

Quality of Life Research: Responses to Emerging Issues in a Changing World

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Quality of life (QOL) is an important issue that has attracted the attention of researchers, practitioners, policy makers and the public at large. Throughout different stages of the family life cycle, we are facing many issues related to quality of life. With the growing knowledge-based economy and fluctuation in the global economy, it is timely to ask how we can live a “quality life” and promote quality of life in a turbulent and rapidly changing global ecology. With such changing macro landscapes, it is definitely necessary to conduct more QOL research to examine the related issues.

In 2003, a conference entitled “International Conference on Quality of Life in a Global World” was organized by the Faculty of Social Science, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. With the kind support of Professor Alex Michalos, Editor of *Social Indicators Research*, selected papers presented at the conference were reviewed and published in a special issue of *Social Indicators Research* (Shek, Chan & Lee, 2005a) and a book (Shek, Chan & Lee, 2005b). To provide another platform to examine advances in quality of life studies, with particular reference to human development and the environment in different parts of the world, another international conference entitled “Human Development and the Environment: Advances in Quality of Life Studies” was held on December 11-12, 2008 at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. Besides, the conference was held to commemorate the 60th anniversary of New Asia College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The New Asia College emphasizes the importance of Chinese cultural heritage in the College spirit. Obviously, the humanistic values and virtues underlying Chinese cultural heritage (particularly Confucian thoughts) are closely related to the concept of

quality of life developed in the Western culture.

Based on the papers that focus on the quality of life of Chinese people presented in the conference, a special issue entitled "Quality of Life of Chinese People in a Changing World" was published (Shek, 2010). In this special issue, other papers presented in the 2008 QOL conference are included. These papers are intimately linked to emerging quality of life issues in the changing world. The first paper of this special issue is concerned about Internet communication. We are currently living in a world with a quick flow of information. The Internet has become a basic tool for trading, entertainment, communication, as well as education in the contemporary world. The award of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Physics to Charles Kao is an affirmation of the vital role of communication using optical fibers. Nevertheless, despite its popularity, the side effects of Internet use (Shek, Tang & Lo, 2008, 2009) and the relationship between Internet communication and quality of life are relatively unexplored. As such, the paper by Lee et al. examining the relationship between Internet communication and quality of life is a pioneering study in the field. Interestingly, although they found a significant relationship between face-to-face communication with friends and family members and quality of life, they did not find any support for the hypothesis that Internet communication is intimately linked to quality of life.

With the rapid consumption of natural resources and the fast growing economy in the past few decades, people become aware of the importance of sustainable development, which is commonly conceived as meeting one's own need without adversely affecting the future generations. To celebrate the U.N.

Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), Michalos conducted two exploratory surveys to assess knowledge, attitudes and behaviors concerning the basic themes of the U.N. Decade. These two studies identified predictors of knowledge, attitudes and behavior measures of sustainable development in both student and adult samples. Obviously, the findings from these two studies provide important insights for education for sustainable development.

Quality of life is an important focus in the health settings. In particular, helping professionals are exploring interventions that can improve the quality of life of people with poor health. In contrast to traditional medicine, such as chemotherapy and surgery in which reductionist principles are maintained, clinical holistic medicine attempts to offer alternative intervention strategies, such as re-establishing contact between the existential core of man and existential healing. While such strategies may seem appealing, their effectiveness needs to be evaluated. To answer this question, Ventegodt et al. reviewed treatments of over 2,000 chronically ill or dysfunctional patients and more than 20 different types of health problems. Based on the studies under review, the authors concluded that creation of a maternal and infantile bonding coupled with a combination of conversation therapy and bodywork appeared to be the most successful intervention.

Another aspect covered in this special issue is poverty. According to Shek, Lee and Chan (2005a & b), although QOL studies in the medical and rehabilitation settings have commonly focused on the physically disadvantaged and intellectually impaired groups, comparatively fewer studies have examined

the quality of life of persons experiencing economic disadvantage. The study of QOL in persons experiencing economic disadvantage is important because poverty has not diminished despite growth in the global economy in the past decades. Unfortunately, in contrast to the growing problem of poverty in the global context, research in persons experiencing economic disadvantage has been under-researched (Shek, 2008; Shek & Ma, 2009). Obviously, more QOL studies in individuals, families, communities and societies experiencing economic disadvantage should be conducted.

