



Urban social exclusion and mental health of China's rural-urban migrants – A review and call for research



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ABSTRACT

China's internal rural-urban migrants experience social exclusion that may have significant mental health implications. This has historically been exacerbated by the hukou system. Echoing recent calls for interdisciplinary research on the interdependencies of urbanization and mental health, this review examines evidence of rural-urban migrants' mental health status in comparison with nonmigrants and its association with various dimensions of social exclusion. We found conflicting evidence on the mental health status of migrants in comparison with nonmigrants, but strong evidence that social exclusion is negatively associated with migrants' mental health: limited access to full labour rights and experience of social stigma, discrimination and inequity were the most significant factors. We discuss the limitations of current social epidemiological research and call for an attempt to use close-up, street-level ethnographic data on the daily experience of being a migrant in the mega-city, and describe our aim to produce a new sociological deep surveying instrument to understand migration, urban living, and mental health.

1. Introduction

China's economic reform and rapid urbanization over the past three decades has led to unprecedented massive rural-to-urban migration. Up to 2015, around 277 million people had left their hometown in rural areas to seek job opportunities and pursue a better life in the rapidly growing cities. In such a large country with great variation in regional geography, culture and lifestyles, China's internal migrants are likely to encounter diverse challenges in adapting to their new environments, which are likely to be different from those of international immigrants. Epidemiological research has documented that migration and urbanicity both contribute to the risks of mental illness, associated with particular features of the urban environment or difficulties encountered in migration (Galea et al., 2011; Virupaksha et al., 2014). Concerns about the burden of mental disorders and its association with urbanicity have grown worldwide, however, little is known about the extent of these issues in the rapidly-expanding megacities in developing countries such as China, Brazil and India. As Amin has argued “for the vast majority, cities are polluted, unhealthy, tiring, overwhelming, confusing, alienating. They are the places of low-wage work, insecurity, poor living conditions and dejected isolation for the many at the bottom of the social ladder daily sucked into them” (Amin, 2006, p1011). This may be particularly true for China's rural-urban migrants

who have to leave their familiar countryside life and survive adjustment to life in big cities with socio-economic disadvantages and institutional barriers, which could lead to their urban social exclusion. Interdisciplinary research involving sociologists, historians, anthropologists, urban geographers, psychiatrists, neuroscientists and others is required to understand these issues. To that end a series of international and interdisciplinary workshops on ‘the urban brain’ were held in London from 2013, leading to a call for conceptually informed empirical studies of the ‘neuropolis’ (Fitzgerald et al., 2016a) and a programme of research on mental health, migration and megacities, focused initially on Shanghai.¹ Along the same lines, Adli et al. (2017) recently called for an interdisciplinary approach termed “neurourbanism” to “characterise urban stressors and their modulators and identify high-risk populations (eg, migrants) who do not have equal access to what is called the urban advantage, but are more exposed to stressors such as social isolation”.

The focus of most conceptual work on migration and mental health from the 1930s to the present has been on transnational migration (Bhugra, 2004; Cantor-Graae and Selten, 2005; Odegaard, 1932), yet the mental health consequences for ‘internal’ migrants – who have made up the greater part of population movements both historically and today – has been less explored. The literature explains the links between transnational migration and mental health consequences

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primarily through two social process – social and economic inequality and acculturative stress – both are based on ethnicity and race. The social and economic inequality thesis argues that immigrants as ethnic minorities suffer from economic disadvantage, racial harassment or discrimination, and inequalities in access to health services, while the acculturation thesis focuses on the loss of language and changes in attitudes, values, social structures and support net-works, which forms one's ethnic identity (Nazroo and Iley, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2010). How these processes are related or different to internal migration depends on the specific contexts of discussion. For example, internal migrants in China are faced with hukou-based rather than ethnicity-based social exclusion, and they also experience differences in language (particularly colloquial and dialect), value, and lifestyles, but likely to a lesser extent compared with cross-border migrants. In the present paper, we consider the extent to which the concept of social exclusion might contribute to the development of a theoretical understanding of the relations of rural to urban migration and mental health today. Thus we use the concept of social exclusion to review available literature on the mental health status of rural-urban migrants in China, discuss the limitations of current epidemiological research and argue for the need for this research to be supplemented with close-up, street-level ethnographic data on the daily experience of being a migrant in the mega-city if we are to develop an adequate – and actionable – understanding of the complex interrelations of migration, urban living, and mental health.

