

## **Long-term Immigrants in Middle and Later Life: Changing Views of Home**

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### Author Note

We are grateful to the individuals who took part in this study and shared their time and experiences with us.

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**ABSTRACT:** Experiences of long-term immigrants aging in their adoptive country have received limited attention from researchers. The purpose of this exploratory study was to expand our understanding of immigration over the life course, with focus on long-term immigrants in middle and later life residing in the United States. Through personal in-depth interviews with middle-aged and older women and men, we explored attachments to their native and adoptive countries, their changing views of home, and their last wishes. Participants' views of "home" evolved from a nostalgic place of birth to a location where significant life events occurred over the life course. Immigrants in this study are "aging in place" with strong familial and social ties established over the years in the U.S. Practitioners and researchers should avoid making generalizations about isolation and marginalization of this segment of the aging immigrant population; instead, they should recognize resiliency developed as a result of coping with discontinuity and challenges of immigration.

*Keywords:* long-term immigrants; middle-age; aging; home; life course; immigration

### **Long-term Immigrants in Middle and Later Life: Changing Views of Home**

Most literature on immigrants has focused on first-generation immigrants—specifically, working-age adults and the extent of their upward economic mobility and cultural assimilation to their host countries (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Waters & Ueda, 2007). Experiences of the second generation-- the children of immigrants who were born in the United States—have also been widely investigated (Lansford, Deater-Deckard, & Bornstein, 2007; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). However, there has been limited research attention to older immigrants (aged 65 and over) and to some aspects pertaining to middle aged immigrants (aged 45-65) (Gold & Amthor, 2011; Park, 2015; Treas, 2014), despite the fact that these are growing, diverse populations with distinct issues at the intersection of aging, immigration, and ethnicity. In this paper, we present results of our study of long-term immigrants in middle and later life, with a focus on their changing attachments, views of home, and aging in their adoptive country.

### **Aging Immigrants in the United States: Demographics and Diversity**

In the U.S., nearly 5 million adults over the age of 65 are foreign-born (Population Reference Bureau, 2013). According to Migration Information Source, these "older immigrants account for 12% of the 40.4 million elderly in the U.S. and for 12% of the 40 million immigrant population" (Batalova, 2012, p. 1). After declining steadily between 1960 and 1990, the number of older immigrants (those age 65 and over) in the U.S. nearly doubled between 1990 and 2010,

from 2.7 million to nearly 5 million (Batalova, 2012). Older immigrants are expected to reach 16 million by 2050, and are projected to account for almost 20% of America's older population (Treas & Batalova, 2007). In some states, older immigrants already constitute more than 20% of the 65+ population: California, Hawaii, New York (Treas & Batalova, 2007). Although younger U.S. immigrants are more likely to be of Hispanic or Asian origin, non-Hispanic Whites of European descent dominate the older immigrant population (Treas & Batalova, 2007), with Germans and Italians being the largest groups that arrived early in the twentieth century and are now aging in the U.S. (Leach, 2009).

Older immigrants are a diverse group whose members arrived in the U.S. at various points over the life course: as children, as adults, or in later life (Leach, 2009; Wilmoth, 2012). The population of foreign-born elders is comprised of individuals with a wide range of life circumstances and can be divided into three general groups (Population Reference Bureau, 2013; Treas & Batalova, 2007).

The first group is comprised of immigrants brought to the U.S. as young children. These individuals are the most assimilated, having been educated and socialized in the U.S. Because they arrived in the U.S. early in their life courses, they are aging in place with the economic resources, English language proficiency, and experiences similar to those of their native-born counterparts (Treas & Batalova, 2009; Wilmoth, 2012)

The second group of foreign-born elders consists of elderly immigrants who are members of the point-five (.5) generation: aging parents brought to the U.S. later in life by their adult children (who are naturalized U.S. citizens) under the family reunification program (Treas & Batalova, 2007) or older immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as refugees, often with traumatic experiences (Becker, 2002; Lewis, 2009). Due to their advanced ages at the time of immigration these transplanted elders missed opportunities for socializing in the new country through school and workplace, have limited English language skills, and lack familiarity with American culture (Treas & Batalova, 2009). They experience social disadvantages and are at risk for loneliness, dependency, and depression (Bhattacharya & Shibusawa, 2009; Treas, 2009). Lack of integration into their host country, coupled with strong attachments to their countries of origin, contribute to these elders' sense of not feeling fully at home and aging out of place (Becker, 2002; Kalavar & Willigen, 2005; Lewis, 2009). Compared with U.S.-born elders and long-term immigrants, these late-life immigrants also experience economic disadvantages (no jobs, pensions, or government benefits) and often depend on their adult children for support (Population Reference Bureau, 2013; Wilmoth, 2012). At the same time, these older immigrants make significant contributions to their adult children's families by helping with childcare, housework, and kin-keeping (Treas & Mazumdar, 2004).

