Social capital and migrants experience in regional Australia

Naduni Wickramaarachchi
La Trobe University

Introduction

Since the 1990s, directing skilled immigrants to work and live in regional Australia, and requiring a period of regional residency has been an ongoing policy intervention (Hugo 2008; Wulff and Dharmalingam 2008). However, the success of this programme is in part dependent on the long-term retention of these immigrants in regional Australia (Wulff and Dharmalingam 2008). Various factors have influence on longer-term residential location for immigrants. Previous studies on immigrant’s settlement patterns have emphasized that existing social capital and available opportunities to practice specific culture and lifestyle influence longer-term residential choice (Chiang and Hsu 2006; Hugo, Khoo et al. 2006; Hugo 2008; Wulff and Dharmalingam 2008; Yoon and Lee 2010; Townsend, Pascal et al. 2013).

In Australia there is a huge difference between the experience of ethnic social networks and cultural experiences in metropolitan and regional/rural areas (Chiang and Hsu 2006; Yoon and Lee 2010). There is only limited research available to provide an understanding of the settlement experience, social networks and the settlement decision-making process of immigrants in regional or rural communities in Australia (Wulff and Dharmalingam 2008; Holton 2012). This lack of knowledge hinders opportunities to promote wellbeing and better integration of regional immigrants (Misingham, Dibden et al. 2006; Townsend, Pascal et al. 2013).
This study will present the factors that influence building social capital among a sample of regional skilled migrants in the regional parts of Australia. Furthermore, the lifestyle needs of regional immigrants will be discussed in relation to the importance of fulfilling these needs in retention of migrants in regional Australia. The implications of the findings for a successful settlement programme are then discussed.

**Social Capital**

The concept of social capital has been widely used, including as a tool in understanding cross-cultural and ethnicity-based identities (Aguilera and Massey 2003; Missingham, Dibden et al. 2006; Carrington and Marshall 2008). In this study, Putnam’s (1993) view of social capital will be used to consider networks within and beyond immigrant groups.

Social capital can be simply defined as trust, norms and networks that facilitate social coordination for mutual benefits (Reynoso 2003; Knudsen, Florida et al. 2006). Social capital comprises a set of informal institutions such as networks, norms, trust, conventions and unwritten codes of behaviours that generate beneficial outcomes for members of the community (Putnam 1993). In summary, Putnam’s notion of social capital can be divided into three main points (1) that social capital generates positive externalities for members of a group (2) that these externalities can be achieved through shared trust, norms, and values, and (3) that shared trust, norms and values arise from informal organisations based on social networks and associations (Knudsen, Florida et al. 2006). The core idea of social capital is that social networks generate beneficial outcomes to individuals through social norms and trust within community.

Likewise, the concept of social networks has described in various ways. Carrington and Marshall (2008:118) have defined the social network as an arena of interaction between
organisations and individuals with related interests who want to achieve goals and find solutions to problems. Individuals use social networks to achieve their goals because they lack of resources to pursue strategies individually. Networks can extend to different directions: horizontal or vertical (Krishna and Shrader 1999). While horizontal networks direct towards the similar kind of people, vertical networks directs towards the different kind of people. Both types of social capital exist concurrently, and overlap. The possibility of demonstrating different levels of social capital by individuals can be varied according to the human capital, such as level of education and the ability to speak a shared language (Brettel 2005:855). Communities which have a high level of social capital are usually able to tolerate difference and diversity. These communities can work together to achieve common goals and can negotiate well and resolve conflicts (Carrington and Marshall 2008).

