The Impact of Migration on Marital Relationships: A Study of Ethiopian Immigrants in Toronto

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INTRODUCTION

Much research has examined the effect of migration upon individual psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Karasz, 2005; Ahmad, et al., 2004; Boyd & Grieco, 2003; Darvishpour, 2002). The former is commonly associated with psychological well-being and satisfaction while the latter refers to the acquisition of culturally appropriate knowledge and skills (Ataca & Berry, 2002). Little research, however, has examined how migration affects marital relationships, or the processes by which couples adapt to their new circumstances. This is a major limitation to migration research as 'for the most part, it is not individuals who migrate, but intact family groups' (Ataca & Berry, 2002 pg. 15). Information on the impact of migration on marital relationships is doubly important given reported high rates of marital conflict, divorce and intimate partner violence (IPV) in newcomer communities (Stein & Dilmaghani, 2002; Krulfeld, 1994; Kulig, 1994; Tang & Oatley 2002; Naidoo and Davis, 1988).

This paper presents data from a research project conducted with married, divorced and separated newcomer Ethiopians in Toronto. The objectives are to document post-migration changes in the lives of newcomer couples and to examine the impact of post-migration changes on marital relationships.

IMMIGRATION TO CANADA

Every year approximately 250,000 immigrants and refugees arrive in Canada. Over the past 40 years, the ethnic composition of Canada's immigrants has shifted dramatically from European to non-European countries of origin (Van Kessel, 1998). Today, sixty percent of recent immigrants come from Asia and the Middle East (Citizenship & Immigration Canada 2003). The pro-portion of non-European immigrants is even more pronounced in urban centres such as Toronto, where, according to the 2001 census, immigrants represented 44% of the population. This proportion is higher than Miami (40%), Los Angeles (31%) and New York City (24%) (Citizenship & Immigration Canada, 2003). Many of these immigrants are from areas of the world where the cultural norms, beliefs and values differ from those encountered in Canada. Since the mid-1970's, an estimated 1.25 million Ethiopians have fled their homeland

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to settle in neighbouring countries, such as the Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti and Yemen. A relatively smaller proportion immigrated to Europe and North America (McSpadden and Moussa 1993). According to the Ethiopian Association in Toronto (EAT), the Ethiopian population of Toronto numbered 35,000 in 2001 and the community is rapidly growing. Although immigration started in the 1970's, the majority of Ethiopians arrived in Canada during the 1980's and 1990's. Data from the Pathways and Barriers to Health Care for Ethiopians in Toronto, an epidemiological survey of Ethiopians in Toronto, indicated that in 1990-2000, the average length of stay in Canada was 9.2 years; the range being between one and 29 years and highly skewed. As in their home country, the Ethiopian community in Toronto is characterized by tremendous diversity with respect to ethnicity and religion. According to the 1996 census, only 3.7% of Ethiopians had no knowledge of English or French upon arrival (Noh, et al., 2001).

RESEARCH ON POST-MIGRATION CHANGES

Migration has a profound impact on the lives of individuals and couples. For women, the process of immigration often includes the acquisition of a new language and culture as well as changes in both social status and income level. Research on immigrant women has identified several post-migration stressors including finding employment, lack of professional accreditation, securing affordable and safe housing, discrimination, losses of social status, isolation, culture shock and linguistic, economic and cultural barriers to necessary health and social services (Thurston & Vissandjee, 2005; Meadows, et al., 2001; Hyman 2002).

For some women, migration may mean an increase in social mobility, economic independence, and relative autonomy. This is especially true when the move is accompanied by increased participation in the labor market. New economic and social responsibilities may change the distribution of power within the family, leading to greater authority and participation in household decision-making and control over resources. For others, however, labor force participation increases the burden they must carry, unless or until they find new ways of dealing with old roles and responsibilities, particularly those of childcare and housework, and effect a change in the power relationship within the marriage (Boyd & Grieco, 2003; Darvishpour, 2002). Even when migration improves the social status of women, it may not change their relative position within the family.

Stress associated with post migration changes in gender relations is common (Ataca & Berry, 2002; Boyd & Grieco, 2003). Post-migration changes in gender roles have been associated with an increased risk of marital conflict (Krulfeld, 1994; Kulig, 1994). It is well established that marital conflict is a major risk factor for IPV (Jewkes, 2002; Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2002), a key focus of our research program.

