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Older people in America's immigrant families Dilemmas of dependence, integration, and isolation

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Abstract

Immigration to the US has given rise to a population of older people who migrate here to be close to their children. Although highly integrated into their intergenerational families, these seniors voice dissatisfaction with their lives in the US. Intensive interviews with 28 transnational seniors demonstrate that their dissatisfaction stems from the contradictions between high cultural expectations for family sociability and structural constraints on kin interaction in the US. Their dissatisfaction is exacerbated by factors isolating them from social contacts outside the family. Although mobility limitations and not speaking English contribute to their isolation, immigrant families play a role. Older people are sometimes isolated by heavy domestic responsibilities in their child's household, solicitous offspring who insulate parents from practical aspects of daily life, and by a collective family ethos that calls on aging parents to subordinate their needs to those of other family members.

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1. Introduction

The lives of older immigrants are intimately tied to those of their families in the US. While the family lives of other older Americans involve a delicate balance of intimacy and independence, the families of older immigrants are characterized by greater interdependence. Older immigrants, for example, are more likely to reside with their kin (Kritz, Gurak,

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& Chen, 2000) and to contribute in various ways to the families on which they rely for social and material support. The solidarity of immigrant implies a high level of social integration and social support, but family solidarity does not guarantee a high level of late life satisfaction, as research on elderly immigrants has demonstrated (Black, Markides, & Miller, 1998; Gold, 1995; Moon & Pearl, 1991; Mui, 1998). This paper explores this paradox of immigrant family life. Why do older immigrants so often describe themselves as lonely, isolated, and bored when they are so closely integrated into their kin network? How do their expectations for family relations affect their perceptions of their lives in the US? How do the objective circumstances of their day-to-day lives contribute to their unhappiness? To what extent does the family ameliorate or compound the difficulties of immigrant seniors?

2. Background

According to the 1990 Census of Population, 1 in 10 people, 65 and older, was foreign-born (Treas, 1995). In some states like California, Hawaii, and New York, the figure was one in five (Treas & Torrecilha, 1995). Some of the foreign-born seniors immigrated from Europe many years ago as children or young adults. Others—recent immigrants mostly from Asia and Latin America—were already old when they arrived in the US (Kritz et al., 2000). Since most people around the globe are content to age-in-place, to grow old in the communities in which they have lived their lives, few seniors would immigrate were it not for their close family ties in the US.

Most people who move to the US in later life do so under the family reunification provisions of US immigration law. Children encourage aging parents to come here to help out with their children, to share the benefits of life in the US, or to be nearby so they can receive care. Of older legal immigrants who were admitted to the country in 1991, more than two-thirds gained entry as parents of US citizens, a category not subject to numerical limitation in the law (Treas, 1995). In addition to family-based immigrants, some old people entered as refugees, often accompanying their families. Only a handful were admitted on account of employment-based criteria. Besides permanent legal immigrants, many older people visited the US temporarily on 6-month tourist visas, and an unknown, but presumably small, number entered the country without documents.

In terms of income and the receipt of Social Security, foreign-born seniors who have lived in the US for many decades are nearly as well-off as native-born Americans (Kritz et al., 2000). Elderly immigrants recently arrived from developing countries differ from these other groups, however. They have less education, and they are more likely to say that they do not speak English very well. Since their work histories do not qualify them for Social Security and employment pensions in the US, elderly newcomers are more likely to be poor. They depend more on their families and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for financial support (Van Hook, 2000). Whether because of residential preferences or income constraints, seniors who are recent immigrants from the developing world are also more likely to live with kin than are other older people (Kritz et al., 2000).