**Lifestyle**

Early theories that describe migrants’ settlement decision-making processes typically centred around the theme of the importance of labour market issues such as employment opportunities and wages (Greenwood and Hunt 1989; Niedomysl and Hansen 2010). However, recent literature has increasingly focussed on access to amenities or quality of life issues and meeting cultural needs (Niedomysl and Hansen 2010). Notwithstanding the lack of research into such claims, policy makers have focussed on initiatives that develop cultural and entertainment facilities to attract immigrants (Niedomysl and Hansen 2010) as well as promoting lifestyle practices such as the way that people eat, the way that people enjoy leisure time and the way that people practice their own religious activities. Acculturation into a different culture is highly stressful for the immigrants (Yoon and Lee 2010). However, allowing them to practice their own culture is considered to reduce this stress and accelerate the integration process.
Previous research on immigrants in Australia, has emphasised the importance of the available facilities in practicing immigrant’s own lifestyles as a means to retaining immigrants in the regional areas - locations where such opportunities are often more limited than in metropolitan cities (Goel and Goel ; Hugo, Khoo et al. 2006; Wulff, Carter et al. 2008). Hugo et al (2006: 26) emphasised the available opportunities to practice culturally specific lifestyles as one of the important factor that immigrants in regional areas concern when selecting a place to live. Similarly, findings described by Hugo (2008: 142) reveal that the availability of suitable employment is not the only condition that migrants consider when choosing a place to live; lifestyle and education of children were identified as significant.

This research seeks to identify the factors contribute to build social capital and lifestyle satisfaction of the skilled immigrants in the regional Australia.

**Regional Skilled Migrants in Victoria**

This paper reports on the results of an on-line questionnaire survey with 50 regional international skilled migrants in the Bendigo, Warrnambool and Ballarat regions of Victoria, Australia. This study used purposive sample method to reach regional skilled migrants who are spread all over the Victoria. As it was impossible to list all regional skilled migrants in Victoria, the researcher used subjective information (social groups with whom regional skilled migrants associate) and experts (organisations who work with regional migrants) to reach these sample.

**The Research Sample**

The sample for the online survey comprised 27 males and 23 females. Over a half of the participants (59.2%) were from the region of South Asia. Thirteen (participants 26.5%) were
from South East Asia, 5 (10.2%) were from Africa and only 2 (4.1%) were from other countries (Brazil and Austria). In terms of their mother tongue, 91.8 per cent of respondents were from non-English speaking countries.

The sample data shows that over half of the respondents (51.0%) were married and 40.8 per cent of respondents were single. Only 4 respondents stated that they had other relationships. Most of the respondents (57.1%) indicated that they had no children; with, 42.9 per cent of respondents having dependent children.

The survey results in relation to the place of residence indicated that 69.4 per cent of the respondents lived in regional city centres. Eighteen per cent of the respondents lived in rural areas, 8.4 per cent of the respondents lived in peri-metropolitan urban areas and 4.1 per cent lived in outer metropolitan areas.

The questionnaire comprised three sections: background personal information, information on social networks, and information on lifestyle satisfaction of skilled migrants. In this study, the migrants’ level of social capital was measured from responses to five questions relating to friends’ networks and the participation in community activities (volunteering, school activities, community events) and social organisations. A social capital index was fixed by allocating weights for the frequency of participation in the above-mentioned activities. A respondent showing high levels of participation in all four above mentioned community activities was classified as experiencing strong social capital. The type of the social capital (bonding and bridging) existing among the respondents was identified according to their networks within the community.
**Findings**

According to the index close to half of the participants (46%) of this survey have indicated that they have a low level of social capital within their community. Forty per cent of participants revealed a moderate level of social capital and only fourteen per cent of respondent had a strong level of social capital. The findings regarding the membership of social organisations revealed that the respondents had a moderate level of participation in social organizations in their local area. Nearly half of the respondents (52%) held memberships of one social organization, while 24% of respondents were members of two or more social organisations and 24% of participants were not members of any social organisation.

In terms of volunteering, 52% of respondents had not participated in any voluntary activity during the previous year. Only 10% conducted more than one voluntary activity during the previous year. Participation in local community activities in considered building networks and bonds with the community. Therefore, the on line survey tested the frequency of participation in local community activities such as community festivals, local fairs, and other celebrations. Most of the participants (40%) indicated that they did not participate in any local community activity during the previous year. However, 36% of respondents participated in two or more community activities.

Apart from the variables discussed above, characteristics of personal background (age, duration of stay, having children etc.) can influence the building of social capital. Migrants aged below 30 years showed a low level of social capital compared to older migrants. The results indicate that the married/partnered migrants were more likely to have stronger social
capital. The study results indicate that 81% of married migrants had a strong or moderate level of social capital. These results can be influenced by having children in a family as parents are more likely than non-parents to make friends through children’s friendship networks (Wulff and Dharmalingam 2008). In the present study, 44% of regional migrants had children and this group appeared to have stronger social relationships. For example, the study findings reveal that 86% of strongly socially connected regional migrants had children, while 75% of those weakly socially connected did not.

