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## Implications for Counselling Asian Transnational Youth: The Experiences of Taiwanese Youth in Vancouver Incidences sur le travail de counseling auprès de jeunes Asiatiques transnationaux : l'expérience auprès de jeunes Taïwanais à Vancouver

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### ABSTRACT

Using a phenomenological approach, this study sought to explore the long-term psychological impact of families' transnational separation on children through the lenses of Taiwanese youth in Vancouver. Over time, most participants found themselves in a position of "ambivalent outsider," with an increased sense of uncertainty about their identities and future plans. Counselling practices for working with Asian transnational families are discussed.

### RÉSUMÉ

Suivant une approche phénoménologique, cette étude tente d'explorer l'effet psychologique à long terme de la séparation transnationale des familles sur les enfants selon le point de vue de jeunes Taïwanais vivant à Vancouver. Avec le temps, la plupart des participants se sont sentis dans la peau d'un « étranger ambivalent » et ont ressenti une incertitude croissante quant à leur identité et à leurs projets d'avenir. On y discute des pratiques en counseling auprès des familles asiatiques transnationales.

In the last few decades, globalization has generated an unprecedented rise in international migration, fostering a dramatic shift in family structures worldwide (Schiller, 1992; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002). Increasingly, families are entering transnational living arrangements in order to secure citizenship in another country (Ong, 1999). The transnational family strategy is viewed as a means for families to safeguard themselves from impending political and economic instability in their home country, while also taking advantage of better educational and economic situations in another country (Lee & Koo, 2006; Tsang, Irving, Alaggia, Chau, & Benjamin, 2003).

Asian families, one of many transnational family subgroups worldwide, often send the mother and children to a new country while the father stays behind in the home country to work. These families have become known as "astronaut" or "flying trapeze" families because the father travels back and forth between the home and host countries to visit their families (Ip, Wu, & Inglis, 1998; Pe-Pua, Mitchell, Castles, & Iredale, 1998; Waters, 2002). This phenomenon occurs due to "push"

factors from Asian countries as well as “pull” factors from receiving countries. For example, the threat of Chinese takeover in Hong Kong and the political and economic instability in Taiwan in the 1990s (Johnson & Lary, 1994) stimulated a large migration of families from these countries to English-speaking countries, especially Australia, Canada, and the United States. Similarly, growing competition in the domestic educational system and a desire to seek better educational opportunities for their children propelled Korean parents to send their children to English-speaking countries (Lee & Koo, 2006). As for the “pull” factors of receiving countries, the stale economic climates of Australia, Canada, and the United States in the 1980s prompted the adoption of state-sponsored business migration programs such as the Business Immigration Program (BIP) in Canada. These incentive programs were designed for wealthier Asian families to bring their capital and businesses to these newly industrialized countries (Ip et al., 1998; Ley, 2000; Pe-Pua et al., 1998; Smart, 1994; Wong, 2004).

Often referred to as a “gateway city” due to the large influx of Asian immigrants in the 1990s, Vancouver, British Columbia, experienced a 50% rise in Taiwanese immigration alone in less than a decade (Ip et al., 1998; Ley, 2000). Vancouver’s reputation as a gateway city for Asian immigrants and transnationals is based upon several notable factors: the strong presence of established Asian ethnic communities, the desirable climate and environment, and, more broadly, Canadian social policies that celebrate the country’s diversity and “cultural mosaic,” allowing new immigrants and transnationals the freedom to practice their religious and cultural values (Wong, 2004).

Despite transnational families’ hopes for better lives, research indicates that transnational living arrangements also engender negative emotional, financial, and social consequences. The family member most affected by the transnational arrangement is the adolescent child. Adolescents are a population deemed vulnerable to psychosocial adjustment difficulties to begin with (Yeh & Inose, 2002), and the added strains of immigration and family separation through the transnational arrangement create living circumstances that are exceptionally challenging for this age group (Waters, 2002). Research shows that transnational youth encounter discrimination (Wu, Ip, Inglis, Kawakami, & Duivendoorn, 1998), cultural conflicts with their parents (Lee & Koo, 2006; Pe-Pua et al., 1998), and a fragmented sense of identity (Creese, Dyck, & McLaren, 1999; Tsang et al., 2003)—experiences common to all immigrant youth (Berry & Sam, 1997; Phinney, Berry, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; Phinney & Ong, 2002; Phinney & Vedder, 2006; Yeh, 2003).

