

Intergenerational Violence: The Post-Migration Context in Canada

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Abstract

Recent changes to Canadian immigration policies have made intra-family adaptation and interaction more restrictive and stressful, which in turn has implications for intergenerational relations in post-migration contexts. This working paper is a review of the literature on intergenerational violence; specifically on child abuse, conflicts between adolescents/youth and their parents, and elder abuse. Each of these areas are explored using an intersectionality approach as the authors present definitions of violence, risk and protective factors, and barriers to help-seeking. The analysis reveals that gender and gendered manifestations of violence intersect with ageism, racism, sexism, and other factors requiring a complex understanding as well as nuanced solutions to addressing intergenerational violence in the post-migration context. The review also demonstrates a need for further research into the possible role of immigration stress in intergenerational violence and into the cultural and structural factors that may mitigate its effects.

Introduction

This paper is part of the larger university-community collaboration project, *Integration Trajectories of Immigrant Families*¹, undertaken by the Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS).

Recent changes to Canadian immigration policies (Ali, 2014) impact intra-generational relations, limiting interactions, adding stress, and adversely affecting individual and family adaptation. This paper examines the trajectory of integration into Canadian society, which is both influenced by and makes an impact on the phenomenon of intergenerational family violence. Violence holds various meanings and dimensions depending upon the family member, her/his background, and the context, though acts of violence are always undesired and isolating.

The phenomenon of intergenerational violence encompasses three areas: child abuse, violence between adolescents/youth and their parents, and elder abuse. While these three areas can be examined separately, relationships and patterns also connect them. Comprehensive prevalence rates for these types of violence in immigrant families are currently unavailable, but emerging academic and grey literature highlights intergenerational violence in families in the post-migration context as a significant issue. Our examination of family violence in the post-migration Canadian context employs an intersectionality approach that encompasses ageism, sexism, racism, classism, and immigration status, with the potential to include ableism and homophobia. Captured in this report is a summary of emerging literature on this topic. We make preliminary recommendations for future analysis of the intersection of the three identified areas of intergenerational violence.

¹ For more information visit: http://www.ryerson.ca/immigrant_families/

Search Strategy

Literature was sourced through the 'Search Everything' function of the Ryerson library catalogue, along with individual searches of Sociological Abstracts, the Canadian Research Index, and Google for grey literature. Reference lists of the relevant articles were examined for further literature of interest. Key search terms included: elder abuse, intergenerational violence, intergenerational conflict, and child abuse in immigrant families. The search was then narrowed down to Canadian publications from 2000 to 2014. In total, 13 articles were used in the final review for elder abuse, 15 for child abuse, and 25 for violence between adolescents/youth and their parents. As we did not comprehensively review all published and grey literature, findings should be interpreted with caution. For example, this search did not capture "traditional harmful practices", such as female genital cutting or homophobic and transphobic abuse. Presented next is a summary of the three areas with special attention paid to definitions, risk factors, barriers to seeking help, and protective/preventive factors.

Results

Child Abuse

Definitions of violence: The World Health Organization (WHO) distinguishes five subtypes of child maltreatment (child abuse and neglect): 1) physical abuse, 2) sexual abuse, 3) neglect and negligent treatment, 4) emotional abuse, and 5) exploitation (WHO, n.d.). Stipulations such as the duty to report or the consequences of abusive actions may not be understood or applied in the same manner across communities (Preston, 2001; Maiter & Stalker, 2011). In some settings, corporal punishment may be considered a method of effective discipline with an educational purpose rather than physical abuse (Kwok & Tam, 2005; Preston, 2001; Simbandumwe et al., 2008). Most parents across diverse settings strongly disapprove of causing injury to children (Kwok & Tam, 2005: 342). Ambiguous areas include yelling or swearing, which may be considered "natural human responses" (Simbandumwe et al., 2008: 907), leaving children unattended (neglect), and public scolding, shaming, and shouting (psychological abuse) (Kwok & Tam, 2005; Preston, 2001).

Risk factors: Risk factors for child abuse are similar across communities and societies, but some differences exist (Preston, 2001). Abuse may also be a pre-existing behaviour and continue, escalate, or cease in the post-migration context (Tyyskä, 2009; Ma et al., 2013; Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Simbandumwe et al., 2008). Common risk factors across communities and societies may include parents' addictions, such as gambling, alcohol or substance abuse, while unique risk factors specific to pre-migration may include trauma stemming from refugee camp experiences (Ma et al., 2013; Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Preston, 2001; Simbandumwe et al., 2008). In most post-migration contexts, risk factors may include changes to social networks and support systems (Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Ma et al., 2013; Preston, 2001; Roer-Strier et al., 2005) as well as changes to generational and intergenerational relationships (Ma et al., 2013; Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Ma et al., 2013; Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Preston, 2001; Roer-Strier et al., 2005; Simbandumwe et al., 2008).

