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Social Stigma, Social Capital Reconstruction and Rural Migrants in Urban China: A Population Health Perspective

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Abstract

In this study, we examine migrant stigma and its effect on social capital reconstruction among rural migrants who possess legal rural residence but live and work in urban China. After a review of the concepts of stigma and social capital, we report data collected through in-depth interviews with 40 rural migrant workers and 38 urban residents recruited from Beijing, China. Findings from this study indicate that social stigma against rural migrants is common in urban China and is reinforced through media, social institutions and their representatives, and day-to-day interactions. As an important part of discrimination, stigma against migrant workers creates inequality, undermines trust, and reduces opportunities for interpersonal interactions between migrants and urban residents. Through these social processes, social stigma interferes with the reconstruction of social capital (including bonding, bridging and linking social capital) for individual rural migrants as well as for their communities. The interaction between stigma and social capital reconstruction may present as a mechanism by which migration leads to negative health consequences. Results from this study underscore the need for taking measures against migrant stigma and alternatively work toward social capital reconstruction for health promotion and disease prevention among this population.

Keywords

Social capital; Stigma; Rural migrants; China

INTRODUCTION

Relationship between migration and health

Population migration is a primary strategy utilized throughout human history for better opportunities of prosperity and survival. With industrialization and globalization, migration from rural to urban regions within and between nations was and continues to be fueled by rural poverty, famine, drought, and other natural disasters, as well as unequal economic development (Zolberg & Benda, 2001). The growth of farmer-initiated rural-to-urban migration in China since the 1980s, with the number of rural migrants currently totaling approximately 150 million (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2006), presents a significant

challenge and a unique opportunity to examine migration-linked social process and related health issues.

Migration has been reported to be associated with a large number of negative health consequences, including increased levels of stress (Haour-Knipe, 2000; Kim-Godwin & Bechtel, 2004), depression (Spijker et al., 2004), substance use (Chen et al., 2004; Chen, Stanton, Li, Fang, & Lin, 2009; Maxwell et al., 2006), cardiovascular diseases (Fang, Madhavan, & Alderman, 1999), sexual risk behavior for HIV/AIDS (Li et al., 2004; D. Lin et al., 2005; Maxwell et al., 2006; Yang, Derlega, & Luo, 2007), and actual HIV infection (Wiwantkit & Waenlor, 2002; Zehender et al., 2004; Zuma, Gouws, Williams, & Lurie, 2003). Integration into the society of destination is one of the strategies which may assist individual migrants in avoiding negative health consequences (Chen X et al, 2008 and 2009). From a theoretical perspective, reconstructing social capital, or developing resource-rich, trustworthy and reciprocal network connections, may be an important approach facilitating the integration. By reconstructing adequate social capital, migrants can integrate into the society of destination for needed resources. Discriminative social processes such as social stigma, however may create barriers against social capital reconstruction, slowing down the integration process and increasing the risk of negative health consequences (Li, Stanton, Fang, & Lin, 2006; Link & Phelan, 2006).

Social stigma

As an important component of social discrimination, researchers have conceptualized “stigma” as socially undesirable attributes or marks used to separate a group of individuals from the mainstream population (Goffman, 1963; Stafford & Scott, 1986). The attributes may be selected from some specific individuals that are “discreditable” but serve to discredit all individuals within a group who are assumed *a priori* to be alike. Link and Phelan (2001) furthered this concept by proposing the term *label* to describe stigma, arguing that stigma has no independent or *a priori* validity but rather it is something that is created and affixed on people through social processes. Any label becomes a stigma if it is linked to undesirable attributes that are *socially salient* and are *purposefully compiled* as a stereotype to categorize people.

Some labels are stigmas when they are made (e.g., a metal seal of slavery or a discriminative term) while most labels are not stigmas unless they are linked to socially salient negative attributes. A neutral term such as skin color would not be stigmatizing unless it is associated with socially undesirable attributes such as poverty, crime, or characteristics such as laziness. A disease name such as AIDS would not be stigmatizing unless it is associated with socially undesirable attributes, such as using drugs, and having risky sex. A positive term like the word “leader” can be stigmatizing when it is associated with cold-blooded, foolhardiness, and/or corruption. Although stigma has been described as *indicating* differences between people actually it purposefully *creates* the differences (Goffman, 1963; Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, & Straight, 2005; Link & Phelan, 2001; Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997).

