

The Struggle for Life Satisfaction Among Older Naturalized Citizens

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Abstract

Media representations of immigration have the potential to shape and reinforce biased stereotypes and can lead to prejudice and discrimination against immigrants. Such depictions also negatively impact the well-being of immigrants. How information is framed in the media has real-world consequences for how immigrants see themselves and how non-immigrants treat them in a society. Biased narratives can lead to fear, anxiety and reduced well-being for all immigrants. Framing theory asserts that issues can be portrayed differently by emphasizing or de-emphasizing aspects and information. This research examines the impact of how immigrants and immigration have been presented in recent social and political news stories. The paper also explores the impact of widespread negative framing on the well-being of a group of older immigrants who are naturalized citizens living in the United States.

Keywords: Immigration; Framing; Discrimination; Life satisfaction; Well-being

The Struggle for Life Satisfaction Among Older Naturalized Citizens

Social discourse and media representations of immigration tend to focus primarily on negative aspects of immigration and immigrants. Such representations can stoke widespread anti-immigrant fears, reinforce negative stereotypes and lead to discrimination against immigrants. People's understanding of the world is shaped by the ways that information is presented. How information is framed has real-world consequences for the ways that immigrants see themselves and how non-immigrants treat them. Negative and biased framing of immigration impacts the lived experiences of immigrants of all backgrounds and ages. In a study analyzing the well-being impact of negative news frames during the 2024 political campaign, the researchers found that discriminatory framing impacted the well-being of immigrant women over the age of 70 [1]. This study is based on data obtained from qualitative interviews with a group of men and women over the age of 70 who are naturalized citizens and long-term residents of the United States. How issues are presented to the public has widespread consequences for the lived experiences of those who are impacted. All information is in some way biased and issues are portrayed by emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain aspects [2]. The consequence of information is connected to what is said and how it is said [3]. Many examples can be found to illustrate a one-sided negative depiction of immigrants and the related struggles they face. One example, the popular Netflix series "Mo", a story of a Palestinian refugee struggling on the path to U.S. citizenship, who, when injured cannot go to the hospital for treatment for fear of deportation; to the expansion of what is referred to as "expedited removal" allowing the government to deport someone without due process. Each day, there are many examples of stories addressing the deportation and incarceration of immigrants across the country; people of all ages and backgrounds being forcefully taken off the street. Such incidents spread fear and anxiety among immigrants from all walks of life. While the target of these narratives may be illegal immigration, there are numerous examples of permanent residents and naturalized citizens being detained and deported.

Anti-immigration themes do not necessarily focus on legal status; they tend to be more generalized and, as a result, lead to anxiety and fear for all immigrants, even those who have lived in their host country for many years and are naturalized citizens. The implied message is that “you are not wanted” regardless of education, occupation, contribution, or even legal status. The negative personal and social consequences are numerous, leading to increased stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness and alienation among immigrants. Consequences are even more devastating for vulnerable older adults. Older adults who are immigrants may isolate in their homes, avoid important medical appointments and stay away from social outings and professional engagements. Most importantly, fear and vulnerability are preventing them from traveling, visiting family and friends. The outcome of such fearful isolation is likely to have widespread long-term physical and psychological health consequences. This paper examines the ways the current framing of “immigration” and ongoing anti-immigration rhetoric impacts the well-being of older immigrants who are naturalized citizens of the United States. Immigrants, even naturalized citizens, regardless of age and time of immigration, remain vulnerable to stress and trauma related to the immigration process. Leaving one home and moving to another is stressful and has lifelong implications for well-being. Anti-immigration sentiments increase stress and disrupt adaptation processes to the host culture. Regardless of the length of residence in the host country, immigrants continue to be vulnerable to stressors related to immigration policies and political rhetoric on immigration [4]. Studies focusing on the intersection of aging, immigration and well-being have primarily focused on well-being and the overall aging experiences. The ways that the social and cultural environment shapes well-being are important for explorations of well-being, particularly for aging adults [5]. Given the contemporary framing of immigration, there is a need to understand the increased vulnerability associated with a social and political climate that tends to highlight anti-immigration information. Despite the multiple challenges faced by older immigrants, there is little research addressing the physical and psychological health outcomes associated with the intersection of anti-immigration policies, negative social and political framing of immigration issues, discrimination against immigrants and the aging experience. Psychosocial stressors originating from social and cultural biases can increase health risks for older immigrants increasing health disparities between older immigrants and non-immigrants.

