

# Older migrants and their families in Australia

**TRANG THOMAS** discusses the family experiences of older migrants – both those who came as young migrants and now have grown old, and those who came during their old age to join their adult children in Australia.

It is now a truism that the Australian population is ageing, and ageing more rapidly in some groups than others. Specifically, the number of older immigrants of non-English-speaking backgrounds has been growing at five times the rate of the Australian-born aged population in recent years (Hugo and Thomas 2002). It follows that the current generation of Australians looks towards old age with the most diverse cultural faces in Australian history. While the psychology of ageing is important to all of us, this paper is confined to an overview of issues related to older migrants and their families.

While acknowledging that the ageing experience of many older migrants and their families can be a positive one, this paper particularly focuses on some of the difficulties that may arise, since these are seldom discussed.

The dynamics of a substantial long-term migration program generate two groups of overseas-born aged – those who migrated young and grew old in Australia, and those who came here when they were already comparatively older. Those who came to Australia in the post-war years as young migrants have now been in Australia for most of their adult

lives, and their children were either born here or came as young children. The later groups of older migrants consist predominantly of those who came under family reunion programs, sponsored by their adult children. The two groups have different settlement experiences, but now share several similar experiences in terms of family interactions.

The dynamics of migration also relate particular sources of immigrants to particular times of settlement. As seen in Table 1, European immigrants in post-war Australia currently constitute large proportions of the total population of the 65+ years old population. In another generation, by 2026, older people from Vietnam and China will be among the major groups of immigrants to Australia (Gibson et al. 2001). The more recent “post-war” Indo-Chinese immigrants are now sufficiently well established to sponsor their own parents and, in due course, it is expected that the newer African and Middle Eastern immigrants will do the same.

## The two groups of older migrants

For the well established communities who came to Australia before and after World War II, such as the Chinese, Polish, Dutch, Italian and Greek communities, the prosperous economy enabled many to get employment without mastering the English language. As a result, when these groups reach older age, a reversion to the first language occurs for many, a phenomenon well known to everyone who works with older people of non-English-speaking backgrounds.

“Time bound” recollections of the old country are not well researched, but anecdotal evidence – especially from the children of migrants, and often the older migrants themselves – is that their parents recollect the old country and its culture, customs and traditions as such things were expressed when they left it. The culture of the old country may have moved on but is preserved in the memory and society of a generation of migrants as it was. The children of the original migrants, by now themselves around middle age, do not see the culture their parents talk about because it has virtually disappeared, much as the Australian pioneer settlement experience of their grandparents are, at best, historical preserves for young Australians.

**Table 1** Birthplace of immigrants aged 65 and over from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, 1996 to (projected) 2026

Birthplace	Year and ranking according to size of community						
	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021	2026
Italy	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Poland	2	5	6	11	13	14	16
Germany	3	3	3	3	3	3	5
Greece	4	2	2	2	2	2	2
Netherlands	5	4	4	4	4	4	7
China	6	6	5	5	5	6	4
India	7	7	10	9	8	9	8
Vietnam	13	11	11	10	6	5	3
Philippines	21	20	19	15	11	7	6
Lebanon	17	14	14	12	12	10	9
Malaysia	25	24	20	18	14	12	10

Note: Ranking (from 1 = large to small communities)  
Source: Gibson et al. 2001: 82.



It should also be remembered that, for many migrant families, their extended families might be spread over two or more countries. This dispersion has been found to have a significant impact on the psychological wellbeing of older migrants. Research suggests that older migrants in Australia who still have children living in other countries report this separation as a significant source of anxiety (Thomas 1999a, 1999b).

Studies of the overseas-born tend to focus on immigrants who have come during their youth and have grown old in the new country. But there are others – those who made the migration journey during their old age – who have particular issues associated with leaving their homeland during old age, knowing that they are likely to face resettlement problems in an alien society and a prospect of soon dying in a foreign land. For the sponsored parents, family reunion may not necessarily be family renewal.

What makes this older generation an interesting, policy-relevant focus for attention is that, for some groups, they are launched into a new culture at an age when they are coming to grips with their own old age, and are less flexible and less motivated to adjust. Old age is often a time of life review and a search for meaning, and for immigrant elders this takes place in a cultural context different from the culture of origin (Thomas 1999b, 2003a, 2003b).

On the surface, reuniting elderly parents with their adult children in Australia seems an attractive proposition. It accords with the filial duties of the young, as well as with the desires of the older generation to be close to and contribute to the family. Unfortunately, outcomes are often radically different from expectations (Thomas 2003b).

In countries where the extended family is the norm, married adult children commonly live in their parents' house. In the migration context, typically, the older parents come to live in their children's house. In these cases, the structure of authority and the flow of support are reversed (Thomas and Balnaves 1993).