The duration of stay has been identified as an indicator of social capital (Speare 1974; Wulff and Dharmalingam 2008) this study confirms this. Respondents living in a location for less than a year showed low community networks, while a majority (66.7%) in the current location for more than two years showed a strong or moderate level of social networking. Most of the respondents (71.4%) of this survey have indicated that they have only limited number of friends in the regional areas where they live. Regarding the nature of the friends, most of the respondents (44.9%) had indicated that they have friends from different ethnic backgrounds. In contrast to this, 32.7% had indicated their friends are only from their country or the region. However, the nature of the friends or the number of the friends did not show any significant correlation with the social connectedness.

International skilled migrants are considered to be concerned with the locally available opportunities to practice their own culture - such as finding culturally familiar food, enjoying their countries’ cultural dramas and films, participating in their own religious activities (Chiang & Hsu, 2006). The current study attempts to gain information regarding the regional migrant’s perspective in fulfilling these needs. The largest group of the respondents (42%) agreed that they do not have enough opportunities to enjoy their own cultural activities. Only 24% of participants agreed that they had enough opportunities to practice their own cultural
events. However, significant number of respondents (35%) indicated that they neither agree nor disagree that they have enough opportunities to enjoy their culture. Half of the participants indicated that they had enough opportunities to practice their religious activities. Half of the participants indicated that they could find culturally familiar food locally sometimes and 28% indicated that they could not. In terms of the level of lifestyle satisfaction, most of the respondent (73.5%) indicated that they are moderately satisfied. While 14.3% were highly satisfied with their lifestyle, 10.2% were totally dissatisfied with their lifestyles in the regional areas

**Discussion and implications**

Skilled regional migration programmes have delivered a policy approach to identified skills shortages and issues of population over-centralisation in Australian cities. The success of such programmes is dependent on long-term retention of these immigrants in regional areas and attracting more immigrants to regional Australia. However, creating sustainable regional multicultural locations is not easy. As past studies also emphasized, providing economic benefits alone will not retain the skilled immigrants in the regional areas. In this paper it is argued that, if positive outcomes are to be achieved, social factors (building social capital, providing lifestyle opportunities) need to be emphasised.

As acculturation is highly stressful for immigrants, it is likely that the immigrants would seek the social networks that provide a supporting background for them to integrate within the mainstream. Findings of this study have indicated that the regional immigrants have a moderate level of social capital within their community. Surprisingly, bridging social capital exists as the easiest networks to establish for the immigrants with different cultural
backgrounds. This finding is contrast with the previous studies that revealed, immigrants tend to select places to live where they can find those of a similar ethnic background.

Bonding social capital is generated towards enabling survival, bridging social capital provides the motivation to remain and developing linkages throughout the community (Knudsen, Florida et al. 2006:7). Existing literature has pointed out the importance of having bridging social capital in terms of the economic sustainability of immigrants. Current survey findings provide a positive forecast which can be developed in the future, regarding the bridging social capital. Creating such relationships needs active intervention through policy. Therefore, the development of the institutional capital at the local level should be an area of policy concern; in this regard it should be noted that local skilled migration programs are currently being reduced in scope and resources.

In this study it was revealed that the regional immigrants are involved in limited number of social organisations. However, participating in several organisations and community works will provide beneficial outcomes for the individuals as well as the community. Therefore, encouraging immigrants to participate in several organisations will offer greater links to community and also develop a sense of belonging that in return establishes a sustainable community.

**Future directions**

Though, the more emphasise have paid to direct the immigrants to regional areas the research on the regional immigration programme is limited in the Australian context. The existing literature on regional immigrants has largely failed to make an impact on the issues in gaining a more stable multicultural country side in the Australian context (Missingham, Dibden et al. 2006). A range of further research topics is raised on this paper. For example the
understanding of the social trust, social capital and sense of belonging is needed to provide better facilities to regional immigrants.

Furthermore, the lack of knowledge on the comparison studies of different ethnic groups’ perspective on their settlement experience and on their level of integration with the main society is a significant gap in the field of immigrant studies. The large-scale studies on the different regional locations are needed to have a comparison understanding of the settlement experiences of the immigrants.
References:


