



Older migrants' civic participation: A topic in need of attention

Sandra Torres^{a,*}, Rodrigo Serrat^b

^a Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, Sweden

^b Department of Cognition, Development and Educational Psychology, University of Barcelona, Spain



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ABSTRACT

The number of international migrants around the world has steadily increased, as has the number of people that belong to the older segments of our populations. Due to these demographic transformations, topics that have yet to receive scholarly attention have begun to receive the attention of research communities. This article aims to expand the social gerontological agenda on civic participation in old age by arguing that migratory life courses offer new angles of investigation. By bringing attention to older migrants' civic participation, this article argues also for the expansion of the imagination of migration scholars who have yet to regard civic participation as an angle of investigation worthy of attention when it comes to this population. Thus, by proposing some of the research questions that could be posed if older migrants' civic participation was to be a part of the research agenda of social gerontologists and migration scholars alike, this article proposes that the ways in which these older people chose to engage civically is one of the ways through which we could bring explicit attention to the contributions that they make to their so called 'host' societies.

Introduction

As more and more people grow into advanced old age, and our societies become more ethno-culturally diverse due to international migration, new research topics arise, which have the potential to expand the scholarly imagination of both the social gerontological field, and the field that is migration and ethnic relations research. This article brings attention to such a topic, and argues that there are at least two reasons why older migrants' civic participation deserves our attention. First, we argue that drawing attention to these older people's civic participation could expand migration scholars and social gerontologists' imagination on migratory life courses since most research on older migrants focuses on the challenges they face instead of the societal contributions that they make. Second, we propose that focusing on migratory life courses allows us to ask new research questions about civic participation in old age, and that these questions could expand the social gerontological imagination on this type of participation. It is worth noting that we use the term migratory life courses in the plural form because the United Nations define older migrants as

any foreign-born person who either moved to the country of destination via, for example, a family reunification program, at age 65 or older, moved in the past and then reached the retirement age in the country of destination, or was displaced by conflict or climate change at 65 age older or reached retirement age while displaced

(<https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/older-persons-and-migration>).

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps understandable that research on older migrants has shown that there is great diversity in their migration motives as well as the time of the life course in which they migrated. Some older migrants have migrated early in life in order to work, for example, while others have done so late in life for amenity-seeking and/or family-reunification purposes (see Warnes, Friedrich, Kellaher, & Torres, 2004). Lately we have begun to recognize that there are some older people among those who seek asylum as well; a reality we did not seem to fathom a decade or so ago. Thus, not all older migrants have migrated voluntarily. Differentiations such as these ones offer us a way of addressing the diversity that exists among older migrants. Irrespective of them, however, what most older migrants have in common is that they have experienced migration at one point or another, and are aging in a country that is not where they were born.

According to the recently established **International Organization for Migration's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC)**, for example, an estimated 30 million or 11.7% of the international migrant stock are 65+ years old (UN DESA, 2017). On the website that this organization has started – i.e. the Migration Portal – it is stated that:

the estimated number of older migrants aged 65 or above in developed regions increased by more than 11 million from 1990 to

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: sandra.torres@soc.uu.se (S. Torres), rserrat@ub.edu (R. Serrat).

2017, while in developing regions, it only increased by less than a million. This is developed countries in the northern hemisphere were the destination of the majority of international migrants who subsequently aged. In addition, the fact that migrants living in the southern hemisphere tend to return to their countries of origin as they age, explains why the estimated number of older migrants is only rising in developed regions (UN DESA, 2017).

Against this backdrop, it is understandable that migration scholars in Europe started to recognize older migrants as a group worthy of their attention about two decades ago (Torres & Karl, 2016; Warnes et al., 2004; Warnes & Williams, 2006; White, 2006; Wilmoth, 2001). Some Europe-based social gerontologists have also argued that the life courses of migrants are theoretically profuse sources of information about aging and old age (Torres, 2006, 2008). Research on older migrants is therefore on the rise but their civic participation has yet to receive attention. Turning our attention to this topic is necessary but before we do that, we need to clarify what we mean by civic participation in old age, and why we think that migratory life courses offer new angles of investigation for those who conduct research on civic participation.

