

Integrating Research and Practice with Immigrant Families: Cultural Consultation and Collaboration

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Creating a Partnership

Proximity: Mohammed Baobaid and Kamala Shiriyeve Azizova are both foreign-trained, immigrant professionals (Doctorate's in Psychology) who first met Lynda Ashbourne when they were involved with the Family Therapy Internship Program at Family Service Thames Valley in London, Ontario where Ashbourne was providing clinical supervision of their practice. This was a collaboration of opportunity and shared interests.

Shared Interests: During that time, Ashbourne completed a research project investigating the ways in which parents and adolescents negotiate and experience the time they spend together and apart. The three colleagues talked several times about this project as each of them were parents of adolescent/young-adult children in addition to working in a clinical setting with families of adolescents. In particular, Baobaid and Shiriyeve Azizova, as "cultural insiders" were interested in how these experiences might be similar or different for immigrant families. Both had immigrated to London with their families, from Yemen and Azerbaijan respectively, within the past decade. Ashbourne was interested in extending her research to more diverse populations.

The idea: The colleagues' shared interest in how broader social influences and institutions associated with the dominant culture might shape the experience of time spent together and apart in immigrant families served as the impetus for this project. As social scientists, family therapists, and parents, they were interested in understanding this immigrant family experience in both theoretical and practical ways.

Pragmatics: The funding for the initial research project was received as part of internal University of Guelph research funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The project was designed primarily by Ashbourne in consultation with Baobaid and Shiriyeve Azizova. In addition to co-ordinating recruitment of research participants, Baobaid and Shiriyeve Azizova provided suggestions for interview questions, reviewed the research proposal, and consulted during the analysis phase.

The primary research question centered on how parents and adolescents negotiate and experience time spent together and apart within their families. Parents and adolescents were also asked to reflect on the ways in which adolescence and migration may influence their family interactions and experience of family time. Fathers and mothers as well as sons and daughters were recruited to include the multiple perspectives of family members.

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Exploring Immigrant Family Time

Participants

Participant families represented 21 countries of origin in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. While having diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, all identified themselves as part of the local Muslim community.

Our designation of "Muslim" – a product of our consultation conversations and reflecting the local community - is presented here with the understanding that there are diverse traditions and cultures associated with the wide range of countries-of-origin; that there are shared aspects of culture given the large or predominate Muslim population in these countries; that shared identification with the local Muslim community contributes to similarities across the group; and that this group represents a range in individual adherence to Muslim religious practices.

Parents and adolescents who participated in the study migrated to Canada prior to the birth of their adolescent children or during that child's lifetime between 1989 - 2006. Adolescents ranged in age from 16-19 years and parents ranged in age from 32-57 years.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were held in local community locations (Intercommunity Health Centre, Sudanese Community Centre, the Mosque) and males and females were interviewed separately (2 mothers' groups and 1 group each for fathers, sons, and daughters). Ashbourne conducted the focus group interviews with Baobaid and/or Shiriyeve Azizova attended to observe and, in one instance, provide translation.

Selected Research Findings

The findings support an expanded theoretical concept of family life and family time that incorporates:

- Communal or collective time that influences parental monitoring and family acculturation.

- Gender influences that play a key role in shaping the different experiences of boys and girls in these families, with strong cultural dimensions to these differences.

Implications for Service Delivery

- Enhance communication between child welfare, police, school systems, and local immigrant communities.

- Build networks of support for immigrant parents and adolescents – informal means of sharing experience.

- Consider role of technology and others in augmenting parental monitoring.

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Why this Partnership was Successful

1. All **collaborators (professional practitioners, research practitioner) share interests and experience** related to therapy work with families, especially with immigrant families. This shared commitment to supporting families provided a central focus for research that enhances practice. Several graduate students who were enrolled in the Couple and Family Therapy program assisted with the focus group meetings, allowing them to hear from immigrant family members themselves about their family experience and what they feel is important for service providers to know.
2. Allowance was made for **time to engage in conversation and consultation at the planning, implementation and outcome stages** of the research project. This time is essential to provide research that is not merely "culturally-informed" but grounded in the cultural and personal experience and knowledge of research partners who are themselves members of the local community. This cultural consultation was important at all phases of research design, data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings.
3. An added **benefit to service providers** is that research projects that can be introduced alongside service provision (as in the case for the current Safe Integration Pilot Project), and contribute to evidence of efficacy to support future funding applications for effective interventions.
4. The focus group research project **gave voices to families**, specifically parents and adolescents in the Muslim community and these voices, in addition to contributing to research, also provided directions for community-based family and social supports. Focus group participants directly benefited by having their expressed feelings of isolation addressed, in part, by opportunities to share experiences of challenge and success with each other.
5. **Working together with "cultural insiders" enhances credibility** for research that is intended to benefit the participants as well as service providers in the local community and family researchers more generally.

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Challenges and Future Directions

Ashbourne and Baobaid (Executive Director, MRCSSI) continue to work together on collaborative projects designed to further understanding of effective interventions and supports for immigrant families. Not all of these potential projects move successfully beyond the idea phase. For example, both participated in community consultation and discussions with the London Middlesex Children's Aid Society (LMCAS) in the spring of 2010 and, while some of the coordinated efforts of LMCAS and MRCSSI continue, the research component of this project did not continue beyond the discussion stage due to financial constraints at the agency level.

On a successful note, there is currently a very interesting pilot project being co-ordinated by Baobaid through MRCSSI entitled "The Safe Integration Project". This multi-agency project is designed to enhance services to families who have migrated recently from conflict zones and who are identified as being at risk of family violence. Ashbourne is working on the program evaluation for this pilot project.

The compiled and written findings from this research partnership have been prepared by Ashbourne, with review by Baobaid and Shiriyeve Azizova, and disseminated in poster presentations at national and international academic conferences, as well as at the local African Moving Forward Conference, London, ON (November 26, 2010); at a departmental research presentation; and as an academic journal article in a peer reviewed publication (Journal of Comparative Family Studies). Plans are being made for community feedback to parents and teens in London, as well as further academic publications.

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