

## Celebrating UN International Women & Girls in Science: Dr. Ada X. Chen shares her perspective

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- ADA X. CHEN: 00:06 [music] The science is like a puzzle. Identifying the missing pieces and putting the pieces together.
- JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:13 This is Joan Banks-Smith for Kessler Foundation's Fast Takes - Research that Changes Lives. In this special edition, we are celebrating the United Nations international day of women and girls in science. Our special guest is Dr. Ada Chen. Dr. Chen is originally from China. She finished two years of high school there and then her senior year in Scotland. She also remained in Scotland for her undergraduate degree, and that was at the University of Edinburgh, and she majored in sociology. Her first master's is in cultural and heritage management, and that was at the Edinburgh Napier University. Her second master's is in rehabilitation counseling, and that was from the University of Wisconsin Madison. And her third degree, a master's of public health was from the University of Edinburgh. And her PhD was in rehabilitation counselor education, and that was from the University of Wisconsin Madison. Dr. Chen, you have a lot of education behind you. What made you decide to initially go off to Scotland?
- CHEN: 01:22 [music] It was actually a few reasons. First is the family influence. So my father back in 2000-- he is also a medical doctor. He specialized in internal medicine at first and later he visited United States after visiting Scotland. He went to Winchester University in Virginia. And he learned the concept of modern rehabilitation medicine there. So when he came back, he is very impressed with the education system in the US, and he thinks I will be a good fit to go on and study abroad. I also have a few family members and friends who's living abroad, both in the USA and the UK. So that's the influence of the family and friends. And also, for myself, when I was a younger age, I was very excited to have the potential opportunity to experience different language, different culture, and cuisines. The thought of it was very exciting for me.
- BANKS-SMITH: 02:28 When you talk about the culture, and obviously, you have one degree in culture and heritage, how did that translate into then moving into the world of rehab?
- CHEN: 02:38 I guess the path that I took to get to where I am as a post-op fellow during the full-time research on employment disability at Kessler Foundation, it's somewhat a long path, and it's not conventional one. So my undergraduate major was sociology in the UK at the time. So by the time I finished with my degree in sociology, I was very confused. I was not sure what kind of career path I could take with a degree in sociology. So I explored around. I've always liked culture and the thought of heritage. So I saw this master's degree opening up. It's called cultural heritage management. And I thought this could be a good fit because part of the sociology study is about culture and heritage as well. So I applied for that. And during my master's degree study, I realized that this is now the career that I want to take. This is now something I want to do for the rest of my life. So I started to use my knowledge in sociology, especially the knowledge on the disability of sociology as well as some of the sociology methodology and use that background to give myself a opportunity to collaborate with some of the rehabilitation medicine researchers in China. So we

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started to do some rehabilitation medicine research, which kind of gave me a chance to apply for the rehabilitation counseling degree in Wisconsin.

BANKS-SMITH: 04:31

Throughout this journey, aside from your father being a doctor, has there been anybody else who you felt has been influential, either as a mentor, professor, that also helped you decide to go from the culture and heritage studies into rehabilitation?

CHEN: 04:50

Along the way, there were a few people that had heavy influence on my decisions and my development as a researcher in rehabilitation. First of all, it's a family influence. So my father, he's not the only MD in the family. It started with my grandma. My grandma, she graduated with a medical degree back in, I think, 1940s, 1950s.

BANKS-SMITH: 05:20

Wow.

CHEN: 05:20

Yeah. She was [inaudible] the first female doctors in the modern Republic of China. Yeah. At the time, most people didn't even finish high school, and she somehow made it to the doctoral degree and finished with MD. So, yeah, she had an influence her two sons, my father who finished as a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner, specialized in internal medicine, and now his most specialized in rehabilitation medicine. And my uncle, he also went to the medical school. He is a sergeant. He's actually a pretty famous surgeon in cardiovascular in China. So the family influence had a very big influence on my decision process. The second one is my PhD adviser back to University of Wisconsin Madison, professor Hong Chen. I think he's truly a scholar and a gentleman. He's also an excellent educator and a very, very productive researcher. So because I came from a different educational background with my degree in sociology and culture heritage management, I did not know much about the world of vocational rehabilitation counseling. So the first thing he did was he asked me to take a lot of foundational classes during my PhD-- first three years of my PhD years. So I ended up taking classes with master's students. I was taking maximum credits every semester. And he also encouraged me to do the additional internships in three different settings to let myself be familiar with the vocational rehabilitation system as well as the mental health system here in the United States. He also gave me a lot of opportunities throughout my five years as a PhD student to do different research. So he helped me find my research direction, which is on demand-side employment practice as well as psychosocial research on disability. He also taught me how to do data analysis, prepare for the dataset, prepare and submitting manuscripts. He basically taught me how to become an independent researcher. So where I graduated with my PhD in 2021, I actually had over 20 publications. That was opportunities he provided to me, and we still collaborate even through this day.

CHEN: 08:21

The last person that had lots of influence on me is my current center director at Kessler Foundation, our director for employment disability research, Dr. John O'Neill who is an amazing researcher, and he has been a great mentor to me because my PhD program, my major is called rehabilitation council education. We are trained as educators and everyone was expected to get a university job as a professor after graduation. Most people in my field conduct research in university settings as professors. So why apply for post-op position? I guess I was not so sure. I was now very familiar with a typical community based research setting like Kessler Foundation.