2.1. Family lives of older immigrants

Elderly newcomers to the US are highly integrated into their families. Besides being more likely than the native-born elderly to reside in extended family households (Boyd, 1991; Burr & Mutchler, 1993; Choi, 1999), older immigrants are also more likely to be cared for by family members. Studies document the reluctance of immigrants to utilize long-term care and social services and their preference for family-based support of older relatives (Clark & Huttlinger, 1998; Moon, Lubben, & Villa, 1998; Tsai & Lopez, 1997). This is consistent with high levels of exchange and interaction reported for immigrant families. In family exchanges, older people are not only recipients, but also contributors. Among the Soviet Jews of Brooklyn, for example, grandparents help the younger generation by shopping, doing household chores, babysitting, and serving as culture-brokers between their secularized offspring and the local Yiddish-speaking religious community (Orleck, 1987). Among the Koreans in New York, grandparents provide essential childcare and housekeeping services for dual-career couples (Min, 1998).

Older immigrants' cultural traditions promote close family ties. US society values independence and self-reliance. American seniors prefer the intimacy-at-a-distance that comes from living apart from grown children. Despite concerns that economic development and Westernization are eroding traditions (Ingersoll-Dayton & Saengtienchia, 1999; Treas & Logue, 1986), sending societies are typically described as placing a greater emphasis on family obligations. Familism, for example, is identified as a defining Latin American value (Ingoldsby, 1991). Confucian norms of eldercare and deference to the aged are central to the Confucian ideology of Chinese societies (Sher, 1984; Yang, 1959). These norms of filial piety find expression among Chinese and Korean immigrants in the US today (Lin & Liu, 1993; Min, 1998). Although they diverge from individualistic American values, family practices of mutual assistance facilitate immigrant survival and success in US society (Kibria, 1994; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Arguing that Asian immigrants surpass the native-born population in their embrace of family values, Francis Fukuyama (1993, p. 5) observes:

The strength of traditional family values is most evident among immigrants from East and South Asia, where mutually supportive family structures have long been credited as the basis for their economic success. . . . (C)oncern for elderly parents is high in Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese households; for many, the thought of sticking a mother or father out of sight and out of mind in a nursing home continues to be an anathema.

Fukuyama points up the widespread belief that the immigrant elderly can count on a higher level of family commitment and concern than can native-born seniors.

Paradoxically, older immigrants' family ties do not insure their successful adjustment to life in the US. Among Vietnamese (Gold, 1989), Russian (Gold, 1995), and Salvadorean immigrants (Gelfand, 1989), older people do not adapt as rapidly as do younger family members. Elderly Korean immigrants show high levels of alienation (Moon & Pearl, 1991). Their dependence on kin leads to conflict, particularly with respect to their filial expectations for their married sons (Kim, Kim, & Hurh, 1991). Dissatisfaction with help received from kin is associated with depression among elderly Chinese immigrants (Mui, 1998). Seniors from

Mexico are more likely to exhibit depression than other older Mexican Americans, particularly if they are recent immigrants and have not assimilated and acculturated (Black et al., 1998). Latino grandparents with primary responsibility for the care of grandchildren report more depression than other caregiving grandparents (Burnette, 1999).

The problematic adjustment of older immigrants suggests the limitations of family support. As we show, a cultural ideology of family interdependence not only gives much to older immigrants, but it also demands much from them. Collectivist ideologies reinforce subordination of individual interest to that of the group. Older people, being relatively powerless in their families, are unlikely to assert their preferences. Adjustment problems reflect more than the limitations of old age or the alien features of American society. Difficulties adjusting may also be linked to the organization of immigrant family life.

3. The study

This paper is based on interviews conducted in 1998 and 1999 as part of a broader study of transnational elderly persons who maintain close ties to more than one country. The 28 elderly, foreign-born informants either resided permanently in California or were on an extended family visit (6 weeks to 6 months) from their residence in another country. Because immigrants' transnational bonds tend to weaken with the passage of time, the focus on transnational ties biased the study away from immigrants who had spent most of their lives in the US.

A selected group of advanced undergraduate sociology students recruited and interviewed the informants. The students received formal interview training and conducted practice interviews under the close supervision of the investigators. They produced verbatim interview transcripts that permitted an assessment of the quality of their interviews and sometimes prompted call-backs to clarify information. The informal interviews, lasting 1–2 h, followed a guideline of open-ended questions. Interviewers asked about migration histories, travel patterns, adjustment problems, families, health, and use of US government programs.

