OWNERSHIP OF THE IDEA TO IMMIGRATE

“It Wasn’t My Idea to Come Here!”:
Ownership of the Idea to Immigrate as a Function of Gender, Age, and Culture

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Abstract

The present study investigated gender, age, and culture differences in immigrants' ownership of the idea to immigrate to Australia. Married immigrants ($N = 1,702$) indicated whose idea it was to immigrate: their own, their partner's, or a joint idea. Consistent with a patriarchal model, female immigrants were significantly less likely to claim ownership of the idea than male immigrants, and this difference partially mediated gender differences in post-immigration satisfaction. In addition, age and culture qualified gender differences in ownership of the idea to immigrate. Young women and nonWestern women were least likely to claim ownership of the idea. The generality of the patriarchal model across age and culture is discussed.

KEYWORDS: immigration; migrants; gender; age; culture; life satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

The decision to immigrate is one of the most important decisions that a person can make. In order for the immigration experience to be successful, immigrants should feel that they have satisfactory input into the process of deciding whether or not to immigrate (Bürgelt, Morgan, & Pernice, 2008; Copeland & Norell, 2002). However, previous research has found that men and women often have significantly different levels of input into this decision-making process.

One line of work has characterised women as being pulled to immigrate by men (for reviews, see Hagen-Zanker, 2008; Hiller & McCaig, 2007; Pedraza, 1991; Whitaker, 2005). According to this patriarchal model, men immigrate in search of economic advancement, and they bring women with them as their partners. A second view is that the decision to immigrate is reached via bargaining within the household (e.g., Fischer, Martin, & Straubhaar, 1997; Mincer, 1978; Stark & Bloom, 1985). Here, men and women negotiate with one another in order to arrive at a family decision that is beneficial for the household as a whole. Finally, a third view is that women are relatively autonomous in making decisions about migration (e.g., Hiller & McCaig, 2007; Oishi, 2002; Tabor & Milfont, 2012).

The present research investigated gender differences in relation to a very early stage of the decision-making process: ownership of the idea to immigrate. People may report that it was their idea to immigrate (i.e., full ownership), that it was a joint idea (i.e., joint ownership), or that it was another person’s idea (i.e., no ownership). Ownership of the idea to immigrate is an important aspect of the decision to immigrate among married couples because it may indicate which partner represents the “driver” of this key stage of the decision-making process (Tabor & Milfont, 2012). Furthermore, ownership of the idea to immigrate may become particularly salient and symbolic between married couples if the migration experience fails to live up to expectations. For example, one spouse might rebuke the other that “it wasn’t my idea to come here!”

Critically, ownership of the idea to immigrate does not address the more complex and articulated decision-making process that follows the idea (Hiller & McCaig, 2007, p. 467; Tabor & Milfont, 2012), and it cannot be equated with people’s final desire or enthusiasm to immigrate. Nonetheless, it does provide some indication of people’s perceived control over the early stages of the decision-making process. Consequently, it is possible that even this relatively simple and preliminary aspect of the decision-making process may be affected by gender differences. The present research aimed to address this issue by investigating whether gender differences in the decision to immigrate extend to ownership of the idea to immigrate.

Previous research that has investigated ownership of the idea to immigrate has not provided an empirical test of gender differences (Bürgelt, Morgan, & Pernice, 2008; Copeland & Norell, 2002; Hiller & McCaig, 2007; Tabor & Milfont, 2012; de Verthelyi, 1995). de Verthelyi’s (1995) qualitative research came closest to addressing this issue. She asked the wives of international students to indicate whose idea it was to move to the USA to study. She found that:

very few wives (mostly those married for a longer time or living in a country suffering political or economic instability) considered that the project of going abroad had initially been their own idea or that it had been shared from the very beginning. The majority, instead, named the husband as the sole originator of the sojourn. (p. 394)

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Hence, consistent with the patriarchal model, these women appeared to disown the idea to immigrate. The present research provided the first empirical test of this prediction.

In addition to gender differences, the present research investigated age and culture differences in ownership of the idea to immigrate. These variables were considered because they are broad sociocultural variables that have the potential to influence gender role ideology. As hinted at in de Verthelyi's (1995) research, older women were among the few to claim some ownership for the idea to immigrate. This age difference may be related to a greater sense of power within the marital relationship. If this is the case, then cultures that offer more equitable power relations between spouses may also produce more equitable ownership of the idea to immigrate. Hence, older women and Western women may be more likely to claim ownership of the idea to immigrate. The present research explored these possibilities.

Finally, the present research investigated the way in which gender differences in ownership of the idea to immigrate influence an important outcome of the acculturation process: immigrants' post-immigration satisfaction with their host country. Previous research has found that the more ownership women report over the decision to migrate, the more adjusted they are to their post-immigration life (Copeland & Norell, 2002, p. 266) and the less likely they are to return back to their home country (Bürgelt et al., 2008, p. 292). The present research extended this line of research by investigating whether gender differences in ownership of the idea to immigrate mediate (account for) gender differences in post-immigration satisfaction.