Structural theories such as feminist theory and theories of status inconsistency relate the occurrence of IPV to existing social structures. According to the former, gender inequality and male domination underlie violence against women (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). According to theories of status inconsistency, the family is a power system with variation in the distribution of resources among its members. Those who are threatened by their lack of resources, or perceive their status to be inconsistent with social norms, may use violence as a strategy to compensate for lack of power (Campbell, 1992; Goode, 1971; Yick, 2001).

An American study of Chinese immigrants found that when the husband's role as breadwinner was threatened, power and control was reasserted through the use of physical and psychological forms of abuse (Tang & Oatley 2002). Post-migration changes in gender roles were cited in other U.S. studies as contributing to relationship difficulties and increasing levels of divorce, desertion and domestic violence (Krulfeld, 1994; Kulig, 1994). This was particularly true when the woman's economic role increased with no concurrent change in her husband's gender role attitudes (Min, 2001). Expectations of the wife to perform motherhood and household duties in addition to employment outside the home was cited as a major source of conflict among Canadian South Asian women (Naidoo & Davis, 1988). Similar findings were also noted in a Canadian study in the Sri Lankan Tamil community (Morrison, Guruge, & Snarr, 1999).

Except for the work by Ataca & Berry (2002), however, little research has examined the impact of post-migration change on the couple unit. Our study attempted to address this topic within one Canadian immigrant community, Ethiopian immigrants in Toronto.

METHODS

In 2003, a partnership was formed between EAT and academic researchers to examine the risk factors for marital conflict and intimate partner IPV among Ethiopian newcomer couples in Toronto (Phase 1). In 2005, we examined the same issues among Ethiopian women and men who had separated or divorced post-migration (Phase 2). In this community-based pilot study, all phases of the research, development of objectives and research/interview questions, participant recruitment, and data analysis were determined together with the EAT staff. As relatively little was known about the issue in question, an exploratory qualitative methodology was chosen for the study. Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the Sunnybrook and Women's College Health Sciences Centre Ethics Board.

Eligibility for the study was limited to immigrants from Ethiopia. In the first phase, both partners had to agree to participate, and the couple had to have been married/living together prior to migration. In the second phase, study participants had to have divorced or separated post-migration. A variety of recruitment strategies were used including newspaper advertisements, flyers distributed at EAT headquarters, use of key informants (community and religious leaders), flyers in Ethiopian venues and at Ethiopian social events, canvassing of taxi drivers, use of court workers, presentations to Ethiopian community, contact with previous study participants and word-of mouth (snowballing). During the first phase of the project, participants were offered an honorarium of $50.00; this rose to $75.00 during the second phase. Given our prior and ongoing relationships with the Ethiopian community, we were surprised at the difficulty we had in recruiting study participants for the second phase, suggesting that, as in many communities, issues of marital conflict and divorce remain highly stigmatizing.

After all the risks and benefits of participation were explained, participants provided written informed consent and were offered an honorarium for their participation in the study. Data were collected by two (one male and one female) Ethiopian (Amharic-speaking) research assistants (RAs) trained in individual and focus group interview techniques. The interview schedule consisted of two sections: a short socio-demographic questionnaire and migration history; and a set of open-ended questions including:

- How has your life/relationship changed since coming to Canada?
- How has it been difficult for you and your partner to adapt to changes in Canada?
- What creates conflict for you and your partner?
- How do you and your partner resolve arguments?
- [divorced/separated participants only] Can you talk about how changes in roles/ responsibilities might have contributed to your separation or divorce?

In the first phase, the couples were interviewed separately to ensure that the presence of a partner did not influence responses. During pre-testing it was determined that study participants did not have a gender preference regarding the interviewer, so the same person interviewed both partners in each couple. Participants who were separated or divorced were also given the choice of a male or female interviewer. The interviews took between 1.5 and 2.5 hours to complete.

