

Theorising about ageing, family and immigration

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ABSTRACT

This article critically reviews the ways in which theories in social gerontology have been used to explain the influence of ethnicity and immigration on older adults. The purpose of this cursory examination is to explore how these theories can be used for further theory advancement without serious modifications to existing theories. Current theories do not have the capacity to capture the effects of immigration at the structural level and its link to the social, psychological and family levels, let alone the physical ageing of individuals or societies. The overriding complexity of ageing and immigration requires at minimum, a long-term view and an integrating framework with multiple levels that can accommodate a variety of theoretical interests. The conclusions are that a lifecourse perspective, in conjunction with existing theories, can be employed in two different ways to further this theoretical agenda. A lifecourse perspective provides scaffolding for other theories where seemingly incommensurate epistemological positions can be easily accommodated and the principles of the lifecourse can be integrated into existing theories for a more fine-grained analysis of ethnicity and immigration. These approaches leave the theoretical door open to everyone including the positivists, the constructionists and critical and postmodern scholars with the possibility for interdisciplinary theory building to advance the understanding of the lives of immigrant families.

KEY WORDS – theory, ageing, ethnicity, immigration.

Introduction

Social gerontologists have conducted little research on older immigrants and have engaged in theory development to an even lesser extent. Part of the problem reflects the slow development of theory in gerontology generally (Bengston, Putney and Johnson 2005). The famous statement, ‘gerontology is rich in data but poor in theory’ (Birren and Bengston 1988: ix), is especially applicable to ageing, family and immigration. There is a growing body of research but the majority of studies are not guided by theory or

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attempt to develop theory with limited results (*e.g.* Angel and Angel 2006; Lai and Surood 2008; Newbold and Filice 2006; Wong, Yoo and Stewart 2007). While social gerontology is not without theory, much of that theory has languished over the years and ‘newer’ developments have rarely been used to explain the lives of older immigrants. The other half of the problem rests with the complexity involved in studying immigration and ageing since the topic does not lend itself easily to theorising (Durst 2005). What is more, selecting one theory at the expense of another privileges one theory over another (Connidis and McMullin 2002) and sometimes makes little sense in the face of the rising tide of interdisciplinarity (Krause 2008).

The objectives of this article are then to provide a cursory review of how gerontological theory has been used to explain the influence of ethnicity and immigration on older adults and how it can be used for further advancement without tampering with existing theories.¹ The argument is twofold: (a) the lifecourse is simply a scaffolding for other theories where seemingly incommensurate epistemological positions can be easily accommodated; (b) the principles of the lifecourse can be integrated into current theories for a more fine-grained analysis of ethnicity and immigration (George 2003).

Why theory matters

Here a theory ‘may provide conceptual tools to interpret complex events and critically evaluate the current state of ageing’ (Biggs, Lowenstein and Hendricks 2003: 16). With little doubt, the immigration of older adults represents a set of complex events with implications for society, the family and the individual. Because immigration from one country to another at older ages is primarily governed by family reunification programmes, there may be two generations of people who are new to the host country and who face challenging but different issues simultaneously (Keefe, Rosenthal and Béland 2000). For example, of the older immigrants arriving in 2004 in Canada, 80 per cent were family-class immigrants and the majority of them were over age 65. Family-class applicants 54 years of age and over are not assessed under the Canadian point system as for economic immigrants but are assessed for good health and character. A related study of older newcomers to Canada showed that older adults immigrate mainly to care for their grandchildren, adding a third generation to the configuration and underscoring that most immigration of older people into the country occurs within the milieu of a family. In 2006, immigrants made up almost 20 per cent of the Canadian population and represented over 200 ethnocultural groups, not as high a proportion as in Australia where

22.2 per cent of the population are foreign-born but lower than in the United States of America (USA) where 12.5 per cent of the population are immigrants (Statistics Canada 2008). Immigration and ageing within multigenerational families is of global significance since the study of older persons within their own ethnic group and in relation to other ethnic groups reflects how different societies respond to the demands of ageing in different ways that ultimately have implications for their overall experiences in later life (Chappell, McDonald and Stones 2008).