The third and the most numerous group of foreign-born elders includes those who migrated to the U.S. as young adults seeking better educational and professional opportunities. These first-generation immigrants have spent their formative years in their countries of origin, thus their socialization and basic education took place in socio-cultural contexts different from that of the U.S. After immigration, they spent their working lives and raised their children in the U.S., and they made this country their home over the subsequent decades. Although these immigrants are now aging as long-term residents of the U.S., they often maintain varying degrees of attachment to their countries of origin. Such immigrants are commonly referred to as “long-term” or “early-life” immigrants (Bhattacharya & Shibusawa, 2009; Wilmoth, 2012).

Each group of foreign-born elders differs in experiences, strengths, and vulnerabilities. With more time in the U.S., long-term immigrants typically acquire better English language skills, advance economically and socially, and become more integrated into the larger society beyond the immigrant community (Leach, 2009). In contrast, late-life immigrants are a potentially vulnerable population due to limited English language proficiency, dependency on their adult children, and lack of integration in social institutions through work or social contacts (Treas, 2009; Treas & Batalova, 2009). Although distinctions between late-life and long-term groups of foreign-born elders are acknowledged, research studies and reports predominantly focus on the socio-economic and health challenges of the late-life immigrants (Population Reference Bureau, 2012; Treas & Mazumdar, 2004; Wilmoth, 2012). Information pertaining to experiences of long-term immigrants with regard to issues of attachment to their native countries and aging experiences in their adoptive countries is less well known.

Based on analysis of the American Community Survey, the majority of older immigrants in the U.S. are long-term immigrants: 61% of older foreign-born arrived in the U.S. before or during 1970 and have been living in the U.S. for 35 years (Batalova, 2012). Only 11% of immigrants over the age of 65 are recent arrivals who came to the U.S. in 2000 or later (Batalova, 2012). These late-life immigrants (.5-generation), who had been in the U.S. fewer than 10 years, constitute a smaller percentage of the overall elder immigrant population, yet experiences of this group have been the focus of recent research (e.g., Kalavar & Willigen, 2005; Treas, 2009; Treas & Mazumdar, 2004). In comparison, long-term immigrants who comprise a majority of the elder immigrant population have received relatively no recognition. Specifically, there is a need for research that examines this populations’ attachment to their native countries, the changes in ethnic identity development they experience, and their sense of belonging as they enter later life.

### **Immigration Experience from a Life Course Perspective**

The life course perspective can enhance our understanding of the impact of immigration on individuals and families throughout their lives. By examining change over time, considering individual and family positions in the larger social and historical context in home and host countries, as well as exploring the meanings individuals attach to life events, the life course perspective can provide additional insights into the immigration experience and post-migration incorporation (Bengston & Allen, 1993). Applied to immigration, this theoretical lens directs our attention to such variables as an immigrant's country of origin, immigration history, age at immigration, timing of arrival, generational status, family constellation, available resources, and the area of settlement (Trask, Brady, Qiu, & Radnai-Griffin, 2009).

In the fields of family studies, immigration, and social gerontology, there is growing awareness that we should consider immigration as not merely a single event, but as a complex multi-dimensional process that has impact on individuals and families over the life course (McDonald, 2011; Trask et al., 2009; Treas, 2014). The value of the life course perspective is that it can be used as a theoretical scaffold in which to consider the many aspects of the immigration experience and post-migration adaptation. Specifically, the intersection of aging, immigration, and ethnicity can be explored more fully from the perspective of individual migrants and their familial ties, with particular emphasis on timing of immigration in the life course, socio-cultural and historical contexts of sending and receiving countries, and length of residency in the host society.

In the present study, immigrants who arrived in the United States as young adults brought with them formative developmental experiences that took place in different cultural, social, and historical contexts. At the same time, these immigrants (who immigrated between the ages of 18 and 30) were young enough to respond to changes in their lives and in the living environments of their host country. This interaction of pre-migration socialization in the country of origin and the post-migration experience over decades of living, working, and raising families in their adoptive country, creates fruitful ground for examining change over time in terms of immigrants' attachments and views of home.

When documenting and interpreting experiences of these long-term immigrants, recognizing the influence of family (both in the U.S. and in native countries) on various aspects of the immigration journey is important. The decision to migrate and the reasons for immigration, the means of maintaining family ties while abroad, and the changing structure of the family system as generations age in the native country, are just a few of the complexities long-term immigrants experience. Essentially, each aspect of their lives is affected by family roles, responsibilities, and attachments, often resulting in emotional ambiguity about

transnational family relationships and perceptions of “home,” which are fluid and change over the life course in complex ways (Maehara, 2010; Zontini, 2015). Children born in the adopted country serve to root immigrants in “new” lives they are building, at the same time that the familial landscape of their native countries is in a state of change. This dichotomy of feeling grounded and displaced has been a relatively unexplored area, yet it can be effectively examined by applying the life course framework. In the next section, we review recent studies focusing on long-term immigrants and explore their experiences through the lens of immigration, aging, and ethnicity.