The first phase of the project also included focus group discussions. After completion of the in-depth interviews and preliminary data analysis, two focus groups (one for men and one for women) were formed for the purpose of confirming/disconfirming the themes that emerged from the initial data analysis and to inform on-going data analysis. Each focus group consisted of five participants and lasted between 2 and 3 hours. Six participants who had been interviewed were unable to attend the focus-group discussion due to family or work commitments. The two RAs facilitated the focus-group discussions. For reasons of confidentiality and to protect participant's anonymity, focus groups were not conducted with participants who were divorced or separated (Phase 2).

All individual and focus group interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and translated into English (with the exception of two interviews conducted in English). The two RAs cross-checked and validated all interview data. Data from the interviews and focus-group discussions were organized using N6 software. Concepts noted in the literature served as an initial guide for the development of a coding scheme. Additional codes were developed as the first interviews were coded and significant codes were grouped as sub-themes. The coding scheme initially consisted of more than 120 codes. These were later reduced to 11 sub-themes, which were then collapsed and condensed into themes. The findings reported here pertain to themes of Change, Sources of Conflict, Marital Adaptation and Resolving Differences.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY SAMPLE

The study sample consisted of 25 participants. Eight Ethiopian couples participated in Phase 1 and 9 (seven women and two men) in Phase 2. Participants in Phase 1 varied with respect to age (range: 27-71 yrs.), length of marriage (range: 3-42 yrs), and length of stay in Canada (range: 3-20 yrs.). All of the male participants had completed secondary school and at least four had completed university and/or graduate school. With the exception of one participant, all the females had completed secondary school and three had completed community college. All the women and most of the men were employed. The women worked in sales, secretarial work, teaching and accounting; the men worked in engineering, accounting and other

professional and semi-professional fields. With the exception of one Protestant couple, all of married study participants were members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Most of the divorced or separated study participants were in their 20's and 30's (age range: 23- 41 years). Length of marriage varied from two to eight years; the length of time since participants had been separated or divorced varied between one month and nine years. Two participants had been in Canada for less than two years but the remainder had been in Canada for more than 15 years. Most study participants had completed high school or community college only. The women worked in childcare, information technology, accounting and nursing; the men were employed as unskilled labourers. Religious backgrounds included Muslim, Protestant and Roman Catholic, with the majority Ethiopian Orthodox (5). Compared to our sample in Phase 1, Phase 2 participants were relatively younger, less well-educated and more religiously diverse.

FINDINGS

Study findings are presented under two main areas: 1) the changes the study participants experienced since coming to Canada, and 2) the impact of these changes on their marital relationships.

Post-Migration Changes

The major post-migration changes described by study participants included loss of household help, loss of emotional support, loss of income and status, and changes in gender roles.

Loss of Household Help

All of the study participants acknowledged that the availability of instrumental support in Ethiopia was an important contributor to the smooth functioning of the pre-migration family household. This support was most frequently provided by paid staff, e.g., maids, housekeepers cooks and nannies. As a married 42 year old female explained,

> But the difference is that there is help, you can hire somebody to help you in the household activities, to take care of your children. You don't have to worry about all these activities. And therefore, even though all the responsibilities are left for the woman, I think at all standard of life — even the poor can hire somebody, you don't have to be rich to hire somebody. So, it was not difficult there.

The absence of this type of support in Canada was acknowledged by almost all of the study participants as contributing to significant change in the quality of family life experienced post-migration.

Loss of Emotional Support

In Ethiopia, much emotional support was provided to married couples by members of the extended family and close friends. This type of support included help and advice about child-rearing, household disputes and conflict resolution. As described by one separated 41

year old male, "In our culture back home, when a husband and wife fight, family members try to help to bring them back together so they can live in peace and raise their children together."

In Toronto, this support and advice was not readily available, nor did individuals feel they could consult with those back home as many of the issues and problems were considered to be outside the experience of support networks in Ethiopia. As a married 42 year old female described,

> You see, when you are married in Ethiopia, and if one of the partners is following the wrong way, like doing the wrong thing or hang up with bad people, or if I complain of something; there is somebody else who tells him, 'Don't do like that.' It could be from his family or from my family. And therefore, he gets information from everybody, not only from me. He listens to his brother, his sister, to my family and so on. And therefore there is some kind of pressure to build up our marriage life. But, in Canada, there is nobody, nobody. Even if you try to discuss with the family at a distance, there are so many aspects that they can't see here.

