

**Multicultural Mental Health Promotion:
Knowledge Translation Forum**

A presentation of the
Ontario Multicultural Health Applied Research Network (OMHARN)
York University
Feb. 15, 2012 12:00pm- 2:00pm

Reflecting on assumptions in immigrant mental health research: A conversation hour
Presentation by Dr. Yvonne Bohr and Dr. Michaela Hynie

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SUMMARY

Dr. Yvonne Bohr and Dr. Michaela Hynie facilitated an engaging, lively, interactive discussion at York University to address underlying assumptions about multicultural mental health. The event was welcomed by Dean Harvey Skinner and introductions by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou. The event was organized by the York University component of the Ontario Multicultural Health Applied Research Network (OMHARN) knowledge translation initiatives. OMHARN brings together Ontario-based researchers, health, social and settlement service providers, and policymakers in the field of multicultural health to explore opportunities for high quality multicultural health research and to synthesize existing research to inform health planning and management, clinical practice, and policy to ensure that health services in Ontario are culturally safe, effective, and equitable. For more information see <http://www.ryerson.ca/omh/index.html>.

“Reflecting on assumptions in immigrant mental health research: A conversation hour” drew approximately 40 participants from across disciplines and sectors including community organizations, settlement services, multicultural health care providers and university students and faculty. The conversation among participants emphasized the need to demystify the myths and misconceptions about immigrant mental health.

Dr. Hynie and Dr. Bohr began their presentation by commenting that immigrant mental health is assumed to have distinct characteristics. Researchers tend to focus on characteristics associated with the distance travelled by newcomers/immigrants in terms of geography and culture, but focus less on the economic changes they experience. Assumptions that differences or challenges observed in immigrant mental health are due to these characteristics are not always confirmed...and this matters because it affects what kinds of interventions are suggested and implemented. Perhaps because of this, our clinical interventions focus on individual level interventions and cultural differences, and often fail to consider the importance of the broader social and economic context experienced by newcomers, and how that affects their coping, stress, and mental health. If we recognize that resilience in these communities requires strengthening the resources available to them, any discussion of immigrant mental health must also address the broader issue of policies that can improve their larger social and economic context.

Audience participants repeated the message that there is a need to understand the diversity among immigrant groups as well as unpack the concept of “immigrant” and “stress”. There are different mental health considerations among newcomers, refugees, and more settled immigrants, which vary by environmental context. Overall, participants said that for immigrants coming to Canada “everything is new...it is very hard.” They indicated that there are both internal and external factors that support and challenge the mental health of multicultural immigrant populations and individuals.

Dr. Bohr and Dr. Hynie explicitly addressed some of the misconceptions and assumptions about the immigration process and its benefits to migrants, as well as a critical analysis of some of the traditional solutions for optimizing mental health. The audience participants commented that services for immigrants may be too narrowly focused on crisis support and settlement issues without sufficient consideration to other social dimensions of health and well-being. Discussion included mention of the disproportionate number of people coming to Canada and then living with low income without their families for informal natural support and help. The conversation wrapped up with mention of the need to move beyond pathology toward a focus on coping, resources, assets, strengths and positive cultural values in the way we approach immigrant mental health in research and practice.

An article on this event can be viewed at:

<http://health.blog.yorku.ca/2012/02/17/multicultural-mental-health-promotion-forum-explores-stresses-on-immigrant-mental-health-and-coping-strategies/>