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Transnational Mothering in an Era of Globalization

Chinese-Canadian Immigrant Mothers' Decision-Making When Separating from Their Infants

An ever increasing number of women are migrating globally, and many take up transnational lifestyles after their children are born. The ensuing frequent mother-child separations, as children are sent to live with far away relatives, are believed by mental health professionals to be harmful to both mother and offspring. Yet the phenomenon of maternal-child separation is poorly understood. What motivates women to leave their children, how mothers think that they will experience the time apart, and what the repercussions of such disruptions are all need to be examined. In this study, we interviewed a group of Chinese Canadian immigrant mothers. We used qualitative methodology to explore these mothers' decision-making process as related to separating from their infants. The central organizing principle that emerged from all interviews was a theme of "tolerated ambivalence" as mothers shared their heartbreak at trading proximity with their children for better economic chances in their country of immigration. The women also discussed the expectations to conform to traditional cultural norms, and the role that these expectations played in making their choice. While all participants acknowledged what was often a very painful ambivalence about separation, mothers consistently referred to the economic problems created for them by the lack of adequate child-care possibilities in their new country, combined with the power of their culture of origin, as central to reaching their decisions. Implications for policy and future research are discussed.

The number of international migrants was estimated at 214 million in 2010 (International Organization for Migration's World Migration). Of these migrants close to 50 percent are women whose migration is growing at a faster rate than men's (United Nations). Many of these women are mothers, who, in

addition to being more vulnerable throughout resettlement simply on account of being female, also often suffer the great ordeal of being separated from their children during migration. Mothers are important participants in globalization and its movement of workers, jobs, and capital, all of which have had a significant impact on social structures and family networks over the past two decades (Prempeh, Mensah and Adjibolosoo), with repercussions for migrating mothers in particular.

While the topic of Chinese immigrant mothers' separations from their infants—in New York's garment industry—was first brought to life very poignantly in 1999 by journalist Somini Sengupta of the *New York Times*, it has since gained momentum with researchers internationally. Family and child psychologists in particular have been paying attention to a phenomenon that is seen as a significant threat to the mother-child attachment relationship. Now mothers who parent in transnational situations have been given a voice in several recent studies:

My baby is now nine months, I'm afraid that baby will forget about [me]. Seeing her grow up, every day, I feel I can't be separated from the baby. I'm feeling that the baby and I are attached together. I would feel really bad [if the baby had to go to China], if it has to be, then it has to be, but I would feel very bad. (A mother commenting on the heartbreak of a potential separation from her infant.) (cited in Bohr and Tse 276)

It appears that the numbers of babies sent “back home” to China from North America have increased dramatically over the past decade. In 1999 Sengupta had reported that, at the New York Chinatown Health Center, up to 20 percent of approximately 1,500 babies born each year were sent away (Sengupta). In contrast, by 2009, a survey of 219 New York immigrant mothers (80 percent of whom were from Fukien Province in China) suggested that 57 percent of mothers intended to separate from their infants because of a need to return to work and lack of access to child care (Kwong, Chung, Sun, Chou and Taylor-Shih). Similarly, anecdotal evidence gathered from social service workers in culture-specific community centers, during research for the present article, suggests an equal or even greater incidence in the Chinese community of Canada's largest metropolitan area (Bohr and Tse). Community workers in programs designed to help families cope with separation and deal with the challenges of reunification, express concern that “[the practice] has become a serious issue among families in the Chinese community” as it is estimated that “over half of Chinese women in perinatal programs across Toronto face this heartbreaking decision” (St. Stephen's House). Given the significant numbers

of new Chinese immigrants that settle each year in large cities such as Toronto (over 10,000; Canada Citizenship and Immigration 2000, 2006), thousands of mother-infant dyads are likely affected across North America's major cities.

The aim of the present study was to examine mothers' decision-making process in the practice of parent-infant separation in a transnational and transcultural context.

Globalization, Transnationalism, and Mothering

Transnationalism, or existing simultaneously in one's society of origin and settlement, one of the most prominent features of the globalized movement of workers and jobs (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc), has been creating profound repercussions for social networks, most notably women and families. The fact that female skilled workers, traditionally still the primary caregivers in families, have become an important category of international migrants (Kofman) intensifies that impact. While some attention has recently been paid to the complex needs of immigrant children who may have suffered separations during serial migration or the ensuing transnational lifestyle (see, for example, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco), limited information is available on the effects of this type of separation on mother-infant dyads, and on mothers' mental health. While some notice has been paid to the mental health needs of migrant *families* by social psychologists, social workers, educators, social geographers, and medical anthropologists (e.g. Aronowitz; Salaff and Greve; Schilling; Simich; Smith, Lalonde and Johnson; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova and Louie; Waters), research pertaining to the psychological needs of immigrant mothers and their infants, when primary relationships are disrupted by population mobility, continues to be scarce. At the same time, mental health professionals' concerns and proposed interventions are still almost always dictated by models of family mental health based on First World, Western research and child-rearing values (Liu and Clay; Sue et al.). As a result, confusion, bias, and stigmatization may ensue, as well as a lack of responsiveness to the idiosyncratic needs of new immigrant mothers especially.