Although most interviews were conducted in English, others were conducted in the informant's native tongue, sometimes with a family member's assisting with translation. Two interviews were conducted by telephone. The face-to-face interviews took place in the home of either the informant or a relative. This setting put the older person at ease, but it meant that some interviews were interrupted or observed by visitors and other household members. Bystanders would sometimes chime in, adding details or correcting factual information (e.g., dates). Although this lack of confidentiality poses a threat to the validity of the answers, it can be seen as an asset in the context of tight-knit family cultures (Sengstock, 1996). The interviews were taped with the informants' permission and then transcribed into English by the interviewer. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

The study design presents trade-offs. The young interviewers were usually known to the older informants—being family members, family friends, or family members of friends. Based on these personal relationships, interviewers were able to overcome concerns of family gatekeepers and to secure the cooperation of older people who might otherwise be

reluctant to be interviewed. In most cases, the interviewer was a member of the same ethnic group as the informant. Not only were interviewers usually able to communicate directly in the informant's language, but also they were able to interpret interviews in light of their knowledge of the culture and the individual's personal and family history. Of course, some informants may have been unwilling to share confidential details of their life with younger friends and family members.

The informants range in age from 61 to 85 with an average age of 72 years. Females make up 75% of the study group. Although all of the men are married, 41% of the women are widowed. Of the 28 older people, 12 hail from the Philippines. The countries of origin of other informants include Korea (4), Mexico (3), Taiwan (3), Iran (2), Egypt (1), Jordan (1), Pakistan (1), and Vietnam (1). Although a nonprobability sample cannot be generalized to the population of transnational elderly in the US, the interviews yield extremely rich data for an exploratory study of the family lives of a rare population that has received little scholarly attention.

The authors reviewed the interviews for general content and compiled interview summaries covering demographic characteristics, immigration history, lifestyle, travel routines, religious involvement, and participation in intergenerational family life. A chart was created summarizing social and demographic characteristics. The transcribed data were reviewed in detail to explicate specific recurrent themes in the stories of the transnational elderly. In the words of Kvale (1996, p. 201), we alternated "between being a ['narrative finder'] looking for narratives contained in the interviews and a ['narrative creator'] molding the many different happenings into coherent stories." Based on the data, we created broad categories such as collectivist versus individualist, deferential to children versus autonomous, and socially isolated versus integrated. These categories were further refined, particularly in response to cases that did not fit our classification. Through this exploratory study, we hope to provide an understanding of the dilemmas, contradictions, and expectations of transnational elders.

4. Loneliness

Repeatedly in the interviews, older people expressed their dissatisfaction with their lives in the US. Consistent with studies of the American elderly (Koropecj-Cox, 1998), the widowed were especially likely to feel lonely. So were very old or sick people who had a hard time going out. An 85-year-old widow from the Philippines poignantly reflected on her loneliness, fears, and boredom:

I get lonely because my husband died. Especially when I am left home alone. . . . I do nothing sometimes, just staring out the window or pray. When it's prayer time, I just pray. I pray the novena and when it's time to sleep, I pray the rosary three times. . . . I don't like it when it's nighttime and I'm alone. I get scared. Maybe there will be a burglar or ghost or something. (laughs) . . . It's just that I am not used to being left alone. Only here in the U.S. that I experienced being alone at night. (In the Philippines) we had maids at the house if other people went out at night. And, of course, my friends came over a lot.

The US did not have the same high level of sociability that they were used to at home. Older people's social isolation in the US contrasted with the home country where entertaining visitors, giving parties, and going out to visit was a part of daily life. A 69-year-old woman explained, "I miss my friends and family back home. Living here is totally different. People have a difficult time gathering amongst themselves. You do not see that in Iran. Every night is a social gathering. A person my age will never feel lonely there. But here I think you will." In a similar vein, an older man described his daily routine in the Philippines, gossiping with friends in a local store and returning after lunch for more conversation and perhaps a mahjong game. As for his typical day in the US, "I do not like. I hate because during these times after lunch, after breakfast, I talk to my friends but here no. I stay home. It's boring."

