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‘I was Independent since I was Born’: Pre-Immigration Traumatic Experiences and Pathological Gambling in Four Chinese Canadians

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Introduction
According to research conducted in Canada, the United States and Australia, South-east Asian refugees (Petry et al., 2003), Asians (Welte et al., 2001) and Chinese immigrants (Blaszczynski et al., 1998; Sin, 1996) show a higher rate of pathological gambling than the population average, which is estimated to be between 0.2% and 2.1% (Shaffer et al., 2004). The pre-disposition of Chinese immigrants to gambling and their higher prevalence of pathological gambling have been attributed to cultural values and practices, post-immigration stresses in acculturation and social isolation (Raylu & Oei, 2004; Sin, 1996; Tse et al., 2004; Wong & Tse, 2003). Since not everyone who gambles becomes a pathological gambler, understanding the pre-disposing, contributing and precipitating factors that put immigrants at risk of developing pathological gambling is important for informing culturally-appropriate prevention and treatment for Chinese immigrants (Tse et al., 2004). Trauma has been hypothesised, and anecdotally reported by researchers and clinicians, to be an important factor in the development of problem and pathological gambling (Jacobs, 2001; Henry, 1996; McCormick & Taber, 1987; O’Donnell, 1993; Rosenthal, 1996).
Pre-Immigration Traumatic Experiences and Pathological Gambling in Four Chinese Canadians

Pathological gambling and Chinese immigrants: a trajectory

The onset of pathological gambling was found to occur some thirty years after immigration in a cohort of four Chinese Canadian immigrants who came from Hong Kong to Canada between 1968 and 1974 (Lee et al., 2007). Complex interactions between post-immigration stress and a set of late mid-life changes were delineated (Lee et al., 2007). Post-immigration stress including language, geographical and cultural barriers, overwork, lack of leisure and recreation, insecure employment and racial discrimination characterised the first two decades of the immigrants’ settlement. The third decade saw a thinning social support network, marital breakdown and the precipitous deaths of close family members for these immigrants. Combined with an ‘empty nest’, employment insecurity and personal setbacks in late-middle adulthood, the life circumstances of these immigrants deteriorated, leading them to resort to gambling as an escape from their many woes and disillusionments (Lee et al., 2007).

The childhood and pre-immigration history of Chinese pathological gamblers and the role it plays in pathological gambling have not been studied in qualitative research. Childhood maltreatment and trauma are associated with substance abuse and poorer adult mental health (Horowitz et al., 2001; Kessler et al., 1995; Kilpatrick et al., 2001; Najavits et al., 1997), but their role in gambling disorders has not been studied as extensively (Petry & Steinberg, 2005). A recent study of US South Asian refugees queries the association of physical torture and abuse with pathological gambling (Petry et al., 2003). High rates of childhood abuse and neglect are associated with pathological gambling, but the role and trajectory of childhood trauma in those individuals diagnosed with pathological gambling have not been well elucidated (Petry & Steinberg, 2005). Indeed, turning from epidemiological studies to investigating the underlying root system leading to pathological gambling opens up a ‘road less traveled’ for researchers that needs to be pursued to advance research, policy and practice (Shaffer et al., 2004).

Qualitative methodology is especially suitable for examining the underlying dimensions of pathological gambling, because it enables the researcher to uncover, interpret and represent complex human phenomena (Creswell, 1998). At a later stage, qualitative findings can be corroborated by larger samples in quantitative studies. Discoveries from qualitative explorations are therefore especially valuable in contributing to the construction of a conceptual framework which can guide the direction of future research (Strauss, 1987).

This paper reports on the pre-immigration history of one cohort of four pathological gamblers in a larger immigration stress and pathological gambling study (Lee et al., 2007), revealing the multiple traumas which they had experienced before the age of 18. The impacts of these pre-immigration, early life, traumatic experiences and the way they wove their way into the fabric of the immigrants’ lives are discussed. Our purpose is to elucidate the nature, experience and types of trauma these Chinese immigrants suffered, and the cultural, socio-economic and political contexts in which these traumatic experiences occurred. The implications of pre-immigration traumatic experiences in the development of pathological gambling are considered.

The research study

Research questions

Two research questions guided this study:

• What are the pre-immigration experiences of a cohort of four Chinese Canadian pathological gamblers?

• What are the possible links of these experiences to the development of pathological gambling some 30 years after immigration?

Method

This study employed a comparative case study design (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) to gather information comparing qualitative findings on pre-immigration life experiences leading up to the immigration of four Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong to Canada. Comparative case studies are characterised by a small sample size that fosters an in-depth and rich exploration of the human phenomena of interest, while allowing comparisons to be made across cases, revealing common themes and any significant differences. The use of semi-structured person-centred interviews (Levy & Hollan, 1998) allowed the participants’ own stories to unfold richly, while providing an interview structure with common dimensions for exploration across cases.
The research procedures and protocols received the approval of the University of Lethbridge Human Subjects Research Ethics Board before implementation.

**Recruitment and sampling**

Four participants were recruited using convenience sampling. They were purposely approached from an active client pool at Chinese Family Services of Ontario in Toronto, where they were receiving counselling services for pathological gambling. The sample size was determined both by the case study design for in-depth interviewing and by the constraints of the funding allocated for this study. Inclusion criteria were for participants:

- to meet DSM-IV-TR-APA (2000) pathological gambling criteria
- to demonstrate a stable psychological condition
- to be able to benefit from the interviews of the study for self-understanding and insight
- to speak to the breadth and depth of their life experience in childhood and pre-immigration to Canada.

It was fortuitous that the sample formed a cohort who immigrated from Hong Kong to Canada in the same period (1968–1974).

Potential recruits were assured that their clinical services would in no way be compromised, regardless of whether or not they consented to take part in the study. The research interviews were conducted independently of the participants’ regular counselling sessions. An honorarium of $100 was offered to each participant for their contribution to the study. One participant declined the honorarium, saying that he would be rewarded if other Chinese immigrants benefited from his story.

