

Meanings of Seeking Social Support Among Chinese Canadian Post-Secondary Students



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Introduction

In light of **culture-specific challenges related to accessing mental health services** (Chen, Kazanjian, & Wong, 2009; Leong & Lau, 2001), one way we can better understand **other avenues of addressing the needs of Chinese Canadian post-secondary students** is by investigating their experiences of seeking social support. **Social support** has been defined as **“the social resources that persons perceive to be available** [emphasis added] or that are actually provided to them by **nonprofessionals** in the context of **both formal support groups and informal helping relationships**” (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010, p. 512). In spite of the various health and academic benefits of social support, research has found that Asian Americans are generally less likely to report using social support to help in coping with stress than their European American counterparts (Gloria & Ho, 2003; Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008). Ethnic-specific research within Asian populations **focused on the meanings that Chinese Canadian students make of their experiences of seeking and engaging with social support** may provide new perspectives on culture as it relates to academic and mental health needs.

Research Question

How do Chinese Canadian post-secondary students make sense of their experiences seeking social support?

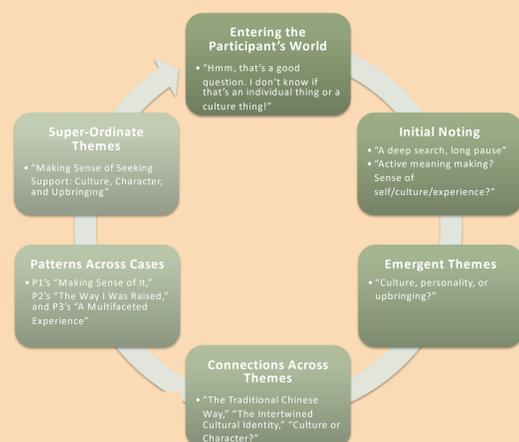
Method

Participants and Data Collection

Three Canadian-born Chinese students (two male, one female) were recruited through snowball sampling from the University of Calgary to take part in one-hour semi-structured interviews. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions about participants' experiences with social support. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research method that focuses on how individuals make sense of their lived experiences together with the researcher's interpretative commentary (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).



Findings



Discussion and Implications

Canadian-born Chinese post-secondary students may understand their experiences of seeking and engaging in social support in a variety of ways unique to each individual.

Themes

The recurring themes within each participant's account reflected **unique and distinct interpretations**. Meanings also converged across cases, specifically upon **the importance of belongingness, authentic and vulnerable sharing, and family as a special form of sharing life together**. Experiences within each of the four super-ordinate themes represented in this study overlapped in the sense that **meanings about social support informed who and what was perceived as supportive** (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010).

Conclusion and Implications

Post-secondary students may face a multitude of issues including academic concerns, anxiety, depression, and general psychological distress (Robinson, Jubenville, Renny, & Cairns, 2016).

In order to promote culturally sensitive service delivery to students of a Chinese Canadian or other cultural minority background, mental health service providers might consider the **similar and different ways in which experiences with social support are both uniquely and collectively understood**.

Furthermore, an appreciation for unique yet overlapping experiences may aid the exploration cultural meanings and experiences to **raise awareness around an additional avenue of meeting the academic and mental health needs of Chinese Canadian students**.

Future Research

This pilot study may be extended to include the perspectives of Chinese international students on seeking and engaging in social support. Furthermore, future research with Chinese Canadian students may investigate experiences of social support as it relates to the process of seeking mental health services (Chang, Chen, & Alegria, 2014).

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