4.1. Social networks

Seniors who enjoyed the companionship of other old people were more satisfied with life in the US. Married couples, for example, kept each other company. As an older man put it, "I have my wife near me all the time and we talk about everything, so I don't get too lonely." Visiting the US with her husband, a Mexican woman relished the feeling that she was in her own house after her daughter left for work. Having friends also reduced loneliness.

Friends their own age shared their interests and had time for activities. Men shared activities with fishing buddies or fellow habitués of the local coffee shop. Women favored movies and bus tours with the older ladies whom they had gotten to know at church. Filipinos got together with other old people at events organized by clubs for people who had immigrated from the same region (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994). Korean widows, who lived in senior housing populated by coethnic elders, socialized frequently with their neighbors. Their Los Angeles neighborhood, Little Korea, had churches, senior centers, and businesses that catered to Korean immigrants.

Seniors who had friendships shared several characteristics. They had either settled permanently in the US or often made extended visits. On frequent trips from London, a lively Pakistani widow borrowed her daughter's pass to the local fitness center so she could meet her Pakistani lady friends there for exercise classes. Of course, some older people were simply too sick or frail for friends. Social networks contracted as they aged. Friends died, and disabilities made it hard to keep in touch. Widowhood not only robbed the elderly of a companion, but also meant seeing fewer friends. When their husbands died, older women reported, they gave up couple-oriented activities like dancing.

4.2. Residential and geographic constraints

Some older immigrants were isolated due to the nature of the communities in which they lived. They found themselves in sprawling Southern California suburbs where their children moved so that the grandchildren could attend the best public schools. In their rural villages and dense urban neighborhoods, older people were used to walking to visit friends or to shop.

In American suburbs where few attractions were within walking distance, older people were trapped at home. Unless they could drive, they had to wait for busy family members to give them a ride, because suburban public transportation was not as well developed as city bus systems (Freeman, 1989). The upshot was that older people did not get out as often as they would have liked. As one informant put it, “My problem is, you know, we are bored because we are staying home always. Nothing to go, that’s my problem.”

Outside ethnic enclaves, not speaking English increased social isolation and dependence on kin. Noting that her suburban neighbors were “Americans,” a Taiwanese woman explained wistfully, “When they say hi to me, I really want to talk to them more but I can’t. I know if I try to practice more with them, my English will improve a lot, but I don’t know where to start.” Some older people spoke English, but those who came to the US when they were already old had problems learning the language. They lamented not being able to remember new words no matter how hard they studied. One woman complained that she had difficulty even pronouncing English words because of her dentures. Not speaking English not only impeded communication with outsiders, but it also limited interaction with younger family members. English was the primary (and often the only) language of grandchildren who had spent most of their lives in the US. When asked if her grandchildren kept her company, a visiting Jordanian woman replied, “Maybe so, but they get bored, too. I cannot talk to them because they do not understand me completely.”

4.3. Isolation within the family

Tellingly, some older people had no social ties or interests beyond their kinship network. The Jordanian grandmother explained, “(M)y family are my friends. They are the only ones I am here for. I really don’t have any other friends.” A closed family network is not surprising for seniors who visit the US only infrequently for short stays or in response to family crises or special occasions requiring their full attention. Family demands could be so consuming that older people had little time or energy for friends and outside activities. An Iranian woman, for example, was preoccupied with her widowed daughter. “I spend very little time outside the immediate family. Since (the daughter) is mostly alone, I try to spend as much time as possible with her.”

