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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).

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).

Methodological orientation and theory

As the study involved capturing social behaviours of older adults in the community, and the influence of cultural and retirement context,

we sought to use a structural ethnographic approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 2015). In addition, as the intervention promotes community development, we wanted to allow participants to learn more about their community, towards them reflecting on community problems and solutions together. We therefore selected three qualitative methods that integrated ethnographic approaches with methodological approaches of community-based participatory research.

They were (a) Photovoice documentation and discussion groups (Wang & Burris, 1997), (b) Walking Through Spaces or 'go-along' interviews (Kusenbach, 2003) and (c) Community Focus Groups Discussions which tapped into participatory learning for action (PLA) exercises (Appel, Buckingham, Jodoin, & Roth, 2012; Pretty, Guijt, Thompson, & Scoones, 1995). In line with ethnographic approaches, all three methods allow the researcher to observe the community, either directly by walking in it (e.g. walking through spaces interviews) or indirectly through the eyes of participants (e.g. through photos in photovoice). Secondly, they allow participants to interact with their community to record information, before sharing with us their perspectives. This was useful to increase participants' understanding of their community, and to elicit the influence of context on social behaviours. I first explain our overall approach to combining these three methods, then detail how we used each method in the 'data collection' subsection of the methods.

To explore the continuum of social participation, we first conducted PLA group activities in the community focus group discussions with older adults, to *focus* on topics relating to participation in community activities, and other ways of social participation. We then sought to *expand* these perspectives using photovoice by asking elder participants to photo-document for one month, anything they felt showcased 'lives of elders' in Whampoa. Our aim was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the socio-ecological context in Whampoa that influenced social participation of older adults, including culture and the larger policy context. Lastly, we sought to *compare* perspectives from older adults, with perspectives from key community leaders who worked for older people in Whampoa through walking through spaces interviews. To do so, we conducted go-along interviews as we walked around different precincts in Whampoa, with community leaders.

Sampling

Using maximum variation sampling, we recruited 109 older adults from all ethnicities, across the seven Whampoa precincts which are referred to as 'Resident Committee' (RC) zones in Singapore. Participants had to be older than 55 years unless they were recruited to walking through spaces interviews, which had no age criteria. These interviewees had to be community volunteers working on ageing issues. Access to ethnicities of minority representation was challenging due to their low numbers in Whampoa. To compensate for fewer non-Chinese participants as well as ethnic/language diversity, we ran heterogeneous ethnic groups which gave rise to mixed voices (Table 1). Half the group sessions were with only Chinese, the other half were Indian, Malay or mixed sessions. For walking through spaces, to preserve anonymity, we did not tie these descriptors to specific walkabouts or quotes.

Method of approach and setting

Recruitment took place either through community events, community gatekeepers, or referrals from community members. Most community focus groups discussions were formed spontaneously to run the session 'there and then', during neighbourhood outdoor tea parties. All data was collected in community sites in Whampoa such as RCs, open spaces below apartment blocks, senior activity centres, religious institutions (Sikh temple).

Research team and reflexivity

The data collection team was female, consisting of two senior qualitative researchers (ZH and YJO); one Masters in Gerontology (CL) and one PhD student (SA). CL and SA were fluent in Mandarin and various Mandarin dialects. Informal Malay, Punjabi and Tamil interpreters were also used. Community focus group discussions were conducted with participants who had no prior relationship with the researchers. However, some photovoice participants and two walking through spaces interview participants were recruited from the CFGDs, allowing greater rapport to be established.

Data collection

All data was collected from June to September 2015. In the community focus groups discussions (CFGDs), we ran two group activities to elicit community insights on social participation among older adults. The first activity adapted the 'ten-seed ranking' exercise used in participatory action research, asking participants to list and rank community activities they took part in, or would like. This was used to elicit views from elderly participants on their experiences taking part in community activities, how they felt about them, and what else was needed. To understand other ways of social participation, apart from joining community activities, we asked participants to jot down and elaborate on the other activities in 'a day in the life' of an older adult who does not take part in community activities. CFGD activities were developed through role-play prior to field-testing.

