

Research

Ageing in an inconvenient paradise: The immigrant experiences of older Korean people in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Aim: *The purpose of this paper is to explore the immigrant experiences of older Korean people and their intergenerational family relationships in the New Zealand context.*

Methods: *Data were collected from qualitative interviews with older people, community leaders and professionals in Christchurch and Auckland. Data analysis was conducted using concept mapping techniques in the cross-cultural context where two languages were simultaneously used.*

Results: *The findings of the study show that older Korean people in New Zealand were likely to face multiple challenges due to the combined effects of immigration and ageing in a new country. Some older people experienced difficulties in managing their immigrant lives and intergenerational relationships in the transnational family context in which their family members were dispersed across two or more nations.*

Conclusion: *The immigrant experiences of older migrants might be affected by an 'invisible' source of isolation and exclusion at familial, community, societal and transnational levels.*

Key words: *ageing, immigrant, Koreans.*

Introduction

Koreans form one of the largest Asian ethnic groups in New Zealand. They have established the fastest growing minority community in the country from the early 1990s. The latest census data [1] show that the number of Korean residents has increased more than 30-fold from 930 in 1991 to 30 792 in 2006. Although Koreans represent less than 1% of the New Zealand population, they play an important role in promoting the movement of people, products and cultures between the two nations [2]. The Korean population in New Zealand is considerably younger than other ethnic groups due to the short history of immigration to the country [3]. While 12.3% of New Zealanders are aged 65 years and over, older people in this age group comprise only 2% (642 in number) of Korean residents [4]. The number of older

Korean people, however, is expected to increase substantially over coming years as the first immigrant generation is reaching older age.

Although immigration provides older Korean migrants with opportunities for new life experiences, there are challenges and difficulties related to both cross-cultural adaptation as a migrant and getting older in an overseas country. Ageing 'in distance' raises a range of personal and familial issues in contrast to the more usual practice of ageing in place [5]. For some Korean older people, necessary support services may not be readily available in an unfamiliar environment. Differences in language and culture may often lead to significant barriers and constraints on the social activities and networks of older migrants.

In ageing research, insufficient attention has been paid to older adult migrants and their immigrant experiences [6,7]. A few studies with older people from minority ethnic backgrounds have explored the issues associated with their adaptation and resettlement processes [8,9]. In a study of Korean-Americans, Lee [10] suggested that moving to another culture contributes to weakening family obligations and duties towards older people among immigrant families. Min et al. [11] have highlighted adjustment or socioeconomic difficulties as the risk factors that affect the psychological and physical health of older migrants. Abbott et al. [12] also identified depression as an issue that threatens the health and well-being of older Chinese migrants in New Zealand. While there has been interest in the living arrangements of older immigrants [13,14], the transnational nature of family relationships has not been adequately explored.

Very little is known about Korean older migrants and their lives in New Zealand. They are likely to be 'invisible' in the community and society. The purpose of this study was to identify key factors that could affect Korean older migrants' everyday lives and family relationships in New Zealand.

Method

A qualitative methodological approach was chosen in order to obtain in-depth and detailed data on the experiences of older Korean people. Data were collected from face-to-face interviews with 10 older people and 20 key informants. Participant recruitment and data collection were undertaken by the first author who shared the same ethnic and linguistic background as participants. The study was reviewed and approved by both the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury and the New Zealand Health and Disability Ethics Committee (Multi-region).

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The 10 older people participated in in-depth interviews about their life experiences and family relationships. The participants' ages ranged from 71 years to 88 years, among whom five were female. All the participants were those who moved to New Zealand as an older adult to live with their family members. A multiple interviewing format, referred to as 'in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing' [15], was used to collect people's private and personal stories. These multi-stepped interviews ensured that participants felt more comfortable in talking about their own experiences, than being interviewed only once with someone whom they had never met [16,17]. The participants were recruited mainly through snowballing sampling techniques in which the identification of one participant would lead to another within the community [18].

The group of 20 participants who were recruited as key informants were a well-versed resource on the subject matter of the study, and were willing to share what they knew about the people and community [19]. They consisted of three senior group leaders, four health service coordinators, three community leaders, three church ministers, two social workers, a doctor, a nurse, an acupuncturist, a lawyer and a rest home owner. The participants' ages ranged from their thirties to their eighties. Only one interview was conducted with each person, lasting from 48 to 95 minutes. The key informant participants were a convenience sample identified through the researcher's professional network within the community.