The absence of emotional support was compounded by social isolation. This idea is highlighted in the following quotes.

> In that sense, one of the things is actually because you have people around you who can relate with you, and loneliness was not a factor in Ethiopia. There was no time that actually you are alone. You have people around all the time. (married 41 year old male)

> You don't see each other! You have no one to talk to. You want someone to talk to. When he comes at 8:00 p.m., I feel so happy. When he comes at 11:00 p.m., he is tired and he does not want to hear any noise. He has been driving long hours. As a result, we can't ... I would be happy if this did not happen to others. It is a great pleasure to sit down and chat. I have no friends. He works long hours. (separated 23 year old female)

In the post-migration context of lengthy or different work hours and schedules, men and women had little emotional support from others including from their own partners. This was particularly true of study participants who had separated or divorced.

Loss of Income and Status

For many of the male participants, migration was associated with downward status mobility and a loss of status and authority in the family. Despite high levels of education, many of the male study participants were not working in fields that reflected their skills and educational achievement.

Even though the majority of female participants were employed in Ethiopia, men were considered the primary breadwinners and women's income was viewed as supplementary. However, in Canada, women's contribution to the household income was a necessity and was as important as their husbands'.

> She is the bread earner now and I get my retirement benefits. The bulk of the income is generated by her. I have accepted that role. (married 71 year old male)

However as we shall see in the next section, not all couples adapted in the same way to these changing patterns of employment and income generation.

Changes in Gender Roles

All of the study participants described families in Ethiopia as patriarchal in nature. Women were primarily responsible for taking care of the household and children, the 'inside' matters, while men were primarily responsible for providing an income for the family, the 'outside' matters. The majority of men did not share household tasks with women and if they did, they performed activities such as gardening or household repairs. In fact, in Ethiopia, there were no expectations that men would or should share in household tasks. As a separated 36 year old male described,

> If we take Ethiopia, for instance, most of the time women are responsible for household tasks and men for outside tasks. That by itself is division of work. While the woman works hard in the house, cooking and raising children, the father also runs around—toils and supplies whatever is needed in the house. This by itself is division of tasks.

Most of the study participants reported changes in their own expectations of their roles and responsibilities in Canada. As a married 54 year old male explained, "I feel a lot more responsibility here than in Ethiopia." In Canada, there was evidence of a more equitable sharing of household and external work.

> There is no task that I consider to be specifically to a man or a woman. Because—we can do any kind of mental work that a man does. As for manual work, we all have hands and legs and we can do whatever a man can do. There is no such thing as a man's task or a woman's task. (separated 23 year old female)

> Here, the woman works outside and comes back home, and to ask her to go into the kitchen is something unacceptable. As long as both of us work, we have to share household tasks. (divorced 35 year old female)

This expectation was especially true of women who were working outside the home and contributing to household income.

Impact of Post-Migration Changes on Marital Relationships

In this section, we report on the impact of the post-migration changes on marital relationships, what created marital conflict, and how marital conflicts were or were not resolved. The key themes presented here include increased marital conflict, increased autonomy for women, increased mutual dependence and more joint decision-making, and changes in communication and intimacy. These themes reflect both negative and positive impacts of change on marital relationships.

Increased Marital Conflict

One of the major negative impacts of migration was increased marital conflict. A major contributor to conflict, directly related to the absence of support and financial need necessitating demanding work schedules, was work overload and overtiredness. As a 47 year married male explained,

> Then when she comes she does her work and after she finishes, she comes and sits with her coffee and say euffff.... Then after what she needs is a peaceful sleep and what I want is a different thing. Then what do you think will happen? We quarrel.

Another prime source of conflict arose when couples were unable to renegotiate new gender roles and responsibilities. For example, some men were unwilling to take on certain tasks; particularly those they felt belonged to women. Males also felt that they should not be expected to change overnight. Female participants reported that they were more likely to assume the double burden of work and family which often led to resentment. As two married women described, "70% of the work is mine," and, "In Canada, we both are working, but I still take most of the responsibilities."