Photovoice (PV) (Wang & Burris, 1997) was undertaken over 2 sessions with 4 groups. In the first session, we handed out polaroid cameras and trained participants in photography and the ethics of photo taking. Participants were encouraged to go around their community and photo-document 50 photos relating to 'lives of elders' in Whampoa, using a photo journal to organize these photos. After one month of photo-documentation, we conducted focus groups sessions asking participants to share with us their photos, and experiences of photo-documentation. The top 5 photos from each person were selected and sorted inductively into topics as springboards for discussion. Topics that emerged included social activities older people in Whampoa participated in, community and social events, services used, spaces they frequented in Whampoa, and work older people did.

Walking through Spaces (WTS) or 'go-along' interviews (Carpiano, 2009; Kusenbach, 2003) were carried out with key community from each RC zone, who worked with older adults in the community. We asked questions relating to how culture and retirement context influenced social participation of older adults, as well as how leaders in each RC zone organized community activities, did outreach, and built rapport with older adults. However, the interviewee could also raise new topics, and comment spontaneously on what they observed as we walked through each precinct.

Hence in all three methods, we leveraged on community spaces and brought the speakers face-to-face with the realities of their communities. All sessions were recorded, with notes taken by a field assistant, for quality assurance purposes and writing up. CL, SA and YJO transcribed audio recordings verbatim, directly translating where needed. Transcription was therefore done by someone familiar with the original meanings; sessions using interpreters were checked by native speakers.

Data analysis

We conducted thematic analysis to analyse data from all three methods (Fereday & Muir-cochrane, 2006). In photovoice, we focused on the themes that emerged from the top 5 photos that each participant chose and narrated, rather than content analysis of the photos. We synthesized themes elicited from each method to enable comparison and triangulation (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003). Data was explored with all research members, where a three-level thematic coding structure (themes, subthemes, and qualifying subthemes) was agreed upon. ZH did blind double-coding 10% of the data. Subsequently, SA coded the remaining data independently. Saturation was judged to have occurred at the top

Table 1
Participants' characteristics.

	Name of RC precinct/ institution	Number of participants	Gender (male: female)	Median age (male: female)	Ethnicity	Languages
Community focus groups	Whampoa Garden	15	2:13	65–69	Mixed	English, Mandarin
	Towner	10	4:6	70–74	Mixed	English, Mandarin, Malay
	Whampoa View	12	3:9	70–74	Chinese	English, Mandarin
	Lorong Limau	10	4:6	75–79	Chinese	Mandarin, Cantonese
	St Luke Eldercare	8	3:5	65–69	Chinese	Hokkein, Teochew
	Sikh temple	10	0:8	65–69	Indian	English, Punjabi
	Whampoa View	10	2:8	65–69	Indian	English, Tamil
	Whampoa Drive	8	4:4	65–69	Malay	English, Malay
	Cumulative total	*83*				
Photo-Voice	Towner	5	3:2	70–74	Chinese	English, Mandarin
	Whampoa Garden	5	2:3	65–69	Chinese	English, Mandarin
	Lorong Limau	4	0:4	70–74	Chinese	English, Mandarin
	Whampoa Drive	5	2:3	60–64	Malay	English, Malay
	Cumulative total	*102*				
Walking Through Spaces	Jalan Rajah	1	*Not disclosed to preserve participant anonymity*			
	Lorong Limau	2				
	Whampoa Garden	1				
	Whampoa View	1				
	Whampoa Drive	1				
	Bendemeer Precinct	1				
	Cumulative total	*10*				
		9				

level of thematic coding; thematic consistency was evident across methods. Both minority voices and wider collective themes were accounted for. Participant checking of transcripts was not used; although smaller themes and inconsistences across data sources were discussed and agreed with ZH. Study findings were shared with stakeholders from Tsao Foundation, and found to be consistent with experiences on the ground.

Results

The ways in which older people participate in community and social life was patterned in three distinct ways. A preference for consistent social interactions was observed to shape the social interactions of some older adults, where these individuals mostly did familiar activities with familiar people in familiar settings. This juxtaposed with older adults who sought to expand their social network through meeting new people and joining different activities, and with older adults who sought social engagement, to help others and give back to society. These three ways of social participation contrasted with older adults who preferred to stay in their comfort zone doing solitary routines, and more isolated and marginalized older adults who feared social contact.