**Interview procedure**

An interview schedule was developed by the first and third authors, based on their clinical experience and previous research with pathological gamblers (Lee, 2002). Questions for the semi-structured interviews followed a chronology covering the participants’ pre-immigration and post-immigration history up to the present. Pre-immigration history is the focus in this paper. Areas of exploration included:

- childhood experiences
- factors motivating the decision to immigrate to Canada
- dreams, wishes and anticipations with regard to immigration
- memorable thoughts and feelings prior to immigration
- internal and external factors that were helpful and difficult in the immigration process.

Each participant was interviewed each week for five weeks, each interview lasting between one and one and a half hours. The interviewer had a pre-existing relationship with the participants as their problem gambling counsellor. However, only the material disclosed in these research interviews was used for analysis and interpretations in this study. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese.

**Data analysis**

All the interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and translated into English by a bilingual transcriptionist/translator. The accuracy of the translation was ascertained by the interviewer. Three researchers read the transcripts to gain a sense of the ‘story’ of each participant and the essence of their spoken narratives. Each researcher then coded meaningful units in relation to the research questions. Collaboratively, categories and themes were established and the team reviewed and discussed their respective ‘findings’ until consensus was reached. Corresponding themes and meaningful units across cases were established, compared and contrasted.

**Bias**

Like the participants, the first and third authors are also Chinese Canadian immigrants from Hong Kong, and could be pre-disposed to be sympathetic towards the plight of Chinese-Canadians immigrants. At the same time, the positions of these two researchers were an asset in the study, as they readily understood the cultural nuances and the contexts of the participants’ history. A check on any potential bias was balanced by the second author. All three researchers, the authors of this paper, are counsellors with
experience working with pathological gambling. The data was therefore interpreted through a clinical lens.

**Trustworthiness**
The coded data, categories and themes were reviewed and discussed by three researchers, and the interpretations were made through discussions to reach consensus. The findings were also member-checked by bringing the results back to the participants for their feedback and corroboration. Three of the four participants were available to confirm the interpretations advanced in this paper, which they said illuminated their own understanding of their history and pathological gambling.

**Participants**

**Table 1**, below, provides the demographic information on the four participants. Pseudonyms are used for the participants with alteration and disguise of identifying information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cathy</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Felix</th>
<th>Keung</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Range 55 – 61 years</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of birth</td>
<td>Guang Zhou City</td>
<td>Guang Zhou City</td>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Guang Zhou City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current religion</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Grade 10</td>
<td>Technical institute</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Grade 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>Technician</td>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>Manual Labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (CND p.a.)</td>
<td>$6,000</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
<td>$150,000</td>
<td>$7,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling expenditure</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
<td>$75,000</td>
<td>$250,00</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years gambled</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming type</td>
<td>Baccarat, Zabo</td>
<td>Slots, Blackjack</td>
<td>Pairs, Baccarat,</td>
<td>Baccarat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Blackjack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling status</td>
<td>Abstained 1 year</td>
<td>Abstained 1 month</td>
<td>Still buys lottery</td>
<td>Abstained 1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tickets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent mental health problems</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent addiction</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings
Analysis of the participants’ descriptions of their lives leading up to their immigration revealed multiple forms of traumatic experiences. Table 2, below, presents a matrix identifying the types of trauma, namely:

- loss and abandonment
- neglect and deprivation
- physical and emotional abuse
- political and socio-economic oppression.

Loss and abandonment
The first theme, loss and abandonment, refers to the absence, loss of or estrangement from one or both parents because of death or separation. It is noteworthy that all four participants suffered a form of loss and abandonment during childhood or adolescence before the age of 18. At an early age, two participants experienced the death of a parent and the other two experienced separation from their parents (Table 2). These momentous childhood events were buried deep in their memories, awakened with affect only in the safety provided in this context with the interviewer who was also their counsellor.

Table 2
Pre-immigration trauma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Cathy</th>
<th>Peter</th>
<th>Felix</th>
<th>Keung</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loss/abandonment</td>
<td>Age 11 – death of father</td>
<td>Age 14 – separated from mother</td>
<td>Age 5 – death of mother</td>
<td>Age 8 – separated from parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Left in care with alcoholic father</td>
<td>Parentified child; violence to protect family business; sent to England with older sister at the age of 13; exposed to illegal gambling venues and brothel at age 13</td>
<td>Forced child labour; lone sojourn from China to Hong Kong age 8; aborted education (grade 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect/deprivation</td>
<td>Raised in poverty; parentified child; aborted education (grade 10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical, emotional &amp; psychological abuse</td>
<td>Emotional abuse by older brother</td>
<td>Physical and emotional abuse by father; work place humiliation by work supervisor</td>
<td>Physically abused by step-mother; bullied and assaulted by customers at work</td>
<td>Extreme working conditions; forced departure from family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-political oppression</td>
<td>Lived in squatters huts; social exclusion and degradation</td>
<td>Illegal escape involving physical ordeals from communist China to Hong Kong; family underwent surveillance and torture in China as a result of his escape</td>
<td>Experienced social racism; called names and beaten up on the streets in England because of his race</td>
<td>Began working at the age of 11 to support himself financially</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In childhood, being wrenched from their primary caregivers and providers stripped them of security and protection in a precarious world. Their survival was in jeopardy. They dealt with the dissolution of their family structure and their place in it resourcefully and heroically, in a manner that is hard to imagine for children, including taking on parenting and protective roles towards their younger siblings. Fending for their physical and economic survival came first. They perceived the adults around them to be preoccupied with their own survival. Bereft of a safe haven with compassionate and understanding adults, their more tender emotions were best left unexposed. Not only were the fears and grief from their losses not disclosed, but also they had to brace themselves to face the days and years ahead to support the remaining parent without whose goodwill and sustenance they could have ‘extinguished’, a word one of them used when contemplating his situation as a child. Clearly, the trauma of loss and abandonment left a wound in their existence.