The majority of study participants who were divorced or separated agreed that conflicts over roles and responsibilities contributed to their separation or divorce. As these study participants explained,

> Yes, I always raised this issue. This is because, at the beginning, of course, when we came to Canada, until I got used to the country, and since I was staying home, I was working in the house. But later, I started working. When I come back from work, he eats and refuses even to pick up the plate he has eaten from and we used to quarrel over that. I used to say to him, "Why don't you wash the dishes? Why don't you help out on at least things that you can do—such as the laundry. You may be working, but I am working too." (middle aged female—age not provided)

> He takes shower; he has breakfast, gets dressed and goes to work. He always had clean clothes ready for him. Then he goes to work. This is in Canada! I am talking about Toronto! He goes to work, and then after work, if he wants to hang around with his friends, he does so and comes back home late at night. As for me, I toil all day. I clean the house, take care of the kids. That is how I spend my day. So, it has definitely contributed to the divorce. (divorced 41 year old female)

However, the degree to which these conflicts contributed to separation and/or divorce varied. In two cases, participants attributed their separation/divorce mainly to infidelity and addiction. Interestingly, in both of these cases, conflicts over gender roles and responsibilities were not described.

Increased Autonomy for Women

The majority of female participants reported that they worked because it gave them autonomy and a sense of independence, not only out of financial necessity. Both men and women

observed that many women derived benefits from working such as reduced isolation and increased adaptation, in addition to generating household income.

> When somebody stays home, you know the condition of this country, you can't have the kind of socialization we have had in our culture. Therefore, she won't be comfortable if she is not working, she can't share ideas with anybody unless she is working. If she always stays home while I am working and coming home, it will create for her some sort of stress. It is because to work and come home and staying home do have big difference. Beside, it also brings some additional income if she works; it is a benefit. (married 40 year old male)

Furthermore, as a result of increased independence, many women no longer felt obligated to remain in unsatisfactory marital relationships in Canada. Women felt there were alternatives, and many knew of the availability of government assistance to low-income families. As explained by a married 53 year old female,

> Many women in our country are financially dependent on their husbands and they say, "Where am I going to end up if I leave him?" or, "What kind of life am I going to have?" So they stay even if they are not happy in their marriage. When we come to Canada, you don't have to say, "Where am I going to go or for whom am I going stay?" The women can even get support from the government if they have no other choice.

This divorced 37 year old female explained,

> Because there is welfare and because the Canadian government supports us, we don't have to depend on them. Our mothers were beaten by our fathers because they depended on them just because the men provided bread or injera.

While most women perceived increased autonomy to be a good thing, men often felt that women had 'special rights' in Canada. They perceived Canadian laws as favouring women and women taking advantage of their rights such as government money and assistance for single mothers.

Increased Mutual Dependence and/or Joint Decision-Making

Among the couples who remained together post-migration, there was evidence of increased mutual dependence. In other words, couples began to rely more on each other for support and help, rather than family and friends. As explained by a married 41 year old male,

> Compared to what we used to do back home, it has changed. Because here you don't have someone to help you. Husbands and wives have to share things more to take care of things in and out. Here I can say I try to share everything. After doing my work outside, when I come home I help. For example, now she is not home and I have to take care of our children; I have to help them with their homework and I have to try to take care of the other things in the house when she is not here.

Another positive change in relationships was described as an increase in joint decision-making among couples. Although there was shared decision making among couples on major financial issues in Ethiopia, some male participants also indicated that they had much more decision making power in Ethiopia than their wives. In the quote below, one of the female participants spoke about the decision-making process that she and her husband have developed since coming to Canada:

> We always discuss whenever we want to do something, like I may say what if we give this much for this wedding? We also discuss the money that we give for the church. We discuss everything, I don't hide anything from him and he doesn't hide anything from me. (married 60 year old female)

Changes (or no changes) in Communication and Intimacy

Many study participants reported changes in communication and levels of intimacy following migration. For married couples this was often attributed to greater reliance on one another, often due to the absence of other supports such as family and friends. As a married 42 year old male explained,

> When we came here it is only me, my wife and the children that came here and there is no other family, friend, cousin or any other extended family here. But in our country she has family. I have family; she has friends, I have friends; we have extended families. When we came here, we became closer and talk everything together, even the minor things and even those which we were not talking about when we were in Ethiopia. Because there is nobody else here that you talk with and the life here made us closer.