Civic participation in old age: the questions that the migratory life courses-angle raise

Older people's civic participation has become an increasingly relevant topic in social policy and scholarly research agendas. International organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) as well as the European Commission (European Commission, 2012), as well as state and local governments across the globe (not to mention countless non-profit organizations), promote civic participation among older people as a way to foster their active and successful aging. Defining what civic participation means is not, however, as easy a task (Berger, 2009). While some scholars advocate for a broad perspective on civic participation, including any activity contributing to the development of social capital (Norris, 2002; Putnam, 2000), others advocate a narrower take and focus primarily on volunteering (Cutler, Hendricks, & Neill, 2011). The ways in which civic participation is studied varies as well. Some scholars use a selection of items from different surveys (e.g. European Social Survey, Survey on Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe) to create composite indicators of civic participation (e.g. Hoskins & Mascherini, 2009), while others focus on identifying relevant conceptual dimensions in order to qualitatively distinguish among different types of civic activities (e.g. Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Theocharis & van Deth, 2016). Although there are differences on the conceptual dimensions proposed, most scholars agree, however, that there is a difference between social and political forms of civic participation (e.g. Adler & Goggin, 2005; Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014; Berger, 2009; Ekman & Amnå, 2012).

Social participation includes all the activities primarily directed towards helping others outside the family, producing a common good, or solving a community problem. This type of civic participation includes both individual activities, such as prosocial behaviors directed towards non-kin, donation of money or in-kinds supports towards charities or NGOs, and collective activities, such as participation in volunteering, community, or charitable organizations. The later have been called 'civil', 'pre-political' or 'latent political' participation, due to their no manifest political intention. Conversely, political forms of civic participation groups all the activities that have the explicit aim of influencing political outcomes. This type of civic participation also includes individual forms, such as voting, contacting political representatives, donating money to political parties and organizations, signing petitions, boycotting, or political consumption activities, and collective forms, such as protest activities, participation in political organizations or forums, or participation in social movement

organizations.

A recent scoping review of research on older people's civic participation (Serrat, Scharf, Villar, & Gómez, 2019) has shown that social participation (and particularly volunteering) is the angle of investigation that has received the most attention, while political activities have been largely overlooked. This is not surprising considering that research into older people's civic participation tends to be framed against the active and successful aging paradigm; a matter that has received some critical attention (e.g. Martinson & Minkler, 2006). Moreover, the focus on volunteering that some of this research has had has reinforced the conceptualization of older people as contributors to welfare regimes, rather than as citizens that could potentially challenge the political establishment (Serrat et al., 2019). This is, of course, interesting in and of itself, but the question we raise here is why so little research has focused on older migrants' civic participation since, as the next section will show, we lack both, a conceptualization of older migrants as contributors to their host societies' civic activities, and/or as political agents of change.

Having said this it seems necessary to state that most research on civic participation in old age has focused on the antecedents or outcomes of this participation, with fewer studies addressing how older people experience participation as such (Serrat et al., 2019). Following the classic civic voluntarism model – which states that individuals participate in civic activities only if they can do it (resources), want to do it (motivations), and are provided with the opportunity to do it (opportunities) - the literature on antecedents has focused on resources, motivations, and/or opportunities for civic participation (e.g. Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). This perspective brings attention to the mobilizing factors that promote civic participation (such as higher education, income, extensive organizational affiliations and/or informal social networks). Previous research has shown, for example, that older people who participate civically tend to have greater human and social capital resources than people that do not participate in this way (e.g. Serrat, Villar, & Celdrán, 2015; Warburton & Stirling, 2007). This raises the question of whether the different migratory life courses alluded to earlier translate into differences in civic participation. A focus on the antecedents would also allow us to explore whether older migrants, who have lived longer in a country, are more civically active than those that have lived for a shorter period of time, whether degree of integration into a society leads to increases in civic participation, and whether the orientation of older migrants' civic participation changes as they become more integrated into a society (i.e. whether older migrants engage, for example, in volunteering activities deemed to be relevant to the lives of other migrants when they first arrive, but move on to engage in activities outside of their ethnic enclaves as time passes).