**Peter**

Peter was left in the care of his alcoholic father in China at the age of 14 after his mother’s departure to Hong Kong to seek medical help and employment, at a time when China was gripped in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Peter recalled his separation from his mother with sadness, coupled with disdain towards his father. ‘I hated my Dad a lot. He had been an alcoholic for the longest time. I had vivid memories from childhood bow he scolded my Mom and me. My Mom was a very traditional Chinese woman who didn’t complain a lot. When he treated her badly, she took it without saying a word. She would even explain that since he was the head of the family and that he was the breadwinner, he had the right to do anything. Later on after liberation by the communists my Mom became very sick, no doctors in China could cure her, and the financial situation in our family was getting worse. My Mom realised that with the poor economy in China, she could not really rely on my Dad for a living in the long run.’

Peter’s primary attachment was to his mother, to whom he referred admiringly. In this retrospective account four decades later, he implied that his mother was trapped in an era in which imperial, feudal and patriarchal ideology kept her in a subservient position, and so tolerated and excused his father’s maltreatment of her. He had also experienced his father’s unpredictability and bad temper, which deprived him of safety at home. Peter did not feel close to him. Left without any choice because of economic hardship and his mother’s poor health, Peter reluctantly and helplessly watched his mother depart for Hong Kong to seek the help she needed. His dream was to be re-united with her one day.

**Cathy**

After a period of prolonged and painstaking caring for her sick father, Cathy experienced his death when she was 11. Without the head of household and its breadwinner, meeting the demands of survival took precedence over all else. Adding to the weight of grief, Cathy quickly took on the burden of ‘caretaker’, as a support and confidante to her mother and surrogate parent for her many younger brothers and sisters. Family dynamics played a role, as Cathy’s elder brother was perceived as bright and promising. It was hoped the he would eventually open out of poverty for the struggling family. As the eldest son, as was the custom he was afforded the privileges of time and the family’s meager financial resources to pursue his education. Meanwhile, Cathy assumed the role of ‘Cinderella’ who looked after all the chores and had no time to study beyond achieving a passing grade.

Without a provider, and resting on church and meager social assistance, the family’s focus had become one of practical survival, leaving the pain of their loss in the shadows.

‘We never really talked about my dad’s death. I only remember Mom once comforted us saying no matter what, only if we stuck together, we would make it through... That’s why I felt a strong need to help, particularly when I saw that my mom was exhausted.’

Duty and worry about her mother’s well-being and the family’s survival claimed Cathy’s time and energy. The family inequities she accepted as a young girl created hidden resentments which were difficult for her to acknowledge, given the social norms, necessity of survival,
and her natural empathy and devotion as a daughter. Her secondary role in relation to her brother’s entitlements, and the lack of familial acknowledgements of her sacrifices and efforts, gave rise to a distorted self-perception of her own inferiority and an excessive sense of obligation to others. In later years, her earlier resentment of her brother compounded her repressed resentment of her husband. She felt downtrodden in her marriage and overlooked in her contributions at work, and was prey to other gamblers and loan sharks when she ventured out into the gambling arena to declare her independence.

Felix

Felix suffered a significant loss when he was five, when his mother died while giving birth to his younger brother. Some 50 years later, Felix described his loss with regret in vivid detail, providing insight into the mechanisms he employed in order to make sense of his world after such a sudden, and to him preventable, loss. Seeing his father as ineffectual, Felix disclosed:

‘I have a memory of the time when my Mom died. I was five. I remember going to the funeral parlor to pay my last respects. She died birthing my younger brother because she hemorrhaged and lost too much blood. Medical care at that time was not well developed so she only went to a midwife and did not go to the hospital. Such a shame because she did not need to die… I really got through most things with bravado. I have had to put up a strong front because I had to deal with things myself. I could not look to my father… I had to toughen up and deal with the situation myself, and figure things out on my own’.

Felix learned in early life to rely on himself alone. He therefore never reached out for help when he found himself in need. He was allowed only to be strong, and the denial of his feelings and vulnerability cost him dearly in finding intimacy in his marriage. He was not inclined to seek marital and social support when he encountered difficulties.

Keung

Forced by poverty and desperate parents with too many mouths to feed, Keung separated from his parents in China at the age of eight. His parents sent him, the oldest son, to live with his uncle in Hong Kong. Though Keung told the story with nonchalance, his recall of the eight year old’s sojourn from home into the unknown had a sorrowful tone, one that Keung hinted at in the following vignette.

‘Because of the living conditions at home… There were so many kids and because of communism, my uncle advised me to go to Hong Kong. So I went, I was eight years old and I took the train by myself from Guang Zhou city to Hong Kong. I remember my uncle telling me: “It will be okay, because I will watch out for you here”. So I got on to the train and took it all the way to the boarder at Shen Zeng. The border crossing soldiers brought me across the bridge and then banded me over to the local police who then send me off to the city where I took public transportation to Tsim Sha Tsui. And from there I found my way to where my uncle lived.’

What could have registered in the mind of an eight year old sent away to live with a relative he hardly knew in a faraway place, put on the train without a companion, the only escort being soldiers at the border and the local police? Besides providing him with room and board, Keung’s uncle had little to do with him. Alone and a thousand miles away from home, Keung worked as a bus-boy in Hong Kong. His life was all work. There was no social welfare safety net or child labour law. Whatever money he earned, a good portion he sent back to his parents in China.

The stories of the four participants bear witness to the heart-wrenching loss and separation they each suffered at a young age. They had no-one to lean on or confide in, so the grief of these separations had been buried and unexamined. Their childhood suffering was related for the first time in these interviews. As Felix said, without safety and protection he got by with ‘bravado’, steeling himself for existence, duty and hard work. That was how these immigrants survived as children.

