Successful aging among immigrants after midlife: Comparison of six ethnic groups

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Abstract

Relocation by crossing borders can be a risky endeavor, regardless of the amount of resources and support one receives. While many immigrants experience stress by functioning in a foreign language and culture, aging in a foreign environment can lead to an additional burden among older people. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the number of immigrants age 65 years or older reached an unprecedented high of 5 million in 2010, representing approximately 12% of the total foreign-born population. The growing number of older immigrants, coupled with the diversity of various ethnic groups, highlights the critical need to promote the well-being for these older immigrants. This study explored the current status of physical and psychological well-being of immigrants from six different ethnic groups (Bosnian, Chinese, Indian, Korean, Latino, and Vietnamese). Data were collected through interview surveys with immigrants who were 40 years old and older (n=330). These six groups present distinctive differences in the entry to the U.S., racial backgrounds, educational levels, and cultural and linguistic proximity to mainstream Americans. Quantitative results indicated that connection with others and integration to the community and mainstream Americans were important factors of life satisfaction in general. However, analyses of comments to open-ended questions found that meanings of 'successful aging' vary among different ethnic groups and that generational arrangements were also different among them.

Introduction

Relocation by crossing borders can be a risky endeavor, regardless of the amount of resources and support one receives. While many immigrants experience stress by functioning in a foreign language and culture, aging in a foreign environment can lead to an additional burden among older people. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that the number of immigrants age 65 years or older reached an unprecedented high of 5 million in 2010, representing approximately 12% of the total foreign-born population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The growing number of older immigrants coupled with the limited availability of resources highlights the critical need to promote health-related quality of life and well-being among these immigrants. Although the well-being of older adults is a key area of study in gerontological research and life-course studies, the inclusion of immigrants, particularly those who are of limited English proficiency, remains a major missing component, thus the needs of older immigrants is not well known. While there are many definitions of 'successful aging' according to different cultural contexts, psychological well-being is one of the important components in aging well. Component of subjective well-being involves evaluating one's life in positive terms (Diener et al., 1985), thus studying life satisfaction and relevant factors in general and within different cultural contexts offer some implications to gerontological researchers as well as policy makers. This study has two objectives: 1) To explore factors which predict life satisfaction among immigrants, and 2) To compare and contrast six ethnic immigrant groups.

This study was conducted in St. Louis, Missouri, in the United States of America. While the numbers of immigrants may be much higher in larger metropolitan areas, such as New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, St. Louis has been one of the gateways for immigrants in the past few decades. Further, the number of refugee populations has also been increasing since St. Louis was designated as one of the preferred communities for refugee resettlement. Recent estimates suggest that there may be as many as 150,000 immigrants in the St. Louis area (Focus St. Louis, 2003; Strauss, 2012). Some aspects of the needs of older immigrants in the U.S. may be gleaned from the sparse research literature, but many of these studies do not distinguish between different cultural or ethnic groups. Considering the fact that these immigrant populations continue to age, it is imperative to explore needs of older immigrants, by identifying specific areas that may prove fruitful in improving health-related quality of life and well-being.

Methods
Data Collection

Interview survey was used to collect data from six ethnic groups (Bosnian, Chinese, Indian, Korean, Latino, and Vietnamese). These six ethnic groups represent different backgrounds in terms of race, entry to the US, religion, length of stay, and ethnic community size. Criteria for recruitment were a) 40 years old or older, b) came to the U.S. at age 18 years old or older, and c) legally reside in the U.S. We included immigrants younger than 65 because this age cohort will reach their retirement age within the next two decades, thus they will provide valuable information in terms of policy recommendations. Data collection was conducted by a total of 16 students and

service providers who were able to speak one of the six languages. We were able to conduct interview survey in English win an Indian group. The final sample size was 330 (80 Bosnians, 80 Chinese, 80 Latinos, 30 Indian, 30 Korean, and 30 Vietnamese). The survey consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions and explored several dimensions associated with successful aging.

Variables
In this paper, we focused on several constructs, including Life Satisfaction, Social Involvement, English Competency, Perceived Discrimination, Social Support, Connection with Others, and Self Esteem. Many constructs were measured by existing scales which had been validated by many published studies. For the purpose of data analyses, composite scales were created after reliability tests. We were able to achieve good reliability for all the constructs, ranging 0.61 and 0.92. Control variables were Age, Years in the US, Sex , Education, and Household Income.

