VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AS A SOCIAL SUPPORT:

IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN CANADA

BY

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ABSTRACT

Immigration in Canada has been on the rise for the past half century. Immigrant parents go through two major life events almost at the same time: adjusting to new roles as parents, and adjusting to the new society. As a result of these compounding challenges, it is crucial to promote the well-being of these parents to ensure healthy development of their children. Virtual communities may be a viable tool to help parents, to promote the well-being of immigrant families with small children as they struggle. In this paper, I investigate the effects of virtual community as a form of social support that increases the coping process of immigrant parents during the stressful life events. Taking an ecological perspective, literatures from various disciplines are reviewed through an interdisciplinary approach. Many studies suggest the importance of social support for coping with stressful life events, such as acculturation and adjustment to parenthood of young immigrant families. Personal social networks, which strengthen social support, can exist in virtual communities. Hence, the use of virtual communities can provide additional support especially for those who tend to be isolated from society for various reasons.
Virtual Community as a Social Support: Immigrant Families in Canada

Introduction

Canada has been accepting many immigrants from all over the world and the number of immigrants in Canada has drastically increased during the past few decades. Immigrants as individuals as well as entire families from all over the world come to Canada for various reasons: some seek economic advantages, while others seek less volatile political climates. By 2017, more than one-fifth of the Canadian population may be foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2008b). In the city of Toronto, where I practice as a family support worker, a large portion of the population is made up of recent immigrants. About 28.3% of Ontario residents are foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2008c).

A Family Resource Program (FRP) is a community-based organization designed to support families with small children, who are generally from 0 to 6 years of age (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998; Smythe, 2004). For a stronger society, families, the basic unit that makes up communities, need to function in good condition. Well-functioning families nurture healthy development of children (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998). FRPs work to empower individuals, families, and communities for their well-being (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998; Smythe, 2004). The well-being of a family is an important factor for the healthy growth of children, who will grow up to play a significant part in Canada’s future.

Family support advocates consider all parents with small children are in need (Smythe, 2004). They need to adjust to a new role as a parent who needs emotional, practical, or informational support. In addition, moving to a different country, where not only cultures and customs but also the spoken language is dramatically different from their origin is a life event (Finch, & Vega, 2003; Thomas, 1995). Immigrant parents are under a lot of stress as they strive
to acclimatize to a new life in a new environment, and at the same time, they need to establish themselves as parents.

Social support is believed to be one of the key elements to promote the well-being of families (Drentea, & Moren-Cross, 2005; Finch, & Vega, 2003; Melkote & Liu, 2000; Rothery, 1999). When we have adequate support, we feel we are better able to cope with the demands of our lives, while a perception of not enough support leads to the experience of emotional, physical, or social distress (Rothery, 1999). There is a vast potential for community development online to increase social support for people in need (Jetelina, 2011a). In the age of information technology and globalization, a vast amount of information has become available. The internet is a great tool and provides convenience for those who seek information. It is also a helpful means to interact with others. Statistics Canada (2008) reports that recent immigrants use the Internet more than Canadian-born citizens do. The use of Internet is not limited to gaining transmittable one-way information but to stay in touch with immigrants’ friends and families in their country of origin (Melkote & Liu, 2000) and meet new friends online (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Studies show that the Internet can play a vital role in providing the essential social and emotional support to immigrant families by, for example, being a member of a virtual community and connecting with others who are in a similar situation or with the same cultural background (Drentea, & Moren-Cross, 2005; Finch, & Vega, 2003; Kiesler, 1997; Melkote, & Liu, 2000; Plantin, & Daneback, 2009; Schaffer, Kuczynski, & Skinner, 2008; Scharer, 2005; Wright & Bell, 2003).

Taking an ecological perspective, this paper will explore the positive effects of virtual community as a source of social support that may promote the well-being of immigrant families in Canada. Through literature reviews, it aims to gain deeper insight about how virtual communities influence immigrant families’ acculturation process by providing resources such as
The virtual community also serves as an alternate source of social support. It becomes a mediating factor that will foster the well-being of families. For the research, I use an interdisciplinary inquiry because immigration is a complex topic, which requires multiple disciplinary approaches and perspectives (Angus, 2012; Hirsch, 2012). This mode of inquiry will bring knowledge together from various disciplines and integrate it into new insights (Angus, 2012). The aim of the study is pragmatic (Newell, 2007) as findings and suggestions may help to improve family support services that are offered through family resource programs in Toronto. As a family support worker, I am hoping to be able to highlight the positive effects that online communities can bring to immigrant families.

