



## Explaining the continuum of social participation among older adults in Singapore: from 'closed doors' to active ageing in multi-ethnic community settings



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** This study aims to identify and explain the continuum in which older people in Singapore participate in community and social life, highlighting the influence of culture and policy context on social participation.

**Methods:** Using an ethnographic approach in a neighbourhood (n = 109), we conducted focus groups with older adults of different ethnicities, exploring experiences of social participation. Next, participants took 50 photographs relating to 'lives of elders', showcasing the socio-ecological context that influenced social participation. Lastly, go-along interviews were conducted in various precincts with community leaders.

**Results:** A continuum of social participation emerged among older adults, ranging from (1) marginalization and exclusion, to (2) 'comfort-zoning' alone (3) seeking consistent social interactions, (4) expansion of social network, and (5) giving back to society. Seeking consistent social interactions was shaped by a preference for cultural grouping and ethnic values, but also a desire for emotional safety. Attitudes about expanding one's social network depended on the psychosocial adjustment of the older person to the prospect of gossip and 'trouble' of managing social relations. Despite the societal desirability of an active ageing lifestyle, cultural scripts emphasizing family meant older adults organized participation in social and community life, around family responsibilities. Institutionalizing family reliance in Singapore's welfare approach penalized lower-income older adults with little family support from accessing subsidies, and left some living on the margins.

**Discussion:** To promote inclusiveness, ageing programs should address preferences for social participation, overcoming barriers at the individual, ethnic culture and policy level.

### Background

Encouraging older adults to participate in community activities is the cornerstone of the active ageing strategy in many countries. While many studies focus on benefits of social participation, few studies consider why older people participate in different ways, and the extent to which social participation occurs across its full continuum for older people. Defining social participation as time spent in social interactions doing social activities, distal to proximal levels of social involvement

have been identified along the continuum of social participation (Levasseur, Richard, Gauvin, & Raymond, 2010). For example, Levasseur et al. (2010) distinguishes between social activities performed with others (e.g. participation in informal social activities and organized social activities) to those for others (e.g. volunteering and civic engagement). Partaking in social activities of the latter type relates to social engagement, which has been described as a higher level of social participation, where the individual seeks to influence and involve themselves in the community (Levasseur et al., 2010).

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Yet as empirical studies of older adults and psychosocial theories of ageing highlight, not all older adults desire to engage in new community activities or social engagement- and may prefer familiar social interactions (Bukov, Maas, & Lampert, 2002; Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Johnson & Barer, 1992). These inter-individuals' differences have been attributed as a function of health, social, and financial resources, yet few studies examine how these factors interact with culture and the policy contexts to influence social participation. The current study aims to identify, contrast and explain the continuum in which older people in a multi-ethnic diverse Asian context of Singapore, participate in community and social life. To do so, we first discuss social participation in the psychosocial contexts of ageing, and then the larger culture and policy context for older people in Singapore.

#### *Social participation in the psychosocial context of ageing*

Psychosocial changes in ageing influence how older adults engage in community and social life, yet there is a lack of reconciliation among the different ageing theories on how so. Continuity theory emphasizes how older adults seek a consistent sense of self through continuing social roles, relationships, and activities (Atchley, 1989). On the other hand, disengagement theory and socioemotional selectivity theory posits a reduction or selective narrowing of social interactions, to focus on meaningful social activities and relations (Cartensen, 1992; Cummings & Henry, 1961). The latter two theories suggest that with age, older people focus on existing social routines and informal social activities, rather than high levels of social participation, and expanding their social network.

Empirical studies show there is variability in the occurrence of continuity versus disengagement among older adults (Bukov et al., 2002; Johnson & Barer, 1992; Nimrod, Janke, & Kleiber, 2008; Scherger, Nazroo, & Higgs, 2011). For example, Johnson and Barer (1992) found approximately half of his sample of old-old seniors (85 years and above) continued participating at a senior centre, community club or church despite extensive loss of family members and contact with family. Among older adults who reduced social contact, the authors found they redefined their social boundaries in various ways, which can be seen as a selective narrowing of social interactions. (Johnson & Barer, 1992). For example, reducing extended social ties to avoid bothersome events, and regulating social life by pacing activities and establishing routine. A separate literature however, distinguishes this selective narrowing from social isolation, which refers to a lack of social and personal relationships the older person can access (Lubben et al., 2006; Machielse, 2015). While there is a lack of theory to explain this variability in continuity versus disengagement, reduction of social participation has been associated with poor health, disability, little social resources and poorer psychological well-being (Jivraj, Nazroo, & Barnes, 2016; Maddox, 1965; Scherger et al., 2011).