The limited but growing research about the influence of race, ethnicity, national origin and culture on individual and population ageing has shown that ethnicity and race have a profound influence on the ageing experience, whether it be as a consequence of expectations for old age and preferred lifestyles, intergenerational differences, living arrangements, family supports, the use of ethno-specific health and social services, or the problems of racism and discrimination (*e.g.* Blakemore and Boneham 1994; Chappell and Kusch 2007; Collings 2001; Hooymann and Kiyak 2005; Keefe, Rosenthal and Béland 2000; Kobayashi 2000; Lai 2004; Lai and Surood 2008; McDonald *et al.* 2001).

Why theory matters to immigrant families

Immigration usually occurs within a family context especially among the older immigrants who come to Canada under the family reunification programme because that is the main route to Canada if 54 years of age or older. To understand older immigrants, it is necessary to understand them within their families (Rumbaut 1997). Using Canada as an example, there is growing evidence that membership of an ethnic group is related to different patterns of family support between generations (Chappell, McDonald and Stones 2008). What is more, service providers in settlement services have long argued that family support has many advantages for immigrants to Canada such as developing a sense of empowerment, reducing stress, fostering community integration and sustaining mental and physical health. Conversely, a lack of family support increases feelings of loneliness, loss of identity and an unawareness of available health and social services (Simich, Beiser and Mawani 2003; Simich *et al.* 2005). Immigrants, especially those from non-European cultures, are sometimes perceived to be generally more family-oriented than the Canadian-born. Data from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey provide some support for these perceptions. In that survey, respondents were asked to rate their sense of belonging to their family. Close to 63 per cent of recent immigrant older adults (who immigrated between 1991 and 2001) rated their sense of belonging to their family as very strong compared to 58 per cent of long-term immigrants (immigrated before

1961) and 55 per cent of non-immigrants. While those recent immigrants aged 65–74 years were just as likely as Canadian-born older adults to receive care, they were more likely (65%) to be provided care exclusively by informal sources like family than Canadian-born and long-term immigrant older adults.

Co-residence has frequently been conceptualised as an indicator of a close-knit family with strong family solidarity that ensures support for older family members although the evidence is mixed (Lowenstein and Katz 2005; Tennstedt and Chang 1998; Wilmoth 2001). A study by Gee (1999) captured both views. She found that Chinese widows who lived alone reported lower levels of wellbeing but they also reported they did not want to live with an adult child. Be that what it may, in Canada, one of the important distinguishing characteristics of recent immigrant older men and women is that they are much less likely to live alone than long-term immigrant or Canadian-born older adults (Turcotte and Schellenberg 2007). For example, fewer Chinese older immigrants aged 65 or more years (about 11%) lived alone, compared with 25 per cent for all older immigrants and 29 per cent for Canadian-born older adults (Government of Canada 1996a: 5–6; 1996b: 5–6). One of the reasons for co-residence is that older immigrants are usually sponsored by their families for up to ten years and usually occupy the same household when they arrive in Canada. Another is that they come to give care, which allows the middle generation to work (McDonald *et al.* 2001). In fact, it is important to note that in North America and some parts of Europe, governments' commitment to and 'legal' enforcement of family responsibility for older adults is the norm and affects the whole family when immigration occurs. Family responsibility is specifically encased in Canadian immigration law and enforced when sponsorship agreements breakdown (Armstrong and Kits 2001; Funk and Kobayashi 2009).

Overall, most Canadian research indicates that family supports are different for immigrant families. As an example, Keefe, Rosenthal and Béland (2000) found that respondents of southern European, Asian and East Indian ethnic origin were twice as likely as those of British origin to provide three hours a week or more of care to older members of their families. In terms of values, filial obligation was important to all groups, but co-residence had the strongest influence on helping behaviour. Research in specific ethnic groups also has shown the differences in family support. For example, family support from Korean family members was more helpful than from the non-Korean community (Noh and Avison 1996). Lai and Kalyniak (2005: 587) found that a stronger Chinese ethnic identity strengthened the social support system for older Chinese-Canadians and Ho *et al.* (2003) reported that social support helped Chinese-Canadian women

cope with the stresses of caring for relatives with Alzheimer's disease. Kobayashi (2000), in her study of generational support between second-generation and third-generation Japanese Canadian families, found that the value of filial obligation influenced the provision of emotional support and the quality of the support, but that parents' health and socio-economic status affected the provision of financial and service support. In a subsequent study of second-generation and third-generation Japanese Canadian family dyads, the researchers found that despite different historical lifecourse experiences and acculturation processes both generations continued to regard filial obligation as important with positive implications for future care-giving (Kobayashi and Funk 2010).