The data collected were managed in a cross-cultural context which required an alternative approach for the data analysis process, rather than relying on existing code-based analysis techniques. A concept mapping technique [20] was chosen to enhance data interpretation in the bilingual research setting. This method used conceptual diagrams to represent concepts and explore their relationships, focused on the broader cultural and social context [21]. Concepts were identified by creating, feeding back, adjusting and recreating main ideas from the bilingual raw data. When concepts were identified, they were located on a concept map which included a range of conceptual clusters. Twelve concept maps were systematically drafted throughout the whole process of data analysis. These concept maps, then, became incorporated into a larger conceptual profile on which core clusters of concepts and networks of ideas were mapped. During this visualised mapping practice, concepts were sorted and categorised repeatedly, and duplicates removed. Key themes emerged from the cyclic process of constructing the conceptual profile in a reflective way that critically analysed concepts generated and their relationships.

Results

Following the concept mapping analysis, four major themes were identified: inconvenient experiences of Korean older people in later-life immigration, their intergenerational family relationships, and their invisibility in a migrant

setting. These major themes are closely connected with each other, reflecting on the 'family-centred' life of older Korean people. In this paper, direct quotations from interviews were restrictively used in a sensitive way to protect participants' privacy and personal information since the data were obtained in the 'small' Korean community in 'small town' New Zealand.

Inconvenient experiences in later-life immigration

Immigration in later life can be a major life event, impacting on the lifestyles and social networks of older migrants. The findings of the study show that older Korean people experienced a range of changes in their lives, activities and relationships at individual, family and societal levels. An older person commented that his movement into New Zealand caused '*a total change*' in all aspects of his life. In particular, the English language was the most difficult barrier that seriously affected older people's immigrant lives. An older person stated that '*I felt becoming deaf, blind and mute after immigration, and living in an inconvenient paradise*' because he could not speak English well. A key informant also described how an older woman struggled with English in her daily life:

Well, both sugar and salt start with 'S' ... [The older person] bought an item labelled with 'S' at a supermarket, but she found later it was salt, not sugar ... So, after shopping, she felt much frustrated.

The immigrant experiences of older Korean people were either positive or negative depending on the individual's situation. A social worker explained that there were two groups of older people: migrant older people who moved to New Zealand in their later life, and older adults who came to the country at a younger age and, then reached the age of retirement. The needs and skills of the former group were significantly different from those of the latter group. Gender also worked to shape older people's daily lives and activities. For example, a health professional described how older men might be '*less adjustable*' to the new environment than their female counterparts. From her own observations with her clients over many years, she stated that older women tended to maintain an active life, keeping themselves busy in doing household chores and looking after grandchildren as they had done in their homeland. In contrast, male older migrants were likely to feel bored or demoralised by '*having nothing to do*' either in or outside the home.

Juggling between transnational families

Older Korean people were likely to live within the transnational family setting in which family members were scattered across two or more nations. To them, transnational families occurred when they separated themselves from family networks in their homeland to join children in New Zealand. Transnational families was also formed when family members had moved to another nation, leaving their parents in New Zealand. An older person stated that he had six children across four nations:

[Among our children] two live in New Zealand, . . . two in Sydney, one in Japan . . . [Another] lives in Seattle [in the United States]. No children in overseas countries seem to return to New Zealand to live with us.

According to a health service coordinator, such changes in transnational family structures often altered family dynamics or roles between younger and older family members.

The findings of the study also show that as family members were dispersed across nations, the intergenerational relationships of older migrants became complex and difficult among transnational families. The majority of participants were concerned that some older people were not treated with respect and care by their family members in New Zealand. A few cases of financial abuse and psychological abuse were identified by the older people who took part in the in-depth interviews. For example, an older woman revealed that she was financially abused by her son who had used her whole resources for the benefit of his family members. A form of elder neglect was also found when adult children were not able to support and care for parents due to their lack of knowledge and understanding about health and social services in the host society. According to an older woman interviewed, her son often neglected or '*pretended not to hear*' her asking for help to visit a medical practitioner because he was not confident in the English language.

Being 'invisible' in a migrant setting

For some of the Korean older migrants, the issues associated with language barriers and transnational family settings did not remain on individual and family levels; but seemed to also encompass community and societal dimensions. The older people interviewed revealed their difficult experiences in gaining access to social welfare and health systems in New Zealand. This was attested to by a participant who commented that:

Older people do not receive 'natural' benefits or rights, which they may be entitled to, due to language barriers . . . [They] often give up something necessary because of not being able to speak [English]. Some live like 'birds in a cage' and, therefore, isolated and depressed.

