BETWEEN LONELINESS AND BELONGING

Lifelong experiences of (dis)connection among older immigrants

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Multicultural seniors in age-friendly North Shore communities webinar, May 19th, 2020
Social isolation vs. loneliness

- **Social isolation** (no or few meaningful ties) to social participation – *objective*: size of the person’s social network.
- **Loneliness** to belonging – *subjective*: the feeling that the number or intimacy of social relationships is not enough
  - But social isolation also seems to have some subjective components
Canadian government response

Social isolation of Seniors (Vol I): Understanding the Issue and Finding Solutions

Social Isolation of Seniors (Vol II) Ideas exchange event toolkit
Recent immigrants (in Canada < 5 years) at greater risk

More likely to experience risk factors identified for all older adults (e.g., higher levels of poverty, lack of awareness of services),

Experience unique challenges, such as lack of charter language (English/French) ability
Lived Experiences of Aging Immigrants
A narrative-photovoice project 2014-2017
Risk factors for social isolation and loneliness (1)

- living alone;
- being age 80 or older;
- having compromised health status;
- having multiple chronic health problems;
- having no children or contact with family;
- lacking access to transportation;
- living with low income;
Risk factors for social isolation and loneliness (2)

- changing family structures;
- being left behind by younger people migrating for work;
- location of residence;
- experiencing critical life transitions such as retirement, death of a spouse, or losing a driver’s license;
- lacking awareness of or access to community services and programs; and
- being a caregiver.
Storytelling

2 case studies
Kim Young Chul, 77

“In Canada, the most difficult part is finding a place to rent”
1938
Born in Korea

1963
Married and began work as civil servant

1998
Daughter sponsored him and his wife to immigrate to Canada

1999-2004
Ran own restaurant; sold after shooting

2005-2009
Worked on mushroom farm until retirement

2014
Daughter moved to U.S.

Now
Caregiver to his wife
Feeling disconnected, isolated, in need of housing
Wants to learn English
Discomfort with American son-in-law
Limited income
No status/family ties in Korea now
Low vision—can’t drive & wife has mobility challenges
Few services for Koreans

“Without [my daughter], every single thing is a challenge.”
Mr Kim’s risk factors (1)

- living alone;
- being age 80 or older; [getting close]
- having compromised health status;
- having multiple chronic health problems;
- having no children [close by] or contact with family;
- lacking access to transportation;
- living with low income;
Mr Kim’s risk factors (2)

- changing family structures;
- being left behind by younger people migrating for work;
- location of residence;
- experiencing critical life transitions such as retirement, death of a spouse, or losing a driver’s license;
- lacking awareness of or access to community services and programs;
- being a caregiver.
Immigrant-specific barriers

- Lack of English
  - Money for interpreters
  - Pay for English courses
  - Citizenship disqualifies him for free EAL classes
  - “It’s inconvenience, difficult. But let’s say I feel like disabled. ...No communication....I can’t [be] involve[d].”
  - Takes classes at immigrant-serving organizations; studies at library
  - Hampers navigation to housing
Family and Support
Divine
Ill health and support network

- Relied on a network of friends; no family nearby
- Depression from dependency (“burden”) – support group
- Struggles to establish eligibility for services (compensation, caregivers)
- Rehabilitation, surgeries, medications
- Return to Philippines for family support – too expensive
Divine’s risk factors (1)

– living alone;
  – being age 80 or older;
– having compromised health status;
– having multiple chronic health problems;
– having no children [close by] or contact with family;
– living with low income;
– lacking access to transportation;
Divine’s risk factors (2)

— changing family structures;
— being left behind by younger people migrating for work;
— location of residence;
— experiencing critical life transitions such as retirement, death of a spouse, or losing a driver’s license;
— lacking awareness of or access to community services and programs;
— being a caregiver.
Factors specific to migration that increase risk of social isolation (1)

- **Language barriers** – not all immigrants can take classes as newcomers due to conflicting responsibilities, but classes are no longer free after 5 years. Few services in origin languages for some minorities, e.g. Korean.

- **Family** – often assumed that immigrant families “take care of their own” but migration (and pre-migration circumstances, e.g. war, unstable employment) can separate families and not all immigrants have children

- **Migration policies** – long period of dependency following sponsorship*/domestic worker rules limits opportunities
Factors specific to migration that increase risk of social isolation (2)

- **Caregiving** – grandchildren (esp. sponsored immigrants) +/or spousal
- **Lack of awareness of services** – language barriers + unfamiliarity with social structure and variety of services
- **Housing** – location limited by affordability/accessibility – late-life immigrants (esp. sponsored) often have low income, limited choices
- **Transportation** – language + sensory impairment/disability adds to difficulty of getting driving license; language barriers can inhibit transit use
What helps?

- **Community supports**, esp. in own language – includes immigrant serving agencies, multicultural clubs in community centres and religious institutions

- **Charter language capability** – classes needed at any stage of migration trajectory

- **Subsidized housing** close to community supports and public transit

- **Pensions** (prior to end of sponsorship period, now 20 years)
Babysitting services in conjunction with community programs for immigrant older adults

Low-cost/free culture and language appropriate respite care for caregivers (volunteers?)

System navigator outreach to assist immigrant older adults with finding needed services
Son Jung Suk ignores the rain to connect with friends

Thank you!

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