

Reflecting on assumptions in immigrant mental health research

Seminar presented at
Ontario Multicultural Health Applied Research Network
Knowledge Translation Forum
York University, February 15th , 2012

Michaela Hynie & Yvonne Bohr



Faculty of Health

**LaMarsh
YIHR**

Why study **immigrant** mental health?

- What are our assumptions about why immigrants may differ from non-immigrants?

Immigrant mental health may be distinctive because of

- Experience of migration
- Ability to access care (e.g., IFH versus OHIP, language)
- Cultural distance
- Other?

Why is there a difference?

- Is parenting affected by cultural beliefs, culture of origin, or culture of residence? (Su & Hynie, 2010)
 - Compared 192 mothers of young children
 - Chinese in China
 - Chinese immigrants in Canada
 - European non-immigrants in Canada
 - Looked at parenting styles
 - Found cultural differences
 - EC less Authoritarian than either Chinese group

But is it culture?

- Authoritarian parenting increases with stress
 - True for all mothers
- Tested for “mediation” by:
 - Cultural beliefs
 - Around parenting, in general interpersonal orientations
 - Immediate social circumstances
 - Stress, social support
- “Cultural” difference in parenting styles was fully explained by stress
 - If you control for stress, differences disappear

Could differences be due to measurement?

- Study on Maternal Sensitivity in Chinese Canadian dyads as compared to European Canadian dyads (Chan & Bohr, under review)
- Chinese parents were lower in sensitivity on standardized measures
- In interviews, were clearly as attuned to their children
- Questions about the observational *teaching* task
- What questions do these results raise?

Reflecting on distinctiveness

Canadian Immigration Context

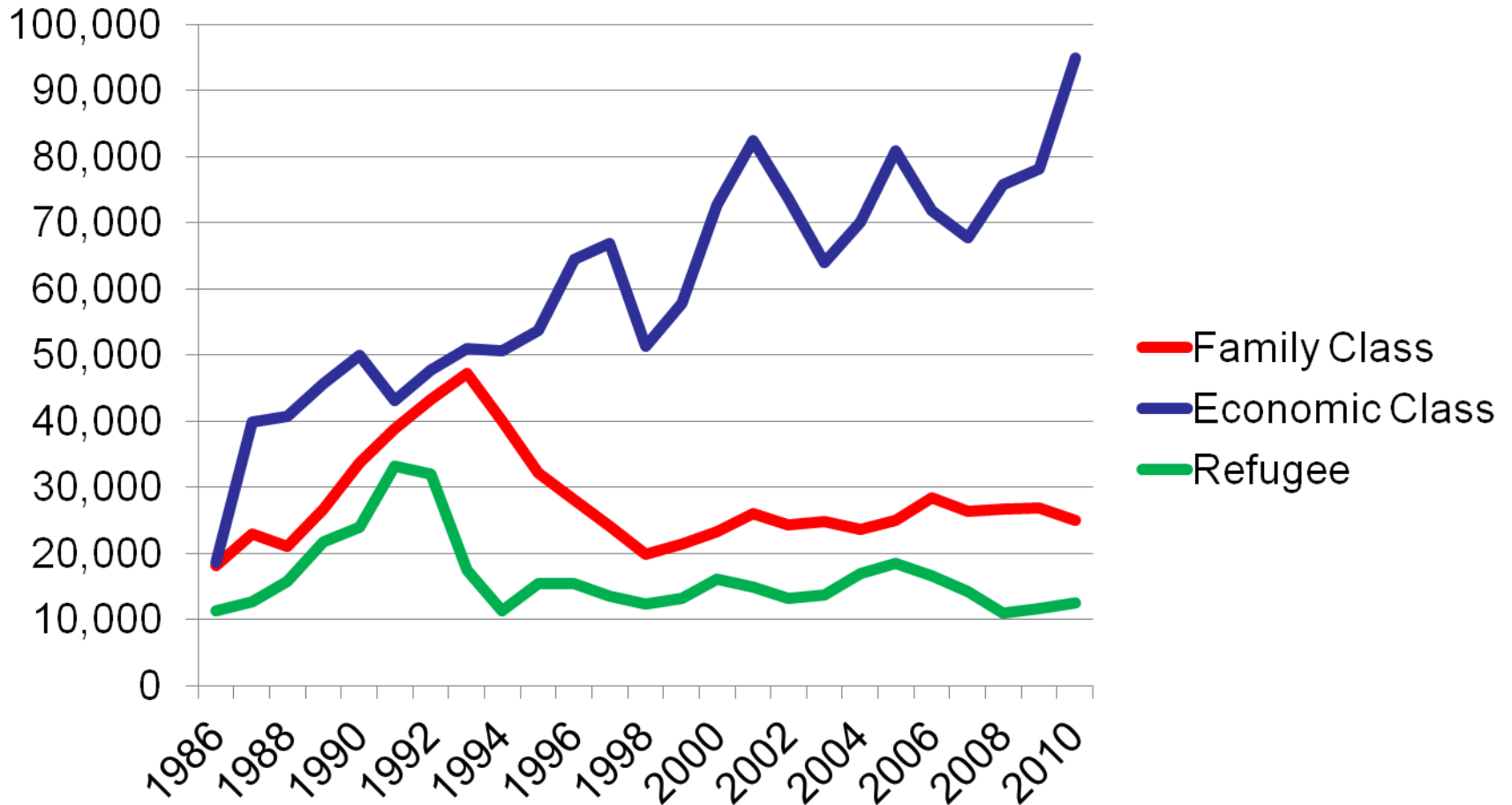
- 6,186,950 immigrants as of 2006
 - 19.8% of Canadian population: foreign-born
- 280,681 permanent residents as of 2010
- 2010 permanent residents from:
 - Africa/Middle East 23.8%
 - Asia/Pacific 48.1%
 - South/Central America 10.1%
 - US 3.3%
 - Europe/UK 14.7%

