

Shining A Cultural Perspective into Active Ageing Patterns of Seniors in Singapore

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ABSTRACT: The article provides insights into the different ethnic patterns of active ageing of seniors in Singapore based on the research conducted by the authors over the past decade. The methods used in the majority of the studies is qualitative interviewing and focus group discussions.

The article is both descriptive and analytical as the meaning of 'purpose' varies according to the ethnic and cultural identity of older adults. Singapore is a multiracial society, consisting of many ethnic groups that have contributed towards its colourful landscape.

Using a gerontological perspective, the multidisciplinary focus allows the author to delve deep into the various facets of the meaning of 'purpose' including psychological, cultural, social and spiritual. Four main themes emerged i.e. family-centred activities are meaningful, health-related activities are valued, community-based activities give joy and meet social needs and paid work provides a purpose to the lives of older adults. The data indicates that religious and spiritual pursuits are more attractive to the Indian and Malay ethnic groups as compared with the Chinese ethnic group, who prefer recreational activities such as physical exercise.

The term 'active ageing' is given a cultural and spiritual flavour, overlaying the typical activities such as caregiving, physical exercise, and paid work. In conclusion, the author summarises that expanding the understanding of the active ageing concept with a cultural perspective provides scholars with deeper insights into the older adults' choices and lifestyles.

INTRODUCTION

There are many perspectives adopted by gerontologists to understand the adjustment process in old age. As Singapore is moving towards becoming a digitally advanced nation, active ageing includes being digitally savvy, being involved in community activities and mentoring younger generations in ways that connect them. Using findings from research conducted in the last decade, the author examines the manifestations of active ageing in different groups of the population, with the aim of discussing the purpose and meaning that these activities offer to them. This approach demands reflexivity and distancing from the author, as the data is analysed using a new lens i.e. the cultural lens. The rich data contained in the research studies, and accessible to the author, is revived. As Singapore is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation, the cultural diversity offers a natural laboratory to explore the influence of culture on the patterns of active ageing.

There is a small but growing body of literature on older adults from the different cultural groups in Singapore. Qualitative methods are usually applied to examine the cultural nuances and perceptions of ageing such as Verbrugge and Ang (2018) who studied family reciprocity of older Chinese Singaporeans. Filial piety is a concept that is discussed by scholars (Cheng and Chan, 2006) in the context of a Chinese ageing population. Experiences of family caregivers are researched by scholars as factors such as cultural norms, beliefs and values have bearing on the dynamics of caregiving for older persons (Tuomola et.al. 2016; Ng et.al 2016). Relatively few studies compare the cultural patterns of ageing across different ethnic groups, and this article tries to fill the gap.

The Singapore Context

According to the Singapore Census of Population 2020, the median age rose over the decade from 37.4 years to 41.5 years. For the purpose of this paper, old age will be defined as age 65 and above. The ageing of the resident population is reflected in the proportion of people 65 years and above, which rose from 9% in 2010 to 15.1% in 2020 (Singapore Census of Population, 2020 Statistical Release 1: 5). The total fertility ratio has been below replacement rate in Singapore for the last decade. In 2030, it is expected that one in four residents will be above age 65. What is important to note is that the percentage of seniors in the workforce has been increasing steadily. The Retirement and Re-employment Act (2012) has facilitated the increase in workspan of elders in Singapore. The official retirement age is 62 years and re-employment age is capped at 67, and this will be raised further in 2030. Re-employment age refers to the opportunity for employees to work longer if they wish to, and if their health permits them to continue

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working. In 2006, 13.8% of seniors were working and in 2020 it increased to 30.1% (Statista, 2021).

The three major ethnic groups in Singapore are the Chinese, Malays and Indians. They constituted 74.3%, 13.5% and 9% of the resident population respectively (Singapore Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1:7). The remaining “Others” group include a variety of ethnic/national groups such as Japanese, Eurasians, Australians, British, Americans etc. They constituted 3.2% of the resident population. The ethnic distribution has been stable in the last decade. The Singapore government adopts a multicultural approach, encouraging the various ethnic groups to practice their own cultural norms and traditions, respecting each other’s belief systems and values. In terms of religious affiliations, the majority of Malays are Muslim, while the Chinese and Indians have a heterogeneous religious composition including but not limited to Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism and Jainism.

Similarly, the “Others” category is also heterogeneous in its religious composition. It should

be noted that 20% of the Singapore population claimed that they had ‘no religion’ (Singapore Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release1: 32,33) and of the three major ethnic groups the Chinese had the highest proportion in this category as compared to the Malays and Indians.