Another key informant pointed out that Korean older people who were hampered by unfamiliarity with culture and language in their host society tended to participate less in social activities than when in their home country, and, as a result, become isolated and excluded within their new environment.

Social isolation of Korean older migrants was also exacerbated by the social atmosphere which often prevented them from being '*visible*' in their own community and society. A key informant stated that Korean older migrants '*are likely to be forced to*' live in the society that '*locks them up*' in a highly limited world. For some older Koreans, their

social setting acted as a place where their voices were not heard properly and thus, they were '*an almost forgotten generation*' in both the host society and the homeland. An older person called his peers and himself '*centennial guests*' (commonly referred to as sons-in-law in Korean culture) who were always dealt with as outsiders, rather than as inside members in their community and society. He added that his sense of loneliness and feeling of '*living in an invisible prison*' were intensified by discriminatory attitudes and behaviours against older people who seemed to belong neither to '*where they came from*', nor to '*where they are residing*'.

Discussion

While acknowledging that many older Koreans experience a positive immigrant life, the findings of the study indicate that some face challenges and difficulties in their new familial and social contexts. The majority of older Korean people are 'older adult migrants' who moved to New Zealand in later life to live with their family [22]. They are neither 'voluntary' migrants who are self-initiated, motivated and capable of coping with the processes of adaptation and resettlement, nor 'involuntary' migrants or refugees who are forced, and have no choice other than to move to another country. This 'late-in-life' immigration [23] can be a source of 'a double jeopardy' that adversely affects their resettlement, as well as their ageing process in a new environment [24].

The findings of the study also indicate that those older Korean people who came to New Zealand at a younger age and, then, reached old age in place are relatively well settled with their long experience and familiarity with the host language and culture. Despite this, they may 'experience isolation in later life, particularly if their children choose to travel and live overseas'. [25] In addition, older women are more likely to be settled than their male counterparts by keeping busy in their everyday life in the new country. Older men may experience the loss of social networks that existed in their homeland, and find themselves facing difficulty in playing their role in the family and community. This observation is not consistent with the existing notion that female migrants are particularly vulnerable to the problems of psychological health and family relationships [26].

The role of the family is more vital for older migrants' survival in the host society than if they had remained in their homeland. In a transnational family setting caring for ageing parents may pose a range of challenges. Immigration affects not only the size and composition of family networks, but also the practice of care and support for parents. Intergenerational relationships between older migrants and their offspring may become difficult and complex. The findings from the study add to the evidence that the traditional norm of filial piety, referred to as care and respect for older people [27], is likely to be eroded among Korean families in New

Zealand. Adult children may experience gaps between their filial piety tradition and the reality of its everyday practice due to the significant influences of the host context [28].

Older immigrants are vulnerable to elder abuse and neglect because they are likely to be separated from their family or kinship networks within the transnational family context [29]. The transnational dispersion of family leads to a lack of family contacts and resources, which can decrease family solidarity and kinship ties and, contribute to the development of elder mistreatment within intergenerational family relationships. The occurrence of elder mistreatment among Korean families in New Zealand can be closely associated with changes in their family arrangements, as well as their cultural changes, between the homeland and the host nation. The results of this study have added a further piece of evidence to the commonly cited notion that elder abuse and neglect happens in every culture, within every ethnicity, and in both developing and developed countries [30].

Conclusion

Immigration in later life can be a double-edged sword for older migrants who move to another nation to live with their offspring. Korean older migrants are likely to face challenges in both resettlement and ageing processes due to their lack of knowledge and skills in regard to the host language and culture. The family ties and relationships of Korean older people are changed in the transnational family setting where family members are dispersed across two or more nations. Social norms associated with the tradition of filial piety are eroded by relocation to a Western-dominated culture. As a result, the experiences of older Korean people can be adversely affected by a hidden source of isolation and exclusion in the migrant context.

Although this study adds to the body of literature on the experiences of older people who migrate in later life, it has the limitation of a small convenience sample. As the first generation of Korean immigrants begin reaching old age in New Zealand and Australia, their experiences and views may differ from what was found in this study. It is suggested that further research in this area may shed more light on the nature of immigration in later life and contribute to the development of understanding about older migrants and their transnational families.

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Key Points

- Older migrants who move to another nation in later life are likely to face double challenges due to both resettlement and the ageing process.
- Filial traditions of care and respect for older people are likely to be eroded among immigrant families within a transnational context.
- The immigrant experiences of older migrants might be affected by an 'invisible' source of isolation and exclusion in a migrant setting.

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