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What does social inclusion mean to Singaporeans? A qualitative study of the concept of social inclusion

Marcus Y. L. Chiu
National University of Singapore

Kheng H. Lim
National University of Singapore

Kara Chan
Hong Kong Baptist University, karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

Sherrill Evans
Swansea University

Peter J. Huxley
Centre for Mental Health and Society, School of Social Sciences, Bangor University

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Title: What does social inclusion mean to Singaporeans? A qualitative study of the concept of social inclusion

Authors:

Marcus Yu-Lung Chiu*
Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences
National University of Singapore, Singapore
Email: mchiu@nus.edu.sg

Lim Kheng Hwee
Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences
National University of Singapore, Singapore
Email: a0071891@nus.edu.sg

Kara Chan
Department of Communication Studies
Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong
Tel: (852) 3411 7836 Fax: (852) 3411 7890
Email: karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

Sherrill Evans
School of Human Sciences
Swansea University, United Kingdom
Email: S.Evans@swansea.ac.uk

Peter J. Huxley
Centre for Mental Health and Society
School of Social Sciences, Bangor University
Wales, United Kingdom
Email: P.Huxley@bangor.ac.uk

*Correspondent Author

Abstract

In recent years, the term "social inclusion" has more frequently been mentioned in policy initiatives than academic debates in an Asian context that is characterised by fast economic growth, widening poverty gap, ageing populations, and prevalent stigma situation for disabled and marginal groups. It may be particularly meaningful to understand what social inclusion means to the people on the ground, in leading societies like Singapore. This paper presents the qualitative findings of seven focus group discussions with a total of 51 participants of different background, including social workers, social work students, users of mental health services, older community dwellers, adults and youth leaders. The concepts are by and large similar to those found in Hong Kong (Chan et al, 2013; 2015; 2016) and UK (Huxley et al, 2008; 2016), surrounding access and opportunities to basic dimensions of community living, but there are also several interesting and unique observations with regard to social inclusion.

Keywords: Social Inclusion, Singapore, Concept Mapping

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<u>Introduction</u>

The concept of social inclusion was first conceived in France in the 1970s to refer to groups who were being excluded from the social security system (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaurd, 2002). It continued to gain attention in the 1980s in the entire of Europe and in 1997, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was set up by the United Kingdom (UK) government to address issues of exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004). Now, many countries, like Australia (Hayes, Gray & Edwards, 2008), Nepal (Acharya, 2007), Hong Kong (Hong Kong Government, 2013), Singapore (Lee, 2012) and the United States (Wilson, 1987), and international organisations, like the European Union (EU) (European Commission, n.d.) and the United Nations (UN) (Division for Social Policy and Development, n.d.) adopt social inclusion as part of their policy or practice agenda.

Many definitions of the term social inclusion/social exclusion exist, including that by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), UK's SEU, EU and Australia's Social Inclusion Unit (Hayes et al., 2008). According to UNESCO's definition, social inclusion is seen as a "society for all in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play" (Division for Social Policy and Development, n.d.).

On the other hand, social exclusion, putting the various definitions together, happens when an individual is unable, either due to a lack of abilities or opportunities, to gain access to resources, goods and services despite having an interest to do so. The person is also unable to get involved in normal relationships and activities in all arenas. Consequently, the individual's life chances and quality of life are affected and these in turn, worsen the level of inclusion for the individual. Justice and the solidarity of the society are also compromised in the process.

Despite the widespread use of the term "social inclusion" by many countries around the world, the concept of social inclusion does not seem to be as established in the Asian society. "*She hui bao rong*" (social tolerance), "*she hui rong he*" (social integration) and "*she hui gong rong*" (social mutual integration) are a few Chinese terms that have similar meanings to "social inclusion" whereas "*penyertaan sosial*" (social participation), and "*penglibatan sosial*" (social involvement) are the Malay representatives of the term. The terms individually imply certain important concepts of social inclusion, like being tolerant and accepting of one another, and being able to enter society, participate and be involved in it. However, there is no exact match for "social inclusion" in either language. This reflets that "social inclusion" is a still a relatively new concept in the Asia although a few countries like Hong Kong and Singapore have already adopted it as part of their policy agenda.