The topic of active ageing is important and relevant in the context of Singapore’s population as the latest Census of Population 2020, showed that 11.2% of all residents above 65 years had difficulties in performing their activities of daily living across 6 domains i.e. seeing, hearing, mobility, communicating, self-care and remembering. In terms of statistics, they totalled 69, 435, which is a significant number (Singapore Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 2: 480). Programmes and activities in the community could help to improve or maintain their current level of competency. In future, the burden of health care expenditure for the older adults, their families and the state could probably be decreased if older persons practised an active lifestyle.

From a gerontological perspective, purpose and meaning of life in old age is linked closely to one’s religious and philosophical beliefs, and these tend to be stable throughout one’s life course (Knodel et. al. 2002; Gelfand, 2003; Kunkel, and Morgan, 2016). Individuals tend to pursue activities that are congruent with their belief systems as they get older e.g. in retirement, as they have more time to indulge in the activities they did not have sufficient time for, when they were working. However, there may be exceptions as there are older adults who pursue new interests and hobbies upon retirement. In this paper, therefore, the active ageing concept will be interpreted to include a wider sphere beyond productive or healthy ageing. Productive ageing, and healthy ageing for the purpose of this paper refer to ageing in a manner that benefits oneself and others and ageing with the major body and mental functions intact respectively.

The Singapore policy framework on active ageing

The World Health Organisation’s Active Ageing framework (2002) has been adopted by the Singapore government. The fast pace of ageing of Singapore’s demographic profile has necessitated the launching of national policies, schemes and programmes to support ageing families, especially caregivers of aged relatives. Seniors are strongly encouraged to be self-reliant and work if their health permits them to do so.

Mehta (2015a) describes the government policies, and ground-up projects that are successful in the community. Seniors are encouraged to be socially engaged with neighbourhood activity centres, libraries, volunteering to visiting seniors who live alone and become senior ambassadors. Council for Third Age (C3A) and the Senior Academy are two examples of government-supported agencies that are delivering workshops, seminars, and short certificate courses to broaden the knowledge of seniors, and upgrade their skills e.g. digital skills. The government encourages lifelong learning as a way for people of all ages to adapt and realise their dreams. Wong (2017) describes in detail the government’s approach towards social policies in the digital age. In a technology-driven world, disruption can be created by automation, leading to the loss of jobs by middle-aged as well as older workers. Social trends have to be detected early and the national policies, such as safety nets, workfare supplements, and government-subsidised upgrading courses need to be introduced to ensure employees are not made redundant.

“The social challenges we face cannot be tackled only in transactional terms, or in terms of income redistribution.

It must involve the community – to engage

the human spirit, to provide personal fulfilment and to strengthen collective well-being.”

(Wong, 2017: 49)

From June 2014 – May 2015, The Ministerial Committee on Ageing together with their partners, conducted 50 focus group discussions with over 4000 Singaporeans to listen to their aspirations and how the government could help Singaporeans to age well. One of the key themes was Health and Wellness (Ministry of Health, 2016: 15).

Theoretical background

To set the theoretical background, the Activity Theory (Havighurst, 1961), Erikson’s eight psychosocial stages of the life cycle (Erikson, 1963, 1985), and Gerotranscendence theory (Tornstram, 2005) are relevant to this paper. These theories provide a heuristic framework, to analyse and explain the adaptations made by older people to their ageing process as well as the changing circumstances they face in their physical, social, relational and spiritual world. According to the Activity Theory, older persons

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will experience life satisfaction and positive adjustment if they continue to remain active and socially connected. In addition, the cultural context colours their experiences. Within the cultural context, religious and spiritual/ philosophical beliefs, principles and intrinsic values that they have been socialised into, enmesh into their daily lives creating a mosaic of interwoven social fabric. Thus, the multidimensional and multidisciplinary gerontological perspective will be applied in this paper to flesh out the meaning and purpose of active ageing for older residents in Singapore, against the background of a fast-modernising nation.

Erikson's eight psychosocial stages over the human lifespan highlight the crises that an individual faces at each life stage (Erikson, 1963). According to Erikson, the individual has to resolve the crisis at the earlier lifestage in order to successfully progress to the next one. The crisis of Generativity vs Stagnation is faced at the approximate age of late 50's to 60's when retirement is looming close. This is followed by the crisis of Integrity vs Despair in the 70's and 80's. In his writings, Erikson described the importance of ego integration at the eighth stage. However, after his death his wife Joan finished his last publication with the addition of a ninth stage that involved gerotranscendence. The self-actualisation, defined as self- realisation, experienced by the individual when he/she is at the last stage of life is the peak of his/her development.