Seeking out consistent social interactions

These social interactions ranged from informal social activities such as chitchatting in habitual gatherings (Fig. 1) or doing hobbies with an inner circle of people (Fig. 2), to joining similar organized activities albeit with familiar people, in familiar settings. Two subthemes suggested how these social groupings arose. The first referred to *ethnicity as an organizing structure for activities*. This organization was not only in terms of how older adults preferred social integration amidst their ethnic subgroup, and were influenced by their cultural values and scripts, but also how community activities were often organized to cater to the ethnic majority. For others, social interaction through these groupings reflected a *psychosocial strategy to simplify their social life*, to cope with the demands of ageing.

Ethnicity as an organizing structure for activities

Through photovoice photos where participants showcased 'lives of elders', we found that for Malay and Indian older adults, their culture particularly emphasized social integration through cultural and religious activities. As a result, social interaction with family through celebrating cultural and religious activities occurred frequently as compared to Chinese participants (Fig. 3). Across all ethnic groups, a common cultural script was family-centeredness or giving priority to family interests where female older adults were expected to undertake caregiving duties for the family.

Strict internalization of these cultural scripts therefore led some female older adults to perceive activities outside of home as 'wasteful' as this could be spent taking care of the family at home. As one Indian community volunteer explained: 'Our culture is that we eat at home. So eating out means you are lazy to cook. With my mum, she must have a reason why she is going out. So bringing them out of their comfort zone, it's wasting her time. She rather wastes her time indoors.' (WTS4) Such cultural scripts may explain the cultural devaluing of organized activities outside the home, where these older adults described taking part in organized activities as 'loitering around': 'Loitering … to socialize, to move around and to dance around is a western culture. […] Whereas in our Hindu culture, no no, it's very taboo […] if I'm dancing, it means I'm not a good person. It's basically our culture and upbringing.' (WTS4)

We noted however, that for younger Indian older adults, the cultural significance of generativity was more influential in shaping perceptions of successful ageing, and encouraged participation in community activities. One female participant in early 60s related this using the cultural symbol of the Banana tree: 'Any Hindu special occasions you go to, they will have this banana tree. Every part of the banana tree is useful, and before it finishes its life span, it leaves another root. […] it shows that life is continuous. We lend a helping hand to others in any matter, that is our social responsibility.' (CFGD7) Thus younger Indian older adults seemed to define themselves in other ways through community participation, beyond traditional family roles, allowing them to interpret cultural scripts more flexibly.

Nevertheless, participation in community activities was frequently organized around preferences for cultural grouping, particularly among the Malay, and Indian older adults. As one community volunteer shared: 'Sikh Indian older adults do not like to join community activities if they are organized by the community club (CC). But if we (religious institution) organize, the whole group comes in.' (CFGD6) This preference for cultural grouping may be due to their shared religious practices and sense of belonging as one participant explained: 'One reason most of us come here is because of our religion. Second is the community bonding […] there are many activities to attract the congregation.' (CFGD6) Thus, we observed an important role for religious institutions, in bringing in older adults from ethnic minorities together in Whampoa.

Fig. 1. 'Hanging out in the market together':older Chinese men enjoy their daily chitchat.
(Photovoice filtered image)

While cultural grouping contributed to a low visibility of ethnic minorities in mainstream community activities organized by the grassroots organizations (RCs), the problem was also exacerbated by a lack of cultural attractiveness of these activities for ethnic minorities. Because many of the organizing committees in RCs were predominantly run by Chinese members, this may explain an unintentional lack of cultural sensitivity and variety of these activities for the ethnic minorities. WTS community leaders shared how many of these activities outwardly appeared structured towards the Chinese in terms of types of activities, food (e.g. non-halal for Malays) and language translation.