2. Method

The data were drawn from the first interview of the second survey conducted by the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia, which is a government-run survey program that conducts research on international immigrants to Australia. This particular data set was chosen because it is more recent than that of the first survey and more detailed than that of the third survey and further interviews.

Separate interviews were conducted with primary visa applicants and their spouses during the survey. The *primary applicant* was the person upon whom the approval to immigrate was based. Only primary applicants received a detailed interview in which they were asked whose idea it was to immigrate. Consequently, the analyses were restricted to this group.

2.1 Participants

The participant population consisted of primary applicants who arrived in Australia as offshore visaed immigrants between September 1999 and August 2000. Participants were interviewed approximately six months after arrival. Analyses were restricted to married participants in order to investigate ownership of the idea to immigrate in the context of intramarital relations. Analyses were also restricted to participants who arrived on a family or skilled visa. Participants who arrived on a humanitarian visa were excluded because their migration was less likely to be a matter of choice.

The final sample consisted of 1,702 immigrants (938 men, 764 women) and had a mean age of 36.99 years ($SD = 12.60$). Of this sample, 61.34% arrived on a family visa, 38.66% arrived on a skilled visa, and 43.77% had one or more children. Immigrants arrived from countries all over the world, with the largest percentages being from China (10.22%), England (9.17%), and South Africa (5.35%).

2.2 Measures

Participants responded to a number of questions during a structured interview that lasted approximately 1.5 hours ($M = 86.72$ mins; $SD = 25.84$ mins; $Min = 30$ mins; $Max = 240$ mins).¹ During the interview, participants indicated their gender, age, country of birth, visa type, marital status, number of children, whose idea it was to immigrate, and satisfaction with Australia and their former country of residence.

The country of birth variable served as a proxy for participants' culture. Europe, Ireland, Oceania, North America, and the UK were coded as Western, and the remaining world regions were coded as nonWestern. It is acknowledged that this is a rather crude and unrefined distinction. Nonetheless, it has proved to be useful in recent, high quality cross-cultural research studies (e.g., Bos, Picavet, & Sandfort, 2012; Liu et al., 2012) because it distinguishes between cultures that differ in terms of their modernity and affluence.

The key dependent variable consisted of the question "whose idea was it to emigrate to Australia?" Participants were presented with the following five response options: "yours", "your spouse/partner", "you and (your spouse/partner) together", "some other relative", "someone else." "Yours" responses were coded as +1 to indicate that the respondent claimed sole ownership of the idea. "You and (your spouse/partner)" responses were coded as 0 to indicate joint ownership of the idea, and "your spouse/partner" responses were coded as -1 to indicate partner ownership. "Some other relative" and "someone else" were coded as missing data because they did involve the attribution of ownership within the marital relationship, and so they did not provide a valid test of the various models under investigation.

3. Results

Ownership of the idea to immigrate was regressed onto gender, age, culture (Western/nonWestern), visa type (family/skilled), children (present/absent) and their interaction terms simultaneously. There was a significant effect of visa type, $\beta = .24$, $p < .001$. Immigrants who arrived on a family visa were significantly less likely to claim ownership of the idea to immigrate ($M = -.14$, $SD = .56$) compared to people who arrived on a skilled visa ($M = .20$, $SD = .59$), $t(1,277.29) = -11.46$, $p < .001$, $d = -.59$. There was also a significant effect of gender, $\beta = -.09$, $p = .005$. Consistent with the patriarchal model, female immigrants were significantly less likely to claim ownership of the idea to immigrate ($M = -.12$, $SD = .60$) compared to male immigrants ($M = .11$, $SD = .58$), $t(1,589) = 7.52$, $p < .001$, $d = -.39$. There was also a significant effect of age, $\beta = .09$, $p = .028$, showing that ownership of the idea to immigrate increased with age.

The gender and age effects were qualified by a two-way interaction between gender and age, $\beta = .08$, $p = .033$. To decompose this interaction, the relation between age and ownership of the idea to immigrate was estimated at each level of gender. This relation was significant for women, $\beta = .21$, $p < .001$, but not for men, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .630$. Hence, older women were more likely than younger women to claim ownership of the idea to immigrate. However, this age difference was not significant for men. Table 1 presents the mean ownership values as a function of gender and age, split at one standard deviation above and below the sample's mean age (Aiken & West, 1991).

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Table 1

Ownership of the Idea to Immigrate as a Function of Immigrants' Gender and Age

	Gender	
	Male	Female
Young (16-25 years)	-.08 _a (.58)	-.23 _b * (.56)
Old (50-92 years)	.05 _a (.61)	.12 _a (.60)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Asterisks indicate that the mean value is significantly different from the value of zero, which indicates joint ownership ($p < .001$). Means with different subscripts are significantly different from one another within columns ($p < .001$) and marginally significant within rows ($p = .077$).

