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Ethnicity in the Informal Networks of Older Sunbelt Migrants

A Case History of the Finns in Florida

The importance of family, particularly adult daughters, in providing assistance to community-based elderly raises questions about the informal support networks of older persons who migrate to sunbelt retirement communities. These migrants are largely married couples in their sixties, in relatively good health, with higher than average levels of education and income (Biggar, Longino & Flynn 1980, 217-232; Rives & Serow 1981, 259-278; Wiseman 1980, 324-337).

Little is known, however, about the experiences of these older migrants and how they cope with life-course transitions. Using an exchange-theory perspective, this chapter integrates research on caregiving, migration, and ethnic identity to explore the impact of shared ethnicity on support networks among elderly migrants. The research is focused on a community of retired Finnish Americans in Florida. The study of this particular ethnic group's experiences with life-course transitions may serve to shed light on the problems faced by sunbelt migrants in general.

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Informal Supports of Older White Ethnics

Relatively few studies have explored the informal support networks of older white ethnics (Holzberg 1982, 249-257), even though white ethnics are less likely to utilize formal services than older persons in general (Gelfand 1982, 195-226; Guttman 1979, 246-262). Several studies have demonstrated a preference for both friendships and professional relationships within the ethnic group (Cohler & Lieberman 1980, 445-469; Place 1981, 195-226), but this research has focused on respondents who maintained residential continuity.

Several studies shed more direct light on the role of ethnicity in the helping networks of elderly migrants. Myerhoff's (1978) ethnographic research highlights the importance of ethnic attachment among surviving members of a once active communtity of retired eastern European Jews in Venice, California. Although she does not stress instrumental assistance, her research highlights the role of ethnic identification in the elderly residents' search for meaning of life.

The community provides a forum for celebrating individual biography, for sharing the lessons of survival, and for

coping with the daily reminders of the losses that accompany aging. Myerhoff avoids the fallacy of viewing ethnic identification with an immigrant subculture derived an Old World heritage, which, as Gelfand and Kutzik (1979) warn, negates the importance of ethnicity for later generations. Rather, her view of ethnicity is fluid, incorporating past experiences but also responding to present needs.

Chrisman's (1981) study of a Danish-American community in the San Francisco area also provides evidence of the integrative potential of ethnicity. Although residentially scattered and culturally invisible, these Danish Americans have maintained a set of ethnic voluntary associations and stable interpersonal relationships for over a century. Chrisman argues that integration of new migrants into the community is facilitated by an ideology of common descent and a national network of ethnic organizations linking Danish-American communities throughout the United States.

These voluntary associations not only provide newcomers with an organizational entry into the community but may create indirect ties among new and earlier migrants that provide both hospitality and resource assistance. Whether such communal bonds would generate long-term assistance to recently integrated but impaired migrants and whether ethnic organizations would emerge to meet the instrumental needs of frail older members are questions beyond the scope of Chrisman's research. Nevertheless, his work is important in pointing out the integrating mechanisms and exchange systems provided by organizational networks linking ethnic communities, and it provides a departure point for my case study of Finnish self-help networks in Florida.

The Finns in Florida
A Case Study: Community History

An important focus of my research in progress in a Florida community of retired Finnish Americans is exploring ethnic attachments among sunbelt migrants. Several thousand older Finnish Americans live in the West Palm Beach/Boca Raton Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), and the number is estimated to grow by more than 10 000 during the winter months. The community is not a planned retirement settlement. Members are scattered through several towns in the area, linked through a variety of ethnic organizations.

The community began in the late 1940s, when retired Finnish immigrants moved south from New England and the upper Midwest. Residents today include first- and second-generation retirees from both the United States and Canada, primarily Northern Ontario. In addition, there has been a sharp increase in immigration from Finland to Florida since 1960. Interviews with these recent arrivals suggest that most are drawn by the existence of the Finnish community in the area (Copeland 1981, 126-143).

Many of the retirees moved from Finnish-American ethnic communities in Massachusetts, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin, and northern Ontario. First- and many second-generation Finns, who represent today's elderly population, remained geographically concentrated, exhibited endogamous marriage patterns, and maintained a relatively strong attachment to the ethnic community (Olson 1979). Chain migration patterns have meant that many new migrants arrive with pre-existing ties to current residents. As with the Danes studied by Chrisman, chapters of national ethnic organizations, including the Finlandia Foundation,

Knights of the Kalevala, and Ladies of the Kalevala, provide entry points for new residents.

There are three ethnic religious congregations in the area, which still sponsor Finnish-language services. Finnish communities traditionally sponsored "Finn Halls", whose activities provided a focus of ethnic participation. The Finnish Tourist Club of Lake Worth *(Turisti-haali)*, founded in 1940, was the first ethnic association. A more politically oriented organization, the Finnish Workers Educational Club of Lake Worth *(Kenttä-haali)* was formally organized 2 months later. Both organizations still maintain buildings and sponsor active cultural and social programs.