### *The clash of cultures*

Studies of attitudes toward filial obligation among families from different cultural groups in Australia have found that Asian, Southern European and Middle Eastern people put more weight on all forms of family responsibilities and obligation than those from Western Europe and Anglo backgrounds (De Vaus 1996). Overseas research has uncovered similar results: Lee and Liu (2001) looked at intergenerational family conflict and found Asian-American college students reported the highest likelihood of family conflict, compared with those of Hispanic and European American backgrounds.

Older parents' interpretation of filial duties has a surprising commonality across Southern European, Asian, African and Middle Eastern cultures that demands near-absolute obedience and support from children, and children's respect for the dignity of their elders. Such collectivist cultures also hold in high importance the honour of the family, and consider the family tradition as more important than individual rights or happiness (Triandis 1994).

These values often do not fit comfortably where adult children are striving to rear their own children in an environment, which they believe the

older generation does not understand, and where they are isolated by language and acculturation.

The older generation often also seems to want to establish, or live by, the traditional kinds of relationships that exist (or existed) in the home country, whereas the young cannot reconcile the values of traditional filial duties with the self-assertive culture of the West, which is their future.

### **Family dynamics**

It should be recognised that the great majority of migrant parents will seldom be economically independent in Australia: they will be subsidised either by their children or by the taxpayer (Morrissey, Mitchell and Stillson 1988).

Newly arrived migrant parents often find the economic circumstances of the host country create conflict with which it is difficult for them to cope. If their children are financially successful, they are busy with their work, their own children's activities, and the need to support other family dependents. If the children are not financially successful, the parents are both vulnerable and subject to distress over whether they are a burden to the family and have made poor decisions in migrating.

Many older immigrants have left a lifestyle with financial independence and social power, and now instead are totally dependent upon their children, especially if they are not eligible for government financial assistance. Having to ask their children for assistance with such apparently minor needs as transport to visit friends and money for postage stamps, reduces the older person's dignity and self-esteem.

Older migrant parents often expect from their children services that can be better fulfilled by professionals, from transport and supply of meals to personal care and nursing. Major discrepancies arise between what the home culture traditionally required of the roles of the older people, male and female, and those available to them in the new country. Weinstein-Shr and Henkin (1991) found that older migrants lacked familiarity and understanding of both the language and the new culture. The outcome was inevitable: the older parents were unable to give advice and direction about matters with which they were unfamiliar, or the advice they did give was often inappropriate in the cultural circumstances of the new country. In the perceptions of their children, their loss of credibility rebounded adversely upon the traditional values and customs of which the older generation saw itself as guardian.

For the older generation, satisfaction with their lives in the new country is likely to be adversely affected if they are dissatisfied with their relationships with other family members, but the conditions which might satisfy them may be beyond the abilities of the other family members, more fully acculturated, to give. The older generation often considers they have fewer gains and greater losses than do their younger family members (Yee 1992).

It is common for three generations of migrant families to live under the one roof and sometimes in crowded conditions, which is believed, in the general case, to be inimical to life satisfaction and adjustment. The levels of adjustment are lowest for the

older members, but their grandchildren, likely to be highly accustomed to the Western way of life, can also experience stress (Tran 1990).

On a positive note, there appear to be phases during late adolescence and adulthood, when these same grandchildren seek affirmation of their cultural heritage and family history, to which the grandparents are able to contribute. When some grandparents are involved in care giving, they can act as the "culture keepers". They influence the grandchildren's beliefs, as found in a study in the United States (Kopera-Fry and Wiscott 2000) which confirms that minority groups and females were more likely to engage in culturally related activities. Liu and colleagues (2000) studied filial piety obligations among young Chinese in New Zealand and found social identifications as both a New Zealander and as a Chinese were positive predictors of filial piety obligations.

Batrouney and Stone (1998) examined the availability and dynamics of family support across a range of Australian families to determine whether distinctive patterns exist for families of non-English-speaking backgrounds. They found similarity in attitudes, values and experiences across families of all cultural groups. However, parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds were more likely to have their children living nearby and to receive more financial support from adult children. These families were also more likely to have one parent, usually the mother, living with them.

Families of non-English-speaking backgrounds hold values which favour close interaction and mutual assistance and, when possible, translate this into practice within their extended families. However, a lack of resources often prevents them from fully realising these values.

### **A new conundrum? The changing role of women**

A great conundrum for certain immigrants is that they migrate to find a better life for themselves and more importantly, for their children, but they frequently bring with them to the new country a set of attitudes and cultural orientations that may hinder them from achieving their objectives.

A simple example, which does not have a simple solution, is the emphasis on gender equality, or at least greater inhibition on expressing overt forms of inequality and discrimination towards women. This concept is often alien and incomprehensible to older migrants. Where traditional cultural roles do not easily adjust to the Western host country, the consequent stress fractures show up at several levels such as domestic violence and increased rate of marital break-up, as noted by Gold (1992) and Shepherd (1992) in the context of families from Vietnam and Laos in the United States.

