Transnational Older Adults and Their Families*

Judith Treas**

Abstract: This qualitative study explores the international migration patterns and the family lives of older adults. Informants \((N = 54)\) reported that they came to the United States to help out their grown children with housekeeping, child care, and domestic economizing. They described how they strategically navigated U.S. immigration laws choosing to visit, immigrate, or naturalize in order to balance their ties to the United States and their homeland. Their transnational loyalties sometimes led to lives that did not strictly match their visa categories. There were “permanent” temporary visitors, U.S. permanent residents who maintained a “permanent” home elsewhere, and U.S. citizens who had naturalized in order to spend more time abroad. Implications of the findings for immigration policy and family practice are discussed.

Key Words: family caregiving, immigrant families, intergenerational relations, older adults, transnational.

The purpose of this article was to examine the relationship of older adults’ immigration patterns and their transnational family lives in the context of contested public policies. We were interested in learning how older people sustained transnational loyalties and lifestyles in the face of immigration laws that presume undivided allegiance and present various obstacles to travel between countries. Because older adults are admitted to permanent residence in the United States under the “family reunification” provisions of immigration law, we also wanted to understand the part that older, transnational adults play in America’s immigrant families. How did older adults navigate U.S. laws to maintain commitments and connections in two countries? How did they contribute to the well-being of the younger members in immigrant families? Life course theory informed this analysis and offered a framework for examining the agency of older adults in orchestrating lives linked to intimate others across national borders. This article drew on qualitative interviews with foreign-born older adults to examine their transnational experience, including the reasons why they visited family members, immigrated, or became U.S. citizens. We also investigated how older adults’ caregiving activities served their children and grandchildren in the United States.

Theoretical Perspective and Related Research

Life course theory offers a theoretical lens for analyzing how older adults—with lasting attachments to a homeland—“do” family reunification. The life course emphasis recognizes not merely the age-related aspects of older immigrants’ lives (individual time) but also the interplay of their experiences with those of family members (family time) and with the contemporary social context (historical time) (Hareven, 1994). The research design, analysis, and interpretation were influenced by four sensitizing concepts from the life course perspective (Elder, 1994).

First, the tenet that individual lives interact with historical change and within social context offers insight into older immigrants’ experiences. Thus, the reunification of older adults and their immigrant

*Preparation of this article was supported by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation and by the Petersen Visiting Scholar Award in Gerontology and Family Studies at Oregon State University. The views expressed are solely those of the author.

**Judith Treas is a professor of sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine, Social Science Plaza 3151A, Irvine, CA 92697 (jktreas@uci.edu).
children in the United States can be seen as the product of the unique historical opportunities created by contemporary immigration law (Treas & Batalova, in press). Families, however, live not only in particular historical epochs but also within social contexts. The transnational challenge is that immigrants’ lives and loyalties transcend a single place (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994), with the social contexts in both their host society and their homeland shaping their experiences and actions.

Second, timing in the life course is highly salient for outcomes such as immigrant incorporation. The strength of older adults’ transnational commitments owes much to the timing of their immigration. Having spent their lives in another place, older immigrants do not become as fully integrated into American society as those who arrive as children or young adults (Stevens, 1999; Treas & Mazumdar, 2002). Because older immigrants feel the pull of past places, later life is a strategic time for the study of transnational processes.

Third, the life course emphasizes linked lives, that is, the interdependence of family members (Hareven, 1994). With family reunification as a criterion for immigration, U.S. law recognizes this interdependence. Exigencies in the lives of immigrant children draw aging parents to the United States; ties to kin and friends elsewhere beckon them home. Thus, the life course principle of linked lives offers a key analytic concept in understanding the divided loyalties of transnational families.

Fourth, the life course perspective honors human agency. The decision to immigrate is often described as a rational calculation by individuals or families to better their lives (Massey et al., 1993). Older immigrants are party to this decision making and contribute to this betterment. The strategies that older adults use to reconcile the competing demands of transnational commitments serve to demonstrate their creativity in addressing the personal and structural constraints of their situations.