In Singapore, social inclusion is frequently being represented by the term "an inclusive society" (Lee, 2012) where "No one is being left behind" (Lee, 2012). The government seeks to ensure that every Singaporean has access to resources and services that cater to their basic needs, and

these include healthcare, education and public housing (Lee, 2012). There are also strong efforts to ensure that equal opportunities are being given to every citizen to succeed in life such that social mobility is possible (Lee, 2012). For those who require extra assistance, the government, alongside the community, steps in to provide the necessary aid.

In recent years, issues that have impinged on the level of social inclusion, like widening income gap, rising cost of living and slowing social mobility have become more prominent (Institute of Policy Studies, 2012). The government has thus responded with various initiatives, like workfare for the low wage workers, various initiatives to ensure fairer competition in education, and also helping older people cope with rising healthcare costs (The Straits Times, 2012).

With regards to the groups that are disadvantaged, special attention has been given to the group with physical and disabilities in recent years. In 2013, Singapore ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the two Singapore's Enabling Masterplans, 2007 – 2011 and 2012 – 2016, set out how Singapore intends to build an inclusive society for persons with disabilities.

Although there is a strong government intention to make Singapore "an inclusive society", there have been recent calls for the government to do more (Chiang, 2012; Liu, 2012). However, no actual study has been done in Singapore to find out what ordinary citizens understand by the term 'Social Inclusion', whether it aligns with what the government puts forth or with the

international understanding of social inclusion and what more can be done to further the cause of making Singapore a more inclusive society. The study and pursuit of social inclusion is important to Social Work because it involves a fundamental issue of equality in society and the opportunities available for disadvantaged groups to improve their well-being in life; both of which are important principles laid in the Code of Ethics by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1996) and the Singapore Association of Social Workers (Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2004). It is believed that helping individuals and groups to be included is an integral part of social work practice. Therefore, an exploratory study was carried out to find out qualitatively how ordinary Singaporean citizens interpret social inclusion and discuss what more can be done to further the pursuit of that in Singapore. The example of Singapore, the authors believed, may stir up some further thoughts on social inclusion in other parts of Asia as well.

Method

Participants

Semi-structured Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with seven groups of participants. The first two groups consisted of professionals, including social workers, psychologists and case managers and non-professionals (for second group only) from a mental health service. The third group was made up of social work students from a local university and the fourth group comprised of mental health service users. The last three groups were members of the public recruited via personal contact. They were grouped according to their age/role; elderly (aged 60 and above), parents and youths (aged 21-30).

These seven groups were chosen to cover the potential differing views the Singapore society can have on the topic of social inclusion after making reference to a study that was conducted in the UK (Huxley et al., 2008; 2016) and a related one in Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2013). Both studies were similarly conducted to find out the key concepts of social inclusion as understood by ordinary citizens. The arguments for the applicability of the same issue in Singapore are: a) Singapore is a multicultural society and social inclusion has always been one of major wish of people and the government; b) Singapore has a dominant Chinese ethnicity by population census, and the findings on social inclusion from this and other further research may therefore be comparable to social inclusion studies that involves Chinese ethnicity; c) Singapore as a modern city state needs to move with inclusion and solidarity and before that is possible, research studies are needed to understand some basic questions such as do people care about others; do they see the need for social inclusion, and what are their views on their fellow citizens who are less able to achieve when compared to others.

Procedures

This project was carried out upon approval by the National University of Singapore's Institutional Review Board (NUS-IRB). Participants were given information about the study in the form of a Participant Information Sheet and a face-to-face explanation. Informed consent is obtained according to the NUS-IRB guidelines prior to the start of the discussions.

Participants were asked to share their understanding of social inclusion and all the associations with it. Then, they were asked to write down the key ideas of social inclusion on post-it notes individually and subsequently share what they have written with the group. The notes were put

together on either the table or the board, classified and organised into a mind-map that the group could agree on. In the process, participants were allowed to modify and add on ideas and also encouraged to name the clusters of ideas and draw links in between them. The rationale for doing so was to allow participants to consolidate and represent their ideas with the use of a concept map (Huxley et al., 2008). The discussions each lasted for about one and a half hours. All group sessions were conducted in the period March – April 2014 in English by the same interviewer. Only the older persons' group session used also a mixed dialects of Mandarin and Hokkian, in addition to English language.