Toronto Immigration Context

- Metropolitan Toronto (CMA) :major gateway for immigrants in Canada
- 45.7% of CMA population: foreign-born¹
- In 2010, 31.2% of Canada's international migrants settled in Toronto.

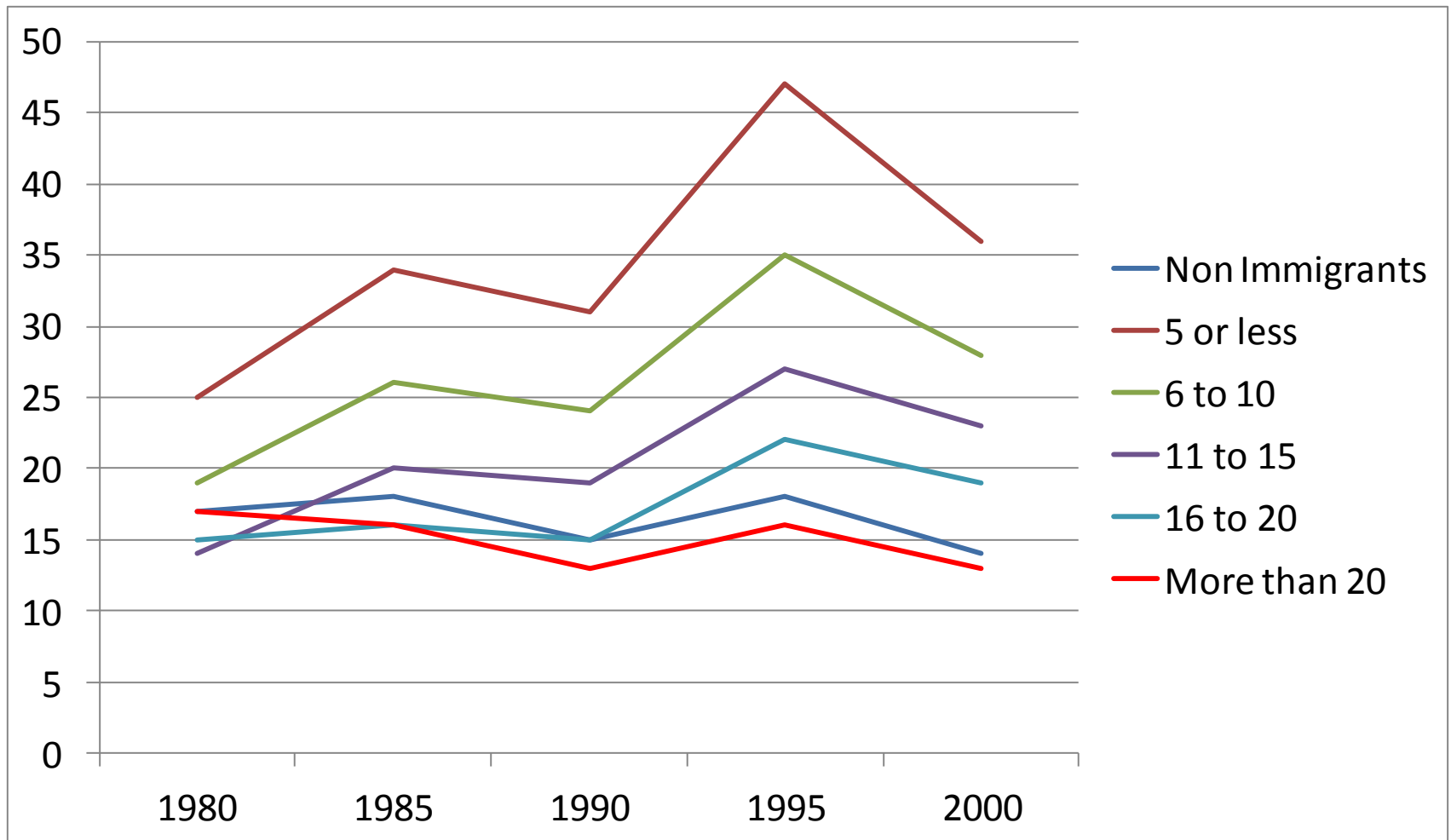
¹ Statistics Canada, 2006

Classes of Immigrants, 1987-2010



Source: Citizenship and Immigration, Canada 2010

Percent Canadian residents at low income cut off by migration status



Picot & Hou, 2003

Percentage of immigrants at Low Income Cut Off by education

Highest Education Level	1990	2000	% Change
Less than high school	34.3	38.4	13.1%
High school graduate	31.0	38.3	25.2%
Some post-secondary	26.4	33.7	27.6%
University degree	19.1	27.5	44.0%

Source: Picot & Hou, 2003

Summary of context

- Numbers of immigrants increasing
 - Fewer accompanied by families
 - Majority coming from non-European and non-English speaking countries
- Percentage of immigrants earning low income increasing
 - Increase greatest among those with highest education

Reflecting on distinctiveness

Other misconceptions
about the immigration
process and benefits to migrants?

Misconceptions and myths

- Immigrants are lucky to be able to settle here (North America)
- Their lives improve as soon as they arrive here, and continue to improve
- It's best for immigrants to acculturate as quickly as possible to ensure mental health and success
- There are many settlement & mental health services available to immigrants

Further assumptions about immigration

- That immigration is permanent
- That it is direct
- That people's lives improve
- That they have many choices

Traditional solutions for optimizing immigrant mental health

- Increasing access
- Cultural competence in mental health providers
- Individual focused
- Stress reduction emphasized
- Decontextualized

Traditional solutions for immigrant mental health

- Are traditional solutions misguided?

Case study 1

- Parent-child separation in transnational families: risks and resilience (Bohr, Hynie, Whitfield, Shih & Zafar, 2011)

What we know and don't know

- Parent-child separations present challenges for children, parents and communities:
 - Significant problems associated with major disruptions and losses in the bilateral caregiver-infant relationship¹
- The extent and nature of these challenges (risks) is unclear
- Little is known about culturally embedded strengths and protective factors (resiliency)
- Needs of families and communities must be better defined²
 - Western mental health models prevail