Within literature, three distinct processes of stigmatization can be identified including ‘labeling’, ‘responses’, and ‘consequences’. The labeling of an individual may be associated with his/her natural physical appearance, e.g., skin color, and/or an artificial ‘branding’, e.g., a burned symbol on the body or a particular uniform. Most often, labeling is achieved through psychosocial and cognitive processes, including transmission through media and/or interpersonal communications to reach the targeted individuals.

Two types of responses to stigma include ‘passive’ and ‘active’ (Green et al., 2005). A passive response is one in which the stigmatized individuals accept the label and their

“inferior” status resulting in internalized or felt stigma (Jacoby, 1994). Consequently, this type of stigma may result in low self-confidence, anxiety, stress and depression. An active response may include the individual denying or taking action against stigma or being stigmatized. Destigmatizing actions may lead individuals to experience emotional (Reissman, 2000) and other health problems (Link & Phelan, 2006; Malcolm et al., 1998). This ‘enacted stigma’ may further result in discriminatory actions and/or loss of social status (Malcolm et al 1998).

Social Capital

Social capital describes the sum of resource-rich, trustworthy and reciprocal *network* connections as an asset that *empowers* a group and its individual members to efficiently achieve their goals (Bourdieu, 1985; Chen, Stanton, Gong, Fang, & Li, 2009; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). After the pioneer work by Durkheim on group life and suicide in 1897 (Durkheim, 1951), the French sociologist Bourdieu first systematically defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu 1985, p.248). Independent of Bourdieu’s work, the American sociologist Coleman defined social capital by its function as consisting of “some aspects of social structures” that “facilitate certain actions of actors - whether persons or corporate actors” (Coleman 1988, p.S98).

Social capital as an attribute of an individual or a group has been actively debated among researchers (Astone, Nathanson, Schoen, & Kim, 1999; Kawachi & Berkman, 2000; Poortinga, 2005). Consensus now has emerged that without network connections, there is no social capital. Playing with one’s own pet does not create social capital, but having coffee with a friend and playing games on a team create social capital. At the micro level, a connection between two entities (e.g., individuals and social organizations) generates *four* basic characteristics of capital: self-growth, assets, profits, and reinvestment. *Self-growth* results from having a friend through whom one meets the friend’s friends. Joining an organization leads to meeting other members of that organization. This is analogous to investing a dollar in the market with the result of a return of more than one dollar. Valuable connections function as *assets* as estate, wealth and other properties. *Profits* are generated because in addition to the growth of network connections, the connected entities can achieve more than the sum of the same number of unconnected entities (e.g., increases in functions, efficiency, or both). *Reinvestment* occurs because the profits generated from a network connection can be used to produce new network connections for additional resources.

To become social capital, a network connection must be resource-rich, bonding, and goal-oriented. The connected entities must possess adequate resources including material, monetary, informational, educational, professional, cultural, psychosocial, and political (Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote, 2002; N. Lin, 2001). An integrative and cohesive social group (a family, a neighborhood, an association, a community) can be endowed with high stocks of social capital only if the group members possess the resources needed for its goals. The network must be bonding in that the connected entities are trustworthy, reciprocal and collaborative (Bourdieu, 1985; Lindstrom, 2005; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1995). Finally, the network must be goal-oriented, with the connected entities sharing at least one common goal (Portes & Landolt, 2000).

Social capital is inherent in relationships that connect individuals and is therefore an attribute of a group and its individual members. Although social capital is an asset not “ability”, it *empowers* the individuals and/or groups that possess it. The quantity and quality of network connections of a group (e.g., a couple, a family, a religious group, an academic society, a community, a state, or a nation) constitute its social capital that determines the

potential “profits” to be gained for the group (Poortinga, 2005; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 1995). Likewise, the quantity and the quality of network connections of an individual that link him or her to other entities (e.g., persons, groups, communities, nations) constitute his or her own personal social capital that determines the potential profits to be gained for the individuals (Astone et al., 1999; Portes, 2000).

Social capital is first a *private good* of an individual. That an individual spends resources to build his or her social network connections is analogous to investing in stocks or bonds to raise further capital. However, when individual members of a group develop their own network connections, they automatically contribute to the social capital of the group – a *public good*. This is because profits generated by the group as a whole will be available for the group as well as all group members. Investment in social capital results in growth of social capital itself as well as resources obtainable from the social capital. In addition, an individual can benefit from public social capital as a common good without contributing to it, a negative aspect of social capital (Portes 1998).