In traditional cultures, women often worked, but predominantly in the confines of the non-cash, agricultural economy, so their capacity to achieve economic independence was severely circumscribed. In the new countries, women's employment creates ambivalence because the necessity of higher household income and her consequent sense of independence, are sometimes in conflict with traditional roles. This has potential to be a substantial source

of conflict among recent immigrants in Australia, especially those from collectivistic cultures where a family honour code exists and the conflict is both within and across generations.

In this context, it is instructive to consider Torres (2001), who apparently had some difficulty in recruiting subjects for a study of Iranian immigrants into Sweden: her sample of 30 persons, of whom 22 held University qualifications and the rest held high school diplomas, is clearly not representative. Even within this highly educated sample, Torres (2001: 338) noted that "Iranians are . . . more traditionally oriented than Swedes regarding gender appropriate behaviours and roles".

In their traditional roles, male partners in families tended to dominate what Kibria (1993) calls contacts with societal systems (encompassing employers, schools, health, legal and utilities suppliers, government, and control over money). But in the new country, as Johnson (1998: 249) acutely observed: "The men decreased their traditional liaison with such institutions but retained the pattern of not performing household work". The effect appears to disempower migrant men but does not seem to empower migrant women. The Johnson phenomenon is reported to generate stress for the women as they deal with unaccustomed responsibilities, increased workloads and conflict with their husbands. Simultaneously, it undermines the role of "the patriarch" and leaves him attempting to exercise even tighter control over those things, usually domestic relationships, where he retains authority. Immigrant men in general, and older ones in particular, appear to

sufficient command of English to shop for food, to apply for aid, and to contact police or other services when needed. In an Australian study, Pittaway (1991) called for special classes for older people because most are years away from any structured learning experience and some have little formal education even in their own languages. Failure to learn English due to inappropriate teaching methods also may reduce the older person's already low self-esteem and add to their social isolation (Thomas and Balnaves 1993).

Difficulties in making new friends and language problems contribute heavily to older immigrants' social isolation. Further, there is the problem of boredom resulting from often having little to do if these migrants arrive at an age too old for employment. This demoralising problem applies particularly to the older men who had previously had jobs with some status.



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experience downward mobility in economic and social terms for reasons which are well documented – age, language, non-transferable skills and unrecognised qualifications (Thomas and Balnaves 1993).

While among Vietnamese, Lao and Hmong populations, early studies report that older women adapt more positively to life in the new country than do their male counterparts (Yee 1992), this may turn out to be a short run phenomenon. That is, in the short term, the women may have an affirmative role in assisting in the house, such as cooking, child minding and the like, in the support of other members who go out to work. But in the longer term, these women suffer isolation from lack of English language skills, independent friendships and appropriate responses to the new culture. Their children eventually achieve a degree of economic stability and their grandchildren grow up: the evidence is not yet in on the longer run.

### ***Language and communication***

Difficulties in the acquisition of English at an advanced age have been well documented. Tran (1990) reported that many aged Vietnamese people had difficulty managing everyday affairs in the new country because of their English language problems. They do not have a

For many migrants, reversion to their first language during old age creates communication problems with younger members of their families. In a study about adolescents' relationship with their grandparents, Thomas and Hallebone (1995) found many young people reported their difficulty in getting close to their grandparents who do not speak English. However, communication can occur in other forms: "She doesn't know English and I don't speak Cantonese . . . we watch TV together" (p. 41) and "My grandmother is a fantastic cook" (p. 31).

### ***Mental health issues***

Older immigrants are in double jeopardy because their high risk for developing a mental disorder is coupled with a low likelihood of their needs being catered for (Jayasuria, Sang and Fielding 1992). Older immigrants are vulnerable because they are usually more rooted in their previous culture and sometimes give up any attempt to acculturate, seeing it as a task of the younger generation. Dependency and isolation have also been identified as the most pressing problem of older migrants, coupled with high rates of depression (Thomas and Balnaves 1993).

The extent of the problem is not necessarily obvious because it has been demonstrated that, at least among

immigrants from South East Asia, symptoms of poor mental health are not readily reported. They tend to complain of physical symptoms and bodily discomforts such as skin problems in lieu of psychological symptoms. It is sometimes difficult for medical practitioners to recognise the denial of existing problems and different expressions of depression. For example, complaints about the cold weather are a frequent expression of feelings of despair. The process of seeking help and comfort is exacerbated when the older person is reliant upon a family member to translate. By the time mental health problems are eventually recognised within the family and reported, the conditions are often at an advanced stage (Tung 1985).

