Influences of (Non)Engagement in Volunteering: First-Generation Immigrant Perceptions of Integration into US Society

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Abstract This qualitative research study examines how volunteering and nonvolunteering is associated with immigrant perceptions of their integration into US society. The study analyzes 24 semi-structured interviews to explore differences in social integration experiences and perceptions of social integration between immigrant volunteers and nonvolunteers. The study’s theoretical framework is intersectionality, and the conceptual framework consists of social integration, rational choice, and symbolic boundary theory. While past studies assert that volunteering increases feelings of social integration, this empirical study offers a comparative perspective between immigrants who volunteer and those who do not. Study findings suggest that formal immigrant volunteers build a stronger sense of agency in their social integration journeys through their contributions to American society. Data suggest that most nonvolunteering participants achieve minor benefits by engaging in informal volunteering outside of organizational auspices.

Keywords Immigrants • Social integration • Symbolic boundaries • Intersectionality • Formal volunteering • Informal volunteering

Introduction

Volunteering is broadly defined as engaging in help-related activities extended over time for causes or individuals in need, without expectation of rewards or personal benefit (Smith et al., 2017; Wilson, 2012). Expanding this definition, immigrant volunteering refers to voluntary work conducted by individuals with a migrant background (Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Wang & Handy, 2014). The literature identifies volunteering as a tool to develop experience, cultivate resources, and build networks essential for immigrant integration into a host society (Greenspan et al., 2018; Sinha et al., 2011). Studies on immigrant volunteering argue that immigrants who volunteer are more likely to thrive in their host community due to sustained cooperation, social engagement, and continuous positive interactions (Oliver, 2010; Yap et al., 2011). Furthermore, immigrants who volunteer formally may feel more connected to their communities and experience a stronger sense of belonging (Kunst et al., 2015; Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019). Formal volunteering is defined as unpaid contributions within an organization (Chambré, 2020; Lee & Brudney, 2012). Conversely, informal volunteering is conducted outside of an organization and aimed at non-household individuals (Smith et al., 2017; Taniguchi, 2012).

Although integration-related processes have been explored in the USA, immigrant volunteering remains understudied. While existing research offers empirical evidence that voluntary work in ethnic or religious congregations increases immigrant integration (Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Sinha et al., 2011; Wilson, 2012), the present study sought to understand how volunteering in interethnic, non-religious organizations increases perceptions of integration. In addition, the research captures the
opinions of immigrant volunteers’ nonvolunteering acquaintances—a lens absent in the current literature. The study explored how volunteering versus not volunteering influences immigrant integration to support informed policy-level promotion of volunteering so as to foster inclusion and inform recruitment and engagement practices for nonprofit organizations (NPOs).

The perspective used throughout the research process is of a deductive, aka ETIC nature. ETIC refers to descriptions of behaviors attributed by an outside observer (e.g., the researcher) that are not organically conceptualized by the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). While study interviewees were asked to define “volunteering” and “integration” in their own terms, data analysis was conducted by applying standard academic definitions and theories.

Additionally, due to the qualitative nature of this study, we follow Ravitch and Riggan’s (2016) proposition of grounding this research in a theoretical framework (intersectionality) and a conceptual framework (social integration theory, rational choice theory, and symbolic boundary theory). The theoretical framework consists of a single theory that acts as the primary means of understanding and investigating the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). Conversely, the conceptual framework consists of theories that capture the studied phenomena holistically to show existing relationships between ideas and how they relate to the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2019; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The study’s central research question is: How does volunteering engagement and nonengagement influence first-generation immigrants’ perceptions of their integration into U.S. society?

In the following sections, we present literature on immigrant volunteering and social integration, and describe the study’s theoretical and conceptual frameworks. We then describe the research methods and explore the findings. Following an analysis of dynamics between immigrant volunteers (Vs) and immigrant nonvolunteers (NVs), we discuss implications for theory and offer recommendations for volunteer managers and policymakers involved with immigrant experience and social integration.