When Mothers and Infants Are Separated

The importance of mother-infant attachment in child development, and the problems associated with major disruptions and losses in this relationship have been well established (Cassidy; Karen). Attachment theorists have consistently warned about the potential emotional damage from disruptions to the bond with the primary caregiver, still most often the mother (Bowlby 1951; Kobak).

From a children's mental health vantage point—albeit a point of view derived from Western models—separating youngsters from their mothers to be with distant surrogates would be viewed as highly problematic. Indeed, multiple prolonged separations from primary caregivers, and the resulting losses and disruptions to the attachment relationship, are typically thought to translate into a poor prognosis when it comes to the child's later socioemotional development (Bowlby 1969; Fraley and Shaver).

Little has been written about the risk of such disruption for mothers, in contrast to the recognized concerns about children's experience of separation from their parent, yet interpersonal theories of family functioning and psychopathology, and bidirectional developmental models would predict that mothers too would suffer from stress, and/or depression, when separated from their young children. However scant empirical evidence is available on this topic in the psychological research literature (Feldman, Weller, Leckman, Kuint and Eidelman). Only recently have some reports begun to outline the greatly increased risk for depression in Latina mothers who leave their offspring behind in their homeland (e.g. Miranda, Siddique, Der-Martirosian and Belin). Similarly, an exploratory study examining the repercussions for mothers of having experienced a separation from their infants in the context of migration showed that these mothers report much higher than average levels of parenting stress, as well as distress about their relationship with their child (Whitfield). Furthermore, some qualitative studies are emerging that document mothers' experience in that context (e.g. Bohr and Tse; Kwong et al.).

Most researchers agree that even the most uncomplicated migration experience is stressful for families, especially mothers (Avila; Berry, Kim, Minde and Mok; Dreby; Padilla, Cervantes, Maldonado and Garcia; Schilling; Short and Johnston). As maternal stress and psychological distress have been known to influence the quality of mother-child relationships, possible adverse effects on both mothers and children of an added separation should be carefully monitored (Avila; Biglan, Hops, and Sherman; Webster-Stratton). It is fair to suspect that routinely disrupted attachments could potentially result in a mental health crisis for some communities of immigrant mothers and families.

Mother-Infant Attachment and Separation Across Cultures and in a Chinese Context

It is a well-known fact that many societies (e.g. Chinese society) have traditionally endorsed the involvement of multiple caregivers, often with prolonged boarding of the child with grandparents (Salaff and Greve; Waters). One has to consider that the “satellite babies”—or infants who toggle between families—phenomenon is but a variation on this practice. However, there are two

major differences between traditional and contemporary practice. Traditionally, three-generation child care arrangements occurred in close geographic proximity and were embedded in one language and culture. In contrast, the contemporary arrangement typically involves great geographic distance and participation in two, often quite disparate, cultural and linguistic settings. Yet we have very little information about the impact of this new variation on the developmental outcomes of families. The two new factors—geographic distance and culture duality—may mark a great difference in the workability of the old custom, rendering it problematic.

Risk Factors that May Be Specific to Chinese Immigrant Mothers

Extended family support has always been important resource for women generally, and Chinese women especially (Chou and Chi; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan and Buriel; Liu and Clay; Schilling). When such support is reduced or missing due to mobility and immigration, this can be a significant stressor. Moreover, the marked differences between the known collectivist family values of the country of origin, and the unknown, often different, cultural norms of the country of settlement can further intensify migration stress (Crooks, Hynie, Killian, Giesbrecht and Castleden; Sue and Chin; Sue and Sue). This would be especially true when the old culture's values are poorly understood by mental health professionals in the host country. The fact that Chinese immigrant women may underreport problems further complicates the delivery of timely assistance with stress-related mental health problems (Sue and Morishima).

The Current Study

We report on an exploratory inquiry consisting of interviews with Chinese Canadian immigrant mothers who were struggling with the decision of whether to separate from their infant. These mothers debated whether to send infants back to the parents' country of origin to be raised by members of their extended family, with the intent of having the child return home in time to begin school. The mothers' decision-making process was examined, as they pondered child-rearing options, and the functional and socioemotional outcomes of their choices.