Network connections developed through free interactions between two individuals is *free-bonding social capital* or simply bonding social capital (Putnam, 1995; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Adequate opportunities for people to freely interact with each other are thus a prerequisite for the development of such capital. Durable connections may also develop when people live together, study together, work together and/or play together. Network connections mediated through this mechanism may be termed *bridging social capital*. A connection established through either free bonding or bridging across vertical power or authority hierarchical levels of a society results in *linking social capital*.

Migration, Stigma, and Social Capital

In China as in other East Asian countries including the Republic of Korea and Japan, stigma against rural residents has a history rooted in the processes of nation-building and the post-1949 government's initial strategic emphasis on urban growth (Christiansen, 1990; Zhang, 2007). During this post-revolutionary period, resources were channeled into developing urban enclaves and urban residents experienced and expected advantages over rural residents. After economic reform in the late 1970s, the rural-urban socioeconomic gap continued to expand in China resulting in an environment conducive to social stigma against rural migrants.

Migrants must reconstruct their social capital in order to integrate into the community of destination. Egalitarian relationships (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000), mutual trust, and sufficient opportunities for interpersonal interaction are *three* key factors for social capital reconstruction. People tend to interact with those to whom they feel equal. When two persons trust each other, they are likely to establish a durable relationship. Even if all individuals in a society are trustful and feel equal with each other, no durable relationship is possible if they do not have opportunity to interact. For rural migrants living and working in urban China, social stigma may create inequality between migrants and local residents, and at the same time undermine the development of trusting relationships between members of these groups. Furthermore, rural migrants are also often physically isolated living in *cheng zhong cun* (“villages within the city”). These settlements are located in either the peri-urban or inner-city regions with the settlement residents coming from the same place of origin (Zhang, 2007). All of these factors contribute to stigma against rural migrants and decrease likelihood for social capital reconstruction within the broader urban environment.

The current paper will present qualitative data collected through individual and group interviews with rural migrants and urban residents in Beijing China. We will focus on how stigma and associated discrimination and isolation affect relationships among migrants and

between rural migrants and urban residents. We will utilize these findings to enhance our effort to conceptualize theoretical models for further research for migrant health promotion.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Population and Sampling

Data used for this study were derived from a project designed to investigate the impact of social stigma on mental health among rural migrants in China. Data were collected in 2004 from a sample of rural migrants and urban residents selected from Beijing. Rural migrants were limited to those who were 18 years of age or older, had a legal rural *Hukou* [Household Registration], and currently worked and lived in Beijing without a legal Beijing *Hukou*; while urban residents were limited to those who resided in Beijing with a Beijing *Hukou*. Approximately 4 million rural migrants currently live and work among the 14 million legal urban residents of Beijing (China National Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Research respondents included 40 rural migrant workers (technical workers, laborers, and workers who collect and sell wastes) and 33 urban residents. Twenty one each of the migrant and resident respondents were male. The mean age of migrant participants was 27 years ($SD=1.4$) and mean age of urban residents was 39 years ($SD=11.7$). The urban resident sample was purposely selected to be older because these individuals were more likely than younger residents to be available for the interview and were also more likely to have direct contact with rural migrants through employing them or as co-workers. All urban residents and 10 migrant workers were interviewed individually and 30 migrant workers were interviewed in groups with five participants per group. The participants were recruited using the network sampling method. Written informed consent procedure was obtained from all participants. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA and the IRB of Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.

Interview Methodology

Two interview guides, one each for rural migrants and urban residents, were developed and used for data collection. Both guides consisted of twenty open-ended questions, covering a range of topics including current working and living conditions of rural migrants in urban settings, attitudes toward rural migrants, interaction and trust between rural migrants and urban residents, problems encountered by rural migrants in urban settings, and coping strategies. The same interview questions were used for individual and group interviews.

The individual interviews were conducted in private settings (e.g., closed rooms located at a workplace or in the residential area) while the group interviews were conducted at community settings (e.g., meeting rooms at local residential associations or classrooms of local schools). These settings provided adequate privacy and were convenient to the participants. Individual interviews took approximately 60 minutes and the group interviews were approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted by trained researchers, including faculty members and graduate students from Beijing Normal University. Systematic training was provided before these researchers were dispatched to the field to conduct the interviews. All interviews were audio-taped and the recorded data were transcribed verbatim.

