionally complex contexts. To mitigate recall bias, multiple strategies were employed, including semistructured interviews, time-bound and clarifying questions, reflective prompts, and probing follow-up questions, which supported more accurate recollection and deeper reflection (Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Khare & Vedel, 2019;

Noble & Heale, 2019). Despite these strategies, recall bias could not be fully eliminated and was taken into account when interpreting participants' experiences.

Collectively, these limitations reflected the methodological and contextual boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted. Transparent acknowledgment of these constraints strengthened the study's trustworthiness and provided an appropriate context for interpreting the findings, without diminishing their contributions to understanding workplace integration among highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations were derived from cross-participant interpretative analysis of participants' lived experiences, the idiographic commitments of IPA, and the methodological and contextual boundaries of the current study. Each recommendation is grounded in participants' meaning-making and the interpretative patterns developed in Chapter 4. The idiographic depth afforded by IPA supported a nuanced understanding of how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women interpreted workplace integration in California. At the same time, limitations related to sample size, geographic concentration, reliance on self-reported interview data, and researcher positionality necessarily delimit the scope of transferability (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Accordingly, the recommendations below are intentionally framed to extend understanding while remaining theoretically, methodologically, and contextually aligned.

First, findings from the current study indicated that organizational context influenced access to leadership support, development opportunities, and perceptions of professional legitimacy, suggesting that further exploration of this consideration is warranted. Participants described variation in integration experiences depending on workplace structure and supervisory practices. In addition, the study's geographic and organizational concentration limits its broader transferability. Participants' integration trajectories varied with localized organizational practices and leadership responsiveness (Themes 1 and 6), but were constrained by the fact that participants were drawn primarily from California-based professional environments. Participants described how organizational context shaped access to mentorship, clarity of expectations, and professional visibility, indicating that sector-level differences may further influence integration outcomes. This recommendation builds directly on the present study's identification of contextual variation while addressing the limited organizational scope of the current sample.

Second, findings from the current study highlighted that early workplace experiences and initial leadership interactions played a significant role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and professional confidence, justifying additional consideration in future studies. Participants described unclear onboarding processes and uneven access to mentoring as contributing to prolonged uncertainty and self-directed integration. The existing literature emphasized that structured onboarding and mentoring are key mechanisms for cross-cultural adjustment and workplace integration (Hays & McKibben, 2021). Longitudinal qualitative designs may help illuminate how onboarding

and mentoring influence the evolving negotiation of identity, retention, engagement, and career confidence over time.

Third, findings from the current study demonstrated that perceived quality of leader-member exchange shaped access to feedback, learning opportunities, psychological safety, and professional visibility. Participants interpreted leadership relationships as central to integration trajectories. However, reliance on single-perspective interview data represents a methodological limitation. Future research could therefore employ dyadic or multi-perspective qualitative designs involving both immigrant employees and supervisors to deepen understanding of relational processes while reducing reliance on single-source narratives (Holmes, 2020; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Such designs would remain consistent with IPA's interpretative commitments while strengthening relational depth.

Fourth, findings from the current study indicated that faith, family, and community networks functioned as stabilizing resources that supported emotional regulation, meaning-making, and professional persistence when organizational support was perceived as limited. While the existing literature largely emphasized organizational support, leadership practices, and policy mechanisms, this dimension was less emphasized in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Research examining how these support systems interact with leadership relationships, particularly in contexts in which LMX relationships are perceived as limited or conditional, may provide deeper insight into coping and professional sustainability. This recommendation extends the study's findings by encouraging deeper exploration of culturally grounded coping resources.

Fifth, findings from the current study demonstrated that intersecting identities shaped how participants interpreted evolution, legitimacy, and risk, thereby influencing career decisions, including role changes, retraining, and sector transitions. Participants described these shifts as strategies for reducing sustained identity-based scrutiny and preserving well-being. Future studies using explicit intersectional qualitative approaches could further interpret how race, gender, immigration status, and cultural background jointly influence professional navigation and coping strategies.