The research that has focused on the reasons why people participate civically has explored the range of attitudes, psychological dispositions, and motives that are associated with greater participation in different types of civic activities. Thus, factors such as generativity (e.g. Serrat, Villar, Warburton, & Petriwskyj, 2017), attitudinal, normal, and control beliefs (e.g. Warburton, Terry, Rosenman, & Shapiro, 2001), self- and other-directed motives (Petriwskyj, Warburton, Everingham, & Cuthill, 2014), or altruistic and self-benefit motives (e.g. Chen & Morrow-Howell, 2015) have been shown to determine different types of civic participation. This raises the question of whether the same motives apply for older migrants, and whether different migratory life courses are associated with different motivations for civic participation. Finally, research that brings attention to the opportunities for civic participation, have shown that there is a range of micro, meso, and macro contextual level factors that are associated with greater participation. Regarding micro-level factors, for example, research has shown that having been invited to participate by someone in one's informal social network (e.g. Rozario, 2006), as well as perceived social support and reinforcement (e.g. Cheung, Tang, & Yan, 2006), are factors associated with greater participation in civic activities. As for meso-level factors, variables such as religious attendance (e.g. McNamara & Gonzales,

2011), neighborhood connectedness (e.g. Dury et al., 2016), or community attachment (e.g. Okun & Michel, 2006) has been positively associated with older people's civic participation. Finally, with regards to macro-level factors, structural factors such as government policies (e.g. Warburton, Paynter, & Petriwskyj, 2007) or welfare state regimes (e.g. Hank & Erlinghagen, 2010) has also been related to civic participation. All of these angles of investigation beg the question of whether all of this is just as relevant when dealing with older migrants.

Regarding the outcomes of civic participation, research on older people's volunteering has shown that there are a wide range of benefits associated with this type of engagement, such as improvements in physical and mental health, cognitive function, mortality risk, well-being, physical activity, health care use, loneliness, and prospective engagement in lifestyle or productive activities (Serrat et al., 2019). Although it makes sense (at first glance at least) to assume that the same would hold true for older migrants, we do not in fact know whether or not the benefits of volunteering would be as tangible for this group. Some of the volunteering that these older people may engage on could entail, for example, remaining committed to being of assistance to those left behind, and when this entails remaining in touch with people who are living in the midst of an armed conflict, volunteering may not rip the same tangible benefits that previous research has identified.

Scholars on old age civic participation have argued that most of the available literature does not consider the diversity of the older population, in terms of "... gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, health status, need for assistance with personal and domestic care, class, political persuasion, work and life experience; experience of collective action" (Barnes, Harrison, & Murray, 2011, p. 257). However, emerging studies on this topic show that diversity interacts with antecedents, experiences and outcomes to shape who is in fact able to participate in civic activities, what experiences do they have of participation, and what benefits arose from their engagement (Serrat et al., 2019). This is one of the many reasons why we argue that drawing attention to the implications of different migratory life courses for different types of civic participation is a particularly propitious way of advancing research.

The lacuna of research on older migrants' civic participation

This article stems out of the realization that research on older migrants' civic participation is scarce. This realization is the result of a scoping review of literature on older people's civic participation using an array of keywords pertinent to this topic, and no publication year limit (for details see Serrat et al., 2019). A total of 429 articles comprise the data corpus for that review but only seven of them brought attention to older migrants, and it is this lacuna that prompted us to wonder why it is that civic participation has not been on the agenda of scholars who focus on older migrants. In Table 1, we display the few studies there are about older migrants' civic participation taking into account the type of civic participation, and the type of older migrant group addressed.

