Participation by Chinese Australians in Community Group Educational Activities: Impact on Life Satisfaction and Well-being

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While the proliferation of ethnic community groups suggests that they are meeting the needs of the community they represent, there is scant research on the impact of such groups. This study focused on the educational activities provided by 20 Chinese community groups and their impact on the life satisfaction and well-being of 600 Australians of Chinese descent migrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, and Malaysia. Since most participants were aged from 40 to 70 years, and were unemployed, these community group instructor led educational activities provide opportunities for learning, socializing, and relationship building that may impact on their well-being. These migrants came to Australia across a 34-year period with the bulk (60%) arriving in the years 1989–1997. Results suggest that demographic variables such as migration year and employment status have more influence on their life satisfaction and well-being compared to educational activities and other more general community group activities. A Structural Equation Model (SEM) indicates the relative impact of different variables on the life satisfaction and well-being of participants.

Chinese migrants in Australia
The Chinese have a long history in Australia dating back to 1827 when Chinese domestic servants and labourers were brought to Australia (Hwang, 1998). The discovery of gold brought a second and larger wave of Chinese who worked as miners or as workers in industries supporting the miners (Choi, 1975). Almost 100,000 Chinese entered Australia by 1900. However, during the anti-Chinese period, several states introduced legislation to discourage the arrival of new Chinese migrants. This was the precursor to the Immigration Restriction Act 1901, also known as the 'White Australia Policy', and from 1901 to the abolition of the policy in 1973 the numbers of Chinese in Australia declined. From 1973 Australia transformed its immigration policy and program so that persons of any ethnic or cultural background could migrate to Australia (Burnley, 2001).

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, Australian governments encouraged a new category of immigrants, the business migrant or entrepreneur who brought capital and other economic resources (Inglis & Wu, 1992). Several countries in South-East and East Asia, because of their rapid economic growth, became important immigration sources to Australia, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, notably from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Taiwan (Burnley, 2001). Promotion of educational programs abroad caused a large influx of students from China. These factors caused the rapid increase in Chinese migrants (Goughlan, 1994).
In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, more than 24,000 Chinese students and their dependants were given temporary resident visas (Hon & Coughlan, 1997). After this event, there was a large increase in the numbers of business migrants coming from Taiwan and Hong Kong. More recently, the major factors that influenced business people to migrate to Australia are the China policy towards Taiwan, and the return to China of Hong Kong in 1997. These insecurities created by China resulted in wealthy families seeking more secure places to live (Coughlan, 1994).

The characteristics of the Chinese community in Australia today, contrasting with earlier migrants in the 19th century, are more diverse. Newcomers come from diverse cultural backgrounds and countries. Besides China, recent Chinese migrants have arrived from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. The new migrants who have arrived within the last decade have had a major impact on the various Chinese communities in Australia (Hon & Coughlan, 1997). However, integration with mainstream Australian society has been difficult for many current Chinese immigrants. Pe-Pua, Mitchell, Iredale, and Castler (1996) examined a group of immigrants from Hong Kong and found that the majority of interviewees enjoyed many varied recreational activities such as sporting activities, playing mahjong, visiting friends, and attending church. All these activities, however, were conducted with Chinese friends and family. Few had used mainstream services including school counsellors, welfare services, social workers, neighbourhood centres and migrant resource centres, preferring to use Chinese community services. They also mainly socialised with other Chinese.

**Chinese community groups**

The first Chinese community group in Australia, the "Siyi Association", began in 1854 by miners who came from the Siyi region in China. The aim of this group was to offer assistance and support, such as representing their members in negotiation with their employers and local governments to solve their members' problems and improve their situation. Help was also provided in raising funds for sick and aged Chinese. Assistance was offered in resolving unfortunate calamities such as transporting the corpses of deceased persons back to China, and providing a regular meeting place for lonely single males. Early Chinese community groups were formed by members of the same region or of the same clan so that members could communicate in the same dialects. These kinds of groups can be called "clan groups" (Hwang, 1998).

In contemporary Australia the Chinese communities exhibit a wide diversity of socio-demographic and economic characteristics because their members have migrated at different times, for different reasons, and from different countries of birth (Hon & Coughlan, 1997). Chinese community groups in Brisbane have more than 30 organizations to meet their diverse needs. These groups have more clearly defined purposes and functions, e.g., some are based on the same religion, profession, hobby or interest, gender, or original country of residence.