**Background and Significance**

**Immigrant Social Integration**

In a US context, the term “immigrant” is defined as a person who does not have US citizenship at birth (Waters & Pineau, 2016; Zong et al., 2019). The immigrant population in the USA consists of undocumented immigrants, individuals with temporary visas, refugees, asylees, lawful permanent residents, and naturalized citizens. Every seventh resident is foreign-born, which amounts to 325.7 million people—about 13.7% of the US population, with 62% of US immigrants speaking Spanish (Waters & Pineau, 2016; Zong et al., 2019). Given the diversity and magnitude of US immigrant groups, closer inspection is warranted into integration processes, how immigrants interact with the host society, and how they seek to improve those interactions, if at all. Among other measures, immigrant integration is often explained in terms of knowledge: linguistic skills; ability to navigate the host society; and capacity, such as investment of social, mental, and economic resources. However, social integration speaks specifically to the quality of interactions and social ties between immigrants and nonimmigrants in the host country (Harder et al., 2018; Jiménez, 2011). Recent research shows that social integration is not the same as assimilation; the latter requires immigrants to abandon the culture and practices of their country of origin and conform to the host society’s norms and values (Danso & Lum, 2013; Esses & Abelson, 2017).

Immigrants commonly struggle to understand culture and language, and often experience bias and discriminatory barriers within their host society (Oliver, 2010; Waters & Pineau, 2016). Whereas wealthier immigrants may have an easier time adjusting due to higher educational capital, the average newcomer faces multiple challenges while settling into the host society (Alba et al., 2011). Integration barriers can limit opportunities to foster professional networks and other vital factors that promote social integration for immigrants who seek to engage more robustly in the host society (Danso & Lum, 2013; Waters & Pineau, 2016). Barriers include difficulty learning the language, limited access to integration courses, and cultural-adaptation challenges (Esses & Abelson, 2017; Jiménez, 2011; Weng & Lee, 2016). One way to foster resources that are necessary for integration (e.g., skills to navigate local bureaucracy, cultivate trust-based networks with nonimmigrants, etc.) is to engage in civic-participation activities like volunteering (Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Kunst et al., 2015; Wang & Handy, 2014).

**Immigrant Volunteering**

Given the population’s diversification, research shows that volunteering generates stability and cohesion among differing groups (Putnam, 2000), which are socio-politically desirable attributes in US communities with immigrant populations. Volunteering rates tend to be higher for immigrants prompted to join by friends, co-workers, or acquaintances, making “being asked” the main driver (New American Economy, 2016). The Current Population Survey shows that 15% of immigrants volunteer compared
to 28% of nonimmigrants (New American Economy, 2016). Interestingly, once immigrants are engaged, they tend to volunteer more than nonimmigrants; on average, native-born spend 18 weeks a year volunteering, whereas immigrant volunteers average 20 weeks per year (New American Economy, 2016).

While these numbers apply for formal volunteering, little is known about immigrants’ informal engagement. Formal volunteering is defined as contributions of unpaid time to the activities of an organization (Chambre´, 2020; Duran & Jones, 2020; Hankivsky & Remennick, 2017; Ng, 2009; Yap et al., 2011). By contrast, informal volunteering is conducted outside organizational auspices and assists non-household individuals (e.g., taking care of an elderly neighbor, picking up trash at a nearby park, etc.) (Martinez et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2017; Taniguchi, 2012). In recent years, there has been a notable increase in studies on the social benefits of formal volunteering (Bowe et al., 2020; Chambre´, 2020; Wilson, 2012). Among immigrants, volunteering has been explored as preparation toward job-market entry and tool of self-improvement (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017; Ng, 2009; Yap et al., 2011). In addition, volunteering has been found to cultivate trust across populations of immigrants and nonimmigrants (Oliver, 2010; Sundeen et al., 2009). A study by Handy & Greenspan (2009) suggests that volunteer-seeking organizations often do not fully understand the untapped potential of personable, talented, and resourceful would-beVs within immigrant populations.

Key motivations for volunteering include a desire to adapt to life in the host country, increase social connections, and improve access to the job market (Greenspan et al., 2018; Handy & Greenspan, 2009), as well as to give back to the social system that assisted their entrance into the country (Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019; Voicu, 2014; Weng & Lee, 2016). Studies on immigrant populations assert that immigrants lack social unity, social trust, and civic engagement (Wilson, 2012). The findings suggest that volunteering addresses these interconnected phenomena.