Coding and Data Analysis

Four categories of thematic codes were used: (1) Stigma against rural migrants; (2) impact of stigma on factors that affect social capital reconstruction and separation; (3) social capital reconstruction of rural migrants in urban settings; and, (4) social capital between rural

migrants and urban communities. The same thematic codes were used to process the interviewed data from all participants with the assistance of the software ATLAS.ti 5.0 (Scientific Software Development Berlin, German). Two researchers worked independently to select and code the transcripts. Intercoder reliability was high (~90%). Coding was conducted in Chinese and selected transcripts were translated into English for purposes of reporting. Three Chinese-English bilingual researchers checked the translations, ensuring that the English translation accurately conveyed the meaning of the original data in Chinese. Discrepancies were resolved through group discussion.

RESULTS

Social Stigma and Inequitable Relationships between Rural Migrants and Urban Residents

Public media and migrant stigma—Two common stigmatizing labels for migrant workers, “*Mang Liu*” [blind floating] and “*Nong Min Gong*” [farm workers], are widely used in the public arena. When the Chinese media first used *Mang Liu* to describe the large volume of domestic migration initiated in the early 1980s, it implied that rural migrants were inferior to non-migrant residents. The phrase literally means that rural migrants are headless and do not know where to find a job – but rather are blindly floating between rural and urban areas. The second phrase *Nong Min Gong*, seemingly more neutral than *Mang Liu* however remains discriminatory because of the focus on the rural origins of migrant workers and thus they are assumed to be inferior to urban workers.

Information derived from the interviews indicated that public media, primarily local newspapers, magazines, television programs, and radio programs play a role in the creation, dissemination, and reinforcement of labels against rural migrants. When urban residents were asked to describe rural migrants in general, they often tended to report very negative images:

“They [rural migrants in general] are inferior, incapable, cheating, violent, stealing, robbing, killing, setting off fires,.....”

When further asked their experiences in regards to migrants who actually engaged in these activities, a frequent response was that “you can find these from newspapers, radio stations and television programs...”

Rural migrants also discussed the role of the media in propagating negative attitudes and stigma against them.

“It may be true that a few rural migrants cheat, steal, or rob; however, from the newspapers and magazines it seems that all these bad things are caused by rural migrants...”

“I was deeply hurt by a local newspaper. The newspaper claimed that rural migrants from Henan [a province approximately 450 kilometers south of Beijing] like fighting, stealing and robbing. However, there are so many people from Henan who work in Beijing, and not all those who steal and rob are Henan migrants. Why blame all Henan people?”

Several migrant workers reported that newspapers, radios and television programs frequently called the general public to treat rural migrants equally; however their own experiences were of discriminatory behaviors from residents.

“Urban people feel they are superior to us, talking to us in a very high voice and a very arrogant manner, always looking down on people. They think they are the consumers [the king], and we are their servants”.

Alternatively, some urban resident respondents who directly interacted with rural migrants (e.g., hired a migrant to work for them, worked in the same factory with migrants) had positive images of the rural workers despite negative media.

“They [rural migrants I know personally] are very good people, hardworking, strong, capable of handling tough and dirty jobs, obedient, and honest. They complete assigned tasks on time with good quality.”

Some urban residents also expressed concerns regarding the work and living conditions of the migrants.

“I feel deeply sorry for them when I see those people [rural migrants] working so hard for long hours on the very dirty and difficult jobs, but have their meal outside during the windy and frozen winter days, with only a thin layer of broken clothes on their body. At least the employer should provide a room for them to have their meal”.

Public safety workers and migrant stigma—Members of urban communities express concern about socially undesirable behaviors of rural migrants and a sense that migrant communities cannot regulate these behaviors through informal social control mechanism. This perception of a lack of informal social control has resulted in the establishment of a practice whereby migrant residential areas are divided into small *Pian* (zones) and are assigned to individual police to monitor and prevent civil and criminal activity. Many urban residents reported feeling unsafe around *cheng zhong cun* (village within city) in urban communities with large numbers of rural migrants. Neighborhood leaders, policemen and other public safety workers expressed difficulties with maintaining safety in urban settings.

“It becomes harder and harder for us to manage problems caused by rural migrants. They may ... steal, rob, use drugs, go to commercial sex, fight with others ... killing people, and set off fires on properties. If they run away from the spot, it is almost impossible for us to follow them up. No one knows where they live and where they go”.