**Chinese community group activities**

Most of the present Chinese community groups in Brisbane provide general activities and/or educational activities, activities conducted by an instructor, for their members. These general activities include attending special ceremonies for Religion or Chinese
festivals, Buddhist chanting services, Sunday worship services, health/travel/business seminars, fundraising, and some voluntary works. Educational activities include dancing, knitting skills, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese painting, English language, computer class, and Bible study. Through their participation in these community group activities, it is hypothesised that members might achieve higher levels of life satisfaction and their feeling of well-being will increase from this involvement.

**Life satisfaction (SWB) and psychological well-being (WB)**

Subjective well-being (SWB), based on the people's own internal perspective, represents people's evaluations of their lives, and includes happiness, pleasant emotions, life satisfaction, and a relative absence of unpleasant moods and emotions (Diener, Biswas-Diener & Oregon, 2003). The focus on an internal perspective means that other criteria of well-being recognized by the community, philosophers, or by mental health professionals, may not be met in every individual who has a high SWB (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997). Ryff (1989) comments that SWB is only one aspect of psychological well-being and outlines additional characteristics beyond SWB. The fundamental assumption of this alternative approach to well-being is that the criteria for well-being and mental health are dictated from outside rather than from the respondent's internal experience (Robbins & Kliewer, 2000). Ryff (1989) suggests that a comprehensive evaluation of a person's psychological well-being should include six key dimensions of Self-acceptance, Positive relationships with other people, Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Purpose in life, and Personal growth.

Diener (1984) suggests that life satisfaction or subjective well-being (SWB) is gained when goals are reached and needs are met. When people make progress toward their goals, they react positively, and when they fail to achieve their goals, they react in a negative way. Cantor and Sanderson (1999) also emphasize the importance of having goals. People committing themselves to a set of goals may help them to cope with different problems in daily life. Therefore, when they meet adversities, they can still maintain well-being. Robbins and Kliewer (2000) describe a process-participation model that supports this notion that the individuals' participation in goal-directed activities facilitates SWB. However, these goals must be intrinsically valued, autonomously chosen, realistic, and achieved through life's daily activities. Although the individuals' social, personal, and tangible resources will influence individuals' abilities to pursue personal goals, this type of model emphasizes the process of participation in goal-directed activities as central to SWB, rather than those resources.

Generally, individuals should be more interested in maintaining their participation in those activities which are more personally rewarding and motivating (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999), are goal-directed, and through which they experience greater positive affect and satisfaction (Cantor & Fleeson, 1991). This model also suggests that participants have to choose realistic and feasible goals to be significant for their well-being (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999). Individuals who participate in goal-directed daily life situations are likely to experience greater well-being (Cantor & Fleeson, 1991).

Involvement in interesting and challenging activities also might impact on SWB. Interesting activities are those activities in which a balance between the challenges and
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the skills of the participants can be found (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975). If such a challenge can be balanced by the participant's skill, the activity can produce the highly pleasurable experience of 'flow' because it provides an appropriate level of achievement. Therefore, an activity can be stressful if the participant does not have an appropriate skill, and an activity becomes boring if the participant requires too little skill (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997). 'Flow' refers to a state of consciousness that a participant experiences when his/her attention is focused on an enjoyable activity that is challenging, but achievable (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975, 1997). It can be further hypothesised that process-participation (Diener, 1984), and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) would propose that when individuals participate in interesting and challenging activities in which they are seeking to achieve certain goals, their SWB will be improved. If participants perceive these activities as interesting, they are more likely to continue these activities, they will feel happier and have higher well-being.

Community groups and SWB and WB
Community groups have been defined as a learning community linked by geography or some other shared interest that address the learning needs of members through proactive partnerships (Kearns, McDonald, Candy, Knights, & Papadopoulos, 1999). In line with a process-participation model, these groups meet the learning needs of members through goal-directed activities that might also draw on social and personal resources and promote social cohesion, regeneration, and economic development for participating members. Flow theory would propose that educational activities in the community group might provide activities that are not only interesting and challenging, but achievable.

Community groups provide some educational activities for their members to participate. Since all of these participants are mature aged, they can be defined as adult learners, and the educational activities provided can be defined as adult education. Recently, a number of adult educators suggest that later life adult education has possible health-related benefits associated with cognitively stimulating activities. For example, Schaie (1993) has suggested that carefully planned instruction can reverse the process of intellectual decline. Snowdon, Kemper, Mortimer, Greiner, Wekstein, and Markesbery (1996) reported that a stimulating learning environment has positive effects on cerebral health and may provide some resilience to damage. The relationship between cognitively challenging activities and aspects of good health in adult learners may be difficult to establish. However, it seems reasonable to speculate that adult learners who continue to engage in intellectually challenging activities will be better equipped to cope with the exigencies of ageing than those who give up (Swindell, 2000). Orrell and Sahakian (1995) also suggested that adult education programs and stimulating mental activities may help older individuals in the development of coping skills and problem solving strategies.