As a result of facing challenges such as migrating and resettling, and raising children in a new country together, several couples described their relationships in Canada as stronger than they might otherwise have been. As a male focus group participant explained,

> She migrated with me just for me and this is a big a big sacrifice for me and I can't change it with what so ever. And as we live together more and more, we are developing our love more and more as a husband and wife, as brother and sister, mother and child -we have all kind of love. We came through all these and passed many challenges and now we are at this stage. But for the future, for the coming generation, we have to prepare something.

However, several of the separated and/or divorced study participants described communication related problems that hindered their ability to resolve conflicts. These most commonly involved difficulties expressing needs, establishing intimacy, and poor listening skills. Many of these difficulties were attributed to gender and/or cultural factors that persisted post-migration. For example, a divorced 37-year-old female described, "It is true! The way we were brought up does not help us to be expressive. It has to do with the culture." Other study participants echoed these thoughts.

> Generally, our men do not have communication skills. They cannot sit down and have a discussion on either the good or the bad. I mean even about their personal

> experience, their life, and their future—they don't know how to have a discussion on that. (divorced 34 year old female)

> Naturally, I don't like to talk or argue. I usually prefer to listen than talk a lot. She talks a lot, as you know this is women's thing- and when it comes to the point, I only throw a word and that just makes her nervous and make her talk more. I don't know how to talk at that point and so I don't say anything. So we argue sometimes. (divorced 41 year old male)

Study males were at times described as unable to express intimacy. As a married 34 year old female explained,

> Sometimes when we talk amongst my girl friends, it is probably 2% of Ethiopian men who can say "I love you," or "I can't live without you." It is only when they feel like having sex that our men come close to the woman. This affects your sexual desire. They can't even embrace you when you are in bed.

Some men were described as having poor listening skills. As a result, women felt that their partners did not respect what they had to say. As these women explained,

> Communication, not listening to each other, is the main problem. Most of the time, the man says, "I know better. Listen to what I have to say." (divorced middle aged female)

> He has this chauvinist kind of attitude. "A man is superior to a woman," that is how men feel. So he always says that, "You are a woman and you have to listen to what I have to say. You have to do what I ask you to do." That was it. So that is how the discussion ends. So I say to myself, "Why would I go on when he is not willing to listen to me?" He feels he is superior even in every way. (divorced 41 year old female)

As result of poor communication with their partners, female participants described escalating tensions and arguments.

> Yes, it has contributed to our separation. Arguments lead to hatred for each other. If you hate him, then you may not be happy to see him when he comes back home. You would say, "Why would I want to live with him? We are always arguing. He always asks me to do this or that. " So, yes, it has contributed significantly. (separated 25 year old female)

> In my case, we leave it without resolving the issue. So, it builds up and builds up, and contributes to this problem. So, if things are not discussed and solved, it will create a problem. That is what happened to me. (divorced 41 year old male)

DISCUSSION

This study extends previous research on the psychological and sociocultural adaptation of migrants by examining the impact of migration on marital relationships. While the major

types of post-migration changes experienced by newcomer Ethiopians in Toronto, i.e., losses in emotional and instrumental support, changes in income and status and changes in gender roles were similar to those reported in other studies (Thurston & Vissandjee, 2005; Meadows, et al., 2002; Hyman 2002), the impacts of these changes on marital relationships were found to be both positive and negative.

Among the negative impacts of migration on the couple unit were increased marital conflict and communication issues. Marital conflict over gender roles and responsibilities is well documented in the literature on the adaptation of newcomer women (Tang & Oatley, 2002; Krulfeld, 1994; Kulig, 1994; Min, 2001; Naidoo & Davis, 1988). Problems in communication emerged as a central issue for most of the separated and divorced study participants. These problems were strongly linked to cultural norms regarding gender. For example, women did not always feel valued or respected by male partners. Women often felt uncomfortable or were afraid to express needs to a male partner. Men did not always have the necessary skills to be good listeners or express intimacy. However, married study participants overcame some of these communication problems by being open, respecting each other and sharing common goals and values (Hyman, et al., 2004).