Both rural migrants and urban residents indicate that policemen and other public safety workers' behaviors and language support stigmatized labeling of migrant workers. Police will often first blame, interrogate, and arrest migrants when a crime has been committed. A policeman admitted that rural migrants were often their priority target for any civil and criminal cases.

“Our data indicate that the criminal rate is higher among rural migrants than among urban residents. Rural migrants are involved in approximately 70% to 80% of all civil and criminal cases in the urban settings, although rural migrants as a vulnerable group are often the victims in many of these cases”.

The actions and attitudes by policemen and other public safety workers reinforce the public belief that rural migrants are the causes of crime and safety problems in the city.

Rural migrant respondents frequently discussed the roles of policemen and other public safety workers in relation to reinforcing negative images. Interview data from both rural migrant workers and urban residents indicated that these public safety workers seemingly treated rural migrants as if they were their “cash box”.

“They know that many of us [rural migrants] do not have the *Zan Zhu Zheng* [Certificate of Temporary Urban Residence] issued by them ... A policeman or a public safety worker can stop you at his or her will anywhere and anytime to check your ID and *Zan Zhu Zheng*. You can predict that you will be charged a fine, sometime even if you have the document. You are often asked to pay the fine in

cash but given no receipt. If no money to pay, you will be detained in their institution and wait for your family, friends, or relatives to pay you out”.

Although some rural migrants indicated that not all policemen and public safety workers treated migrants this way, the action of a few undermined the trust between rural migrants and public safety workers and further exacerbated feelings of mistrust to urban residents in general.

Daily activities of urban residents and migrant stigma—The day-to-day experiences of migrants in their interactions with residents are a frequent reminder of their position within the social setting. A majority of rural migrants indicated that urban residents often used their eyes to make the migrants feel inferior.

“When urban people look at us, their eyes are seemingly saying that we all are dirty, poor, rude, incapable, vulnerable, hopeless and helpless ... To them, many rural migrants are simply hooligans or hoodlums who cannot make a living in rural areas at their hometown and come to the city to pick up gold.”

One female urban resident said emotionally,

“If I were them [rural migrants], I would never come to the city. Nobody can tolerate being stared by others [urban residents] this way.”

Both rural migrants and urban residents revealed that the non-local accent was one of the most convenient marks for stigmatization and discrimination. Many rural migrants expressed stories of receiving poor treatment in multiple interactions including shopping, dining, taking public transport, as well as seeking healthcare. One urban resident noted,

“From their voice, we know who they are, what they look like, and where they come from. All negative things show up in our brain. It happens automatically without thinking, just like a conditioned reflection”.

Rural migrants reported being directly disgraced and discredited by the actions of urban residents. Many urban residents expressed that it was reasonable that rural migrants were not treated equally because they were from the countryside. One participant stated,

“They [the rural migrants] are from the poor rural areas. Although they earn much less than us, it IS a lot for them compared to what they can make in the countryside. They bring all the bad habits from rural areas to urban areas while making a lot of money to build big houses at their home in the countryside...”

A couple of rural migrants mentioned that some urban parents kept silent when their children exhibited rude attitudes and or actions against rural migrants in the public, thus reinforcing the social processes of stigmatization and discrimination.

“One day, a boy about twelve or thirteen with his parents came to my stand to buy melon. I greeted them as usual and said, “You can get it free if my honey melon is not sweet.” The boy replied in a high pitch and arrogant voice, “If your melon is not sweet, I will smash your stand.” Both parents did nothing, seeing their kid doing all of this”.

Even with success, rural migrants continue to experience poor relationships with urban residents within the work place. A few migrants who had been promoted to administrative positions admitted that it was much harder for them to manage urban workers than rural migrant workers.

“I have been promoted step by step from a worker to be a director of the quality control/assurance department of our factory due to my work excellence. However, I

feel it is much harder for me to manage urban workers than rural migrant workers. Urban workers probably think that I am a rural man [inferior to them] and younger than them, therefore not be able to manage them.”

Stigma, Trust, and Migrant-Urban Relations

Most rural migrants reported that they were often cheated by urban residents, undermining their trust in rural residents in general. Many rural migrants expressed that urban residents did not like them and that residents consider migrants to be incapable and unknowledgeable, and thereby easily cheated.