Barriers to seeking help: On a basic level, victims of abuse may be unaware of available support services or how to access them. Victims have unique background experiences and current tensions, both of which may lead to mistrust of state intervention and government agencies, fear of discriminatory treatment or racism by authorities, or concerns over their contribution to community stigmatization (Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Preston, 2001). Lack of engagement can also reflect unfamiliarity with government laws and policies in the post-migration setting, or a persistent belief that authorities do not have a right to interfere in situations of child discipline within their families (Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Preston, 2001; Yeung & Chang, 2002). Practical barriers to assessing “mainstream” social services include: lack of effective interpretation/translation services; inadequately trained staff with regard to difficulties arising from migration; interpersonal and systemic insensitivity; or lack of respect for cultural issues (Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Preston, 2001; Simbandumwe et al., 2008).

Protective and preventive factors: Interventions need to encompass a more inclusive approach allowing parents to exercise agency in decision-making, and to take into consideration unique cultural and contextual situations (Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Maiter & Stalker, 2011). Parenting support groups have the potential to reduce isolation felt by immigrant parents (Maiter & Stalker, 2011). Other recommendations include hiring staff from the communities served, having interpreters available, and ensuring respectful practices by service providers (Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Preston, 2001; Alaggia & Marziali, 2003 in Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Preston, 2001; Simbandumwe et al., 2008). Caution is recommended when hiring staff, as some families perceive stigma when their problems are disclosed to service providers of a similar background (Alaggia & Maiter, 2012). Strength-based approaches to care are strongly endorsed for their emphasis on positive family relationships and promotion of resiliency among caregivers and children. Other effective initiatives for prevention and intervention may include parenting education programs on reducing abusive discipline practices (Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Ma et al., 2013; Preston, 2001). Community-based and informal social supports are important for prevention and intervention, as resources are often acquired outside of formal support channels and through community-based approaches (Alaggia & Maiter, 2012; Maiter & Stalker, 2011).

Youth and Parental Intergenerational Violence

Definitions of violence: Violence in the context of youth and parental intergenerational violence can include physical, sexual, verbal, financial, and emotional/psychological abuse. Physical violence may be used by a parent as a form of discipline, with the intent to re-assert authority in response to actions by their children. Actions by adolescents such as verbal abuse toward parents may reflect their own build-up of immigration stress, generational acculturative differences, or discrimination at school (Maiter & Stalker, 2011; Yeung & Chang, 2002; Noivo, 1993; Merali, 2004). The concept of “forced marriage” is another distinct form of violence to which youth may be vulnerable, which

must be distinguished from “arranged marriage”² and can be present in newly settled or established immigrant communities (Netting, 2006; Zaidi & Shuraydi, 2002; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012).

Risk factors: Family violence may pre-date migration and may continue, escalate, or cease in the post-migration context (Tyyskä, 2009). Family relations and power hierarchies may remain or undergo significant change in the post-migration context (Dion & Dion, 2001; Tyyskä, 2008). This may include shifting gender roles that result in increased tension between adolescents and their parents and a potential for more restrictive parenting practices (Tyyskä, 2009; Merali, 2004; Terman, 2010; Kilbride et al., 2001). Some studies, however, illustrate that parenting practices fall along a continuum of traditional to non-traditional and are subject to change upon immigration and settlement (Tyyskä, 2005). Stressors of immigration due to economic and financial pressures include a loss of social status, feelings of frustration, inferiority and diminished authority in the home, and a shifting position in the family hierarchy due to an inability to provide financially as per prescribed traditional roles (Yeung and Chang, 2002; Tyyskä, 2009; Noivo, 1993; Haque, 2010; Tyyskä, 2005). For youth, the loss of extended family and community supports may produce a situation in which there is little alternative to “the family” for support, including multi-generational living situations (Noivo, 1993; Tyyskä, 2009; Haque, 2010). Prolonged family separation due to Canadian immigration policies whereby transnational families face delays to reunification can also have a negative influence on family relationships (Bernhard et al., 2009; Tyyskä, 2009).

Barriers to seeking help: Jiwani (2005) notes both a lack of places for newcomer adolescents to turn to for support and inadequate resources and responsiveness when newcomer youth do seek assistance. In addition, Jiwani (2005) also points to a “code of silence” that exists in immigrant communities with respect to intra-family conflict. Stigma surrounding situations of family conflict and abuse, especially if they result in intervention from authorities, can be a barrier to seeking help (Tyyskä, 2009; Yeung & Chang, 2002; Morrison & James, 2009). While there are examples of spaces and programs created for and by immigrant communities to respond to family violence, fear of re-inscribing community stigmatization may also result in reluctance to identify and seek help for family violence and to participate in research and/or programming directed at newcomer families and youth (Jiwani, 2005; Tyyskä, 2009).

Protective/prevention factors: Family therapy as a method of enhancing communication may mitigate the impact of stigma on accessing services (Yeung & Chang, 2002). Through therapy and social support programs, families can communicate about the stresses of immigration, the effects of acculturation, and their perceptions of themselves and their family members in relation to cultural values and behaviours. Cultural brokering and negotiation can be conducted in a manner that increases empathy and understanding in these settings (Yeung & Chang, 2002; Merali, 2004; Shariff, 2009;

² In a forced marriage, one or both spouses do not consent, and those who are forced to marry may be subject to physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse or confinement if they do not comply (Forcedmarriages.ca, n.d.; PHAC, 2012; PHAC, 2012).

