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Multiple Senses of Community among Older Chinese Migrants to New Zealand

Abstract

Existing literature suggests that successful ageing is linked to a sense of community (SOC) that is developed through shared daily practices. For migrant groups SOC can extend across home and receiving countries. In order to understand the issue of successful ageing in place and multiple SOCs among older Chinese migrants, this paper investigated 32 older Chinese migrants' narratives of developing a SOC in their local and home communities. Findings suggest that a SOC can be viewed as constructed through practices such as neighbouring and supportive interactions within local contexts as well as engagement with the home country via new media. The findings provide insights into everyday practices central to the cultivation of a SOC among the participants whose engagements span the cultural spaces of China and New Zealand. For example, the use of media contributes to the participants' SOCs both in China and New Zealand. As a result, they live in a transnational community that can be understood as an 'imagined' community where the participants engage with significant, although absent, Chinese others. Living between China and New Zealand, between homes and between languages, the participants create identity 'inbetweenness' that is constructed at the intersection of interdependent, compatible and mutually reinforcing communities and spaces. The findings therefore extend conventional understandings of ageing migrant experiences that assume successful ageing and community participation occur in one locale to an understanding of multiple SOCs within the context of transnationalism.

Keywords: Ageing in place, sense of community, transnationalism, inbetweenness, narrative

Introduction

Through an investigation of older Chinese migrants to New Zealand, this article addresses several issues of concern for community psychology, including the limited focus on issues of ageing (Cheng & Heller, 2009), the importance of culture in daily life (Sonn, 2002), the multiple nature of community (Brodsky & Marx, 2001), and SOC among older migrant groups (Li, 2013). We will show that globalization, transnationalism and international migration challenge conventional understandings of ageing experiences, which often locate people in their immediate physical environments. Taken-for-granted daily practices provide a focus for exploring how older Chinese migrants build and continue their connections with communities both in New Zealand and in China to reveal a sense of transnational connectedness. This is particularly apparent in the use of media to stay in contact and engage in regular interactions with significant others residing in often distant places (Hodgetts et al., 2010). In focusing on such processes, we extend existing knowledge of successful ageing across local and transnational community settings.

Living in an ageing world, the concept of successful ageing is important not only to older people but also to the society as a whole (Ouweland, de Ridder, Bensing, 2007). Over the past two decades, the research on the concept has changed its emphasis from formulating specific criteria for successful ageing to investigating the process of successful ageing. Kaye et al. (1994) described successful ageing as individuals being able to function effectively and successfully and being likely to experience very little cognitive decline with age. This conceptualisation of successful ageing is arguable, in that, to some extent, it imposes a one-size-fits-all approach to ageing and does not take into account the diversity of older people. From a more balanced perspective, Baltes and Carstensen (1996) considered successful ageing as the resilience of

people who succeed in achieving a positive balance between gains and losses during ageing. Tate, Lah, & Cuddy (2003), who adopted a broader approach, defined successful ageing as a dynamic process during which a series of choices and adaptation can be made. These choices and adaptation include such things as adjusting to cognitive capabilities; keeping active physically, mentally and socially; being productive; maintaining independent; and positive spirituality. Regardless of how successful ageing is defined, this positive perspective suggests that older people have skills, knowledge and experience to age successfully and to contribute to society, and that the expected growth in the proportion of older people provides the family, community and society with a valuable resource (Li, 2013).

In order to promote the value and participation of older people in communities, the New Zealand Government has reiterated a commitment to creating environments in which people can successfully age in place. Ageing in place refers to people's ability to make choices in later life about where to live, and how to receive the support to do so (Li, 2013). This policy implies that older people would remain in their communities, either in their family homes or in supported accommodation, rather than moving into residential care. The policy promotes 'home' as a place where older people, including older migrants, feel safe, secure and protected, and where older people can maintain a SOC through continuity in everyday activities and relationships that they have built up over a lifetime.

Earlier work in SOC proposed that SOC is 'setting-specific' (Hill, 1996; Hughey, Speer, & Peterson, 1999), devoting strong emphasis on the individual's own orientation to his or her local community. Human movement between countries, however, requires us to expand traditional notions of SOC as a process; as an enactment of relationships between people, physical settings and social spaces. This movement raises issues of how people might participate

in multiple communities simultaneously (Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007). Further, older migrants face particular challenges in managing their ageing in place and SOC in the process of moving across geographic and cultural borders, in comparison to local residents who are well rooted in place (Li & Chong, 2012). Migration and settlement points to the need to delve into a SOC within the context of transnationalism, which describes migrants who build, maintain and reinforce multiple social and emotional interconnections in more than one country (Green, Power, & Jang, 2008).