Psychosocial strategy to simplify their social life

For other older adults, focusing on social interaction with familiar people and activities was a way to regulate and simplify their social life. They perceived benefits in doing so, to reduce the complexity that came with interacting with new people in new social situations. Not getting along with someone, or meeting someone who could not be trusted, were perceived as potentially troublesome events that should be avoided. For example, in the CFGD, one participant explained how they preferred to avoid community activities and stick to inner social circles 'in case they offend some people. Gossiping. Sometimes you may not say anything but others accuse that you say certain things.' (CFGD3)

Fig. 2. 'Love for mah-jong':older Chinese women gathering to play.
(photovoice filtered image)

Fig. 3. Friends and family gathered at home to prepare Malay festival, Hari Raya Puasa. (photovoice filtered image)

This fear of gossip and conflict increased their wariness to expand their social network and join community activities. Similarly, participants relayed how gossip in community activities led some older adults to discontinue these activities. These older adults valued the intimacy of social interactions with familiar people which they perceived brought about safer and more meaningful interactions, compared to community activities which could seem more focused on external program elements, such as quantity of turnout.

Simplifying one's social life was also seen as an adaptive strategy to cope with functional limitations and problems with health that gradually increased with ageing. For those with problems managing their heath and mobility, reducing social participation freed up resources, and allowed them to focus on activities they enjoyed the most.

Seeking expansion of social network

Unlike older adults who sought emotional safety with familiar social interactions, these older adults were keen to stay abreast of upcoming activities and meet new people, as described: 'If we meet today, we will discuss if tonight there is a new program, and ask who will be interested to go.' (PV3) Two subthemes explained their social behaviour. First, they tend to value expanding their social network as a *meaningful strategy to prevent loneliness in old age*. Secondly, we observed seeking out organized activities was connected to the perceived *desirability of an 'active ageing lifestyle'*.

Meaningful strategy to prevent loneliness in old age

Expanding one's social network was seen as a useful way to prevent loneliness, and loss of social support in old age. As one participant explained about her active engagement in social activities: 'We want to know more friends because we are living here […] We don't want to be alone later.' (PV4) These older adults particularly valued building relationships with other older adults outside of family: 'It will be more meaningful to go as an elderly group. If we go with our children, it is only the family. But if we go as a group, we can know each other.' (PV3) Friendships with older adults were perceived to bring greater mutual understanding and sense of belonging due to the shared psychosocial experiences of ageing.

Perceived desirability of an 'active ageing lifestyle'

We noted how this perceived desirability were shaped by narratives from ageing campaigns as well as endorsement of these narratives from family members. Older adults cited messages in existing ageing campaigns as underscoring individual responsibility in maintaining good health and keeping socially active and saw their active participation in community activities as doing so. The degree to which older adults found an active lifestyle desirable was influenced by the attitudes of family members. If family members encouraged seniors to keep socially active, interdependence of relationships with family naturally motivated older adults to do so. Participants explained this was because being independent reduces burden on children as explained:'It is better than waiting for children to bring us. They will have a peace of mind if they know we have some activities. Otherwise they worry about us being alone.' (PV3)

Consequently, family support provided these older adults with greater social resources to overcome functional limitations and participate in community activities. Among participants who described themselves as active in community activities - some of whom were wheelchair users, we observed how they had family members to bring them to or pick them up after activities. However, it was suggested that a certain amount of freedom and flexibility from family responsibilities was required to expand one's social network. For older adults who were caregivers in their families, it was evident across ethnicities, how most planned their availability to join community and social activities around their family responsibilities.

Seeking to give back to society

Lastly, *volunteering in activities* was common among some older adults, either informally through helping in activities, or through leadership roles in the community. They noted meaning in helping others especially the more vulnerable. However, having free time to do so was emphasized, as most older adults preferred to pick volunteering commitments that could fit into their grand parenting and family activities.

A yet stronger impetus, that made people more willing to sacrifice personal time, was simply a genuine *desire to give back to society* as described: 'I feel I need to give back to society […] As long as my legs can carry me […] I'll do until God says full stop.' (WST6)

Social isolation

The theme of social isolation first emerged in the community focus group discussions when we asked about the 'day in a life of an older person who did not take part in community activities'. Later, in photovoice as participants went around photo-documenting lives of older adults, they uncovered the lives of the more isolated older adults in their neighbourhood, sharing with us the experiences of those who were willing to talk to photovoice participants. We then clarified about lives of isolated older adults with community leaders in the walking through spaces interviews. Structural barriers to participating in community activities was evident among some older adults who were *living on the margins*. While a *fear of social contact* perpetuated isolation among some older adults, others simply preferred *'comfort-zoning' alone or* using solitary routines to stay in one's comfort zone and avoid social contact.