Other causes and correlates of SWB
Some researchers suggest that demographic and environmental factors affect happiness at varying levels, and Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) found that the demographic factors of age, sex, income, race, education, and marital status accounted for less than 20% of the variance in SWB. Argyle (1999) determined that external circumstances account for approximately 15% of the variance in SWB. Personal
reactions to life circumstances may be more important than the events themselves, and that personality affects our reactions (Inglehart, 1990).

Even though many Chinese migrate to Australia through a voluntary acculturation process, they still have to undergo the process of adaptation (Berry & Sam, 1996). This psychological adaptation can occur immediately or over a long term, and might be longer for those who experience acculturation in later life, such as after retirement, when older parents migrate to join their adult offspring under the family reunification program (Ebrahim, 1992). It is likely that many of these migrants will have high expectations about their life in the new society. If their expectations are not met, these migrants might experience greater stress (Berry, 1997), and their SWB might be affected.

**Measurement of subjective well-being (SWB)**
The usual method of measuring SWB is through self-report surveys in which the respondent judges and reports his/her life satisfaction, the frequency of his/her pleasant affect, or the frequency of his/her unpleasant emotions. The assumption behind self-reports of SWB is that the respondent is in a privileged position to report his/her experience of well-being. Only the respondent can experience his/her pleasures and pains based on their own internal experience (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997). The 'Satisfaction with Life Scale' designed by Pavot and Diener (1993) is one of the most widely used approaches to measuring SWB across different cultures. The Satisfaction with Life Scale was translated into Mandarin by Dr. Mantak Yuen in 2002.

**Measurement of psychological well-being (WB)**
Using a "construct-oriented" approach, Ryff (1989) has developed a measure of psychological well-being with six dimensions: Self-acceptance, Positive relations with others, Autonomy, Environmental mastery, Purpose in life, and Personal growth. These six dimensions represent six universal needs, and the degree to which people reported fulfilling these needs correlated with life satisfaction, and a breadth of wellness (Ryff, 1995). A short form measure of psychological well-being used in a number of U.S. national studies (Ryff, 1995) is used to measure the six dimensions of a person's psychological well-being.

**Aim of the study**
Many Chinese migrants experience multiple difficulties, such as English language difficulties, cultural differences, and establishing social contacts in their new environment that might impact on their life satisfaction and psychological well-being. To overcome these difficulties, involvement in educational and other activities at Chinese community groups may realise benefits. This study aimed to investigate the impact of educational activities, among other variables, on the life satisfaction (SWB) and psychological well-being (WB) of members of Chinese community groups.

**Methods**
The study was a random survey of 600 Chinese-speaking migrants from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore who were participants in educational activities and other activities offered through 20 different Chinese community groups. Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that focused on specific demographic
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characteristics of participants, a 5-item life satisfaction measure (Pavot & Diener, 1993), a short 18-item measure of the six dimensions of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1995), and on other factors likely to impinge on life satisfaction and well-being. The questionnaire was offered to participants in both English and Chinese versions and was completed by 400 partaking in 20 different educational group activities, and 200 in 25 different non-educational group activities.

Sample

Most of the participants were female (71.3%). Approximately two thirds of them were over 50 years of age (42.2% were between 50 and 59, and 23.7% over 60 years). They migrated between 1970 and 2004 from Taiwan (66.8%), some from China (18.5), and a few from Hong Kong (10.1%). The majority of them migrated to Australia before 1997 (80.5%), 59.3% of them arrived in Australia between 1990 and 1997. The majority (42.5%) obtained a tertiary degree, 24.8% had TAFE diplomas, and 32.7% had school education only. Most (60%) were unemployed or retired, only 40% had work (including paid or unpaid, full time or part time). Most of the participants had a partner (89.4%). Most of them spoke Mandarin (88.3%), but only 7.2% and 3.8% could speak Cantonese and Taiwanese, respectively.

The most popular five educational activities for this sample were choral/singing (22.2%), English language class (11.0%), Buddhist Sutra study (9.3%), computer class (7.7%), and Bible study (7.7%). The most popular five general activities were Sunday worship services (22.3%), Buddha Birth Day Festival (18.0%), Buddhist chanting services (14.5%), Health seminar (9.7%), and Day tour/excursion (6.5%).