Morrison & James, 2009; Carranza, 2013). Community and public education is recommended for raising awareness of the importance of violence prevention in immigrant families (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2012; Terman, 2010).

Elder Abuse

Definitions of violence: Forms of elder abuse include physical violence, neglect, excessive control of and restrictions on mobility, and financial abuse (Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Matsuoka et al., 2013; Sev'er, 2009; Tyyskä, 2009; Tyyskä et al., 2013; Tam & Neysmith, 2006; Walsh et al., 2007). Disrespect is a pervasive form of elder abuse and includes shouting, ignoring, dismissive comments, unreasonable commands, misidentifying by name, and name-calling (Tam & Neysmith, 2006; Tyyskä, 2009). Other non-physical forms of elder abuse include psychological abuse, spiritual neglect and abuse, verbal abuse such as spreading rumour in the community, insulting, joking about death, and threatening (Matsuoka et al., 2013; Sev'er, 2009; Tam & Neysmith, 2006; Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Tyyskä et al., 2013). Further, sponsored family members are often abusively expected to perform unpaid labour in the home such as cooking and caring for grandchildren (Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Matsuoka et al., 2013; Tyyskä et al., 2013). Violence occurs across different relationships and may occur between spouses, adults and children and/or grandchildren, members of immediate family, and in-laws (Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Matsuoka et al., 2013; Tam & Neysmith, 2006; Tyyskä et al., 2013; Tyyskä, 2009; Walsh et al., 2007).

Risk factors: The risks of elder abuse may stem from the pre-migration context (Matsuoka et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2007). The intersection of stresses related to migration can result in changes in social status, financial difficulties, material pressures, and high stress. These factors may lead to frustration or impatience with elderly relatives, which can potentially escalate to abuse (Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Sev'er, 2009; Matsuoka et al., 2013; Tam & Neysmith, 2006; Tyyskä et al., 2013). Furthermore, the attempt to comply with traditional cultural expectations in a new environment may also facilitate opportunities for abuse. Insistence on dowries is one example of these expectations (Tyyskä, 2009; Walsh et al., 2007).

Barriers to seeking help: Barriers to seeking help from abuse include stigma and community gossip; wanting to protect from shame and embarrassment; concern about children/grandchildren's welfare; traditions of obeying the husband; fear of retaliation from the abuser; and fear of personal re-victimization or of their families in the social, health, or criminal justice system (Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Tyyskä et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2007; Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Tyyskä et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2007; Tam & Neysmith, 2006). Structural barriers include issues of accessibility, availability and affordability, immigration criteria of sponsorship, difficulty finding work, and ineligibility for pensions or benefits (Guruge & Kanthasamy, 2010; Tyyskä et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2007; Matsuoka et al., 2013; Matsuoka et al., 2013; Koehn, 2006). Other barriers that shape responses to abuse include social isolation, language barriers, dependence on the family (particularly if they are sponsored and ineligible for pensions or benefits), lack of government financial support, and lack of knowledge of rights or available services (Matsuoka et al., 2013; Sev'er, 2009; Tam & Neysmith, 2006; Tyyskä et al., 2013).

Protective/prevention factors: Education emerges as a key element for service providers (e.g., health care and social workers) and potential users (e.g., older immigrant women), with an explicit incorporation of cultural sensitivity training (Matsuoka et al., 2013; Tyyskä, et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2007). General supports to maintain independence and quality of life (such as pensions, social assistance, subsidized housing, and physical and mental health services) are recommended, as well as an examination of sponsorship policies which potentially create dependence and may render those who are sponsored more vulnerable to abuse (Walsh et al., 2007; Koehn, 2006). Diversity among health, social, and settlement service providers – with the ability to speak the same language as service users – is also noted as important (Tyyskä et al., 2013).

Conclusions and Emerging Research Questions

Across all three areas of literature, there are connections between the stresses of immigration in the post-migration context, socio-economic conditions, and violence. Structural factors and stresses stemming from immigration offer an interesting point from which to analyze the processes and effects of ageism, racism, and sexism. The effects of gender roles feature prominently across all three areas and require further analysis in the context of other oppressions. Gendered violence can pre-exist and may remain, shift, or begin in the post-migration context. Examining violence in an ecological framework and from an intersectional standpoint can reconcile “cultural” and “structural” factors that may result in violence in immigrant families. Other overarching factors include immigration policies that emphasize economic migration and the financial commitment of sponsorship and deprioritize family reunion. Language also emerges as an interesting factor. For example, language can decrease isolation, improve employment opportunities, and act as a barrier to communication between parents and children, and to accessing services. Across all three areas of violence, “immigration stress” emerges as a potential source or accelerator of violence in immigrant families. The influence of the post-migration context of violence, separate from pre-existing violence in the family, remains to be examined. Moreover, violence that occurs during migration is a separate area of study that deserves attention. Further research can examine what is unique about immigration that contributes to stress and situations of violence compared to violence that may pre-exist migration and violence in the Canadian-born population. An examination of resilience in the face of immigration stress presents opportunities and best practices for intervention.

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