Fear of social contact

Explaining this fear among isolated older adults was a deep sense of mistrust towards others. Mistrust was characterized by the phenomenon of 'closed doors' by these older adults living in housing estates, who often rejected help, and felt imposed on by others interacting with them. As this participant describes: 'My neighbour is very strange. Knock on her door, she doesn't open […] I told her not to be afraid. Sometimes she may fall and nobody knows. Sometimes I go over to take a look but she always closes her door.' (CFGD5) However, 'closed doors' in high-rise apartments were also described as culturally acquired after Singapore rapidly demolished the village way of life in the 1960s (Housing Development Board, 2016), where neighbours welcomed interaction and kept their doors open. With these developments, the erosion of neighbourliness and increased fear towards strangers increased security warnings to keep one's door closed. This made it harder to identify and reach out to isolated elders. Their mistrust extended to suspicion towards others: 'When we approach them, they are a bit apprehensive and think why is this person suddenly so nice?' (WTS4), and thus were difficult to reach out to.

Community leaders working with isolated older adults explained that their fear of social contact was also reinforced by a sense of being overwhelmed around social stimuli: 'Because of staying alone, these older adults may find a certain selfishness in them. For example, when there are noisy kids around, they think 'I cannot just think.' It's not that you don't like kids, it's that you cannot take it.' (WTS6). Or, as it was put in a community focus group discussion: 'They say: 'I am scared of this and this, so I don't want to go out.' (CFGD7)

Living on the margins

Photovoice participants photo-documented lives of older adults in Whampoa who had fallen on hard times and lived outside the socially accepted norms of their community- having to earn a living by asking for alms, and doing odd jobs. Picking up and sorting through cardboard or other recyclables, was common to these older adults (Fig. 4). While many lived in subsidized rental flats, we were also told about homelessness and sleeping in open spaces, such as void decks or alleyways.

As we walked around the poorer rental-flat precincts, community volunteers shared that living this way was largely because they faced financial difficulties and were estranged with their family yet faced barriers in accessing subsidies entitled to lower-income adults. Many of these older adults lived alone or with another person who shared rent, kept little contact with family members, nor received help from their children. More extreme cases of exploitation by their children were noted who would 'come and rob [their parents], knowing the government has just given them money (subsidies).' (WTS6), perhaps due to

the greater intergenerational poverty in these families. In the Asian context where filial piety was expected from children, these actions from their children created bitterness, increasing their mistrust and desire to turn inwards away from others. For example, community leaders described one common complaint among these older adults was how "my kids are all useless. I prefer to stay by myself, eat my own food and not care about other people." (WTS6) This sense of 'betrayal' by their children, reinforced their desire for self-sufficiency; most refused to rely on family for help, even if they needed it.

Despite this desire and their family estrangement, a criterion for many governmental subsidies (e.g. Medifund) was proof of exhausting financial assistance from family members. Therefore it turned out that some older adults would rather forgo subsidies due to their pride, and desire to avoid straining relationships: 'All the relationships get affected negatively […] I asked why their children are not helping to pay your medical bills when they are earning good money, but the older adults said no.' (WTS3) Other problems raised by community leaders were that these subsidies were not updated in line with the cost of living and pegged to type of housing when housing was often multi-generational and not reflective of their income. As a result of living on the margins, participants described that these older adults did not prioritize participation in social and community activities: 'They have no income…They will say that I already have problem walking and eating, how to come here for talks?'(CFGD5) In line with this, community leaders described how it was difficult to encourage these older adults to join community activities, without offering monetary incentives such as goodie bags and lucky draws.