**Theoretical Framework**

Intersectionality theory is the theoretical framework for this research (Crenshaw, 2021). Intersectionality explicates how social-identity categories (e.g., race, gender, and class) intersect to create different modes of discrimination and advantage by identifying contributive factors of dis/advantage (Crenshaw, 2021; Duran & Jones, 2020; Hankivsky & Cormier, 2011). As an example, in the USA, an upper class, White, Christian, female immigrant from Germany will experience different disadvantages while job hunting than those encountered by a working class, Black, Muslim, male immigrant from Somalia. Analyzing immigrant experiences through the lens of intersectionality reveals the layers of complexity in immigrant lived experiences of social integration. Within this framework, we explore social integration challenges through a critical examination of the influence of immigrant social-identity categories (e.g., ethnicity, class, education, etc.) (Kwon, 2015; Stasiulis et al., 2020). Research on immigrants rarely captures comprehensively the range of overlapping challenges these newcomers face during the integration process (Kaushik & Walsh, 2018; Kwon, 2015; Stasiulis et al., 2020). By collecting and analyzing data within the framework of intersectionality, we offer a critical examination of the individualized import and value of volunteering.

**Conceptual Framework**

To capture this phenomenon holistically and critically, the study’s conceptual framework is based on the theories of social integration and symbolic boundaries (Ravitch & Carl, 2019).

**Social Integration**

Blau (1964/2008) defines social integration as bonds of attraction that unite group members into a cohesive unit. The literature describes social integration as a group’s process of agreeing on a shared system of meaning, language, and culture (Björkman et al., 2007; Blau, 1964/2008). This definition implies that an increase in social integration reduces conflict and increases perceptions of integration (Dahinden, 2013; Oliver, 2010). Moreover, inter-group tensions diminish when minority individuals engage in activities that make them more desirable to the dominant group—specifically as potential new members. For instance, when an immigrant shows genuine interest in learning the host country’s language and cultural norms, nonimmigrants tend to be more willing to include them in their social circles (Blau, 1964/2008; Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019). This social acceptance can be enhanced by participating in services valued by the host society, such as volunteering (Blau, 1964/2008; Yap et al., 2011). When an immigrant shares personal resources and talents with others (e.g., choosing to volunteer in a US nonprofit organization), host society members may lower their defenses and feel a greater connection to the immigrant volunteer, thus supporting their social integration.

**Symbolic Boundaries**

Symbolic boundaries define the boundaries of a person or group, while excluding others (Dahinden, 2013; Lamont...
et al., 2015). Groups often form based on factors such as race, religion, education, and language (Lamont et al., 2015; Sohoni & Mendez, 2014). This study aims to uncover whether volunteering is a determining factor in immigrant integration experience and construction of social realities (Sohoni & Mendez, 2014; Wittek et al., 2020) in US society. We explore if and how immigrant volunteering redefines symbolic boundaries to make immigrants feel more included in the host society.

Studies suggest that the unique environment of immigrant volunteering can diminish symbolic violence—a phenomenon birthed out of symbolic boundaries (Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Sohoni & Mendez, 2014): Symbolic violence happens when a dominant group (e.g., nonimmigrants) defines itself as superior and imposes deficit orientations on other groups, while denying the power-relation underlying this exclusionary behavior (Lamont et al., 2015; Wittek et al., 2020). Symbolic boundaries theory guides the design of the central research question and interview protocol used to explore immigrant (non)volunteers’ lives.

Research Setting and Design

The Corporation for National and Community Service reports that 26.5% of Philadelphia residents volunteer, equaling 1,367,200 civic participants (CNCS, 2015). With an average of 30 volunteer hours per capita, this totals 142.8 million hours contributed and $3.3 billion in services. However, no specific statistics are available on immigrant Vs in the Philadelphia area.

Methodology

To explore volunteering and nonvolunteering influences on first-generation immigrant perceptions of social integration in the USA, we conducted semi-structured interviews and thematic data analysis. Interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of immigrant V perceptions and lived experiences of social integration (Engel & Schutt, 2016). Conducting interviews during the Covid-19 quarantine led us to flux methodology, which supported a healing-centered interview approach. Study participants were engaged with responsive compassion for the acute-on-chronic challenges they faced at the time. In addition, we foregrounded flexible interview hours, given changes in living situations and trauma caused by the pandemic (Ravitch, 2020a, 2020b).