Finally, the current study relied on retrospective accounts, which represent a limitation related to recall bias. Future longitudinal qualitative designs could explore how workplace integration evolves over time, capturing shifts in identity negotiation, leadership relationships, and career trajectories as they unfold. Selective integration of quantitative indicators alongside qualitative data may enhance dependability while preserving interpretative depth. By adopting these comprehensive research methods, scholars can develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic process of workplace integration, ultimately contributing to strategies that support the sustained success and well-being of highly skilled immigrant women in diverse professional settings.

Collectively, these recommendations build directly on the current study's findings regarding leadership relationships, identity negotiations, credential reconstruction, coping practices, and structural constraints, while also addressing limitations related to sample scope, geography, and methodology.

By extending inquiry across organizational sectors, strengthening attention to onboarding and mentoring, deepening analysis of relational leadership, and attending to

additional organizational supports, future research can advance understanding of workplace integration among highly skilled immigrant women. These directions remain aligned with IPA's idiographic and interpretative commentaries while offering practical implications for organizations seeking to support inclusive professional environments. These efforts not only promise to advance academic knowledge but also have practical implications for organizations aiming to harness the full potential of a diverse workforce.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study illuminated how workplace integration was interpreted and internalized through lived experiences involving relational access, identity negotiation, credential reconstruction, and structural constraints. Participants described the workplace environment not just as influenced by external factors but as experiences that influenced their internal perceptions of confidence, belonging, professional legitimacy, and ongoing engagement. These lived experiences reflect the main phenomenon identified in this study, in which workplace integration is a resilience-driven process of professional rebuilding influenced by relational leadership dynamics, identity negotiation, and structural constraints. Grounded in participants' lived meanings, the findings carried implications for positive social change at individual, organizational, and societal levels as well as for methodological, theoretical, and empirical scholarship.

These implications emphasized interpretative processes, relational sense-making, and embodied experiences rather than prediction or generalization (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Consistent with interpretative phenomenological analysis, these implications were derived from participants' lived interpretations of their workplace

experiences and remained bounded by the methodological and contextual scope of the study. These implications therefore reflect how participants interpreted and made sense of workplace integration through their lived experiences rather than an external assessment of organizational practices or policy structures.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

At the individual level, participants' lived experiences reflected how access to supportive leadership relationships and professional recognition shaped internal interpretations of confidence, resilience, and professional identity. Experiences of relational affirmation were perceived as reinforcing the internal construction of confidence, competence, the pursuit of development opportunities, and sustained engagement when leadership interactions were perceived as responsive and affirming.

From participants' perspectives, leadership interactions were understood not merely as procedural but also as signals of the degree of legitimacy and belonging within organizational hierarchies. These lived experiences aligned with LMX theory, which emphasizes how high-quality relational exchanges facilitate access to resources and developmental support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Through an intersectional lens, participants described how race, gender, and immigration status shaped the interpretation of inclusion and exclusion, influencing internal sense-making and identity construction (Crenshaw, 1991). These findings underscored how relational leadership practices shaped participants' internal understandings of competence, belonging, and professional legitimacy, rather than merely external workplace outcomes. These interpretations suggested that professional confidence and resilience were not solely individual attributes

but were constructed through participants' ongoing interpretations of relational workplace experiences.

At the organizational level, lived experiences reflected that culturally responsive leadership, relational consistency, and inclusive communication norms were interpreted as central to integration. Participants interpreted culturally responsive leadership, relational consistency, and transparent communication as signals that shaped how they understood their place within organizational hierarchies. Leadership behaviors such as consistent feedback, trust-building, recognition of international experience, and clear expectations were experienced as contributing to perceptions of professional legitimacy and career advancement.