The first thing to note is that all the seven studies on older migrants' civic participation identified through the scoping review mentioned are studies that focus on social participation, and more specifically on volunteering. In other words, older migrants' political participation has yet to receive attention; a baffling result to say the very least. Regarding types of older migrant groups it is noted that four studies focus on migrants that have migrated for family-reunification purposes (Mui et al., 2013; Nayar & Wright-St Clair, 2018; Wright-St Clair et al., 2018; Wright-St Clair & Nayar, 2017), one for amenity-seeking reasons (Haas, 2013), and one for asylum seeking purposes (Gele & Harsløf, 2012). The remainder study (Lee et al., 2018) brings attention to a mix of international labor and family reunification migrants. With regards to the countries of origin and settlement, it is also noted that five papers focus on Asian migrants living either in the United States (e.g. Lee et al.,

2018; Mui et al., 2013), or in New Zealand (Nayar & Wright-St Clair, 2018; Wright-St Clair et al., 2018; Wright-St Clair & Nayar, 2017). Only two papers bring attention to older migrants in Europe [one dealing with British retirees living in the Costa Blanca in Spain (Haas, 2013) and the other with African refugees living in Norway (Gele & Harsløf, 2012)].

With regards to the methodology that these articles have used, it seems interesting to note that all of these studies are exploratory, and rely on small purposively selected samples (range 18–74 participants), with the exception of one paper (i.e. Lee et al., 2018). This one paper analyzes a large sample from the California Health Interview Survey ($N = 1812$) with participants between the ages of 50 and 92. In the other studies listed in the table, the samples are either gender-balanced, or it is mostly older women that have been interviewed. From this it follows that most studies use a qualitative design, which makes sense considering that they are exploratory. A range of instruments for data collection have been used, however, including questionnaires, interviews, participant observation, and focus groups.

Most of the studies are framed against the backdrop we ourselves use when introducing this article, namely that increased diversity among the older population could pose challenges to gerontological policy and practice. The idea being that older migrants are believed to pose a challenge for their countries of settlement, due to their culturally and often linguistically different backgrounds, and their social embeddedness is often compromised at least initially, which is especially pronounced in those who migrate late-in-life (e.g. Wright-St Clair et al., 2018). The fact that older migrants' unique life courses could potentially expand the gerontological imagination, which is what the articles in this **Special Section** are arguing, is not, in other words, part of the equation that seems to have prompted researchers to inquiry into older migrants' civic participation. Instead, the few studies that have been conducted so far on this topic are studies that allude to the fact that being an older migrant can be associated with negative outcomes, such as poor physical health (e.g. Gele & Harsløf, 2012), mental health (Mui et al., 2013), social isolation, and/or loneliness (e.g. Wright-St Clair et al., 2018), among others. In this context, volunteering is thought to promote their integration into their host society and to impact their health and well-being in a positive way (e.g. Gele & Harsløf, 2012).

The literature on older migrants' civic participation analyzed here tends, however, to mirror the broader literature on civic participation in later life, with nearly all the papers addressing antecedents of participation, some of them looking at outcomes, and none focusing on the experiences of participation as such. With regards to antecedents and/or the resources that the literature on civic participation in later life associate with higher odds of being civically engaged, it is clear that the few studies on older migrants' civic participation take for granted that education, income and health facilitate older migrants' volunteering (Gele & Harsløf, 2012; Haas, 2013; Lee et al., 2018; Nayar & Wright-St Clair, 2018). However, this pattern was not consistent across the ethnic groups that some of these studies bring attention to (see Table 1 for information on the groups). Lee et al. (2018), for instance, analyze the factors associated with volunteering among four distinct first-generation Asian ethnic groups (Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese) who migrated to the United States. Their results show significant variations in the factors associated with volunteering in these four sub-groups. This highlights the importance of taking into account migrants' ethnic backgrounds when studying civic participation, and raises, of course, the question of whether ethnicity plays a role in how older migrants choose to become civically engaged.

Beyond the role of human capital resources, there are studies that have shown that low proficiency in the settlement country's dominant language is a significant barrier for civic participation among older migrants, which can limit this participation to activities targeting the ethnic enclaves to which older migrants belong. Thus, although some participants in the studies by Haas (2013) and Wright-St Clair et al. (2018) openly expressed that the impact of their contributions reach

Table 1
Studies on older migrants' civic participation by type of civic participation and type of older international migrant group addressed.