Importantly, since the research was conducted during quarantine, engagement in volunteering was greatly reduced or moved online. Interestingly, one volunteer compared getting used to quarantine to an immigrants’ integration process, noting:

Even with COVID, […] it’s like going into a new culture […]. You know, there’s rules. Then we’re trying to decide what the rules are and how you adapt to it. […] The better you are at adapting to a new situation, not holding on to the old stuff, and being ready to change, try something different and see if that’s okay. (2a)

Participant Selection and Selection Criteria

The study used a convenience sample of 12 immigrant Vs and a snowball sample of 12 immigrant NVs, all above age 18, with an average age of 39 years. Table 1 details additional participant characteristics. The Vs interviewed were active in youth-oriented or help-related NPOs. In-depth interviews and a thematic analysis of data (Engel & Schutt, 2016) were conducted to understand immigrant V and NV perspectives on social integration, and volunteer benefits and disadvantages related to social integration (Engel & Schutt, 2016). Interviews were conducted until saturation, the point in data collection when themes start repeating themselves (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

To select participants, we contacted help- and youth-related NPOs in the greater Philadelphia area. We presented the research purpose to the volunteer manager via email or telephone. Further information was then sent via listservs to Vs active in 2019 and/or 2020. After their interviews, the 12 Vs were asked to recommend one non-volunteering peer of similar cultural background for an interview. Except for three individuals, all Vs recommended a NV from their own country of origin.

Among the five male and 19 female participants, most were either full-time students (8) or employees (7). The sample features individuals from 13 countries. Mexico is the most prevalent (4), followed by China (3). Twelve of the 24 participants spent over half of their lives in the USA, and ten immigrated as small children. While the sample is diverse in culture, age, and occupation, it is still not representative of the US immigrant population. Instead, the focus of this study is gaining an in-depth understanding of how volunteering and nonvolunteering influence immigrant perceptions of integration into US society (Fig. 1).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis surfaced several conceptual themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Engel & Schutt, 2016). Data analysis began with describing data, then interpreting themes, followed by analytic conclusions and their theorization (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theoretical freedom of thematic analysis allowed for a complex, holistic, and detailed examination of data. Furthermore, it enabled us to
capture participant realities and provided opportunities to reflect on the experiences they shared (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Engel & Schutt, 2016). Interviews lasted one hour were audio-recorded, transcribed, and imported into the coding software NVivo. Participants were given the option of English or Spanish interviews to increase sample diversity. We conducted 22 interviews in English, and two in Spanish.

While presenting the findings we use “supplementary counting” to complement the data analysis results (Maxwell, 2010). In other words, we quantify the number of interviewees that had similar opinions—not to produce a central contribution of the research—but to build on existing findings on volunteering and integration (Hannah & Lautsch, 2011; Maxwell, 2010).

**Findings**

**Participants on Volunteering**

The study findings illuminate the perspectives of immigrant Vs and NVs. When asked how they define volunteering, both Vs and NVs shared that volunteering is an activity geared toward helping people in need and conducted without expectations for financial rewards (Smith et al., 2017; Wilson, 2012). NVs thought of volunteering as

| Participant characteristics |
|-----------------------------|
| **Volunteer** | Gender | Age | Background | Years in US | Occupation | **Nonvolunteer** | Gender | Age | Background | Years in US | Occupation |
| 1a | Female | 30 | Uruguay | 5 | Lawyer | 1b | Female | 43 | France | 5 | Nurse |
| 2a | Female | 73 | England | 16 | Retiree | 2b | Male | 56 | France | 51 | Retiree |
| 3a | Female | 60 | China | 53 | Bookseller | 3b | Female | 31 | China | 28 | Executive Assistant |
| 4a | Female | 23 | Mexico | 17 | Student | 4b | Female | 19 | Mexico | 17 | Student |
| 5a | Male | 67 | Trinidad & Tobago | 61 | Chiropractor | 5b | Female | 40 | Senegal | 2 | Housewife |
| 6a | Female | 20 | Taiwan | 8 | Nurse | 6b | Female | 23 | Chinese | 5 | Nurse |
| 7a | Female | 19 | Mexico | 9 | Student | 7b | Female | 42 | Mexico | 9 | Housewife |
| 8a | Male | 72 | Israel | 35 | Retiree | 8b | Female | 70 | Israel | 35 | Retiree |
| 9a | Female | 24 | Kenya | 20 | Student | 9b | Male | 27 | Kenya | 20 | Entrepreneur |
| 10a | Male | 26 | Ethiopia | 9 | Student | 10b | Female | 22 | Ethiopia | 9 | Student |
| 11a | Female | 24 | Ecuador | 14 | Student | 11b | Female | 56 | Ecuador | 14 | Entrepreneur |
| 12a | Female | 29 | Korea | 28 | Student | 12b | Female | 27 | Korea | 25 | College Advisor |

Fig. 1 Perspective and frameworks applied during research
a unilateral service to others. Conversely, eleven Vs thought of volunteering as an exchange of voluntary services for intangible goods, such as the satisfaction of doing their part. For example, one participant noted:

Giving up my time to do something for society without having any personal gain from it. I mean, well, [...] I have satisfaction when the refugees are doing well, but without having any compensation and without hoping for any compensation. (8a)

Additionally, four Vs shared that volunteering could be done in a right or a wrong way, meaning with deliberation and intentionality rather than for self-serving purposes:

So, I think like going into volunteering, you really have to think about, what is my goal? [...] And if I go into this community, will I be doing more good for them or more harm? And if you come to the realization it can be more harm, that shouldn’t be the place where you volunteer because volunteering is like a service [...] to help and grow and better community. (9a)

Curiously, eight out of twelve NVs had been involved in formal volunteering in the past, mostly in religious organizations such as migrant churches. On the other hand, ten out of twelve NVs were actively involved in informal volunteering, usually among people within their own culture:

And my thing is also I help my family out with a lot of things [...], so I feel like that’s sort of my volunteer, because I have a lot of like relatives who come to me for like translation help [...], so I’m sort of helping but, [...] I wouldn’t necessarily call it volunteering, but I’m helping people, so I still get that volunteering aspect of the feeling good. (3b)

While the NVs engaged in voluntary work, they did not refer to it as “volunteering.” Rather, they made a point to state their desire to help those experiencing similar challenges in their resettlement, perhaps even in a formal capacity in the future:

I hope to have a little more time to dedicate to [volunteering] [...] so that I can help people that have been in a similar situation to ours [...] Because we have first-hand experience, and volunteering has a lot to do with integration. (11b)

Several NVs openly expressed admiration of their V acquaintances, recognizing how volunteering helped Vs gain confidence and a sense of higher purpose. Vs, in turn, described their motivations to volunteer as creating a legacy for themselves and future generations:

I mean, you have to get something back to society [...]. I’m doing it as an American not as anything else. I’m doing it because I’m well and I [...] and my grandchildren are doing well and are happy. And we have to return something, and I have to give [...] an example to my children and my grandchildren. [...] Once they’re going to be sufficiently accomplished and financially secure, they have to do the same thing. (8a)

Eleven Vs also shared a sense of duty to give back to those less fortunate, linking this ethic to their personal experiences of being outsiders in a new country.

Interactions with Immigrants and Nonimmigrants

Most NVs shared that they chose to engage with immigrants from their own culture due to a sense of comfort and belonging. If present in their near vicinity, NVs often defaulted into building relationships with individuals of the same or similar culture:

But as diverse as it is, we struggle to integrate, like, to interact with the different [people]. Everyone has their own flock; they gather with their own type. And I personally actually do that [...] And, I noticed that [...] I was more inclined to be friends with people [...] from Africa, like, because I felt like I connected with them. (10b)

Vs, on the other hand, were comfortable mingling with immigrants of all backgrounds and instead, looked to commune with like-minded people and individuals with similar experiences:

I definitely felt more comfortable with people with other backgrounds. [It] doesn’t matter where [they’re from]. I have friends from Russia, Pakistan… [These] places aren’t necessarily my own culture. But I think [...] the [immigrant] background makes me feel more connected to them [over] a lot of my American friends, colleagues, or whatever. (1a)

Both Vs and NVs expressed a heightened awareness of the dire state of race relations in the USA. But for three participants, all NVs, openly shared pessimism about nonimmigrant treatment of immigrants in the USA. Many believe that nonimmigrants consciously choose to ignore or actively alienate immigrants out of fear, guilt, or feelings of self-preservation:

[Nonimmigrants] don’t want to see what things are going on, you know [...] They don’t want to be blamed. [...] Because for them, to see that [suffering], they’d have to recognize that they benefit from
the system. So, they [...] want to avoid pain, or want
to avoid facing a negative side. (4b)

Conversely, except for one interviewee, all Vs shared that
they maintain an optimistic outlook on immigrant-nonim-
migrant relationships, even as severalVs encountered
prejudiced nonimmigrants:

I’ve learned to [...] say “it’s okay.”, you know? They
don’t know any better. And so, [...] I’ve learned to
learn about other cultures, [...] saying: ‘Hey, I don’t
know much about this. Sorry if this insults you, but
I’m going to ask you.’ And, I feel like we would be
much better if we were [...] curious about other
people and their cultures. (4a)

Study findings suggest that Vs tended to actively seek
individuals with similar values. NVs tended to engage with
people of their own culture and bypass foreign social
challenges.