Experiences of unclear norms and uneven leadership engagement were associated with prolonged uncertainty and increased reliance on self-directed integration. These interpretations supported LMX theory by illustrating how relationship quality shaped access to opportunity and recognition (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Nardon et al., 2021), while intersectionality theory clarified how relational fairness varied across identity positions. Participants interpreted structured mentorship, transparent evaluation practices, and culturally responsive onboarding as experiences that reduced interpretative ambiguity and supported psychological safety. These implications were grounded in participants' shared meaning-making rather than in the evaluation of organizational performance. Collectively, participants interpreted relational and structural alignment as central to sustaining professional engagement.

At the societal and policy levels, participants described broader structural influences on workplace integration through lived experiences of credential devaluation and constrained labor mobility, which were interpreted as disrupting professional identity despite high qualifications. The current study did not evaluate policy effectiveness; rather, participants described inequitable credential recognition processes that limited professional reintegration and advancement (Akanle et al., 2020; Khattab et al., 2020). These findings suggested that more equitable recognition structures may support immigrant professionals' capacity to contribute fully; however, these implications remain interpretive and should not be construed as a policy evaluation.

### **Methodological Implications**

Methodologically, the findings supported the value of IPA in illuminating how participants interpreted, internalized, and made sense of workplace integration. Consistent with IPA's double hermeneutic, the analysis reflected both participants' sense-making of their experiences and the researchers' interpretative engagement with understanding how the participants interpreted their experiences. Given the depth of experiential meaning identified, IPA appeared particularly well-suited for organizational leadership and immigration research, where lived experiences and meaning-making are central and a nuanced understanding is essential (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Participants' narratives suggested that integration involved layered identity considerations and relational processes that benefited from idiographic, interpretative approaches.

### **Theoretical Implications**

In terms of theory, the current findings highlighted LMX and intersectionality as complementary frameworks for understanding workplace integration among highly skilled immigrant women. LMX clarified how relational leadership proximity shaped access to trust, feedback, and developmental opportunities, while intersectionality illuminated how overlapping identities influenced differential experiences of inclusion and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1991; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Rather than extending theory, these frameworks were used interpretively to contextualize participants' lived experiences. Together, these frameworks illuminated how relational leadership dynamics operated within identity-laden organizational hierarchies, shaping participant professional legitimacy and belonging.

### **Empirical Implications**

Empirically, the study contributed idiographic insights into the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women in California workplaces. The current study findings expanded the understanding of immigrants' experiences of professional integration within a specific socio-cultural and regulatory context. These contributions were analytical and idiographic rather than generalizable and were interpreted within the methodological boundaries of qualitative IPA research (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). The study findings underscored the importance of nuanced, context-specific approaches to understanding immigrant experiences in professional settings.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the current study's findings, several practice-oriented recommendations were identified for leaders and organizations employing highly skilled immigrant professionals. Grounded in participants' meaning-making and interpretative accounts of their lived experiences and interpreted through LMX and intersectionality frameworks, these recommendations remained intentionally bounded by the study's scope, connections, and qualitative design.

Participants interpreted leadership development initiatives as most meaningful when relational competence, identity awareness, and culturally responsive engagement were prioritized over technical management alone. Participants interpreted high-quality LMX as characterized by accessible communication, feedback, and development support, framing these elements as essential for professional acceptance and integration (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Leadership training incorporating reflection on implicit bias, power dynamics, and cross-cultural communication was interpreted as potentially enhancing relational trust and psychological safety within identity-laden contexts (Hays & McKibben, 2021). Early integration experiences were characterized by unclear expectations and reliance on unwritten norms, suggesting that culturally responsive onboarding, including explicit guidance on workplace norms and expectations, may support early integration and professional acceptance. Sustained inclusion was most evident when leadership behaviors and organizational systems aligned rather than operated in isolation. Equity-oriented practices embedded into everyday operations,

rather than stand-alone diversity initiatives, were interpreted by participants as more credible and meaningful.

