

Befriending with Socially Isolated Immigrant Seniors: An Inquiry into
its Contributions and Challenges

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Abstract

Social isolation is a major risk factor for a host of physical and psychosocial health problems among older adults. The Befriending program is a community intervention used by service agencies to reduce social isolation among older adults. While there are several reports on the positive effect of these programs on the lives of older adults in general, there is no information on its use with the immigrant population. This article presents the findings of an exploratory qualitative study of a befriending program with the socially isolated immigrant seniors. Data were collected during face-to-face interviews with immigrant older adults and befrienders at two points in order to examine their perspectives and subjective experiences, as well as the factors associated with the continuation of their relationships. Based on the study findings, recommendations are made to service agencies to enhance their organizational capacity, and to adopt more effective recruitment and retention strategies.

Key words: Immigrant seniors, Social isolation, Befrienders, Volunteering.

Literature Review

As the immigrant population in most Western nations grows in size, the number of older immigrants is expected to increase in the years to come. One of the implications of this trend is that service agencies and professional providers are more likely to work with immigrant seniors. Thus, they need to learn about the unique challenges faced by this group of clients.

One of the main challenges faced by immigrant seniors is social isolation (Ajrouch, 2008; Northcott and Northcott, 2010). In addition to the losses associated with ageing, immigrant seniors often face challenges that could place them at a greater risk for social isolation. When immigrant seniors leave their countries of origin, they leave behind their extended networks of relatives, friends, and community support. Even when they live with their adult children, their children may have limited time to spend with them, as they struggle to adjust to a new society. Moreover, the feminization of the workforce, further reduces the availability of the female relatives, who traditionally have cared for older adults. Linguistic and cultural barriers also increase the risk of isolation among immigrant seniors (Ajrouch, 2008; Ng and Northcott, 2010).

Research has consistently shown that social isolation is a risk factor for a host of physical and psychosocial health problems among older adults, including mental health problems, cognitive decline, injuries, hospitalization, and even premature death (McGowan and Jowett, 2003; MacCourt, 2016; The National Seniors Council, 2014a,b). Social support networks can mitigate these negative effects by providing needed resources, enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy, and reducing the perceived importance of stressful life events (George, 2005; Stanfeld, 2006; Yoo and Zippay, 2012).

Thus, service agencies have developed various intervention programs aimed at reducing social isolation among older adults by: a) offering training programs to improve older

individuals' psychosocial and communication skills, necessary to develop and maintain meaningful relationships; b) increasing opportunities for social interactions, by organizing groups with educational and support purposes; c) providing transportation services to facilitate participation in social activities (Cattan et al., 2005; De Jong et al., 2006; Findlay, 2003; National Seniors Council, 2014b; Stevens, 2001).

Befriending programs have also been used to enhance the social networks of the older adults (Andrews et al., 2003; Cattan et al., 2005; Goldman, 2002; Lester et al., 2012; McNeil, 1995). In befriending programs, isolated individuals are matched with volunteers who act as friends and offer support for a determined period of time. Research shows that befriending programs reduce the effects of social isolation, and improve health and emotional well-being among the participants (Andrew, et al. 2003; Behnia, 2007). However, to the author's knowledge, to date, there are no published studies on the befriending interventions with immigrant seniors. Given the potential impact of such programs on the lives of socially isolated and marginalized groups, it is imperative to learn more about them, and to find ways to enhance the recruitment and retention capacity of the organizations that offer such programs.

This article presents the results of a qualitative study of a befriending program with immigrant seniors - the *Friendly Visiting Program* -in Ottawa (Canada). In this program, socially isolated immigrant seniors are matched with volunteers who speak their native languages (they may or may not be of the same ethno-cultural background). The overall goal of this study was to learn about the immigrant seniors' and the befrienders' perspectives and the subjective experiences of their relationships. A particular emphasis was placed on exploring the factors that propelled the befrienders to volunteer with immigrant seniors and the underlying reasons for their continued commitment.

Methods

In this study a descriptive qualitative exploratory research design was adopted. A convenient sample of immigrant seniors and befrienders was interviewed at two points, within two months of matching, and then again during the fifth to sixth month of their relationship. Two sets of interview guides (one for the befrienders and one for the immigrant seniors) were developed for data collection at each phase. The interview guides, consisting mainly of open-ended questions, were pre-tested and the necessary changes were incorporated. The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the author's university research ethics board.