What sets transnational youth apart from immigrant youth, however, are the unique challenges they experience as a result of family separation. For example, children of transnational families are reported to feel a heightened level of parental pressure to succeed academically because of the family sacrifice in transnational living (Creese et al., 1999; Tsang et al., 2003). Furthermore, research indicates that due to the absence of their fathers, transnational children are likely to take on far more responsibilities in the household and act as cultural brokers for their mothers (Pe-Pua et al., 1998; Tsang et al., 2003). The increase in responsibilities combined

with a drastically reduced network of peer and extended family support from their home country renders this population especially vulnerable to mental health issues (Aye & Guerin, 2001). Furthermore, emotional difficulties individually experienced by their parents and strains in their marital relationship (Chee, 2003; Creese et al., 1999; Waters, 2002) add another stressor to transnational youth.

Despite significant psychological and emotional difficulties that transnational youth face (Creese et al., 1999), most empirical research conducted on transnational families focuses on the experiences of the parents (Chee, 2003; Creese et al., 1999; Lee & Koo, 2006; Waters, 2002; Wu et al., 1998). While some studies have included the experiences of youth, they mostly relied on parents' reports on their children's experiences. Also, the long-term impact of the dual household living arrangement on transnational youth remains unexamined.

To fill these gaps in the literature, this study aims to explore, using a qualitative method, children's perspectives of entering a transnational living arrangement and the psychosocial consequences of such an arrangement. It is believed that giving voice to transnational youth is key in providing transnational family members and helping professionals with a clearer picture of the consequences of entering a dual household arrangement. Although several Asian ethnic groups have entered into transnational living arrangements in Canada, this study sought to explore one ethnic group—Taiwanese youth—in order to minimize the influence of demographic differences of participants' pre-migratory experiences on the results of the study. More specifically, this study explores the following research questions: (a) How did Taiwanese transnational youth understand their family's decision to enter a transnational arrangement? (b) How did Taiwanese transnational youth's family dynamics and individual familial relationships change over time? and (c) How has the experience of transnational migration affected Taiwanese transnational youth's identity development and their plans for the future?

In light of the exploratory nature of the study, the qualitative method was chosen with the primary goal of identifying factors that could be further examined in future studies. As well, the qualitative method is considered a better tool for answering "how" or "what" questions, and it allows the researcher to obtain rich information on the subjective experiences of participants that cannot be captured in the analyses of statistical significance of results in the quantitative method (Morrow, 2007). Among many qualitative approaches, the phenomenological approach was chosen because its focus on the "description of the essence of the experiences" (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007, p. 252) of participants was deemed fitting for the exploratory nature of this study.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

To be eligible for the study, participants had to be in their 20s and had to have immigrated to Canada between the ages of 12 and 19, thus having received secondary education in Canada. Also, participants had to have one parent living

in Canada and the parent moving back and forth between Canada and Taiwan. “Parachute kids” who were sent alone to a foreign country without their parents to pursue education were excluded because it was deemed that their experiences would be qualitatively different from adolescents who migrate to a new country with one of their parents.

Participants were 6 in total (4 male and 2 female) from the metropolitan Vancouver area. They ranged in age from 23 to 27 years ( $M = 26$ ). Participants immigrated to Canada between the ages of 12 and 16 years. At the time of the interviews, 4 participants were full-time university students (2 in graduate school and 2 in undergraduate school) and 2 had full-time jobs. All participants had at least one sibling. In terms of religious affiliation, 4 participants identified themselves as Christian, 1 participant as Buddhist, and 1 participant as non-religious (see Table 1 for demographic information).

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Current Age	Age at Migration	Gender	Status	Religious Affiliation
1	27	12	Female	Student	Christian
2	27	13	Female	Employed	Christian
3	23	16	Male	Student	None
4	25	16	Female	Student	Buddhist
5	25	13	Female	Student	Christian
6	27	16	Male	Employed	Christian

*Note.*  $N = 6$ .

### *Procedures*

Participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 1990). Recruitment e-mails were sent to Taiwanese student associations and flyers were posted at a university campus, nonprofit multicultural organizations, and Taiwanese religious organizations in the greater Vancouver area. A snowball sampling technique was also used. Six individuals expressed interest in participating in the study. The first author and her bilingual research assistant conducted semi-structured interviews with an interview protocol and predetermined prompts that allowed interviewers to ensure consistency across interviews, while remaining open to the uniqueness of each participant’s experiences. Prior to the interview, participants were asked their language preference; conducting the interview in the language in which they felt most comfortable in expressing their inner experiences

was deemed important in order to obtain rich data of participants' experiences. The first author conducted three interviews in English and a research assistant, a native Mandarin speaker, conducted three interviews in Mandarin. Interviews were conducted at locations that were convenient for participants (e.g., their home, a reserved room at the library) as long as privacy could be ensured. Interviews were audio-recorded, and they lasted 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and translated by two additional bilingual research assistants. The research assistants who translated the Mandarin interviews were instructed to translate the interviews word for word as much as possible. If the diction became unclear as a result of the direct translation, the Mandarin sentences were paraphrased into English to achieve conceptual equivalency between the Mandarin text and the English text. Translation of Mandarin interviews was verified by the research assistant who conducted the interviews, who had also studied translation for her undergraduate degree.