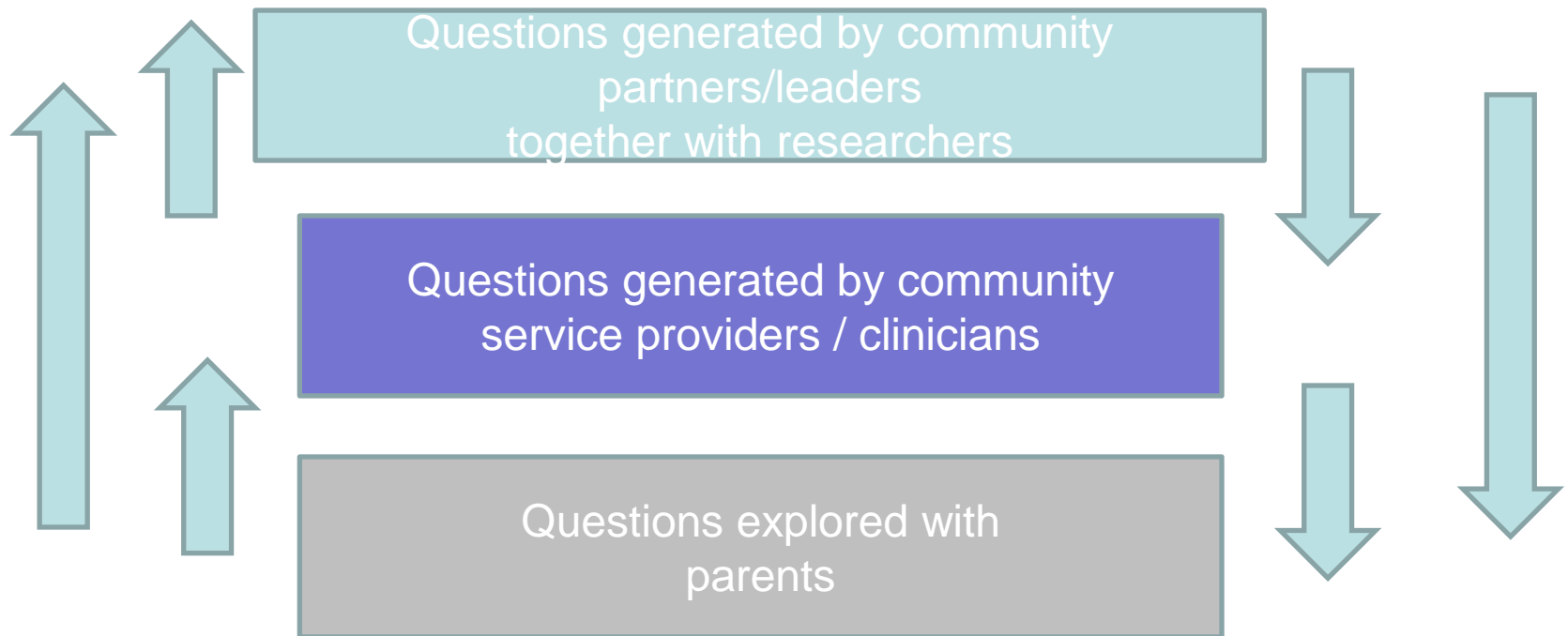
¹ Bowlby, 1951/1969; Cassidy, 1999; Karen, 1994; Kobak, 1999; Miranda, Siddique, Der-Martirosian & Belin, 2005; Smith et al., 2004; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; ²Liu & Clay, 2002; Sue, Casas, & Fouad, 1998; ² Tomlinson & Swartz, 2001

Objectives of this study

- To better understand the experience of families in three diverse Toronto communities where transnational parent-child separations occur from the families' and communities' perspective
- To describe risks, resilience and needs in a strength-focused and culturally appropriate manner
- To contribute to knowledge that can help inform policy and practice

Methodology

- A community based participatory action approach (PAT, Whyte, 1991)
- 3 communities



Methodology

- Three communities: Chinese Canadian, Afro-Caribbean Canadian, South Asian Canadian
- Semi-structured interviews with four community leaders and
- Seven service providers (n= 3,2,2)
- 5 focus groups; 11 interviews : 34 parents
- Thematic analysis¹ of focus group narratives and content of parent interviews
- Highlighting of most salient themes

¹ Adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006

Interviews with Community Partners, Clinicians, Parents

- What are the most common reasons for which parents separate from their children in your community?
- How do families re-establish relationships with their children upon reunification?
- What could be helpful in supporting you to keep your child in Canada?

Summary

- Three communities exhibited distinct patterns of transnational parent child separation including timing and length
- **Themes common to all three:**
 - Pursuit of better opportunities in the receiving country often did not materialize, creating many stressors during re-settlement
 - Separations involve weakened emotional ties between parents and children and distress
 - Parents had no choice (separation as coping) and would likely not separate again
 - Better systemic resources are needed to support new immigrants
- **Themes that were community specific:**
 - Economic concerns as *push* and cultural factors (e.g., grandparental expectations) as *pull* for separation (Chinese community)
 - Separation as necessary evil in escaping abuse (Caribbean)
 - Fathers separating (South Asian)
 - Educational dilemmas (South Asian and Chinese)

Last words...

