



## **(How) is it possible to stay healthy in migration?**

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Despite growing demand for changing research perspectives since the 1992 WHO-Conference 'Migration and Health', only few researchers studied health and wellbeing of migrant people instead of disease and illness. Very little is known about the experience of health and daily health activities of migrants. Knowing more about resilience and health resources mobilised by migrants is needed for future health practices and politics.

Inspired by Antonovsky's salutogenic approach, this project shifts the perspective and asks why migrants stay healthy. At the centre of interest are Sub-Saharan Africans living in Switzerland who consider themselves and/or are considered by others as mastering problems affecting their health. Another strand of research has also been inspired by Antonovsky and his salutogenic perspective but uses a qualitative methodology to develop the categories of health, well-being and resistance resources from the point of view of the people themselves. This orientation expands the approach of Antonovsky by considering the subjective and social construction of health. Individual persons draw on social representations and (re)produce them in daily life. The present PhD project starts from this research tradition to look in a new way at the relationship of migration and health.

Although a comprehensive qualitative investigation on migration and health from a salutogenic perspective has not yet been conducted, several small studies in Germany and Switzerland recently addressed the issue. The exploratory qualitative study of Obrist and Büchi (2006, 2007) contributed to filling this gap. The study was carried out within the framework of a research program on Migration and Health of the Swiss Federal Office of Health from February 2004 to January 2006 and inquired how migrants from Africa living in Switzerland define health and what they do in their everyday life to stay healthy. The mixed African-Swiss research team explored health concepts and daily activities of resilient African women and men living in Zurich and Basel through in-depth interviews and participant observation. Based on these case studies, research instruments for a participatory rapid assessment were developed and tested in group discussions.

The data show that resilient migrants have a dynamic and multi-dimensional understanding of health and see “staying healthy” under difficult life conditions as a task. Staying healthy is closely related to various personal, social and material resources they mobilise in response to the demands of difficult life conditions. The migrants have further learnt to interpret their difficulties as “stress”, a popular illness concept in Switzerland and Europe but hardly known in their home countries. Resilience seems closely related with the appropriation of “stress” as an illness concept: It not only gives meaning and helps to explain their bodily and emotional symptoms, it also offers an agenda for action and contributes to their feeling of social belonging in the host country. These findings have important implications for policy and practice in the rapidly changing field of migration and health.

Based on these results the study focuses on the following thematic fields:

#### *Appropriation of the illness concept of “stress”*

The above mentioned findings of the qualitative study of Obrist and Büchi and the process of appropriation of the illness concept of “stress” by the migrants will be studied in more detail, discussed in additional interviews and reflected in the light of the sociological theory work of Pierre Bourdieu.

#### *Religion as a resource for health*

Religion plays an important role in the health concepts and in the health related daily activities of the interviewed migrants and will be analysed and discussed.

#### *Work as a resource for health*

A small number of qualitative studies among different migrant groups in Switzerland show that work is often seen by migrants as a health resource. These studies will be closely analysed in order to deepen our understanding of the relationship of work and health in the life experiences of migrants in Switzerland.

#### *Health promotion with migrants*

Health promotion focus on the development and maintenance of health in everyday life and tries to contribute to social change that reduces health inequality.