Tornstam (1997) is well known for his theory of Gerotranscendence, which emphasises the spiritual growth of the individual in his/her life journey. The theory presumes that an increase in gerotranscendence is accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction. Tornstam described three aspects in his concept ie. Cosmic dimension, Self dimension, and the Social and Personal Relationship dimension. The cosmic dimension includes a greater sense of communion with the universe, connection with older and younger generations, and acceptance of the mysteries of life. The self dimension consists of self-discovery, decrease in self-centredness and coherence in life. The personal relationship dimension comprises the courage to show their true selves, increased need for positive solitude and a lesser focus on material needs (Tornstam, 2005: 55-69). According to Tornstam the person who grows in gerotranscendence experiences a meta-shift in his perspective of life from a materialistic to a transcendental one.

Research Methodology

The author has conducted research, either as a principal Investigator or co-investigator, among older adults in Singapore since 2000, investigating various topics related to ageing, including widowhood, caregiving, employment and grandparenting. The common qualitative methods applied across all the research studies were focus group discussions and face to face interviews. All of them were funded and all received Institutional Review Board approval before the fieldwork was launched. All participants gave their informed consent before they participated in the studies. Appendix 1 summarises the publications that emerged from the 5 research projects.

The author is a member of one of the major ethnic groups in Singapore, and she was conscious of the importance of distancing herself from the data that was gathered to reduce any bias in interpretation. In most of the research projects there was at least one research team member from another ethnic group, hence the interpretation of data went through several rounds of analysis to reduce subjectivity.

Table 1: Summary of Research Projects

Researchers	Project Year	Title	IRB approval	Publications/ Conference papers (2010-2021)
1. K.Mehta, Peggy Teo	1997-2000	Widowhood: The Asian Experience	National University of Singapore	1
2.Thang Leng Leng and K. Mehta	2010	Qualitative Study on Informal Caregiving in Singapore	National University of Singapore	3
3.Calvin Chan, K. Mehta, Chui Yoon Ping and Kelvin Tan	2012-14	Enhancing e- Government Service Delivery to Senior Citizens	Singapore University of Social Sciences	2
4.K.Mehta and Thang Leng Leng	2003-06	Grandparenting in selected Asian Societies	National University of Singapore	5
5.David Chan, K. Mehta	2012-13	The Retirement and Re-employment Act; Prospective Study on its effects on older workers' well-being	Singapore University of Social Sciences	2

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Procedure and analysis.

The synthesis approach was adopted after a systematic review was carried out of the 13 publications. No computer software was applied. Manual coding was done based upon the main findings and significant themes that were highlighted in the publications/presentations.

Table 2: Review of 13 publications (see Appendix 1)

SN	Title of Publication/ conference presentation	Family- centred activities are meaningful	Health-related activities are valued as they protect physical and mental health	Community- based activities give joy and meet social needs	Paid work provides a purpose to the lives of seniors
1.	Being a Good Grandparent: Roles and Expectations in Intergenerational Relationships in Japan and Singapore.	x		x	
2.	Family Caregiving System: Network of complementing and compensatory roles and functions.	x	x		x
3.	Family Caregiving and Intergenerational Dynamics	x	x		x
4.	Experiencing Grandparenthood: An Asian perspective.	x	x	x	x
5.	Older Singaporeans' experiences of Caregiving for family members	x	x	x	
6.	Active Patterns and Styles of Active Ageing among widows and widowers in Singapore.	x		x	
7	Research on the Well-Being of Older Workers	x	x		x
8.	IT Literacy among Seniors: Why is it important for a sustainable ageing society?			x	x
9.	Singapore's strategies at developing and implementing an active ageing framework.	x	x	x	x
10.	IT Literacy and Singapore Seniors: A Qualitative Study	x			x
11.	Experiences of Formal and informal Caregivers of Older Persons in Singapore	x	x		x
12.	Teach me to be filial: Intergenerational Care in Singapore families.	x		x	
13	Lived experiences of the adjustment of older employees to re-employment in Singapore: a Bourdieusian perspective			x	x
	Total	11	7	8	9

