

Living in “transnational spaces”: Gendered vulnerability to HIV of Chinese immigrants in Canada and the implications for future interventions (CIHR, 2011-2016)

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BACKGROUND

Immigration studies in recent decades document international migrants’ dual engagement in both the sending and receiving countries. The notion of transnationalism and its implications for research into HIV risk have been largely overlooked, however. Most studies have examined HIV-related risk to immigrants in their host countries, ignoring *the simultaneous influence of the home country context* (which is not limited to its culture) on immigrants’ risk perceptions, risk exposure and risk responses. These perceptions of HIV risk, influenced by multiple and sometimes contradictory discourses and sources, in turn, have important but seldom specified implications for access to and practices for HIV prevention.

What is “transnationalism”?

Transnationalism challenges state-centric thinking about international migration as consisting solely of movement from one country to another, or as an event that ends with migrants’ settlement in the receiving country. The concept of transnationalism draws attention to two key features of immigrants’ transnational lives: (1) the *cross-border linkages or networks* of relationships created by transnational flows of people, goods, ideas, values, and so on; and (2) the *simultaneous engagement* of individuals with two nation states, made increasingly possible by technological advance (e.g., the Internet, air travel, satellite technology and the mobile phone) (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Mazzucato, 2010; Tsuda, 2012).

METHODS

The research design of this project was informed by multi-site ethnography (Amelina et al., 2012; Marcus, 1995), a method that can capture migrants’ cross-border relations, as well as their geographical and cognitive trajectories, in the context of transnationalism. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. The data were collected through 66 eligible individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews carried out from 2012 to 2015 with 66 Chinese adult immigrants in four study sites in Canada and China – Toronto, Vancouver, Beijing and Shanghai. These sites constitute the most important hubs of the transnational networks of movement between the two countries.

RESULTS (SELECTED THEMES)

Based on three emergent, interconnected themes, this poster presents some of the effects of transnationalism on those individuals’ risk perceptions, risk exposure and risk responses.

First, the settlement processes and subsequent challenges in Canada – such as downward occupational/ economic mobility, geographic separation of married spouses, social isolation, and racial inequalities – have made Chinese immigrants under study vulnerable to sexual health (including HIV) risks that they may not face back home.

Second, there is a gap between these individuals’ views (including misconceptions and silence about HIV) and their changing sexual practices in a post-immigration context. Despite the changing dynamics of HIV risk in a new environment, their risk perceptions and attitudes toward HIV were largely influenced by the values and beliefs they developed in China.

Third, gender – in particular, gender-based norms, identities, and socioeconomic inequalities in a transnational context – has played a complex role in shaping the immigrant men and women’s vulnerability to HIV. Although living in Canada means a bigger space for individual freedom, their “double consciousness” about desired gender relations in two societies has also generated various contradictions and conflicts – such as between knowledge and practice and between rationality and emotionality – that have compromised their capacities to respond to the risk.

CONCLUSION

The selected themes presented in this poster illustrate the role of transnationalism – in particular, cross-country mobility and connections, simultaneous cultural engagement and the “in-between” identities of Chinese immigrants in Canada – in shaping the meanings of, and power dynamics around, gender, sexuality, “race”, socioeconomic status and the nation-state in the contexts of HIV-related risk and HIV prevention. In a globalizing world, risks to international migrants’ health involve complex, multi-faceted interactions between host and home country values, practices and norms. Taking into account Chinese immigrants’ sustained linkages with their home country, we argue that researchers should go beyond a nation-bound concept of society (i.e., the host society), and take into account the simultaneous influence of both Canada and China on their HIV vulnerability. Failing to consider these aspects, we risk excluding an important part of immigrants’ lives, in which both health risks and the resources to tackle them may be embedded.

Selected Publications of This Project

- Huang, H. (2017). Sexuality and everydayness in a transnational context: toward a re-imagined West-China relationship? *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 19(6), 667-679.
- Micollier, E. (2017). Femininities on transnational journeys and sexual health risk: experiences of Chinese immigrant women in Canada. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 24(12), 1787-1806.
- Sinding, C., & Zhou, Y. R. (2017). Intimacy, identity and relationship in the accounts of Chinese immigrants to Canada: The contribution of narrative analysis. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 19(6), 653-666.
- Wei, W. (2017). Masculinities on transnational journeys: sexual practices and risk management among male Chinese immigrants to Canada. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 19(6), 680-694.
- Zhou, Y. R., Watt, L., Micollier, E., & J. Gahagan. (2018). "Rethinking 'Chinese community' in the context of transnationalism: The case of economic immigrants from China in Canada". *Journal of International Migration and Integration*. Advanced Online Publication. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s1213>
- Zhou, Y. R. (2017). “Race” and HIV vulnerability in a transnational context: The case of Chinese Immigrants to Canada. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* (A symposium on Transnationalism and HIV Risk), 19(6), 695-708.
- Zhou, Y. R. Coleman, W. D., Huang, Y., Sinding, C. Wei, W., Gahagan, J., Micollier, E., & Su, H. (2017). Editorial introduction: Exploring the intersections of transnationalism, sexuality and HIV risk. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 19(6), 645-652.
- Zhou, Y. R. (2012). Changing behaviours and continuing silence: Sex in the post-immigration lives of mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 14(1), 87-100.
- Zhou, Y. R., & Coleman, W. (2011). “It’s a forced separation ... and we’ve got used to this kind of life”: Changing dynamics of HIV risk in the context of immigration. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 7(1), 5-15.