Each discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed anonymously. The transcripts were then reviewed and ideas related to social inclusion were coded and subsequently classified into themes with the aid of MAXQDA version 11. Initial coding was cross-checked, discussed, and revised among the researchers. Representative quotes were selected and presented.

Results

There were a total of 1343 codes generated for the seven group sessions. The codes are subsequently merged to find arching themes. Eventually, they are classified into six sub-themes under two major themes: (1) Components of social inclusion and (2) Ways to increase social inclusion. To avoid being impressed and biased by the prior study in UK and Hong Kong, the initial coding and constant comparison of codes are done by a research staff who has not been involved in the UK nor the HK studies. The PI helped the checking of initial coding but did not direct the initial formulation of the themes.

Theme 1: Components of social inclusion

<u>Rights</u>

Rights was seen as one major component of social inclusion that should be accorded to all. Participants believed that all individuals in the society should have their basic needs taken care of and common concerns like employment, healthcare, education and housing were raised.

> *"I guess human rights to basic things like healthcare, education, housing and stuff like that."*

(Group 1: Professionals)

Participants also referred to rights as opportunities and access to resources and common spaces. Associated with this was the concept of equality. Many groups felt that there should be equal opportunities and access to all regardless of differences. They argued that discrimination has been observed in Singapore, especially in the areas of employment and education and this should be frowned upon.

> *"They just want an equal opportunity… like if they are grads, they want to be able to go to a company and get a grad job… not having have to go to a cleaner job, or a security guard job. That defeats the whole purpose of them working so hard to get a grad."*

(Group 4: Service Users)

<u>Engagement & Participation</u>

Participants also felt that one who is socially included would ideally be engaged in and participating in activities and some social groups.

"Engage in activities… it can be something simple like even going to the library, using the resources in the community."

(Group 1: Professionals)

This engagement and participation helps one form networks and connections which one can rely on for company and support, thereby ensuring a sense of belonging.

"If they include you in their entire concept of … "my social group", then they will treat you a certain way that makes you feel included, can be the tone of voice, the way they look at you, the way they share their jokes with you… and importantly, they will communicate with you with respect… it is a recognition you are part of that community, and they will make an effort to keep you updated of the latest happenings and they will want to improve with you together, so the plans they make will automatically include you as well."

(Group 2: SAMH staffs)

A socially included individual would also be possessing a meaningful role and be contributing to the society in one way or another.

"… meaningful role in society, such as maybe working, provide for the family or being a mother or having a meaningful role basically."

(Group 1: Professionals)

Community Integration

Community integration is an ideal situation whereby the society on a whole is caring for its members and members are willing to support one another through, instead of closing their doors on others when the latter is in need. Participants shared examples of what they would see as an integrated community:

> *"We (The RC) always gather, like a… there's lunch, all these things, free lunch. So I always get them (residents) to know each other, and then you have to take care of that, take care of that, you know… there is one who fell in the house, cannot get up. So, they will call me, go over, get the police, the Civil Defense to open up the house."*

(Group 5: Elderly)

Theme 2: Ways to increase social inclusion

Participants on the whole agreed that there are a few key determinants of the level of social inclusion in Singapore. They believed everyone had a role to play and the factor affecting whether these players do their part is their values, attitudes and beliefs which can be changed by the amount of education they are exposed to and time.

Role of various parties

Participants agreed that everyone has a role to play in influencing the level of social inclusion in Singapore. The biggest player identified in the Singapore's context was the government.

> *"First of all, in Singapore context, it will always be the government who spearhead this kind of initiative."*

(Group 4: Service Users)

Participants argued that the government can directly influence the level of inclusion of certain groups through the setting of direction, allocation of resources and formulation of policies. This is illustrated in the following example:

> *"Sometimes organisations and different places, they are kind of like stuck because without funding, which is a very real thing, money… when policy-makers don't make certain policies, money don't get pushed over there. So, if policy-making is not made in the, with social inclusion at the back of their mind, then it's very difficult for people on the ground to do a lot of things that we would like to do, say if you want to include people in the marginalized society."*

(Group 2: SAMH staffs)

However, some participants also believed that the members of the Singapore society can do their part to make Singapore a more inclusive society even if the government is not taking the initiative. They even raised examples of such movements taking place in Singapore:

> *"You also mentioned about them doing some… us doing something for ourselves right? Reminds me of like "pink-dot-movement" and all that… (Another participant,) A lot of things are going on, and it's growing." (Pink- dot movement in Singapore is an annual campaign movement by and for LGBT. It has been regarded as one important step from a more conservative to a more open and embracive society.)*

(Group 3: social work students)

The society also determines the parameters of who can be socially included through the setting of social norms. People who do not fall within the social norms are being judged, labelled, and excluded.