Analytic procedures

Key demographic variables were selected in a two-step process that identified relationships between variables, and then collapsed response categories to eliminate categories with low participant numbers so that more stable (and hence more reliable) inferential analyses could be performed. Optimal Scaling analysis was used to plot relationships between a number of variables, using all response categories across a range of variables and treated as nominal in terms of their measurement properties. After examining the outcome, frequencies per response category for each variable, and response categories were collapsed to maximise cell sizes in subsequent univariate and multivariate parametric analyses.

Results

Demographic variables

Optimal Scaling procedures plotted the associations between six demographics (age group, migration year, gender, employment status, country of birth, and educational level) with the twin aims of facilitating the steps of collapsing response categories and selecting variables for use in subsequent analyses. Marital status was omitted because a very large majority (90%) stated that they were married. The emerging generalisation (see Funnell, Bryer, & Grimbeek, 2004 for more detail) was that participants who migrated prior to 1989 were likely to be male, from China or Hong Kong, 60 or more years old,
possessed at best TAFE qualifications, and likely to be unemployed or retired. In contrast, those who migrated since 1998 were likely to be female, tertiary educated, working, and less than 50 years of age.

Chi-square analyses indicated that work status was not significantly associated with either gender or migration year but was significantly associated with country of birth such that those without work were more likely to have come from Hong Kong, China, or other countries in the region. Likewise, work status was significantly associated with educational qualifications such that those with pre-tertiary qualifications were more likely to be without work. Finally, migration year as such was not significantly associated with any of the other four demographic variables.

Selection of variables for subsequent analyses
Variables with orthogonal (independent) characteristics were selected for subsequent analysis while non-orthogonal (significantly associated) variables were excluded. So, if one considered work status to be a useful indicator of attitudinal and behavioural outcomes, variables with independent characteristics to work status would include gender and migration year, but exclude country of birth and educational qualification.

Outcome scores

Life satisfaction scale
Participants were asked the five items related to life satisfaction, and asked to respond by selecting categories from a 7-point Likert agreement scale. The items were: In most ways my life is close to my ideal; The conditions of my life are excellent; I am satisfied with my life; So far I have gotten the important things I want in life; and If I could have my life over, I would change almost nothing.

The scores for these items were entered into a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which indicated that while all items significantly predicted the latent variable, life satisfaction, the error terms for two of the items/variables (change, achievement) were significantly correlated. Since the adjusted Chi square value exceeded 3, and since the standardised regression weight was lowest for change, this item was excluded, and a second CFA undertaken. With change excluded, the correlations between error items became non-significant, and the adjusted chi square no longer exceeded 3. More importantly, the difference in chi square values was significantly better for the 4-item model. In all subsequent analyses, Life satisfaction was represented by these four items.

Ryff scale
This questionnaire used the 18-item (six factor) Ryff measure with a 7-point Likert agreement response scale. Attempts to undertake a CFA on the six-factor model failed because the model would not converge. So, the single factor model was tested by a CFA instead. After iteratively excluding redundant (significantly correlated error terms) items or low regression loading or poor univariate normality, a six-item well-being scale exhibited acceptable adjusted Chi Square and goodness of fit measures. In all subsequent analyses, psychological well-being was represented by these six items.

Learning activity scores
Participants were to report their attendance at educational community group activities versus general group activities. In all, 2/3 (N = 400) reported attendance at educational
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activities, 78% ($N = 468$) reported attendance at general activities, and 45% ($N = 268$) reported attendance at both types of activities

Impact of variables on life satisfaction and well-being
Participants were asked to identify their level of disagreement/agreement (across 7 levels) with the impact of a range of experiences and issues on the improvement of their life satisfaction and well-being. To ascertain the relative agreement with these statements, the percentage of top two responses (strongly agree and agree), and their mean score on a scale of agreement (1–7, with strongly agree = 7) were identified. Community group educational activities (74.2% strongly agree or agree, mean 5.71) were considered to have most impact on improving life satisfaction and well-being across all participants. General community group activities (66.6%, 5.62) were judged to have more impact than relationship issues (62.7%, 5.49), with self-education activities (49.2%, 5.13), health issues (48.9%, 5.26), and financial issues (43.4%, 5.15) at similar levels of self-reported impact.

Participants’ satisfaction with activities
Participants were asked to identify their level of disagreement/agreement (across 7 levels) as to how much they had achieved their goals and found the activities interesting, when undertaking community group educational activities and also community group general activities. To ascertain the relative agreement with these statements, the percentage of top two responses (strongly agree and agree), and their mean score on a scale of agreement (1–7, with strongly agree = 7) were identified. Participants of community group educational activities achieved their goals (53.8% strongly agree or agree, mean 5.71) and found them interesting (71.0%, mean 5.66). Participants of community group general activities reported similar levels of achieving their goals (52.7%, mean 5.33) and finding them interesting (67.6%, mean 5.58).