**The Importance of Family Ties**

In 1965, changes to the Immigration and Naturalization Act unleashed large-scale immigration to the United States, including a “new immigration” from Asia and Latin America. Giving priority to persons with family members in the United States, family reunification, not labor migration, was the cornerstone of U.S. immigration policy (Treas & Batalova, in press). U.S. citizens 21 and older could sponsor the immigration of their middle-aged and aging parents, as well as spouses and minor children. This unique historical context prompted an increase in late-life immigration. With no limits on the number of parents that could be admitted, parents of U.S. citizens numbered 82,113 or 7.3% of all new immigrants in 2004 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2006). According to Census 2000, 1 in 8 of the 3.3 million foreign-born adults, 65 and older, in the United States arrived in the 1990s (Treas & Batalova, in press). Not counting most Canadian and some Mexican travelers, 2.3 million persons 65 and older made temporary visits to the United States as nonimmigrants in 2005 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2002).

Older people maintain strong emotional attachments to the personal connections and customs of their homeland (Becker, 2002, 2003). Having loyalties to kin in two places shows the often contradictory positions that transnational immigrants attempt to reconcile in the service of a self that is inextricably linked to the lives of others (Bhatia & Ram, 2001). The “dissonant acculturation” (Portes, 1997) of older newcomers into American society proceeds more slowly than for younger generations. For example, older immigrants are less likely to learn to speak English (Stevens, 1999). As a result, families will be responsible for many older newcomers for the rest of their lives. Without personal income and familiarity with American culture, even former professionals depend on family members for financial support, transportation, and language brokering and help navigating the customs and practices of a new society (Gold, 1995; To, 1999).

According to my tabulations of Census 2000, almost half of post-1989 immigrants 65 and older lived in the homes of their children, as compared to 4% of the older, U.S.-born nonimmigrants. Living in their child’s home was strongly associated with older immigrants being financially dependent on this child (Glick & Van Hook, 2002). Given cultural preferences, economic constraints, and Medicaid ineligibility, family care trumps formal care for disabled elderly relations (Clark & Huttlinger, 1998; Moon, Lubben, & Villa, 1998). Some older immigrants do return to their homeland to be cared for by family members when their health fails. Until they become frail or ill, however, the hallmark of elderly newcomers is family interdependence, not old age dependence. Over the life course, immigrant...
households are strategically constituted in the United States to maximize resources and to meet needs, such as freeing up workers, caring for the young, or providing companionship (Kibria, 1993; Phua, Kaufman, & Park, 2001). In this context, aging parents can be valuable assets in immigrant families (Min, 1998; Orleck, 1987; Treas & Mazumdar, 2004).

Traditionally, immigration theory has focused on labor migration motivated either by national labor needs or by the cost-benefit analyses of individuals. Consistent with a life course perspective, recent theorizing recognizes migration as one way that families spread risks and maximize resources (Massey et al., 1993). International family linkages sustain migration as earlier immigrants pass on information about opportunities and are joined by kin, friends, and neighbors. Enabled by global economic integration, improved transportation, and new communication technologies, families with a foot in two countries exemplify the broad process of transnationalism (Basch et al., 1994; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). This article asks how older adults navigate immigration laws to maintain transnational commitments and how their transnational lifestyles contribute to the well-being of immigrant families in the United States.

Method

Sample

This article draws on interviews with 54 transnational older adults carried out between 1998 and 2004. We selected informants according to a criterion sampling strategy (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). This purposive criteria specified foreign-born persons, 60 and older, visiting or residing in Southern California, who demonstrated continued connections to another country (e.g., visits, letters and phone calls, remittances, property ownership, and business interests). The study’s focus on older adults with transnational ties meant that the sample was biased toward newcomers who have stronger ties to a homeland, rather than toward highly assimilated, long-term immigrants. After preliminary interviews and analyses, the sampling strategy was refined to secure more interviews with informants in “underrepresented” groups salient for an emerging conceptual framework on transnational strategies of older adults (e.g., Mexicans, whose proximity to their homeland encouraged regular visits). Informants included 25 persons in their 60s, 20 in their 70s, and 9 in their 80s. Women made up three quarters of the informants. All men were married, but only 45% of the women. Informants came from 15 countries, including Bangladesh (1), Cambodia (1), Cuba (1), El Salvador (1), Egypt (1), Iran (5), Japan (1), Jordan (1), Korea (6), Mexico (7), Pakistan (4), The Philippines (17), Spain (1), Taiwan (4), and Vietnam (3). Finally, one third of informants spoke no English.