Maintaining psychological well-being in later life is challenging in the best of circumstances; it can become more challenging in the face of an unwelcoming and hostile social and cultural climate. In such circumstances, immigrants may disengage from their communities and societies, increasing loneliness and isolation. Loneliness and isolation are conditions that have been shown to increase among the older adult population [6]. For example, one in 3 older Americans reports being lonely and isolated, conditions that are associated with multiple negative consequences, including unhealthy eating, substance abuse, depression, heart disease, dementia and increased mortality [7,6]. There are currently more

than 7 million immigrants over the age of 65 living in the United States, of these more than 70 percent are naturalized citizens. Older immigrants make up more than 13 percent of the older adult population (Hawkins et al., 2022). For these older Americans, anti-immigration narratives that reinforce negative stereotypes, prejudice and biases about immigrants can challenge life satisfaction and well-being, particularly among at-risk older adults who may already be struggling with economic or health challenges. For older immigrants, after a lifetime of working and contributing to society, feeling unwanted and unappreciated by that same society can be devastating [8]. Cultivation theory, first proposed in the 1960s when television viewing became popular, suggests that exposure to a message over time shapes perceptions, attitudes and behaviors related to the message presented [9,10]. In other words, the way that information is presented shapes personal and social reality. In the case of immigrants, regardless of the diversity of the older immigrant population relating to education, occupation, income, health status and cultural competence, discriminatory and biased narratives can have serious consequences for their overall well-being. While older immigrants may face health challenges similar to all aging adults, it is evident that they are also at risk for additional threats to their life satisfaction and well-being relating to immigration, acculturation and marginalization.

The Struggle for Life Satisfaction

Studies of life satisfaction focus on how individuals experience their lives as worthwhile, enjoyable and fulfilling [5,11]. Life satisfaction is a key component of overall well-being. It is subjective but linked to objective conditions in life such as health, wealth, work, resources, connections with others, community, nature and one's ability to engage in enjoyable and meaningful activities [12,13]. A sense of belonging and integration in a family, community and society serve as powerful indicators of life satisfaction, particularly in later life. For older immigrants, feeling unwanted in their adopted home can challenge satisfaction with life. A person's position or standing in a community, their sense of belonging, shapes thoughts about self, others and the evaluation of life in general. As such, social integration is a crucial predictor of life satisfaction. Social integration reduces isolation, loneliness and depression. For older immigrants, a sense of integration into their host societies may be hard-earned and tied to a feeling of generativity or the contributions they feel they have made; generativity is one of the major foundations of the development of ego integrity over a sense of despair at the end of life [14]. Older immigrants have spent their later years in communities, societies and countries that are very different from the ones that shaped their earliest memories and expectations about the future. As they face the last years of life, feeling a sense of connection and integration in a host country can result in peace and acceptance in a chaotic world. Belonging and acceptance also promote well-being and life satisfaction. When social and political messages focus on the downside of immigration, the need to rid the country of immigrants and when the contributions of immigrants are denigrated, these messages challenge late-life satisfaction and lead to anxiety and despair for all immigrants, including older naturalized citizens.

The Consequences of Immigration Framing

Political framing has the power to distort reality and reshape the ways people understand information. Framing shapes public opinion. Issue-specific frames for immigration focus on the portrayal of immigrants; currently, many of these frames focus on the threats presented by immigrants [15,16]. The tone of the messages can lead to fear and anxiety and shape and reinforce prejudices and stereotypes [17]. The current “them” versus “us” narrative denigrates all immigrants, including those who have spent their lives living and working and contributing to their host country. While there is considerable research on the impact of framing, studies have not sufficiently examined the impact of the contemporary anti-immigration narrative on the well-being of older naturalized citizens. This qualitative study explores the consequences of the current framing of immigration on the lived experience and life satisfaction of a group of older naturalized citizens who are long-term residents of the United States.

Method

This paper is based on interviews with a group of older immigrants who are naturalized citizens in the United States and have lived in the U.S. for at least 30 years. Data were gathered from individual interviews as part of a life history project which began in 2019 and continued until 2025. Life history interviews are one method utilized in qualitative research for identifying themes and patterns in how individuals respond to social and cultural environments. By analyzing narrative data, life history interviews can aid in understanding the subjective lived experiences of participants [18]. Eighteen adults over the age of 65 (11 women and 7 men) were interviewed. All were naturalized citizens who had lived in the U.S. for at least 30 years, had at least a bachelor's degree and were retired from full-time work, although the majority continued to work part-time. They were from a self-described “middle class” background, had held full-time professional jobs before retirement from full-time work. All were or had been married with at least one child. Two were widowed and one was divorced. Six were immigrants from Europe, 5 from the Middle East, 2 from South America, 4 from India and 1 from Japan. All spoke English fluently. Interviews focused on identifying overall life satisfaction, including satisfaction with friends, family, community and society. Life satisfaction, contentment, or happiness with their present life, was measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 5 (very satisfied) by one question with follow-up open-ended questions for elaboration (“How satisfied are you with your life at present?”). The study also explored feelings of loneliness and isolation, supports, resources and coping strategies, as well as meaningful engagement and activities. Qualitative analysis of the responses focused on identifying themes relating to life satisfaction, coping with stressful life circumstances and perceived supports and threats to overall well-being.