### *Data Analysis*

Among two approaches to phenomenology (i.e., hermeneutic phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology), the transcendental approach was chosen for this study. Unlike hermeneutic phenomenology that focuses on the researcher's interpretation of data (van Manen, 1990), transcendental phenomenology focuses on a description of the core essence that runs through participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The authors used a constant comparative method of data analysis (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) to ensure rigorous analysis. Following an inductive approach to analysis, authors created categories based on the themes that emerged from the data across cases. The authors continually re-examined the data, regrouping themes to create categories that best represent the data, and cross-checking the transcripts against the code words to ensure that each theme could be found in the transcripts. These steps were followed by the development of a textural description (i.e., description of participants' experiences) as well as a structural description (i.e., conditions, situations, or context of participants' experiences), as recommended by Moustakas (1994).

### *Trustworthiness of Data*

Several steps were taken by the authors to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Before conducting the study, both authors reflected upon their past experiences and how these experiences contributed to their assumptions or biases going into the study and engaged in ongoing discussions on the possible impact of their subjective stance on data analyses (Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Peer reviewing and auditing were also used to enhance trustworthiness of data. A peer reviewer, a Taiwanese graduate student of theology, reviewed the transcripts and provided feedback on the codes to further refine the coding scheme. The peer reviewer also checked the translation of interviews to review their accuracy. The second author audited the initial coding of data and the results of cross-analysis.

## RESULTS

Sixteen themes emerged from cross-analysis and were grouped into four categories: *pre-migratory experiences*, *post-migratory experiences*, *family dynamics*, and *social support*. The common thread that seemed to run through these categories, capturing the essence of participants' experiences, was their heightened sense of independence characterized by emotional self-reliance and independent decision-making. Participants seem to have developed these coping mechanisms as a means to deal with the dramatic changes in their lives as a result of the transnational arrangement. In this section, variations of themes in the four categories will be illustrated with quotes. These four categories represent the sequential process of transnational adjustment as well as contextual changes that take place as a result of transnational migration. **All quotes are presented word for word, despite grammatical errors**, in order to provide the most accurate representation of participants' responses.

*Pre-Migratory Experiences*

Participants shared various aspects of their experiences and circumstances in Taiwan before immigrating to Canada, including their motivation to leave Taiwan. Some participants identified dissatisfaction with the Taiwanese educational system and the intense and competitive nature of the educational environment in Taiwan as their primary motivation to leave their country, as reflected in the following quote.

[W]hen I was younger, the university only took about 30% of all the grads, of all the people of my age, so the entrance exam is very strict ... and my parents didn't want me to go through all the stress ... people usually go to tutoring school, studying from 7 am till like 9, 10 pm. (Participant 1)

Other reasons for leaving Taiwan included an imbalance between academic learning and extracurricular activities and the political threat posed by China.

Another theme was the process through which a participant's family reached a decision to leave Taiwan. Most participants reported that their parents reached a decision together and informed the children afterwards. While some participants felt that moving to a new country was exciting, others wanted to stay in Taiwan for fear of losing their friends. Unlike the participants who were not included in the decision-making process, Participant 3 reported that his parents held a family meeting to reach an agreement on the decision to leave Taiwan.

The majority of participants discussed their family's reasons for choosing Canada as a destination country and their expectations of Canada. Reflecting their dissatisfaction with the Taiwanese educational system, many participants reported that better education was the main reason for choosing Canada. For some participants, family connections in Canada and positive impressions of the country from prior visits emerged as influential factors in their family's decision to move to Canada. However, participants' expectations of their lives in Canada were

mostly related to practical aspects of Canadian living such as speaking English, the immense size of the country, and typical Canadian food.

### *Post-Migratory Experiences*

The overwhelming majority reported that they felt lonely and lost, especially during the initial adjustment phase, as shared by Participant 2:

I cried every day, like every day after school, I would come home and cry. 'Cause I was so lost, and I was really freaked out, like the day before the first day of school ... I think I was struggling like the first 4 years, I would say ... it was really painful, but you become, you begin to adjust, you become numb, I just thought it became like a routine, I would go there, sitting in front of teachers, not understanding a word, and come home.