Structural equation model for learning activities
Given the conceptually proposed links between the various variables, a number of structural equation models (SEMs) were tested. In each, the models contained the identified set of orthogonal background variables, plus standardised scores for the revised life satisfaction and revised Ryff scale (z-scores). One model tested was that background demographic variables and educational and general activities would predict Life satisfaction and Ryff well-being scores and also group activity scores, and demographic scores would also predict group activity scores.

The other model tested was that background demographic variables would predict educational and general activity scores and Life satisfaction, and Ryff well-being scores and attitudinal scores would also predict group activity scores. Since participation in educational activities was significantly correlated with participation in combined activities, the second SEM with both included would not converge. The first model, however, did converge, and as shown in Table 1, exhibits desirable qualities of goodness of fit in all respects, and is illustrated in Figure 1.
Year of migration was directly and negatively associated with Life Satisfaction and the Ryff Well-being score. Employment status (whether working in any capacity) was positively associated with Life Satisfaction scores and with participation in general community activities and negatively with the Ryff. Gender (being male) was positively associated with participation in general activities, whereas females (i.e., negative association for being male) were positively associated with educational activities. Finally, general community activities were positively associated with Life satisfaction scores.

![Figure 1. SEM for general and educational activities, with significant links retained.](image)

**Discussion**

In terms of analysing the SEM, examination of items related to the two attitudinal scores suggested that Life satisfaction items related to the present and Ryff well-being items to the future. From this perspective, it seems that migrants who have been here for some time and are employed exhibit more positive attitudinal scores on both measures, that is, they felt positively both about the present and the future. It may well be that many migrants who have been here for some time have developed a balance of life, and
become acculturated into the local Chinese community. However, employment status
distinguishes between the present and the future insomuch as those who were employed
reported high Life satisfaction score and lower Well-being score. That is, these migrants
felt better in terms of their current situation but worse in terms of future possibilities.
One way of interpreting this is that the type of work they were able to obtain did not
reflect their qualifications or expected status, and thus impacted negatively on their view
of the future (Well-being: Berry, 1997).

It is also clear that males who undertook general activities also reported feeling more
positive in the present (Life satisfaction) was associated with undertaking general
activities, but this sentiment was not strongly expressed by females undertaking
educational activities. It would seem that demographic characteristics, such as migration
year and employment status were more impacting and predictive of attitudes in the
future (Well-being) than was gender. Consistent with this, Argyle (1999) determined that
external factors account for approximately 15% of variance in SWB, and it seems that
because more recent cohorts had experienced voluntary migration, that move may have
had negative consequences on both Life satisfaction and well-being. Migration around
the time of the Tiananmen Square incident and the closing of Hong Kong would have
been strongly influenced by push factors (Bogue, 1969) related to poor or threatening
conditions in the migrants homeland, rather than the pull factors of Australia. Adjusting
to a new country, and consequent psychological adaptation might also have been prime
influences on SWB and Well-being, and if employment and other expectations were not
met, stress and poor SWB were more likely (Berry, 1997). It's likely that the general
activities offered by the community group provided a distraction from negative
influences. It might well be that educational activities, however, cause perceived demands
and pressure to perform in an instructor led process, compared to more general
community activities. In support of this interpretation, it is noted that males, with
possibly higher expectations regarding work, were associated with general activities,
whereas females were more likely to be associated with educational activities.
Undertaking general activities however did have significant positive impact on Life
satisfaction for those who were employed.

The majority of participants in this study reported that they achieved their goals in
both general activities and educational activities, and in this case, process-participation
(Diener, 1984) would predict that SWB would be improved. The majority also found
these activities interesting, and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) would predict they
would feel happier and enjoy greater well-being. With the structural equation model
suggesting that educational activities did not significantly impact on Life satisfaction or
on Well-being, the results from this study provide partial support for these theories, in
relation to general community activities. Despite this mixed support from the SEM, from
a self-report perspective, community group educational activities, and general group
activities were reported by most to have improved their life satisfaction and feeling of
well-being.
Conclusion
The findings of this study indicate the complexity of the influences on Life satisfaction and Well-being of this cohort of Chinese Australians who have migrated to Australia. While it was expected that educational activities might have had a positive impact on these outcome measures, general activities and other characteristics such as year of migration, and employment, were found to be more influential. Participants reported that group activities were most influential in improving their Life satisfaction and well-being, compared to other variables. Finally, the outcomes of this study support a conclusion that their members are benefited by the variety of programs offered by Chinese community groups.

References