Research findings also indicate that poverty experience adversely affects the development of children and adolescents living in families with economic disadvantage. According to Family Ecological Models, economic stress exerts a negative impact on the psychological well-being of parents, which in turn disrupts dyadic family processes (such as parenting, spousal relationship and parent-child relational processes); disruption of dyadic and systemic family processes would then further negatively affect adolescent adjustment (Shek, 2008). Nevertheless, few studies have examined the psychological well-being and parenting behavior of parents that experience economic disadvantage in the Chinese culture.

In response to the above-mentioned deficiencies, two papers are included in this special issue. In the first paper, Wong Hung reported poverty and social exclusion situations in youth, women and elderly living in six remote areas in Hong Kong. He found that quality of life of these populations was adversely affected by limited job opportunities, high cost of travel for employment, and poor neighborhoods in the community, although the

perceptions of the root of the problems differed between respective groups. In another paper, Lam examined parenting characteristics in families experiencing economic disadvantage and found that the five types of disadvantaged families under study differed in terms of economic hardship, psychological stress and family relationship. Results demonstrated that family relationship and social networks protected economically disadvantaged families, while the negative effects of low income were amplified by powerlessness. Based on the findings, the author argued for the adoption of a family perspective in the formulation of poverty-alleviation policy, and the provision of service.

Another important issue in quality of life research is on quality of life throughout different stages of the life span. A review of the literature shows that research on the quality of life of children and adolescents is inadequate (Shek, Chan & Lee, 2005a & b). In addition, Shek and Lee (2007) remarked that emotional quality of life of adolescents has been under-researched. As such, several papers in this special issue address quality of life in Chinese adolescents. In the first paper, Ken Land and his associates introduce the Child and Youth Well-Being Index (CWI) and the related findings. The CWI uses past historical values, other contemporaneous units (e.g., comparisons among subpopulations, states, regions, countries), or goals or other externally established standards for comparisons. Utilizing two base years (1975 and 1985), the general objective of the CWI summary indices is to give an evidence-based picture on the overall direction of change in the well-being of children and youth in the United States. Based on the CWI, the well-being in adolescents in different age groups can be clearly described which has obvious

policy implications.

In the second paper, bullying behavior in the Chinese culture was examined. Despite the growing concern about violence in adolescence, few studies have been carried out in the Chinese context. In the paper by Chen et al., the influence of student victimization by other students on adolescent self-esteem and depression among 1,376 Taiwanese junior high school students was examined. Although student victimization by students and student perpetration of violence against students successfully predicted depression, they did not predict self-esteem. In addition, findings showed that school violence predicted depression and the impact of student victimization by fellow students on depression was buffered by positive peer support. The paper underscored the negative influence of school violence on the emotional quality of life of Chinese adolescents.

In another study, Ng and Hurry examined the role of stress, coping, family relationships, and alexithymia in depression in 1,199 Chinese adolescents. The models tested confirm the relationship between stress and depression. Several protective factors were identified in the study, including ability to identify of one's feelings, problem solving coping and the rejection of non-productive coping. Support for the mediating effect of coping on the relationship between alexithymia and depression was also found. This is one of the few studies that have examined alexithymia in Chinese adolescents.

In the next paper, Law, Shek and Ma attempted to validate the Revised Personal Functions of the Volunteerism Scale which assesses volunteerism among Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong via several validation studies. This

study is important for two reasons. First, volunteerism is an important aspect of positive youth development which contributes to the quality of life of young people. Second, there is a lack of measures of motivation for engagement in volunteer behavior in Chinese adolescents. The study demonstrates how Western measures could be adapted and validated in a non-Western context. This is also a constructive response to the comment of Shek (2010) that there is a gross inadequacy of measures of quality of life in Chinese adolescents in different Chinese communities.

In the final paper, Lee studied the self-reported best years of life among old people in Hong Kong (N=842) and the perceived reasons for their choices. Utilizing the developmental theory proposed by Daniel Levinson and the Best Years of Life Index developed by the National Council on the Aging, findings showed that roughly half of the respondents regarded the best years of life had been in pre-adulthood and early adulthood (ages 10-49). However, patterns of diversity were also observed which could be accounted for by the unique experiences of the respondents. These findings have obvious theoretical implications as well as practical implications such as how we can help old people to conduct life review.

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