Advanced undergraduate students, most of whom were from immigrant families and many of whom were bilingual, carried out one or two interviews each. They recruited informants from family members, family friends, or friends’ family members. The interviewers’ personal contacts offered access to a hard-to-reach group of transient older adults who were sometimes guarded by protective family gatekeepers. Given the strategy of recruiting from interviewers’ social networks, interviewers and informants shared ethnic backgrounds and personal connections. Interviewers were often familiar with the culture, language, personal histories, and social networks of informants. Their “insider knowledge” was invaluable and enabled the interviewers to locate informants who met the sampling criteria, secure their cooperation, achieve rapport, tailor questions to individuals, and supplement interviews with clarifying background information. Ties between interviewer and informant could bias responses if, for example, the informant feared that confidential information would be shared with mutual acquaintances. A careful examination of transcriptions, however, showed surprising candor on sensitive issues (e.g., immigration status) and captured naturalistic interactions (e.g., an informant-grandparent lecturing an interviewer-grandchild). Informants drawn from personal contacts cannot be generalized to all foreign-born older adults, and they are biased toward people with family and community ties in the United States.

Procedures

Interviewers were closely supervised by the author, who provided 12 hours of training and practice in recruitment, interviewing, and transcribing. Following an interview guide (Kvale, 1996), the semistructured, qualitative interviews lasted 1–2 hours. Each interview had four sections (demographic information
and child roster, immigration history and travel patterns, life in the United States, and vignettes on older adults’ transnational dilemmas). On the basis of the response to “Are you currently in the U.S. as a visitor, as a permanent resident with a green card, or as a U.S. citizen?,” the informant was asked questions about the visit and intention to immigrate or about admission to the United States and motivation or intention to naturalize.

Interviews were either in English, the informant’s native language, or a colloquial blend (Spanglish). To put the informant at ease, face-to-face interviews took place in the home of the informant or a relative. Two interviews were by phone. Curious family members and the lack of privacy in the home meant others were sometimes present, occasionally volunteering comments or helping to translate. The lack of confidentiality could also bias responses, but private interviews could discomfort informants from familistic cultures (Sengstock, 1996), and kin input helped to clarify some facts (e.g., immigration dates). With informant permission, interviewers audiotaped interviews and then transcribed them verbatim—translating into English if necessary. These transcriptions preserved the irregular speech patterns of nonnative and non-English speakers to convey the unique and often-eloquent voice of the informant.

Analysis

To analyze the transcripts, a life history summary was first compiled for each informant on demographic characteristics, immigration and travel histories, work life, family relations, adjustment issues, lifestyle, and perceptions of the United States and their homeland. Repeated transcript readings revealed recurrent themes (e.g., helping kin) and suggested typologies needed to be further refined. Although informed by grounded theory, which argues for deriving concepts inductively from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the inquiry necessarily began with the U.S. immigration categories (temporary visitors, permanent immigrants, and citizens), which were universally recognized by informants. The method of constant comparisons revealed multiple cases that did not fit the assumptions of this schema. The immigration status typology was expanded to recognize recurring and incongruous immigration types such as “permanent” visitors; permanent U.S. residents who were transient international travelers, including those who maintained their “permanent” residence outside the United States; and U.S. citizens for whom the primary benefit of naturalizing was not having to be in the United States. Similarly, a close review of cases revealed that helping U.S.-based children encompassed housekeeping services, moneymaking and economizing activities, and caring for and instructing grandchildren. As a check on interrater reliability of emerging categories and themes, a second researcher analyzed many of the interviews at the beginning of the project. Interpretations were triangulated against prior research literature, our interviewers’ interpretations, and our interviews from independent analyses of young adults from immigrant families who reported on the grandparents with whom they were closest.

Results

Although dedication to their immigrant children led some older adults to the United States, continuing commitments to a homeland also encouraged them to adopt a transnational lifestyle as exemplified by their trips back and forth. To maintain this lifestyle, they made strategic use of immigration policies that presume a desire for permanent U.S. settlement and constrain international travel patterns. Despite these challenges, older adults made meaningful contributions to the well-being of their children and grandchildren.