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A total of 13 publications and conference presentations were reviewed on the topics of grandparenting, caregiving, intergenerational relationships, IT literacy and seniors and their connection with active ageing in Singapore. Spiritual activities are also popular amongst Asian elders, and they will be analysed as a form of meaningful ageing as well. The question that was posed in this exploration was: How does the ethnic culture explain the rationale and meaning behind the active ageing patterns adopted by the Chinese, Malays and Indians in Singapore? For the present paper, an iterative process of examining the 13 publications and, where necessary, the qualitative data (transcripts of focus group discussions, and interviews) was carried out.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of research findings

The cross-cutting themes that emerged in relation to the meaning and purpose of the seniors' lives are: a) family-centred activities are meaningful b) health-related activities are valued as they protect physical and mental health c) community-based activities give joy and meet social needs and d) paid work provides a purpose to the lives of seniors. Of the four themes, the first i.e. family-centred activities are meaningful to older adults, was the most prevalent (see Table 2).

The rest of this section will expand on these themes and discuss them with supportive qualitative evidence from the respective research.

a) Family-centred activities are meaningful

Asian societies affirm the importance of family, and inter-dependence is a common value upheld by family members (Green, 1999:69; Gubhaju and Chan, 2016:13; Ko, 2012: 56). The social value of filial piety is still given a key position in lives of Singaporeans (IPS Survey, 2018 cited in Towards Ageing Well: Planning a future-ready Singapore, 2021: 46) albeit its form is changing with modernisation (Goransson, 2010; Mehta and Thang, 2017a). The younger generations still wish to look after their ageing parents, and are realistic in acknowledging that they may have to employ secondary caregivers such as migrant domestic helpers or professional caregivers (Mehta and Thang, 2012; Thang and Mehta, 2021).

The research projects on caregiving and grandparenting documented many families where the seniors willingly assumed the role of caregivers e.g. to spouses, to grandchildren and sometimes to mentally/physically challenged adult children (Mehta, K. and Thang, L.L.

2017a; Mehta, 2014a). The following quotes illustrate their motivation for family caregiving.

What roles do you think grandparents should play at home?

They should be able to share their experiences with their grandsons. And really act as a bridge between children and parents. So if they are able to instil some positive values in them, and share their own experiences with them, it'll be very beneficial.

If they are able to know more from the youngsters' world nowadays, and know how to deal with them, it'll be helpful to guide the youngsters.

(Quote 1: Chinese Singaporean grandparent)

What do you get the most satisfaction from?

You see, I study my religion also. When you go into religion it's like a philosophy. You know how to reduce your attachment from the world. So, as an Indian I am very satisfied with my family, grandchildren...it's a small family. But slowly I am developing a feeling that I should shorten my attachment. Let them develop on their own, if they are doing fine, I should be happy.

(Quote 2: Indian Singaporean grandparent)

The above quotes indicate the motivation of emotional gratification or satisfaction, and the opportunity given to influence the next generation's values, through sharing of the grandparents' past experiences. Grandparents felt that they were useful to their family members, and their purpose as elders in the family was to assist their adult children in bringing up the next generation. To the grandparents, this is very meaningful as they are sharing the burden of running the household. In the quotes, the pragmatic outlook of the Chinese grandparent is typical of older people in the Chinese culture, whereas the Indian grandparent explains his tendency to shift focus to religion (Hinduism) according to the cultural script of his Indian culture. The Gerotranscendence theory was applicable to the 81 year old Indian grandparent (see quote above).

The cultural context plays a part in deciding which set of grandparents are approached to care for the grandchildren i.e. maternal or paternal grandparents. In patriarchal communities, such as Chinese and Indian, it is usually the paternal grandparents that are involved. Continuity of the family line or lineage is a very important family norm in Asian societies (Thang, 2012: 63). However, practical considerations such as co-residence played a part due to convenience and practical arrangements e.g. dropping off and picking up grandchildren from school. Other factors that mediate are the geographical proximity, closeness of relations between the adult generation and the older generation, and whether the grandparents are working i.e. availability to be involved in grandparent care. Hence, while the ethnocultural preference was important, it was not always the final deciding factor.

Caregiving towards family members is driven by reasons such as filial responsibility,

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gratitude, love, cultural expectations, and “re-payment for earlier help rendered.” A clear and common example of the last named reason, is the filial care rendered by the middle generation towards aging parents because the grandparents had provided care to grandchildren in the past (Mehta and Thang, 2012: 12). This was common among all three ethnic groups.

The Qualitative study of Informal Caregivers included 30 sandwich generation caregivers, 28 grandchildren and 15 migrant domestic workers. The study aimed to understand in-depth the stressors experienced by family caregivers, especially in the care of parents with dementia.