Neglect and deprivation

Neglect is the failure of one’s caretakers to provide over time what is necessary for the development and well-being of the child, including sufficient food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, education, psychological
nurture and support, and protection from harm before the age of 18 years (Jacobs, 2002; WHO, 2006). Devoid of the care and protection of their caregivers when children, the participants suffered emotional deprivation, social isolation and truncated education opportunities. In addition, they had to meet crushing parental expectations in assuming adult roles to fend for their younger siblings and the family’s interest at a young age. Among the four participants, deprivation and neglect began at an early age, not to mention that all worked for their own subsistence before the age of 14.

**Cathy**

Cathy described the family’s poverty after her father’s death.

‘We used to live in wooden squatter areas. Since the government wanted to build seven-storey resettlement estates in our spot, we were resettled elsewhere. We did not even have money to renovate the unit when we moved in. It was built of sandbrick… Very small, approximately 100 square feet for a family of 8; I still remember we did not even have electricity because we did not have money to pay a deposit. We were still using kerosene light.’

Moreover, Cathy assumed responsibility for providing for the family and caring for younger siblings, at the expense of her own education.

‘We came from a very poor family… So many children in the house. I saw that my mom was working very hard and I wanted to help out. I was doing it from the depth of my heart and I never complained. My dad had been sick for a long time and couldn’t work for over a year before he died. In Chinese culture, it is almost a rule for older kids to take care of younger ones. I was in grade 4 when my mom started working. I was 11; I had to do cooking, laundry, grocery shopping and all the house chores, and babysitting. When I was done with all these, it was usually after 10 pm… This was the time I started doing my homework; that’s why I did not even pass my primary six examinations.’

**Felix**

For Felix, the loss of his mother was compounded by his father’s intermittent and unreliable presence. He was left on his own with his siblings, unattended and unsupervised, as he described with hopelessness and dismay.

‘He was always busy; be used to say be has to make a living, so be was always rushing in and out. We spent very little time with him… We rarely saw each other. We had to fend for ourselves and were on our own. We fend for ourselves or we extinguish. That’s the way it had been and always will be.’

Felix’s sense of safety in the world continued to be challenged with the assumption of adult responsibilities for his father’s grocery store business along with a parentified role for his younger siblings at the age of only 13. He saw himself as a defender and guardian, resorting to violence when necessary.

‘The grocery store was huge and we had to run the store. And because my sister left home when she was 17, there were only myself and my younger brothers and sisters who could watch the place. In those days, we would often have thieves who would come in and try to steal things from us or even try to burglarise the place. So when I was about 13, I was already trained to… Like, I knew how to protect our interests and I would be quick to draw a weapon if I had to.’

Disappointed in his dad’s inability to protect him and his siblings, Felix saw his father as a weak ally in facing up to a mean step-mother.

‘He couldn’t even manage to do what a typical father would do for his own children. He couldn’t stand up for or defend his children’s interests… So you could say he tried to protect us, but each time he would only have an argument with her [stepmother] and nothing ever came out of the arguments. You see she was actually a very selfish and self-centered person. She would have liked for all of us to fail but wanted her own kids to excel and succeed.’
Loss of trust in one’s caregivers in a ruthless world became Felix’s template for a stance of extreme self-reliance and readiness for combat, a position that he vigilantly clung to in his adult life.

**Keung**

Not only was Keung deprived of parental care as a child, he described as well the dangerous child labour he was expected to perform, labour that would have made an adult wince.

“You could say I was independent since I was born. I had to start working when I was barely a few years old helping my mother… I had to… It was very complicated… My family did not farm… China at that time… I had to help the soldiers with their laundry and bathing water. My family opened a business helping the soldiers by providing boiled water for their use. I had to get the water… I had to carry the water for them to bathe… It wasn’t just one or two of them, there were many soldiers… And I had to physically carry over a continuous supply of water for them… That is why I said I was independent since I was very young. You had to start at a few years old; it was non-negotiable.’

Just as Felix lamented how he and his siblings had to ‘fend for ourselves or we extinguish’, Keung found himself in a world that was ‘non-negotiable’, requiring him to be ‘independent since I was born’. Adult care-givers, champions and advocates were nowhere to be found. For these immigrants as children, the world was bleak indeed and they only had themselves to rely on. As he entered his early teens, Keung reported working extended hours to help support his geographically distant family.

“In my teens I was an errand boy, doing food delivery and odd jobs in the restaurant. I started at 8 in the morning and finished at 2 in the morning. I didn’t have a lot of spending. So I just sent some money home occasionally to my parents.’

Keung was left in a world dominated by work where even school was a luxury; nevertheless, he managed to complete grade 6.

**Physical and emotional abuse**

‘Physical and emotional abuse’ refers to a situation in which one person uses his or her power or influence to affect adversely the mental or physical well-being of another (Porcerelli et al, 2006). Physical violence in the home against children is often inflicted as punishment (WHO, 2006). Such abuse can occur over long or short periods and take a variety of forms, including degradation, isolation, threats or explicit violence resulting in physical and/or emotional harm (Taylor & Leonard, 2001).

For the four immigrant participants, emotional and physical abuse came at the hands of their parents, superiors and siblings.

**Peter**

Peter spoke candidly about both forms of abuse, with excessive physical punishment dealt out by his alcoholic father occurring in childhood.

“My dad beat me, many, many times when he was drunk. I was around 11, I didn’t do anything wrong. He seldom laid hands on the daughters. He was rougher with the sons.’

He was clear about the undeserved nature of the beatings and the differential treatment of sons and daughters, based on cultural norms of the time. Years later in his early 20s as an electrical technician before his emigration, Peter disclosed a grave humiliation, equivalent to emotional abuse, delivered to him by his supervisor, which left a significant mark.