Different patterns of family support in immigrant families require different explanations, especially if policies and practices are to be responsive to new immigrant families. The underlying assumption driving the research is related to modernisation theory discussed below which uses a traditional–modern continuum for classifying ethnic groups. Seemingly, more 'traditional' ethnic groups have extended families available to them and, because of culturally conditioned norms of filial responsibility, are more supportive of older family members (Keefe, Rosenthal and Béland 2000; Ujimoto 1995). This is one theory of the differences between families that immigrate and families in a host country, but there are many more that could be used to explain support differences that take account of macro, meso and micro levels of explanation and their links. For example, government policies at the macro level may dictate patterns of support by immigrant families which are tempered by ethnic values of filial responsibility and the realities of family child care at the micro level and the condition of the labour market at the meso level (Schellenberg and Maheux 2007). We now turn to some of the theoretical possibilities.

Current theories in gerontology

To many scholars, current theories in gerontology are somewhat outmoded but as the empirical evidence indicates, they continue to be applied to ageing and immigration. The rather threadbare activity and disengagement theories, both micro theories, focus on the adjustment of individuals to ageing. Activity theory hypothesises that those individuals who are able to meet their social and psychological needs through maintaining the activity level of middle life will be the most adjusted and satisfied with life at older ages (Kart and Kinney 2001). In an up-to-date examination of the 'activity society', Katz (2000) addressed the problems of older adults being treated as 'busy bodies' as a part of how professionals manage everyday life in old age,

especially in institutions which he labels 'management by activity'. The concept of 'successful ageing' is viewed by some gerontologists as a reincarnation of activity theory (Litwin 2005; Rowe and Kahn 1997). Successful ageing generally means that older adults have sufficient capacities to prevent illness, to minimise losses in physical and mental function, and to enhance their engagement in life – the prescriptions of activity theory when first proposed over 40 years ago. Torres (2001, 2006) has used successful ageing theory to explain the situation of Iranian immigrants to Sweden. She found that those who had pre-migration understandings of successful ageing that were different from those found in the host society tended to change to the latter when they immigrated. The problem with successful ageing, of course, is that if an older person is sick, chronically disabled, poor and not busy – then they are considered to have failed in their personal ageing. An older person might fail at immigration too if they do not accommodate or assimilate or are stressed.

Using disengagement theory, Blakemore (1999) developed a typology for the comparative study of ageing in minority ethnic communities that categorises the reasons for migration including a reversal of migration. He posited that disengagement and activity theories and the study of older adults' expectations and aspirations for migration should be combined for a better understanding of the immigration process. He provided several examples from Britain but few theoreticians have followed through on his work or used his typology. If one arranges theories along a continuum from the micro to the macro levels, the following surface: continuity theory, social exchange theory, age stratification theory, ageing and modernisation theory, political economy theory and the lifecourse perspective. Continuity theory holds that as people age, they make choices in an effort to preserve ties with the past as they move into older ages (Kart and Kinney 2001; Nuttman-Schwartz 2008), a factor we know that applies to older immigrants who hold on to parts of their past (McDonald *et al.* 2001). Taking a very different perspective, social exchange theory focuses on the calculations and negotiations that transpire between individuals as they seek to maximise rewards and minimise costs in their interactions. A proponent of this perspective, James Dowd (1975, 1980), argued that older people find themselves with fewer resources in exchange relationships. Unlike other theories, exchange theory has been used more often in ethnicity and ageing. Most recently, Fiori, Consedine and Magai (2008), in a large study of two heterogeneous racial groups in the USA, found that patterns of social exchange represented differences in ethnic group membership and the relational context in which the exchange took place.

Age-stratification theory posits that society is structured by age and that people play different roles at different ages, have different capabilities,

resources and status as they move through age strata over a lifecourse (Riley, Johnson and Foner 1972). In a study of Filipino veterans who had been given the option of American citizenship, the veterans chose to immigrate to the USA because of the financial benefits of citizenship and for the status gained in their families (Becker, Beyene and Canalita 2000). Modernisation theory, which was one of the first theories applied to older immigrants, links the lower status of older people to the increasing industrialisation of a society as when simple societies are transformed into complex urban societies (Cowgill and Holmes 1972). Older Chinese and key informants were interviewed in a modern new town in Tuen Mun, Hong Kong, where the researchers found some evidence that traditional Confucian filial piety was on the wane because of changes in traditional values (Ng, Phillips and Lee 2002).