A total of thirty-nine face-to-face interviews with immigrant seniors and their matched befrienders were conducted. Twelve immigrant seniors and twelve befrienders were interviewed within the first two months of their match. In the second phase, eight of the participating immigrant seniors were interviewed for a second time. The attrition of the immigrant seniors was caused by illness, out of country travel, and one refusal. Of the initial twelve befrienders, seven participated in the second phase of the study. Five volunteers had either moved away from Ottawa, or were traveling out of Canada at the time of interviews.

The majority of the immigrant seniors was female (91.6%), 65-74 years of age (70%), and lived with their spouses or other family members (58%). Half of them had university degrees (50%) from their countries of origin. The majority of the befrienders was female (91.6%), 25-64 years of age (75%), married (58%), and had university degrees from their countries of origin (75%). All befrienders except one, who was born into an immigrant family in Canada, were foreign-born.

Interviews, which were conducted in the participants' places of residence, lasted approximately 60 minutes and were tape recorded. The data coding and analysis were guided by

the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998) to ensure an open-minded, exploratory and systematic process. Upon the completion of interviews, the researcher read and open coded the transcribed interviews in order to identify categories and patterns that reflected the experiences and perspectives of the study participants. This step involved indexing data by applying labels to sentences and paragraphs of transcripts which signified aspects of experiences addressed by the excerpts. This process allowed the researcher to identify emergent categories and patterns. In the second phase of analysis, the identified categories and patterns were tested on the transcripts and the necessary revisions were made. In the third phase, re-reading of the data within indexed categories allowed researcher to interpret and synthesize the data, and to identify themes.

Results

Social Isolation

The participating immigrant seniors expressed a profound sense of social isolation, and identified some of the contributing factors. Some had no family in Ottawa (or even in Canada). But even those whose adult children lived in Ottawa experienced loneliness as a result of their children's busy lives or family conflict. Declining health was cited as a major barrier to their ability to engage in social activities such as shopping, visiting family and friends, participating in community events, and attending language classes. They also relayed the negative impact that the lack of access to adequate public transportation and home support services had on their engagement with the outside world.

The social isolation experienced by the participants created a range of emotional reactions including a sense of loneliness, sadness, and vulnerability: "Solitude is very difficult...I am all alone." For one of the study participants the pain of loneliness was so unbearable that she reported leaving her apartment door open in the hope of initiating social contact:

“I spend every day like this, between four walls. I really like having people come...I would lose my memory staying like this all the time, all alone...I leave my apartment door open to show the people that they can visit me.”

Befrienders' Contribution

Befrienders made invaluable contribution to the lives of immigrant seniors. They escorted them to medical appointments, language classes, shopping malls, parks, museums, and community events; they taught them how to use public transportation; translated documents; helped them to practice their English or French; and encouraged them to do physical exercise and join community programs. In addition to the face-to-face visits, several times a week, they called their matched seniors in order to monitor and support them. These phone conversations were very reassuring to the immigrant seniors, and gave them a sense of relief that, should they need help, there would be someone to rely on.

The befrienders described their deliberate attempts to empower the immigrant seniors by validating their feelings, respecting their social persona, and reaffirming their sense of self-worth and identity. Some talked about actively creating opportunities for the immigrant seniors to express their knowledge skills and wisdom on various topics, such as child rearing, family matters, and cooking.

The remarks made by the immigrant seniors reflected their acknowledgment of the many benefits of their relationships with the befrienders. One participant described the impact on her mood this way: “You know I am changed so much now. Before, I was crying, crying all the time, because I was alone. I was so sad. Solitude is so difficult.” For others, the befrienders acted as close confidants with whom they could share their most intimate concerns and personal

information: “I told her ‘we seniors are afraid of getting Alzheimer’s disease ... The old people, they [lose] their memory...I am scared!’”

Remarkably, the closeness of the immigrant seniors-befrienders dyadic relationships was such that most participants used familial terms, such as daughter and mother to refer to each other: “I feel like I have a daughter by [my] side.”