First, I will look at factors that contribute to the well-being of families as I identify the unique needs of immigrant families with small children. Second, I will explore how communities are formed and create social capital online. My aim is to integrate the theory of social capital with an understanding of virtual communities that contribute to strengthen social support, as a key source for the healthy functioning of immigrant families. There are online group discussions using asynchronous (not in real time) and synchronous (real time) communication. In this paper, asynchronous online community is examined. Finally, I would like to suggest how to implement these factors within the context of family support in Toronto.

**Ecological perspective approach**

The study of immigration and settlement takes various frameworks (Berry, 2001). However, it is helpful to set a framework that focuses on the psychology of immigration while taking a broader social context into account. Human life is interrelated with the environment (Berry, 2001; Park, 1936). The ecological perspective offers a “mode of engagement with
knowledge, subjectivity, politics, ethics, science, citizenship, and agency that pervades and reconfigures theory and practice at multiple levels” (Code, 2012, p.192).

The ecological perspective is also central in approaches among FRPs. Individuals and families are considered as a part of larger systems, and the development of a human is largely affected by their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Thompson & Kinne, 1999). Emphasis on interconnectedness among families, communities, and a larger society is central in supporting families and their children in a holistic manner (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998). Also, FRPs encourage mutual support based on equality and respect for diversity (Smythe, 2004).

The community-based family support programs offer a range of services at various levels that help families and promote their healthy functioning. There are services aimed at the population that includes immigrant families, as well. For instance, services include counseling, ESL classes, short-term child-care services, and opportunities to be involved with other community members. Services are offered in many different languages depending on the community, in which the family resource programs are based (Kyle & Kellerman, 1998; Smythe, 2004).

Family support programs are proven effective in promoting families’ well-being based on local-communities; however, advocates are still faced with difficulty reaching parents who are isolated from society (Rhéaume, 2010). For example, immigrant parents’ limited language ability or lack of knowledge about the community they live in poses difficulties in making good use of services. In some cases, immigrant parents’ lower rate of attending parenting support programs is also due to their disapproval of a parenting style in their new society (Rhéaume, 2010). There are services that are offered in a language that immigrants use; however, this sometimes creates tension between Canadian-born parents and immigrant parents (Rhéaume, 2010). Overall
increase in the general use of the Internet indicates the potential of the Internet as a part of support services. From the ecological perspective, it is inevitable to include a virtual tool as a window to reach out to support families. Through interventions that make use of online communities, family support advocates may be able to solve some of the challenge they are facing.

**Unique needs of immigrant families**

Being a parent is one of the life’s happiest and most rewarding experiences, though it can also be very stressful. Parenting stress is defined by Ostberg, & Hagekull (2000) as “a specific kind of stress, perceived by the parent and emanating from the demands of being a parent” (p. 615). For example, emotional and physical energy from parents are constantly demanded in order to meet children’s needs. New experiences also demand additional efforts involved with learning new skills. New role as a parent may also conflict with other roles such as a wife or a career-oriented person, for instance (Balaji et al., 2007).

Similarly, immigration can cause a lot of stress to families as well as to a single person (Assanand, 2011; Jetelina, 2011a; Melkote & Liu, 2000). Immigrants move to Canada for various reasons and there are marked variations in circumstances; regardless, it is not so easy to adjust to a new society. “A post-migration decline in functional competence due to unfamiliarity with the new environment” among new immigrants has been pointed out (Ying & Han, 2008). Difficulties immigrants face include “learning a new language, having a limited education, difficulty obtaining adequate employment, low socioeconomic status, stressed family life, and changed socio-political and immigration status” (Thomas, 1995, p.140). It may accompany acculturative stress and cultural shock. Immigrants may avoid cross-cultural interaction due to
uncertainty and unease caused by limited language skills and cultural knowledge (Ying & Han, 2008).

In addition to general parenting and acculturative stress that may affect immigrant parents’ ability to parent, immigrant parents face unique hurdles to overcome (Assanand, 2011; Jetelina, 2011a). For instance, immigrant parents face practical difficulty such as lack of help and other resources for effective parenting (FRP Canada, 2010). Teaching children two or more languages or about their home culture is already an additional task (Jetelina, 2011b). Moreover, they may face parenting style dilemmas between host and culture of origin. Since theory and practice of parenting is a social construct, what is good for children tends to be determined by ideologies that exist in the new host country (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). A parenting style that is considered appropriate in one culture may not be viewed positively in another. For instance, Chinese parents tend to expect their children to be obedient and accept parents’ decisions without question (Assanand, 2011; Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). Though the authoritarian style of parenting is found wanting in European cultures, and associated with children’s poor performance at school, Chinese children are known to do well in academic performance (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008). Therefore, immigrant parents are often required to re-examine their parenting style (Assanand, 2011). Many of them adopt Western style parenting as a result of assimilating to the host society (Ochocka & Janzen, 2008).

