

EXPLORING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AMONG CHINESE IMMIGRANT MOTHERS IN CANADA AND THE US DURING THE COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of Chinese immigrant mothers in Canada and the US overcoming the challenges through adult learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Transformative learning theory is utilized as a theoretical framework. Transformative learning, as an important component of adult learning theory, emphasizes the expansion of consciousness through which an individual can critically reflect on their personal experiences and feelings (Mezirow, 2009). Based on this theoretical framework, we aim to understand how Chinese immigrant mothers as adult learners experience the pandemic and learn mothering during these uncertainties and at the same time, reorient their self-consciousness and self-directed learning skills in the new normal. Adopting qualitative research, we have conducted 50 semi-structured interviews among Chinese immigrant mothers in Canada and United States. This study reveals that Chinese immigrant mothers are increasingly marginalized as a result of the global pandemic and capitalism, which accelerate their motivations for enhancing their self-consciousness and self-directed learning.

Keywords: The keywords are: Chinese immigrant mothers, transformative learning, mothering, lifelong learning, and COVID-19.

Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has brought a global financial recession, and immigrant mothers are facing unprecedented times. While facing these uncertainties, immigrant mothers as adult learners are disproportionately impacted in their life and work by the pandemic overall. They not only need to take care of their families, work and personal life, but also need to learn some new skills, such as online learning, working at home, and taking care of children during the pandemic for integrating themselves in the new normal.

Chinese immigrants have become one of the largest immigrant groups in North America. According to the United Nations Statistics, there were nearly 2.43 million Chinese immigrants in the United States and 930,386 Chinese immigrants in Canada (United Nation, 2020). With the large populations, Chinese immigrants contribute to local economies and policies in multicultural societies of North America, simultaneously experiencing challenges such as race, gender and class inequalities (Zhu, 2020). The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of Chinese immigrant mothers in Canada and the US in overcoming these challenges through adult learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we explored the challenges that Chinese immigrant mothers faced and how they learned mothering skills during the pandemic. Transformative learning theory was adopted to guide this study. Based on this theoretical framework, we aim to understand how Chinese immigrant mothers as adult learners

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experience the pandemic and learn mothering during these uncertainties and at the same time, reorient their self-consciousness and self-directed learning skills in the new normal.

Two research questions are explored in this study.

RQ1: What challenges have Chinese immigrant mothers faced in their mothering and learning practice during the Covid-19 pandemic in Canada and U.S.?

RQ2: How do Chinese immigrant mothers face the challenges during the Covid-19 and learn mothering skills during the pandemic?

This paper contributes to the theory of adult learners and transformative learning. It diversifies adult learners' experience, identity, and knowledge, and highlights Chinese immigrant mothers' transnational learning experience is important to understand how women of color as adult learners learn mothering skills in different living conditions. It has implications for social services, immigration policies, schools, and adult educational programs for immigrant mothers.

Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning, as an important component of adult learning theory, emphasizes the expansion of consciousness through which an individual can critically reflect on their personal experiences and feelings (Mezirow, 2009). Hoggan (2015) highlighted that the theory of transformative learning should be understood at the individual level "along with those structural changes for substantive social change to occur" (p. 59). He also pointed out that transformative learning theory could be utilized as an *analytic metatheory* that provides parameters around the phenomena for adult educators/researchers to understand "a number of ways that learners experience a significant shift in their sense of self" (p. 66).