Clear, consistent organizational communication regarding inclusion, expectations, and support mechanisms was associated with increased psychological safety, particularly during periods of social or political uncertainty. Alignment between leadership conduct and organizational processes was experienced as supporting ongoing, relationally mediated organizational processes rather than a one-time intervention.

Collectively, the findings from the current study position workplace integration as a relational and identity-driven process rooted in lived experience. In this process, professional identity and belonging are continuously constructed through interpretative engagement with organizational contexts among highly skilled first-generation immigrant Kenyan women and understood as a shared organizational responsibility rather than an individual burden. Participants' lived experiences show that meaningful inclusion arises through coordinated relational and structural practices shaped by identity-based dynamics. Concepts like relational equity, identity awareness, and cultural clarity are experienced as conditions that support professional contribution and ongoing engagement. Overall, these implications reinforce the study's main phenomenological finding: workplace integration is an evolving interpretative process where legitimacy, belonging, and professional identity are constantly negotiated within relational and structural contexts influenced by intersecting systems of power. Relational exchanges, in line with LMX theory, influence access to recognition, trust, and opportunities for advancement.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative IPA study was to explore the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan women as they navigated workplace integration in California. The study focused on how workplace integration was experienced in relation to leadership relationships, organizational contexts, and identity-based dynamics that influence professional integration and career growth. Through detailed interviews, interpretative analysis provided a deep, personalized understanding of how participants experienced and interpreted workplace integration within specific relational and sociocultural settings.

As a phenomenological study involving a small purposive sample, the research focused on depth rather than breadth and provided nuanced insights into the shared experiential meanings of workplace integration. Across participants' narratives, workplace integration was experienced as a multifaceted process involving skill recognition, career development, social inclusion, and overall well-being. Integration was not experienced as a linear or time-limited transition but as an ongoing process mediated through relationships and influenced by leadership interactions and self-perception. Participant meaning-making indicated a tendency to interpret integration challenges as their personal responsibility, which supported ongoing self-regulation, adaptive learning, and reliance on individual and extra-organizational coping strategies.

Cross-participant interpretative patterns indicated that workplace experiences were understood within professional environments characterized by unequal access to recognition, mentorship, and opportunity. In alignment with the study's purpose and

research question, workplace integration was experienced as a relationally driven, structurally embedded process situated within specific organizational and sociocultural contexts. Within California's social and regulatory environment, integration was experienced as requiring shared relational responsibility supported by equitable leadership practices and organizational systems. Leadership relationships were experienced as central to shaping access to recognition, feedback, and visibility, consistent with LMX theory. From an intersectional perspective, participants narratives reflected how gender, race, and immigration status influenced interpretations of inclusion, exclusion, legitimacy, and belonging across career stages.

Interpretative accounts further illuminated adaptive strategies and meaning-making processes, such as ongoing skill development, networking, seeking mentorship, faith, and community support. Participants used these strategies to maintain engagement and resilience amid structural and relational challenges. These experiential insights contributed to workplace integration literature by foregrounding the persistence of identity negotiation and the importance of support outside the organization, especially when organizational systems were limited or inconsistent. When leader-member exchanges involved trust, recognition, and access, and when organizational systems acknowledged intersecting identities shaping opportunity and belonging, professional engagement and advancement were experienced as more sustainable. Equitable workplace engagement was interpreted as a shared relational responsibility grounded in identity-aware leadership practice rather than a test of individual resilience.

Overall, workplace integration was understood as a co-constructed, interpretatively negotiated process shaped by relational exchanges, organizational systems, and broader sociocultural structures. Professional identity was experienced as continuously constructed and reconstructed within complex organizational environments. Integration was not experienced as an individual achievement but as an evolving relational process requiring identity-aware leadership and equitable participation. Workplace integration was experienced as a lived, meaning-rich process through which professional identity, belonging, and legitimacy were continually interpreted within relational and sociocultural contexts.