“My entire life was about work. I tried out my first business in Hong Kong… In one instance, I finished an apparatus. It was a simple job… I gave the finished product to my boss… He frowned as he took it and broke it into half in front of me without saying a word… [sobbing], he then gave me the money and signaled me to go away. I felt so humiliated, so insulted… He broke it right at first glance in front of me. I believed this episode had huge impact on me. I felt looked down upon and I vowed that I would excel at work and prove to him some day that I was not as bad as he thought about
me. I was very resilient this way, the more people stepped on me, the more I rebounded.’

Peter’s past abuses and humiliation led him to develop a resolve that he would not ‘stand down’ to others. As he progressed in life, he felt a continual need to ‘prove himself’ in his work in order to maintain his dignity and worth. So a lay-off in mid-life was a devastating event to him, one that precipitated his problem gambling, in addition to a marriage worn thin.

**Felix**

Felix described receiving beatings himself, while also witnessing the physical abuse that his sisters underwent. The beatings were merciless, and he took it upon himself to become his siblings’ protector.

‘My stepmother, she treated us… Well, because my sisters were girls, when she hit them they would just take it and not fight back. She used to hit them and she would use canes to beat them. She would be heedless where she was hitting. She would not care if she was whacking them on the head or in the face. We were very young, and I would fight her. I had even gone after her and chased her down when she came after me. It is really quite unbelievable… We had bumps and bruises to show for it. In retrospect, she was actually very abusive.’

In narrating this episode, Felix labeled the beatings he and his sisters suffered as ‘abuse’. Although as a child he did not have the proper label for his step-mother’s actions, instinctively Felix knew that what his step-mother did to him and his sisters was excessive, unjustified and unacceptable. The role of protector of defenseless women in relation to his sisters was one that he carried into his marital relationship. To a wife who berated him, he never spoke a harsh word in return. Over the years he deferred to her, while also tending to do more than his share of the household chores. Perhaps he was afraid of losing her as he did his mother long ago; at the same time, he perceived her to be defenseless and fragile like his younger sisters.

Felix’s experience of physical violence and abuse did not cease after he left home; when acknowledgements of past abuses came into Felix’s awareness, other traumatic stories followed one after another. To escape from an abusive home environment, Felix decided to immigrate to England at age 13 to make a life for himself, following his sister’s lead. There he encountered racially motivated violence and bullying at the hands of his customers at the restaurant where he worked. They took advantage of him because of his small stature and his limited English.

‘The main purpose driving my departure from Hong Kong was always to further my education. It was much harder in England because of the language barrier. I was rather discouraged for a while, and actually quit school when I was fourteen to work for a year. It was forced upon me. You learn to have the ‘pluck’ to deal with things along the way. For instance, when I was in England, I was beaten badly several times when I tried to confront the customers who were trying to take off [without paying for their meals]. I was only fourteen then. Over time I just built up a sense of confidence around handling such matters and then it became easy. After a few times, I learned how to make the first move by throwing the first punch. I remember I would confront them with whatever weapon I could get my hands on. I had to put my life on the line for a living then.’

In having to defend himself and his own interests against an abusive step-mother and bullying customers at a young age, Felix developed a survival strategy of confrontation, counter-attack and pre-emptive bravado. Outwardly he was bold, but inwardly, even some 40 years later, Felix could still recall his fear when confronting his customers.

‘I was so scared… I peed in my pants. I remember I crawled under the table to hide from the first encounter. The second time I was still scared, but I also knew if I tried to hide under the table again, I would be pulled back out.’

**Cathy**

In contrast to the blatant emotional and physical abuse experienced by Felix and Peter, Cathy’s abuse was covert. She sacrificed her school work and extracurricular
activities to help her mother and her siblings. Her older brother was exempted from the chores because he was seen to be intellectually and academically superior to Cathy. Nonetheless, Cathy and her mother treated her brother with adulation and Cathy paled in comparison in every respect. This engendered a deep sense of inferiority that coloured her self-perception into her adult years. Cathy described her brother’s entitlements.

‘My mom worked to support the family after my dad died. My brother was studying in secondary school. It’s a school for middle class people. He blamed my mom for having too many kids. He said he deserved to go to a better school and said my mom should not have so many kids if she was not able to provide them for what they needed. Eventually my brother went to Taiwan and asked everybody to join him there. After we all moved, there, he realised that it’s not as good as he expected and changed his mind. Said we should all go to Western countries. He wanted to go to university abroad. He saw us as his dependents.’

Upon their immigration to Canada, Cathy’s brother put pressure on her to look for work immediately and chastised her for not being competent enough to find a job.

‘I was not a smart person. I would be glad only if I could adjust to a new country. My thought was, ‘Take a step at a time’. I couldn’t think and plan too far. I was not an ambitious person who wanted to achieve a lot. I would be very pleased only if I could handle whatever came along.’

Ultimately, Cathy’s sense of inferiority and inability to speak up to the aggressive personality and entitlement of an older sibling spilled over into her role as a subservient wife who, despite all her contributions, financial and otherwise, remained unappreciated. She felt that her rights and dues had been usurped. When Cathy finally came to realise how she had been belittled, all her repressed resentment broke out of the dam. She let herself loose in gambling as a way to ‘get even’ in finally doing what she wanted to do without qualms. She had held herself in check for too long.

Keung

Similarly for Keung, although he did not describe overt emotional and physical abuse, the immense psychological strain of his early forced labour and ‘expulsion’ from his family at the young age of eight left its scar. Devoid of attachment and affection, emotional support and understanding, Keung developed a stoic nonchalant disconnection from his feelings, be they fear or sadness. In his presentation, Keung was flat in his affect and completely matter-of-fact. When the interviewer acknowledged his courage in what it must have taken for an eight year old to have left his family to make a living, Keung’s reply was ‘Well, I didn’t care. I could have gone anywhere and be fine’. He had learned to minimise his pain and his glory, in other words himself.

