



Resilience, Social Connection and Community Organization Forum

Vancouver Site Report: February 19th, 2019

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Introduction

On February 19, 2019, a diverse group of stakeholders attended the Resilience, Social Connection and Community Organization Forum hosted by the Lived Experiences Vancouver research team. This forum used the photovoice exhibit, *The Lived Experience of Aging Immigrants*, to springboard facilitated discussions on the topics of resilience, social connection, and community organization in relation to immigrant older adults. Click [here](#) to view an online version of the exhibit.

Funding for the forum was provided by grants from Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research ([Reach 2017](#), PI, Sharon Koehn) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Connection 2018, PI, Shari Brotman). It is one of a series of forums to be held across four Canadian sites (Greater Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal, and Quebec City). Following completion of all the forums, a consolidated project report will be released.

The forum was organized in conjunction with the United Way of the Lower Mainland's launch of their Healthy Aging [CORE](#) (Collaborative Online Resources and Education) platform. Social gerontologist Eddy Elmer (PhD Candidate, Vrije Universiteit) commenced the forum with an insightful presentation based on his [work with the Vancouver Seniors Advisory Committee on social isolation and loneliness](#).

This site report for the Vancouver *Resilience, Social Connection and Community Organization Forum* summarizes the key themes and ideas that were discussed during the forum for each theme (resilience, social connection, and community organization) and the final concluding discussion that occurred at the end of the forum. Discussion of the individual themes occurred as a part of World Café style conversations, where groups of 4-7 people discussed each theme. The concluding discussion at the end of the forum consisted of a larger group discussion.

Please note that the opinions contained in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the research team or all participants in attendance, but rather reflect faithfully the diversity of opinions and comments made by all the forum participants.

Theme 1: Resilience

Question 1: What are your impressions about resilience in relation to immigrant older adults based on viewing the exhibit?

Forum participants identified various expressions of resilience in the photographs and stories of immigrant older adults. Individual diversity in their characteristics and experience contribute to the unique resilience demonstrated by immigrant older adults. In addition, individuals' mediators of resilience (i.e., passion, faith, or education) must be identified and supported.

- Various older immigrants demonstrate an ability and willingness to adapt. Some act independently to help themselves, while others might need a helping hand. In both situations, resilience is innate to the older adult in a way that is evident or waiting to be realized.
 - Both the internal ability of older immigrants and external drivers are contributors to building resilience; it is important that we reinforce these internal and external processes.
- Some of the immigrant older adults were able to name or identify what contributed to their resilience. For example, some stories recognized the role of faith, nature, and family. Through their passions and activities, participants recognized their own abilities and demonstrated their capability.
- Both formal and informal education was seen to contribute to the social and psychological capital on which older immigrants drew to respond to and ameliorate challenging transitions, regardless of their awareness of their own resilience. They utilized this reserved knowledge to act independently.

Older immigrants' resilience can be characterized by independence, determination, and a willingness to persevere in the face of past and on-going challenges and trauma. Sharing their stories and solutions demonstrated these characteristics and highlighted their resilience.

- Although systems (health care, social services, etc.) in Canada can be challenging to navigate, photovoice participants exhibited independence and a desire to maintain their own voices and abilities. Their stories were characterized by a "just won't give up" attitude, regardless of past trauma(s).
 - Past and current stress shaped the resilience of participants moving forward.
 - Stakeholders underscored the necessity of recognizing diversity in immigrant stories, paying attention to unique individual characteristics and environmental features.