Many older people were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare in their children’s homes. These duties could be very confining as an 84-year-old Filipina pointed out. “I enjoy more my life when I was working (as a farmer in the Philippines). . . . Yes, because every day I would go out. (A)nd now I am taking care of the babies. I only stay in the house. . . . I just clean around the house and that’s it. And sometimes do the laundry.” Caring for grandchildren interfered with outside activities, preventing one woman from taking a computer class with her husband and two others from enrolling in English classes. Having listened diligently to English conversation tapes, a Taiwanese woman stopped practicing her English when her grandchildren were born and now faced the daunting prospect of starting over with her studies.

Although some older relations had no social ties outside their families, the companionship of family members was not always enough to stave off loneliness and boredom. In their

homelands, an extended kin network offered a high level of sociability that compensated for the burden of family responsibilities. In the US, the younger generation was often too busy earning a living or getting an education to keep older relations company. Even when incorporated into their children's households, the seniors said that they were lonely and bored. When their social circle was limited to younger family members who were often absent, older people were unhappy.

Families sometimes seemed to fold in on older people, simultaneously ignoring, indulging, and isolating them. The very solidarity and integration of families could contribute to loneliness and boredom. Speaking to an American grandchild about her adaptation to life in the US, a widowed Filipina, who immigrated to live with her married daughter, illustrated the complex dynamic of family protection, isolation, and neglect.

I didn't have to talk with a lot of people outside the family because anything that I needed was taken care of by the family . . . I just stayed at home and watched the kids or watched television. I only went out when the family went out. (E)verybody is busy with work and their outside life. Like you kids . . . you like to go out with your friends and party and do your own thing. In the Philippines, we always sit down together as a family and have breakfast and dinner together. Over here, all of you are too busy to just eat together.

Grown offspring often took charge of parents' lives, whether to assist their elderly relations or to make things more convenient for themselves. Even after older people had been in the US for a number of years, grown children handled legal arrangements, chose the doctor, and planned the outings. With children who took care of everything, seniors had few occasions to master a new culture. Being taken care of not only isolated older people, but also increased their dependence on kin. In their native land, the seniors' experience would have qualified them to offer advice to younger people. In the US, they had little useful knowledge to offer. They had to rely on the judgment of their children.

A 61-year-old Taiwanese woman, Mrs. Tsu, allowed that her daughter was the one who knew who her health insurer was and where the land that they had bought together was located. When asked whether she would apply for SSI benefits and where she and her husband would live in the future, Mrs. Tsu said it was up to her children. Although she lived with her only son, she was resigned to ignorance about his life. When asked where her son worked, she replied, "Now, I don't know. When I asked him about his job, he always told me don't worry. He said he can take care of his own life. I know there are many things we don't understand in the US, so I didn't ask too much about their (the children's) lives."

5. Power, submission, and resistance

The combined effects of old age and immigrant experience surely contributed to older people's isolation in the US. Because they were old, seniors were not exposed to the acculturating experiences of work and school, and they had a harder time learning a new language and culture. Disabilities and an intimidating new environment often kept them at

home. Committed to the native culture they had known most of their lives, they sometimes resisted new ways of doing things. While these arguments offer partial explanations for the older immigrants' difficulties, immigrant family life itself contributed to the unhappiness and isolation of some older family members. Aging parents were loved and protected, but they were also neglected by the younger generation that had other claims upon its attention.

Their dependence on kin, reinforced by cultural ideologies of family collectivism, led older immigrants to bow to family needs and children's desires. Even when things were not to their liking, even when they were lonely and bored, older people seldom challenged family arrangements directly. Aging parents made it clear that they deferred to their children's wishes and respected their offspring's authority. Like Mrs. Tsu who explained, "I am not an authoritarian type of mother," parents were quick to define themselves as subordinates in their children's household. "Well, my role is the mother and, well, I cannot say that I'm the boss. (laughs) You know they are the boss because it is their household. I'm just living with them. My role only is as a mother. . . . I cook and clean. . . . I do everything. That's it." When asked about her grandchildren's education, another woman declared, "I cannot interfere so much because that is the decision of my daughter and my son-in-law. I am just a supporting role. I don't want to be an interfering mother."