'Comfort-zoning' alone

While most people enjoy some lone habits, comfort-zoning is distinguishable when these are the centre of everyday life and used to avoid social interaction. The role of sedentary routines was highlighted among older adults, one of the most prevalent being eating alone, and watching television: 'They face the TV every day. They don't want to socialize.' (CFGD3) These sedentary routines perpetuated isolation, as one participant said about her neighbour:'She's used to her own habit of living. She doesn't like to come out of her house.' (CFGD4) Being absorbed in these routines were described as reducing communication from the older adult, also making people around them less likely to initiate interaction.

Summary

Our results therefore show a continuum of social participation among older adults in Whampoa (Fig. 5). At the bottom of the ladder were older adults who faced marginalization and exclusion from social participation, due to their socio-economical circumstances, and fear of social contact. Older adults who preferred 'comfort-zoning alone', did not necessarily fear social contact or faced marginalizing circumstances, but seemed too accustomed to the security of their sedentary routines to engage in social life. Older adults who sought consistent social interactions participated in informal or organized social activities in familiar settings with familiar people. This contrasted with those who expanded their social networks or sought social engagement. While the latter two groups were motivated to seek higher levels of social participation, older adults could nevertheless gain satisfaction and social integration through familiar social interactions.

Several individual factors were suggested to enable the older person to move up the continuum or ladder of social participation. As seen with older adults living in the margins, their financial difficulties led them to prioritize basic needs over social participation. Similarly, older adults who faced problems managing their health tended to simplify their social life, prioritizing consistent social interactions over expansion of social network. Support from family members however compensated for poor health and functional limitations; enabling them to remain active in community and social life.

Fig. 4. 'Lots of cardboard today': three older adults sorting through recycling materials. (photovoice filtered image)
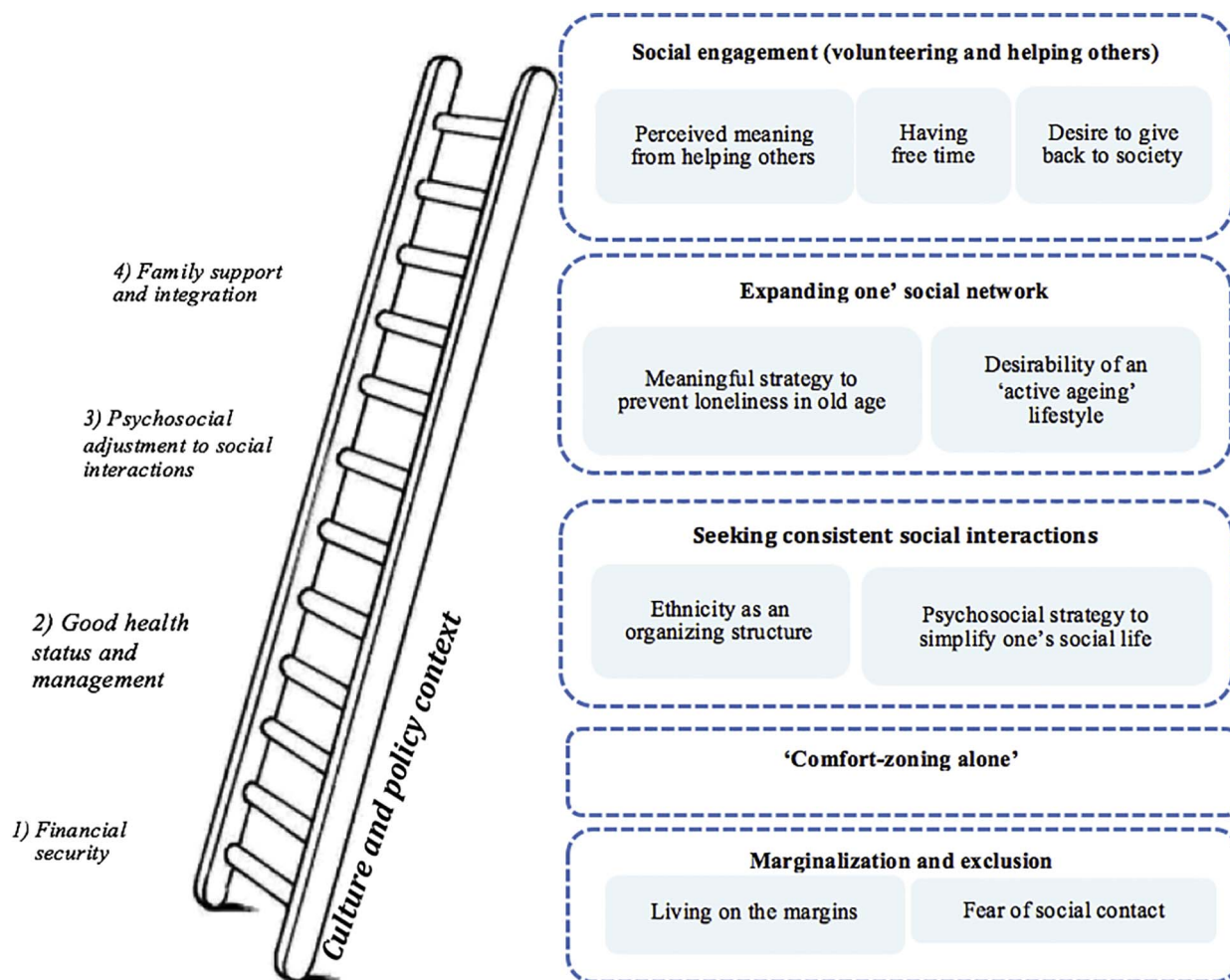

