Elderly newcomers who follow their adult children to the United States are valuable members of many immigrant households. Little known outside their families and ethnic communities, they never win spelling bees. They do not join criminal gangs. Nobody worries about Americans losing jobs to Korean grandmothers. Arriving too late in life for the Americanizing influences of school and workplace, they remain invisible to the broader society and dependent on kin for support, companionship, and help in navigating U.S. society. Being focused on the economic and cultural incorporation of working-age immigrants and their children, researchers have neglected older newcomers. As shadowy figures on the American landscape, older newcomers succumb to easy stereotyping.

Most of the older immigrants in the U.S. are not newcomers, but rather have lived in the country for many years. Having immigrated as children or young adults, they are usually well incorporated into our society. However, one in eight older foreign-born persons now in the U.S. is a newcomer—a late-life immigrant who arrived in the U.S. during the last decade (Treas and Batalova, 2007). Almost 50,000 adults age 65 and older were admitted to permanent residence in the U.S. in 2005. Another 2.3 million older adults come and go as “temporary visitors” each year. Most of the older people who immigrate permanently are the aging parents of naturalized U.S. citizens. Middle-aged and older parents make up 7.5 percent of all legal immigrants annually (Treas and Batalova, 2007).

U.S. immigration law places a premium on reuniting families, instead of focusing solely on serving the labor needs of the economy. The appropriate balance between family reunification and labor immigration is in fact a point of contention. Higher levels of immigration have led to a growing population of naturalized citizens who are able to sponsor the immigration of aging parents. There is no immediate economic advantage to bringing an older adult to the U.S. Ever since welfare and immigration reform of the mid 1990s, newcomers have been
largely barred from receiving federal benefits (Estes et al., 2006). Family sponsors are legally responsible for the support of aging newcomers.

My research focuses on older newcomers who have relocated, often reluctantly, over long distances. They have moved at a time in their lives when most older adults are content to do what gerontologists call “aging in place”—growing old in the communities where they have lived most of their lives. Whatever their places of origin, these immigrants to the U.S. have much in common simply by virtue of age and immigrant experience. They share concerns about the upbringing of their grandchildren, about who will care for them (the elders) when they can no longer care for themselves, and about learning English when you struggle with poor memory or bad dentures. Their common experience refutes many stereotypes. In particular, findings about older newcomers challenge four myths about the lives of the older people in immigrant families.

**THE OLDER NEWCOMERS**

The study on which this article is based examined the results of intensive interviews with older, foreign-born adults who were either residing permanently in the U.S. or visiting from their residence elsewhere. Advanced sociology students (whom I trained and supervised) recruited and interviewed the older adults. Informants were usually the interviewers’ family members, family friends, or friends’ family members. Scientific sampling was ruled out by the difficulty of locating transient visitors and securing the reluctant cooperation of non-English speakers protected by family gatekeepers. Interviewers’ personal relationships overcame these barriers. Besides speaking the same language as the informants, interviewers were able to interpret interviews in light of their own knowledge of the informant’s culture and personal history. The study included fifty-five persons in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. Reflecting gender differences in mortality, three-quarters were women, half of whom were widowed, while all the men were married. They came from fifteen countries: The Philippines, Korea, Mexico, Pakistan, Iran, Taiwan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Egypt, Spain, Cambodia, Belize, Jordan, Cuba, and Japan. (For more on the sample and methodology, see Treas, 2008; Treas and Mazumdar, 2002.) Results of the study defied a number of common myths about older immigrants, as described below.

**MYTH 1: IMMIGRANT FAMILIES ARE TRADITIONAL**

We often think of immigrants as traditional. They often think of themselves as traditional. Criticizing “American” families, an undergraduate student from an immigrant household pronounced, “My family is very traditional. We take care of our grandmother.” This South Asian family was not really traditional. In the U.S., the grandmother lived with the family of her married daughter. In India, she would have been expected to live with her son.

Many immigrant families were untraditional. In a manner unthinkable in earlier generations, some older adults shuttled between continents on a routine schedule. A Pakistani widow lived near her sons in England, but she traveled for most of the year to spend time with each of her three daughters. During autumn in Canada, winter in Southern California, and spring in Australia, she pitched in to help around the house and teach religion to her grandchildren. Other older adults moved between the homes of children who cared for them, perhaps spending the workweek with one family and the weekend with another. In another Indian household, an elderly couple lived apart from one another for several years. With their daughter in medical school, they took turns babysitting her children. When one grandparent arrived on a six-month visit, the other returned home to apply for another short-term visa. Maintaining traditions is difficult. Indian parents of the Brahman caste in prosperous families were sometimes rumored to be doing such shocking activities as toilet scrubbing, because Mexican immigrant housekeepers could not be trusted to follow hygienic Hindu rituals correctly.

