

## Parent-Infant Separation in Transnational Families: Risk, Resilience and the Needs of Young Immigrant Parents

*Yvonne Bohr, Michaela Hynie, Natasha Whitfield, Cynthia Shih and Sadia Zafar*

### What you need to know

Immigrant families separated from their children who live in another country experience significant problems that go beyond just issues of attachment and parent-child relationships. Yet little is known about the risks involved or even about certain strengths or coping mechanisms that might be specific to particular cultures that send their children to live abroad with relatives. This research looks at the risks, resilience, and the needs of parents in Chinese, South Asian, and Caribbean communities in Canada, as well as the perspective from mental health practitioners who provide support to these communities.

### What is this research about?

Toronto is one of the world's most ethnically diverse cities and is continuously praised for its multicultural image. It is estimated that by 2031, visible minorities will in fact become the majority. However, many families maintain ties with their home country and may be defined as "transnational families", meaning that they have social bonds, and even homes, in both countries. It is not uncommon for some immigrant parents to be separated from their children. For some families, the separation from their child can be based on the desire to keep children in traditional education of the home country. Other parents may be forced to leave their child or to send them back to their country of origin due to the financial pressures of being immigrants as they pursue a better life in Canada. Some parents are not able to support their child and cover basic rent and living costs in their adopted country, and are forced to separate. This study used a



Separated parents and children of transnational immigrant families experience weakening emotional ties and distress on both sides.

community-based participatory action approach to examine and address the problem of family separation in three Toronto immigrant communities where families often live apart.

### What did the researchers do?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four community leaders and six mental health service providers in Chinese, African-Caribbean, and South Asian Canadian immigrant communities. The interviews helped to inform and develop the questions that were then asked to the remaining participants. Five focus groups and 11 interviews were held with 34 parents in these three communities in the Greater Toronto Area.

The narratives and stories from the interviews of the parents were then analysed and grouped into themes to better understand how experiences might be shared.

### Methodology

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



## What did the researchers find?

Chinese, South Asian, and African-Caribbean groups showed both similarities and differences in their cases of parent-child separation including the timing and length of separation. All three groups shared the following experiences:

- pursuit of better opportunities in the receiving country often did not happen causing stress during re-settlement
- separations resulted in weakened emotional ties between parents and children and distress on both sides
- parents felt that they had no choice since the separation was seen as a way of coping with difficult circumstances
- parents would likely not separate again
- parents believed better system-wide resources are needed to support new immigrants

On the other hand, the following differences showed that some experiences are community-specific:

- **Chinese community:** economic concerns as *push* and cultural factors (like expectations of grandparents) as *pull* for separation
- **African-Caribbean community:** separation as a necessary evil in escaping abuse
- **South Asian community:** fathers particularly suffering during separation
- **South Asian and Chinese communities:** educational dilemmas driving separations

## How can you use this research?

While this was an exploratory study that needs to go further, these early findings argue for the need of increased resources in Toronto to support families that have separated from their children during or after migration. Policy recommendations are necessarily linked to immigration processes and practices. The results also support the demand for more efficient and transparent licensing and certification processes so that immigrants with children might be integrated more quickly into an appropriate sector of the Canadian labour market. The need for more affordable child care facilities and parent educational opportunities should also be considered as an important policy goal.

*“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.”*

*-Words from a separated parent*

## About the researchers

**Dr. Yvonne Bohr** is an Associate Professor of Clinical Developmental Psychology at York University, and the Director of the LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research in the Faculty of Health. She is a clinical psychologist specializing in child and family mental health in a multi-cultural context. Her work focuses on evidence-based treatment and mental health care access for immigrant families. She directs an Infant Mental Health team at Aisling Discoveries, a Toronto children's treatment centre located in one of the city's most diverse neighbourhoods. Contact Dr. Bohr at [bohry@yorku.ca](mailto:bohry@yorku.ca).

**Dr. Michaela Hynie** is an Associate Professor of Psychology at York University and Associate Director of the York Institute of Health Research. Her research focuses on culture, immigration and health inequities, including culturally appropriate health and mental health care, health care access, and using community based research methods in diverse immigrant communities; and on how basic interpersonal or social psychological processes are affected by culture.

**Natasha Whitfield** is a fourth year Ph.D. student in the Clinical Developmental Psychology program at York University. She earned her Masters Degree at York University, and her Honours BA at the University of Windsor. Her main research interests lie in the study of parent-child separations, relationships and social functioning in immigrant families.

**Cynthia Shih** is a first year Ph.D. student in the Clinical Developmental Psychology program at York University. She completed her BA at Ryerson University and the University of Waterloo. Her Masters research focused on the different cultural conceptions and manifestations of parent-infant attachment relationships, transnational parenting, and the role of multiple caregivers, especially grandparents, in child development.

**Sadia Zafar** is a second year Ph.D. student in the Social Personality Psychology Program at York University. She earned her Honours BA Degree as well as her Masters Degree, both in Psychology, at York University. Her main research interests lie in the study of immigrant acculturation and domestic violence in immigrant families.

## Keywords

parent-child separation, immigrant parenting  
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