Results

Results of the analysis indicated that all but one of the participants expressed a recent decline in life satisfaction and

well-being. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being very high, the average scores of the 18 participants declined from an average of 8.5 to a score of 6 out of 10 over one year. Questions exploring the basis of the decline indicated (a) health concerns; (b) fears and anxiety related to the current social and political climate, (c) economic concerns and (d) increasing feelings of marginalization and alienation in large part due to the current social climate and perceived widespread anti-immigration sentiment. Many no longer felt comfortable visiting their country of origin and, as a result, felt a sense of loss and disconnect from extended family. The majority expressed an increase in fear and anxiety relating to their overall individual well-being, finances, social trust, the future and feelings of belonging, comfort and safety. Although all participants were retired from full-time work, several (12 of 17) had continued working part-time. Three stated that they had recently fully retired or cut back on work specifically because of the current anti-immigration climate. For example, Alfred (name masked), a 71-year-old physician, an immigrant from the Middle East, said that he had reduced his workload in recent weeks due to anxiety and stress. He stated: “I feel terrible, I have worked for almost 30 years in this hospital, I am not certain what will happen now. They are talking about cutting services. Who will take care of people? Most of our staff are immigrants and say they all feel anxious all the time. This anxiety is bound to affect our lives and our work. I feel very discouraged.” Leila, 74, a retired teacher, said: “I am so completely shocked by what is happening, all the anger, deportations. I do not even know what to think. The only thing I know for certain is that I am anxious and nervous all the time. I do not feel like going anywhere. I am certainly not buying anything. I was going to redo my bedroom, but I have placed the project on hold.” Another participant said that she woke up each morning with a sense of dread. “That feeling of peace I used to have about how I would spend my day appears to have disappeared. The world feels like such a hostile place suddenly.”

Mina, 76, a retired University educator and administrator, said that she is planning to move to a smaller place, save her money and be prepared to return to Europe with her husband if this situation continues. “I never thought I would feel so unwanted. The deportations do not affect me and my family, but on some level, we are all immigrants; we are no longer wanted. How sad it is to face the last years of my life like this, after working for so many years in education, making a difference in the lives of young adults. I now feel discarded and unwanted. I do not want to live where people are treated so badly.” Only two of the participants did not express serious ongoing anxiety over widespread anti-immigration narratives. Others felt concerned, empathic for those targeted and distressed over the current situation. Most felt an increase in vulnerability and anxiety, even though they were citizens and they were making changes to their plans and goals for the future. Changes involved limiting pending, limiting travel, particularly travel out of the country, limiting community engagement, concern over medical care with the depletion of service providers and a reduced sense of social trust. Social trust, or the belief in the integrity and reliability of officials and institutions, the notion of

having faith, is an important concern leading to feelings of safety and security in the world [19]. As one faces the last years of life, one way of promoting life satisfaction and ego integrity is to feel a sense of trust, satisfaction and safety in the world. Such feelings promote ego integrity and well-being.

Discussion

Although this study is based on a limited sample of middle-aged adults, older naturalized citizens living in the United States, the findings are important, indicating that this population is still vulnerable and their well-being is impacted by current anti-immigrant narratives. Many of the participants have begun to self-isolate, avoiding important medical appointments, increasing the possibility of poor health. Anti-immigration framing, even if not directed at them, threatens a lifetime of living and working in a society and contributing to a culture that gave them a home. A decrease in life satisfaction based on changed social circumstances in later life can have long-term negative consequences, especially in later life. If paired with an increase in isolation, alienation, anxiety and insecurity, it can be devastating for overall well-being and happiness. Measuring life satisfaction involves understanding views about an individual's past as well as feelings about present circumstances and future expectations and hopes. If current realities are perceived as threatening, satisfaction over a lifetime of accomplishments and hard work can be reduced. As such, negative and biased framing of immigration can have a detrimental effect on the evaluation of the past, anxiety about the present and despair about the future.

Conclusion

The findings of this life history study suggest that social and political immigration narratives potentially have widespread negative long-term consequences on the well-being of all immigrants. This paper is based on a small number of interviews; however, the general fear may be pervasive. Stories in the media continuously report on how many immigrants are being deported and what the government is continuing to do to reduce the number of immigrants and the influx of immigrants. Can there be any justification for consciously threatening the well-being of a country's citizens? Frames emerge out of social and cultural conditions; they also shape social and cultural conditions. A more realistic portrayal of the contributions and diversity of the immigrant experience could mitigate some of the consequences of biased framing.

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