### **Studies of Long-term Immigrants in Middle and Later Life**

Existing studies of aging long-term immigrants span such destination countries as Canada, New Zealand, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the U.S., and include diverse immigrant groups: Bengalis, Chinese, Estonians, Filipinos, Germans, Iranians, Irish, Italians, and Japanese. These studies explore various issues, many of which overlap and include the following: (a) the role of family relations in the immigrant’s construction of home (Ganga, 2006; George & Fitzgerald, 2012; Izuhara & Shibata, 2001, Zontini, 2015); (b) the myth of return and feelings of belonging (Leavey, Sembhi, & Livingston, 2004); (c) national and ethnic identity in middle and later life (Park, 2015; Tammeveski, 2003; Tiamzon, 2013); (d) the meaning of successful aging in different cultures (Torres, 2006); (e) the process of acculturation over time (Bonisch-Brednich, 2002); (f) transitions and developmental tasks in middle and later life (Akhtar & Choi, 2004; Kobayashi & Preston, 2007); and (g) aging, sickness, and death in the host country (Gardner, 2002).

Many long-term immigrants relocated to their host countries in the middle of the twentieth century, which was a time of limited communication and transportation. As a result of this lack of contact with their native countries, some viewed their immigration as a one-way journey with little to no means of visiting or returning home (Izuhara & Shibata, 2001). Other immigrants planned to stay only several years to reach their financial goals before returning to their homeland (Ganga, 2006; Leavey et al., 2004). Regardless of their original intentions, many immigrants in these studies integrated themselves into their host countries over the years by working, raising families, and developing social networks (Ganga, 2006; George & Fitzgerald, 2012; Zontini, 2015).

As these immigrants age in their adoptive countries, they encounter developmental tasks over the life course such as launching their children, becoming grandparents, retiring from jobs, mourning the deaths of loved ones (in both original and adoptive countries), and facing their own

mortality (Akhtar & Choi, 2004; Gold & Amthor, 2011; Kobayashi & Preston, 2007). From the psychoanalytical perspective, immigrants are generally theorized to feel torn between the land of their parents and the land of their children as they enter later life and contemplate end-of-life questions (Akhtar & Choi, 2004). However, late-life and long-term immigrants may perceive this issue differently and it is important to make that distinction. Late-life immigrants indeed are more likely to view their stays in the U.S as temporary and may wish to return to their countries of origin for death and burial (Becker, 2002). By contrast, long-term immigrants think of their adoptive countries as their homes where they want to be laid to rest (Ganga, 2006, Zontini, 2015) or report dual attachments by belonging to both their original and host countries (Gardner, 2002). Some long-term immigrants resolve these dual attachments in later life by generating social networks with co-ethnics in the host country, and some others forgo residential assimilation by intentionally relocating to an ethnic community in retirement (Tiamzon, 2013).

Experiences of various immigrant groups aging in their host countries have been explored through in-depth semi-structured interviews with participant observations (George & Fitzgerald, 2012; Izuhara & Shibata, 2001; Park, 2015; Tammeveski, 2003; Tiamzon, 2013), focus groups (Kobayashi & Preston, 2007; Leavey et al., 2004), individual vignette methodology (Torres, 2006), and by extensive field research and life history interviews (Bonisch-Brednich, 2002; Zontini, 2015). Using various qualitative methods allowed researchers to provide rich descriptions of immigrants' perspectives, decision-making processes, as well as negotiations of identity, home, and aging.

Although researchers have generally explored immigration experiences of both men and women together (Park, 2015; Tammeveski, 2003; Tiamzon, 2013; Torres, 2006; Zontini, 2015), some studies have focused exclusively on immigrant women in middle and later life (Izuhara & Shibata, 2001). A few studies have delved into gender's influence on the life course of aging immigrants (Bonisch-Brednich, 2002; Gardner, 2002; Maehara, 2010); however, this area of research remains relatively unexplored.

In sum, research on immigrants in later life is growing, with an increasing emphasis on the intersection of aging, immigration, and ethnicity. This approach challenges our assumptions about assimilation and expands our understanding of what it means to be "aging in place" in an era of global migration and transnationalism. The purpose of the present study is to expand our understanding of long-term immigrants in middle and later life as they age in their adopted country. Using a life course perspective, we seek to investigate immigration as a process that unfolds over time as well as immigrants' changing attachments and views of home as they age.

## Method

Data for this paper come from an ongoing study of aging immigrants that received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Montclair State University. Recruitment of participants for the study took place in the Northeast through senior centers, residential facilities, local newspapers, e-mail announcements within a public university, personal contacts of the authors, and snowball sampling. The basis for eligibility was (a) immigrants residing in the U.S. aged 45 and older and (b) having arrived in the U.S. as young adults (between 18-30 years old). Such criteria allowed us to recruit our target population of long-term immigrants who have spent significant parts of their adult lives in the U.S.

### Participants' Characteristics

A total of 37 participants (29 women and 8 men) took part in the study. Participants ranged in age from 47 to 92 ( $M=68$ ), and reported having immigrated to the U.S. as young adults, at an average age of 25 years. These long-term immigrants spent significant portions of their lives in the United States: the length of residency in the U.S. ranged between 28 and 69 years ( $M=41$ ). Half of the participants fit the category of middle-aged (45-65 years) and another half were categorized as older adults (65+ years).

Participants originated from the following 23 countries: Argentina (2), Austria, China, Colombia, Czech Republic, Egypt (2), Ethiopia, France, Germany (5), Great Britain, Greece, Guatemala, India, Iran (2), Italy (3), Korea, Lithuania, Mexico, Philippines, Poland (2), Romania (2), Scotland, Switzerland, and Taiwan (3).