Circumstances call for innovative adaptations, expedient compromises, and sacrifices in order to honor important cultural values. These adaptive practices are hardly traditional, even if they are recast as “tradition” by immigrants them-
selves. In such ways, immigrants themselves often participate directly in the making of the “traditional” myth, but they are not alone. Noting the immigrant propensity to live in multi-generational households or to receive family care rather than formal care (Moon, Lubben, and Villa, 1998; Wilmoth, 2001), we often point to cultural differences as characterizing immigrant families. Although culture plays a role, it takes a fine eye to distinguish what is “traditional” as opposed to a practical adaptation to poverty, ineligibility for public programs, or the need for trusted household help.

**MYTH 2: IMMIGRANT OLDER ADULTS ARE FAMILY DEPENDENTS**

Older newcomers do depend on family members. Because they lack incomes and are unfamiliar with American society, these elders rely on kin for support, housing, companionship, transportation, and help understanding English and navigating American society. It is easy to imagine that dutiful adult children bring their parents to the U.S. just so they can look after the older generation. Older people, however, give as well as they get. Immigrant family life emphasizes interdependence over dependence. Grown children invite parents to join them in the U.S. in part because they know that the older generation will help them out.

What do older family members do? They do the cooking and cleaning that permit the dual-earner couple or the single mother to get an economic toehold in American society. The older family members free older children from household responsibilities so they can go to school. Elders are babysitters, sometimes moving between households as each new grandchild is born (Treas and Mazumdar, 2004). Even if they themselves have little schooling or knowledge of English, they monitor study time at the kitchen table. They offer encouragement to despondent college students who call home. They care for the sick. They teach family traditions, native customs, and their own language. They keep in touch with relatives separated by great distances. In households where others are too busy to follow strict religious traditions, they are the designated performers of prayer and other rituals. In their spare time, they help to make ends meet by recycling aluminum cans, growing vegetables, and shopping at thrift stores.

Take one example. An 84-year-old Filipina described her day looking after her son’s five-year-old twin boys:

> If I am caring for the kids, I wake up early and give them food and drink. I cook for the kids because the parents work. I care and bathe them. I make lunch and rest when they go to school. But I don’t rest much because I clean, wash clothes, and then fold laundry. Then they come home and I change their clothes and give them food. Then I cook again for dinner, wash dishes, and then I sleep. . . . I sleep with the twins on either side.

Studies of American grandparents report that most of us are either “distant” (largely uninvolved) or perhaps “fun-loving” (enjoying the good times but leaving the hard work of child-rearing to the parents) (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986). Older immigrants are hands-on caregivers. While grandchildren eventually grow up and grandparents grow too old to help out, older immigrants are important to the well-being of the younger generation.

**MYTH 3: IMMIGRANT ELDERS ARE AUTHORITY FIGURES**

Despite everyday household responsibilities, despite the affection of kin, older immigrants do not call the shots. Respect for the aged is the hallmark of many countries, especially Asian societies with a Confucian heritage of filial piety. This situation suggests that older kin are respected people whose counsel is sought and whose wishes are catered to. Whatever the culture, the authority of older immigrants is undermined by their limited resources and their lack of familiarity with American society.

First, older newcomers lack money. They are neither employed nor eligible for U.S. pensions. They are reluctant to cash out a family homestead when it can support kin who stay behind or provide a place to live should they decide to return. Because they depend on their children for support here, older adults subordinate their preferences to the needs of the young. A grandmother living with grown children may feel at home in an ethnic neighborhood where others...
speak her language. Still, she has to go along if younger kin decide to move to a distant suburb with better schools for the kids.

Second, older newcomers are seldom conversant with the English language or American ways. They rely on family members to navigate American society—translating at the doctor's office or driving to church. Aware that their children are more incorporated into the culture, older adults defer to their greater knowledge of American society. A 61-year-old Mexican woman laughingly insisted that her kids were smarter than she was, because they had learned modern ways while parents only knew the old ways.

Or, consider the wisdom of a 54-year-old Taiwanese woman who frequently makes extended visits to be with her daughter in Los Angeles: I only come to stay for a very short period of time, so I respect my daughter’s way of living. . . . It is like taking a taxi. If I don’t like the music a taxi driver plays, I won’t interrupt his . . . choice. I only take the taxi for a very short period of time, but the taxi driver has to drive the car for the whole day.

Older relations may offer gentle advice, but only in rare cases (when an older parent is very rich or an adult child very dependent) do parents call the shots. Grandparents defer to parents in the upbringing of grandchildren. And, the elders’ lives go on according to the younger generation’s terms, usually reflecting the demands of their work and school schedules. Older people’s visits to friends wait until some family member is available to drive. Even immigrating may reflect not so much the older person’s desires as the needs of younger family members. This situation is not unique to older immigrants. Euro-American older adults, too, give up some autonomy if they are dependent on younger family members (Pyke, 1999).

MYTH 4: IMMIGRANT FAMILY LIFE GUARANTEES HAPPINESS AND SECURITY

Many immigrant families are what sociologists refer to as “familistic”—characterized by high levels of interpersonal solidarity and kin togetherness. One downside of immigrant family life is the limited control that older immigrants have over their own lives. The strength of family ties should not blind us to their limitations.