Although the political divisions that separated participants in the two halls during the early years have become less salient, identifiable yet overlapping social networks still distinguish them. Several informants stressed the fact that only one of the halls serves alcohol at social events. A recent development with respect to long-term care was the establishment in 1970 of the Finnish-American Rest Home, which now includes a skilled nursing facility. Residents proudly explain that construction of the facility was financed from an endowment based on contributions by the Finnish-American Community. In addition to providing care for frail elderly, the rest home is a focal point for the community; programs, coffee parties, and birthday celebrations are frequently scheduled in its dining room.

Community Ties

Informal interviews with several residents suggest that friendships within the ethnic community may compensate for the absence of kin in providing support for retirees who encounter increasing frailty. Several residents reported "doing favors" for fellow residents, who could later be relied on to reciprocate with needed assistance.

Several key questions remain to be answered. Chain migration from ethnic communities "up North" means that many new migrants arrive with pre-existing ties to current residents. How important is chain migration in influencing the structure and content of informal helping networks? Do older migrants rely most heavily on long-term friendships originated on their prior residence or can common ethnicity substitute for the lack of long-term commitment characterizing kinship? What is the effect of level of ethnic integration on return migration decisions and long-term care plans? Although most of these questions require data on individual networks, several characteristics of this ethnic group contribute to an understanding of the Florida community's response to growing old.

Community and Ethnicity

In exploring the role of ethnicity in coping with the problems of aging, it is important to note the small size of this ethnic group. Of the total number of immigrants in the United States up to 1920, Finns made up less than 1 %. Maintaining an ethnic community requires greater organizational effort with so small population, although smaller ethnic groups may be more concerned about cultural survival (Glazer 1980, 1-16).

A number of factors heightened the importance of the ethnic community in the lives of many first- and second-generation Finnish Americans. The height of Finnish immigration coincided with a growing nativism. Although both northern European and Protestant, Finns were viewed as part of the "new immigration", composed

largely of southern and eastern Europeans (Aaltio 1969, 63-69). Modernization in Finland occurred later than in other western European countries, and most Finnish immigrants were poor, had little formal education, and lacked industrial experience. Speaking little if any English, they found employment as miners, lumberjacks, mill operatives, domestics, and laborers clearing farms (Jalkanen 1969, Olson 1979). Furthermore, because the main wave of immigration coincided with the rise of nationalism in Finland, many immigrants brought with them an intense loyalty to their native culture. Nationalists promoting ethnic consciousness were active in immigrant organizations (Hoglund 1960).

Another relevant feature of this group is its history of organizational activity (Greeley & MacReady 1974; Woehrer 1982, 65-78). In addition to religious congregations, temperance societies, benefit organizations, socialist locals, and sports and social clubs, Finnish immigrants developed various cooperative enterprises, including stores, creameries, and boardinghouses (Hoglund 1960). This tradition of cooperative organization along ethnic lines provides a structural foundation for collectively coping with problems associated with aging.

Women's Role in the Community

Another important legacy of the immigrant experience has been the role of women within the community. Since the 1890s, the majority of female immigrants from Finland were young single women who came alone, often settling in major cities where Finnish men were rare (Wargelin-Brown 1986b). Most had no more than a *kansakoulu* (elementary) education, and many spoke no English. A large number found work as *piikas* (domestics) in the homes of middle- and upper-class American families, learning English and American lifestyles. The *piikas* enjoyed high status within the immigrant community because of their relatively high wages, economic independence, facility in speaking English, and familiarity with American culture (Koivukangas 1986, Penti 1986). Hoglund (1960) argues that because they tended to acquire an economic status equal to that of immigrant men, Finnish-American marriages were relatively egalitarian.

In addition to economic independence, first-generation Finnish-American women assumed active roles within the immigrant community. They grew up during a period of gains in women's rights in Finland, resulting in enactment of women's suffrage in 1906. In the United States, immigrant women were active participants and leaders in the three major institutions of the immigrant community; the temperance movement, the socialist workers' clubs, and the Finnish synods of the Lutheran Church. This legacy of economic independence, relative equality within marriage, and political activism provides elderly Finnish-American women with a tradition of reliance on networks of female peers in coping with problems encountered in old age (Wargelin-Brown 1986a).

Finnish-American Distinctiveness

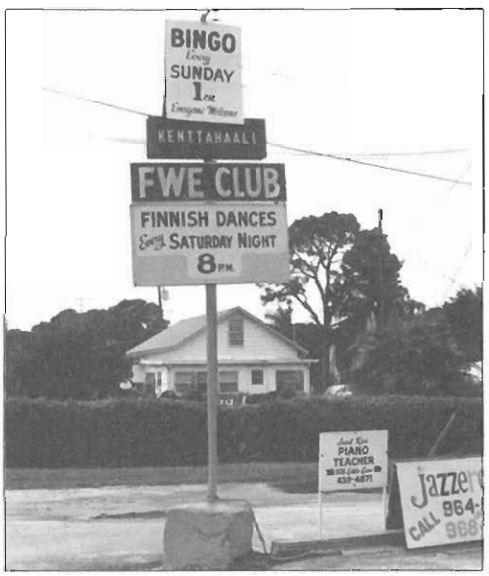
Although Finnish Americans share several characteristics with other white ethnics, they also exhibit distinctive features. Like other immigrants arriving in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Finns faced strong nativist sentiment. Although they shared northern European origins and Protestant religion with earlier waves of immigrants, language barriers and geographic concentration