Here and There: Transnational Attractions

Because older newcomers have a hard time getting work here and may never qualify for means-tested public benefits, they had little financial incentive to immigrate. Informants often spoke of America’s amenities (clean streets, abundant fresh produce, and high-quality health care), but these positive sentiments were usually tempered by their reservations and longings for home. Foreign-born older adults described the United States as confusing, impersonal, materialistic, rushed, and callous in its treatment of people who were too old to care for themselves. For all their acknowledged faults, informants’ homelands were described as places of personal connections, caring relationships, and familiar customs. Their ambivalence raised the question of why older people would want to come to the United States at a time in their lives when most
older adults are content to do what gerontologists call “aging in place,” that is, growing old in the communities where they have lived their lives.

To explain what brought them to the United States, older adults pointed to their desire to be close to loved ones and to help out grown children living here. An older man described how one child after another had immigrated to the United States. Left alone in Iran, he and his wife could only follow. “The companions of fathers and mothers are their children. (M)y friends now . . . they ask me, ‘Why don’t you come back? Why have you gone?’ I tell them, ‘Myself, alone without my children, how can I enjoy life?’” According to parents, children who sponsored their immigration wanted them to enjoy family life and American advantages, but they also often wanted them to be available to help out. In a few cases, kin urged them to immigrate and become U.S. citizens in order to sponsor the legal immigration of relatives who were left behind.

Grown children drew them to the United States, but the older adults we interviewed were truly transnational; they wanted to live their lives in two places. And, unless they were too frail or disabled, they moved back and forth between their homeland and the homes of their children in the United States as often as they could. Refugees, such as a woman alienated by the Cuban revolution from her birthplace, were exceptions. If older adults had close relatives elsewhere, they included those places in their travels too. One mother, who visited her daughter several times a year, proclaimed that the flight between Taipei and Los Angeles was as easy as taking the bus. Younger family members acknowledged ties to home. Older people who helped out families in the United States sometimes reported that their children paid for their annual trip home to the Philippines or Mexico—an arrangement that resembles the paid vacations found in standard employment.

If older adults came to the United States for their children, trips home were also motivated by the desire to be with family and friends. Going home was a chance to immerse oneself in a familiar culture and to revisit one’s own personal history. As one man put it, “I like visiting Egypt because it feels like the old days.” Their frequent visits were a transnational bridge between kin who were separated by long distances. Moving back and forth, older family members gathered for family get-togethers and meaningful rituals, including weddings, christenings, graduations, and funerals. They carried family news, well wishes, and gifts from kin in one place to the next. What grandchildren in the United States knew of their far-flung kin was apt to be mediated by older relations, who were quick to remind family members of the ties and obligations that transcended borders.

**Travel Patterns and Immigration Status**

Virtually, all informants fell into one of three immigration categories—temporary visitors, permanent U.S. residents, or naturalized U.S. citizens. The narratives of older adults, however, revealed several incongruous types. There were “permanent” visitors, permanent residents who were not permanent, and U.S. citizens who naturalized to maintain ties to another country. Given existing immigration law, older adults worked out strategies to reconcile their desire to be close to their U.S.-based children with their affection for a homeland and family members left behind. Their strategies bore little resemblance to the tidy immigration categories and stated requirements of U.S. law.

Some older people were content to visit as nonimmigrants admitted on temporary “tourist” visas. The “temporary” designation understated their strong presence in immigrant households. Older visitors sometimes had their own designated bedroom in a grown child’s house. They could be thoroughly immersed in household routines. Some stayed as long as they could in the United States, returning home only when their 6-month visitor’s visa expired in order to apply for a new one. For years, when their daughter attended medical school, an elderly South Asian couple traded off caring for her babies by staggering the grandmother’s and grandfather’s visits on temporary visas. An older Iranian couple had decided to visit often instead of immigrating permanently because, as the husband explained, they were simply too old to adjust to living in a new country.

(1t would be so nice to be closer to our kids [in the U.S.], [but] it would just be too hard to pick up and move. We have grown old there [Iran] and gotten used to the way of life there. It would just be too difficult to adjust to the way of life here. . . . For example there would be a language problem. (Starts speaking in English with an accent). I can speak English but not very good! (laughs). We are old now. Maybe if this was 10 or 20 years ago, we would
move but honestly we are content traveling. . . . Plus, even if we did [immigrate], we would still travel to Iran to visit just as much as we come here, so technically it’s the same in the end, so why go through all that trouble when we don’t need to?