Participants were diverse in marital status: 20 married, 13 widowed, 2 divorced, 2 never married. Their educational attainment varied, from fifth grade educations to a doctoral degree. The majority of the participants, mostly in the older group, were retired (19), whereas middle-aged individuals were more likely to report being currently employed (18). Primary reasons for immigration to the U.S. included: (a) job and educational opportunities (21), (b) family reunification or marriage to a U.S. citizen (8), and (c) escaping religious or political persecution as a refugee (8).

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using in-depth personal interviews conducted by the first author. Interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and took place in participants' homes, the researcher's office, or public spaces (e.g., libraries or senior centers). After participants signed

the consent forms, they were asked about their backgrounds and demographic information. The main part of the interview followed a semi-structured protocol with 30 questions related to immigration history and motives, connections and visits to the countries of origin, heritage languages and culture-related activities, ethnic identification, social connections and community ties, and last wishes. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Immediately following interviews, the first author wrote detailed field notes and memos with observations and reflections on the interviews.

We analyzed data inductively with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) informing our methods. Each author studied interview data to identify segments of text that we felt contributed to potential codes. The goal was to reduce textual data to coded sections representing varied topics described in participant narratives. We practiced regular peer debriefing by meeting to discuss, compare, and contrast our coding process on a line-by-line, page-by-page basis; each of us led discussions about specific coding terminology and definitions (Patton, 2002). As patterns emerged we identified thematic categories, their properties, and any relationships between categories that appeared (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Finally, categories were organized by theme(s) and examined for a qualitative version of inter-rater reliability, where core codes and thematic concepts (a) were identified by each researcher, (b) reoccurred across narratives, and (c) were significant to experiences of aging immigrants.

## Findings

### Where is Home?

Although participants had varying degrees of attachment to their countries of origin, they overwhelmingly reported the U.S. as their home. This sense of “home” evolved from being a place of birth to a location where significant life events occurred -- where participants raised families, worked, and spent their adult lives. Afshan<sup>1</sup>, a 65-year old woman from Iran who has lived in the U.S. for 39 years, explains:

After my children were born then the U.S. became my home. It’s their home and it’s my home...because I lived here, I got married here, had my children, went to school, had my profession—so a lot of things happened in my life here, the significant milestones took place [in the United States].

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

What seemed to have grounded many of the participants in their adoptive country was having and raising children, as well as spending significant portions of their adulthood in the U.S. Their reaction to the question “where is home?” was to talk about their families and their accomplishments since they immigrated. For some participants, it took years to recognize that U.S. was home. They had been dreaming of the opportunity to return to their homelands later in their lives, following retirement. When they thought about all they would be leaving behind, however, they came to a realization that their adoptive country had *become* “home,” as explained by Wojtek, a 56-year old man from Poland who has lived in the U.S. for 34 years.

For years I was dreaming, what if my wife and I move back to Poland to retire? I take all my money, my pension, my social security and we would be able to live like kings. I remember sitting on the plane [returning from Poland] and thinking, “No, this is my home, this is where I retire, this is where my kids are, this is the country where my grandchildren will be.”

Although the experience of having and raising children in their adoptive country had a powerful grounding effect on those immigrants who were parents, study participants without children, as well as never married immigrants, also reported feeling remarkably attached to the U.S. These participants pointed to personal growth they experienced following immigration and how they felt they had changed from their earlier selves. New roles and relationships acquired as a result of work, family, and broadened social networks altered how they viewed themselves, yet people in the countries of origin did not witness these significant changes. Adele, a 72-year old widow without children who emigrated from Britain, explains:

Because I’ve been here for so long, I have forfeited my “original” home. I feel fundamentally more at home here because this is where I spent my adult working life. When I go back to Britain, people only know me as a child; they don’t know me as a married woman, as a career person, as John’s widow. When I come to America, here I have creditability, I’m known as Dr. \_\_\_ and I have a place in society here.

Along with the individual growth and development that takes place during one’s adult years, immigrants also described losses they encountered over time as well as challenges they had to overcome in immigration. Sheba, a 50-year old woman who emigrated from Ethiopia as a student, is not married and does not have children. Although she has aunts and cousins still living in Ethiopia, her parents died there, thus limiting her ties to her native country. Sheba describes the strong attachment she has to the U.S.:

This is home! The fact that I don't have parents over there [anymore]...and most of my memories are here...the struggling life, what I went through, college, to get a job, living by myself, dealing with people, it's all here. Yea, this is home.

Beyond building lives through family, work, and community, a common explanation as to how the participants view the U.S. involves the process of assimilation experienced as a result of immigration itself. Upon arrival in a new country, the first few years of life are full of demands that accompany starting their lives anew. So much time is spent focusing on survival that there is no time to reflect on changes taking place. For several participants, there was a specific moment of realization that America is home. Similar to many other immigrants, Isabelle, a 47-year old divorced mother from Colombia, experienced downward mobility in terms of her social class and economic status. She emphasizes not only positive aspects of her immigration journey (e.g., freedom, opportunities, safety) that tied her to the U.S., but also challenges she experienced that ultimately resulted in her loving the life she had created.

