



# Immigrant social worker practice: An ecological perspective on strengths and challenges

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## A B S T R A C T

In response to the needs of growing immigrant populations in the United States, social service agencies are developing culturally appropriate interventions and recruiting bilingual and bicultural practitioners. While few studies have explored social work practices with immigrant children and families in the child welfare field, very little is known about the experiences, perceptions, and practices of child welfare social workers who are immigrants themselves. This study applies the socioecological framework to identify strengths and challenges among immigrant social workers at different system levels. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with ethnic Chinese immigrant social workers who work or have worked in a family supportive service program in New York City. Findings from this study reveal that, at the individual level, immigrant social workers expressed the following advantages: 1) engaging families through emotional connections, 2) being a role model for families, 3) performing as a mediator between parents and children, and 4) being open-minded to different cultures. They also experienced challenges such as 1) unfamiliarity with Chinese subcultures, 2) power imbalance with clients, and 3) clients' resistance. At the agency and community levels, immigrant social workers were likely to 1) provide culturally appropriate services and 2) become a cultural broker for colleagues within the agency and for other professionals in the larger community. Particularly, immigrant social workers were building a community with available and accessible services for diverse groups. But they encountered agency and community discrimination and/or exploitation and felt insecure about their jobs due to their immigration status. Implications for practice and future research were discussed in order to improve professional development and working environments of immigrant social workers, as well as to enhance the quality of service delivery to immigrant children and families.

## 1. Introduction

The United States has experienced rapid immigrant population growth since 1970. Currently, more than 10% of the population is foreign-born (Fix, Zimmermann, & Passel, 2001; Zong & Batalova, 2016) and 25% of the U.S. child population is either an immigrant or has an immigrant parent (Shields & Behrman, 2004; Zong & Batalova, 2016). Immigrant children can be particularly vulnerable to the challenges (e.g., language barriers, legal status, financial burden, and material hardship) that immigrant families may face while adjusting to life within the United States. (Pine & Drachman, 2005). Because many immigrant families are unfamiliar with child-raising cultural norms, Child Protective Services (CPS) may become involved in parenting practices that are considered maltreatment in the United States. Among

immigrant populations, Asian immigrant parents are one of the most rapidly expanding groups, and some arrive with limited English proficiency, few job skills, and little knowledge about American values and child welfare policies (The Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, 2001). Because of this, they may also experience misinterpretation and biases in child maltreatment investigations. Though the literature points to a great need in addressing these barriers, there is limited national data about immigrant families involved in child welfare (Reisig & Miller, 2009), and even less is known about the professionals working with immigrant families.

Many child welfare agencies respond to immigrant families' increasing cultural and linguistic needs by developing culturally appropriate interventions and recruiting bilingual and bicultural practitioners, who may also be immigrants themselves (Johnson, 2007).

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However, few studies focus on social workers' professional preparation and practice with immigrant families. Even less is known about the experiences and perceptions of immigrant practitioners who work in the field of child welfare, especially those who work with Chinese families (i.e., the majority of Asian immigrants). The limited research that focuses on social workers who are immigrants themselves centers on service barriers for immigrant families, as opposed to examining workers' own personal perceptions, work-place challenges, and implemented strategies for direct practice social workers (Han & Osterling, 2012; Thomas, Medina, & Cohen, 2010).

Though immigrant social workers provide insight into the development and delivery of sensitive treatment approaches in immigrant and racial/ethnic minority families, they can be overlooked as members of this vulnerable population themselves. However, it remains unclear whether the process of immigration and professional development among immigrant social workers creates integration or conflict. Thus, it is important to expand our understanding of the experiences of these helping professionals, who may themselves be immigrants.

The current study contributes to the knowledge base in the child welfare and social work workforce literature, by initiating the first steps in understanding how immigrant social workers interact with children and families from diverse backgrounds within the context of the U.S. society and policies. Specifically, this study applies a socioecological framework and explores ethnic Chinese immigrant social workers' experiences and perceptions in working with children and families who have contact with CPS in New York City. This study especially focuses on addressing the following research question: What are the strengths and challenges faced by ethnic Chinese immigrant social workers in the U.S. child welfare field?