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We had some really great conversations about what to expect, the differences between doing the research in universities settings versus settings like Kessler. He was able to share a lot of valuable insight because he has experience as both the university faculty and a researcher at Kessler. So after those conversations, I was very convinced that this would be a great fit for my career [inaudible]. Coming here is definitely the best decision I've made in recent years. I've enjoyed doing the research work here as well as working under Dr. John O'Neill and also seeing firsthand the impact of the research that he does here. So those are the people have influenced my decision process along the way.

BANKS-SMITH: 10:13 It seems that it's a nice mix of different areas of study to help you along this journey?

CHEN: 10:18 Definitely.

BANKS-SMITH: 10:21 You mentioned that you have a master's in public health and your PhD is as a rehab counselor educator. How has those degrees helped you in your current employment here at the foundation?

CHEN: 10:33 My PhD degree in rehabilitation counseling or rehabilitation counselor education and my master's degree in public health, I think these two degree compliment each other very well. So for rehabilitation counseling or vocational rehab, our focus is on employment. The research we do is employment and disability. At least here in the United States, employment is often viewed as a public health intervention because employment provides better physical, mental, and emotional health to the individuals with disabilities, also helping to achieve independent-living goals as well as better quality of life. On the other side, being unemployed is connected to a few problems or issues including depression, anxiety, substance abuse problems, ultimately lead to poverty and bad health and lower quality of life. I thought employment is viewed as a public health intervention. By learning some of the advanced knowledge and especially the advanced methodology in public health could really help me with my research in rehabilitation and counseling of vocational rehabilitation. I think my education backgrounds in both sociology, public health, as well as vocational rehabilitation counseling, it has shaped who I am as a research now. This experience have provided me with the opportunity to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the medical, psychosocial, and vocational aspects of approaches related to the research I'm doing now, which is employment and disability.

BANKS-SMITH: 12:44 I'm going to shift gears here a little bit. During the pandemic, you, John O'Neill, and myself, and a few others had the opportunity to work on the VRF manual. The VRF stands for vocational resource facilitation, which is a narrative and guide, what does this narrative and guide do? What's it used for? And if it's available to clinicians, other researchers?

CHEN: 13:13 First of all, I want to talk a little about the intervention which is called vocational resource facilitation. We usually refer it to as the VRF. So this intervention, it is a person-centered and early-interventions vocational rehabilitation program. It is designed to promote return to work and competitive integrated employment. For currently, it is people with spinal cord injuries. So the intervention starts during the inpatient phase at the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation. It delivers the vocational

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services to newly injured individuals with spinal cord injury during the acute medical inpatient rehabilitation state. And the intervention followed by systematic assertive employment services, coordination, post discharge for around two years, which leading to competitive employment. The manual we're talking about, it's like a resources guide because vocational resource facilitation, the big part of it is to provide to the patients with different resources and information that's relevant to the employment that could help them return to work. So the manual describes what vocational resource facilitation is. And some of the resources that the practitioner can use to provide services to the individual. So my current project is to study different stakeholder's experience and perceptions in regards to the effects of vocational resource facilitation intervention. So by stakeholders, we're looking at two different sites. First one is the supply side, which include the participants with spinal cord injury who have received services from the vocational resource facilitation program as well as the New Jersey state vocational rehabilitation counselors who have provided services to the participants with spinal cord injury. And the other side is what we call the demand side. It's the employers who have hired or rehired the VRF participants with spinal cord injury. So I'm hoping to gain some insights about how those stakeholders-- their thoughts on how to improve the VRF intervention program, and I want to use those findings to enhance the current manual as well as the current interventions.

BANKS-SMITH: 16:28

For our listeners, back in the day, when somebody came into the hospital or the rehab facility with a spinal cord injury, it could be a lengthy stay. But people didn't necessarily think about what's this person going to do after when they get home. But today, the thought process is even while you're in the hospital, we already have to start thinking about how you're going to move forward, what are you going to do, what can we do to get you back into the job, is that correct?

CHEN: 16:55

Yes. That is correct.

BANKS-SMITH: 16:57

This manual, is this for caregivers as well as clinicians?

CHEN: 17:03

Well, now this manual is mostly for the clinicians, but we are hoping we could expand the manual to include some relevant information and resources for the care takes as well.

BANKS-SMITH: 17:19

This manual is on our [KFlearn.org](http://KFlearn.org) website. If listeners are interested in taking a look at it, we'll have all of that information in the description of this podcast. We're going to wrap this up, Dr. Chen, and I just have one last question for you. From your experiences so far, what advice would you give to girls and women seeking a career in the sciences?

CHEN: 17:45

One important advice I will give, which has helped me a lot of the way is to keep your curiosity-- is to be curious because science or the research work is very curious in nature and really, to embrace and enjoy the intellectual challenges of the barriers that you find along the way. Always asking questions, science and research itself can fulfill a lifelong of curiosity for you. And I guess science is like a puzzle. Identifying the missing pieces and putting the pieces together. So, yeah, I think the advice I would give is to keep curious and don't give up.

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- BANKS-SMITH: 18:35 I think that's excellent advice. Dr. Chen, thank you so much for spending some time with us and for sharing your background and the work that you do at the foundation. We really appreciate all that you do here. [music]
- CHEN: 18:48 Thank you very much for the opportunity.
- BANKS-SMITH: 18:50 We will have Dr. Chen's bio in various links in the program now. So be sure to check those out. Tuned in to our podcast series lately? Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Be sure and subscribe to our SoundCloud channel, Kessler Foundation, for more research updates. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcasts. This podcast was recorded remotely and was edited and produced by Joan Banks-Smith, creative producer for Kessler Foundation. [music]