Immersion in work became his mode of being, enabling him to survive under the most strenuous of conditions. His culinary skills developed over the years eventually won him recognition as a chef, and an invitation by a businessman to immigrate to Canada to work in his restaurant business with his kitchen crew. However, Keung himself downplayed and shrugged off even this success.

‘The 10 years were a lot of hard work and felt like a long time. It involved some luck as well as abilities because there can only be one head chef in a shop so it wasn’t easy to get into that position. Sometimes these things are all about luck. But of course you will have to be hard working; one must be diligent when working. But I just knew I was trying things out... So if it didn’t work here I would have just gone elsewhere. It was never a problem for me.’

Keung’s interview style was non-committal and equivocal. He was unwilling to take a personal and passionate stand. This could have been one of his ways of coping in an unsafe world without protective adults and a place to call home. Non-committal ambivalence staved off any opposition or criticism; disengagement from affect and expectations shielded him from disappointments. All he knew was hard work in making a living and ensuring his survival, along with doing his duty.
Political and socio-economic oppression
What this immigrant cohort had personally undergone and suffered at the level of family, leaving them with psychological wounds, occurred in a context of history, politics, socio-economics and culture, the influence of which cannot be ignored. Indeed, a psycho-social understanding of pre-immigration trauma must take into account the societal contextual factors that interacted with individual styles of coping.

Oppression is defined as infliction of force or pressure on another that creates a significant burden in one’s life (Cudd, 2006). In addition to their adverse childhood experiences resulting from loss and abandonment, abuse, neglect and deprivation, these immigrant participants had also suffered political oppression, socio-economic strains and social exclusion that led them to seek out new horizons in a foreign land that held out promises of opportunity and freedom.

Peter
Because of political oppression under communism and the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, Peter chose to risk his life by escaping from his home city in China, Guang Zhou, for Hong Kong at the age of 22. This journey was fraught with danger and uncertainty. In undertaking it, Peter risked his life. He recounted these ordeals.

“We cycled for four hours without a break… Around sunset we were right on top of a hill overlooking a small village. We heard villagers shouting loudly, said they found illegal residents. We knew if we were found our plan would fail… We rolled downhill; we crawled like dogs along the trails and managed to go as far as we could during the night… We had to hide ourselves again when the sun rose; we hid in an unused grave. The second night, we started cycling again; we could already see the light from Hong Kong. The third night, I still remember how excited I was when I saw the coastline… Since I was badly injured along the way, when I got to the sea the pain got worse… The sea current was bad, but it was a point of no return for us… I went on for 6–7 hours… It was then that I saw a big boat steering towards me; I was spotted under their high beam. My heart sank, somebody yelled at me to get on the boat… After an hour or so, the owner of the boat told me that he was a Buddhist; his mission was to save people instead of hurting them.’

Miraculously, after trials of life and death, Peter was re-united with his mother in Hong Kong. Peter believed that his life was taking a turn for the better until he learned about his family’s torture in China at the hands of political oppression. Peter stated:

‘It was supposed to be a happy beginning for me, but a week later we got news that my dad was arrested in Mainland China because of me [sobbing]. My dad was accused for conspiring to assist my leaving the country illegally. He was sent to jail and everything that belonged to me (including certificates) were burnt. My sister told me that dad had been beaten up and put on stage in public and humiliated... He was made to kneel on broken glass. After nine months he was released because they couldn’t find any evidence that he knew of my escape.’

His exodus led him to the British colony of Hong Kong, but Peter was haunted by fears of being captured and the worry that China would eventually regain its authority and control in Hong Kong. Peter spoke about these apparitions.

‘During the seven years in Hong Kong, I had nightmares all the time; I dreamed that I was caught by the Communists. Sometimes, I dreamed that I was arrested and was sent to jail. Sometimes, I dreamed that I was sentenced to death.’

Retrospectively, it can be interpreted that Peter’s survival of his extraordinary ordeal left him with a sense of both vulnerability and invincibility. On the one hand, he believed that the gods were on his side. On the other, he saw life as an ordeal in which he had to prove himself repeatedly without rest or reprieve. He continually extended his limits without knowing it, primarily by overworking. His health, family and marriage suffered in his later life. His one obsession was to prove himself through work, but in the end he reported that such
acknowledgement was never achieved. It was then he turned to gambling, which offered him moments of solace, escape and rest.

Felix

Felix also experienced the hand of oppression, but in his case it was the oppression of being a stranger in a foreign land. He faced the brunt of racism while living in England and the more subtle form of institutional racism he experienced in Canada.

‘In England racism was outrageous... I could just be walking down the street, minding my own business and people would spit it on me or hit me on the head... and they would then laugh and curse at me. But that's not the case here [Canada]. Here, it's mostly through work... When you obviously got the ability but they would hold you back and refuse to let you advance.'

As a fighter with a heightened sensitivity to discrimination and injustice, Felix adopted a style of challenge and confrontation when he ‘smelled’ racism at work. This both pre-empted any bullies from taking advantage of him and made him more provocative and vulnerable to his enemies. It created for him job insecurity during times of economic downturn, despite his ability. Ongoing frustrations at work, the anxiety of lay-off and job loss were important contributing factors in his turning to gambling to escape from all his woes.

Cathy

In a different vein, Cathy and her immediate family felt the tremors of the Cultural Revolution and winds of its horrors in Hong Kong. They were well aware of their status as outcasts socio-economically, and their family experienced the social exclusion that came with living in squatter huts.

‘We, lower class people, were usually looked down upon. Going abroad made possible for us to take a leap in terms of social status. Having the chance to study abroad made a big difference. Going to university was even better.’

Her elder brother led the way to secure a life beyond squalor in moving to Taiwan. Unable to find work, the family returned to Hong Kong and eventually chose Canada as their next frontier in the pursuit of a better life.