The concept of social exclusion is multidimensional and contextual and it is defined differently in different disciplines. Levitas et al. (2007) in their report *The Multi-dimensional Analysis of Social Exclusion* prepared for the Social Exclusion taskforce of the then UK Government, provided an expansive definition of social exclusion, which we will utilize in this paper: “Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole” and they added that “Deep exclusion refers to exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances.” The aspects highlighted in this definition are particularly relevant to rural-to-urban migrants in China where the legacy of the socialist hukou system continues to limit their full citizenship rights when they move to cities. Under the hukou system, in operation from the mid-1950s, each individual was registered in one place of residence, and was categorized as a rural or urban resident on their hukou status. In the socialist era, the hukou system as a social control and administrative mechanism had two major functions: allocation of social resources (e.g. housing, education, health care etc.) in favour of urban dwellers and restriction of migration, particularly from rural to urban areas. The hukou system has been undergoing a gradual reform since the late 1980s when the central government allowed rural-urban migration without transfer of hukou status. However, it was not until 2003 that rural migrants' basic rights in the cities have gradually been recognized by the central government. Since then, a series of policy reforms have taken places in many cities to provide some public services to them, and increasing numbers of small and medium cities have begun to grant rural migrants local hukou status on certain conditions. Nonetheless, it is not clear what proportion of rural-urban migrants in China actually wish to move their hukou from their villages, as many currently maintain close connections with their places of origin, and express the intention of returning there after some five years of city life (Liu et al., 2017b; Tang and Feng, 2015). The studies we review here date from between 2006 and 2016, when, despite these gradual reforms and improvements, a disparity remained between rural migrants and their urban counterparts. It remains to be seen if current and future studies show a different picture.

Against the contexts of the changing hukou system, economic and urban studies have generated rich findings about urban social exclusion of rural migrants and the ways in which they are deprived of equal participation in the opportunities available to urban residents (Chow and Lou, 2015; Guo and Wang, 2015; Huang et al., 2010; Zhan, 2015). While most studies recognize that hukou-based institutional exclusion leads to unequal rights and opportunities, Zhang et al. (2014) provide an expanded account of hukou-based social exclusion of rural migrants on the regulative, normative, and cognitive dimensions. The regulative dimension concerns the regulations in the hukou-based administrative and management system which provide the legal basis for the restraint of citizenship rights of rural migrants. The normative aspect refers to the solidification of rural–urban hukou classification into hukou-based social identities with differentiated social status, which they suggest builds a wall between urban residents and rural migrants in their social interactions. From the cognitive perspective, they argue, the formation of hukou-based social exclusion has led to social stigma as rural migrants are negatively defined, interpreted and categorized, separated from urban society and experience social discrimination. Accordingly, in the specific context of hukou-regulated internal migration in China, three dimensions of social exclusion for rural-urban migrant workers can be identified: economic exclusion, community exclusion, and psychological exclusion. Economic exclusion refers to the limitation of rural-urban migrants' opportunities for and access to social welfare and services, employment and education. Community social exclusion refers to the lack of opportunities in social interaction and participation and the experiences of stigma and discrimination. Psychological exclusion refers to migrants experiencing conflicts in identity and sense of belonging. Economic exclusion echoes the regulative dimension while the latter two echo the normative and cognitive dimensions of hukou-based social exclusion.

Following the international migration health literature and recognising that rural migrants may encounter a set of stressors different from non-migrants, some scholars have paid attention to the mental health status of China's rural-urban migrants. Their work has been particularly focused on the comparison with the population in their hometown or host society and the effects of different dimensions of social exclusion as stressors, not least of which is the hukou system, and this has generated rich yet conflicting results. The only earlier attempt to synthesise the knowledge of China's migrant workers' mental health was the work by Zhong et al. (2013). They undertook a meta-analysis to estimate the prevalence of psychological symptoms in migrant workers, based on 48 Chinese and 2 English studies using SCL-90-R, and reported that China's migrant workers experienced a greater severity of psychological symptoms than the general population on nearly all symptom dimensions. In this current paper, on the other hand, we aim to provide a narrative synthesis of published empirical research in both English and Chinese, focusing on 1) the difference in mental health status between rural migrants, urban residents, and rural non-migrants; 2) the associations between migrants' urban social exclusion and their mental health consequences. The evidence is summarized to provide explanatory contexts to mental health and migration in the mega-cities and leads to recommendations for future 'neourbanistic' empirical research.

2. Search strategies and selection of studies

We conducted literature searches using Ovid MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Web of Science and CNKI (China Academic Journal Database) in February 2017. The search strategy consisted of a key word search using 'China' AND either 'migrants', 'migration', 'migrate workers', 'floating people', 'peasant workers' AND either 'mental health', 'mental illness', 'mental disorder', 'psychological distress'. The reference lists of the selected articles were examined to identify additional eligible articles. We evaluated each article against our inclusion criteria based on the title and abstract. Full text review was then conducted to decide whether the article met all of the criteria. To be included, studies must

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