Moving to a purely structural perspective, the basic premise of political economy theory is that the experience of old age can only be understood within the context of the economy, the state, the labour market, and the intersections of class, gender, age and racial/ethnic divisions in society (Estes *et al.* 1984). The theory seeks to uncover the structural conditions that create age inequalities and the way that older adults are defined and treated (Quadagno and Reid 1999). Angel and Angel (2006) showed that ethnicity-based differentials in health are related to social structures in the USA. It has been applied, however, at the global level to describe population ageing in developing countries where the creation of transnational communities and global families arise as a result of the international migration of workers. People grow old as migrants and go backwards and forwards from one home to another so that there is a new kind of ageing where the dynamics of family and social life may be stretched across different continents and across different types of societies (Gardner 2002; Walker 2002; Yeates 2001).

Finally, the lifecourse perspective, often considered the vanguard gerontological theory, can be defined as sets of trajectories that extend across a person's life such as family, school or work trajectories; and by multiple transitions in the trajectories such as entering or leaving school, acquiring a full-time job, and the first marriage. 'Each life course transition is embedded in a trajectory that gives it specific form and meaning' (Elder 2000: 1615). A few scholars have begun to apply this perspective to the lifecourse of immigrants although the perspective has been limited to physical and mental health, income security and non-local moves of older adults and does not usually bridge country of origin and host country (*e.g.* Cornman *et al.* 2004; Longino *et al.* 2008; Wilmoth and Chen 2003). Fry (2003: 272) argued that time is actually problematic when a lifecourse perspective is applied to another culture because of the way it is measured

and the cultural knowledge that informs chronological time. According to Fry, the lifecourse is a cultural construct, based on cultural definitions of time and the uses of age. For example, she shows how time is different in East Africa and in industrialised capitalistic societies. In East Africa, time is expressed in terms of generational differences between fathers and sons, not in terms of chronological age (Fry 2003: 277). At the same time, Settersten (2005: S175) calls for social gerontology to take up the mission of explaining multiple types of ageing as in childhood studies that describe and explain multiple childhoods.

The last set of theories includes the more recent developments in feminist theory, critical theory and postmodernism (Chappell, McDonald and Stones 2008). Calasanti (2004: S306) has recently observed, 'feminist gerontologists theorize gender relations as forces that shape both social organizations and identities as men and women interact with one another'. Calasanti and Slevin (2001: 3) continued, 'examining the influence of race and ethnicity implies that we must include majority as well as minority racial status in our analyses. The privileged position of one group relies on the disadvantaged position of another'. Gender relations are essentially constructed power relations that are embedded in social processes and institutionalised in ways that have consequences for life chances across the lifecourse. Critical theory emphasises a critique of the existing social order and its treatment of older adults by exposing assumptions and myths that maintain the status quo. In keeping with the centrality of reflexivity (self-examination), critical gerontology seeks to provide an understanding of the meaning of ageing and old age (Biggs, Lowenstein and Hendricks 2003). The creation of concepts like the use of the masquerade where older adults hide behind masks because they cannot express their ageing selves in a prejudicial society are one of the more significant contributions of postmodernism to theory (Biggs 2005). The development of this idea as it pertains to older immigrants who not only have to negotiate personal ageing but also biculturalism (their own culture and that of the host society), would probably be productive. While no theory is mentioned, Cantonese-speaking and Korean-speaking older immigrants reported how factors such as a changed economic environment, living alone and extending their social network beyond family helped them become more bicultural (Wong, Yoo and Stewart 2006). Again, applications are beginning to appear that use postmodern approaches although the material is still fairly new (Katz 2001–02).