Our goal was to first explore individual, cultural and socioeconomic factors that contributed to the mothers' decision to separate from their child. On the face of it, this choice would seem to defy the evolutionary value of the human attachment system, which ensures infant protection and survival (Bowlby 1973) and is reciprocal in that it productively entangles the mother just as much as

the child. What forces and variables would lead mothers to take the counter-instinctual decision of relinquishing—albeit it temporarily—this enmeshment? How does it feel to make this decision? What variables would have to change to alter this choice? A qualitative analysis was used to highlight and attempt to understand the mothers' beliefs about the strengths and risks of this custom as it affects their babies.

Methods

Twelve mothers were recruited through a children's mental health centre located in a multicultural neighbourhood of Toronto, home to many of Canada's recent immigrants. All participating mothers had either attended, or were about to attend a psychoeducational parenting group for Chinese-speaking parents who planned to send their infants to China. All were struggling with the decision of whether or not to send their infants back to their country of origin, to be raised by relatives. All but two mothers were as yet undecided.

The mothers' average age was 26 years, and ranged from 24 to 36. All were university-educated and had emigrated from mainland China. The babies' ages ranged from five to fifteen months, with an average age of ten months. The families had been in Canada from one to three years, with an average stay of 1.5 years. In four cases, the mothers' husbands (and babies' fathers) elected to be part of, and contributed to, the interview, however their contributions are not included for the purposes of this report.

One-hour meetings were arranged with mothers who had responded to a call for participation, and who agreed to discuss their decision-making process. Interviews were conducted by the author in participants' homes, with the help of a Mandarin speaking interpreter. A token of appreciation was offered to all participants upon completion of the meeting. The interviews were semi-structured and were focused on open-ended questions such as: "Tell us about life with your baby"; "Tell us about your decision to send your baby to China."

A social constructivist approach was chosen to address the data in this study, as this approach stresses the importance of culture and context in understanding various aspects of a society (Derry; McMahan; Prawat and Floden), and relies on participants' understanding, or construction, of their reality. This methodology was deemed appropriate given that this was a study of a poorly understood, culture-specific custom which has not been previously examined. The data were subjected to a modified grounded theory method (Glaser; Glaser and Strauss; Rennie, Phillips and Quartaro). In this type of analysis, once a phenomenon of interest has been identified, a conceptual structure is developed through the extraction of common, categorical data units from a data set (i.e. interviews). Descriptive categories are considered "saturated" when

new data no longer add to their definition (Rennie and Brewer). In this study, in keeping with the grounded theory method, a model of decision-making was constructed based on emergent categories from the interviews, as opposed to the testing of hypotheses.

Results

The central organizing principle that emerged from all interviews was a theme of “tolerated ambivalence.” While all acknowledged what was often a very painful ambivalence when contemplating separation from their offspring, mothers forcefully referred to the economic problems created for them by the lack of adequate child-care possibilities and the power of culture as influencing their choices.

Economic Necessity (“We need the time to build our career and life here”)

All mothers alluded to a need for education, career, financial issues, and a lack of affordable child care or more facilitative immigration policies (“*The grandparents would come here if they were allowed*”) as factors. Without exception, mothers, all of whom were university educated, and greatly valued education, cited two reasons for considering parenting by proxy: First, the need to retrain or to develop their careers, and second, the fact that the high cost of child care would not permit them to keep their baby in Canada. All cited the difficulty of starting anew, and the impediment of caring for a baby, without the support of either extended family or social networks that they had known in China:

I’ve been here for three years, I want to have my own career; I had a good job in China but I am starting over, here ... I feel like I have to start all over; because of the baby I can’t go back to work ... I want to work harder to get a house ... is hard to afford; the most important factor is financial.

Many cited the baby as an obstacle to the mother’s obtaining the education necessary to find a good position. All mothers discussed the better child care resources and supports available in their country of origin:

In China usually people will have a babysitter and it is easy for family and everything is much cheaper. And here because babysitter fee is high, so mommy has to take the job and it is much harder.

Daycare is one of the most important things.

Every single participant shared her hope that it would soon be possible for

families to minimize trans-national disruptions. There was unanimous opinion that this could be accomplished by: 1) making affordable child care available to working families, and 2) changing immigration policies to allow grandparents to visit as long as their children needed them to assist with infant care.