Some parents were content to visit, but roughly 80,000 choose to immigrate each year. Typically, the decision to be a permanent resident was preceded by temporary visits to try out life in the United States. Asked why they became ‘permanent’ residents, they offered paradoxical explanations. Rather than just wanting to live in the United States, a number reported that they wanted to be able to come and go more easily. An 80-year-old Mexican farm laborer had earned his permanent resident visa in the wake of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which put many undocumented workers on the path to legal status. Visiting back and forth was no problem for him. “No, no, for me it’s okay. . . . I moved around . . . to visit the family, and we don’t have to tell the country [U.S.] anything.” However, his wife was not a legal permanent resident; she lowered her voice to confide how difficult it was for her to visit her daughter in the United States without a green card.

After 9/11, getting a visitor’s visa meant new bureaucratic hurdles, delays, and expenses. A Salvadoran widow described an intimidating encounter with a U.S. embassy official who suspected that her plans to visit her daughter were a pretext for illegal immigration. To allay suspicions, she swore she would stay in a hotel rather than in her daughter’s home. Tighter border security also “locked in” undocumented Mexican immigrants who feared being apprehended if they tried to return home. A Mexican woman described making an arduous illegal border crossing into the United States because her children, who had all settled illegally here, found it increasingly hard to return home. A “green card” facilitated the transnational lifestyle favored by older adults and also made things easier for their children who helped to make their travel arrangements.

Permanent resident status did not necessarily mean permanent residence in the United States. Not only did older immigrants travel back and forth, but many kept what they called their “permanent” home abroad. Older people with low incomes said it was too expensive to live in the United States. Some moved back home when they retired from U.S. jobs, when they became disabled, or when their grandchildren were old enough to care for themselves. Others made their regular home outside the United States because they had loved ones there, were more comfortable in a familiar culture, or wanted to end their days in familiar surroundings cared for by kin. They returned to the United States at least annually to see family members and to meet the legal requirement of demonstrating that they had not abandoned their permanent resident status. An Iranian man, age 69, explained, “We [he and his wife] are permanent residents with a green card. Because of this we must come to the United States at least once a year to be able keep our green cards. Besides seeing our family, we come to the United States to keep our residency active. It is so much easier traveling with a green card than as a visitor.”

Just as some older people chose permanent resident status as a travel expedient, others became naturalized citizens to facilitate trips abroad. A Filipino, age 79, noted that U.S. citizens did not have to return every 6 months like permanent residents and temporary visitors. “Even though how long I stay there [The Philippines], there’s no problem because I come back to the United States. I don’t need to go the American Embassy for permission because I am a U.S. citizen.” Others cited pragmatic reasons—public benefit eligibility, ability to sponsor the immigration of adult children, and concern that the door to U.S. citizenship might close for good. Retrieving naturalization papers to show the interviewer, older people voiced great pride in passing their citizenship test. Finally, no one cited emotional bonds to the United States to explain becoming a U.S. citizen.

Older Adults in Immigrant Families

Older adults were often a significant resource in immigrant families. Their contributions included keeping house, moneymaking and economizing, and caring for and instructing grandchildren. Older women were charged with domestic responsibilities for the whole household. They shopped, cleaned, washed the clothes, prepared meals, cared for children, and nursed the sick. Women described helping as a continuation of their maternal role. As a 73-year-old Pakistani widow put it, “Mother is always a mother.” Men did “masculine” chores—household repairs, yard work, and auto repairs. Some helped with “women’s work,” especially if their wives had health problems. To earn money, some
older people took on casual jobs—piece sewing at home, recycling aluminum cans, or babysitting for neighbors. They stretched household budgets by growing vegetables, scouting curbsides for discarded furniture, and shopping for school clothes at thrift stores. One young woman recalled her grandmother’s “Mama Julie’s casserole,” a frugal concoction of leftovers that the grandchild swore always tasted better than the original dishes.

The household responsibilities of older adults were not merely a natural outgrowth of multigenerational living. Children often invited parents to the United States so they could live with them and provide assistance. Most came willingly, but immigrants gossiped about older people pressured to help out. A granddaughter asked her Filipina grandmother why she came to the United States to be her babysitter. The woman explained that her own daughter had forcefully insisted that she immigrate because she was having so much trouble with her regular babysitter. “(S)he [her daughter] is always mad at me at the telephone and crying (laughing). . . . Yeah, she pushed. Just [so I] could take care of you! (laughs).” Helping also occurred between households. Parents dropped children at a grandparent’s home on the way to work. A sophisticated European, married to an American professional, cleaned house for her working daughter. “My husband used to joke, because I had someone [a paid housekeeper] cleaning my house, but I used to go to her house to help her with her cleaning. It was crazy but I did that.”