heightened community cohesion, and small size and Finnish nationalism strengthened commitment to ethnic solidarity. Although both Finnish immigrants and immigrants from southern and eastern Europe came from rural backgrounds, Finns had a history of small, family-owned farms. They did not share the legacy of serfdom with other southern European immigrants, which Schooler (1976) argues encouraged passive responses to problem dependency in social relations, decreased feelings of autonomy, and lessened capacity for rational planning. Instead, a tradition of cooperative organization along ethnic lines provided a structural foundation for collectively coping with problems associated with aging. Finally, women within the immigrant community possess a history of organizing and problem solving that extends beyond the family unit and emphasizes reliance on networks of other women.

Despite the preliminary nature of this research, there is evidence that the Finns in Florida have continued their earlier patterns of cooperation and ethnic organization in coping with late-life transitions. Several questions need further exploration in determining the generalizability of the Finnish experience to other ethnic groups. What has been the effect of the legacy of independence and reliance on female peers that social historians have described among the first-generation *piikas* (domestics) on strategies for coping with old age? Has this tradition been maintained among second-generation women, many of whom experienced their childbearing years during the 1950s?

Shared Ethnicity and Aging

This chapter has suggested that shared ethnicity may partially compensate for lack of kin in the support networks of first- and second-generation ethnics in sunbelt retirement communities. The importance of this argument hinges on the continued salience of ethnicity. Cross-sectional research suggests that the salience of ethnic identity is positively correlated with age (Hoyt & Babchuck 1981, Place 1981). An assimilationist perspective would suggest that this is a cohort effect, reflecting the concentration of first- and second-generation ethnics among the elderly. As these older cohorts are gradually replaced by generations further from the immigrant experience, the salience of ethnic identity among the elderly could be expected to decline.



(Photo: Ismo Söderling)

More recent writing, while recognizing that assimilation and acculturation continue to take place, has argued that a new form of contemporary ethnicity has developed. This perspective views ethnicity as a continuous variable rather than an ascribed attribute and has stressed the importance of identifying the conditions under which ethnicity is particularly sal-

ient (Yancy, et al. 1976, 391-403). Variously described as "emergent" (Yancy, et al. 1976, 91-403), "symbolic" (Gans 1979, 1-20), "situational" (Paden 1967) and "latent" (Pavalko 1981, 111-125), ethnicity is seen as largely voluntary, a label that an individual may choose to project in particular situations (Padgett 1980, 55-77).

Gans (1979, 1-20) found that symbolic expression of ethnicity may persist among third- and fourth-generation ethnics who have had little involvement in immigrant cultures and organizations, citing as examples the persistence of ethnic identification among Scandinavians, Germans, and Irish. Several explanations have been offered for this persistence of ethnic identity. Ethnicity, at least based on a European ancestry, entails few disadvantages. As argued above, it can satisfy internal identity needs of late adulthood, providing a source of continuity in both self-concept and social participation, buffering the effects of role losses in other areas (Myerhoff & Simic 1978; Cool 1980, 149-169).

This chapter has suggested that shared ethnicity may generate community networks on which retired migrants can depend in coping with increasing frailty. Among many first- and second-generation ethnics today's elderly population, these exchange relationships may reflect a continuation of lifelong involvement in an ethnic community. Alternatively, renewed emphasis on ethnic identity may be a reaction to loss of other roles and opportunities for social participation (Hoyt & Babchuck 1981, 67-81). In the case of chain migration, these friendships may have lasted many years and resemble kinship in longevity. Even among more recent acquaintances, the sense of shared identity and faith in the continued viability of the ethnic community may activate norms of generalized reciprocity even when friendships lack long-term commitment.

Although the form of ethnicity may have changed in generations further removed from the immigrant experience, symbolic ethnicity may still contribute to satisfying needs for continuity and sociability. Shared ethnicity among older sunbelt migrants, particularly when reinforced by similarities in age, life-style, socioeconomic status, and residency, may generate a sense of community in the new environment. However, this form of symbolic ethnicity is also characterized by its lack of demands on other areas of life. Gans (1979) argues that third- and subsequent-generation ethnics *"...look for easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity, for ways that do not conflict with other areas of life... Ethnicity takes on an expressive rather than instrumental function in people's lives, becoming more of a leisure-time activity" (Gans 1979, 12-13).*

(Photo: Ismo Söderling)

Symbolic ethnicity may form the basis for new friendships among migrants. Whether this new form of ethnicity will also generate exchange relationships with sufficient strength to cope with increasing frailty remains an empirical question. It is also possible that belief in the continued viability of the new community will activate norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage organizational efforts paralleling the institutional completeness of the older immigrant neighborhoods. This awaits the results of further investigation.

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Mitä on elämämme?
Helähtävä nauru,
kyynel joka putoaa.
Unelma, joka loistaa ja katoaa,
vierivä arpanoppa,
kieli, joka soi ja katkeaa.
Se on meidän elämämme.
Miksi siis säästää?