It is common in Singapore for adult children to employ a migrant domestic worker (MDW) to help in caring for the older generation. The option of hiring a MDW has been documented in many previous publications, so it will not be discussed in detail here (Yeoh and Huang, 2009; Liew et.al, 2020). The study was designed to explore qualitatively, the experiences of the adult caregivers, the grandchildren and the live-in migrant domestic worker in the home. The positive and negative aspects of caregiving emerged from the study. The positive aspect of caregiving was evident from the satisfaction adult children felt in being able to care for their parents, while the negative aspect was evident from the conflict between siblings over the caregiving tasks that their older parents needed.

The following quotes of middle-generation male family caregivers reflect the spiritual faith that moderates the mental and emotional stress of caregiving:

I believe that spirituality is what you do, and what you give with what you have. That is true spirituality. They (parents) have given us some gifts, and with those gifts you move on.

(Quote 3: Indian Singaporean caregiver)

You know, a lot of times we become spiritual because we need the spiritual advice. If not, other times, we don't... I'm one of them. I do feel spiritual but I am firm believer of right and wrong, so I pray more in the heart than I would go in the temple.

(Quote 4: Indian Singaporean caregiver)

Quotes 3 and 4 illustrate that there may be times when caring for family members can be challenging for the caregiver. Family caregivers are often categorised as “informal caregivers” as they are unpaid, while formal caregivers e.g. the migrant domestic workers are paid. Family caregivers may be motivated to continue providing care, whether they are appreciated or unappreciated by the care recipients i.e. the older relatives. In such situations, spiritual motivation which may be based on a philosophy, or a cultural value helps the caregiver to overcome the challenges. “Spiritual advice” (second quote) can be interpreted in the context of the Indian lady, who expresses that through prayer she receives guidance from the deity she prays to.

The study on “Widowhood: An Asian Perspective” was a mixed quantitative and qualitative design, with 237 widows and widowers sampled, and in-depth interviews conducted with 25 respondents of the sample. The respondents consisted of 81% females and 19% males. There was representation from the major Singapore ethnic groups i.e. Chinese, Malays and Indians, and the religions they adhered to were Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. However, 4% had no religion (Mehta and Teo, 2000:4). The extremely active lifestyles of the widows and widowers were portrayed in their involvement with household chores e.g. cooking, cleaning, helping in the garden; grandparenting e.g. feeding grandchildren, supervising their homework, picking them up from school/childcare and so on, running errands like shopping for groceries. In their leisure time, they would contribute towards the community by volunteering at the community centre or religious place of workshop; some attended religious classes, and others participated in health-related activities like *Qi Gong* and *Tai Chi*. Many of the widows were caregivers to their spouses before the latter passed on; therefore, to fill the void they tried to be active in the family and community spheres. They also negotiated new identities in the home space in order to maintain their self-esteem and self-worth (Teo and Mehta, 2001: 139). The sacrifices made by the respondents included neglecting their health and social life, with Indian and Malay widows making a higher degree of personal sacrifices due to their more traditional thoughts (Mehta, 2014b: 77). It should be noted that the seniors interviewed shared their experiences generously, including some women stating their feelings of unhappiness regarding decades of family caregiving, at the cost of their own physical health.

In terms of their coping strategies, Chinese widow/ers were involved in health-related activities such as *tai qi* and *qigong* (exercise regimes that are suitable for seniors) calligraphy and *mah-jong* (a popular game among Chinese seniors). Recreational activities such as pet-rearing and Chinese opera singing were also popular. The Indian widow/ers found comfort in religious pursuits like visiting Hindu temples regularly, joining yoga classes and ethnic community activities. Malay widow/ers focussed on more spiritual pursuits i.e. practising the Muslim prayer rituals five times a day, attending religious classes and involvement in *marhaban* (Malay word for religious) singing groups (Mehta, 2014a: 228).

When we feel troubles, we should say some prayers. Read the Quran...

Religion is important. Never skip your daily five prayers.

(Quote 5: Malay Singaporean widower)

The cultural patterns of ageing emerged from the research indicate the higher importance placed by Indians and Malays on religious/spiritual pursuits in late life as compared to the Chinese elders.

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b) Health-related activities are valued as they protect physical and mental health

As mentioned in the earlier section, Chinese seniors (more than the Indian or Malay seniors) actively and regularly participated in physical exercise classes, generally held in parks or by the beach in the morning e.g. 7 – 9 am. Health is valued by almost all seniors, as it allows them to be mobile and independent, as well as achieve their goals such as visiting friends and enjoying social and communal activities. They find that they can continue their past lifestyle and relationships if they are able to maintain good health. However, the Chinese older adults gave physical exercise higher priority and the older adults of the other ethnic groups exercised less regularly as it was of lower priority to them.