- Older immigrants were characterized as amazing survivors finding courage, creativity, and conviction in the face of hardship.
 - They demonstrated determination to persevere during difficult experiences, no matter how uncomfortable life was/is.
 - Individuals exhibited the will to come to Canada alone or unsupported, and in so doing further reinforced their courage and strength. No matter what, they are willing to come here and make it work; for immigrants there is no turning back: “They must find a way, because they have the will.”
 - Facing barriers at the intersections of immigrant status and as old age requires exceptional strength and resilience.
- Story-telling, sharing, and establishing community connections were seen as a resilience builders for photovoice participants and immigrant populations.
 - Sharing their stories and experiences helps to dispel myths and stereotypes about people from various cultural backgrounds and the immigrant experience overall.
 - Stakeholders and service providers saw the individuals and their stories in terms of the skills they taught and the lessons they shared.
 - Shared experiences can be realized through older immigrant stories, subsequently allowing for positive changes in services or supports as well as community building between older immigrants.
 - However, stakeholders also emphasized the sensitivity and understanding required around the disclosure of their stories; not everyone wants to share their story. Additionally, immigration might represent an opportunity for a new story, freedom for a fresh start, and immigrants have the right to choose whether to share their past or not.
- Stakeholders expressed gratitude and appreciation for the humility and humbleness the immigrant older adults exhibited in starting a new life here in Canada.

Question 2: What actions do we need to take in order to remove barriers and build on strengths?

Systemic barriers that were identified included temporary funding models and over-dependence on volunteers. Forum participants recommended processual changes informed by community-based research, the diverse needs of older immigrants, and an open mindset regarding the many approaches to support immigrant populations.

- Stakeholders noted that temporary funding models create gaps in the continuity of supports that are available to older immigrant seniors.

- In order to narrow these gaps, stakeholders recommended a reconceptualized implementation process, informed by research, service-provider and community knowledge, and discussions between stakeholders.
- Some service providers noted the challenge of feeling that they much of their planning is “driven by the next grant” and fighting this status quo mentality is difficult.
- Stakeholders identified the need for systemic change to ensure necessary supports for immigrant older adults. One example provided was the lack of systemic sustainability if support for immigrant groups relies entirely on volunteers.
 - The diverse needs of immigrant populations necessitate an ‘evolving solutions’ mindset rather than a one-size-fits-most approach.
 - Across Canadian society, stakeholders identified a need to endorse giving and inclusive attitudes, and reconsider how we as individuals and a nation show up to support others.

Participants recommended daily changes in our individual behaviors, interactions and attitudes to build community and resilience. Both personally, and professionally, we can recognize and promote the resilience in others through greater inclusion, curiosity and promotion of diversity.

- At the individual level, stakeholders recommended daily changes be made through even small acts. Some examples included: getting to know our neighbors, smiling at strangers, and creating space for community in our lives.
 - Human interactions were emphasized as an opportunity to build resilience.
 - Stakeholders were encouraged by exhibit participants to take more risks.
- In their daily work practice, stakeholders cited a need to continue building relationships, encouraging, supporting and recognizing the potential in the individual. They also emphasized the need to assess what older immigrants want and value, as opposed to the endorsed knee jerk reaction for program provision that may not match their desires and values.
- Stakeholders noted a societal need for more openness and curiosity, and they felt this could be attained through promoting greater cultural awareness and inclusion.
- We all need to encourage the continued recognition and promotion of the diverse strengths possessed by individuals such as the photovoice participants. Notably, this includes respecting the right of seniors to use their own voice and choice. As service providers and supporters, we must recognize and accept the risks and autonomy that individuals choose to exercise.

Across the levels of Canadian society, it is important to challenge our assumptions regarding the immigrant experience. We need to be aware of the ways in which attitudes, policy, and supports prohibit older immigrants from succeeding.

- Forum participants emphasized how an open-minded attitude was needed to rectify the current challenges posed by an “us vs. them” narrative.
 - Make note of instances when we are just allowing immigrants into Canada versus actively welcoming immigrants into our country and communities.
 - Provide supports with the goal of helping people become less dependent on the system.
 - Be open to recognizing the prejudice and privilege that we bring to the service process. In other words, we must assess our own internal biases/ways of understanding, and work to be more accepting and open hearted.
- Participants noted the need to set realistic immigration expectations as a society and a country, to recognize when we are telling people how they should act or behave whilst creating barriers that prohibit immigrants from succeeding.
 - Barriers to funding and supports stopping us from helping people who want to participate fully in society

Continued sharing of stories from willing immigrant older adults promotes resilience across individuals and communities, and informs practice while dispelling cultural myths and immigration stereotypes. We need to continue to promote cultural spaces for sharing diverse stories and making community connections.