Sometimes linked to critical theory, postmodernism is fundamentally anti-theoretical, however, the approach has been recently used in gerontology to 'theorise ageing' (Katz 2005; Powell 2006). Postmodern constructions of ageing consider the cultural interaction between the ageing body and

the social context in shaping the way people experience their lifetimes (Biggs, Lowenstein and Hendricks 2003; Katz 1995). To have omitted the physical signs of an ageing body in social and psychological theory is in retrospect astounding, so this postmodern contribution is quite timely. Torres (2000) contended that ethnogerontologists' (those who study ethnicity and ageing) research concerns are not entirely consistent with postmodernism. Specifically, she claimed that the interest of postmodernism in eliminating traditional conceptions of majority and minority populations and power structures with it, threatens the study of ethnicity-based conditions that affect ageing processes. In addition, Torres maintained that ethnogerontology supports a solution-oriented approach rather than the reflexive perspective favoured by postmodernism that may not be useful to older adults. Nevertheless, she concluded that postmodern approaches to the critical assessment of ethnogerontological knowledge have already produced several benefits for research and theorisation.

Theories specific to ageing and immigration

Modernisation and assimilation theories

Standard sociological theories underpin both gerontological theory and general theories of ethnicity. As mentioned earlier, one of the first perspectives applied to the study of older immigrants was modernisation theory. While the theory has been used in a number of capacities, one of its main uses has been at the macro societal level to explain disparities among societies at different points along a continuum from developing nations to highly industrialised societies (Olson 2001). Similarly, it has been used to study various ethnic groups on a continuum of modernisation and their specific rank at different points on the continuum. Today, modernisation theory is criticised as having little to contribute to our understanding of older immigrants and their families. As an illustration, some researchers have discovered, contrary to what the theory predicts, that less-modernised families do not necessarily support their ethnic elders any more than modern families (Rosenthal 1983). Chan (2005) found that the immense economic development in Asia and the rapid ageing of the population did not conform with classical modernisation theory. Economic development did not result in a decline of older adults' wellbeing because family support of older persons did not appear to deteriorate as suggested by modernisation theory. Longitudinal data for select South-East and East Asian countries indicated minimal changes in living arrangements over time while cross-sectional data on intergenerational transfers still showed high levels of support for older persons by family (Chan 2005: 281).

The essentialist approach to ethnicity, with its roots in philosophy, is one of the oldest in sociology and anthropology. Essentialists argue that 'ethnicity is something given, ascribed at birth, deriving from the kin-and-clan structure of human society and something more or less fixed and permanent' (Isajiw 1999: 30). It involves a set of 'ready-made' attributes and an identity that an individual shares with others from birth. Spin-offs from this approach treat ethnicity as a matter of identity, including what forces help maintain it or impel it to change (Chappell, McDonald and Stones 2008). When scholars investigate pluralism among ethnic groups, the core issue is about ethnic identity (Li 1999). For example, Ward (2000) examined the effect of leisure activities on the social identity of marginalised immigrants. In a study of older Iranian women who immigrated to Canada in later life, cultural identity overshadowed the ageing process which was rarely acknowledged as a force in these women's lives (Shemirani and O'Connor 2006). Assimilation theories lost their sway over time when confronted with extensive variations between and within ethnic groups and in response to multiculturalism policies, that promoted pluralism (Fleras and Elliot 1992; Kymlicka 2010). Driven by the complexity of ethnicity, researchers created a multitude of continuums that ran between assimilation and pluralism on a variety of levels, to include both external and internal processes (Driedger and Halli 2000; Li 1990).

Age and ethnic stratification

Additional approaches that cross-cut gerontology and immigrant studies are the structural frameworks used to explain ageing and ethnicity. The theories in ageing, namely age stratification, political economy and critical theory, and ethnic stratification in the field of ethnic studies, operate on the assumption of inequality in the social structure because of age in the former and immigrant status in the latter.

Various ethnic groups are differentially incorporated into the larger society (aided and abetted by prejudice and discrimination) and membership in different groups confers different levels of resources, prestige, and power. The indicators of education, occupation, and income typically have been used to measure these positions. (Chappell, McDonald and Stones 2008: 154)