Feelings of isolation were juxtaposed with a wide range of issues such as low self-esteem, a sense of powerlessness that resulted from not being able to express their needs in the new environment, and self-imposed pressure to meet parents' expectations when applying for universities. Participant 2, in particular, even had suicidal thoughts toward the end of her high school years:

I think like just different stages, when I first got here, I had really low self-esteem for the longest time, I felt ugly ... I felt stupid, like all the time. And then ... it was one of the toughest times for me, like in my life, like I was actually feeling kind of, the worst suicide actually came into mind at that time.

However, not all post-migratory experiences were negative. A few participants shared that increased family responsibilities after migration enhanced their personal growth. For example, Participant 1 explained that she had become more independent and opinionated as a person and would not "blindly follow" her friends. A few participants also reported that their perspectives broadened, and they became more open to other cultures and ways of thinking. Although most participants adopted some western values from living in Canada, some participants reported that they still felt Taiwanese culture and family values were deeply rooted within them.

Plans for the future (i.e., intention to stay in Canada) were another theme that emerged in this category. While some participants reported they wished to stay in Canada to settle down and pursue further education, other participants reported feeling torn about staying in Canada. In some cases, such ambivalence was related to a dilemma between advancement in career and family obligations, as reflected in the following quote:

Well, I have to do my residency, and probably like training afterwards; and yeah, it is a bit of a dilemma for me right now, umm, job-wise it's hard for me to move back to Taiwan 'cause I have to get certificates and stuff, they don't just take, not just because I graduated from Canada, I can't employ myself in Taiwan easily, and then my parents are getting older now, and my father he



just had a stroke, just two months ago, so, now, I am more think they don't have any, they only have me and my sister, right? And my sister also she studies at Western, kind of university in West Canada, so, she just cannot move immediately. And so, it's a little bit of a dilemma. (Participant 1)

### *Family Dynamics*

Participants identified the shift in family dynamics as the most significant change that occurred as a result of the transnational living arrangement. Not only did the change affect the family as a whole, but also the individual relationships among its members, including the parent-child relationship, spousal relationship, sibling relationship, and relationships with the extended family.

As for the impact of the transnational living arrangement on the family as a unit, participants reported a wide range of changes. For many of the participants, the transnational living arrangement brought some positive elements to the family dynamics, such as a decrease of tension in the family, an increase in appreciation for the time that the family spends together, and solidification of the closeness among the family members living in Canada. However, some participants reported experiencing negative changes in their family dynamics as was the case for Participant 4's family:

I feel I, fortunately, because my dad is always busy with the business, the feeling of distance is not that obvious, but more or less there are still some differences, because there is no subject to talk about, or there are some difficulties of communication because he doesn't really understand the life here.

Participants also reported several notable changes in the parent-child dynamic. The majority of participants reported that their mothers came to rely on them more for practical support on bill payment, house purchasing, and translating of documents because of their limited command of the English language. For Participant 2, the role reversal extended to an emotional level. Her mother confided in her and her siblings about her marital problems and the possibility of divorce.

[T]here was a funny thing like it was pretty bad, like the word divorce, but then when my dad was being unbearable, like my mom would talk about like, you know, she was like one day, I am going to have enough, I am going to, about to explode, like that. And I might divorce your dad. She was preparing us for it. But it never happened, we were ready. We were emotionally ready, like yeah, maybe that would be a good thing, you know.

In some cases, participants reported that their relationships with their fathers improved as a result of the transnational living arrangement. For example, Participant 2 disclosed that since her father moved back to Taiwan, they actually miss each other and they have learned to communicate their feelings to one another. Similarly, Participant 1 reported that her relationship with her father was positive as they adopted a more friendship-based dynamic. Interestingly, Participant 1 added



that her father had a negative view on the shift to a more friend-like relationship with his daughter.

All participants discussed changes in their parents' marital relationship as a result of geographical separation. Some participants reflected that maintaining a long-distance relationship caused emotional strains for their parents. On the contrary, Participant 2 reported that her parents' relationship improved once her father moved back to Taiwan. In Participant 4's case, she came to understand a different perspective that her parents have on their relationship—she explained that her parents held a traditional Taiwanese concept of marriage and prioritized their roles as parents and role models to their children first, rather than focusing on their own relationship as a couple. A few participants reported that their awareness of sacrifices that their parents go through along with their parents' high expectations of them led them to feel a great deal of pressure to succeed.

Changes in sibling dynamics were also reported by most of the participants. Some participants noted that their relationships with their siblings grew closer after immigrating to Canada. Interestingly, most of them viewed the closeness with their siblings as a necessary strategy that helped them better cope with acculturative challenges that they have faced, especially in the beginning phase of their adjustment to Canada. However, their dependence on their siblings waned over time as their command of the language improved.