Similar to the concepts of ageing in place, SOC is fundamentally concerned with experiences of community life (Hyde & Chavis, 2007). SOC refers to belonging to a community based on the perception of similarity among members, where reciprocal relations facilitate the satisfaction of individual needs (Sarason, 1974; Sonn, 2002). SOC includes the following primary dimensions: membership, influence, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Inherent in this conception of SOC is interdependence, mutual responsibility and collective action (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2007). Earlier work was focussed on SOC as ‘setting-specific’ (Hughey, Speer, & Peterson, 1999). SOC research has later expanded to multiple communities and multiple senses (Brodsky, 1996; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007). Phenomena such as globalisation and the development of media technologies open up multiple ways for people to express themselves and require that research into SOC looks beyond local settings to how connections to people located elsewhere are enacted through the use of communication technologies such as satellite television, social media, and email. Utilising these technologies, older Chinese migrants can interact and maintain relationships in transnational communities and develop multiple SOC across groupings and geographical spaces (Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007).

The literature has made invaluable contributions to our understanding of SOC, primarily with a strong emphasis on the cognitive perceptions that individuals or groups have towards their local place-based communities (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). However, as Mannarini and Fedi's (2009) point out, a SOC is the product of shared everyday narrative practices that extend out beyond the local physical setting. People's everyday experiences of community as anchored in mundane practices therefore should not be ignored. To address this research gap, this article devotes attention to the social construction of community through daily practices that are culturally patterned through which a SOC is cultivated and enacted (Rapley & Pretty, 1999). Through analysing both linguistic and embodied everyday practices we seek to explore how a SOC is lived within and beyond the local setting and into transnational communities.

In order to understand the issue of successful ageing in place and multiple SOCs among older Chinese migrants the findings are presented in two sections. The first section investigates older Chinese migrants' experiences of developing a SOC in their local communities. To better understand how everyday activities, processes and practices foster multiple SOCs, the second section explores their SOC within the context of transnationalism. A key focus of the article is on processes and practices that foster multiple SOCs in local and home communities.

Present Study

Participants

The first author provided information about the research to a range of Chinese community groups who agreed to refer potential participants to the researcher. Eighteen female and 14 male older Chinese migrants, who ranged in age from 62 to 77 years, agreed to participate in the study. Most had moved to New Zealand under the family reunion program to

assist with the caring of their grandchildren. The length of residence in New Zealand in the first interview ranged from 4 months to 12.5 years. On arrival in New Zealand, all of the participants lived in the homes of their adult children. However, at the time of the first interview in 2008, less than half continued to live with their adult children and one third no longer had children living in New Zealand. All the participants became retirees before moving to New Zealand. Prior to retirement participants were employed as engineers, health professionals, teachers, managers and factory workers. The primary source of income of the participants was the New Zealand means-tested emergency grant of about NZ\$10,000 per annum. To ensure participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used in this article.

Interviews

Three sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author with each participant between April 2008 and September 2009. Interviews were conducted in either Mandarin or Cantonese depending on the participant's preference. The first interview investigated the life history of the participant (e.g., history of immigration and social lives in China). The second interview focused on the participant's present experiences in New Zealand (e.g., community activities and social connections). The direction of this interview was informed by the concept of SOC. The third interview explored the participant's reflection on his or her experiences of ageing in place in both China and New Zealand. During the second and third sets of interviews, the first author participated in and observed participants' community activities—permission was sought from all participants to do this. In this way, the interview-based approach to this study incorporated aspects of what is commonly termed the “go-along” interview. The first author accompanied participants around their environments as they engaged in activities considered important and meaningful to them (Carpiano, 2009). Having a researcher to explore

community involvement prompted participants to reveal the history and personal relevance of particular activities in their everyday lives. This information would likely be overlooked when employing casual observations alone (Li, Hodgetts, & Ho 2010).

Data Analysis

The data analysed in this paper are taken from a larger study which explored ageing, housing and wellbeing of Older Chinese Migrants to New Zealand (for details of the larger research, see Li, 2011). All interviews were transcribed in Chinese by the first author. Preliminary data analysis was processed in Chinese and then translated into English for further analysis. To ensure the translation reflected the full depth of meaning the translated interviews were checked by two Chinese academics fluent in communicating in Mandarin, Cantonese and English (Li & Chong, 2012). Our analysis of the data was then guided by the concepts of ageing in place and multiple SOCs. That is, we brought the concepts to the analysis of the translated transcripts. A narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) was employed to analyse the data, with three steps being taken. First, while translating the interviews from Chinese into English, the participant accounts were chronologically rearranged. This process generated 32 chronological biographical narratives—one narrative for each participant. Second, the authors worked with the chronological biographical narratives to develop analytic themes. The four dimensions of SOC (membership, influence, fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connections) were utilised as tools for developing themes. The two major themes of the paper, “SOC in a local setting” and “SOC in a transnational context”, reflect those four dimensions. Third, particular cases were selected to illustrate the themes and highlight key points.