Furthermore, immigrating to another country can mean losing the social networks that families had previously established in their homeland. Families may feel isolated without knowing many families from similar backgrounds, with children of the same age (FRP Canada, 2010; Jetelina, 2011a). Studies confirm that there is the need among parents for positive affirmation and sharing of parenting experiences with others (Plantin & Daneback, 2009). It is
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extremely helpful to communicate and share with others about daily lives as well as stressful events. Finch and Vega (2003) also found that immigrants of Asian origin who lacked social support experienced lower physical health due to discrimination compared to those who had social support. Social support is empirically found to be associated with well-being of families (Wright & Bell, 2003), and plays an important part for immigrants’ improved adjustment to their new life (Levitt, Lane, & Levitt, 2003; Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Shou, 1997), but also as a help with parenting (Balaji, et al., 2007; Nicol, 2011). Therefore, one’s limited social network due to relocation may negatively impact immigrant families’ ability to adjust into their new context and enjoy an optimal life.

**Positive effects of social support on families’ well-being**

Social support is linked to our mental and physical health when we go through stressful life events such as migration, acculturation, and raising children (Drentea, & Moren-Cross, 2005; Finch, & Vega, 2003; Kiesler, 1997; Melkote, & Liu, 2000; Plantin, & Daneback, 2009; Rothery, 1999; Schaffer, Kuczynski, & Skinner, 2008; Scharer, 2005). Social support is generally defined as a support that is provided by the interaction with other individuals, groups, or larger community (Cooke, Rossmann, McCubbin, & Patterson, 1988; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). The four categories of support that can be offered through social support are: 1) Emotional support, such as empathy, caring, love, trust, esteem, concern, and listening; 2) Instrumental support, including goods, money, services, or any direct help; 3) Informational and skills support, providing advice, suggestions, directives, and information; 4) Appraisal support, providing affirmation, sense of belongingness, feedback, social comparison, and self-evaluation (Cooke, Rossmann, McCubbin, & Patterson, 1988; Rothery, 1999).
Emotional support and appraisal support can boost one’s psychological well-being by providing a buffering effect to reduce stress among members of social group, and that may lead to an increased physical health (Wright & Bell, 2003). One may be able to get instrumental and informational support via other means, such as looking up services online or at a library; however, quality support comes from one’s social networks that can be considered as a valuable resources (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006).

**Social capital**

Social capital is a notion that considers social relationships and networks as “resources embedded in a social structure” (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005, p. 922). It is an important concept as it connects concepts such as social support, integration and social cohesion (Claridge, 2004). Its definition varies considerably depending on the context and purpose of the study. Social capital may exist in multiple levels, such as in a family, community, or larger organization (Claridge, 2004). At any level, interpersonal relationships are valuable as they allow members to access the social resources available within the network and mobilize them in useful ways (Zhao, Xue, & Gilkinson, 2010). For instance, Wright and Bell (2003) suggest that social networks may promote people’s health by rapidly providing information of health and health resources, by buffering the effect of stress, by reinforcing the health norms through social influence, and by providing emotional support. By the same token, social capital is believed to be one of major determinants of immigrant well-being (Zhao, Xue, & Gilkinson, 2010) as well as that of parents with small children (Balaji, et al., 2007; Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005).

**Communication and community**

Communication is a key factor for building social relationships with others and social support (Wright & Bell, 2003). Kraut et al. (2002) assert that “Communication, including contact
with neighbours, friends, family and participation in social groups improves people’s level of social support, their probability of having fulfilling personal relationships, their sense of meaning in life, their self-esteem, their commitment to social norms and to their communities, and their psychological and physical well-being” (p.50).