Study findings further challenged the notion that the impact of post-migration changes on marital relationships is all negative. On the positive side, couples reported increased mutual dependence and autonomy, improved communication and intimacy, and more joint decision-making. Cheung (2004) also provided evidence of resilience factors such as increased intimacy and mutual reliance in her study of immigrant couples in Canada.

Some limitations to our findings must be noted. Although representativeness is never the aim of qualitative research studies, the Ethiopian community in Toronto is heterogeneous and voices of certain segments of the community in Toronto may have been missed. Secondly, married and separated/divorced study participants differed on certain characteristics. For example, all of the married study participants were advantaged in terms of their educational, occupational and living circumstances in Ethiopia. Even though most had experienced a drop in their standard of living in Canada, they could still be considered success stories in terms of their adaptation to Canada. These couples were also more likely to have lived in a third country before migrating to Canada, which may have accelerated their adaptation process. Overall, the study participants who were separated or divorced were younger, more likely to have come directly to Canada, and less financially secure. Younger age and low income are known risk factors associated with marital conflict and IPV (Cohen & Maclean, 2003).

Despite these limitations, our research findings may have implications for the development of theory on the etiology of IPV in newcomer communities and violence prevention strategies. Though feminist theory focuses on factors that underlie the occurrence of violence, (Dobash and Dobash 1979), it does not consider what happens when these structures are challenged, for example, following migration. Couples who migrate from societies where patriarchal ideologies prevail may find themselves forced to confront more egalitarian notions of male/female relations in Canada. For couples that embrace more liberal ideologies, the result is likely a shift in gender roles (and responsibilities) and associated power relationships which may disrupt established patterns of relating and communicating to one another.

Theories of status inconsistency take change into consideration, but mainly focus on the negative aspects of change on the power dynamics between men and women, and not on positive changes such as increased resiliency. Some couples in our research study found positive changes, such as increased intimacy and communication, female autonomy and independence, and fluidity in accepting formerly gendered responsibilities, which buffered the impact of migration related stress upon their relationships. These positive aspects also should be considered when applying theory to the occurrence of IPV in immigrant communities.

Recognising the potential for both positive and negative changes in marital relationships following migration can inform the practices of settlement organizations and the development of violence prevention strategies for newcomer couples and communities. For example, the EAT offers a wide range of services, including English language training; settlement, employment, housing and job counseling; crisis intervention; a drop-in centre; interpretation and translation. In October 2006, the EAT held a community forum to share study findings with Ethiopian, community-based and mainstream health and social service professionals, to provide information on professional, spiritual and community-based approaches to reducing marital conflict and IPV, and to engage community and mainstream providers in developing strategies to address marital conflict and IPV in immigrant and refugee communities. Acknowledging the changes in levels of instrumental and personal support, enhancing communication between spouses, encouraging more sharing of household responsibilities, and identifying positive outcomes associated with increased female autonomy may all assist newcomer couples in their positive adaptation to the changes associated with migration.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although our findings have theoretical and practice implications, this research represents only a first step in our knowledge of the impacts of migration on marital relationships. This research needs to be extended to other immigrant communities representing different migration and resettlement experiences (e.g., immigrant and refugee, visible minority and non-visible minority, newcomer and established). This would enable us to explore community-specific experiences, begin to identify commonalties, and synthesize results across communities.

Given that issues of marital conflict, divorce and IPV are of major concern to many newcomer communities, more research is necessary on the factors associated with marital outcomes. For example, large scale surveys, such as the National Survey of Families and Household in the U.S., collect a broad range of information to enable the identification of patterns associated with current states of marital relationships. Longitudinal data is collected on variables such as division of household tasks, marital happiness, availability of social support and marital conflict. Similar surveys need to be developed for newcomer communities that take into account the immigrant context, such as the post-migration changes in income, support and gender roles identified in this paper.

We have examined the relationships of Ethiopian newcomers, and this research represents a first step towards addressing information gaps related to the experience of migration on marital relationships. Further research is necessary to confirm the findings of this study with other immigrant communities, and to generate new knowledge which can inform the promotion of healthy relationships in immigrant communities.

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