There is a risk of creating stereotypes for communities that might, in the Western context, experience adjustment difficulties. For instance, in a culture that has been emphasising youth values, there has been some idealisation of societies in which the elders are seen as the source of experience and wisdom. Such societies belong to an era where life was short and harsh, so that the inhabitants reached the end of their lives before they reached the end of their faculties: "the elders" were, chronologically, what we would now call middle aged. Chenoweth and Burdick (2001: 21) report that: "Some older refugees are surprised to learn that they are not considered old by their new country's standards, and they are expected . . . to work and be self sufficient. . . . In other cultures, people in their fifties are considered elderly."

Old age can bring psychopathology and distress to the migrants who entered Australia as refugees or asylum seekers and have experienced significant past trauma due to war, violence, hardship in refugee camps, death or disappearance of loved ones, and family separation. Studies of older trauma survivors have confirmed that they experience intrusive memories of the trauma and are vulnerable to post traumatic stress disorders (Kahana 1992). Increased incidence of chronic illnesses and a growing awareness of nearness to death may act as reminders of the severe assault on the self caused by earlier trauma. Development of effective therapy programs are needed for this particular group of older people and their families.

### **Caring for the aged**

In Australia, the expectation of being cared for at home during the last years of their lives is particularly common among older migrants. Older migrants expect to be cared for by their families instead of being cared for in nursing homes. Many came to Australia from countries where homes for older people either do not exist or are of such poor quality that placing one's parents in them is equivalent to institutionalising them like orphans or the mentally unsound. Of course, many native-born Australians also have an unfavourable view of modern nursing homes (Thomas 1991).

In a study where children of older Vietnamese migrants were interviewed about their intentions regarding caring for their parents when the latter became frail or sick to the extent that much nursing care would be required, participants expressed much confusion and uncertainty. Most were adamant that they would not send their parents to nursing homes but many were not willing to leave their jobs either

(Thomas 1999b). Most carers believed that they would be able to cope somehow, either by sharing the burden among other members of the family or by relying on employed helpers.

The tradition of caring for the elders in extended families has been often promoted in the ethnic communities and lauded as a desirable norm, despite being recognised as a possible source of burden for many migrant families. Research in the United States confirms that, among families of ethnic minorities, older parents are more likely to live with their children (Glick and Hook 2002). Personality conflicts, pressures from different priorities, and stress caused by shortage of finance and time can create immense difficulties for everyone, risking the development of elder abuse.

While the objective of the elderly living at home with their children may be commendable and can be assisted by policies such as the increased availability of respite care or home visits by professionals, ethnic families should be given the choice of selecting the best type of care for the ageing members of their families, rather than trying to live up to unrealistic social expectations. In societies where nursing homes do not exist, or are unacceptable, the families had no choice but to care for their older parents at home. They have choices now, but in a study of 11 ethnic groups in Chicago as long ago as 1988, the biggest single barrier to the older person's use of social services was a belief and expectation that their children would provide full support (Chicago Department on Ageing and Disability 1988).

Finally, it is often helpful for older migrants to visit their old country. A return might help to ease their homesickness, help them to realise that the idealised old homeland has undergone significant changes, and help them to remember why they left. They may then be able to achieve contentment with their families and an appreciation of their new homeland (Thomas and Balnaves 1993).

### **Conclusion**

It should be no surprise that there are many impediments to the happiness of those who migrate at an advanced age, or growing old in a new country. Nevertheless, many seem to manage it well.

Lest it should appear that the experience of older migrants is essentially negative, it should be noted that there are also substantial gains for them and their families. Being close to their children is important to older parents, and visa versa. Despite potential conflict over cultural adjustments, older migrants often contribute in a meaningful way to the household, and their grandchildren also come to value their heritage preserved by the older members.

Valuable support for the wellbeing of older migrants is to be found in the size of the ethnic community to which they belong – as the community becomes larger and better established, it provides a wider social milieu and can provide support services for its older members.

A policy implication arises from this observation. Newer groups may require some services funded by the wider society until their own community is able to handle the task. The so-called "ghetto effect" of new migrant communities is potentially a positive

benefit to the older members as this is where older people could find people of common cultural values and friendship without language barriers.

It seems we have allowed the focus of research to move too intensely to questions about "what are the problems of migrating?" without balancing the equation with the question of "what are the problems of family separation caused by migration?" Many of the negativities that show up in research are often associated with the older migrants attempting, with greater or lesser degrees of success, to adhere to their cultures of origin.

The lesson may be that life in the old country has its attractions, and so does life in the new. Having chosen to migrate, what was familiar is replaced by many things that are not. Under these circumstances, some sense of loss is normal, but that loss is, hopefully, more than compensated for by family, material benefit, good health care, and the personal factors that motivated the migration in the first place.

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**Trang Thomas** is Professor of Psychology at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and Director of Science of the Australian Psychological Society. She was made Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her contribution to the community in aged care and ethnic affairs.