Transformative learning theory is deeply rooted in Paulo Freire's (2005) critical pedagogy that understands "education as a practice of freedom" (p. 14). He highlights the oppressor-oppressed relationship in education and suggests that it is urgent to consider the students as knowledge producers rather than knowledge receivers. Following these roots, Allman (1999) discusses Gramsci's theory of hegemony and ideology. She points out that Gramsci's term "hegemony" describes that Western democratic power is operated not just "through the political state," but becomes an ideology experienced everywhere (Allman, 1999, p. 88). By understanding Freire and Gramsci, Allman (2001) points out that Marx's writing in terms of dialectical conceptualization, theory of consciousness and concept of ideology that provides possibilities to develop a revolutionary praxis in education, which she called *transformative learning* (p. 178). She further addressed the importance of suggesting a practice of critical education and self transformation for revolutionary social transformation. Based on this idea, Carpenter and Mojab (2013) criticize critical or radical adult education by carefully examining Marx's ideas. They claim the importance of raising a revolutionary consciousness for developing a transformative learning practice in our society.

Based on transformative learning theories, we argue that individuals' self-directedness of adult learning is extremely important for social transformations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, immigrant mothers are facing new challenges in these uncertainties. Their self-consciousness and self-directed learning during the pandemic would help researchers to clearly see how women of color are marginalized under different social conditions.

Methodology

This study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 Chinese immigrant mothers in the US and Canada. During 2020 to 2021, we interviewed 20 Chinese immigrant mothers in Canada and the United States and explored their mothering practice, learning experience, career development, identity construction, knowledge production, and civic engagement. This study particularly focused on their learning and mothering experience during the pandemic. The interviews were audio recorded. Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Chinese. We translated the interviews and coded the interview data by using Nvivo software.

In the data analysis, we adopt a Grounded Theory Method (GTM) in data analysis. The GTM is a research methodology that could help researchers to systematically derive theories of human behaviour from empirical data (Urquhart, 2013). With the help of GTM, we could link our empirical data with concepts and theories. By looking at Chinese immigrant mothers' interview data, we found that several key concepts were merged, including transformative learning, identity construction, uncertainty, and knowledge production.

Findings

Through our data analysis, we have found five major dimensions in terms of immigrant mothers transformative learning experiences. They are: 1) learning in uncertainty; 2) self-directed learning during pandemic; 3) learning mother-child relationship and self-consciousness; 4) challenges for mothering and learning; and 5) supports for immigrant mothers.

Learning in Uncertainty

In our study, we found that many immigrant mothers learned mothering skills during the Covid-19 pandemic under a lot of uncertainties. While the Covid-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the society, it destroyed their normal life and recreated a new life within immigrant mothers' families. These uncertainties created fears, which accelerated immigrant mothers' learning practice in order to maintain and secure their family life.

Jenn is a Chinese immigrant mother in the US. She talked about that the biggest motivation for her learning during the pandemic was about "uncertainty". She said:

During the worst time of the epidemic, all my son's classes were cancelled. There were a lot of workshops during the transition period from face-to-face to online instruction. I have participated in it once or twice. It's a kind of online workshop to

teach you how to help your kids study online...About the motivation, I think it was mainly about uncertainty. I wanted to learn it because the pandemic makes me feel anxious and want to have more information, which can help me make sure that my life are stable.

Self-Directed Learning During Pandemic

Self-directed learning is considered a common practice among immigrant mothers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the immigrant mothers not only reoriented their mothering practice and self-directed learning, but also increased the time for learning activities. They took self-directed learning as an opportunity for enriching their skills and reconnecting themselves to the new normal.

Xi is a new immigrant mother who immigrated to Canada in November 2020. She told us that self-directed learning plays a very important role in her life in Canada. She said:

My current time is indeed not enough. I have to study and do some things on my own every day. I am also using some spare-time for my educational work... That's for sure. As I just said, I have to continue to learn in the process. For example, sometimes I do some reading, I want to learn the methods of reading or learn English language. I treated them not as skills, but as majors. It should be beneficial to some of my own professional knowledge. I always make up some lessons for myself to learn.

Learning Mother-Child Relationship and Self-Consciousness

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many immigrant mothers experienced a crisis between themselves and their children. During the time staying at home, most of the mothers have to rebuild the relationship with their children.