Virtual space can be an alternative means for communication with others and it can contribute to widen one’s social network. The convenience of the Internet also lessen obstacles such as language difficulty, busy schedule looking after children, or not knowing where to find friends. Communities can be developed even in virtual environments where people can feel a sense of belongingness and emotional support (Schaffer, Kuczynski and Skinner, 2008; Rheingold, 1993; Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

Virtual community

Community, a sociological construct, refers to a group of people with something in common (Bartle, 2007; Thompson & Kinne, 1999). In some cases, it is a group of people sharing a homogeneous characteristic, such as people of Japanese origin, unemployed, or a religious group. In other cases, members do not necessarily share common values, beliefs, language, or cultures, but living in a same geographical area or belonging to something in common, such as schools. Traditionally, community is referred to people who are tied to a same geographical boundary (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). During the last half century, due to an advancement of information and communication technology, a community can be formed on the Internet as an online group.

“Electronic networks” where people who share interests are loosely connected through technology providing information and help to each other can be seen as a form of community (Rubin & Rubin, 2008). Ridings and Gefen (2004) define virtual communities as “groups of
people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism”. They may or may not be tied geographically together, yet usually share interests (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Rheingold (1993) explains that virtual community is a social aggregation with sufficient human feelings building personal relationships using information and communications technology.

The main motivators to join the virtual community found by Ridings and Gefen (2004) are to access information and to gain social support. Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006) stress the value of information within virtual community: “without rich knowledge, virtual communities are of limited value” (p.1873). Literatures on parents’ use of Internet suggest that parents are not only mere consumer of the knowledge. Members of a virtual community not only find, but also interpret, create, and circulate information (Miura, 2011; Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Additionally, being a member of a virtual community creates the sense of belonging, which ultimately empower individuals (Schaffer, Kuczynski and Skinner, 2008). Studies found the significance of emotional support that can relieve the feeling of isolation among mothers who felt isolated from society while taking care of small babies, and the positive effects a virtual group can offer (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Plantin & Daneback, 2009).

Examples of virtual communities include online asynchronous media such as bulletin boards where members come to discuss topics of shared interests on a regular basis, such as parenting, medical problems, or the problems of owning a sailboat (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Using asynchronous communication is convenient because our busy life with children, different schedules, and time zones make it difficult to find a time to talk to other members in real time message (Wright & Bell, 2003). Asynchronous communication also allows multiple people to respond to a single message (Wright & Bell, 2003).
A virtual community, that I belong to, is an online support group of Japanese families living in Canada, based in Toronto, called Family Talks Forum (FTF). FTF is a virtual community designed to support young families of Japanese origin through online forum (Miura, 2011). Basic interactions among members are via e-mails and postings on the forum. Other activities include parenting workshops, the end-of-year family parties, and annual picnics. Professionals of Japanese origin who are actively working in Canadian communities, such as a public health nurse, realtors, RESP agents, social services workers are also member and offering help through the forum. Some members only receive information that is distributed or by asking; others enthusiastically debate matters of concern including children’s schools, organize activities and appeal to other members.

In the FTF community, online interactions may lead to activities in persons, such as local playgroups, fund raising events, and starting up or promotion of small businesses. This often develops into closer friendships and strengthens one’s social support. The exchanges online as well as physical meetings among members of FTF create a strong sense of community. Many members contribute to improve members’ lives through offering knowledge and skills to add to the services to support community. The information provided is archived and anyone who joins later can access it anytime, creating the knowledge capital.

**Virtual community as a source of support for immigrant families**

My personal example of FTF shows that a virtual community can provide an example of virtual communities that found support networks and social capital exist online, as they do in traditional communities (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Wright & Bell, 2003). Moreover, to increase mutual benefit for members, organizers of social networks can promote and coordinate further cooperation among people (Chiu, Hsu, and Wang, 2006; Putnam, 1995; Thompson &
When young immigrant families are going through a life event that requires a great deal of adjustment, the Internet is able to offer networking opportunities with others in the same situation and provide other forms of social support (Scharer, 2005; Wright & Bell, 2003).

**Immigrants’ acculturation and ethnic identity**

Furthermore, the FTF community promotes the attitude of acculturation called “integration” (Abougendiaand & Noels, 2001, p.165). This attitude values cultural maintenance of origin, at the same time, it seeks interaction with other cultural groups. It is shown to be the most effective attitude among immigrants for the psychological adjustment to new society (Abougendiaand & Noels, 2001). For example, in the FTF community, a new parent in Canada seeks where to find a Japanese school for his or her children. A new home owner asked about a good contractor who may not necessarily be Japanese, but can help. This contributes to maintain members’ ethnic identity, while providing useful information and resources that can increase members’ social capital to help their adjustment to new environment.