In low-income families where busy, dual-earner couples or single mothers juggled several jobs to make ends meet, parents were not home to look after the children, and there was no money to pay for housekeepers or babysitters. As a result, older parents were essential helpers. For example, when her daughter went back to school to become a nurse, her grandmother moved into her child’s home to share expenses, keep house, and care for her grandchild. Even immigrant families who could afford to pay for help often preferred trusted family members over strangers and unfamiliar institutions like daycare centers. In immigrant households, cultural preferences—ranging from norms of familism to the desire to live by traditional customs—came into play. For instance, asking parents to scrub toilets was thought shocking and shameful, but Brahmins worried that Latina housekeepers might pollute the whole household if they failed to follow the correct hygienic Hindu rituals.

Not only did grandparents work without pay (a point of pride emphasized by low-income seniors), but they were flexible and on call 24 hours a day to, say, care for a sick child. Siblings recruited an unmarried Filipina to visit the United States whenever a family member needed nursing. School calendars and others’ work shifts dictated older adults’ schedules. Being home alone gave them autonomy in their housework, but they had limited authority, if only because they did not understand American society as well as their acculturated offspring. A Filipina grandmother, age 66, explained, “(M)y 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.”

Immigrant parents welcomed grandparents as hands-on caregivers, sometimes tending to a succession of grandchildren over the years. Older adults were at risk of chronic health problems, but they carried on with domestic responsibilities as long as they were able. Despite vertigo, poor vision, sore legs, and liver disease, a Taiwanese woman kept house for her unmarried son and cooked elaborate dinners for her working daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren. A Filipina, age 82, did all the housekeeping and provided round-the-clock care for 5-year-old twin grandsons while their parents worked. Intimate experiences in a grandparent’s care left a lasting mark, as evidenced by the fact that older grandchildren sometimes reported talking to their grandparent, rather than their parent, whenever they had a personal problem.

Foreign-born grandparents were also important forces in the academic and moral development of youngsters as they instructed their grandchildren in religious, cultural, and family values. A 64-year-old Filipina and her husband looked after their two grandsons when their mother’s job took her out of town with the grandmother insisting on good manners: “Always respect your older, and never, never, raise your voice with the older one. And, I always believe yes sir, yes mam, thank you.” She pointed out how she and her husband promoted the youngsters’ good work habits and school success.

Well, I think we both play an important role, because we have to follow if they have the homework. Like the older one. Even [if] his [school] is only kindergarten, he has homework during weekdays so I have to make sure he does his homework. Even if I bring him [to my]
home, he had to do his homework, and it is important that they have to do their homework before they watch any TV or play computer.

Grandparents also promoted the bilingual ability known to be associated with academic achievement (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Even if grandparents did not consciously set out to teach grammar and vocabulary to the youngsters, grandchildren acquired a working understanding from everyday interaction with elderly relations. Older adults had difficulty mastering English, but even grandparents who were fluent in English sometimes favored their native tongue around grandchildren. Some saw this as a way of maintaining the family’s cultural heritage, whereas a few argued the educational and practical advantages, saying “you can never know too many languages.”

Discussion

This article describes how older adults navigate immigration laws to contribute to the lives of their U.S.-based offspring and maintain transnational ties to a homeland. Family life course theory emphasizes the interdependence of family members’ lives (Elder, 1996), a perspective echoed in social network theories of immigration, which stress the role of personal contacts in motivating migration decisions (Massey et al., 1993). Changes in family reunification laws have made it possible for aging parents to come to the United States to be with their children and to help out with daily lives and occasional crises. Their domestic contributions promoted the survival and successes of children and grandchildren in the United States. Slower to acculturate, late-life immigrants maintain loyalties to their homeland, its familiar culture, and family and friends who remain behind.