Befrienders’ Reasons to Volunteer with Immigrant Seniors

A common reason cited by the participants for volunteering was their desire to help immigrant seniors in dealing with the many challenges of living in a foreign land. For some of them, befriending seemed to bring to the surface, and possibly help them process, their own anxieties and uncertainties vis-à-vis their future as immigrant seniors: “I one day will be like them in many ways...I will be very lonely.” Befriending provided an opportunity for vicarious learning, preparing them to better cope with similar future experiences: “From this relationship, what I receive is... a lesson about the future. I must prepare myself...”

Among other motivating factors identified were: a) a desire to meet people from different cultural backgrounds and life experiences; b) seeking the opportunity to gain Canadian work experience, and to acquire skills needed to improve their chances of getting a paid job; and c) altruism, a genuine desire to improve people’s lives.

Challenges of Volunteering with Immigrant Seniors

In response to the question, ‘have you experienced any challenges in your befriending relationship’, some befrienders vented their frustrations of working with immigrant seniors, and two disclosed their deep sense of disappointment to the extent that they were contemplating the termination of their involvement. The main underlying reasons for their negative experiences were related to the perceived difficult behaviors of their clients. A few described their matched

seniors as being disrespectful and defiant: “He’ll make sure that I know that he knows more than I know...It really does discourage me a little bit.”

Others noted that some immigrant seniors were overly sensitive, and could be easily offended. This caused befrienders to be extra cautious in their communications in order to avoid inadvertently hurting the seniors. At times, setting personal boundaries seemed to be difficult. Befrienders complained that some immigrant seniors asked personal questions about their marital status and religious beliefs that made the befrienders feel uncomfortable: “Seniors ask you about your religion and [then] they comment on your religion.”

Sometimes the source of difficulty rested with the immigrant seniors’ families. It was noted by a few befrienders that some immigrant families were concerned that their relatives might disclose private family-related information with the befriender, who might, in turn, share it with other members of the community. This made some of the befrienders feel overly conscious about how their conduct may be interpreted.

Finally, a history of animosity or conflict between the countries of origin of the immigrant seniors and their befrienders was another potential source of tension in their relationships: “When the first time I met her, we felt we [had] a big distance, because [I am] from Communist [China] and Taiwan sees the Chinese Mainland like an enemy.”

Befrienders used various strategies to cope with some of the aforementioned challenges. For instance, to avoid unfriendly family members, they arranged to visit immigrant seniors when their relatives were not at home. When there was a history of animosity between their countries of origin, they tried to avoid any discussion around politic issues.

To maintain their relationships with immigrant seniors, some befrienders resorted to cognitive strategies. For instance, some attributed the challenging behaviors of immigrant seniors to their low self-esteem: “They think ‘nobody knows me’, ‘I am nobody’ ... ‘nobody loves me’.” Others used ageist interpretations to explain the seniors’ difficult behaviors. A few compared seniors to children: “...like you deal with a little kid about the age four-five years old...They need your attention, they need your love.” Another befriender talked about age-related cognitive decline as the cause of such behaviors: “When you get old, [your brain] is gone ...Because the brain is shrinking.”

Factors Associated with the Continuity of Relationship

A number of factors influenced the befrienders’ commitment to their relationships with the immigrant seniors. Their admiration for the seniors’ personal traits, such as resiliency, optimistic outlook, open mindedness, patience, and pleasant manners played an important role in their desire to continue their volunteer work.

Moreover, befriending seemed to help some of the volunteers feel reconnected to the memories of their own cherished past family relationships, and/or to re-experience the close bonding and affection they had been longing for. Witnessing the positive impact of their contribution on the quality of lives of immigrant seniors was another major reinforcing factor for some the befrienders. The improvements made in various domains of the seniors’ lives confirmed that their efforts had the intended effects and were not futile.

Interestingly, the immigrant seniors were not merely passive recipients of help. They seemed to be active partners in maintaining and strengthening their relationships with the befrienders. They tried to reciprocate the volunteers’ support through acts of care, genuine expression of their gratitude, and interest in their well-being. Some immigrant seniors treated

befrienders with the same care and affection that they would extend to their own children and relatives. A befriender relayed the following experience: “She’s more like a mom...when I am sick, she calls me...to make sure that I am okay.” Befrienders also pointed out that immigrant seniors showed their appreciation by offering food, courtesy, and even money: “She appreciates everything that I do for her... she insists that she wants to pay me, actually. So I say no –that is not our deal!”