	Older international migrant groups			
Type of civic participation	International labor migrants	Family-reunification international retirement migrants	Amenity-seeking international retirement migrants	Refugees
Social participation	<p>Lee, Johnson, and Lyu (2018) Country of birth: China, Philippines, Korea, Vietnam Host country: United States</p>	<p>Mui, Glajchen, Chen, and Sun (2013) Country of birth: China Host country: United States Wright-St Clair & Nayar (2017) Country of birth: China, India, Korea Host country: New Zealand Nayar and Wright-St Clair (2018) Country of birth: China, India, Korea Host country: New Zealand Wright-St Clair et al. (2018) Country of birth: China, India, Korea Host country: New Zealand</p>	<p>Haas (2013): Country of birth: UK Host country: Spain</p>	<p>Gele and Harsløf (2012) Country of birth: Somalia, Eritrea, Uganda, Ethiopia Host country: Norway</p>
Political participation	–	–	–	–

beyond their own ethnic enclave, all the studies reviewed here bring attention to older migrants' *current* participation in *organizations in their country of settlement*. Thus, none of these studies draw attention to older migrants' *personal history of civic participation*, which could, of course, allow us to study the effect of migration on participatory trajectories. The lacuna of research found makes it impossible to draw conclusions about any of the patterns that these studies bring attention to. Thus, we do not know whether older migrants are involved in *organizations outside their own ethnic group*, or whether they are involved in *transnational civic participation oriented towards their countries of origin*. Both of these angles of investigation deserve, of course, attention.

It is also worth noting that older migrants' motives for civic participation has received much less attention in the seven articles in question, although some studies highlight both self- and other-directed motives. Doing something for oneself, such as making friends or creating daily routines, were, for example, the primary motivation that the older Brits who were actively involved in a charitable organization in Spain mention (Haas, 2013). They were also motivated by the possibility that civic participation offers in terms of allowing them to use the skills and qualifications that they had acquired in their country of origin, a motive that was also present among older Asian migrants living in New Zealand (Nayar & Wright-St Clair, 2018). This last study also showed that giving something back to the country of settlement could be an important reason to engage in volunteering activities; a line of reasoning that deserves more attention. Regarding opportunities for participation, it seems interesting to note that the study by Gele and Harsløf (2012) with older African migrants living in Oslo identifies lack of information about relevant organizations and mistrust towards organizations as potential barriers to engage in volunteering. Wright-St Clair and Nayar (2017) found also that although older Asian migrants in New Zealand felt welcomed into co-ethnic communities, they has also experienced discriminatory behaviors from the wider New Zealand community. This raises the question of whether experiencing racism impacts older migrants' readiness to participate civically.

Although outcomes of participation have received less attention than antecedents, three of the studies analyzed here focus on this issue. Mui et al. (2013) report, for example, on a volunteer intervention aimed at improving well-being and satisfaction with life among older Chinese migrants living in New York City. As part of this program, older migrants were trained to provide emotional support to co-nationals that are informal caregivers. The underlying assumption seemed to have been that empowerment through volunteering roles could help older migrants overcome depression and feelings of social isolation and, at the same time, provide help to informal caregivers from their own community. Results from this study suggest also that the volunteering

intervention in focus may have a positive impact on older migrants' health, personal and social well-being; a finding that deserves attention considering that these older people are often perceived to inhabit disadvantageous positions. Wright-St Clair et al. (2018), who have carried out a study in New Zealand with older Asian migrants, have reported similar results. Finally, Haas (2013) has examined the functions of volunteering for British older migrants living in the Spanish Costa Blanca, and has shown that volunteering contributes at the individual level to participants' psychological and social well-being. At the collective level, volunteering appears to be a way of fostering bonding (e.g. mutual aid within the British community) and facilitating integration into the host society. This speaks volumes about the role that civic participation could play in older migrants' lives.