5.1. Sacrifice

The circumstances of immigrant life in the US required a high level of self-sacrifice and family cooperation in order to survive and prosper. Older people saw their close-knit families as being different from and superior to what they perceived to be American society's individualistic family patterns. One mother emphasized that she taught her children family values—to always be together and, whenever possible, to help one another. Although immigrant communities can be critical of younger generations that adopt American values (Lessinger, 1995), the older immigrants did not describe their children as willfully abandoning traditional values. Instead, they saw their offspring as doing their best in a new culture that the older generation sometimes found unfathomable. The seniors lamented the nature of American life, its devaluation of family ties, its fast pace, and its extraordinary demands on the energies of the young. Younger family members had no choice but to work hard and study hard in order to succeed in the United States. Seniors saw their role as helping out offspring by keeping house and minimizing their own demands. As one lady explained, "My gosh, my children in the U.S. are too busy to visit me. They are too busy making a living in the U.S. So, to make it easier, I go and visit."

Inevitably, the interests of some members got prioritized over those of others (e.g., children's schooling dictated moving to the suburbs from the ethnic enclave that grandparents favored). Reflecting the general principle of social exchange (Blau, 1964), less powerful family members, namely older people, traded deference and subordination for their offspring's support. Offspring looked after their parents, but older people did not push their claims. Given the unequal power of the generations, of course, there was a potential for exploitation.

5.2. Coercion

Some informants recognized that older parents could be coerced into helping children in the US. An elderly Filipina went to great lengths to emphasize that her children did not want her to do chores around their house. They wanted her to relax and have fun. “They’re not like those people who make their mothers baby sit for them or do things for them.” Another woman was asked what an older woman ought to do if she wanted to return home, but her daughter wanted her to stay to care for the grandchildren. As someone who regularly helped her daughter with two disabled grandchildren, she pondered the question thoughtfully. She began by acknowledging that mothers and daughters did not always get along.

If that is the only child, I don’t know how is the bonding with the daughter. Sometimes they (mother and daughter) don’t really interact with each other and if she’s happier to go home and if she has properties in there, the decision is hers to take because I have seen some situations where parents are brought in here and being enslaved and taken advantage of. This is really a very, very hard situation. You have to see all the parameters. How is she being treated by the daughter and the children? How is she being given the chance to also live, you know, have the privilege to have some nice time being an older lady? And if she have little bit more years to enjoy her life and if she’s happy and if financially she can manage to go home and if she think that she is happier to have someone take care of her when she gets old, maybe she should decide. Really, that is a hard situation.

Well-off financially, this Filipina and her husband had worked many years in the US at good jobs. They had inherited property in the Philippines and talked about returning home where they could afford to hire servants to help them in their old age. Her remarks acknowledged that power and resources affected how older people could live their lives. An elderly parent was vulnerable to exploitation. She could not go against a child’s wishes if she were not financially independent. If she had to rely on only one child in old age, she would probably have to subordinate her personal desires to her child’s wishes, rather than risk offending her future caretaker.

6. Resistance: self-reliant seniors and mothers in charge

Many immigrant seniors were isolated within families that did not provide enough companionship to fend off loneliness and boredom. Most aging parents had a secure, but relatively powerless, position in the immigrant family. The ideology of family interdependence insured that they would be supported in their later years, but it also demanded that they contribute whatever they could and go along with the wishes of the younger generation. A few seniors, however, challenged the notion that older people should automatically defer to their grown children. Their autonomy permitted them to seek satisfactions outside the family and to wield more clout in family relations. To opt out of stifling family interdependence, some invoked the American value of self-reliance. Others pointed to cultural traditions or their own superior resources to justify their authority over grown offspring.

Several older immigrants embraced American values of independence and self-reliance. These values offered a rationale for evading the oppressive demands of the younger generation. Being independent of the younger generation gave parents more freedom and imposed fewer burdens, the older people pointed out. Having left an abusive husband in the Philippines to raise two daughters on her own, an older woman appreciated the ethos of self-reliance in the US. Living alone gave her autonomy that multigenerational living would not. “It’s good in terms of getting by on your own . . . like not having to rely on someone else . . . for decisions, or not having to worry about others. Whereas if you live with close family, the eldest persons usually have to look out for the younger ones. Either that, or the younger ones would always have to worry about your health.”