Findings and Discussion

SOC in a local setting

Our analysis reveals that older Chinese migrants are active community members who strive to develop connections and a SOC in New Zealand. To explore the participants' SOCs in the local setting, we focus on the two key issues. One is the role of neighbouring and social support in fostering belonging and familiarity in the local setting. The second aspect of neighbouring is a product of exclusionary experiences and proactive practices of engagement. The local community is physically tangible and above all else is relational and emotional (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009).

In finding a place to make a home and cultivate a SOC our participants emphasised the need to build a history of residency in a new setting. For the participants, ageing in place is associated with emotional bonds and belonging to the neighbourhood. Although many participants reported that language was a barrier to full involvement, many established good relationships and emotional bonds with their neighbours through their engaging in helping practices. Hong, a 75 year-old female, told the interviewer that she and her husband provided instrumental assistance to their neighbours. This assistance included collecting letters and newspapers, and watering gardens for holidaying neighbours. Hong also told the interviewer a story about how she and her husband utilised their language skills to help a neighbour:

I learnt English when I was young. My husband studied in Russia for five years. One day, our Russian neighbour lost her wallet in a supermarket and came to us for help because she failed to communicate with the staff member in the supermarket. We went to the supermarket with her. She talked to my husband in Russian. My husband translated what she said into Chinese to me. I explained to the staff member in the supermarket in English. The lady got her wallet back. (Smiles.)

Hong was very proud of herself when she told the story. She told the interviewer that being able to help her neighbour made her feel that she was part of a larger group, rather than an isolated person. Hong's account showed that through specific acts people could become members of a place and come to trust that their needs would be met. This process came to the fore through supportive interactions among neighbours. Supportive social interactions led the members of the neighbourhood to attach meaning to the local setting and foster belonging and familiarity. As a result, the neighbourhood became a place where the person could gain membership and establish emotional connections foundational to the development of social capital and social cohesion. In the example above Hong, her husband and their neighbour spoke different languages, yet were able to support each other.

Language proficiency is a key topic in migration resettlement. As shown in Hong's account, our participants' limited English capacities restricted their verbal communication with English-speaking people. In this sense, language barriers did hinder the participants' adaptation and adjustment. Nonetheless, Hong, her husband and their neighbour worked around language barriers in ways that were beyond language. This finding suggests that the resettlement experience of migrants is more complex than is presented in migration research, which usually regards language as one of the sole key indicators of successful resettlement and ignores the roles of social interactions and means of communication that are beyond languages and can span cultures. In this sense, our participants' engaged in unique practices, compared to other migrant groups, because they did not rely solely on spoken language dependence to cultivate a SOC.

Apart from the emotional bond and belonging, the cultivation of a SOC also encompasses the overcoming of negative experiences. In the following extract, Tian, a 69 year-old male, described his negative relationship with the neighbourhood at the time when eggs were thrown at

his daughter's car. For Tian, this incident represented a significant event that ruptured his sense of belonging in the neighbourhood. When the first author arrived at Tian's home for the second interview, Tian was cleaning up his daughter's car and told the first author:

Kids threw chips and eggs at my daughter's car. It's frightening. I will remind myself to be careful in the future. For example, lock my doors and windows when I go out, and not to walk closely to a stranger.

Tian's narrative suggested that negative experiences and incidents could provoke fears and emotional insecurity (Brodsky, 1996). Consequently, his positive emotional connection with the neighbourhood was eroded. It also showed how broader negative discourses around migration can shape local actions, in this case leading to the throwing of eggs. Such experiences were evident in other participants' accounts. For instance, Hong said:

Several of us were attacked by kids in our neighbourhood. Some girls threw eggs at us. A group of young men threw stones at an older Chinese couple who were waiting by the bus stop near their home. The couple had been afraid to leave their home since then. We didn't feel safe when we walked on the street even at as early as seven o'clock in the evening.

Hong's account describes a disruption to her positive relationship with the neighbourhood, while illuminating the impact of negative experiences on older Chinese migrants. All people may experience negative neighbourhood interactions at different times. Older migrants are more likely to spend time in their neighbourhoods, partly because their limited social networks and English language abilities constrain their social lives. As a result, they may suffer greater exposure to stressful neighbourhoods, especially when they become the targets of attacks.

