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Chinese and Anglo-Australian Seniors Perceptions of Health and Loneliness

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Background

- Self-rated health, loneliness, place
- Anglo-Australian and Chinese seniors
- City of Manningham, Victoria, Australia
- 15 kilometres east of Melbourne
- Diverse, green, relatively advantaged, ageing population

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Qualitative Study

Semi-structured, face to face interviews:

- 18 Anglo-Australian seniors
- 7 Chinese seniors
- 1 Chinese seniors focus group

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Interviews explored:

- descriptions and perceptions of health and loneliness
- relationships
- perceptions of Manningham

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Emerging Themes – Health as:

Functional - good physical abilities and fitness, agility, independence, absence of illness or sickness (but chronic disease is okay if well managed), energy, absence of pain

Psycho-social – happiness, luck, peace of mind, feeling comfortable with yourself and with others, a positive attitude, being in control of your health

Healthy living - taking care of yourself properly (i.e., eating well, exercising, not smoking, not drinking to excess), living in a positive environment (i.e., fresh air and water, greenery)

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Differences in descriptions of health

Chinese seniors – health as a positive state; activity is crucial; happy and peaceful relationships important; offered many suggestions for promoting good health

Anglo-Australian seniors - health as the absence of illness; friends important; must have control over health

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Health and lifestyle

Chinese seniors - diet, exercise, physical activity, joining clubs for physical activity, and a healthy environment

Anglo-Australian seniors - exercise, physical activity and joining clubs for social activities

Good genes? Not acknowledged

Healthy upbringing? Not acknowledged

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Emerging Themes - Loneliness

Described by both groups as:

- absence of an important relationship
- absence of direction
- private
- despairing

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Loneliness as absence of an important relationship

"Um, I guess it means that if I have a really special moment, I don't have anybody to share it with. I don't have anybody now that I can ring and say guess what... and the same if something really bad happens." AS 67 years old

"So long as the family is together, I don't feel lonely." CS 67 years old

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Loneliness as absence of direction

"It's hard to define....let's just say every now and again I suppose it's loneliness – I don't know what else you could call it. It's lost knowing what to do." AS 66 years old

(You said earlier you never feel lonely?) "Not feel lonely as in some people say – oh, why is it like so, what shall I do with my life – I've never felt like that." CS, 77 years old

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Loneliness as private

"You see older people, you didn't tell even your neighbours your private business...oh no...families kept with families...you didn't discuss your business, especially if it wasn't good, with other people" AS 86 years old

"Chinese don't share their things around, they keep that to themselves, you don't tell anybody... Chinese culture normally they don't open up or blow their trumpet...they normally keep to themselves." Chinese focus group.

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Loneliness as despair

"No, loneliness is to feel helpless, that sort of thing is real loneliness, isn't it? But loneliness you have to feel you, have to feel yourself, nothing good, nothing to live for, no work to do to keep you alive. That's loneliness." Chinese focus group

"I'm terrified of becoming one of those people who needs to spill everything to a total stranger because that seems to me to be, well, I suppose, the essence of loneliness." AS 67 years old

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Place themes

Seniors felt strongly connected to Manningham

Manningham's natural environment perceived as promoting health and well being

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Manningham as a health promoting place

"Landscape here is beautiful. I quite appreciate the landscaping here with the rolling countryside and beautiful houses here. I like to look at the garden, admire the air, admire the scenery, do my own walking. The fact that I am staying in a nice place, a nice environment, that goes a long way towards getting us to be healthy, getting us to be positive in a particular way. The place we stay in I think is very important. The fact that you have a garden to look at is important." CS, 67 years old

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Manningham as an old friend

"It's fantastic. I get pleasure looking out the window and walking down the paddock and watching the birds, you know, all that sort of thing. I always used to walk up to the river and back again every morning. I can't walk that far anymore. I haven't seen my beautiful bush that I've known for years and years and years. That's so sad, but I can still go down to our river down here. I've got a chair down there. I sit and watch the birds and ducks." AS, 74 years old

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Bringing it all together

- Holistic concept of health for Chinese – mental and physical health integrated into "health" more than for Anglo-Australians
- Loneliness is part of health for Chinese – family is the close relationship
- Loneliness is not part of health for Anglo-Australians - friends/spouse are the close relationship
- Place – access to physical activity in the natural environment is perceived to be important to good health

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Policy Implications

Promoting well-being

- Engage families when addressing health issues with Chinese seniors
- Consider accessible, natural neighbourhood places where activity can be encouraged and supported

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Policy Implications

Reducing inequities, promoting well-being, and ensuring all groups can benefit from the service system can be achieved by thinking "outside the square".

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Thank you!