The first few years here were very difficult. I had to survive... there were a lot of struggles. But I remember one day, ten years into being in this country, I was landing in Newark--it just felt like home. That moment when you are like, "Ahhh, I am so glad to be home!" New Jersey is home for me.

Over time, immigrants move beyond general attachment to "America" to developing a sense of belonging to a particular state or region. It was common for this sample of immigrants to describe feeling "truly American," yet go on to describe home as being either "New York" or "New Jersey." For example, 92-year old Dieter from Germany, who spent 74 years living in the U.S., describes himself as being "fully American," then specifies that he is in fact a "New Yorker." Related to this identification with the U.S., many participants describe having to repeatedly prove their "American-ness" and to explain and even assert their belonging to their adoptive country. Most often, this need to defend themselves as Americans is due to an ethnic appearance or the noticeable accents of these foreign-born individuals. Zhen, a 71-year old woman from Taiwan who has lived in the U.S. for over four decades, shares:

People ask, 'Where are you really from?' They say, 'You come from Taiwan.' And I say, 'I'm from New York. This is my country, my first country. Because I raised my child here. I stay here a major of my life. I'm strong here. This is my home.'

As a whole, our participants conveyed clearly that America was their home. Only a few participants retained varying degrees of emotional attachment to their countries of origin and reported that their "hearts are attached to two places." Individual circumstances and a complex

process of change that took place over the course of the immigration journey influenced this dual attachment significantly, as will be described in the next theme.

### **Changing Attachments**

Immigrants' attachments to the U.S. are based on many factors, including the reason(s) for immigration, which are grounded in socio-historical contexts of the countries of birth at the time. A number of participants in the study never returned home for a visit. Their immigration to the U.S. was involuntary; they arrived as refugees and asylum seekers fleeing ethnic, religious or political persecution. Several participants who were Holocaust survivors from Austria and Germany, as well as religious minorities from Egypt, felt strongly about not returning to their countries of origin. As Hannah, an 85-year old Jewish woman from the Czech Republic illustrated, going back was not an option: "They took everything I had. Why should I go back? No, no, no... I closed that chapter. It's finished." Immigrants who arrived in the U.S. after the Second World War as displaced persons had nothing to return to, not only in terms of lost family members but also in terms of physically destroyed homes and towns. For example, Frida, an 84-year old ethnic German from Lithuania who spent years in Russian labor camps where she lost siblings, explains:

What [are] we gonna go back to? Everything was changed... the houses aren't there no more, the roads are changed, there is nothing that you can say, 'Oh this is a landmark'...you don't even know where you are.

Another example of the complexities of returning was illustrated by 65-year old Afshan, an immigrant from Iran. Due to Iran's political turmoil, the fact that her husband was an American, and concerns her family had for her safety, Afshan went back only once during her 40 years of life in the U.S.

By contrast, some participants came to the U.S. as voluntary immigrants, taking advantage of educational, professional, and career opportunities, as well as family reunification. Due to socio-historical contexts in their countries of origin, these participants had the option of making return visits. The reasons for returning and the circumstances surrounding these visits were considerably diverse: for example, (a) going back to see family and friends, (b) sharing the culture and landscape of their youth with their children, (c) taking care of property, and (d) enjoying vacations in a place to which they felt connected. Eleni, a 58-year old from Greece who has lived in the U.S. for over three decades, shares her experience:

I love visiting Greece! I feel like it's a place where I know everybody, where I can speak the language. We don't do much while there: sleep late, go to the beach every day, eat local food, and take small trips to the inner islands--so relaxing!

Although the desire and opportunity for visiting their native countries was present, not all immigrants returned for purely recreational reasons or enjoyed their time there. Cornelia, a 59-year old Romanian woman who has lived in the U.S. for over three decades, visits Romania infrequently, primarily to "solve a problem" such as overseeing or selling the remaining property or to arrange care for her aging mother-in-law. Such experiences were common for our middle-aged participants who provide transnational caregiving to aging family members. Even though Cornelia tries "to make the best" of her visits, she does not like staying in Romania longer than a week and admits that she feels a growing disconnect from the country of her youth. Similarly, 67-year old Emma, who has lived in the U.S. for 47 years, described how during her visits to Austria she recognizes "that place is no longer mine; I am no longer a part of it." Participants' narratives indicate that they do not always feel at home while visiting their birth countries, and that some even "feel like strangers."

Immigrants in our sample represent a range of visiting experiences, from those who enjoy primarily social and leisurely returns to those who report less satisfactory and rather obligatory trips to their countries of origin. However, all interviewees remarked how the passage of time and their life experience in the U.S. can accentuate changes that have taken place in their worldviews and in their reactions to their immediate surroundings. Specifically, participants described noticing not only changes in the countries to which they returned, but also identifying themselves as the primary sources of change. For many immigrants, reentering a society with collectivistic values and relationships challenged their newly acquired individualistic attitudes. Benicio, a 56-year old from Argentina, illustrates this clash:

I go to see my family and have no choice but to stay with them. One time I stayed in a hotel, and everyone was so friggen upset! They say, 'What, you don't feel comfortable coming to my place?' You know, I don't want to be explaining myself, I need my space... but they want to know everything!