Miz is an immigrant mother in the United States. She has two young children. She talked about how she found the mother-child relationship was changing during the pandemic. She told us,

It is about the relationship with the child during the epidemic. During the pandemics, I think I spend more time thinking about how I should deal with the different stages of the relationship with my child. During the epidemic, I could see him every day at home for such a long time. I could communicate and interact with him, so I could see his changes or differences every day. For example, if he did some unusual behaviors and said something wrong, it would let me think about if our relationship is changing and how to deal with it. When everyone is busy at ordinary times, we don't have time to observe or reflect on these things. For me, the epidemic help me to re-learn the relationship between me and my sons.

Challenges for Mothering and Learning

The immigrant mothers have faced more challenges since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Some of the mothers found they have challenges in terms of physical and mental wellbeing. Others said their challenges are about reorienting their mothering skills and relearning to parent their children.

Yan is a Chinese immigrant mother in Canada. She has immigrated to Canada for two years. She told us about the challenges that she has experienced during the pandemic, which she thought were about time management. She said,

It's not very persevering. It is equivalent to replacing the role as a teacher if you are at home. As a mother/teacher at home during the pandemics, you have to schedule the time yourself. I think it's more tiring. If you send your kids to school, you will have more personal time. During the epidemic, you will find that you can't leave him alone, so you have to arrange things for him. Arranging things for him is equivalent to arranging things for yourself, because you have to accompany him. That's too much for me. I think I am very tired.

Supports for Immigrant Mothers

In our study, we found that there is little support for immigrant mothers in both the US and Canada. Summer is a Chinese immigrant mother in Canada. She told us that there is almost no support from the government during the pandemic. She said,

I don't receive any support. But my family will help me. There were some changes during the pandemics because the contacting time with my children is much longer than before. There were more emotional time because no one was helping you here. I was more suffer, and I was looking for a better way to get along with him.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to explore Chinese immigrant mothers' learning and mothering experience during the pandemic. It revealed that Chinese immigrant mothers are increasingly marginalized as a result of the global pandemic and capitalism. Their learning and mothering experiences can be classified as a kind of transformative learning that transcends boundaries of being a mother and being themselves. The pandemic brought them a lot of uncertainties and new challenges, which accelerated their learning practice and helped them to better understand their children and themselves.

The findings of this study have important implications for adult educators and immigration policymakers and practitioners. Understanding the challenges and experiences of immigrant mothers could help the host countries, such as the United States and Canada, recognize immigrant mothers' needs. For adult educators, it is important to realize immigrant mothers' motivations for learning, which might closely relate to their work-life balance and desire of living in the new countries. For example, while the mothers mentioned "uncertainty" as the biggest factor of their learning motivation, it is

necessary to provide sufficient learning supports in terms of parenting, job-seeking, language education, and time and financial management for matching their needs. In addition, since these Chinese immigrant mothers mentioned the biggest challenge is time management, adult educators could find better ways to facilitate meeting the learners' needs, such as using online and offline communications with the learners and adopting synchronous and asynchronous instructions based on their time and needs. Finally, it is also critical to acknowledge immigrant mothers as adult learners. Through their self-directed learning process, we could find that they had "a shift in their identifications or self-locations" (Hoggan, 2015, p. 66). These immigrant mothers started to reconstruct their sense of belonging and relearn their relationship between their children and family.

For immigration policymakers and practitioners, it is key to understand how immigrant mothers as individuals practice mothering and learning under uncertainties. While the government does not provide enough social and economic supports for these immigrant mothers, these immigrant mothers have to find resources and support by themselves in order to balance work, life, and mothering with their family and children. This will push them to another pole of marginalization. As a result, we suggest that the government should provide more support particularly focusing on childcare services, financial, physical, and psychological supports.

In conclusion, this paper explores Chinese immigrant mothers' mothering and learning experience during the pandemic. It suggests adult educators and immigrant policymakers acknowledge immigrant mothers' needs and taking the individuals' transformative learning experience to develop social supports and learning programs for social transformations.

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