> *"You are living the so-called "mainstream" life that everyone is living. So like, for example, like a normal Singaporean would go through primary school, secondary school, tertiary education and then University. So, if somehow along the way, you don't follow the norm, you are not being included."*

(Group 3: social work students)

> *"Societal norms and perceptions – so you will be excluded from activities if you don't conform to certain looks, behaviours and stuff like that."*
> (Group 7: youths)

Lastly, individuals have their part to play too – they need to be contributing to the society as elaborated under Sub-Theme 1. They also have to make an active decision to participate in activities and grab opportunities as they come along. This description of a competitive environment and the striving individuals is very much in line with the typical narratives about Singapore and Singaporeans.

> *"So the choices are there, the opportunities are there, okay, and they could be socially inclusive if they want to. But if they choose not to… nobody can…"*

(Group 1: Professionals)

"My company... we are looking for those disabled people helping us... we want them to do stickling. (But) their society will only allow us to bring our product to them, and they do it and they transfer to our factory. But the thing is we need people in the factory. So, it's whether we include or they exclude us."

(Group 6: Parents)

While individual responsibility is emphasised, the notion is well taken that individuals vary in their perception of the situation and the way how they would feel socially included.

"Everybody have their own limits... So, maybe somebody may feel included just by... having... colleagues, some people may need 5 different groups of friends... So I think it matters, on yourself."

(Group 7: youths)

Values, attitudes and beliefs

Values, attitudes and beliefs of the various players were identified to be a key motivation behind one's actions. Participants argued that the society and its members need to be less judgmental and celebrate diversity instead of being so averse towards differences. Members need to adopt a more open and non-judgmental attitude:

"You drop the labels, you see... you look beyond them, beyond the label, you look beyond and see them for who they are, see them as a fellow human being. See them for who they

are, for their intrinsic worth, and engage them at that level and not really just cast that

label onto them."

(Group 4: service users)

Respect was another quality that was mentioned to be important by the participants:

"When I go to the market and people identify that my accent is different… they become

not very polite to me, I will feel that I don't belong to the circle again."

(Group 2: SAMH staffs)

The importance of caring for the people around us was also repeatedly brought up. In the

following example, one participant shared his voluntary experience of visiting live-alone elderly

and how he shows concern to them and encourage them to participate in activities:

"Although he is been given food, provided by the siblings, pay money… it is not that food

that counts… it's the… Care… Talk to people (the live-alone elderly), hold their hand,

'Hi… Hi Mr. Tan, how are you today? What's happening? Shall we go out for a walk?

Shall we go to coffee shop for a bread? Why not you come down?'"

(Group 5: Elderly)

"In other words, caring for the neighbor… there are case recently, happen sometime

back, on teachers and his sister, both died, nobody knew about it, until people walk that

way, the smell (of the decomposing bodies)…"

(Group 5: Elderly)

Education

Education was seen to be a major determinant of people's attitudes. It was believed that with the right education in school and at home, people's attitudes towards different others would be a more positive and accepting one.

> *"I think it really has to start from school, like when you are young, and you are being taught to be like open-minded and things like that, not even in school, but also like at home... To be more accepting towards differences and... behaviours that... deviate from the norms and if people just like have really weird behavious, just see them as different... don't go and say things like "well, that person is probably crazy" or what not... So I find that education wise, it really helps you to understand that kind of like differences and when you do, then it may change attitudes in that sense."*

(Group 1: Professionals)

Sometimes, stigma or fear comes about because of a lack of understanding of others who are different. Therefore, apart from education, having a common platform for people to interact with different others was also seen as a way to clear misconceptions people have of different others and to facilitate better understanding. A better understanding of one another is then the cornerstone of greater acceptance and increased social inclusion.