Participants on Integration

Vs and NVs defined ideal social integration along the lines
of Harder et al. (2018), as the capacity and knowledge
needed for a successful life in the host society. The
majority stated that immigrant integration means the
capacity and knowledge to live a successful and fulfilling
life in the USA, without having to shed their culture of
origin (Harder et al., 2018). Both groups shared that most
of the responsibility to integrate lies on immigrants them-
selves. About two thirds of NVs talked about social inte-
gration as unachievable due to systemic glass ceilings and
societal constraints. One NV participant noted:

Integration is like trying to force two things that
people don’t want to happen. And, to me, it is hard.
Some people are built for it but it’s hard, [...] you
know? Now, it’s just like there’s just some battles I
cannot fight because I know I’m not gonna win. (9b)

On the other hand, over half of the Vs recognize that
immigrant integration is a continuous, never-ending pro-
cess, and that it is best to accept it as an ongoing journey of
learning:

You know, integration is complicated. [...] I think
integration takes a lot longer than any of us think it
does. And that’s okay. If we keep learning from it,
and keep refining it, and use it to try to help both
yourself and others. So, I think, yeah, that’s what I
feel about integration. I think it just goes on. (2a)

Both groups shared a realistic outlook on integration;
however, Vs tended to be more optimistic and accept social
integration as an ongoing journey rather than a linear or
rigid goal.

Perceptions of Connection and Integration

When asked what contributes to a sense of social integra-
tion, most participants, particularly NVs, prioritized lan-
guage skills as pivotal to achieve integration. NVs shared a
sense that US society is generally open to immigrants
integrating, but that the political climate makes social
integration a challenge. Five NVs shared that the volunteer
sector helps them bridge this divide by creating a safe
environment for interaction with nonimmigrants:

Volunteer organizations have helped me a lot;
because of them, I felt respected. And as I said pre-
viously, I would love to create something to volunteer
for...I’d like to create or be part of a voluntary group.
(11b)

Vs expanded this idea by sharing their experiences in
formal, organization-based volunteer positions. Eight Vs
expressed that volunteering helped them build connections
in and beyond the volunteer setting. Additionally, they
shared that volunteering helped them gain skills necessary
for social integration like navigating US bureaucracy. Half
shared that volunteering provides a community willing to
listen to and interact with its members’ experiences when
others are not:

Because again, like, we can sit here and have this
amount of, like, White students, this amount of Black
students and this amount of like, Latino and Asian
[...]. But if we’re not really sitting down and having
the conversations that need to be, [...] we need to
have an understanding of our place in society. Then
there’s no point in the integration. (4a)

One V pointed out that these characteristics make volun-
teering a powerful tool for immigrant social integration,
especially from an institutional perspective:

I think as far as integration goes, I think agencies that
put in the effort to integrate [...] should try to help
people get more involved in more social activities
instead of rushing them [to] get a job, [...] try to get
them involved in community activities [...] That
would help them to adapt better [...] because many
times [...] they feel secluded and alone, and it will
also help them learn the language faster. (10a)

Both Vs and NVs agreed that feeling socially integrated
requires contributing to the host society through volun-
teering. Importantly, the host society must provide the
opportunities to do so.
Intersectionality

There was a significant overlap between V and NV social integration challenges. Participants agreed that one of the most notable categories of discrimination is language. While most participants spoke English fluently, there was consensus that even having an accent impedes integration into US society:

I would say that I would feel more integrated if my accent was more American. I feel… I do feel foreign because of my accent […]. (8b)

Apart from language skills, two non-White immigrants suggested that White immigrants have an advantage when integrating into US society since they “do not look foreign”:

White people can integrate much more easily. I don’t know if we ever integrate into the society as we know it. I think, as a person of color on your own […] you’ll get accepted. But as far as integration, I don’t even know how you can define it. (5a)

Other participants stated that immigrating at an older age made adapting to the host society’s behavioral standards challenging. Especially when they missed their country of origin:

So, I’m much less integrated than the people in my position I believe. It has to do with both the connection to my past and lack of time. And by now, I’m just too old (8b).