Another shift in family relationships raised by participants was their relationships with extended family members in Taiwan. Two salient patterns emerged in the data. While some participants reported that most of their extended family was also abroad, and thus they no longer reconnect in Taiwan, others reported that when they returned to Taiwan they received comments from their extended family members that they had changed as a result of living in Canada.

### *Social Support*

All participants highlighted the importance of family, peers, and community organizations as sources of emotional support after moving to Canada. For most participants, their family was their primary source of support. Peers were another source of support, especially in the first few years after migration. Interestingly, all participants reported that their closest friendships were intra-ethnic (i.e., shared Taiwanese ethnicity). In some cases, these intra-ethnic relationships were forged with new friends they met in Canada, but the existing relationships with Taiwanese friends back home were also mentioned as important sources of support. It was reported that these transnational peer relationships were maintained mainly through the use of the Internet. In addition to their close intra-ethnic friendships, many participants reported having inter-ethnic friendships with peers from different ethnic backgrounds. A few participants cited benefits of their inter-ethnic relationships, such as gaining a broader perspective. However, participants reported that the inter-ethnic friendships did not last very long due to cultural and language barriers.

Although participants had mostly positive things to say about their peer support networks, a few participants reported negative aspects of peer relationships. For

example, Participant 2 disclosed that she was bullied a lot at her high school when she first arrived in Canada, and her classmates would call her names. Participant 6 also raised the point that transnational youth are the most easily influenced by peers at that age, and may turn to the wrong types of peers for friendship and a sense of belonging. In his experience, many of his friends made these choices:

I think, if they came at this age (adolescence), it would be easy to get lost in the influence of peers, and so, if among their friends, there were some aggressive tendencies, or the background of gangsters, I think many of my friends were influenced as new immigrants, they were attracted by that. So I think for the government ... the counselling of new immigrant youth is important as well, especially when it comes to finding out if there are gangster-related problems, they should start with the mental aspect to solve the problem because most of the time they just don't understand, because the only thing they can rely on is friends, at least for that age, it's friends.

Community organizations and the church were also cited as important sources of support, especially in terms of building a network of other Taiwanese immigrant friends.

#### DISCUSSION

The core phenomenon of participants' reported experiences in this study was their heightened sense of independence. By positioning themselves on the fringes of both the host culture and their culture of origin, they were better equipped to cope with incongruence between their family values and the values of the surrounding environment. While participants' heightened sense of independence seemed to serve them well in navigating between two cultures, it also seemed to foster ambivalence about both cultures and uncertainty about the future. In the following section, we will discuss the contributing factors (i.e., changes in support system) of the core phenomenon (i.e., a heightened sense of independence) that emerged from the data and the implications of the core phenomenon for the participants' self-identity and future planning.

##### *Changes in Support Systems*

One of the noticeable changes in participants' primary support systems was the physical and emotional unavailability of their parents. With the geographical separation, fathers were less able to provide emotional support to mothers and children, which weakened the family system. Consistent with findings of previous research (e.g., Waters, 2002), participants in this study reported that their mothers went through very difficult periods of loneliness and depression due to the lack of adequate support from their husbands, extended family, and housekeepers. As several participants shared in the interviews, the physical absence of their fathers and the emotional unavailability of their mothers taught them to deal with problems on their own.

The quality of family dynamics in the home country seems to have some influence on the shaping of the quality of family dynamics after transnational migration. In a foreign cultural environment without the support system from their home country, mothers and children may experience a collective sense of isolation and spend more time together. For the mother and children from family units that had good relationships, the situation may not be difficult. As illustrated by Participant 5's description of her home as a "cocoon," the safety of their home environment served as a refuge from the unfamiliar and large world around them. For mothers and children who did not have healthy dynamics, however, the increased amount of time spent together could be very difficult. The opposite trend was observed for fathers' relationships with their wives and children. For parents of participants who did not have a healthy spousal relationship in Taiwan, the physical absence of fathers was a better arrangement than living as an intact family that was conflict-ridden.

Another significant change that was reported by the participants in this study was the redistribution of roles in the family. Mothers bore all of the household responsibilities in Canada while the fathers were in Taiwan. As a result, participants were given more responsibility because their mothers struggled with their limited English to accomplish practical goals such as bill payment. This outcome supports existing research that reported youth playing the role of "cultural brokers" (e.g., Alaggia, Chau, & Tsang, 2001; Aye & Guerin, 2001; Pe-Pua et al., 1998; Tsang et al., 2003). By taking on more responsibility in the household and playing the role of mediator between their mothers and the English-speaking environment, many youth in this study gained important life skills at a very young age. Some participants viewed this shift as a role-reversal in which they adopted more of a peer-like relationship with their parents, actively engaging in family decision-making and sometimes providing guidance and advice to their parents.