Fig. 5. Explaining the continuum of social participation among older adults in Whampoa.

Beyond health and financial security, attitudes about expanding one's social network related to the psychosocial adjustment of the older person to the prospect of gossip and 'trouble' of managing new social relations. It may be that older people who perceive this as a meaningful way to build up social resources in old age, are more confident of managing social interactions with new people in new social situations. Fearing and being overwhelmed around social stimuli perpetuated avoidance of social interactions, and contributed to social isolation. Social integration within the family affected the psychosocial adjustment of the older person, to social interactions. Embittered ties between isolated older adults, and children who do not support them at old age, create mistrust that extend to other relationships. To understand these feelings, it is necessary to contextualize it within the normative expectations for reciprocity, or filial piety of children to parents in Asian culture.

Factors at the cultural and policy level were represented as a continuous thread binding the continuum of social participation, accounting for ethnic and family-centred integration in our context. For example, collective identity of ethnic groups encouraged seeking out consistent social interactions in cultural groupings. However, the lack of cultural attractiveness of mainstream community activities also created barriers to expanding one's social interaction beyond familiar setting in religious institutions. Despite ageing campaigns endorsing the desirability of an active ageing lifestyle, cultural scripts emphasizing the family meant older adults mostly did social participation around family responsibilities. For lower-income adults estranged with family, they faced difficulties accessing financial subsidies due to Singapore's policy of encouraging reliance on their 'family first'.

Discussion and implications

The aim of this study was to identify, contrast and explain the continuum in which older people in a multi-ethnic diverse Asian context participated in community and social life, highlighting the influence of culture and the retirement context on social participation. Our continuum (Fig. 5) identifies social engagement as a higher level of social participation, consistent with Levasseur et al. who distinguishes social activities performed for others (e.g. volunteering) from those performed with others (e.g. participation in informal and organized social activities). For social activity performed with others, we found that regardless of type of activity, older adults patterned their interaction to expand their social network, or seek consistent social interactions through these activities.

Referring to how socioemotional selective theory posits older adults seek to maximize positive emotional experiences and minimize emotional risks, the desire for emotional safety may underlie the seeking out of consistent social interactions (Carstensen et al., 2003). In the same vein, this selective narrowing of social ties and activities, to avoid complexity, can be seen as a form of disengagement (Cummings & Henry, 1961). However, this selective narrowing of social interaction contrasted with older adults who sought to expand their social networks and engage in ways to give back to society. Our study therefore supports the idea of variability in the occurrence of continuity versus disengagement, or emotional selectivity of social participation among older adults.

