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Abstract

Understanding the unique challenges confronting older immigrants is becoming increasingly imperative in the face of a global demographic shift in ageing and migration, leading to an increase in the population of older immigrants globally and specifically in Canada. Social isolation, which characterises an individual's feeling of lack of meaningful social connection, can significantly impact the health and well-being of older immigrants, yet little research has examined this phenomenon. Hence, our qualitative study investigates the impact of community experiences and social networks on the social isolation experiences of Punjabi-speaking older immigrants living in Calgary. With the aid of NVivo 14, we conducted a thematic analysis to examine the narratives of 10 Punjabi-speaking older immigrants who were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Preliminary findings show that many participants perceive the physical distance created by migration as a significant factor in their experiences of social isolation. The intersection of language barriers, cultural differences and ageism also impacted their experiences of social isolation. However, the participants revealed that community connections through a local community centre have improved their social network composition and reduced social isolation. This research contributes insights into the experiences of isolation of older immigrants and the importance of community spaces designed for cultural events and intergenerational connections as potential avenues for mitigating social isolation.

Findings

Theme 1: Factors Leading to Loneliness/isolation

Older Punjabi immigrants in Calgary identified several factors leading to increased loneliness/isolation, including retirement (does not work or volunteer), health issues, lack of access to transportation, distance from friends, living arrangements, and language and cultural differences.

"There's one simple thing, people like me in India who come here, there is a lot of difference in culture. Like there, people come and go, people here don't have time to come and go, they do their own thing. People don't have time for each other. Everything busy."

"...If you have friend's where you live there you don't feel things lacking."

Theme 2: Loneliness and Isolation

Isolation among older immigrants can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, impacting mental and physical health. Language barriers, cultural differences, and limited social networks amplify this effect, leading to depression, anxiety, and a reduced quality of life. As a result, they may find themselves reminiscing about home, feeling disconnected, and feeling overly reliant on their children.

"No, I cannot stay at home as I am from Punjab. In Punjab I did wrestling, kabaddi, Kho-Kho [cultural games]."

"After that the kids take me in the car. It has been one and a half years routinely the kids they daily drop me off and pick me up."

"...but where I live, I don't meet anyone. There are people everywhere and doing their own thing. Everyone is in their own routines."

Theme 3: Coping Strategies

In response to the challenges of increased loneliness and isolation, older Punjabi immigrants in Calgary have adopted various coping strategies, including community involvement, making new friends, planning visits back to their homeland, and prioritizing quality time spent with their children and grandchildren.

"I have kids at home, a son, a son and a daughter, and with them I spend time"

"We come to [a community centre] like it's our dad's house. We come and go as we please, we open and close the doors. No problem coming in and out. Right? What more do you want? People are playing cards, sitting here, no one is going to bother them."

When asking the participant if they visit India regularly, they answered "I'm running from here in January, also."

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We respectfully acknowledges the traditional territories of the Indigenous people of the Treaty 6 and 7 regions of Northern and Southern Alberta.

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Context

- The World Health Organization (2015) highlights that immigrant and refugee seniors are vulnerable to social isolation due to language barriers and separation from familiar social networks. While familial support structures offer some protection against loneliness, the quality of interpersonal connections within the household remains paramount.
- Loneliness is linked to depression, as lonely individuals often show signs such as pessimism, dissatisfaction with life, increased sadness, and feelings of helplessness (Mushtaq et al., 2014). It is also associated with a higher risk of Alzheimer's disease and dementia, especially among older individuals (Mushtaq et al., 2014)
- Existing literature highlights social isolation in older immigrant populations and suggests interventions for their well-being.
- Culturally sensitive outreach and community integration initiatives can mitigate social isolation and loneliness among immigrant and refugee seniors (Johnson et al., 2019). However, this has yet to be examined among culturally distinct populations in Canada.
- Thus, this research explores the role of community support in combating social isolation and loneliness among older Punjabi immigrants living in Calgary.

Methodology

- Sampling Procedure:** Purposive sampling technique (Inclusion criteria: Punjabi speaking, 60 years and over, immigrant, living in Calgary)
- Sample Size:** 10 (7 Male and 3 Females)
- Data collection:** Semi-structured interviews lasted between 26-49 minutes; audio recorded with participants' consent
- Data analysis:** Verbatim transcription and translation to English; coding with NVivo 12; and thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016)
- Ethics:** The study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board, and participants provided written informed consent



Figure 1: Semi-structured interview

Discussion

Social isolation and loneliness issues not only affect the mental and physical well-being of immigrant seniors but also pose significant hurdles to their integration and sense of belonging in their host communities. The research underscores the critical importance of targeted interventions and culturally sensitive support structures to address the multifaceted nature of loneliness among immigrant seniors (De Jong Gierveld et al., 2015). By recognizing different immigrant communities' unique needs and vulnerabilities, policymakers and service providers can develop holistic strategies that foster social connection, resilience, and empowerment among elderly immigrants.

Available literature highlights the intricate interplay between cultural factors, familial support, and loneliness among elderly immigrants (Nasir et al., 2022). While family ties can provide a sense of security and belonging, the quality of interpersonal relationships within households and the loss of cultural and social resources due to immigration can exacerbate feelings of loneliness (Nasir et al., 2022). This literature underscores the necessity of interventions that address social isolation at the individual level and consider broader cultural contexts and community dynamics. By fostering inclusive environments that respect and celebrate diverse cultural identities, communities can create spaces where elderly immigrants feel valued, supported, and connected.

Promising avenues for intervention, such as peer-based support programs, culturally specific services, and community engagement initiatives (Zhao et al., 2022) that provide practical assistance and social opportunities and also validate the lived experiences of elderly immigrants and empower them to actively participate in their communities are needed (Lai et al., 2020). However, the literature also emphasizes the need for further research to fill existing gaps in understanding among specific immigrant populations, including Punjabi seniors. Research is needed to inform the development of tailored and effective interventions that promote the well-being and resilience of elderly immigrants in Canada.

Multidisciplinary Recommendations

- Increasing Awareness:** Provide community-based sessions or workshops to educate individuals about available services, cultural differences, and resources.
- Enhancing Social Support:** Establish community-based support groups, peer networks, and training programs to provide comprehensive social support, including emotional assistance, practical guidance, and community integration initiatives.
- Promoting Health and Well Being:** Facilitate access to healthcare services through community-based health fairs or clinics.
- Addressing Social Isolation:** Organize regular social events and activities to unite community members, foster connections, and reduce social isolation.
- Weather Adaptation and Safety:** Provide information on adaptation strategies, such as dressing appropriately for Canadian weather.
- Transportation Convenience:** Advocate for improved public transportation options, such as increasing bus frequency or expanding safe and accessible walking paths to and from community centers and residential areas.
- Social Engagement and Integration:** Facilitate social activities and group events at community centers to encourage interaction and friendship formation among residents.

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