In addition to shifts in family dynamics, participants in this study faced significant changes in their peer relationships that contributed to their increased independence. For one, they were geographically separated from their peers in their home country. With time, maintaining contact became more difficult because they no longer had shared experiences with their Taiwanese peers. Supporting previous research conducted on Asian immigrant youth (Jou & Fukada, 1996; Yeh, 2003; Yeh & Inose, 2002), most participants in this study also encountered cultural and language barriers in forging relationships with their peers in the host country—this was especially challenging because their peers represented the dominant culture. An inability to connect with peers from the dominant culture served to further marginalize these youth. With the exception of making close friendships with other Taiwanese youth from their church and immigrant community organizations, most participants in the study forged few long-lasting inter-ethnic relationships and were quite isolated in their new lives in the host country.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to the struggles that transnational youth in this study experienced integrating with their peers in the host country. One of the advantages is that they learn to negotiate and adapt their identity and

values according to their environments. This finding supports previously published literature on transnational youth indicating that they tend to shift their identity to respond to environmental demands—a skill that allows transnational youth to maintain social harmony while navigating different realms of ideals and values to further ascertain their own (Tsang et al., 2003). As a result, they came to adopt a more critical stance on the behaviours and choices made by their peers in both their home and host cultures. The benefit of having this perspective is that youth are able to engage in deliberate decision-making without being overly influenced by their peers.

One of the greatest disadvantages that participants in the study reported about having a unique social positioning, outside of the dominant Canadian culture as well as Taiwanese culture, was loneliness. Being on the fringes of peer groups is a difficult and uncomfortable position for transnational youth to adopt. In the long run, however, the loneliness of being on the outskirts of social groups seemed to pay off; all participants in this study, for example, reported that they appreciated the confidence they gained from making decisions independently from family and peers. Over time, their choices became more driven by their intrinsic values, and less by external pressures such as the desires of their parents, friends, and society at large.

### *Alternative Support System*

Largely as a means to cope with the reconfiguration of their family systems and the distance from their peers in their home country, many transnational youth in this study relied more on alternative forms of support that do not fit into the traditional constraints of time and place. As reported by previous studies on Asian immigrant youth (Yeh et al., 2005), religious faith played an important role for participants. For one, it provided emotional and psychological support to participants. Some participants relied on God to support them under any circumstances, especially when they felt very alone. Second, their faith brought with it a sense of connectedness with the broader community of worshippers that met regularly at church. Several youth in this study relayed the importance of their friendships with other Taiwanese in this context. Despite these benefits, seeking solace and support primarily from their church kept transnational youth from integrating into the host society. In other words, the church created a microcosm of Taiwan and the former lives of Taiwanese transmigrants, which might have prevented them from reaching out to and becoming more involved in the broader culture of the host country.

In addition, the participants in this study also sought ways of staying connected to family and friends overseas and in their home country through the use of the Internet. As discussed by Tsang and colleagues (2003), the more recent advent of Internet sites (e.g., Facebook, Meetup, and Twitter) that serve to connect people and build communities across borders facilitates the maintenance of relationships for transnational youth. The exponential growth of Internet media in the last few years will also provide more ease in the maintenance of long-distance relationships

for this population in the future. The Internet thus provides a vehicle through which transnational youth may reach out to their communities without physically being together, enabling them to establish what Vertovec (1999) refers to as “imagined communities” of shared history and interests.

*“Ambivalent Outsider”: Long-term Impact of Transnational Living*

The long-term impact of transnational living on youth is a particularly interesting finding.

The majority of participants reported that they experienced significant hardships in the first few years after moving to Canada. It is also clear from participants’ reports that being an outsider was extremely difficult in the beginning. Lacking a sense of belonging is especially challenging at the vulnerable age of adolescence, a time of constant growth and change, when support from family and peers is critical (Yeh, 2003; Yeh et al., 2005). As a result of being positioned on the fringes of their peer groups at school as new immigrants, and at a distance from their friends in their home country, most participants in the study had an “outsider status” for quite some time. This outsider status was something participants experienced not only at school, but also in the broader contexts of their communities. With time, however, they adapted their coping skills and learned to rely more on themselves, their faith, or their online friendships. Their coping skills enabled them to perceive their situations in a more positive light.