The enabling and hindering factors for participating in health-related activities emerged from the Widowhood research (Mehta, 2014b). Enabling factors are mobility, availability of time

i.e. when family and work responsibilities are reduced, stamina, good vision, and social support (seniors are more motivated to participate in physical exercise when they are accompanied by friends or family members). Factors which hinder such activities are poor mobility or frailty, lack of motivation, fear of falling or losing balance, lack of time due to family caregiving responsibilities, and poor weather conditions.

Mental health, such as self-confidence, is improved if a senior gets involved in meaningful activities, as reflected in the quote below.

Before marriage, I used to be quite active in the temple – going there and singing religious songs. But after marriage, I stopped religious singing. Then I used to go to temples with my family. After my husband's death, I started to go for religious classes in addition to (visiting) the temple And then, slowly from there I started teaching in religious class in temples.

(Quote 6: Indian Singaporean widow)

The voice of the Indian woman conveyed the cultural acceptance of her ethnic community for widows to participate in religious activities. Liang and Luo (2012) introduce the concept of harmonious ageing based on the Yin-Yang philosophy. "In contrast, harmonious aging stresses the complementary coexistence of body and mind, harmonious family and social relationships, and a balanced outlook that appreciates both challenges and opportunities in old age" (p. 333). This Indian woman can be seen as starting to achieve 'harmonious aging.' She capitalised on the opportunities and challenges as she started teaching religious classes.

c) Community- based activities give joy and meet social needs

Retirement and widowhood are two common and universal life transitions in the lives of seniors. Each transition has its impact in an individualised way, depending upon the life circumstances and personality of the person concerned. For some, retirement is a break away from a life of routine, and the beginning of a sense of "freedom." Erikson (1982) mentions that at this stage the "generativity vs stagnation" crisis occurs, and many seniors start contributing to community and society. The availability of time is one advantage in retirement and the other is the opportunity to volunteer and widen one's social network. Widowhood is accompanied by grief and loss, and these may lead to loneliness, especially if the couple had a good relationship. However, a small minority of participants in our research had a poor spousal relationship, which explained the surviving spouse's sense relief from caregiving and experience of a sense of freedom from 'a bondage.'

Quote 7 captures the attempts of women to overcome loneliness through community activities.

Since I joined the community center, I don't feel lonely. Every now and then I go there. We don't gamble. We have meetings, and we decide to go (out). Last night we had a meeting to decide that this Sunday we are selling toys. We give the money to charity.

(Quote 7: Chinese Singaporean widow)

I think it is about the way you take it personally and how you are going to live your life. For me, I am not going to mourn and stay at home and cry about it.... it is fate. ...I leave it to God, whatever plans he has for me. I just take it a day

at a time. My life now is OK. I do community work. My children are good to me.

(Quote 8: Chinese Singaporean widow)

Quote 8 may be seen as a philosophical or spiritual attitude adopted by the widow. It may be noted that there were a minority of Chinese Singaporeans who were religious, and they resorted to religion for comfort when there was a death in the family.

Altruistic deeds such as doing community work for the less advantaged in society or collecting money for charity through making handicrafts, are ways by which human beings experience a sense of inner satisfaction, and it helps them to overcome their personal problems. During meetings with like-minded people, friendships are formed and this reduces the sense of loneliness among widows and widowers. For the retired, it helps to substitute workplace friendships and results in a sense of belongingness. Helping others gives the volunteer a sense of joy and it meets their social needs too. These social and emotional needs are present in all age groups,

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but for seniors they are important channels because their social networks tend to decrease with age. Harmony in social relationships not only gives the elder a sense of belongingness, but also it makes him/her feel part of the mainstream society.