As Table 1 shows, most immigrants had mean ownership scores that were not significantly different from zero, which indicates joint ownership of the idea to immigrate between spouses. The exception to this pattern was young women. The relatively large negative value for this group ($M = -.23$) indicates that they reported that the idea to immigrate had been driven by their partner rather than by themselves or jointly. This relatively high level of disownership on the part of young women resulted in a marginally significant gender difference between young men and women ($p = .077$) and a significant age difference between young women and old women ($p < .001$).

There was no overall effect of culture (Western/nonWestern), $\beta = .02$, $p = .600$. However, there was a significant interaction between gender and culture, $\beta = -.06$, $p = .037$. An examination of the effect of culture at each level of gender showed that nonWestern women claimed significantly less ownership of the idea to immigrate ($M = -.16$, $SD = .61$) than Western women ($M = -.06$, $SD = .57$), $t(564.05) = 2.18$, $p = .029$, $d = -.17$, but that this cultural difference was not significant between nonWestern men and Western men, $t(804.72) = -1.34$, $p = .179$. Table 2 presents the mean ownership values as a function of gender and culture.

Table 2

Ownership of the Idea to Immigrate as a Function of Immigrants' Gender and Culture

	Gender	
	Male	Female
Westerners	-.07 _a * (.55)	-.06 _a (.57)
nonWesterners	.12 _b * (.59)	-.16 _c * (.61)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses. Asterisks indicate that the mean value is significantly different from the value of zero, which indicates joint ownership ($p \leq .023$). Means with different subscripts are significantly different from one another within columns ($ps \leq .005$) and within rows ($p = .032$).

No other regression effects were significant ($ps \geq .133$). Hence, the above effects were not qualified by either visa type or the presence or absence of children.

A measure of increases in immigrants' satisfaction following their immigration was computed by subtracting satisfaction with their life in their former country of residence from

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satisfaction with their feelings about their life in Australia (both items were recoded so that 1 = *very dissatisfied*, 5 = *very satisfied*). Male immigrants showed a greater increase in satisfaction ($M = .62$, $SD = 1.27$) than female immigrants ($M = .29$, $SD = 1.21$), $t(1,687) = 5.46$, $p < .001$, $d = .27$. In addition, ownership of the idea to immigrate positively predicted an increase in satisfaction, $\beta = .09$, $p < .001$. Finally, Hayes' (in press) PROCESS software was used to test for mediation effects. This software uses a path analytical framework and bootstrapping methods to estimate direct and indirect effects in mediator models. Gender was included in the model as an independent variable; ownership of the idea to immigrate was included as a mediator variable; and post-immigration increase in satisfaction was included as a dependent variable. The results showed that gender differences in ownership of the idea to immigrate partially mediated (accounted for) gender differences in increases in satisfaction, $b = .013$, 95% CI $(-.058, -.007)$.

4. Discussion

Previous research has suggested that women are less involved in the immigration decision-making process than their male partners (de Verthelyi, 1995; for reviews, see Hiller & McCaig, 2007; Pedraza, 1991; Whitaker, 2005). However, no previous research has investigated whether this gender difference extends to very early stages of the decision-making process, including the idea to immigrate. Consistent with the patriarchal model, the present research found that female immigrants were significantly less likely than male immigrants to claim ownership of the idea to immigrate. This is an important finding because ownership of the idea to immigrate predicted increases in satisfaction following immigration and partially mediated gender differences in these increases. Hence, women who perceive less ownership over the idea to immigrate may experience less of an increase in their satisfaction following immigration and, as Bürgelt et al. (2008) found, they may then be more likely to return to their home country as a consequence.

The gender difference in ownership of the idea to immigrate was qualified by immigrants' age and culture. Young women were less likely than older women to claim ownership, and nonWestern women were less likely than Western women to claim ownership. Hence, the present research qualifies the patriarchal model by demonstrating that young women and nonWestern women are most likely to be "trailing spouses." This pattern of results may reflect a lack of intramarital power experienced by young and nonWestern women. Alternatively, young and nonWestern women may be more flexible spouses who are more willing to immigrate in order to make their partners happy. Future research should compare and contrast these possibilities.

Two important limitations of the present research are that it did not address people's reasons or motivations for immigration and that it did not address the later stages of the decision-making process that may provide a clearer understanding of people's desire to immigrate. Future research in this area should investigate the extent to which gender, age, and culture predict reasons, motivations, and the later and more complex aspects of the decision to immigrate. For example, it is possible that male and female immigrants of all ages and cultures took more equal roles in this subsequent and ongoing decision-making processes (e.g., Adams, 2004; Hiller & McCaig, 2007, p. 467). Future research should also test the generalizability of the present results to immigrants who immigrate to countries other than Australia.

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Footnotes

1. For full details of the interview questions, please visit
<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/research/lsia/questions/c2w1pa.pdf>