Lengthy residency in the United States and extended absences from their countries of origin make changes in immigrants' attitudes more apparent. Both men and women from different cultures and countries of origin commented on their expectations for comforts, conveniences (e.g., hot water, air conditioning), and privacy in their living spaces and personal affairs. Participants note that changes in their attitudes and preferences did not go unnoticed by family members, as described by Sheba, who visited her native Ethiopia after a 16-year break:

I'm still really good at being an American and being an Ethiopian... but my ways have changed. Even my sister says, 'I don't want to push you because now you are used to the American way... I don't know what to do with you.' They just have to let me be.

Participants reported not only wanting more privacy during their return visits, but also feeling overwhelmed by requests for time by family and friends. Donatella, a 64-year old woman from Italy who has lived in the U.S. for 44 years, shared how she "made a lot of enemies" by declining to visit some relatives in Italy in favor of touring the country with her U.S.-born and raised niece. Initial feelings of guilt and resentment surrounding family obligations are later replaced by a more pragmatic desire on the part of returning immigrants to make the best out of their short vacations (often with their U.S.-born children) and to enjoy their countries of birth as tourists. Over time and with subsequent visits, immigrants come to terms with the reality that they cannot squeeze lost time and daily experiences into a few days. Vincent, a 61-year old from Switzerland who has lived in the U.S. for 33 years, shared:

I used to feel guilty, but over time I got used to the fact that there was this large distance-- you just learn to deal with it. That is all I can do. And there is nothing wrong with [skipping seeing some relatives and] saying, 'We are taking the kids to see this beautiful 14<sup>th</sup> Century gothic cathedral'...you just can't find that in New Jersey.

It is important to recognize that the family idyll is not always realized during family visits. Immigration and prolonged separation can lead to awkwardness and tension in family interactions. Over the life course, each family member exercised his or her agency in different ways. These divergent lived experiences contributed to feelings of disconnect and emotional distance. For Zhen, a 71-year old woman from Taiwan who has lived in the U.S. for 41 years, visiting family has invariably proved "disappointing" as a result of prolonged conflicts in her "dysfunctional family." Although acute family conflict was not prevalent in the narratives of all our participants, their stories did point to complicated family relationships and interpersonal tension, as illustrated by Brigitte, a 79-year old woman from France with 55 years of life in the U.S.:

I could visit my younger sister, but I can't be with her for more than two days because she drives me crazy. My other sister has dementia. My cousin's wife that I could visit now has Alzheimer's, she might have died by now, I don't know... I just don't have people to visit anymore.

Brigitte's story also demonstrates how the inevitable decline of aging family members and deaths in the countries of origin provide immigrants with fewer reasons to return. In other cases, immigrants' aging parents and/or siblings join them in the U.S., thus shrinking their social networks in their countries of birth. Combined with expanding social ties in the U.S. through

immigrants' growing family and lives, these changes can decrease their feelings of attachment to their birth countries and further diminish reasons for return visits. Immigrants of advanced age also experience health problems that limit their ability to travel internationally. As a result, some participants share that at some point, they make "the final trip" knowing it will be their last opportunity to say goodbye to their country of birth.

When asked whether they would choose to return permanently to their countries of origin, almost everyone in our sample replied they would not. As 80-year old Jasmin, who has lived away from her native Egypt for 47 years, put it "I am not thinking about going back at all... it is not anymore my country." This view that the country of birth was no longer "theirs" was an overwhelming sentiment that our participants shared. They supported this sentiment consistently by their desires to remain close to their children and grandchildren, and by the emphasis they placed on the lives they built in their adoptive country. For the majority of study participants, spending their remaining years in the U.S. was a priority, which the next theme describes.

### **Final Destination**

To further explore participants' attachments to the United States, we asked them about where they wanted to live out their lives as well as their thoughts or arrangements for their final resting place. For all but three immigrants, the United States was viewed as a final destination, a place they wish to spend their remaining years and eventually be buried. The reasoning they provide relates primarily to the extended time they have spent in this country, where their children and grandchildren live. Heidi, a 76-year old woman from Germany, who has lived in the U.S. for 50 years, is certain that she does not want to "go back" and prefers to "stay here where [her] family is." This sentiment is also illustrated by Radoslaw, a 56-year old man from Poland who immigrated to the U.S. over three decades ago:

Oh, it's definitely in the United States! I would not be able to even think of being buried anywhere else now... because of the fact that my kids are here and my grandchildren.

In relation to their desire to remain in the United States, most of these middle aged and older immigrants want their final arrangements to be simple, not to inconvenience their families. As Vincent from Switzerland states, "[My remains should] be somewhere around here, just because it is practical." To transport immigrants' remains to the countries of their birth would not only be costly; the opportunity for their children and grandchildren to visit their graves would also pose significant challenges.

Only three participants expressed a desire to spend some time in their later years in their native countries, with the U.S. being their home base. These individuals also expressed a

preference to have their cremated remains divided between their native and adoptive countries. It is worth noting that these three immigrants had maintained strong relationships with their families in their countries of origin, thus reinforcing an interest in going back for extended visits and their final resting places.