Voicing a similar sentiment, a man observed that parents in the Philippines faced a hardship, because they were expected to feed and shelter adult offspring who needed help. In the US, married children were supposed to make it on their own. Older people did not have to support grown children. Instead, they could save money, perhaps to be spent voluntarily on the younger generation. An older Taiwanese man, a cosmopolitan retiree who had lived in several countries, argued that it was bad for grown children to depend on parents. When asked the hypothetical question about the woman who longed to return home but whose daughter wanted her to stay in the US to babysit, he quickly responded, “She can help her daughter but when is she going to let her daughter be independent? She must work her way to make her daughter independent.”

While most mothers deferred to their children, a few did not. They took for granted their authority in their child’s life. A Korean widow explained why she lived with her 42-year-old younger son, rather than with her older one as tradition dictated. As she put it, her older son was stable and could take care of his family while her younger son could not even take care of himself. He needed her advice. As a respected professional in the immigrant community, her success, coupled with his apparent failures, gave her the right to direct his life. Maternal duty justified a 71-year-old Jordanian taking charge of her children’s domestic lives. “These are my sons so I must show them the correct way of doing things.” Protesting that she was in very poor health, she catalogued a long list of chores she did to help “put their house in order.” To justify her position of authority, she pointed to her special status in Jordanian culture. She was the family’s head since the death of her husband. In addition, she was a mother and grandmother, which she said were honored positions in Jordanian, if not American, culture.

7. Conclusion and discussion

Previous studies emphasize that older immigrants have trouble adjusting to life in the US. Our informants reinforce this conclusion with their complaints of loneliness and boredom. Their feelings reflect their social isolation. While frailty and widowhood conspire to isolate older people, old age also intensifies the challenges of immigration, as evidenced by how difficult immigrant seniors find learning a new language. The residential context—poor public transportation, urban street crime, English-only suburbs—also impedes the incorp-

oration of older immigrants into the community, especially outside the comfort of an ethnic enclave. Since immigrant seniors tend to live with their offspring, we might assume that families compensate for the social isolation of aging parents. Our study shows that families often fall short. The younger generation is too busy to meet the expectations that seniors have for companionship. Older people who must take on big responsibilities for the homes and children of their offspring are further isolated, as are seniors whose helplessness is reinforced by solicitous kin.

Our study contributes to research exploring the contradictions of immigrant family life. Immigrant families embody many admirable qualities, including resourcefulness, resiliency, and solidarity. Some family features can prove problematic, however, at least for certain family members in American society. Patriarchal domination of women, harsh physical discipline of children, and conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are key elements of cultures from which many recent immigrants hail. Immigration itself introduces new challenges that contribute to family stress (Dinh, Sarason, & Sarason, 1994; Kibria, 1993). While we focus on aging parents, others have considered adverse consequences for husband–wife and parent–child relationships. Although American life may promote gender equality (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Lin, 1997), domestic violence in ethnic communities demonstrates that immigration makes some wives even more dependent on husbands and more vulnerable to abuse (Chin, 1994; Song, 1996). Parent–child conflict is revealed by adolescents' complaints about authoritarian parents who pressure them to get high grades, prohibit dating, and do not show enough affection or understanding (Dinh et al., 1994; Lee, 1988; Lessinger, 1995; Wolf, 1997; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

The youngest generation's unhappiness reflects their unmet expectations for family life based on newly acquired American values. By contrast, the unhappiness of elderly family members stems from their unrealized aspirations for a life embodying traditional values of family closeness, companionship, and sociability. In our study, a few foreign-born seniors espoused American values of individualism and self-reliance, but most continued to operate according to the collectivist values that they brought with them from home. They defined the family as the appropriate focus of their attention and the main source of personal rewards. Believing that family members were obliged to help one another, they accepted significant responsibility within the family, but they were often disappointed with their relations with American-based kin.