- Continuing to share these stories was noted as an important strength to build upon, spreading strength and resilience within immigrant communities, and the communities of practice that support them.
- Canadian ideals of welcoming new citizens were seen as both a strength and weakness. Ideals of finding and building communities are easier said than done. Changing community spaces to be more inclusive and diverse requires time and effort.
- Stakeholders noted that differences exist in various community and immigrant contexts—cultural stereotyping was recognized as a weakness to be addressed. For example, some individuals would rather face language barriers in a mixed ethnic environment than face community barriers among members of their “traditional” ethnic community.
- Importance of creating and respecting opportunities for intercultural and ethno-specific spaces.
 - Cultural competence building highlighted as an important step to value and respecting various backgrounds and cultures. Continued promotion and celebrations of diversity in an inclusive manner can help reduce community siloes through bi-directional exchanges between diverse communities.
- Service providers can help facilitate connections, but only if people want this.

Theme 2: Social Connection

Question 1: What are your impressions about social connection in relation to immigrant older adults based on viewing the exhibit?

Social connection is an essential component for immigrant older adults' success and resilience within their communities. Various aspects of older adults' identities and communities may enable or inhibit these connections. Establishing connections within familiar or comfortable social environments (e.g., ethnic or faith enclaves) may bolster the skillsets and leadership opportunities to transfer to new environments.

- Participants observed that the exhibit highlighted how intersections of identity created barriers or enablers to participation in programs or events that foster social connection. Important identity markers that contribute to the mix include age, gender, finances and education, mobility and physical and mental health (including PTSD), language, housing (i.e., complexes vs. single-family dwellings) and family circumstances.
 - With respect to family, intergenerational connections were deemed to be important to social connection
 - Education was deemed to be helpful, but in some cases, the devaluation of educational qualifications in Canada leads to a loss of self-esteem and isolation among immigrants.
- Social connection is tantamount to thriving; it gives people a sense of purpose and belonging and contributes to their power. In this sense, success begets success and builds resilience.
- Social connection often takes place in places of worship (despite some negativity associated with religion in Canadian society) – religion has been central in the lives of many immigrant older adults throughout the life course; it also provides opportunities to assume leadership.
- Ethnic (or faith) enclaves are often viewed as counter to adaptation and integration, but it was argued that familiar connections within such enclaves build resilience because people are able to escape discrimination, can communicate more readily and access resources within these environments. In this way, they are better able to build resilience and integrate with the wider society.
- Certain people have skill sets that they are keen to share and to contribute to society – this desire should be enabled in order to build their confidence and power.

Question 2: What actions do we need to take in order to remove barriers and build on strengths?

Financial, psychological, or cultural barriers can inhibit social connections. Peer support and recognition of the inherent value that individuals possess can remove barriers and build on social strengths.

- Religious activities are free, but many community services require a fee and even getting to a free service may incur transportation costs, which can be a barrier
- Self-image can also be a constraint or enabler to connection
- We need to think in terms of Maslow's hierarchy (of needs) and attend to people's basic needs first, to free them up to self-actualize. Peer support can improve mental health and improve people's faith in their ability to contribute, especially when they have opportunities to give back (e.g. preparing a meal, singing).
 - For example, a man in a high-rise apartment offered annual barbecues for building residents. Gradually, the number of people participating grew – ingredients of his success included his investment in the BBQ equipment, as well as his own skills as a Community Builder.
- We also need to lobby policymakers and licensing bodies to recognize the credentials of immigrants (these rules change to ensure people are kept out of the professions – e.g. English levels needed to practice as a nurse here have increased over time).

Community planners, community-serving organizations, schools and public service agencies all have a role in promoting and facilitating social connection. Creating and encouraging intergenerational, cross-cultural, and equity-based spaces requires effort, activation, and proper application of resources.