#### *Social participation in the cultural and policy context*

This focus on the individual however, neglects how culture and the policy context affect social participation through norms and expectations of ageing, and social roles for older adults. For example, Asian societies emphasize social integration within the family unit (Mjelde-Mossey, Chin, Lubben, & Lou, 2009). A guiding principle for maintaining harmony in Asian contexts is reciprocity of social exchanges, where older adults are also expected to play a meaningful role in their family (Chow, 1996). Central to this role, are traditional tasks such as giving wise advice, transmitting knowledge and cultural values, or grand-parenting (Wu et al., 2005). In addition to gaining respect from these tasks, filial piety also accords social power and status to older adults through its emphasis on the younger generation honouring, and caring for them (Chow, 1996). Informal social participation in the form of interactions with family may therefore precede over social or volunteering commitments in the community (Ng et al., 2011).

On the other hand, the policy context has implications on the financial security of older adults to do social participation after retirement. Older adults who retire in countries with a minimal welfare system seek financial security through intergenerational transfer, savings or work. For lower-income retirees, Peter Laslett's notion of the Third Age (Laslett, 1991), in terms of freedom from working life, can be unattainable (Abramson, 2015; Moffatt & Heaven, 2016). There is a scarcity of studies in Asia, looking at the effect of these contexts on social participation of older adults.

#### *Exploring the cultural and policy context of Singapore*

Singapore therefore offers an interesting case study in Asia, due to the make-up of three major ethnic groups, which allow us to explore the effect of different cultural scripts on social participation. Singapore is majority Chinese (83%), followed by Malay (10%) and Indian (6%) ethnicity (Department of Statistics, Singapore 2015). Cultural scripts for older adults tied to maintaining social integration, or harmonious relationships within the family differ between the three ethnic subgroups. Malay and Indian older adults socialize their children and grandchildren more frequently through religious activities, education and guidance, compared to Chinese older adults (Mehta, 1997). Accordingly, it suggests that ways of social participation for Malay and Indian older adults would revolve more tightly around interactions with family members, and celebration of cultural traditions and religious festivals.

Singapore's policy has traditionally espoused reliance on collective responsibility, and anxiety about creating state dependency. These values have shaped a lack of universal financial assistance, and encouraged dependency of lower-income older adults on the 'family first' (Mehta, 2006; Times, 1993). Social assistance schemes for lower-income older adults, such as ComCare (Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2016) and Medifund (Ministry of Health, 2016) can only be accessed after family members are proved inapt to support them. However, given the structural changes and increasing burden on the family unit, studies in Asia have begun to question the adequacy of social welfare approaches with high reliance on the family, in offering security and enabling social participation among older adults (Du & Guo, 2000; Yamashita, Soma, & Chan, 2013). The aim of our study was to identify, contrast and explain the continuum in which older people in the multi-ethnic diverse Asian context of Singapore participate in community and social life. Towards this aim, our first objective was to identify and contrast the different ways of social participation along the continuum. Our second objective was to explain how individual factors among older adults interact with cultural and the policy context in Singapore to influence these different ways of social participation.

## **Design and methods**

### *Study background*

This study was part of a wider community assessment, to inform the development and evaluation of a community intervention in a Singaporean housing estate-Whampoa. Whampoa has been selected as a pilot site for development into an elder-friendly neighbourhood, as part of the City for All Ages initiative (Ministry of Family and Social Development, 2014). Tsao Foundation, a non-governmental organization, has been invited to take the lead in this initiative, in partnership with the local grassroots, using a community development model (Golden & Earp, 2012). The intervention seeks to give older people a voice in solving community issues that affect them, by setting up elder-led interests group, towards promoting greater social participation among older people (Tsao foundation, 2014).

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