Participants’ sense of isolation became normal and accepted to the point where it became a part of who they were—outsiders. As they matured, they became aware of some of the benefits of this positioning in that they could act autonomously and make decisions that most fit their needs. Their self-concept was thus built around their outsider status.

What makes their concept of their identities unique is that most participants reframed their dislocated status into something more positive over time; they came to perceive themselves as strong, independent individuals who do not “follow the herd.” The experience of being an outsider is common to both immigrants and transnational youth. However, what seems to set transnational youth apart is a more pronounced uncertainty about their futures. Most participants in this study were unsure about whether they would continue to live in Canada after graduating from university, move back to Taiwan, or reside in an entirely different country. Besides their futures being uncertain, most participants in the study did not have a clear preference of where they would like to settle down. This finding is consistent with the results of Tsang and colleagues’ (2003) study in which participants reported feeling overwhelmed and confused by the multitude of future possibilities. Eventually, transnational youth may find themselves in a dilemma; the education in which their parents invested so much may be at risk of becoming worthless in Taiwan where training and certification requirements are different.

Without having a clear picture of whether they will stay in Canada upon completion of their studies or join their parents in Taiwan, participants in this study seem to be far less emotionally and psychologically invested in the host country.

They live in a prolonged state of ambivalence in which their acculturation to the host country is minimal and their attachment to their home country is still very real (Tsang et al., 2003). Within Berry's (1980, 1997, 2005) framework of acculturative strategies, such a strategy could be conceptualized as separation. As these youth enter into adulthood and assume more responsibilities in the society (i.e., establishing their career, raising their own family), they will have to constantly negotiate and re-evaluate their cultural identities and acculturative strategies. This unique population is most likely to adopt what Vertovec (1999) refers to as a hybrid cultural identity that involves the synchronization and "creolization" (p. 451) of their culture of origin and the host culture.

### *Implications for Future Research*

This study has made unique contributions to the existing body of literature on the transnational family phenomenon. It is one of only a few studies that provide rich information on the experiences of transnational youth from their own perspectives. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only study to date on Asian transnational youth that highlights the long-term implications of transnational living. The outcomes of this research have provided insight into the emotional and psychological costs of entering a transnational arrangement for youth. In addition to the challenges that transnational youth may face, the study also illuminates the rewards of entering a transnational arrangement—over time, youth developed a stronger sense of independence, a broader worldview, and confidence in their abilities.

Despite these contributions, there are several limitations of the study. One of the limitations is related to limited transferability of results, a limitation embedded in all qualitative research. Due to the emphasis on information-rich cases and uniqueness of data, the results of the study cannot be fully transferred to other groups of transnational youth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In addition, the interviews in Mandarin were noticeably shorter than the interviews in English. The inconsistent length of interviews is clearly a limitation of this study in that the information provided by some participants was richer in content than that of other participants. This is further complicated by the small sample size of the study. Even though the repetitiveness of data was observed (i.e., indication of saturation of data) with 6 participants, the small sample size may have limited the range of variations of a certain theme. Thus, a future study with a larger sample size may be beneficial.

That being said, the literature on Asian transnational youth is still in its early stages of development, and further in-depth exploration of topics affecting youth from different cultural backgrounds would be useful. A quantitative approach would be complementary to studies of this nature in order to examine the relationships between variables identified in qualitative studies.

Another limitation in this study was in the translation of the interviews that were conducted in Mandarin. Although the authors took additional steps to maximize the accuracy of translation by having them verified by a bilingual graduate

student trained in translation, true meanings of the Mandarin text might have been unavoidably lost. Considering the significant differences in sentence structures and syntax systems of Mandarin and English as well as in idioms and colloquial terms, it is impossible to accurately capture the emotional and contextual nuances of the Mandarin text in English translation.

In addition, as noted in other studies (e.g., Kinnier, Tribbensee, Rose, & Vaughan, 2001), the experiences of participants may not have been captured accurately through the use of retrospective interviews due to selective memory and memory loss. In order to capture more accurate representations of long-term trajectories of transnational youth's experiences, future studies could use a longitudinal design and interview transnational youth at multiple points over time. Further examinations of the long-term implications of the transnational arrangement for youth as grown adults and the family system as a whole would have important and useful implications for both helping transnational families themselves and informing helping professionals about the unique issues that are faced by these transnational families. Also, the long-term outcomes of this type of migration on family systems could potentially influence future migration patterns.