Through idiographic analysis and cross-participant interpretative synthesis, insights were generated into how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women navigated complex organizational settings not merely through structural integration but through ongoing sense-making influenced by identity, power, and relational exchanges. This IPA study emphasized the importance of interpreting nuanced, identity-driven processes underlying professional integration within organizational settings. By illuminating how highly skilled first-generation Kenyan immigrant women interpreted and navigated workplace integration through their lived experiences, this current study contributed to a deeper phenomenological understanding of how professional legitimacy, belonging, and opportunity were constructed within relational and structurally mediated organizational contexts.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

**Research Question:** What are the lived experiences of highly skilled first-generation Kenyan-born women with workplace integration strategies in California?

**Demographic Data**

1. **What is your age range?**
  - 18-24
  - 25-34
  - 35-44
  - 45-54
  - 55+
2. **How many years have you been working in the U.S.?**
  - Less than 1 year
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-10 years
  - 10+ years
3. **Which industry or field are you currently employed in?**
  - Healthcare
  - Education
  - Information Technology
  - Business/Finance
  - Government
  - Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
4. **What is the highest level of education you have completed?**
  - High School
  - Associate's Degree
  - Bachelor's Degree
  - Master's Degree
  - Doctoral/PhD
5. **How long have you lived in the United States?**
  - Less than 1 year
  - 1-3 years
  - 4-6 years
  - 7-10 years
  - 10+ years

6. **What is your current role or position title?**  
 ○ \_\_\_\_\_ (Please provide the name of your role/position)

### **Interview Guide Questions**

1. **Can you describe your daily routine at work?**  
 What challenges, if any, have you experienced related to recognition of your qualifications or past work experience?
2. **What was it like for you when you started working in California or your current workplace?**  
**Follow-up Probes:**  
 What kind of support did you receive when you first started, such as onboarding or mentorships?  
 What thoughts or feelings stand out when you think back to your first days or weeks?  
 How were any aspects of the orientation process, if any, particularly positive or challenging?  
 What do you think shaped your ability to adapt or overcome these challenges?  
 If there was a specific instance when you felt you were adjusting well or struggling, how would you describe it?
3. **How would you describe your relationship with your supervisor when you first started this role?**  
**Follow-up Probes:**  
 How has it changed over time?  
 If there was a time when feedback or support from your supervisor had a meaningful impact or made you feel supported or isolated in your role, how would you describe it?  
 What, if any, challenges did you encounter in your relationship with your supervisor? How did you handle them?  
 In hindsight, how do you feel that experience influenced your professional journey?
4. **How has your identity as an immigrant Kenyan woman influenced your workplace experiences?**  
**Follow-up Probes:**  
 What example can you share when your background influenced how others interacted with you?  
 How have any external social or political events affected how you experience your workplace?

What strategies have you developed to navigate challenges related to your background or identity?

**5. What strategies or approaches did you use to navigate and adjust to your workplace?**

**Follow-up Probes:**

Please describe a specific strategy that helped you feel more comfortable and effective.

Did you consciously develop your approach, or did it evolve naturally over time? How have mentorship, support networks, or advocacy impacted your ability to adapt? How have your workplace experiences impacted your sense of belonging or self-confidence?

**6. What type of support did you rely on, whether formal or informal, when you began your job?**

**Follow-up Probes:**

Please describe an individual or resource that was especially helpful to your integration. Would you please describe the support systems or strategies you've developed or learned in your workplace?

What role, if any, have mentorship or workplace relationships played in your integration process?

How would you describe the support systems or strategies you've developed or leaned on in your workplace?

In what ways did the support you received or didn't receive affect your confidence in your integration process?

**7. Reflecting on your experience, what advice would you give to other highly skilled first-generation immigrant women starting a new job in California?**

**Follow-up Probes:**

What would you say has been your greatest success and biggest challenge at work?

What strategies do you think are most effective for overcoming workplace challenges?

What changes could make workplaces more inclusive and supportive of immigrant professionals?

What goals or aspirations do you have for your future professional growth?