Age-inclusive communities are essential for community bonding in an ageing society such as Singapore. Community centres or clubs, senior activity centres, day care centres and even swimming pools are public spaces where age-integration is a possibility (Mehta, 2020: 256). Such communities facilitate older people to widen their social networks, thus resulting in social connections and sense of belonging to the wider society.

d) Paid work provides a purpose to the lives of seniors

Through the research on the Retirement and Re-employment Act and the research on E- services, the barriers faced by Singaporean older adults in accessing internet services and platforms highlighted the digital divide. The phenomenon “Internet of Things” is exciting for young people in the world, but in most Asian countries, it has instilled fear in the older generation (Tan and Chan, 2018). The fear is linked to being obsolete and unable to keep up with a fast-digitising world, fear of using technological devices e.g. certain apps that have banking, shopping and investment functions, fear of losing relationships due to job disruption caused by a mandatory need for IT literacy (Mehta, 2017). In the first research project, the respondents were asked about their experiences at work, after the RRA was implemented by the Singapore government to give seniors a longer working ‘shelf-life’. Many of them who were already in low paying jobs, were not affected by the Act as they were on contractual terms of work. Others felt that employers used this as a chance to cut their salary and offered them a renewal contract on less attractive terms.

Why I want to continue working is that, you see, in Singapore, we need to work, even in our old age. (that is) the first thing. Second thing is that it keeps you occupied. If you don't work then your mind gets rusty, so it activates your mind, and to be with people. As you grow older you don't want to isolate yourself. You know, being alone, being unemployed and alone, you become isolated from society. So to work is to be involved in a society that we are in. Also, I cannot afford not to work. Who is going to give us the pension, the monthly income?

(Quote 9: Chinese Singaporean Senior)

The mental purpose (work activates your mind) as well as the social purpose (be involved in society) of work is highlighted in the Quote 9. In addition, there is the fear of retirement and financial inadequacy faced by seniors, as they do not receive a government pension. Instead, they are dependent on their Central Provident Fund (CPF) savings, which is generally seen as insufficient for retirement. In Singapore, the current generation of elders above 70 years are known as the Pioneer generation. They share one main characteristic – that they had relatively less opportunities to study beyond secondary school, and therefore accumulated less savings for their old age compared to the following generations (National Survey of Senior Citizens, 2011: 9). In terms of gender, women had even fewer educational opportunities. However, all ethnic groups had similar access to basic education.

The quote below (Quote 10) is an example of the inter-generational transfer of knowledge and experience that occurs at the workplace. Erikson's (1950) concept of ‘generativity’ is applicable here as the employee wishes to pass his knowledge and experience to the next generation.

We're here not just to do a job, we're also training the younger ones. We've come across certain cases in the past, just so that the younger ones do not repeat the same mistakes. So there is a transfer of knowledge and transfer of experience also.

(Quote 10: Chinese Singaporean employee)

For those seniors who wished to continue working beyond 62 years, which is the official retirement age in Singapore, it was essential for them to upgrade their skills in using mobile phones, computers, and lap-tops. Depending on their area of work, they may have to attend refresher workshops, learn how to use the latest applications, and obtain diploma certificates to remain relevant to their industry.

If I can master it, you know, probably it can help me a lot. I can check many things straightaway, with the (mobile) phone.

(Quote 11: Malay Singaporean employee)

But one thing for old people like us, if I don't have this basic knowledge, I will be very scared to go in (computer), to touch anything.

(Quote 12: Indian Singaporean employee)

For a large number of older employees, the financial income was necessary to maintain their families and finance their adult children for tertiary education. Some were still supporting their ageing parents financially so they had to continue working due to financial needs. In such cases, they fulfilled their purpose as a caring family member, by supporting their dependents. Xu et.al (2020) elaborate on the realistic and positive strategies adopted by older employees to empower themselves in workplace environments. Despite facing ageist attitudes at the workplace, the older workers adopted practical and realistic ways to overcome the barriers so that they could fulfil their purpose of supporting their families. The study supports the theme that employment

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provides a deep meaning to older workers as it helps them maintain self-respect and empowers them to provide for their loved ones.

The intersection of family caregiving, work and volunteering in the community in people's lives is examined in a comprehensive way by Clancy et al (2019). On one hand, the impact of employment on family caregivers, and on the other hand, the effects of caregiving duties and responsibilities on employment are analysed by Clancy et al (2019) from a holistic perspective. The key point to be noted here is that even though work serves meaning and purpose for seniors, it exerts its negative toll on their physical and mental health due to competing family commitments. This is particularly noticeable in cultures where familism is a high priority.

DISCUSSION

Connecting purposeful ageing and cultural perspectives

The objective of this article is to illustrate, using Singapore as an example, the different cultural patterns of active ageing (in line with the theme of this special issue) in the Asian context. The gerontological perspective, which is multi-dimensional, is applied in examining the purposefulness of their activities, that with attrition of resources, older people tend to focus on activities that are meaningful to them (see discussion on Socioemotional Selectivity Theory in Schaie and Willis, 2015: 125). The three main theories i.e. Erikson's Eight Psychosocial stages of adult development, the Activity Theory and the Theory of Gero- Transcendence were applied to fully comprehend the choice of activities, the meaning of these activities to the older person and the positive effect the activities had on their lives.