## 2. Literature review

Very few studies focus on immigrant social workers who work in the field of child welfare (Han & Osterling, 2012; Thomas et al., 2010); and there are currently no data about the number of licensed social workers who are immigrants in the United States. In spite of the rising number of racial/ethnic minority children (CSWE, 2012), racial/ethnic minority or immigrant social workers are not recruited and retained in sufficient numbers, creating a high demand for culturally and racially diverse practitioners. According to the National Association of Social Work (NASW) Frontline Workforce Preliminary Report (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006), social workers who serve children and families are, as a group, significantly less diverse than the population they serve. The predominant racial/ethnic group on the frontlines is non-Hispanic Whites (86%), meaning that racial/ethnic minorities in the social work labor force are significantly underrepresented. Six percent of social workers are of African American descent, 5% are Hispanics/Latinos, and only 2% are Asian; in comparison to the child populations they serve (11% African American, 13% Hispanic/Latino, and 4% Asian). Thus, there is a need to understand those social workers who mostly work with minority and immigrant groups. The literature review of this study centers on a) migration of professionals, b) child welfare practices with immigrant families, and c) the child welfare workforce.

### 2.1. Migration of social work professionals

Migration of professionals, such as social workers, is part of a larger trend of the increasing globalization of skilled human resources and the internationalization of higher education (Iredale, 2001). Nonetheless, studies regarding the transnational movement of internationally educated social workers are limited. Few studies have discussed the reasons for migration, the professional adaptation to new cultural and organizational contexts, and the impact of these processes on social work service delivery (Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown, Graham, & Michaud, 2014; Welbourne, Harrison, & Ford, 2007). Though studies have been conducted in countries of large immigrant populations, such as Canada, the

U.K., New Zealand, and Australia (Fouché, Beddoe, Bartley, & Brenton, 2014; Fouché, Beddoe, Bartley, & de Haan, 2014; Fulton, Pullen-Sansfaçon, Brown, Éthier, & Graham, 2016; Lewig, Arney, & Salveron, 2010; Hussein, Manthorpe, & Stevens, 2010; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2014; Welbourne et al., 2007), few studies have focused on the issue within the United States.

Prior studies have indicated that immigrant social workers experience challenges through the process of acculturation and adaptation. For example, a recent qualitative study by Fulton et al. (2016) examine how credentials from countries of origin transferred regarding immigrant social workers' ( $n = 66$ ) employment practices, opportunities, and adaptation in Canada. Findings indicate that immigrant social workers in Canada face such challenges as discrimination, as well as lack of supports in accessing credential recognition and employment opportunities. Similarly, Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study in Canada to explore the adaptation and acculturation experiences of 15 internationally educated social workers. Their findings suggest that personal, cultural, and professional aspects and interactions were all crucial in successful acculturation. Implications of this study reflect the necessity for social work professional development to integrate both local and immigrant social workers' professional values and identities. Integration not only allows immigrant social workers to understand universalized standards of professional development but also alerts local social workers to the culture of oppression and exclusion that their immigrant counterparts may encounter. Local workers thus can be in culturally-sensitive collaboration with immigrant colleagues (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2014).

Additionally, Fouché, Beddoe, Bartley, and Brenton (2014), Fouché, Beddoe, Bartley, and de Haan (2014) conducted two mixed-methods studies in New Zealand identifying immigrant social workers' struggles and strengths. They find that these workers were able to contribute handily in enriching local social work professional development by offering diverse contexts and perspectives. However, slightly over half of the study participants ( $n = 294$ ) experienced mistreatment and discrimination in their workplace (e.g., verbal abuse and humiliation, poor management of discrimination), as well as faced significant obstacles in obtaining information related to local cultural dynamics and practices (e.g., orientations about local culture, historical context, and political environment). Findings from these reviewed studies suggest that though immigrant social workers contribute positively to local social work practice, they encounter structurally-based challenges, such as lack of appropriate management and orientation, specifically regarding different sociocultural contexts within the social work field. Nonetheless, to date, there is limited empirical research focusing on immigrant social workers in the United States.

### 2.2. Child welfare practice with immigrant families

Empirical research, mostly focused on Latino immigrants, shows that immigrant families and children involved with the child welfare system are likely to face many challenges (e.g., difficult economic conditions, lack of support, legal issues, and disruptions in family processes) and to encounter barriers related to these families' immigration status and language abilities in accessing culturally competent services (Ayón, 2009; Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009; Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010; Earner, 2007; Osterling & Han, 2011; Pine & Drachman, 2005).

Studies have also identified these immigrant families' risks and barriers to services through the perspective of child welfare practitioners (Ayón, 2009; Han & Osterling, 2012; Thomas et al., 2010). For example, Han and Osterling (2012) conducted a study in Northern California implementing both quantitative analysis (data from an administrative database) and qualitative interviews (which were conducted with seven Vietnamese immigrant families and eight child welfare workers who themselves were Vietnamese immigrants) to identify factors that influenced reunification outcomes among

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