**Wrap-up and Closing**

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

Do you have any questions about the study or anything you'd like to revisit?

### Appendix B: Closing Statement

Thank you, [participant's name], for sharing your valuable insights and experiences with me today. Your contribution is immensely appreciated and will significantly contribute to the depth and richness of this research. If you have any additional thoughts, concerns, or reflections after this interview, please don't hesitate to reach out to me.

Your feedback on the interview process is invaluable, and it will help enhance the quality of this research. Once again, I thank you for your participation and look forward to the continued success of this study. Have a wonderful [morning/afternoon/evening]!

## Appendix C: Flyer

## KENYAN WOMEN IN CALIFORNIA NEEDED FOR A PH.D. RESEARCH STUDY

**Ph.D Research Study**

**Kenyan Women In California Needed for a Ph.D Research Study**

**About the Study**  
Help better understand how Kenyan women professionals who moved to the US adjust to and experience working in California.

**Who Can Participate?**  
Kenyan-born women

- Completed Diploma, University education or worked in Kenya before moving to the US
- Have a minimum of 5 years of work experience in California
- Must be currently employed and living in California

**What's Involved?**  
In-depth 90 minute confidential interviews

**Scan the QR code to sign up for the study**



Thank you for considering sharing your experiences in this study!

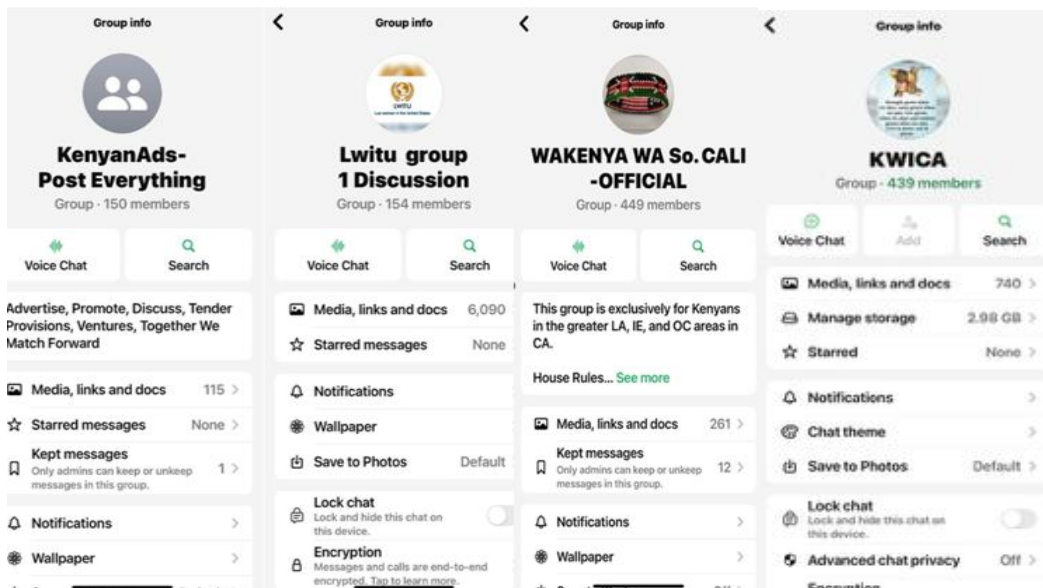
**Your Journey Matters**  
Together we can help inform a broader understanding of the first-generation immigrant experiences in the US.