Job-finding agencies, including the agencies run by the government, represented one of the most common places where rural migrants were cheated. The printed media often claimed that it was rural migrants, not urban residents who cheated migrants in finding a job; but migrants who experienced the opposite could not trust the media. One migrant reported her negative experience when she took the approach suggested by the media to find a job.

“I found an urban couple at their house who claimed to help rural migrants find a job. This couple received me warmly with a very good meal, and then gave a sheet of paper with contact information (name, address and phone number) for a “guaranteed job” and ask for RMB 200 (about \$25, negotiated down to RMB 50, about \$6). However, I found no such a person, no such an address and no such a phone number after a long day of searching in Beijing....When I finally found my way back to the couple's house the next day to request my money back, they beat me and forced me out”.

In another instance, an employer encouraged a young woman to work for him and presented a very friendly attitude towards her. He frequently invited and drove her to dinner in restaurants, and the young woman developed a sense of trust with him. The young woman felt it was an opportunity for a successful career.

“I have been working very hard for him and treating him quite well. However, things began to change after I started working for about one week. No more dinner at restaurants at all, not even a decent meal. Sometimes I even have to eat what he left over. It seems that the better you treat him, the worse. ... I feel that I have been abused by him”.

Both urban residents and rural migrant workers indicated that urban residents tended to take advantage of rural migrants because residents believed migrants were inferior, powerless, and helpless. Rural migrants complained about being over charged when riding buses, sending mail and parcels through the post offices, going to health clinics, and even purchasing newspapers and maps at street stands, and making phone calls at telephone booths.

Urban resident respondents acknowledged a lack of trust with migrants. Urban residents not having regular and personal contact with migrants were most likely to describe feelings of distrust. One resident noted,

“They can easily run away and there is no way you can chase them down if anything happens. I was told a lot of stories of how bad things happened when people trusted rural migrants. There are also a lot of similar reports from newspapers and television stations. You have to take cautions when dealing with rural migrants”.

Migrant workers discussed the superficial support they receive from employers but the underlying sense of distrust. A female rural migrant who worked as a nanny in a family expressed:

“People in the family are very nice to me. When I first came to their home, they told me to work well for them and they promised to help me establish a better career in the future. This has deeply moved me. However, from the very first day I started working, the employer has kept monitoring my daily activities, including coming and going from her home and phone calls to my friends and family. It appears that they are afraid that I might steal, although they have never said it openly”.

Stigma and Physical, Social, and Psychological Separation of Migrants

Social stigma has resulted in physical and social segregation of rural migrants from urban residents. Consistent with the findings of Zhang (2007), rural migrants often reside in *cheng zhong cun* on the outskirts of the city, or in housing established at their work site. These living arrangements decrease contact between rural migrants and urban residents, and perpetuate stigmatizing stereotypes of the rural workers. One urban respondent notes,

“... Where do rural migrants live? They usually stay in areas that are dirty and crowded with migrants, which we call “villages within the city”. People there build very simple huts and houses for themselves or rent out housing....”

Physical segregation increases social isolation among migrants. Some urban residents expressed their unwillingness to accept rural migrants in the urban settings in general and in their local community in particular. Rural migrants were clearly cognizant of these residents’ sentiments.

“They [urban residents] often intend to avoid us. When walking on the street, they try to by-pass us wherever possible. When standing in line, they keep big distances from us. A few are reluctant even to take a bus seat that has previously been occupied by us”.

Rural workers also expressed limited desire to develop durable relationships with urban residents. One worker noted, “If we [rural migrants] can get what we need through other connections, we will not go to urban people”.

Some rural migrants have internalized the stigma they experience on a regular basis from urban residents. Migrant respondents identified themselves as inferior, and incapable of being on equal standing with residents.

“We are from the poor rural areas, nobody can change this. We are inferior to urban people because we have limited education, we cannot talk in the standard Beijing dialect, we work on dirty jobs, we wear dirty clothes, and our body is full of offensive smell. Become urban people? Never thought about it. I just want to make some money here”.

Segregation as well as negative experiences and strongly held feelings about residents affect the ability for rural migrants to establish relationships outside of their own social network. One migrant discussed his desire to ‘help’ other migrants in the future – a direction which could increase social capital within migrant communities but only if sufficiently large numbers of individuals from rural areas develop strong networks and have access to resources.

”We extremely dislike urban people, because they are very greedy and stingy. They always think rural migrants are from the poor countryside. They do not want to get together with us ... Since my condition has improved, I often feel sorry for other rural migrants who are poorer and less lucky than me. I always think about helping them”.