Younger immigrants stated that they felt more socially integrated among individuals with a similar economic background than upper-class peers of the same culture:

After starting to hang out with more middle-class kids from America, I realized, […] we have more similarities […], compared to someone who’s super rich, but is from China. […] I thought I was like, more Chinese than anything, but […] economic class difference is […] more of a difference than cultural difference, in a way. (6b)

Class also influences the level of education immigrants have when they arrive in the USA. While higher education was seen as important to integration into US society, some participants struggled to achieve in the USA what they could not access in their country of origin:

I understand English more than […] I can write it, since I never went to school as a little girl in my country. I didn’t have the opportunity to go to school […] That’s why, it is quite difficult for me […]. I only know the basics (7b).

An additional difficulty immigrants faced when resetting was geographically bound cultural differences within the USA. Integrating into American life in the Northeast is not the same as integrating into life in the South. Grasping these nuances proved challenging to newcomers:

I was raised in a Korean household and also had to, you know, just assimilate to the American culture […] It was like an off and on switch, especially being in the southern […] states, right? Being raised there, […] there’s a lot […] I had to learn […]. (12b)

Finally, while citizenship was explicitly not addressed during the interviews for reasons of safety and confidentiality, some individuals shared challenges they faced due to immigration status:

Either way, it’s difficult to integrate, especially when you’re in a situation where you’re undocumented and an immigrant, because it’s not something that is easy to share with everybody. So, in a way you’re […] hiding part of your identity. […] It’s for your safety and so […] to some point, you can feel like you’re not integrating fully. (4a)

In closing, Vs and NVs listed race, age, class, education, geography, and citizenship as the main overlapping categories of disadvantage. While these barriers to integration are not new, the interviews help shed light on the specific interdependent challenges to integration—despite immigrants’ efforts to contribute to and become integrated into American society.

Discussion and Future Directions

In this section, findings are discussed in light of key theories and prior research on immigrant volunteering. In line with Blau (1964/2008), the Vs shared that formal volunteering allows for a space in which shared norms, values, beliefs, and social interactions lead to acceptance from their nonimmigrant peers, and even in US society more broadly. On the other hand, ten out of twelve NV participants engaged in informal volunteering among members of their own culture (Guo, 2014; Ng, 2009).

According to social integration theory, engagement with family and friends inevitably expands to the community, which serves as a vehicle for long-term social acceptance and integration (Blau, 1964/2008; Putnam, 2000). The few NVs who did not engage in informal volunteering expressed interest in future voluntary work once they have time enough to dedicate to helping others. Research argues that individuals experience social integration according to (1) the extent to which they perceive themselves as part of shared norms (e.g., a group that values helping others), (2)
frequency of social interaction with others, and (3) degree to which they feel recognized and respected by others in society (Blau, 1964/2008; Greenspan et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2011).

Formal voluntary organizations can help fulfill these needs through regular, continuous teamwork and official recognition or public appreciation of immigrant Vs (Ruiz Oliver, 2010; Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019; Weng & Lee, 2016). Informal volunteering may lead to similar benefits on a lesser scale, since informal Vs usually go unrecognized by a society oblivious to their dedicated engagement (Lee & Brudney, 2012; Martinez et al., 2011; Ng, 2009).

Social integration theory emphasizes attraction as the basis of cohesion, meaning potential members (e.g., immigrants) of a group (e.g., nonimmigrants) may want to present themselves as attractive to existing group members (Blau, 1964/2008; Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). While most participants were not consciously trying to present themselves as valuable members of US society, they stated that their voluntary engagement legitimized their claim of belonging to an improved host society. The literature shows that immigrants’ civic contributions do not go unnoticed, as newer studies point to the untapped potential of immigrants’ positive influence on society (Sinha et al., 2011; Wang & Handy, 2014).

The concept of symbolic boundaries explains why formal Vs may experience more social integration than informal Vs. Since symbolic boundaries are the lines that define and include certain people while excluding others, they are based on spatial, temporal, and even visual cognitive contrasts (Lamont et al., 2015; Sohoni & Mendez, 2014; Wittek et al., 2020). According to the participants, while immigration status makes people feel like outsiders, being a member of an intra-cultural voluntary group makes people feel like insiders, especially in a society as multicultural as the USA. Generally, groups tend to form based on similarities of factors, such as religion, education, and race (Blau, 1964/2008); however, voluntary settings often provide a different kind of communality. In essence, the value of helping others supersedes identity differences (Guo, 2014; Ruiz Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019).