- Community planners and developers are also integral to creating spaces and hubs for people to meet in buildings and communities (e.g. community gardens, family rooms). Making the space available may be necessary, but it is not sufficient; people often still need to be activated to utilize these spaces.
- A Richmond-based participant felt that many ethnocultural organizations in Richmond did a good job in reaching out to the wider community to educate them about their language and customs, including food on special occasions and holidays.
- The importance of seniors' inclusion in designing and running groups organized for their benefit was seen as crucial. It also needs to be recognized that 'seniors-driven' does not imply that they don't need support – staff are still needed to link them to resources.
 - Peer-led conversation circles for English language learning are an example (better than a didactic classroom setting for immigrant older adults)

- The importance of eliminating tokenism in this process is also essential. Both seniors and staff need to understand what sharing power actually looks like (i.e., addressing discrimination based on ‘white privilege’ mentality/ethnocentrism).
- In order to address ageism and racism, we need to work with youth to support sustainable social change. For example, Richmond Cares/Richmond Gives has reached out to universities to provide education on reducing ageism.

Additional Comments:

- Neighborhood Houses (NH) were identified as one of the many solutions for connecting people and facilitating community change for a diverse population of participants. NHs develop supportive and inclusive sites throughout Metro Vancouver that are used by immigrant seniors. Through applying a network service model, seniors, community agencies and various organizations come together to help engage and serve seniors.
 - Seniors are at the heart of the service, where they lead, govern, identify and respond to needs. As a result, they gain confidence, cross-cultural social opportunities, and create opportunities for vulnerable seniors.
 - This approach results in better coordination of services and supports for diverse populations in the community.

Theme 3: Community Organization

Question 1: What are your impressions about community organization in relation to immigrant older adults based on viewing the exhibit?

Community organizations offer a variety of options for immigrant older adults, from facilitating social connections to providing a safe space to exist and grow. Equally, these organizations benefit from the engagement of older adults, who often reciprocate by volunteering.

- Forum participants agreed that community organizations play important roles in the lives of immigrant older adults and provide opportunities for older adults to develop a sense of belonging, reduce social isolation, be themselves, and build their skills.
- Community organizations provide a safe space for people of different cultures to chat, interact and communicate.
- While older immigrants gain benefits from community organizations, they also give back to community organizations through volunteerism. Volunteering provides benefits both for the volunteers themselves (e.g., self-esteem, chance to use their skills) as well as the organizations.
 - It is important to remember though that volunteers cannot replace paid staff, and organizations require resources for volunteer management as volunteers need support from the staff and the organization.

Organizations create space for older immigrant adults to utilize and share their skills; whether through volunteer roles or interactions with others, their stories and experiences can be heard.

- Community organizations are welcoming spaces that recognize and accept the gifts of immigrant older adults and provide them with opportunities to use their skills. This is particularly important given that Canadian society often fails to recognize the skills of immigrants (e.g., work experience, educational credentials), which was reflected in many of the portraits in the exhibit.
- Community organizations can promote intergenerational connections and provide opportunities for younger people to hear and learn from immigrant older adults.
- Older immigrants often have strong connections with faith organizations (e.g., churches, temples, etc.) and have trusting relationships with them. Faith organizations see older adults as persons, rather than clients or business opportunities.

Access and communication barriers might exist for immigrant older adults who do not know what is available, how to access services, or cannot engage with informative publications due to language and literacy barriers. Particular immigrant groups may face additional barriers due to lack of services.

- Immigrant older adults may fall through the cracks and not access services offered by community organizations due to lack of awareness of what is available and how to access these services.
- Community organizations need to recognize the differences between language and literacy when connecting with immigrant older adults (e.g., translating a pamphlet into another language is not enough, literacy in their own language can be an issue for some immigrant older adults).
- Language and cultural barriers may make older immigrants reluctant to seek help from community organizations. Older immigrants may feel stigma and shame from needing to seek help, and may perceive accepting assistance from community organizations as akin to placing their problems in the public realm. In some cases, offers of help from community organizations may be overzealous or intrusive. Community organizations also may make assumptions about the types of help older immigrants need rather than consulting with them.
- There is a paucity of community organizations and resources for immigrant older adults and certain immigrant groups in particular. Immigrant older adults may have different ideas about what to do when there are gaps in services and may feel less comfortable speaking up compared to Canadian-born older adults due to cultural differences and experiences with government in their country of origin. There is a need to empower and create opportunities for immigrant older adults to engage in advocacy.

Community organizations play an extremely valuable role in connecting people; however, resource allocation does not sufficiently support them to assist immigrant older adults. Siloed service structures also create access and navigation challenges for older adults and service providers.

- There is a disconnect between the important role community organizations play in the lives of older adults and the resources that are invested in them by government and funders. More resources are needed to deliver programs to immigrant older adults.
- Even with limited resources, there are simple ways community organizations can connect with and deliver programs for immigrant older adults. For example, 411 Seniors Centre organized a cooking and exchange experience with a group of Afghan senior women.
- Services for seniors are siloed, even within individual community organizations. Often for specific services (e.g., housing information and outreach) you need to go to a specific person

within the organization or another organization. This creates challenges for older adults attempting to navigate and access services.

- Individuals/organizations may have the attitude “if it’s not under my portfolio, I’m not doing it.”
- The mentality of the leadership/management of an organization strongly influences the culture of an organization and whether they are willing to serve all or operate services in siloes.
- Funding siloes (e.g., funding allocated to serve only older adults with a specific immigration status) and competition among organizations for funding further contribute to the fragmentation of services.
- Services may be siloed based on language or immigration status. Older adults are often categorized and their access to services is provided (or not) relative to their legal immigration status rather than their needs.
- There is a need for a ‘one-stop shop’ model of service for immigrant older adults to replace the segmented community services that currently exist.

Question 2: What actions do we need to take in order to remove barriers and build on strengths?

Financial barriers such as lack of funding, short-term grant-based funding, and drawn-out and restrictive application processes challenge how community organizations support immigrant older adults.

- Funding was the most commonly identified challenge for community organizations. In particular, challenges with the New Horizons Program for Seniors were mentioned by several participants, though generally concerns about funding were applicable to a wide range of funding streams:
 - Lack of opportunities to renew grants/receive continuous funding for initiatives
 - Strict and inflexible funding criteria which often do not reflect the real needs of communities and do not fund the things that matter (e.g., programs involving food often are not eligible for funding)
 - Need for funding to be more responsive to changing community needs and to be allocated in a timely manner (i.e., not have to wait 9 months to find out if you will receive funding)
 - Lack of funding to support innovative/creative ideas
 - Challenge of how to show the value and outcomes of innovative social programs to funders

Collaboration across organizations and sectors is a strength to build upon. Collaborations between volunteers and community service workers are necessary, and volunteerism is crucial to the success of services but often requires some funded support.

- The United Way's Healthy Aging CORE website is seen as an ideal way to promote collaboration between community organizations and provide information on funding opportunities.
- Collaborations and partnerships were identified as ways to build the capacity of community organizations to support immigrant older adults. It was felt the policy environment is becoming more conducive for collaboration between organizations. There is more focus now on common goals and working together, though there is still the need to remove the competition between community organizations.
- Opportunities exist for collaboration between non-profits, volunteers, the public sector and the private sector, and for community organizations to expand the usual range of partners with which they work.
- Volunteers are a valuable resource for community organizations, but having a very successful volunteer program can backfire, particularly when the government believes that services can be delivered by volunteers, because operational funding (e.g. for paid staff) is sometimes reduced or eliminated as a result. Even when volunteers are plentiful, organizations still need paid staff to support them. Community organizations cannot exclusively rely on volunteers.

Strong organizational and systemic leadership is required to meet the diverse needs of immigrant older adults. Innovative approaches by community organizations can identify and meet the need of underrepresented groups.