Discussion

Research on older people's civic participation has identified social participation (particularly volunteering) and political participation as the two areas worth exploring when trying to bring to fore the civic engagement that takes place in later life. Irrespective of which angle one chooses to focus on this scholarship aims to bring attention to the contributions that older people make to their societies. One of the starting points of our inquiry was the idea that if we do not look into older migrants' civic engagement we run the risk of rendering their contributions to society invisible. We have argued also that because anti-migrant sentiments are on the up rise in different parts of the world, and policy makers are trying to encourage older people to engage actively with their communities, it makes little sense to relegate civic participation to the periphery of the gerontological imagination on older migrants. Shedding light into older migrants social and political participation would render these older people's societal contributions visible, and give us an idea of which societal issues that deem to be worthy of their attention.

As mentioned in the previous section, the scoping review of literature on older people's civic participation identified a whopping 429 articles on this topic but only seven of them bring attention to the ways in which older migrants choose to engage socially, and none has, as of yet at least, brought attention to how they engage politically. Considering that research on older migrants has steadily increased over the past two decades (Torres & Karl, 2016), it was mind-boggling to note that so little attention has been given to this topic. The impression one gets when reading research on older migrants is that we are still primarily concerned with the challenges that they pose to gerontological policy and practice (Torres, 2012), but have yet to fathom that their migratory life courses actually offer an array of new angles of

investigation that could prove to be theoretically and conceptually profuse for the gerontological imagination (Torres, 2006, 2008). The fact that the little research there is on older migrants' civic participation is research that only brings attention to their contributions to society, and does not regard them as political actors worthy of our attention is worrisome since we cannot achieve what we cannot fathom.

Our failure to regard civic participation as angle of investigation worth exploring when studying older migrants means that we lack information about the extent of older migrants' civic engagement, as well as the ways in which they prefer to engage. The fact that we do not know if what we assume about antecedents and/or resources holds when it comes to older migrants is also an area of investigation that deserves our attention, as is the fact that we do not know if they experience the same barriers to civic participation that have been identified so far for non-migrant populations. Research suggests that language proficiency could be a barrier in some cases but there may be other barriers such as, for example, whether or not one has experienced racism, if one feels integrated into the societies in which one lives, and whether or not one is considering returning to one's country of origin in the future. It seems reasonable to assume, for example, that those older migrants that are the least integrated are those that would chose to engage in activities that benefit their own ethnic enclaves and/or other migrants. We do not know, however, if this is the case since all the studies conducted thus far have focused on their involvement in associations and networks that are ethnicity-coded. It is therefore worth exploring if older migrants participate in organizations outside their own ethnic group, and if so, how their civic engagement in these organizations looks like, when it starts and what motivates it. Exploring the ways in which older migrants' engage in transnational civic participation seems also necessary considering that research has shown that the transnational networks of older migrants have increased through the digitalization of society.

The experiences and outcomes of older migrants' civic participation are also topics that we have yet to explore. Moreover, the ways in which older migrants' diversity interacts with antecedents, experiences, and outcomes of participation to shape who is in fact able to participate, what experiences do they have of participation, and what benefits arose from it, are all areas worthy of investigation. A life-course approach to older migrants' civic participation is also highly needed. Most studies tend to focus in current life events and conditions to understand why some older migrants participate while others do not. However, little is known about older migrants' trajectories of civic participation and about the role that migration has had on these trajectories. It is easy to assume that the more civically active older migrants were in their countries of origin, the more willing they would be to participate civically in their host country, but, again, we do not know if this is the case. Disruption in one's civic engagement may also lead to disengagement, which is, of course, yet another question worthy of our attention.

There are, in short, an array of unanswered questions as far as older migrants' civic participation is concerned. This article has aimed to bring attention to this lacuna of research in order to argue not only that we need insight into how and why these older people engage and contribute to their societies, but also because failure to pay scholarly attention to this topic means dismissing to acknowledge their civic engagement. By reviewing the scarce existing knowledge on the topic and suggesting research questions that future studies could address, we hope to ignite the attention of gerontologists, migration scholars, and civic participation scholars.

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