LEISURE AND THE GOOD LIFE: THE PERSPECTIVES OF CHINESE CANADIAN OLDER ADULTS RESIDING IN LONG-TERM CARE FACILITIES
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Introduction
Canada’s population is aging, living longer, and becoming more ethnically diverse. In 2001, 261,155 of Canada’s population aged 65 years and over were of a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2005). The Asian population, in particular individuals of Chinese descent, is considered to be one of the fastest growing ethnic populations in the country (Statistics Canada, 2005). Although many older adults wish to “age in place” (i.e., in their personal homes), the advancements in health care and technology, increases in lifespan, increased risk for chronic illness or disability, decreases in family size, and changes in gender roles and social institutions is resulting in more and more older adults and their families, including older adults from varying ethnic groups, turning to long-term care facilities for help in providing care in later life.

In recent years, the concept of quality of life has become an important focus in the health care industry and in research (Jenkins, Pienta & Horgas, 2002), particularly in relation to quality of life in long-term care settings (Kane, 2001). Nonetheless, few studies have examined the meaning of quality of life for older adults of specific ethnic groups. Fewer still have focused on the perceptions of quality of life for ethnic older adults living in long-term care settings. Moreover, although studies have found that leisure can play a significant role in the maintenance and improvement of quality of life in the community as well as in long-term care settings (e.g., Buettner, 2001; Ho & Card, 2002; Mitchell & Kemp, 2000), our understanding of the relationship between leisure and quality of life for ethnic older adults living in long-term care settings is limited. Guided by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and ethnicity theory (Allison & Geiger, 1993; Gramann & Allison, 1999), the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the meaning of quality of life for Chinese Canadian older adults living in long-term care facilities and investigate how leisure contributes to quality of life for these older adults.

Understandings of concepts such as quality of life and leisure have tended to be premised on Western, white meanings attached to those concepts. Research focused on specific ethnic groups, however, has found that culture and nationality can influence the subjective evaluation of these concepts (e.g., Keith, 1996; Lee & Singleton, 2000; Schalock, 1996; Wang & Stringer, 2000). In fact, researchers have found that many older Chinese adults may not be familiar with the terms quality of life or leisure (Chi & Lee, 1991; Lau et al., 1998; Yau & Packer, 2002). Instead, many Chinese older adults relate more to, and are more comfortable with, terms such as “a good life” rather than quality of life (Gitlin, 2000; Lau et al., 1998) and “recreation” or “enjoyable activities” rather than leisure. In this study, terms more familiar to the participants were used to gain a deeper understand of the meanings of quality of life (or the good life) and leisure (or recreation/enjoyable activities) for Chinese older adults living in long-term care settings.

Methods
The specific techniques of grounded theory methodology were employed in this study (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). More specifically, in-depth, active interviews (Holstein
& Gubrium, 1995) were used to collect detailed, richly textured, and person-centred information from Chinese older adults living in a culturally-specific long-term care facility in Central Ontario. In this inductive approach, all of the active interviews were conducted in a way to allow the meanings of quality of life (a good life) and leisure (recreation/enjoyable activities) to come from the participants not from preconceived notions of these concepts. Using purposive and theoretical sampling, a total of 20 interviews were conducted in order to ensure theoretical saturation. Seven participants were male and 13 were female. The participants ranged in age from 77 to 97 years and most were widowed. The older adults had lived in the long-term care setting, on average, for 2.92 years. All but one of the participants was born in China, with the average length of residence in Canada being 20.2 years. The residents indicated that they had little association with the western culture and the highest level of English proficiency was “2” (0 = none/very little and 5 = very proficient). All the participants immigrated to Canada at a later age and many had already retired when they immigrated. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese depending on the preference of the resident, were audio-taped, transcribed, and professionally translated. All the data were coded and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Member checks were also conducted with 10 of the participants to ensure the credibility and dependability of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings: Emerging Grounded Theory on Leisure and the Good Life

The Chinese older adults in this study attached a number of meanings to quality of life, or the term they preferred “a good life,” that reflected layers of factors (i.e., individual, interpersonal, structural and broader systemic factors) necessary for achieving and maintaining the good life in LTC. Some of the factors identified by the residents, such as “meeting basic need for survival,” “good health and functional well-being,” “collective social relations,” “characteristics of the facility” and “autonomy” were similar to characteristics associated with Western notions of quality of life. Other factors such as “philosophy of life,” “family matters,” and “opportunities for maintenance of Chinese culture” reflected the importance of culture and ethnicity to meanings of quality of life (a good life). Residents also identified having opportunities for meaningful leisure and recreation as being one factor that contributed to the good life in the LTC setting.

At a very basic level, when residents were asked to define leisure (recreation/enjoyable activities), their definitions mirrored classical Western definitions of leisure; that is, as discretionary time, activity, and state of mind or experience. However, meanings of leisure were varied among the residents and influenced whether or not leisure was perceived to contribute to the good life. With further analysis, it was found that if the residents viewed leisure as having a purpose or function within the LTC context, such as satisfying a need, then leisure was viewed as being meaningful and an important component of the good life. However, if residents viewed leisure as having no purpose or their needs were not satisfied, for example, because of discontinuity of past leisure interests, then leisure was not seen as being meaningful. Consequently, for these residents, leisure was not viewed as an important component of the good life in the LTC context. The theoretical model that emerged from the perspectives of the participants is presented in Figure 1. The key assumptions of the model can be summarized as follows:

1. Residents, depending on a number of factors (e.g., acceptance of life situation,
past and current leisure lifestyles, perceptions of old age and health), will think about leisure in different ways (i.e., the meaningfulness of leisure) in the long-term care setting.

2. The opportunities for and the meaningfulness of leisure also are influenced by the characteristics of the LTC environment (e.g., physical and social characteristics).

3. The meaningfulness of leisure is related to the degree to which the residents believe their needs are being satisfied through leisure. Leisure can satisfy needs in the long-term care setting at a number of levels including physiological, social, cognitive, and psychological needs.

4. The perceived meaningfulness of leisure, as related to the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of needs, influences whether or not leisure is seen as contributing to the good life.

5. The meaningfulness of leisure and its relationship to the good life is not static and will change over time as circumstances change for the residents.

**Discussion and Implications for Research and Practice**

The emerging grounded theory on leisure and the good life for Chinese Canadian older adults living in long-term care settings has important implications for both theory and practice. Many of the services within the long-term care setting, including the recreation and leisure profession, have been premised upon the biomedical model and Western individualistic values (Estes & Binney, 1989; Peregoy & Dieser, 1997). The
Chinese older adult residents in this study placed much importance on the maintenance of valued aspects of culture in the long-term care setting. In order to work effectively to meet the ethnic and cultural needs of residents, there is a need for researchers and practitioners to become more culturally sensitive or aware and to gain an understanding of the meanings attached to quality of life or the good life from the perspectives of all ethnic and cultural groups. The research also supports person-centred approaches to care and the importance of finding effective strategies for obtaining and incorporating the perspectives of all residents living in long-term care settings in decision-making and program development. It also demands leisure and recreation opportunities that are flexible enough to meet the diverse, individualistic needs of each older adult resident. Nonetheless, individual perspectives can shift over time as individual circumstances change. Longitudinal research that follows residents over their life in the long-term care setting is needed in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how the meaning of leisure and its relationship to the good life change over time for residents living in long-term care settings.

References