Age and ethnic stratification converge in the double jeopardy hypothesis, a mainstay in the analysis of older immigrant adults (Gelfand 1994; Markides 2001). If a person was old and belonged to an ethnic minority group, especially a visible minority group, that person was doubly disadvantaged. Studies of double jeopardy transformed into studies of multiple jeopardy with the addition of gender and social class to minority status and age (Markides 2001: 691). The viability of the multiple jeopardy hypothesis is yet

to be established (Chan 1983; Havens and Chappell 1983; Lubben and Becerra 1987; Markides 2001) although it has been tested in many contexts that include income, health, social relationships and psychological well-being. The researchers who first proposed the hypothesis found negative effects for income and self-rated health but no effects for psychological wellbeing in their study of African, Mexican and Caucasians in the USA (Markides, Liang and Jackson 1990). Other researchers, however, found considerable evidence that minority older adults expressed high levels of psychological wellbeing, suggesting that social psychological processes of group identification and interaction were just as relevant as external factors like income or occupation (Kobayashi 2000; Miner and Montoro-Rodriguez 1999). The alternative hypothesis, the age-as-leveller hypothesis, maintains that the differences between majorities and minorities may decline over time insofar as age effects cut across all racial and ethnic lines (Cool 1981), levelling out inequalities found earlier in life. The underlying premise is that minorities are confronted with prejudice and discrimination over their lifecourse for which they acquire coping skills that may be used to combat age discrimination in later life (Williams and Wilson 2001).

The buffer hypothesis with its roots in social psychology has been applied to the study of older immigrants in a limited fashion (Miner and Montoro-Rodriguez 1999; Olstad, Sexton and Sogaard 2001). The underlying assumption of this hypothesis is that psycho-social factors buffer stressful events generated by resettlement and life as an older immigrant in a new country. A Canadian study of foreign-born Chinese older adults found that ethnic identity was not a resource that made up for low income (Gee 1999). The investigation unearthed evidence suggesting Chinese immigrants with lower incomes were less likely to identify themselves as Chinese. The reason offered for the findings was that a Canadian identity, instead of a Chinese identity, was probably more accommodating to the descendants of poor older Chinese in terms of receiving resources (Chappell, McDonald and Stones 2008: 155). In contrast, a study of first-generation Somali migrants to London found that family support was the main buffer against depression for this group (Silveira and Allebeck 2001). In the USA, a study of Hispanics compared the role of family psychological factors to structural factors (acculturation, socio-economic status) and concluded that collectivistic family values held by older Hispanics were the more likely to be related to high levels of wellbeing (Miner and Montoro-Rodriguez 1999: 443).

Family sociology has not fared much better when it comes to explaining the situation of older immigrants. Proponents of the predominate theory in the field, the solidarity–conflict model, have long argued the importance of ethnicity and ageing (Antonucci, Jackson and Biggs 2007) and have matched this with empirical studies about generations across nations, about

attitudes to immigration and membership in various ethnic groups (*e.g.* Jackson and Antonucci 2005; Jackson, Forsythe-Brown and Govia 2007; Koyano 1996; Lowenstein and Ogg 2003; Silverstein *et al.* 1998) usually according to several of the seven dimensions of solidarity that represent type and frequency of interactions, geographical distance between generations, exchange and assistance, emotions, agreement on opinions and normative agreement (Connidis and McMullin 2002). Researchers have been diligent in describing the nature of the relationships between successive generations of immigrants (Jackson, Forsythe-Brown and Govia 2007); they have predicted wellbeing, they have examined ethnicity as a buffer that protects intergenerational relationships (Ajrouch 2007) and have studied care-giving cross-nationally (Lowenstein and Ogg 2003) and generational change longitudinally (Bengston, Putney and Johnson 2005). For example, using the National Survey of American Life that compared Black Americans and Caribbean Black immigrants the conclusion was that there was little difference between the two groups insofar as intra-familial relations seemed to overcome barriers of geographical distance (Jackson, Forsythe-Brown and Govia 2007). Overall, the results are sometimes mixed but the pervasive theme is that generational solidarity does not differ a great deal cross-nationally (Lowenstein 2005). Nonetheless, Lowenstein rightly noted that, 'the extent to which race and culture influence intergenerational relationships, though, is unclear' (2005: 405).