Conversely, NV participants define their relatives and members of their own culture as “us,” and describe the rest of US society as “them.” While this may seem contradictory to social integration, a closer look at participants who engage in informal volunteering is generative. In line with the literature, the study’s NV sample shows that first-generation immigrants tend to be informal Vs among people of their own culture (e.g., watching neighbors’ children, setting up chairs at a cultural event, taking care of the elderly) (Hustinx et al., 2010; Lee & Brudney, 2012; Taniguchi, 2012). While intra-cultural volunteering may seem counterproductive to immigrant integration, studies suggest it can be very effective to social integration in the long term (Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Sundeen et al., 2020; Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). Indeed, intra-cultural social capital usually precedes inter-cultural social capital (Sinha, et al., 2011; Weisinger & Salipante, 2005).

This study led to the discovery of insights rarely addressed in existing research on immigrant volunteering. For one, the study provides clarity around the fact that immigrants who are not involved in formal volunteering often default into volunteering informally within their ethnic enclaves. Furthermore, immigrants who engage informally often do not recognize their work as voluntary since it is frequently perceived as standard behavior or a cultural responsibility. While informal volunteering may result in benefitting US communities in the long run, formal volunteering presents a quicker “return on investment” specifically around perceptions of integration into US society.

Furthermore, contrary to previous studies, this study conceptualizes why immigrants choose to engage in organizations that are not based on their religion or culture of origin. Data show that immigrants who volunteer in interethnic, non-religious organizations do so to connect with like-minded people who are willing to help those less fortunate.

Lastly, study findings suggest that formal and informal volunteering tend to be complementary rather than substitutive; two thirds of interviewees had volunteered both formally and informally at one time (Hustinx et al., 2010; Taniguchi, 2012). While social integration theory and symbolic boundaries explain how (formal) volunteering can lead to immigrant social integration, issues of intersectionality may impede this transference.

Implications for Research and Practice

Study findings offer insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers involved in third sector integration-improving practices. This study reveals that foreign-born immigrants who volunteer tend to feel more connected and socially integrated in the host society, especially if engaged in formal volunteering. Participants shared that they volunteer for a variety of reasons including altruism, social activism, and the desire to learn new skills. Each immigrant volunteer stated that their volunteer experience helped them gain capacity and knowledge useful to their life in the USA.

Future research could analyze case studies in which communities actively encourage immigrants to volunteer to see how this engagement impacts social integration in and beyond these communities (Bowe et al., 2020; Ruiz...
Sportmann & Greenspan, 2019). Additionally, research might study this phenomenon longitudinally to determine long-term effects of formal and informal volunteering on perceptions of social integration. Researchers can further explore whether informal volunteering is predominantly intra-cultural, as shown in this study (e.g., Korean immigrants taking care of the Korean elderly); and if not, how and why these informal volunteers choose to assist individuals from other cultures (e.g., Italian immigrants babysitting their Mexican neighbors’ children).

This research makes clear that policymakers partnering with practitioners in the nonprofit sector should foster volunteer-management practices sensitive to intersectional discrimination and immigrant social integration. Immigrants active in formal positions have peers who either show interest in volunteering or volunteer informally. Recruiting peers through individuals who already volunteer is a cost-effective strategy for organizations seeking to increase their volunteer workforce (Lee & Brudney, 2012). In addition, immigrant volunteering provides a win–win situation for policymakers seeking to foster integration-improving practices, NPOs seeking to diversify their volunteer base, and immigrants looking for a way to engage with, connect, and belong in their communities.

One limitation of this research is that participants were from an urban area with high population density and accessibility to cultural clusters. This positioning impacts immigrants’ proclivity to volunteer formally and informally. While this study captures issues of intersectional discrimination that act as barriers to volunteering and immigrant integration, future research should deepen the exploration of how these barriers can be mitigated (Lee & Pritzker, 2013).

Conclusion

This research studied how volunteering and nonvolunteering impacts immigrants’ perceptions of integration into the USA. The study shows that immigrant volunteering helps immigrants feel more socially integrated in the host society. Study findings are threefold: (1) immigrants who volunteer take active control over their integration journey by investing in a better future for their host society; (2) immigrants who do not volunteer formally are often involved in informal volunteering; and (3) formal volunteers achieve clearer if not greater integration-related benefits from their voluntary engagement than their informal peers. Theories of social integration and symbolic boundaries help explain how volunteering leads to increased perceptions of social integration, an intersectional analysis exposes the diffusion effect of intersecting barriers that newcomers face while settling in the USA.

Acknowledgements

We thank the study participants who shared their experiences, the journal editors, and anonymous reviewers for valuable feedback on this paper.

Declarations

Conflict of interest

The authors report no potential conflict of interest. We received no funding for this research.

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