To balance their transnational commitments, older people adopt a variety of strategies to navigate U.S. immigration laws. Some of these older parents become temporary, if regular, visitors. Others are sponsored for permanent immigration by their immigrant children, perhaps after visits to test the waters. And, some eventually become U.S. citizens themselves. Whatever their immigration status, their homeland exerts a strong pull. Older family members make trips back home as often as they can, and some even maintain a home there for an eventual return. In short, the older newcomers in America’s immigrant families epitomize the family reunification immigrant of U.S. immigration law, even as they quietly defy U.S. policies that have been predicated on having only one “permanent residence.”

For 40 years, U.S. policy has encouraged the unlimited, legal immigration of parents of U.S. citizens. In 2007, proposed caps for parents called for a 50% reduction in the numbers admitted annually. Had this been adopted, older adults seeking to join their grown children in the United States would have confronted waiting lists for visas for the first time. Although immigration reform was not enacted because of myriad concerns (Watanabe, 2007), security issues and a crackdown on illegal immigration created new roadblocks for older people, even if they were only interested in a short-term visit with kin in the United States. The rising costs of visas, the lack of public assistance and affordable health care for newcomers, and the stricter accountability of sponsoring families illustrate new obstacles to immigration by aging parents. At the same time, older adults have become, if anything, a more important resource in immigrant families. According to service providers and elderly consumers in immigrant communities, welfare reform of the 1990s not only cut newcomers off from public benefits but also made families more dependent on older relations for, say, child care (Estes et al., 2006). By documenting the incongruities between the transnational practices of older adults and the immigration law, the results of our study of transnational older adults point to implications for policy. In addition to identifying older adults’ contributions in immigrant families, the findings also inform family practice.

Policy Implications

If only because of their contributions to the incorporation of younger family members, older adults merit greater attention in immigration reform. Little is known of older immigrants outside their families and ethnic communities. However, during 1996 welfare reform debates, public attention was focused on Supplemental Security Income receipt by low-income, elderly immigrants (Hu, 1997) and led to charges that the United States was a welfare magnet for the world’s seniors (Yoo, 2001). With low levels of visibility and political participation (Yoo, 2003), older newcomers were an easy target for those who wanted to scale back the welfare system. In 2007,
they were again expendable as political forces worked to shift immigration priorities from family reunification to labor migration.

The transnational lifestyles of older adults reflect the disconnect between U.S. immigration policy, present and proposed, and the lived experience of the foreign-born elderly and their families. Assessing the state of immigration theory, Portes (1997) observed that typologies, including the administrative categories of immigration law (e.g., permanent immigrant), do not speak to the causes or consequences of immigration. Although immigration and welfare laws are written to discourage older immigrants from becoming public charges, older informants do not stress U.S. benefits as motivating their decisions to visit, immigrate, or naturalize. They often opt for an immigration status that enables them to come and go easily in order to balance the demands of transnational loyalties. Even those who are admitted as U.S. permanent residents may spend much of their time in their country of origin. This mismatch between personal goals and immigration categories fosters insecurity, encourages subterfuges, and gives rise to complex immigration histories. This is not unique to older adults as two thirds of newly arrived immigrants in 1996 are estimated to have been in the United States before immigrating, whether as tourists, illegal border crossers, visa violators, students, exchange visitors, temporary nonimmigrant workers, refugees, or asylees (Massey & Malone, 2003).

The current law with its unlimited visas for parents facilitates reunification for many older adults, if not those whose children have yet to become naturalized citizens. The cap on parent visas proposed in 2007 would have made it harder for older adults to reunite with children in the United States and to move back and forth. Given contributions that older newcomers make to the incorporation of their families in the United States, a good case can be made for unlimited visas for older parents. As immigration and welfare reforms of the 1990s show, the United States regards incorporation of immigrants to be a private responsibility. America provides fewer support services (e.g., language classes) than Canada to help immigrants find their way in a new society (Bloemraad, 2006). Absent public support, immigrants need to rely on family members as their safety net. At the very least, immigration policies should focus on streamlining procedures to expedite temporary visas, making it easier for older relatives of American immigrants to travel to the United States.

**Practice Implications**

Lessons for family practitioners emphasize the centrality of older adults in immigrant families. Not every immigrant family has a grandparent, but older adults can be important resources in coping with the disruptions caused by immigration. Immigrant children are at greater risk of loneliness and unsafe behavior because of decreased interaction with their working parents (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007), but grandparents can be caring adults who provide supervision and support. Specifically, the older generation’s help will be increasingly important if families with an undocumented member grow more fearful of accessing public services for which they are eligible. Older adults are seldom family decision makers, but prevention and intervention efforts that fail to engage immigrant grandparents run the risk of missing key players.

Unless they are sensitized to the roles of older adults in immigrant families, family practitioners may underestimate their importance. Lacking English fluency and unfamiliar with U.S. customs, older newcomers are seldom the family’s ambassador to the world outside the home. By age and frailty, we might expect them to have retired from active duty as family helpers. Their intensive grandparenting contrasts markedly with U.S.-born Americans. With some exceptions (Bacallao & Chase-Lansdale, 2005; Dolbin-MacNab, 2006; Gibson, 2005), relations of American-born grandparents and their grandchildren are either remote or companionate, a dominant pattern of warm, sporadic interaction that leaves day-to-day responsibility to the middle generation (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). Immigrant children actually recruit their parents to help out. For example, an octogenarian family member may be the domestic linchpin of a multigenerational household. By contrast, adult children in the broad society sometimes register guilt, annoyance, and frustration if aging parents offer assistance (Ingersoll-Dayton, Neal, & Hammer, 2001).

Leaving aside the challenges of reaching and communicating with non-English speakers, identifying older adults in immigrant households is hardly straightforward—even when they are key family members. A grandmother described as “just visiting” may spend most of her time in the United States and play a critical family role that permits others to work and go to school. Similarly, it is easy to overlook the absent older relation who is on an
annual pilgrimage to visit family members abroad. Even if they reside abroad, older relations may still be mobilized to visit and help out in a family emergency.

Just as the ethnic diversity of the immigrant population demands cultural sensitivity, diverse legal circumstances also call for special attention. Depending on whether they are temporary visitors or permanent residents, naturalized citizens or illegal aliens, and newcomers or long-time residents, older adults draw on vastly different resources and face varying degrees of insecurity. Navigating a complex minefield of immigration and welfare laws, older adults worried about revealing too much. They whispered admissions of immigration irregularities, hastily denied having assets abroad, provided inconsistent reports of income, and turned off the tape recorder before discussing marital status. Because of immigration issues, seemingly innocuous matters were highly charged issues. Although our interviewer was typically a trusted member of the informant’s social network, professionals may face greater difficulties in learning the basic facts about the lives of older immigrants and their families. Building trust through repeated interaction and the support of respected insiders (e.g., kin, religious leaders) is essential.

When older adults play critical roles, caring for the caregiver is an important, if often neglected, issue. As late-life immigrants are preoccupied with the incorporation of children, older adults have difficulty establishing supportive relationships outside the family (Treas & Mazumdar, 2002). Although their help enables kin to make their way in the United States, older adults are apt to be left home alone. Living with others is no assurance of positive mental health outcomes (Wilmot & Chen, 2003). As a result, older immigrants, especially newcomers, are at high risk for depression, loneliness, and mental distress (Black, Goodwin, & Markides, 1998; González, Haan, & Hinton, 2001; Krause & Goldenhar, 1992; Mui, 1996). Immigrants also face chronic problems of health care access and affordability. After welfare reform, fully 12% of older immigrants had no health insurance in 1997 as compared to only 1% of older nonimmigrants (Carraquillo, Carraquillo, & Shea, 2000), and newcomers are especially likely to be uninsured (Choi, 2006). Even if eligible, elderly immigrants are apt to be unfamiliar with supportive services that could lighten their domestic responsibilities or improve their well-being. Family professionals need to reach out to help them to understand and access point-to-point public transportation, senior centers, and other services for which they may qualify.

The transnational lives of older newcomers grow out of what parents see as life-long obligations to support their children, even under difficult circumstances. With its emphasis on personal responsibility and family reliance, U.S. immigration and welfare laws have promoted intergenerational assistance, which contributes to the incorporation of immigrants. As a nation founded on immigrants, the United States has embraced immigration laws that presume permanent settlement and undivided loyalties. With continuing commitments to kin in the homeland, older adults make strategic use of ill-fitting immigration categories to maintain their transnational ties, particularly with travel back and forth. In immigration debates focused on the need for skilled labor and in immigration scholarship preoccupied with the incorporation of children, older adults have been only a footnote. The interdependence of the generations, however, demands more serious consideration of the roles of older adults in America’s immigrant families.

References