These intentions to help other migrants however can be thwarted by the discriminatory and stereotyping of rural residents even when relatives attempt to help one another. One young migrant man revealed that his uncle, who had been born in a rural area, helped him find his current job in the city. His uncle had taken a position in Beijing after retirement from the National Air Force of China, and he subsequently married a woman born in Beijing. The young migrant worker described his experience when he first visited his uncle to show his appreciation for help with finding a job. He noted, “My aunt looked at me and her eyes appeared to say, ‘You poor countryside man, you’re not welcome’.” The young man has not returned to visit his uncle for four years. When pushed by his mother, the young man only agreed to talk to his uncle over the phone.

Children and schooling often provide means of contact for parents to develop social capital. This opportunity is diminished for many rural migrants either because their children go to separate schools or unwillingness of resident parents to allow their children to associate with migrant workers’ children. In particular, younger and less educated parents expressed negative views of migrants.

“... Playing together with the children of rural migrants? Go to the same school with them? I am afraid that my child may pick up all the bad things from those children, including their non-Beijing accents. I do not like seeing my children come home like from countryside, talking in a rural accent and using all the bad words”.

Alternatively some of the college-educated and professional residents, as well as those who had previous experience of rural life noted that urban children could learn certain values from their rural peers.

“Our [urban residents] children may learn something good from rural children, such as hardworking, caring about their parents, cherish what they have. Many urban children are arrogant, fragile, and self-centered because most of them are a single-child and grow up in an environments much better than rural children.”

Access to Resources among Rural Migrants in Urban Communities

Data indicate limited social capital among rural migrants. Most migrants stated that they depend on family and old friends as the primary resources when looking for information regarding jobs, housing, shopping, transport, and healthcare. However, these contacts are often still living in the countryside and not readily available. As a result, rural migrants frequently stated that they suffer from frustration, sadness, hopelessness, helplessness, anxiety, stress, and depression. Two women discussed the callous responses of employment agency employees as they vented their anger and frustration with the system.

“When I felt no option but dying and complained hopelessly in front of a group of urban men in the job-finding agency, they said, ‘Want to jump [from the floor to die]? Go ahead. The building in front of our agency is the highest’.”

“My husband brought our children back home so that I can find a job. With assistance from nobody, all my money went into to their pocket [the job-finding agency], but I got no job. I fought desperately with them to get my money back. After throwing some money in the air forcefully, those men shouted at me, ‘That is it! Take it and go if you want it; otherwise...’ After went out tearfully, I met with several other women not far from the agency whose case was even worse than me. We just crowded together and used all our energy to cry....”

In addition to the resulting negative emotional and psychological, as well as sometimes physical outcomes from experiences of stigma and urban living, a lack of social capital prevented migrants from obtaining psychosocial support or other healthcare to help them to

cope. In health-related, social, and legal situations, most of the migrant respondents stated that they received no assistance. For a few who did receive some assistance, it was limited, and often from their family members, relatives or migrant friends.

“There is very little we can do when we feel bad. Just go home and sleep or drink, smoke, watch some television...We want to talk with our families and old friends, but they are not around. Making a phone call is certainly possible, but we don't want to spend the money, it is not money but sweat and blood”.

“We do not know if there are any laws that protect us. Even if there are some, we do not know how to get protected by these laws. We know few persons and agencies in the city that can help us if we are cheated, discriminated, or physically attacked.”

Several rural workers admitted that some migrants might steal, rob or even kill others, which disgraced all migrants. However, they also believed that many of these individuals were acting in socially undesirable activities after they had exhausted their resources and efforts to find a descent job or to reclaim salary back from the employers who had cheated them. One rural man recounted his own experience.

“My boss refused to pay my salary after I decided to quit my job and I could not go back home without money. When other people were celebrating the Chinese New Year's Eve with their family members in their warm home with wine and fireworks, I stayed with several migrants who also did not get their salary by a construction site, surrounding some burning woods to warm us up... To get our money back, I called the local police station and they said that it was not their business. I then called the Bureau of Labor, they said they were not in charge of this... Finally, I did it the “hard” way and gathered some hooligans to help force the guy [the boss] to pay back my money”.