The Power of Culture (“We must preserve the old culture”)

Another important premise highlighted by all participants centered on *cultural tradition and norm* and *familial expectations* (“My grandparents took care of me”). Cultural tradition played a crucial role in the mothers’ quest for solutions to their economic dilemma, as returning the child to the old culture, and fulfilling extended family’s wishes, while also addressing a child care agenda appeared to be an acceptable solution. Many mothers expressed the fear that their culture of origin might get lost unless traditions, such as having grandparents care for the infant, were continued and the infant received adequate exposure to this culture of origin. Grandparents’ wishes and needs, firmly situated in tradition, were respected, and factored into the decision of separating parent and child, and were often allowed to override the mother’s own desires:

My parents they also want us to send the baby back; they also want to play with the grandchild.

I don’t think it’s a very good solution for children to take them away from their parents.

Cost to Mothers

Mothers usually deferred to the collective needs of the family:

For the child herself I don’t think there’s any advantage for her, but just for the consideration of the family, for the whole family, (we) have to think of it as an advantage.

Many, like the mother in our opening paragraph, clearly expressed their sorrow, alluding to their feelings of loss:

I would feel really bad (if baby had to go to China), if it has to be, then it has to be, but I would feel very bad.

Among the most distressing worries was that of a risk to the bilateral attachment relationship (“It will affect the bonding”). Mothers were able to share some of their fears about disruptions to “the bond,” as well as a worry that their returning child would show behaviour problems:

Okay, so if I sent him back, let's say for two to three years and then we, we don't have a close relationship when we take him back then I am afraid that he won't trust me and he won't listen to me and it's hard for me to discipline him.

Mothers expressed no doubt that there would be psychological repercussions for themselves and the baby in the event of a separation. Most often, negative feelings took the form of guilt, and were related to an abdication of responsibility, of letting the baby down:

The relationship would be blocked; I would feel guilty and self-blame....

Several mothers expressed *lack of control* as well as *resignation* about their fate ("We don't have a choice"), and sometimes regret about what they had left behind. They were able to talk about the difficulties, in general, of coming to a new country, and what these difficulties were forcing them to do—to consider sending their baby away in order to be freed up to rebuild a life in their new country:

In China we had a house and when we came here everything is so much different.

The most important thing is not to send the baby back to China; we do not want to send my baby back to China, this is very clear idea in my head I think, but the situation changed and we (now) have to do that.

The following statement summarizes the mothers' most salient message:

I'm strongly opposed to sending the baby back, have to be separated. No one can replace the parent.

Conclusion

Mother-child separations that happen in the context of immigration have been on the increase worldwide. Such separations are but one of the many repercussions of globalization for mothers and their children, but they are particularly victimizing for women. While there is increasing concern about the developmental sequelae of these disruptions for infants, mothers' experiences are rarely studied. Thus, scant information is currently available on the potentially serious consequences of these separations for mothers' well-being and mental health (Bohr and Tse; Feldman, Weller, Leckman, Kuint and Eidelman).

As this interview study of twelve Chinese Canadian new immigrant mothers showed, mothers experience a profound sense of ambivalence when faced with the culturally-sanctioned decision of sending their baby back to China to be cared for by grandparents—a decision that, while supported by their culture of origin, is generally condemned by the receiving (North American) culture. All mothers felt conflicted, pressured by both economic need and traditional cultural norms. The entering premise for each mother was that, in order for the family to thrive and build a successful new life in North America, she needed to be freed from, or supported in, the responsibilities and constraints of caring for an infant. Mothers all felt that this support was presently not available in Canada, due to a lack and high cost of child care resources, and antiquated immigration policies that make it difficult for relatives (e.g. grandparents) to join families, and assist with child rearing. Mothers shared the heartbreak that they felt in anticipation of a separation from their infant—citing attachment, guilt, fear and sadness—and yet described the forceful and convincing influence that culture exerted on their decision, whilst often leaving them with feelings of resignation and powerlessness.

The culture-specific custom we examined should be addressed from the perspective of a contextual framework such as, for example, Uri Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (cited in Serdarevic and Chronister). Transactions that lead to mothers' separation from their babies need to be directly linked to trends in migration and the larger culture, both the sending and the receiving culture, of globalization and transnationalism. It is clear that a multisystemic cost benefit ratio should be considered when attempting to understand practices that are considered harmful by Western standards, and that future research needs to identify and define both these benefits and costs to immigrant women and their children. It would however also be beneficial if feminist scholars paid some attention to this group of mothers who appear to be caught in an untenable situation, unable to mother their children in the way that they wish. While the current study was intended to be psychological in nature, it becomes apparent, as with so many issues that pertain to the contexts of mothers, that attention should be directed to issues of culture, economics and policy, in particular in the areas of child care and immigration, and the supports that are needed by mothers of young children generally. Immigrant mothers with young children deserve better than to be faced with the indefensible choice between a decent new life in their receiving country, and a chance to raise their child.

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