‘My elder brother went there first, told us that it's a good place to stay. Said Taiwan was bigger than H.K., plus free education was available. He asked everybody to join him there. After we all moved there, he realised that it's not as good as he expected and changed his mind... He believed that we would have more opportunities in Canada. It's hard to find jobs in Taiwan. I still remember I fought extremely hard to get a place in a factory manufacturing jam... I helped in peeling lychee and pineapples. It wasn't a very good job. So my elder brother suggested... since we have so many siblings, if we went abroad, we could help financially by working. That's why we decided to go abroad together. So we could work to make more money. You know, there were more opportunities in Canada.’

Unwilling to be treated as pariahs in the class-conscious British colony, Cathy and her family taxed all their resources, taking the risk to migrate with the goal of carving out a new niche for themselves in a new country and society.

Keung

Keung remembered the Red Guards, his family’s poverty and his childhood labour in war-torn China. His first migration was from China to Hong Kong, where he worked to send money home to his family. When the opportunity arose to take his culinary skills to Canada, he jumped at the chance presented to him by a business patron to better his financial predicament, climb the ladder of social mobility and leave the acerbic working conditions he had to endure in his home country behind.

‘It was all about the money and mainly to work. I was told that Canada was a good place... So I decided to try. It wasn’t a big deal for me. Compared to Hong Kong, the pay would be much bigger here in Canada. If you had a thousand in Hong Kong, you would get at least two here. Further, everything was included. Both room and board clothing, shoes and socks were included. He bad turned down others’ requests to sponsor them, but I was given whatever I wanted.’
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Extended working hours, hard bosses and low pay were par for the course for Keung in Hong Kong. He harboured the dream of moving to Canada as a liberation from these socio-economic pressures he had endured all his life. He pictured Canada as a land of plenty, and his sponsor as a lavish benefactor who could make things happen in a new world.

**Perceived relationship between pre-immigration trauma and pathological gambling**

At the end of the series of interviews, participants were asked to rate the contributions of various factors to development of their pathological gambling. While the researchers who are also clinicians assigned a high significance (9 on a scale of 1 to 10) to the role of childhood trauma in the development of pathological gambling, the immigrants themselves thought otherwise. The mean rating they gave to the contribution of ‘childhood trauma’ was 1, the lowest on a 10-point scale, compared with other factors like chronic stress, life transition, setbacks, mood disturbances, legalisation of gambling, availability of time and money, and big wins. It is of note that the participants perceived the proximal factors as figuring more prominently in their development of pathological gambling than the more distal early life factors.

**Consequences of trauma**

The pre-immigration history of this cohort of Chinese Canadian pathological gambling immigrants revealed adverse and traumatic experiences before the age of 18 and during their young adulthood. They experienced a disruption of the expectable emotional, familial, educational, social and economic provisions and sustenance that we would prescribe for every child today. Not only were these provisions not available to them, but also the four immigrants we studied suffered loss and abandonment, neglect and deprivation, physical and emotional abuse in a context of political and socio-economic oppression. They shouldered crushingly high expectations from their elders, which they lived out heroically to ensure their own survival. The experiences they described accord with what is defined as child maltreatment (WHO, 2006).

The DSM-IV-TR (2000) describes the symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress, among them hyper-vigilance and increased arousal, feeling of detachment or estrangement from others, restricted affect and memory loss, and intense psychological distress at internal or external cues resembling an aspect of the traumatic event. However, even in the absence of these symptoms, we note that the effects of trauma can be delayed and insidious, only to surface under extreme conditions of stress. As is the case with the study of complex human phenomena, often a metaphor serves us well by capturing the breadth and depth of its dimensions. According to LaCapra (2001), trauma creates ‘holes in existence’.

*Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered. The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and future.* (p41)

The impacts of trauma are multi-dimensional, encompassing cognitive, affective, somatic, spiritual and behavioural ramifications (Cudd, 2006). What ensured the survival of the immigrants in this study also became their impediment, as they used their childhood styles of coping in adult life without evolving their repertoire of coping strategies or expanding their ways of being in the world.

Self-reliance, child labour and adult responsibilities began for all these immigrants at an early age. They had no choice. As Keung once alleged, ‘By hook or by crook, I will have to make it work’. These early life experiences, of assuming the role of helper, protector, defender and provider, were carried over into the participants’ adult lives and relationships and all of them became the over-functioning partner in their marriage. They worked to prove themselves to be able providers. They had difficulties in drawing boundaries with their spouses and in asserting their share of rights and entitlements. Acknowledgment, encouragement and praise for their courage and caring were not something they had received or expected to receive as children. The burdens and heroic feats of a parentified child were taken for granted. Hence they too took themselves and their contributions for granted in adult life, never expecting
any acknowledgments from their spouses or extended family. Nor were they able to acknowledge and appreciate their own efforts and contributions. Cathy had this revelation in one of her interview sessions.

'I never thought of it this way. But as you interviewed me, I started asking myself how could I have done it. It was amazing. In terms of time, energy, the multiple responsibilities, I have been doing a lot. I was… like a superwoman.'

Ongoing non-reciprocal inequities in their marriages, without corrective communication, eventually led to mounting resentment in the cases of Cathy and Felix. After Keung had suffered a debilitating accident, he continued to overdraw his credit card for four years to support his family financially as if no accident had ever happened. He lived his marriage as a form of dutiful role fulfilment prescribed by his culture. Peter, in his pursuit of career success to bolster his self-esteem, lost sight of his wife and children. Lack of communication and self-disclosure resulted in alienation from their spouses for all cases. Felix’s depiction of his marriage was poignant.

‘Even at times when I am dissatisfied or when she is dissatisfied, neither of us will hash it out in the open. Neither of us feels the other can understand one's point of view. We are at a stalemate. That's why we cannot resolve anything bigger between us when we can’t resolve this basic difference.’