**Why Participate?**

- Make Your Voice Heard
- Contribute to Research
- Help Build Community

**How to Get Involved**  
Scan the QR Code or contact me via WhatsApp messenger

Appendix D: WhatsApp Groups



## Appendix E: Codebook

1 Theme 6: Leader Dynamics and Relationship
1.1 Quality of relationships between leaders and immigrant workers
1.1.1 Sense of belonging and support
1.1.2 strength of relationships such as trust, loyalty and professional
1.2 Voluntarism and extra roles beyond formal responsibilities outcomes
1.3 7 Communication Style/tone
1.4 Career Development and Expectations
1.5 Demographic Similarities
1.6 Cultural differences
1.7 Employee performance
1.8 Job satisfaction/turn over intentions
2 Theme 5: Coping & Navigation (Cross-cutting)
2.1 Role of faith, culture, or community
2.1.1 Cultural pride as motivation
2.1.2 Family support systems
2.1.3 Faith as resilience (Christian practices)
2.2 Integration strategies
2.2.1 Organizational structure
2.2.2 Building credibility through performance
2.2.3 Changing behavior to “fit in”
2.2.4 Blending cultures (African/U.S.)
2.3 Resistance / advocacy
2.3.1 Redefining stereotypes through leadership
2.3.2 Advocating for other immigrant women
2.3.3 Speaking up against unfair treatment
3 Theme 4: Challenges & Barriers
3.1 Structural Barriers

3.1.1 Structural challenges (lack of recognition of foreign certifications and experience)
3.1.2 . Organizational policies that support integration and address specific challenges
3.1.2.1 DEI policies/Affinity groups/Employee Resource groups
3.1.3 Gender discrimination
3.2 Limited promotion / leadership pathways
3.2.1 Exclusion from decision-making circles
3.2.2 Lack of access to leadership roles
3.2.3 Glass ceiling for immigrant women
3.3 Discrimination / microaggressions
3.3.1 Accent-based discrimination
3.3.2 Subtle bias in daily interactions
3.3.3 Overt racism
3.4 Recognition of foreign qualifications
3.4.1 Re-certification and licensing struggles
3.4.2 Starting over despite experience
3.4.3 1 Credentials undervalued/underutilized
4 Theme 3: Identity Negotiations
4.1 Identity misclassification
4.2 Balancing cultural identity & professional role
4.2.1 Double consciousness: how they see themselves vs. how others perceive them
4.2.2 Negotiating “professionalism” vs. cultural expression (dress, behavior)
4.2.3 Keeping African values while adapting to U.S. norms
4.3 Being African/immigrant in U.S. workplace
4.3.1 Cultural misunderstandings
4.3.2 Accents and identity in professional settings
4.3.3 Experiences of being “the only one” in the room
4.4 Gendered experiences

4.4.1 Stereotyping
4.4.1.1 Stereotyping about
4.4.1.2 Navigating stereotypes about women leaders
4.4.2 Balancing career and family responsibilities
4.4.2.1 Overall mental well being
4.4.2.2 Work life balance
4.4.3 Gendered workload distribution (care vs. leadership roles)
5 Theme 2: Strategies & Processes
5.1 Community support
5.2 Self-initiated strategies (education, resilience)
5.2.1 Personal resilience & self-motivation
5.2.2 Continuous learning & skill upgrading
5.2.3 Pursuing higher education/certifications
5.3 • Networking & community support
5.3.1 Church/religious-based networking
5.3.2 Ethnic community connections (Kenyan/African networks)
5.3.3 Professional associations
5.4 Mentorship / peer support
5.4.1 Support from fellow immigrants or women
5.4.2 Informal peer mentoring
5.4.3 Formal mentorship programs
6 Theme 1: Workplace Integration Experiences
6.1 Political Environment
6.1.1 Social political events impact
6.2 Employer/colleague support
6.2.1 Inclusive vs. isolating work environments
6.2.2 Co-worker collaboration vs. exclusion
6.2.3 Supervisor mentorship/guidance
6.3 Learning workplace culture
6.3.1 Understanding unspoken expectations

6.3.2 Informal learning (“watching colleagues”, trial and error)
6.3.3 Orientation/onboarding processes
6.4 Adjustment challenges
6.4.1 Adapting to different work ethics/speed of work
6.4.2 Navigating U.S. workplace norms (e.g., punctuality, hierarchy)
6.4.3 Language/communication barriers