- Strong leadership and staff teams are key to the success of community organizations. These people have a significant impact as they are the representatives/faces of their organizations.
- Community organizations need to embrace and have an open door policy towards diversity, and to make concerted efforts to connect with these groups on a grassroots level. There is also a need for inclusive and multicultural dialogues within our communities.
- It is important to recognize the heterogeneity of older immigrant populations. For example, many Filipino immigrants come to Canada as caregivers, which may impact their support systems and attitudes towards care.
- There is a need for governments to adopt humanistic approaches to funding and planning services for immigrant older adults.
- Certain ethnic groups appear to be overlooked in the provision of services to immigrants (e.g., Vietnamese immigrants). The reasons for these gaps are unclear and we need to further explore how to connect with these populations.

To address the community needs of immigrant older adults, we must first understand their needs (met/unmet), skills, and experiences. Consulting with and advocating on the behalf of immigrant older adults ensure that real concerns or barriers to community connections, such as transportation gaps, are addressed.

- Government can do more to ensure that the credentials of trained professionals immigrating to Canada are recognized. This lack of recognition is unfair and a loss to Canadian society, since we are unable to benefit from these individuals' valuable skills and education. Often the failure to recognize the education of immigrants is due to the protectiveness of professionals in Canada over their credentials. When immigrants are attempting to have their credentials recognized or upgraded, they may encounter language or financial barriers that prevent them from making this happen. We need policies on educational accreditation that promote accepting and valuing what immigrants bring and establish a system of reward rather than penalty.
- Decision-makers, funders, etc. need to listen to community organizations and immigrant older adults about needed services and resources.
- People need more information to understand government immigration programs (e.g., caregiver regulations). Radio and alternative forms of media can be important forms of communication with immigrant older adults, particularly in populations that have lower literacy levels.
- Community organizations need to be easily accessible by older adults if we want them to participate. Transportation is especially important.
- There is a need for advocacy with MPs by community organizations and older adults for more resources for community organizations and supports for immigrant older adults. A cohesive voice and message are needed for this advocacy.

In order to build on preexisting strengths we need to consult with organizations working with immigrant senior populations (e.g., faith organizations), scale successful programs, and provide opportunities where people are likely to connect (i.e., food gatherings).

- We need to consider how we can build on and scale-up successful programs.
- Faith can provide older immigrants with a sense of continuity when they move to a country that is culturally and linguistically very different from their country of origin. Faith organizations are an important way to reach immigrant older adults; they have an advantage over other community organizations because they are not reliant on grant funding.
- Food is an important way to create connections with people.

Concluding Discussion

Question 1: How do each of the table themes and their solutions connect?

- The themes emphasized both person-centred (people are at the core) and strengths-based (recognize strengths and resilience) approaches for older immigrants.
- The resilience of older immigrants was emphasized in the photovoice portraits. Community organizations and social connection are sources of resilience for older immigrants.
- Connecting with their community is often the first step towards resilience for older immigrants; their community can then refer them to trustworthy community organizations that will help them to build their resilience.
- Participants identified storytelling (as in the exhibit) as an important way for immigrant older adults to communicate their stories to community organizations and the public.
- It is important to provide opportunities for the recognition and empowerment of older immigrants.
- When we support immigrant older adults, the result is not just thriving individuals, but thriving communities.

Question 2: Are there any gaps in understanding that preclude action right now?

- Participants identified transportation as a current gap that can prevent immigrant older adults from participating socially, staying connected and accessing community organizations: “Transportation connects the moments in our lives.” We need to engage in thoughtful design of transportation systems as well as communities to facilitate the mobility and participation of immigrant older adults.
- We need to critically examine Canada’s self-perception of being a multicultural and inclusive society
- We need to consider the sustainability of services and resources for immigrant older adults. Many services are temporary in nature due to changing environments and insecure funding.

Question 3: Who needs to take responsibility for which actions?

- We need to engage in more sharing of knowledge and resources.

- Community organizations need to think about inclusivity when planning programs and services (e.g., celebrating the holidays of different cultures such as Persian New Year).
- The City of Richmond has a service plan for seniors; other municipalities could learn from this and create their own service plans.
- We need to consult with Seniors Advisory Groups and ask them questions about inclusivity and diversity and check in with them when planning programs and addressing issues.
- We also need to share success stories and celebrate the work of the sector. Too often, we overlook this.