The younger generation had many competing obligations and interests. To their regret, seniors found that it was difficult to spend time with offspring, to communicate with grandchildren, and to get kin to drive them where they needed to go. Despite being loved and protected, older people were lonely and bored. Their feelings spoke not merely to the objective circumstances of life in the US, but also to their cultural expectations. In a comparison of European regions, Jylha and Jokela (1990) found that older people who lived alone were less likely to describe themselves as feeling lonely if they resided in an area where living alone was the norm. Coming from places where kin offered constant companionship, where friends were always close at hand, older immigrants experienced the US as a lonely place (Freeman, 1989). When household contributions were not met with companionship, when the separate worlds of young and old limited disclosure and intimacy, older family

members grew lonely. Although familistic values left them open to disappointment, these values also consoled aging parents, who took comfort in the belief that they were better off than older Americans whose individualistic families left them to manage on their own (Kalavar, 1998).

Older parents accepted their situation, even when their family life fell short of their collectivist ideals. Even if they know children who took advantage of their older parents, they attributed their own loneliness more to the demands of American society than to the filial failings of their offspring. In contrast to individualism that breeds assertiveness and active management of relationships (Triandis, 1995, pp. 118–119), collectivism encourages compliance to promote social harmony and group welfare (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994). Moral beliefs encouraging individual sacrifice rationalize routine practices that work to the disadvantage of old people. Injustice in relationships defined by intimacy and affection is difficult to recognize and oppose (Jackman, 1994). In family exchanges, people find it hard to evaluate whether arrangements are fair, because sacrifices need not be reciprocated immediately, in like kind, or even by the immediate beneficiary (Blau, 1964). Even as there are cultural differences in the definition of elder abuse (Moon & Williams, 1993; Pablo & Braun, 1997), there may be cultural blind spots in standards of fairness between kin. Of course, had we interviewed the children of our elderly informants, they might well have expressed their own frustrations with intergenerational responsibilities.

Relatives brought to the US to help out kin resent getting bare subsistence for their services (Basch et al., 1994). Aging parents, by contrast, did not object to their lives, perhaps because they were dependent on their offspring and unable to strike out on their own. Especially outside ethnic enclaves, they relied on younger family members for social support, economic assistance, and help in negotiating a host of unfamiliar situations. Since past accomplishments were soon forgotten in the US, the family was sometimes the only realm where older immigrants continued to enjoy recognition and validation. Besides assuring older people a place in the social world, collective family values gave older people a moral claim to a place at the dinner table. This claim to social and material support from kin took on particular significance for seniors. Many would become frail, disabled, or needy in the years ahead. Given their dependence on offspring, it is not surprising that older relations were reluctant to make too many demands or to challenge the organization of family life. Although aging parents played important roles in their children's households, unpaid work in the domestic sphere did not translate into clout within the family as much as a paycheck did. Instead of empowering older people, their household contributions empowered others (say, by permitting a daughter-in-law to pursue a remunerative professional career) while isolating the senior.

Our analysis focuses on the shared experiences that derive from growing older, belonging to a particular generation in the family lineage, and being a newcomer to an unfamiliar country. Structural circumstances of the later life course can lead to dissatisfaction with American life despite seemingly high levels of family integration. There are exceptions, of course, because personal, cultural, or community resources protect some older people from feelings of neglect and disappointment. Nor are immigrants alone in their inability to realize their preferences. In American families that assume collective responsibility for one another's welfare, native-born elders also defer to offspring's desires in exchange for family support

(Pyke, 1999). These parallels suggest that the difficulties that older immigrants face cannot be attributed just to the immigrant experience nor to the distinctive cultural traditions that they embrace. Although geographic separation from coethnics or linguistic isolation may exacerbate their difficulties, the organization of family life can impose a burden of loneliness on the elderly who lack other social resources.

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