### *Implications for Practice*

When working with transnational youth and their families, it is important for counsellors to examine and enhance their multicultural competencies. We concur with Collins and Arthur (2005) that developing multicultural competence is “not an optional endeavour but a foundation for effective and ethical professional practice” (p. 41). Some of the questions that counsellors may ask themselves include: What are my assumptions about the experiences of Asian transnational youth and their families? What are my beliefs about the core elements of “ideal families” and to what extent does the structure of transnational families fit into such beliefs? What are my reactions to the changes that the increase of Asian transnational youth and their families engender in the school environment and in the communities? What is my level of understanding about the worldviews and socioeconomic realities of Asian transnational youth and their families? How competent do I feel about my ability to establish a trusting working relationship with Asian transnational youth and their families?

Although multicultural competence is an essential foundation for counsellors in working with Asian transnational youth, it is important to also be sensitive to individual differences in the shared experience of transnational migration. We support the stance of Tsang and colleagues (2003), who warn against using a “cultural literacy approach” and viewing every individual as possessing ethnospecific characteristics. This approach is especially ineffective with transnational youth because they appear to hand-pick their own cultural identities by selecting aspects of their home and host cultures that best fit their self-concept. In other words, depending on the context, Asian transnational youth may identify more with the members of their country of origin (e.g., Taiwanese), their pan-ethnic group (e.g., Asian), other youth who have roots in two cultures (e.g., Taiwanese-Canadian), or the



host country where they currently reside (e.g., Canadian) (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Keeping this in mind, counsellors should attend to the ever-shifting and transient nature of transnational youths' identities (Phinney, 2003).

One of the important areas of focus in working with Asian transnational youth is attuning to potential psychosocial and developmental challenges that they may face in their adolescent and early adulthood years in the host country. As many participants in the study shared, the first year or two of living in Canada is the most difficult period. Lacking a sense of belonging and a network of familial and peer support, some participants in this study reported entertaining suicidal thoughts and gang membership. While these were more extreme cases of transnational youth's maladjustment to the host country, they are nonetheless risk factors worthy of concern. When examining the level of psychosocial functioning of Asian transnational youth, it is important to assess their level of functioning in their home country. This enables counsellors to better discern the impact of migration and environmental changes in these youth's ability to exercise their sense of agency in interacting with the new environment. Furthermore, an examination of coping strategies they have used in their home country would allow counsellors to utilize a strength-based approach, helping youth to mobilize strengths and resources they may already have, instead of focusing solely on their difficulties and deficiencies.

As for family counselling, the greatest challenge in providing services for transnational communities may lie in the outreach itself. In transnational family arrangements, increased household responsibilities caused by the absence of one parent along with cultural language barriers may make it difficult for these families to utilize counselling services available in the community. Considering that these transnational youth are already in school, the school system might be an ideal setting through which counsellors can increase their outreach efforts by creating stronger partnership with teachers and school administrators. The results of this study also indicate that the church and immigrant services may also be effective places to direct outreach efforts. It appears that the church and immigrant services serve to maintain "cultural trenches" between Taiwanese immigrants and the dominant culture in which they are immersed. To decrease the isolation or marginalization of transnational families in the host country, practitioners may take a more proactive stance and create partnership programs between immigrant and non-immigrant service providers, thereby creating more opportunities for inter-ethnic relationship building.

Although the transnational phenomenon possesses some positive implications for the individual youth, its implications for the family system and the long-term emotional and psychological well-being of this system is unclear. Combined results of this study and existing research suggest that the transnational phenomenon incurs high social costs for families, without clear educational or professional advantages for youth in the long run. The transnational living arrangement may disrupt families' sense of cohesion, although it is too early to tell because Asian transnational youth from this wave of migration are still young. Furthermore,

the transnational living arrangement prevents opportunities for transnational youth to observe and model spouses raising a family together. It is unclear how this would affect transnational youth's ability to form and raise their own family in their adulthood.

#### CONCLUSION

The Taiwanese transnational youth that participated in this study shed light on the phenomenon of dual household living from their perspectives. The multitude of changes in their psychosocial environment resulted in the adoption of a more "independent stance," thus they became more self-reliant and autonomous. The shift in their coping strategies led to an even greater change in that they began to view themselves as separate entities from their families, their peers, and their communities. The most significant disadvantage of their independent stance is the uncertainty they feel towards their futures. Without a firm notion of their lifestyle and cultural preferences, and a weak attachment to both the host country and their country of origin, it seems difficult for these youth to make plans to settle down in the future. Considering the exploratory nature of this study, follow-up studies need to be conducted to further examine the experiences of transnational youth. As for clinical practice, clinicians need to keep their acculturation expectations (i.e., how migrants "should" acculturate to the dominant culture) (Berry, 2003) in check and attend to the unique needs of transnational youth and their families through active outreach and collaboration with community partners.

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