Research suggests that neighbourhoods where negative experiences occur are as significant as neighbourhoods where needs are met and succour is found in terms of their ability to influence residents' wellbeing, particularly when people put an effort into turning a negative neighbourhood into a positive one (Manzo, 2005). Ming, a 76 year-old male, reflected how older Chinese immigrants and the larger community collectively worked to improve their neighbourhood. This invoked processes of bonding in opposition to discrimination and the threat of crime:

We organised an informal meeting to discuss our worries about our safety. Most victims of the attacks didn't report to the police. Inability to speak English and the belief that the police would do nothing stopped them from reporting the attacks. We decided to act collectively. We approached newspapers. The reporters disclosed the attacks. The police then set up a call centre for Asians in our community. A Chinese-Kiwi Friendship Programme was also established to help Kiwis and the older Chinese to better know each other and to keep our neighbourhood safe together.

Ming portrayed a picture representing a 'culture of civility' (Godfrey, 1988), where residents regarded multicultural diversity as a civic resource and not as a dangerous threat. For example, the police initiative offered older Chinese people a place where they felt safer. The Chinese-Kiwi friendship programme provided a platform to foster friendship, to share experiences, and for cultural exchange. These collective efforts based on civility and mutual interest provided a model for settling neighbourhood conflicts, and contributed to the construction of a SOC and a sense of empowerment for those Chinese elders who inhabited these multicultural contact zones. Through the culture of civility, powerful and positive sentiments were produced in addition to strong emotional connections with the community where participants aged. Through such

neighbourhood-building a SOC is cultivated. As such, SOC does not just happen; it requires collective work that establishes relations between peoples and the community and significantly expands inter-subjectivity beyond the person to the neighbourhood, community and society as a whole. In a way, SOC is accepted as being intertwined and contributing towards collectivity through the reproduction of common values, norms and willingness to participate in social networks and build social capital. The participation leads to a greater SOC, which, in turn, leads to more collective actions (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009).

SOC in a transnational context

As noted previously, the importance of investigating SOC within the context of transnationalism should not be overlooked because migration is one of the main processes that have contributed to the multiple nature of community. For older Chinese migrants, ties to the homeland play a vital role in their SOC because the homeland is not a place that they simply leave behind, but a place of attachment. One of the key features of such transnationalism is belonging in more than one place. For example, because of technology people are able to maintain connections with those in other places, which remain important in constructing identities and multiple belonging.

Zhuang's (a 65 year-old male) account below reflected how satellite television served social and cultural functions. Transnational telecommunications enabled him to maintain contact with distant kin and friends, and thus helped him sustain cultural and emotional connections and social networks:

We installed a satellite dish which was used to subscribe to Chinese TV channels. We received more than 30 TV programmes from China. My wife loved to watch Chinese soap operas. I liked news, talk shows and history programmes... I talked to my family

members and friends via Skype. They told me what's going on in their neighbourhoods. I sometimes gave them suggestions on the programmes they organised for the elders.

Zhuang referred to the phenomenon that older Chinese migrants looked towards their home country for news and entertainment. This is consistent with Siew-Peng's (2001) finding that satellite television viewing was a very significant part of the lives of the older Chinese in Britain. The watching of news events and Chinese soap operas transmitted simultaneously via the satellite allowed Zhuang to maintain relationships with his family and friends across time and space. More important than a sense of shared programmes with people in China, was the sense of community membership and fulfilment of the emotional needs towards China—in fact, a sense of 'Chineseness'. Communication technologies brought new practices for Zhuang's participation in and influence on the community in China. Zhuang's account suggested that an individual's physical presence was no longer a prerequisite to participate in, influence, and develop a SOC for a particular social space (Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007).

For the participants, emotional attachment to China is essential for their construction and maintenance of a SOC. Being far away from home increases the need of communing at a distance and the bridging of the 'here' (New Zealand) and over 'there' (China) for these ageing migrants. Silverstone (1999) proposed that what it means to be human is to commune with others and that such communing increasingly includes the use of various media technologies, which allow people to span physical spaces in a manner that forms an extended community landscape. Using various media, the participants commune across multiple locations; they experience being in two places at once, sitting in a domestic dwelling whilst talking to and seeing friends back in China using social media such as Skype. The characteristics of such

communing not only satisfy the communication needs of the participants, but also are useful for the (re)creation, expansion and maintenance of a SOC across distance.