The warm embrace of family life would seem to insulate older immigrants from the problems facing other older Americans. This myth persists despite research that finds high rates of depression among older immigrants, specifically newcomers (Lee, Crittenden, and Yu, 1996; Mui, 1996). My research finds that boredom and loneliness are big problems, even for those who live with their kin (Treas and Mazumdar, 2002). High cultural expectations for family togetherness are difficult to achieve in American society. Other family members are too busy going to school or earning a living to provide companionship. Those who immigrate at older ages have fewer opportunities to forge new relationships outside the family. The upshot is often older adults who are isolated by old age and circumstances.

Lamenting the absence of household servants and visiting neighbors, a Filipina in her 80s poignantly describes the loneliness that can confront older immigrants, even in multigenerational households:

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. . . . 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) . . .

Social isolation occurs when older immigrants are too busy caring for younger kin to build any life outside the family. Learning English, mastering public transportation, and making friends with people their own age can get put off until the grandchildren are launched. By then, older immigrants may be too frail to get out much. They are also too old to go home. As time passes, hometowns change, kin move away, friends die, and there is little left to return to. Sadly, the U.S.—once seen as just a temporary detour in response to the needs of the younger generation—becomes the end of the line (Becker, 2002).

If family cannot guard against loneliness, neither can it guarantee a secure old age. With her
small Supplemental Security Income (S.S.I.) benefit, an 82-year-old Vietnamese refugee demonstrates both the resilience and the limitations of immigrant family life. After immigrating to live with a daughter in New York, she moved to California to live with her granddaughter, Lucy. She says the following:

I lived there for a while until she had money problems and went bankrupt. Lucy asked me to move out because she could no longer afford the house. I don’t know what’s wrong with that girl. I help her out in paying for rent, but she’s always investing into new businesses. . . .

I then move in with my other granddaughter, Stacy. I live with Stacy for a while up until the day she got married. Everywhere I live I pay rent, even if they don’t accept it, I make them take it. After she got married, her parents, my son and his wife, decided to move in. So they took over my room and basically kick me out, telling me “go somewhere else.” I was hurt but I couldn’t do anything.

At that time Lucy had started another business and was doing okay, so she asks me to move back in with her. But this didn’t last long either. She and her husband started to drift apart from one another to the point where divorce is the only answer. I know, my family is messy, and I can’t do anything about it.

During this time, my son from Oregon had moved to California, and I was hoping to stay with him, but he didn’t want me to live there with him because his wife didn’t like me. His house had an extra room, too!

You’ll probably think I am homeless by then, right? You guess wrong. At that time, my fourth son had divorced his wife, and was traveling like me, too. So I couldn’t stay with him, because I can’t even find him. So I moved to Houston, Texas, to live with my third son for a while, but he had lung cancer and passed away.

Ever since then, I have been flying back and forth between D.C. and Orlando living with only my two daughters.

Indeed, despite mutual support, there are holes in the safety net provided even by a large immigrant family. Although welfare and immigration reforms of the 1990s heightened family members’ dependence on one another, family cannot guarantee happiness and economic security for elderly newcomers.

**Conclusion**

At an age when other elders are aging in place, older immigrants sally forth to distant corners of the globe. These journeys are often made with great trepidation by older people whose heart is still in their homeland. At an age when many older Americans retire, older newcomers are keeping house for busy two-earner couples. While other Americans think about downsizing, they are caring for large, multigenerational households. While the usual American grandparent is an intermittent playmate, the immigrant grandparent is a hands-on caregiver for small children. Foreign-born older adults instill family values, teach religious rituals, promote ethnic traditions, conserve family history and genealogies, pass on native languages, and foster transnational commitments to kin in other countries.

Their emphasis on tradition does not necessarily mean that they are traditional. They must adapt to new circumstances in American society. The grandmother mopping the kitchen floor may well have had maids to do all the work in the Philippines. Nor does being embedded in an immigrant family assure companionship. Older immigrants reported feeling lonely and bored despite living with kin. Whatever authority they might have in their homeland is eroded by their diminished resources in the U.S. Older newcomers defer to the needs of the younger generation on whom they depend.

Newcomers of all ages face new opportunities and new constraints in the U.S. that demand novel adaptations, some welcome and some not. A Taiwanese woman worried about what would become of her if her Americanized son got married. However, she was delighted that her husband had adopted the American custom of helping to wash the dishes. Asked about maintaining Chinese customs in the U.S., she said, “Keep the good one and throw away the bad one!”

Challenging myths about older adults in America’s immigrant families can inform pol-
Elderly parents of naturalized citizens are at high risk of becoming casualties of any reforms that shift legal priorities from family reunification to labor immigration. The failed 1997 immigration proposals offered these parents immigration capped at half the numbers currently admitted and a point system favoring occupational credentials that older adults rarely possess. Whatever the merits of these proposals, older informants give voice to those who would be affected by changes in U.S. immigration law.

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REFERENCES


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