The virtual community can also positively support immigrant families in maintaining their ethnic identity and the process of adjusting to Canadian culture. Immigrants find it easier to adjust to a new society with support of their ethnic peers online (Melkote & Liu, 2000). Keeping close ties to people from the same cultural background and having access to services that support these cultural ties is linked with better integration of immigrants in a new society and with their well-being (Zhao, Xue, & Gilkinson, 2010). For example, Melkote and Liu (2000) revealed that the higher use of Chinese ethnic Internet was associated with stronger preservation of their Chinese cultural values. The community linked participants together creating user communities and helped the process of pluralism. The use of the Internet also provided the learning of American behaviours that helped Chinese immigrants to acculturate into their new culture.
The use of Internet can strengthen the ties of ethnic community members and support the process of adjustment to new cultures and environments.

**The advantage of virtual community**

Easy access to the community via Internet is an advantage for people who are likely to be isolated from a society for various reasons (Wright & Bell, 2003). A study shows that mothers who were more isolated with small babies tend to use the Internet as a source of information and social support more than mothers who are less isolated (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). In addition, partial or full anonymity and “the fewer status cues” that indicate different socioeconomic group is another reason virtual community is convenient (Wright & Bell, 2003).

**Virtual community as a resource in Family Support context**

Fortunately, many studies have indicated the general positive effects of Internet use among users, and this is an opportunity to reach out to parents who are reluctant to take advantage of the services offered by FRP. The context of services offered also need cautious scrutiny. Thompson and Kinne (1999) highlight WHO’s report on how community organizations can adjust the community setting to promote people’s well-being based on “principle of participation” (p.36). This principle refers to the idea that people are empowered as they take control of problems by defining, planning, and acting upon them (Thompson & Kinne, 1999). Since a number of online parent groups already exist on the Internet, immigrant families only need to acquire the knowledge of how to access them and acquire the means of accessing them. For instance, a catalogue of websites with details on languages used and community background information could reduce the time and effort required to seek out these sites. To further reduce any additional barriers, it would be ideal if these families can have access to computers with internet access. Moreover, families can engage in consuming and creating content online without
having to worry about their children: by offering temporary childcare, family resource centres can offer additional support to immigrant parents’ acculturation process as well as their learning journey.

**The disadvantage of virtual community**

Nevertheless, it is also important to caution the use of the Internet. Users need to be alert about false information and privacy issues (Sharer, 2005) as well as hostile messages (Wright & Bell, 2003). The difficulty of forming long-term relationships with people within virtual communities is also mentioned as a disadvantage of Internet use (Wright & Bell, 2003). Besides, not everyone can afford personal computers or the Internet connection at home. It is also ideal for parents to socialize and be involved with a traditional form of community, such as schools and local community centres for children’s optimal development (Ying & Han, 2008), I recommend that immigrant families make use of virtual communities as stepping stones to be fully adjusted and establish a family life in their new country.

**Conclusion**

It has been demonstrated that virtual social communities play a significant role in supporting immigrant families to cope with the difficulties they face with relocation. Virtual communities can help immigrant families by broadening their social networks and increase the likelihood for them to seek out and connect with other parents with the same or similar cultural background, whether virtual or in person (Kiesler, 1997; Plantin & Daneback, 2009; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Scharer, 2005; Wright & Bell, 2003). Easier access to communication online would increase the likelihood for immigrant parents with small children to socialize more, and that would heighten the positive effect of social support. Being members of virtual communities
would also provide emotional support and contribute to immigrant parents’ well-being (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Plantin & Daneback, 2009).

The Internet is a great tool and it has great potential in supporting immigrant families. However, a successful bridging of these technologies to existing services needs to be carefully examined. We need to note its shortcomings as well as merits. As an advantage, a virtual community of people from similar backgrounds who find themselves adapting to the same new society provides a social network to families. Virtual social networks operate as social capital and can offer a wide breadth of information, whether cultural specific or not. It may also lead to personal friendships. Consequently, virtual communities can help immigrant families adjust to new contexts of living in Canada. Nevertheless, using the Internet for communication and making use of social support online is not free of concern: users need to understand hazards regarding the truthfulness of information, the issue of privacy, hostile messages, and weaker ties among online community members versus real-life communities. There is also the issue of accessibility. Access to hardware and fees associated with internet services may be cost prohibitive for some.

In this study, it is clear that virtual community can offer social support and contribute to immigrant families’ better adjustment and their well-being. However, this type of study would be stronger with further empirical studies. Through literature reviews, it is difficult to identify the amount of social or other support a virtual community can provide to immigrant families. Longitudinal studies may also be useful in demonstrating the long-term effects of reliance on virtual community.
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