Constructing ethnicity

A recent trend in theorising about ethnicity and ageing is a constructivist perspective. Older adults interpret and construct their social world and, as a result, there are multiple realities that are equally valid (Fivish and Haden 2003; Gubrium 2005; Holstein and Gubrium 2003). The scholarship conducted under the constructionist rubric varies widely and evinces a mosaic of theoretical sensibilities. Although meaning-making is central to all of the constructive approaches, different versions of constructionism emphasise different aspects and dimensions of social processes. In the case of immigration and ethnicity, 'culture is not a shopping cart that comes to us already loaded with a set of historical cultural goods. Rather, we construct culture by picking and choosing items from the shelves of the past and the present' (Nagel 1994: 162). Exploration of the various ways in which immigrant minorities construct various aspects of their lives makes up almost all of the literature in this area and is mainly descriptive (*e.g.* Acharya and Northcott 2007; Dossa 1999; Kavalari and Van Willigen 2006; Kobayashi 2000; McConatha, Stoller and Oboudiat 2001; Wong, Yoo and Stewart 2006). For example, a study of 21 elderly immigrant women from India

residing in Canada were interviewed to ascertain what they were doing or not doing to reduce the risk of mental distress. The women reported that to lower mental distress they exercised strict control over their 'inner self' and did this by staying busy while they met their family, social and cultural obligations (Acharya and Northcott 2007: 619). Their culture provided a number of culturally prescribed ways to stay busy and was thus identified as 'moral medicine' that protected them from mental distress (Acharya and Northcott 2007: 630).

Looking forward

The field of gerontology in the area of ageing and immigration has accumulated a number of research findings and has begun to establish certain traditions of theory. It would seem, however, from the glimpse above that gerontology scholars in this area have lost sight of the vital contributions of theory to the study of older immigrants. At best, the theories addressed above provide several different lenses through which to examine immigration and its effects on the physical, social and psychological aspects of ageing, although they usually emerge as tacit assumptions in most research. Unfortunately, the net result is fragmentary resulting in limited theory building and the development of a body of cumulative knowledge to guide policy and practice. Many of the theories assume processes deemed to be the 'politically correct' approaches to immigration such as assimilation or pluralism or social cohesion. Most of the theories do not have the capacity to capture the effects of immigration at the structural level and its link to the social, psychological and family levels, let alone the physical ageing of individuals or societies. A lifecourse perspective is rarely used which is surprising since immigrants come with a lengthy history in education, work, family, friends, leisure activities and community involvement. The theories are only beginning to reflect the effects of multi-generations within immigrant groups.

The overriding complexity of ageing in general, and ageing and immigration in particular, requires at minimum a long-term view and some type of integrating framework with multiple levels which cannot be accomplished without theories and concepts that are broader and more general in scope (Bengston, Putney and Johnson 2005). The best possibility to date is the lifecourse perspective which can be either incorporated into existing theories or utilised as a shell-like framework of the lifecourse that can host other theories and concepts about immigration and at different levels of analysis. The main architect of the approach, Glen Elder, developed five paradigmatic principles that provide a concise, conceptual map of the lifecourse: development and ageing as life-long processes; lives in historical

time and place; social timing; linked lives; and human agency (Elder 2006). At minimum, this approach can be adjusted to reflect the measurement of time, timing, age and values significant to the lifecourse found in the country of origin and subsequently found in the host country and the continuity or discontinuity created with immigration and resettlement. Studies can be focused on those trajectories of interest like work, education, leisure, family and so forth. In addition, other theories can be easily fitted into the framework like the accumulative advantage–disadvantage hypothesis (Dannefer 2003), a fresh formulation of heterogeneity and inequality over the lifecourse. The disadvantages or advantages created earlier in life are not only perpetrated in later life but are amplified according to this perspective.

As an example, theory has been used in this way by those who use the solidarity–conflict model, albeit implicitly, meaning that its use is not acknowledged. The model has withstood a number of iterations based on critiques, the least of which was the model’s weak link to historical and structural factors that are so central to the idea of context for intergenerational relations (Antonucci, Jackson and Biggs 2007; Connidis and McMullin 2002; Giarrusso *et al.* 2005; Lowenstein 2005). Nevertheless, there have been a number of calls to adopt this approach by solidarity scholars without really capitalising on the assets of the perspective – the opportunity for linked multi-level analyses over time. Without entering the debate, Bengtson, Elder and Putney (2005) argued that the lifecourse perspective has a good fit with the study of intergenerational relations over time because the concepts pertaining to the lifecourse could be directly transposed to guide research (*e.g.* problem formulation, variable selection, rationale, strategies for design and analysis). This idea has been echoed by a number of researchers in family sociology (*e.g.* Connidis 2010; McDaniel and Tepperman 2007; Silverstein 2004) but little theoretical work has amalgamated the two perspectives and none to date in the area of immigration and ageing. The possibilities would be quite helpful, offering a systematised look at the trajectories of immigrants from beginning to end, the meaning of events and major turning points for different generations and their effect on family cohesion, the differences across cohorts in terms of discriminatory behaviour, how immigrant families are affected by other social institutions like schools, work, labour markets, church and government. George (2003) predicted that this approach will be the more common use of the lifecourse perspective in the future, possibly because researchers can build on their own preferences for theories.

