

research snapshot

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Promoting mental health through empowerment and community capacity building



What is this research about?

Asian immigrant and refugee women tend to use health services much less often than other newcomers. There is much debate about why. Some researchers think that Asian cultural values or health beliefs and practices are the reason. Others have found that structural barriers such as the very design of health service programs and institutions make health programs less accessible to these groups. These studies have pointed to the need for action research to find out what sort of programs work best.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers, Yuk-Lin Renita Wong, Josephine P. Wong, and Kenneth P. Fung, worked with an ethno-specific mental health agency to design a demonstration project. This project used inclusive health promotion to address the mental health needs of Toronto area immigrant and refugee women. The women studied in the project are from:

- Cambodia
- Hong Kong

What you need to know:

Effective mental health promotion must consider the social determinants of health and integrate the principles of social inclusion, access and equity into health programs. Attention to issues of 'cultural competence' and 'cultural sensitivity' is not enough.

- Korea
- mainland China
- Taiwan
- Vietnam

The researchers involved the following groups in all stages of the research:

- community members
- health service providers
- community organizations

The researchers also hired five newcomer women and three Canadian-born or 1.5-generation young women who wanted to connect to their cultural roots through community work to work on the project.

The research team:

- looked at the needs of the communities through focus groups, interviews, and surveys
- did a public service announcement campaign in the target communities
- put together a health information line and referral service in five project languages
- did peer leadership training and peer-to-peer outreach involving 5,029 participants

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that programs promoting mental health in the target immigrant groups were more effective when they paid attention to the social factors that determine health. These programs were also found to work better when their design and structure were consistent with the goals of social inclusion, access and equity.

How can you use this research?

This research will help health services providers, community organizations and public policymakers design programs that more effectively address the mental health needs of Asian immigrant and refugee women in Canada.

About the researchers

Yuk-Lin Renita Wong is an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work at York University. Josephine P. Wong is an Associate Professor at the Daphne Cockwell School of Nursing at Ryerson University. Kenneth P. Fung is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto. This ResearchSnapshot is from their study “Mental health promotion through empowerment and community capacity building among East and Southeast Asian immigrant and refugee women”, which will be published in *Metropolis* (Summer) 2010.

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Knowledge Mobilization at York

York's Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services and funding for faculty, graduate students, and community organizations seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. It is supported by SSHRC and CIHR grants, and by the Office of the Vice-President Research & Innovation. This summary was written by Naoko Ikeda.

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