For Peter, Cathy and Felix, one bulwark of resilience had been the presence of a significant parent or sibling. Their loss of these significant others in late middle adulthood was devastating to them, and was a precipitating factor in the onset of their pathological gambling. This was compounded by their brittle sense of self-worth shaken by job loss and demotion for Felix, Peter and Keung. Their failing marriages deprived them of any haven of solace or affirmation. While commendable for their heroic resiliency over the decades, these immigrants also perpetuated the deficits in emotional, cognitive and interpersonal structures that had defined their earlier existence, leading to their late mid-life disillusionment. The setbacks and losses during this period triggered intense psychological distress, reminiscent of their early life trauma, which they were incapable of handling except through gambling as a route of escape.

Unresolved trauma and pathological gambling

Unacknowledged experience in terms of cognitions, affect and human yearnings have a pernicious way of finding an outlet for their disowned energies in the present that may manifest as irrational or compulsive urges and behaviours. Pathological gambling is one example. The fantasies and wishes accompanying pathological gambling have been found to be related to unexpressed feelings, thoughts and yearnings, a phenomenon noted by the first author in eight in-depth case studies of Canadian pathological gamblers and their spouses (Lee, 2002).

Unless repaired and healed, these ‘holes in existence’ over time became ‘potholes’ into which these immigrants fell when the going became rough in their mid-life journeys. In the early post-immigration phase, the immigrants were absorbed in overwork to establish a life for themselves in the new country, propelled by their youthful stamina and enlivened by their dreams. Late middle adulthood, between the ages of 55 and 65, was less rosy, with deaths, an empty nest, dwindling of extended family and social ties, and deterioration of their marital relationship. Old wounds that were not healed, but only buried, flared up when they were confronted with the deaths of significant others and other setbacks. The immigrants were once again left alone in the face of life’s assaults. The stresses associated with immigration alone did not break them, but in conjunction with their psychological, marital and social deficits, made them unable to bounce back from the crises, losses and adversities that hit them in late middle adulthood (Lee et al., 2007).

Finding themselves bereft of resources, they were lured by the opportunities held out by advertisements for gambling and the opening of legalised casinos. They went down a slippery slope in search of hope, soothing, self-esteem and a comeback (Lee et al., 2007).

Discussion and clinical implications

The value of qualitative research is in providing depth of understanding of phenomena. It can also generate hypotheses and conceptual frameworks for further
Our study focused on one small sample of a cohort of Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong to Canada between 1968 and 1974. The qualitative findings suggest that pre-immigration trauma can exacerbate stresses in post-immigration, undermining the immigrants’ resiliency. The impact of early life trauma is not a static phenomenon. The residue of traumatic experiences is reflected in a person’s way of being and acting in the world. The tasks and circumstances of evolving life stages in the context of a dynamic socio-political environment place varying demands on the immigrants’ capacity to cope and respond.

Decline in longer-term (immigrated over 10 years or more) immigrants’ health over time compared with their Canadian-born counterparts as they enter middle and late adulthood has been reported (Gee et al, 2004). However, the effects of early life trauma in later adulthood have not been well studied (Rysberg, 2004). It is of interest that the immigrants in this study all developed pathological gambling between the age of 55 and 66, in late mid-adulthood. The complex interactions of pre-immigration history and challenges in later life on the health and mental health of immigrants warrant further study.

The heterogeneity of Chinese and Asian immigrants needs to be recognised in research and practice as varied by the immigrants’ country of origin, era of immigration and pre-immigration geo-political contexts. Immigrants’ socialisation and cultural values, their motivations for immigration, and how these factors interact with the myriad of socio-economic and political factors in their host country over time require sensitivity in clinical enquiry.

The transferability of this study’s findings remains to be ascertained. With the proliferation of legalised gambling worldwide (National Research Council, 1999), understanding vulnerable populations and the risks and protective factors in development of pathological gambling has been signalled as a priority area of research (Shaffer et al, 2004). Comparative studies of the history and trajectory of pathological gambling in different cohorts of Chinese immigrants would contribute to the development of screening, prevention and treatment appropriate for this population and its sub-groups.

Apart from factual collection of case history information, an extensive rendering of clients’ childhood and family history is usually not part of the assessment and treatment of problem gambling (Ladouceur et al, 2002; Ciarocchi, 2002). Problem gambling counselling typically focuses on the proximal cognitions and behaviours associated with gambling itself (Ladouceur et al, 2002; Ciarocchi, 2002). This study found that the relationship between pre-immigration trauma and pathological gambling has a distal but important link which is not immediately obvious to gamblers themselves. The connection was masked further as a result of the dissociation and emotional disengagement of immigrant gamblers from their traumatic experiences. Hence the assessment and identification of childhood trauma in immigrant pathological gamblers would not be likely to surface in the first interview.

In this study, the participants’ candid and in-depth disclosures were aided by the strong therapeutic alliance between the interviewer and the participants. The interviewer originated from the same country of origin as the immigrants interviewed, which could have provided rapport and understanding of nuances that enhanced the sense of safety and the assurance of understanding and non-judgment for the participants’ disclosure of painful events. Ethical considerations in investigating trauma in the provision of adequate time, safety and care should be taken in trauma-focused interviews to minimise harm and maximise benefits for the participants, as strong emotions are commonly evoked (Newman & Kaloupek, 2004). Because of the pain that can be activated by in-depth disclosures, provision for professional care should always be made available. On the positive side, participants in this study reported an integrative effect from having undergone the interview which led to insights, understanding and personal growth.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore resiliency and how these immigrants fended off the fall-out of these early, adverse, pre-immigration experiences for the first two decades post-migration. Of equal interest is how they coped as children. Insights into and understanding of factors of resiliency would be applicable in developing prevention strategies, and deserve research and analysis.
In summary, assuming further corroboration of the existence of pre-immigration trauma among Chinese and Asian immigrants in future studies, an in-depth pre-immigration history should be part of the assessment and treatment protocol of immigrants manifesting pathological gambling. Training of counsellors to include the pre-immigration and early life history of pathological gamblers in their assessment and healing of trauma should be an important step towards enhancing services provided to this vulnerable segment of the population.

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