A cross-account examination suggested that satellite television provides not only older Chinese migrants an opportunity to virtually participate in their home community, but also the local residents in New Zealand to participate in their Chinese neighbour's home community. Ming's (a 76 year-old male) narrative embodied the personal, the political and the cultural threads which, when woven together, fostered Ming's SOC for both his home and host countries:

After a large earthquake struck Sichuan, China on 12th May 2008, we learnt from the Chinese TV news that tens of thousands of people died. We organised fundraising activities to support the victims of the earthquake. Our New Zealand neighbours showed great compassion and donated money to the earthquake survivors. We really appreciated that.

The participation of Ming's New Zealand neighbours in supporting Chinese people sustained Ming's multiple SOCs and enhanced his emotional ties to China as well as New Zealand. Such multiple SOCs lay at the intersection of two interdependent, overlapping communities in which shared needs and group processes were built across time and space (Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007). Tong's (a 70 year-old female) narrative below described her emotional connection to China and New Zealand:

I see New Zealand as my home. Look, there are two flags on my desk - the national flags of China and of New Zealand. China is my first homeland. New Zealand is my second homeland. I sometimes referred New Zealand to "our New Zealand" when I talked to my son. My son said, "Whoa, Mom, you are now a New Zealander." (Chuckles.)

The two national flags on Tong's desk served as symbols, which established a bridge between her old and new lives, as well as provided a bond between the past, the present and future. Living between China and New Zealand, between homes and between languages, Hong did not merely insert or incorporate herself into existing spaces in New Zealand; she also created 'inbetweenness' where she experienced multiple SOC's which unified nearness and remoteness, here and there (Li et al., 2010).

As we have shown, the transnational community refers not only to physical locations. The transnational community can be understood as an 'imagined' community (Anderson, 1987) which has profound effects on older Chinese migrants' multiple SOC's because they are engaging with significant, although absent, Chinese others in the imagined community. Since it is imagined, a SOC is not limited to a specific geographic locale. Physically living in New Zealand does not necessarily mean withdrawing from community life or membership in China. Instead, human interaction and practices of connectivity occur in both physical and symbolic spaces and opens opportunities for multiple belonging.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that this study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the sample size is small, so it may not have captured the older migrants who continue to struggle in settling down in a new country. Second, there is a lack of data of negative impacts involved in maintaining links with the participants' homeland, such as whether it stops the participants from connecting more fully with their host community or learning English. Third, the study relied solely on the participants' own descriptions of their experiences and did not seek perspectives from family

members and neighbours about settlement and the cultivation of multiple SOC. That being said we still feel conclusions can be drawn from this study.

Through investigating the participants' everyday experiences in local and transnational settings, we explored activities central to ageing in place and multiple SOCs for older Chinese migrants. Our analysis demonstrates that SOC can be viewed as constructed through practices such as neighbouring and supportive interactions within local contexts as well as engagement with the home country via new media. Through engagements with and membership in local and transnational communities, the participants are afforded opportunities to negotiate belonging, meaningful social interaction, and for settling in the new country, while maintaining links with the home country. Through collective actions such as building safer neighbourhoods in the local community and supporting earthquake victims in China, the participants develop and maintain shared emotional connections to both their host and home countries. Their practices of engagement in New Zealand and in China are subsumed into the practices of daily life and as a result they experience a SOC that encompasses people in New Zealand and China. Maintaining a SOC toward the transnational community appears to bridge the social spaces of their original and new host countries (Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007).

Our investigation provides additional insights into everyday practices central to the cultivation of a SOC among our participants whose engagements span the cultural spaces of China and New Zealand. Our findings also extend conventional understandings of ageing migrant experiences that assume successful ageing and community participation occur in one locale. We have shown how the use of media contributes to the maintenance of a SOC back home in China and a SOC in a new home in New Zealand. These participants simultaneously occupy various communities and local and virtual spaces. In the process, the tyranny of isolation

and distance that can characterise the everyday lives of ageing migrants can be overcome; particularly when the local and transnational communities are folded together as non-mutually exclusive domains through which people can commune. Through deceptively simple acts of cooperation and support, these older Chinese migrants become active community members who both strive to develop and maintain connections and a SOC locally in New Zealand and transnationally in China. In New Zealand their efforts mainly involve co-located physical acts beyond language. On the other hand, maintaining connections with China means they can slip back into the use of their native language to bond with others. In this way both linguistic and non-linguistic practices contribute to the cultivation and enactment of a transnational SOC. Such agentic strategies for communing should be better reflected in our research efforts. Moreover, this research further signals the need for psychology to embrace the complexities and multiplicity of place and movement in order to extend our understandings of community in a manner reflective of peoples' actual daily practices.

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