“I always tell people not to leave their child back home and come up to Canada thinking that life is going to be better...any time I hear someone say it from my country, I’m like please! Don’t do it.”

Reflecting on distinctiveness:

Risk and resilience in transnational environments

Case Study 2: Refugee youth health project (Hynie, Shakya, & Guruge, 2012)

- Community based research project to look at refugee youth mental health in 3 communities
- Afghanistan, Burma (Karen community) and Sudan are among top 10 source countries for sponsored convention refugees to Canada since 2006

Intergenerational relationships through the eyes of refugee youth

- Advisory committee identified intergenerational relationships as being primary concern
- Most research looks at immigrants
 - Refugee may face different or more intense adjustments and challenges

Research on Intergenerational Relationships

- Acculturation gap
 - Children acculturate more quickly than parents
 - Greater gaps may lead to more conflict
- Role reversals
 - Parents' reliance on children challenges parent-child roles
 - More role reversal can lead to more conflict

Birman, 2006; Dennis, Basañez, & Farahmand, 2010; Oznobishin & Kurman, 2009; Tickett & Jones, 2005

Research on Intergenerational Relationships, cont'd

- Deterioration of parent-child relationships
 - Failure to protect/provide,
 - Struggles over authority,
 - Lack of communication,
 - Insufficient time
- Mutual support and resilience
 - Parental support may be particularly important for migrant youth (Walsh et al., 2006)
 - The support youth provide may be critical to family adjustment

Hwang, 2006; McQuillan & Tse, 1995 ; Newman, 2005; Puig, 2002;

Methods

- Focus groups and interviews with Afghan (29), Karen (28) and Sudanese youth (13)
 - Focus groups divided by gender and age (16-19 vs 20-24) (n = 57)
 - Interviews (n = 13)
- Draw self-portrait depicting roles and responsibilities before and after migration
- Research team developed and applied inductive thematic analysis

Results

- Three main themes emerged:
 - Family responsibilities
 - Relationship conflict and deterioration
 - Social support

Family responsibilities

- Interpreting the new environment
- Providing financial support
- Increased responsibilities
- Positive change/growth

Relationship conflict and deterioration

- Lack of communication and understanding
 - Value gaps, lack of communication, and alienation
- Freedom and control
 - Too much freedom versus too much control
- Variability within families

Discussion

- Increased responsibilities for youth
 - Some evidence of role reversals
 - Sometimes tied to their divergent acculturation
 - Often necessitated by systemic barriers to economic security
- Family conflict and deterioration in some cases, but many examples of increased connection, support and strong relationships
 - Acculturation gaps and role reversals may contribute but not sufficient to explain conflict
 - Maybe lack of support and communication

Refugee Youth as Resettlement Champions

- Youth take on resettlement responsibilities and leadership for family
 - Youth forced into greater responsibilities by inadequate resources to parents and youth alike
- Speak of personal stress more than of family stress
- If anything, family functioning enhanced

Mental health consequences of limited choices

- Resilience as a process to frame the question
 - What are the resources available to newcomers
 - Limited external choices
 - Culture and experience determine coping strategies

Reflecting on distinctiveness:

Risk and resilience in transnational environments

Policy Implications

- Immigration
- Settlement / integration
- Child care
- Community, child & family oriented services
- Parent education

Thank you

- The individuals and families who shared their stories
- ACCESS ALLIANCE
- CERIS/Metropolis and SSHRC Canada
- Stella Abiyu Mona
- Arzo Akbari
- Sepali Guruge
- Sheila Htoo
- Azza Khogali
- William Mude
- Rabea Murtaza
- Yogendra Shakya
- Chang Su
- York University labs:
 - Tammy Sikakane
 - May Huang
 - Milena Stelmaszak
 - Mei Chung
 - Lorraine Wong
 - Celina Wu
- York University Faculty of Health
- The LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research
- YIHR
- Connie Tse
- Aisling Discoveries Child & Family Centre



Thank you