Ethnic Culture

Ethnic culture is a major source of meaning in the lives of seniors. Singapore is a multi- cultural city where the national policy of multiculturalism allows the various cultures to practise their own traditions, festivals and religions. Religious and spiritual sources of meaning are embedded in cultural contexts, hence the respondents often shared these aspects in the focus group discussions and interviews. The similarities and differences between the three ethnic groups are subtle yet recurring. The majority of Malay and Indian respondents found purpose and meaning more often in the gerotranscendent sphere while the Chinese tend to be more practical and therefore find meaning in their health-related and recreational activities. A common form of meaning for all three were charitable and volunteering activities for the disadvantaged in society. Family activities and responsibilities were given importance by all the three major ethnic groups.

Filial responsibility

Much literature has focussed on the concept of filial piety and its traditional importance in Chinese societies (Chow, 2001; Ikels, 2004; Shea, Moore and Zhang, 2020). However, it should be noted that even in other ethnicities, the immense value of caring for one's parents or parents-in-law is praised highly as a virtue to be upheld. Religious teachings are also cited to strengthen its importance such as in the Malay community there is a proverb "heaven lies at the mother's feet" and adult children who care for their parents will receive religious merit in the afterlife (Blake, 1992: 87). The value of family caregiving by older adults has been termed as productive ageing as it makes a tremendous contribution towards a family's well- being (Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong and Sherraden, 2001).

Spirituality, health and active ageing

As people grow in age and experience, they tend to shift their attention to activities that hold meaning and purpose in their lives (Tornstram, 2005) hence active ageing is not a superficial goal. If analysed in depth, the activities commonly associated with active ageing e.g. volunteering, may be psychologically, socially, culturally, or spiritually significant to them. The research projects mentioned earlier allowed the author to delve deep into the lives of the respondents, and deduce from their own expressions how the activities fulfilled them. The wisdom of the respondents was reflected in the way they managed their daily routine of not only caring for family members, but also contributing to community and society to lead lives of dignity and self-respect. Their maturity was detected in the way they tried to accept their limitations, and to be contented with their circumstances. Intergenerational bonds with adult children and grandchildren were precious to them, as they felt connected to the larger society through them (Thang, 2019).

The influence of cultural preferences in guiding social participation of older Singaporean women is highlighted by Su et. al. (2017) who state "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 older 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." (p. 54). Su et. al. conducted a comprehensive study in Whampoa, a geographical district in Singapore, and their findings resonate with the author's cross cultural analysis of the three major ethnic groups and their respective cultural preferences. The author concurs with Su et al that implementation of policies at the ground level should take into consideration the cultural factors and customise strategies accordingly, to attract older adults to participate in active ageing programmes.

CONCLUSION

The Asian perspective on active ageing has been described in this article, with Singapore as a case example. The psychological, cultural, social and spiritual aspects of the activities that the seniors are involved in, have meaning in the context of multicultural and multi-religious Singapore. While ageing is a universal process in an individual's life journey, how we age and what motivates our activities is closely tied with our ethnic culture, our religious beliefs, our values and the opportunities available. A caveat is that as people move from the Third Age to the Fourth Age (when they become frail and more dependent) they may not be able to carry out the activities they would like to engage in due to functional limitations.

This limitation affects all people, regardless of their income or educational level. However, one activity they still can do is *prayer*, which is a spiritual/religious activity. Further research is required in this field to explore if older persons with cognitive impairment or dementia retain this ability and can be trained to apply it as an activity. There is much scope to pursue research and interventions in this arena, and some interesting work has been started by Dr MacKinlay (2015) who has focussed on spiritual reminiscence group work among dementia patients and has found that it has positive effects. To sum up, scholars of active ageing can expand their understanding of the ageing process by including the cultural perspective i.e. how culture shapes the behaviour and preferences of older persons. The expanded understanding of the active ageing concept will enrich the future research endeavours in two ways. Firstly, a deeper comprehension would be attained of the cultural factors that drive older adults' choices in active ageing activities. Secondly, such research will grow our knowledge of the meaning of these activities to the older persons. This article makes a small contribution towards the current ethnic literature on elder Asians' ways of finding meaning and purpose in a rapidly ageing society.

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APPENDIX 1

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