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal the positive impact of befriending programs in fostering a supportive social environment for immigrant seniors. The befrienders offered their help with a range of emotional, informational, and instrumental activities. Many provided what has been described in the literature as responsive, personalized, biographical and psychosocial identity care (Aminzadeh et.al.2013). They recognized immigrant seniors’ unmet needs, showed a genuine commitment and caring attitude towards them and consciously used creative strategies to provide opportunities for meaningful social exchanges in order to reaffirm the seniors’ sense of self-worth, personhood and role identity. In turn, the trusting and affectionate nature of the relationships fulfilled the befrienders’ desire for a meaningful connection.

Consistent with the motivational theories in the field of volunteerism, the befrienders were motivated by both altruistic and self-interest motives (Behnia, 2012, 2001; Cook and Speevak-Sladowski, 2013; Rochester et al., 2012; Wilson, 2012). The results also point to the influence of social identity in befrienders’ decisions to volunteer with immigrant seniors. According to social identity theory, people tend to volunteer with groups with whom they feel a sense of connection (Haski-Leventhal & Cnann, 2009; Weng and Lee, 2016). In this study, the perceived shared identity with the immigrant seniors emerged as a major motivating factor for

the volunteers. Moreover, the future prospect of “aging in a foreign land” and the ensuing loss of meaningful familial and social connections appear to draw the befrienders to work with the immigrant seniors. The befrienders’ firsthand experiences with immigration motivated them to reach out to a more marginalized group of immigrants, and sensitized them to their needs. In turn, their interactions with immigrant seniors helped them cope with their own sense of uncertainty of their future as immigrants.

A fascinating finding of this study that needs further exploration in future research is the active role most immigrant seniors played in strengthening their relationship with befrienders. Far from being passive observers and recipients of help, they tried to reciprocate, in any way they could, the care and support they received.

However, not all the interactions with immigrant seniors were described in a positive light. A few befrienders complained of the disrespectful, unappreciative and defiant behaviors of their matched seniors and/or their families. It is noteworthy how the befrienders coped with these challenges by engaging in various behavioral and cognitive strategies. To implement effective strategies to support the befrienders in their efforts to cope with challenging interactions, it is imperative to further investigate activities that volunteers engage in order to sustain their helping relationships.

The findings also point to the key role of service organizations in providing educational and emotional support to the befrienders. Based on the study results, most could benefit from training on various topics such as communication with older adults, changes associated with aging, family dynamics, and cross-cultural communication. Moreover, to ensure successful matching, the organizations could facilitate informal community events in order to create

opportunities for the volunteers and immigrant seniors to meet and familiarize with each other prior to being matched.

Consistent with past research, the findings support the importance of providing feedback to the volunteers on the value of their contributions and the impact of their work on the quality of lives of their clients (Behnia, 2012; Musick and Wilson, 2008). Sharing the immigrant seniors' positive feedback, their sense of gratitude, and the high esteem they may hold for their matched befrienders can boost the volunteer's sense of self-efficacy, and strengthen their on-going commitment to the relationships.

One of the strengths of this study is that interviews with both the befrienders and immigrant seniors provided an opportunity to examine the processes, meaning and efforts from the perspectives of both groups. This is an important first step in filling some of the gaps in our knowledge. However, the results need to be interpreted and generalized with caution. The population interviewed in this study is not representative of all older adult immigrants. The study is limited by its convenience sampling technique, small sample size, fairly homogeneous gender and ethnic composition, and follow-up attrition. More research with larger and more heterogeneous and representative samples of immigrant seniors and befrienders are needed to further validate the findings. Nevertheless, the study findings provide valuable insights that could assist community organizations in their efforts to combat social isolation among older adult immigrants and to increase the number of befrienders and successful matches.

Finally, it should be noted that the befriending programs function within a broader social system. Structural factors such as accessibility and affordability of public transportation, housing, home care services; availability of multicultural community programs and services, and the existence of supportive immigration policies are critical to the health and welfare of older

adult immigrants. It is, therefore, imperative that service agencies advocate for changes at a broader policy level.

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