One serious problem remains with adding the lifecourse to other theories. As Bengtson, Elder and Putney (2005: 495) noted, ‘the concept of “generation” most commonly used as a kinship term denoting position in the biological line of descent, does not easily index historical location or

process'. They settled the issue by suggesting the use of cohort as an index of history and process. Dannefer and Kelley-Moore (2009), however, expand on the issue, characterising the problem as one where cohort becomes coterminous with context so the role of social forces within each cohort is ignored. The second approach to the use of the lifecourse tackles this problem and is also currently used implicitly.

In the second approach, external theories are nested within the perspective at the various levels of analysis. For example, a political economy approach that examines social political and economic structures could be imported into the perspective at the macro level to explain those factors that would affect the immigration of successive generations such as changes in immigration policy, a poor economy or class structures in the host country. The use of a solidarity–conflict model used at the meso level, but now linked to aspects of the political economy model could in turn be used to explain how generational cohesion affects the self-identity of immigrants using the buffer hypothesis at the micro level. The work of Connidis (2010) exemplifies this approach to theory in family sociology when she chooses conflict theory at the macro level with an emphasis on feminist theory that structurally affects intergenerational relationships and other institutions at the meso level which in turn have recursive relationships with the utilisation of symbolic interaction at the micro level to deal with social interaction. All three theories are housed within a lifecourse perspective (Connidis 2010; Connidis and McMullin 2002). The process is reminiscent of how Lowenstein and Ogg (2003) used the ecology of human development model from Bronfenbrenner (1979) where they nested three different theories: the welfare regime and family culture at the macro level, the solidarity–conflict model at the meso level and quality of life at the micro level.

In addition, the whole edifice of the social construction of a lifecourse as currently described by Holstein and Gubrium (2007) is more than amenable to this framework. They take a lifecourse approach and call it *interpretive practice* which is a constellation of practices through which reality is apprehended and conveyed in everyday life and is conditioned by the circumstances within which it unfolds. In their approach they investigate how social realities like the lifecourse are constructed, what the realities are like, what they are composed from and what social factors condition their production. The application of this approach to immigration would move forward the descriptive studies now available in the research to explanations of ageing for various immigrant groups.

Although the article started on a rather bleak note about theorising in ageing and immigration, the opportunities available to scholars at this juncture are extraordinary. Immigration and ageing depends on a range of

theories and theoretical perspectives drawn from many disciplines for the reason that a diversity of theoretical perspectives can offer complementary analyses. The lifecourse is simply a scaffolding for other theories where seemingly incommensurate epistemological positions can be easily accommodated. Almost everyone 'has a life' in that they pass through time, they are located in specific historical and geographical sites, they are linked to others and they do make their own decisions within whatever constraints exist. All theories can be applied to immigration and ageing within this framework whether they be at the micro or macro levels or bridging levels. This means leaving the theoretical door open to everyone – the positivists, the constructionists, critical and postmodern scholars – all of whom would do well to refocus some of their interest on theory development or at least declare their theoretical perspectives. At the heart of the matter, however, is the need for interdisciplinary theory building that brings together all manner of gerontologists if the field is to advance in a significant way in explaining the lives of immigrant families.

NOTE

- 1 Some of the more common themes that appear in definitions of ethnicity include: ancestral origin, a homeland or land of origin, a shared history of one's people and a shared identity, a language, sometimes a religion and, sometimes, a culture or subculture (Chappell, McDonald and Stones 2008). Race is usually considered to be socially constructed based on physical attributes (Antonucci, Jackson and Biggs 2007).

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Accepted 1 May 2010; first published online 5 August 2011

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