Study participants were split evenly between the choice of burial or cremation, with two participants choosing to donate their bodies to science. For those who wish to be cremated, many do not care what is done with their ashes as long as their remains stay in the U.S. -- for example, by scattering ashes "in the garden" or in various U.S. locations where they had happy memories. Those participants who chose burial frequently wanted to be buried next to a deceased spouse or in a family plot where kin could visit and pay their respects. Agnes, a 92-year old widow from Germany who has lived in the U.S. for 70 years, explains:

I decided that I want to be cremated like my husband was. As for the rest of it... my kids can do just what they want.

Like Agnes, many participants lacked strong preferences about specific services to be organized following their deaths and were content with "whatever the children would prefer." However, participants felt strongly that their children not be "burdened" by their deaths in terms of financial costs and making arrangements. A 71-year old Zhen from Taiwan, states:

My daughter [will] probably give me a big funeral service, use my money. I say, why bother [with the] memorial service? I don't need this. I cannot see it. I told my daughter my idea. I don't want to bury, I want a direct cremate, no service, nothing. You die, you die.

For many participants, having expensive funerals, elaborate memorials, and exclusive resting places were deemed unnecessary. A common sentiment is to focus on life and the living as opposed to death and its associated rituals, as illustrated by a narrative from Rosa, a 74-year old widow from Italy. When Rosa decided to purchase a burial plot near her family, the salesman tried to excite her about the only space left on the second level of a mausoleum.

And the guy was trying to impress me like an investment, 'This is going to be the trees through the skylight, this is the only spot left, it's a single.' And I'm like, 'You don't have to sell me this. I'm dead! You think I'm going to visit myself? Are you serious?'

Another thread apparent from the narratives of participants is the feeling of belonging to the United States as a place where they have lived lives containing both joys and struggles. When immigrants have children in their adoptive country, they plant seeds that are of their new

country, and as a result they become deeply rooted through their children and their grandchildren. Isabelle, a 47-year old from Colombia with 28 years of living in the U.S., articulates this sentiment:

I hope to stay here for my daughter. I don't feel that I belong to the rest of my family [in Colombia]. I belong to my daughter. Whatever gives her comfort.

As many other participants expressed, it "wouldn't feel right" to have their final resting place anywhere but in the U.S.

In conclusion, one of the interview questions inquired whether participants felt their immigration journey had been completed and whether the U.S. was their final destination. The overwhelming response to these questions was that the U.S. was their home, their final destination, and their resting place. As Hyeyoung, a 55-year old woman from Korea who has lived in the U.S. for over three decades, stated: "I would say I *belong* more to this place, so I would be happy to be buried here."

### Discussion

Using a life course approach can enhance our understanding of immigrants in middle and later life. By analyzing immigrants' experiences over time in the context of their family relationships we can begin to examine how their ideas of home and belonging shift and what factors contribute to that change. Combining the life course framework and assimilation theory, Treas (2014) notes that "aging and immigrant adaptation are both *time-dependent* processes" (p. 270). Immigrants' relationships with and their attachments to their home countries change over time and may depend on the life course stages they are experiencing. Different stages of the life course bring new social roles, transitions, and concerns, thus changing immigrants' perceptions, priorities, and goals (Bengston & Allen, 1993; Gardner, 2002; Kobayashi & Preston, 2007; Treas, 2014).

For example, during childbearing years immigrants may experience loneliness and homesickness because they miss the support of their families left behind (Nesteruk & Marks, 2009). Immigrant women in mid-life may feel emotional ambiguity about their sense of belonging as they struggle with conflicting loyalties towards their children and husbands in the adoptive country and their responsibilities towards aging parents requiring care in their countries of origin (Maehara, 2010). Entry to and from the labor force and the pursuit of educational goals also represent key transitions in the life course that affect migration decisions (Kobayashi & Preston, 2007). In retirement, aging immigrants may develop increased interest in reconnecting with their ethnic roots and heritages and consciously relocate to an ethnic community in their

adoptive country (Tiamzon, 2013) or contemplate returning permanently to their native countries (Ganga, 2006; Zontini, 2015).

Applying the life course framework to the experiences of the middle-aged and older immigrants in the present study is particularly appropriate. The combination of our participants' young ages at migration (18-30 years old) and long residences in the U.S. (41 years on average), resulted in their successful incorporation and clear sense of belonging in their adoptive country. Although some immigrants may settle in a host country but never "belong" (Leavey et al., 2004) or feel ambivalent (Garner, 2002), almost all our participants said they could no longer live in their native countries and identified the U.S. as their home. Narratives of our participants show how their views of home evolved from a place of birth to a place where significant life events occurred. This finding is consistent with previous studies of long-term immigrants (George & Fitzgerald, 2012; Izuhara & Shibata, 2001).

As a true indication of their sense of belonging, the vast majority of our participants expressed desires to spend their remaining years in the U.S. and to be close to their children and grandchildren as they age. It is the presence of children and grandchildren that makes an adoptive country a "home." Essentially, our participants did not view themselves as "aging out of place;" rather, they described lives filled with relationships, activity, and a strong attachment to the U.S. Previous research also shows that familial ties are essential to grounding immigrants in their host country (Ganga, 2006; Gardner, 2002; Izuhara & Shibata, 2001; Zontini, 2015).