Results

Demographic Characteristics
Table 1 below shows general information on demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics

Sex (Males 43%, Females 57%)
Age (Mean=57.28, SD=12.45)
Years in the U.S. (Mean=18.98, SD=11.25)
Immigration status (Naturalized US citizens 53%)
Education (High School or less 50%, Some college 10%, College 18%, Graduate degree 22%)
Household Income (<$50,000 51%, >$100,000 10%)
Marital Status (Married 78%)

In general, the sample is slightly more educated than general U.S. population of people with 40 years old and older (High School or less 63%, Some college 7%, College 18%, Graduate degree 12%) (Data analysis based on General Social Survey, 2012). Noticeable difference among six ethnic groups were: Indian group resided in the U.S. the longest (Mean=27,54 years, SD=10.44), had the highest level of education (College education 20%, Graduate degree 65%), and reported the highest house hold income (>$100,000 71%) than the rest of five ethnic groups; Bosnian group resided in the U.S. the shortest (Mean=13.92 years, SD=3.54), had the lowest level of education (High school or less 88%), and reported the lowest household income (<$50,000 55%, >$100,000 5%); and Bosnian, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese reported that they practiced religion several times a week and that religion was very meaningful to their lives (>80%).

Factors Predicting Life Satisfaction
Life Satisfaction was the focus of interest of this study. The composite scale of this construct ranged between 5 and 25. While Indian group reported the highest score on Life satisfaction (Mean 20.29, SD=2.68), Bosnian group reported the lowest

(Mean=16.23, SD=3.65) and tied with Latinos (Mean=17.37, SD=3.49). Table 2 shows the results of regression analyses for the entire sample and by ethnic groups.

Table 2 Factors Predicting Life Satisfaction (Standardized Coefficients are reported.)

Variables	All	Bosnian	Chinese	Indian	Korean	Latino	Vietnamese
Age	.048	-.023	-.455***	.354	.254	.202	-.339
Years in the US	.033	.079	.022	.124	-.189	-.038	.255
Sex (1=M, 2=F)	.015	.112	-.085	-.096	.275	.030	-.024
Education	-.063	-.155	-.115	-.192	.374	-.365*	-.953***
Household Income	.113+	.339*	-.015	.231	.247+	.202	-.181
Socialization	.197***	.256*	.111	-.222	-.029	.123	.155
English competency	.120	.097	-.175	.025	.313	.336+	.391
Discrimination	.024	-.003	-.039	-.408	-.283	.104	.002
Social support	.051	.155	.154	-.019	-.058	.026	.411*
Connection	.279***	.313*	.216*	.375+	.040	.218+	.634***
Self Esteem	.193***	.021	.338***	.279	.429+	.150	-.180
F-statistics	15.195***	3.553***	7.711***	2.046	4.840***	3.464***	6.456***
R²	.345	.365	0.55	0.542	0.758	0.359	0.798
N	330	80	80	31	29	80	30

+<0.05 (one-tailed), *<0.05, **<0.01, ***<0.001

Household income, socializing with people (from one's ethnic group and mainstream Americans), connection with others, and self-esteem positively affected one's life satisfaction in general. Older Chinese were less likely to be satisfied with life than younger Chinese. Among Latinos and Vietnamese, the more educated they were, the less satisfied. In spite of high SES, none of the variables predicted life satisfaction among Indians except for connection with others.

Analyses of Written Comments
In this paper, we analyzed the answers to two open-ended questions; 1) What does aging well mean to you, 2) What arrangement do you have with your children and/or parents in the U.S. or abroad? Physical and mental health, and financial independence were top three important items for all six ethnic groups to age well. Indian and Korean groups mentioned that spiritual issues were important to age well, and Latino and Korean group mentioned that community participation would contribute to aging well. In terms of arrangement with their children and/or their parents, Indian, Chinese, Latino, and Korean groups mentioned that financial arrangements had been already made with their children, and Bosnian and Vietnamese groups provided limited response or mentioned that there was no arrangement.

Conclusion and Implications
The results of quantitative data analyses show that connection with others rather than social support predicts one's life satisfaction across six ethnic groups, controlling for demographic as well as other variables. The results of analyses of written comments, however, show that meaning of successful aging is slightly different among ethnic

groups in terms of material and nonmaterial aspects. Indian group, which has been in the U.S. the longest and does not have problems in communicating in English, seems to show good psychological well-being. Bosnian group, which is a refugee group and has resided in the U.S. the shortest, does not have arrangements with their children. The results imply that older people's active involvement (teaching ethnic cultures to younger children, volunteer work, etc.) is important and that there is a need for policy recommendations for ethnic groups which do not have materials resources.

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