DISCUSSION

Stigma against migrants as a common component of social discrimination has been documented in many other parts of the world (Burns, Imrie, Nazroo, Johnson, & Fenton, 2007; Tsuda, 1998; Zolberg & Benda, 2001). Migrants are often associated with dirty jobs, perceived as incapable, less-educated, immoral, less trustworthy, and criminal. Although the situation for rural migrants in urban China has improved in recent years, findings from this study indicate that stigma against rural migrants continues to exist to a degree that hampers their abilities to work, find housing, access day-to-day needed resources, as well as impeding their ability to act against injustices and discrimination.

Stigma against rural workers is reinforced through media messages, the actions of public officials and government organizations, and the behaviors and attitudes of many urban residents. Rural workers have internalized these attitudes and behaviors, so that they often view themselves in a negative and stigmatized light. Stigmatizing labels against rural migrants, including abstract terms (e.g., *Mang Liu*, *Nong Min Gong*) and descriptive images (e.g., rural migrants are inferior, dirty, full of body odor) appear in mass media and are used in daily activities.

Although rural migrants are strangers to the urban environment, the fundamental source of migrant stigma in urban China is also attributable to the large and sustained developmental gap between rural and urban China. The household registration or the *Hukou* System, a culturally and historically rooted system that affect many East Asian countries (Christiansen, 1990) resulted in a developmental gap between rural and urban areas. Only recently has this system in China been modified to allow easier movement between regions. This divide

however has contributed to stereotyping of rural people to the extent that urban residents perceive migrants as inferior, socially undesirable, and in many instances dangerous.

Migrant stigma significantly affects social capital reconstruction, increasing the vulnerability of rural migrants to negative psychological, emotional, and health consequences. From a community developmental perspective, rural migrants in urban China are an integral part of the community contributing significantly to urban development. Urban communities therefore have the obligation to provide services and assistance to rural workers to improve their standard of living, to raise their standing in the urban communities, and to “liberate” them from *cheng zhong cun*. From an individual developmental perspective, rural migrants have the need for and the motivation to establish solid relationships that bond them with resource-rich urban residents and the urban community. It is far from adequate for rural migrants to be associated with only rural migrants.

Equality, trust and opportunities for effective interpersonal interaction are the three necessary and fundamental mechanisms for social capital construction (Putnam, 1995). Trust, reciprocity, and collaboration are three characteristics that determine if a network connection is social capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Lindstrom, 2005; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1995). In the current data, we see a lack of social capital development between migrant workers and urban residents. Migrants are clearly perceived as unequal members of the urban landscape, relationships of distrust are created through multiple social institutions as well as day-to-day interactions, and opportunities for building networks are limited through social and physical segregation. Even if social interactions occur, those interactions are often strained and uncomfortable creating a limited and fragile social network which will not convert into social capital for the workers. Under current conditions, even if networks are converted to social capital, it may short term or for a specific small group of workers.

Similar to migrants in other countries/places in the world, social stigma and lack of social capital represent two significant challenges. Migrant workers often describe their distress and own inferior feelings, as well as lack of resources to deal with these concerns. They also experience negative health consequences due to their position and their day-to-day stresses, but do not have access to adequate healthcare. Young migrants in China are also more likely than rural or urban residents to engage in health risk behaviors, including substance use and unsafe sexual practices. Given the current situation for rural migrant workers in China, individual-based interventions for disease prevention and health promotion, particularly HIV/AIDS prevention, need to be incorporated into broader strategies to mitigate the effects of stigmatization and inadequate social capital. Measures enhancing assimilation to and adaptation of urban life may help rural migrants integrate into urban society. A few published studies in African and South America indicate that social stigma can be reduced (Herek, Capitanio, & Widaman, 2002) and social capital can be enhanced (Brune & Bossert, 2009) by involving migrants and encouraging their participation in community-based activities. These strategies include basic public education, mass media, publicized symbolic acts, and enactment of policies and laws that limit discriminatory and stigmatizing behaviors. Further research is required to verify the effectiveness of these strategies for rural migrants in China. Future studies are also necessary to assess social networks and resultant interactions between migrant workers and urban residents to further support innovative measures to promote migrant health by reducing social stigma and enhancing social capital.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. Results from this study cannot be generalized to all rural migrants in China because data was collected only in Beijing. The situation of rural migrants in China changes rapidly while findings reported in this study reflect the status of these issues at the time of the study. Lastly, these data are cross-sectional and longitudinal data

would provide much stronger data regarding reconstruction of social capital over time as well as consequences for migrant health.

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