What explains this variability may be the adaptive capability of the older adult, or the ability to mobilise resources to adapt to psychosocial changes of ageing. Adaptive capability refers to the freedom or ability of the individual to choose between different sets of functioning (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1985). In the case of social participation, adaptive capability would denote the ability to choose between different ways of social participation and move up the ladder of social participation. Individual factors such as financial security, good health status and management, psychosocial adjustment to social interactions and family support (Fig. 5) enable the older person to manage age-related risks and needs, therefore increasing adaptive capability to choose between different ways of social participation. Our study shows

these factors interact with the culture and policy context, to influence social participation.

In line with previous work in Asia, cultural and family roles of older people in Singapore influenced social participation (Mehta, 1997; Ng et al., 2011). We found cultural scripts of ethnic subgroups shape role expectations of older women to prioritize family interests, and can lead to them devaluing participation in community activities. While we did not manage to tease out differences between Malay and Indian other adults, our findings revealed both ethnic groups placed a greater emphasis on social interactions with family, through religious and cultural events compared to Chinese older adults. We also found cultural grouping to be an important force in shaping preferences for social participation.

In terms of the policy context, our findings show how despite the presence of normative expectations for filial piety, a welfare approach that institutionalizes reliance on family can leave isolated older adults falling through the cracks. If access to subsidies is tied to family, dysfunctional family relationships may result in the older adults being unwilling to claim subsidies in the first place. Declaring a lack of support from one's children can further marginalize them due to the high social status of filial piety in Asian culture (Chow, 1996). While the Maintenance of Parents Act allow older adults to file maintenance suits, both our findings as well as Göransson suggest that parents are often reluctant to take their children to court, even if they are experiencing financial hardship (Government, 2014; Göransson, 2009). We note this policy loophole as an 'open secret' in Singapore, with community leaders calling actions to address this problem as long overdue.

To address these inequalities, mean-testing for eligibility of the older adults, and not household income, has been recommended in situations where biopsychosocial vulnerability can be demonstrated (AWARE, 2016). In line with studies in other Asian countries, this suggests social welfare approaches with high reliance on family offer inadequate security for older adults, given the structural changes and increasing burden on the family unit (Du & Guo, 2000; Yamashita et al., 2013).

Strengths and limitations of study

One limitation of our study was that we did not manage to interview the more vulnerable older adults, though we nonetheless tried to account for their perspectives through older adults who went around speaking to them in Photovoice, and community leaders who worked directly with these older adults. This study is likely to be the first in Singapore to explore patterns of social participation among older adults using in-depth consideration of factors at the culture and larger policy context. We also used a neighbour-level ethnographic and participatory approach, combining three qualitative methods in such a way to focus, expand then compare perspectives for triangulation.

Encouraging social participation: implications

Two programming recommendations to encourage social participation of older adults follow. Firstly, active ageing programs should consider different preferences for social participation among older adults. To attract older adults seeking consistent interactions, allowing natural social grouping to carry on amidst community activities, and fostering meaningful interactions among participants is likely to be important.

Secondly, boosting adaptive capability of the older adult is necessary if the objective is to encourage older adults to move up the continuum of social participation. One way to do so could be to introduce programs that improve the biopsychosocial health of older people, towards them managing their health and improving their ongoing adjustment to ageing. For older adults in Singapore living on the margins, encouraging social participation is a weak substitute for what is required first and foremost: facilitation to redress basic needs and overwhelming vulnerabilities. To promote inclusiveness, ageing programs

should address the different preferences for social participation, overcoming barriers at the individual level, culture and policy context.

Declaration of contribution of authors

ZH, YJO, AS, HJMV, SH and MABG conceived the study. ZH, AS and YJO agreed the analytic plan. ZH, CYFL, AS and YJO were involved in the data collection. ZH, AS and YJO analysed a portion of the data together and reached a consensus on the levels and structure of thematic coding. AS analysed all the data and agreed the final themes with ZH. Upon which the findings were by reviewed GK and MLW to detect for any reflexivity bias in interpretation. AS authored the first draft, which was revised by ZH, and meaningfully commented on by all authors. All authors approved on the final version of the manuscript to be published.

Statement of conflict of interests

We declare that no conflict of interest was encountered with our community partners or stakeholders in the process of this study.

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