AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE OF OLDER CHINESE PEOPLE LIVING ALONE IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT. This study successfully interviewed 109 randomly selected Chinese people aged 60 and over living alone in two public housing estates in an urban area of Hong Kong. The results show that mental health status, number of days staying in hospital, life satisfaction, age, and self-esteem are significant factors in predicting the life quality of older Chinese respondents living alone. The explanatory power of this model is 56.4%. The results of this study are consistent with previous findings reported in the west and in Hong Kong. A subgroup analysis of those older Chinese respondents living alone who have offspring also living in Hong Kong shows that belief in children's support in old age, good walking ability, and better self-reported health status via life satisfaction as the mediating variable, better self-reported health status and satisfactory self-reported financial status via self-esteem as the mediating variable, are crucial predictors of quality of life. This model explains 64.2% of the variance in quality of life from a subset of the predictor variables.

KEY WORDS: family support, health, living alone, older people, quality of life

INTRODUCTION

An increasing aging population, rapid economic growth, and social changes that have greatly improved living standards among older people, all facilitate the scientific study of the quality of life of the same people. In the west, social researchers have been systematically studying quality of life among older people for several decades (George and Bearon, 1980; Farquhar, 1995; Lassey and Lassey, 2001). Only recently have social researchers in Hong Kong begun to carry out rigorous studies of this topic (Leung et al., 1997; Chan et al., 1999, 2000,
2002, in press; Cheng et al., 2002; Kwan et al., 2003), and among these, very little work has been done on the quality of life of older people living alone.

This study adopts George and Bearon’s (1980) frequently cited definition of quality of life to formulate a theoretical framework to assess the quality of life of older Chinese people living alone. This paper reports the findings of a cross-sectional study whose aims are: (1) to identify predictors of quality of life of the Chinese people aged 60 or more living alone in two public housing estates (developed for people of relatively low socioeconomic status) in an urban area of Hong Kong; (2) to further identify predictors of quality of life of those older Chinese people living alone who have children also staying in Hong Kong; (3) to provide information which will help to fill the gaps in the literature of life quality; (4) to point toward ways of improving the well-being of these people; and (5) besides enriching the general public’s understanding of quality of life among Chinese people of lower socioeconomic background, will be compared with findings reported in the west.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality of life, or well-being, is difficult to define. As a concept applied to older people, it has to do with personal characteristics, life satisfaction, happiness, and the process of aging relative to the socioeconomic and cultural conditions in which aging takes place. Generally, quality of life is related to the notion of a good life. Like well-being, quality of life as a research concept has been dogged by persistent problems of definition and measurement and by uncertainties about its changing pattern over the person’s life course (George and Bearon, 1980; Kahn and Juster, 2002).

It is widely known that quality of life in older people can be assessed either subjectively or objectively (George and Bearon, 1980; Fry, 2000; Lassey and Lassey, 2001; Schmitt and Jüchtern, 2001; Cheng et al., 2002; Kwan et al., 2003; Vittersø, 2004). Social researchers believe that older people’s subjective responses, what they think and say about quality of life, are