At the same time, the downside of this incorporation in the adoptive country is a feeling of disconnect from extended family and friends who remain in the original countries. Our participants reported how they often experienced psychological distance from their siblings, peers, and other social contacts during return visits. Over time, participants realized their former "homes" were changing. Landscapes, neighborhoods, and towns did not look the same as immigrants remembered. Siblings were busy with jobs and families while aging parents and relatives became more disabled and died. The idealized memories that immigrants had of their native countries and the people who lived there diminished as time passed. The return visits to the countries of origin served to replace immigrants' nostalgia with realistic understanding that their "home" was now in the U.S. Similar changes in attachments of older immigrants were also found in previous studies: feelings of discomfort and displacement during visits to the native country (Ganga, 2006; Zontini, 2015), the realization that "homeland was no longer home" (George and Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 251), and subsequent changes in phrasing, e.g. "visiting," no longer "going home" (Izuhara & Shibata, 2001).

Consistent with the life course framework, it is important to recognize an immigrant's agency, growth, and personal development experienced as a result of starting over in another

country. One acquires new roles and relationships through family, employment, and broadened social networks over decades of living in the U.S. An immigrant's "new self," gradually constructed over time, contributes to an expanded sense of mastery and confidence. Other studies of long-term immigrants also support themes of personal growth as a result of immigration, independence, and resiliency (Bonisch-Brednich, 2002; George & Fitzgerald, 2012).

When it comes to death and burial choices, immigrants often feel tension between their native and adoptive countries, as previous research documents (Akhtar & Choi, 2004; Becker, 2002; Gardner, 2002; Zontini, 2105). Specifically, they must decide between returning their remains to the land of their birth and ancestors or choosing to have their remains stay near their children and the lives they built in the countries to which they immigrated. When asked about preferences relating to body disposition and final arrangements, almost all the older participants made plans for their remains to stay in the U.S., a sign of established attachment to their adoptive country as well as concern for their children and grandchildren. Although not all middle aged participants had made specific burial plans, they did describe a desire to keep their remains in the U.S. as well.

Overall, immigrants' views of home appear significantly influenced by multiple factors related to the life course: (a) socio-historical context in the country of origin and the host country, (b) individual development and the personal agency associated with immigration journeys, (c) shrinking social networks in the birth country, and (d) expanding familial roles and social connections in the U.S. over time. How long-term immigrants define "home" appears to evolve from a nostalgic place in their memories to a literal location in their present that contains their contemporary lives. The new selves they constructed in immigration as well as the lives they built via relationships and responsibilities all serve to root them in their adoptive country.

### **Limitations and Implications**

The results of our study reveal that long-term immigrants report strong identification with the United States as they age, often in spite of their accents or ethnic appearances. Due to their extended residency in the U.S., immigrants who arrived early in life can be equated in their attachment more with their native-born peers than with the late-life immigrants with whom they are frequently categorized. At the same time, there is a possibility that immigrants who maintained strong attachments to their native countries or felt ambivalent about what they consider to be "home" chose not to participate in this study and therefore our findings do not represent them. Moreover, this study does not capture the experiences of immigrants who returned to their countries of origin in later life.

Recognizing how the social ties of long-term immigrants change over time is important. Specifically, social contacts in their native countries diminish as family members age and pass away, while connections in the immigrants' adoptive countries expand. Family practitioners and service providers need to avoid making generalized assumptions about isolation and marginalization of this segment of the aging immigrant population. Aging immigrants should not be assumed to be "vulnerable" (Akhtar & Choi, 2004); rather, they should be recognized for inherent strengths they developed as a result of coping with discontinuity and challenges of immigration. In fact, the characteristic of resiliency should be noted and emphasized as these elders approach their later years.

In addition to accentuating their fortitude, it is critical that service providers understand that despite their years in the U.S., aging immigrants' pre-migration experiences may continue to be relevant and influential in their lives. In one's later years, it become important to spend time with others who appreciate certain foods, traditions, and entertainment, and who can reminisce about old times, previous events, and places from the past (Akhtar & Choi, 2004; George & Fitzgerald, 2012; Tiamzon, 2013). Senior centers and community organizations should respond to these preferences of aging immigrants with appropriate cultural programs and opportunities for companionship of people with shared backgrounds (Bhattacharya & Shibusawa, 2009; Izuhara & Shitaba, 2001). Facilitating this type of interaction can contribute to elder immigrants' psychological and social wellbeing and is a critical aspect of enabling this population to age successfully.

There is a need for future research to further investigate intersectionality of immigration, aging, and ethnicity. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to investigating the dynamic nature of aging in immigration and to exploring internal processes and changes in identities and attachments over time. Future studies should examine middle-aged immigrants (ages 45-65) and their older counterparts (aged 65+) separately due to developmental differences and time since immigration. Studies focused on one ethnic group can help account for differences in culture and countries of origin. By increasing our understanding of varied experiences of aging immigrants we may be in a better position to develop more culturally sensitive practices and to prepare human services practitioners for work with this population.

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