> *"Actually sometimes you bring the disabled, the Special Needs to normal school, it's not that bad actually... Of course not the normal class... because the Special Needs definitely they cannot follow, but maybe like "PE" (Physical Education) lesson... they can actually try to include and tell them that... they are also normal, it's just that they born with some disability. I think the society (can provide) some educations to the child."*

(Group 6: Parents)

Building Jigsaws

In spite of the naming of the two major themes and six sub-themes, the relationship between sub-themes is never that straightforward. Therefore mapping is still necessary to show the subtlety and to visualize both the relationships (the arrows signs) and the comparative importance (the size of the circles). It is first started with a smaller exercise of a more confined area such as negative feelings (Figure 1) and positive feelings (Figure 2). Different maps are done on different parts of the ideas together by the participants and the interviewer.

In Figure 1, it is clearly noted that irrespective of their own identity and status, participants feel bad about being social excluded. Their negative feelings surround much around stigma situation of people with mental illness and their family. They could point out the disadvantaged position (in education and employment) when someone is stigmatised, even though sometimes it is just differences in style rather than the mental illness that caught the attention. Once a person is stigmatized, one's chances are reduced. Participants understand very well that stigma and its related situation hurts one's psychology, makes one feel lonely, left out, marginalized and isolated. In general, they are not happy to see someone being stigmatized because one is not understood. One is judged simply by the label, and not according to one's own merit and competence. Even though this is not fair to the ill person and their family, the person has to confirm (willingly or unwillingly) to the attitudes, the treats of people, and the arrangement that is stigmatising.

(Put Figure 1 here)

On the other hand, strong positive sentiments have been sensed when participants try to describe situations where they feel being included. When a person is included, it means kindness, care, respect, acceptance and tolerance by the larger society. One is then fairly treated and feels being valued. Under these circumstances, the person is more able to have dignity, feels belonged, and feels the purpose of life and one's own role to play and to achieve in the society.

(Put Figure 2 here)

Finally, a final conceptual map is drawn by the researchers after repeated comparison (Please refer to Figure 3). It is a consolidation of all the concept maps drawn by the focus group participants. The consequences of impact of social inclusion can be both at individual and community level. For the individual, it influences one's participation and engagement in the community. At the community and national level, it affects social harmony and overall social integration. Equality, according to the participants should be reflected in three major domains: material well-being, family, and one's social networks, so that the people have opportunities and choices to realize themselves. Of the ways to influence the level of social inclusion, participants consider education, prevailing values and attitudes, effort and support in the society, and government policies as the major players. It is generally believed that more accepting, less stigmatizing values can be shaped by communal efforts and the government.

(Put Figure 3 here)

Discussion

Participants identified a significant number of points in both subjective domain (e.g. positive feelings of inclusion, negative feelings of exclusion) and objective domain (e.g. the material aspects). However, different groups had varying levels of understanding, and this can be due to different exposure and experience. Mental health workers who are in touch with issues regarding social justice/social inclusion, know what the term is about and can readily raise examples to support their explanations. The educational level of the participants may also influence their views. Youths' group were a lot more educated and have heard the use of the term "social inclusion" by the government before and could give "dictionary" explanations of the term. In spite of the different emphasis/ focus of different groups, *all* groups mentioned the importance of job opportunity for everyone in the society. The emphasis on tangible and a secure living appears to echo with the pragmatism noticed in the Hong Kong study (Chan et al., 2013). However, it is also noticed that participants do not forget those who are less able to catch up. They are aware of the importance to "include" them as they are also fellow citizens. Interestingly they regard it less an absolute "right" of the less able, but rather an obligation of the able others. This dynamic view on rights may probably explain why sometimes researchers are (mis)led to believe Singaporeans do not talk about basic human rights. They do but interpret it with a different cultural framework.

In a society where individual responsibility is cherished and promoted, participants saw the roles of various parties in increasing the level of social inclusion, even the concerned individual has to do right to make social inclusion happen. This concept of self-reliance has clearly been reflected in the views of the participants. It appears that their "rights" concept is not an absolute one as the one used by Western scholars in policy debate. One still has one's role to play, and responsibility to shoulder up. What the narratives have less described are situations after individual efforts failed.

While participants treasured the opportunity to be involved in grassroot or community engagement such as consultative meetings at district level, most participants put strong emphasis on government's role. This is quite different from the UK studies where more people expect local and national organisations to take a lead. Clearly these participants expect government to take the lead, and to provide for direction. This growing expectation may be a result of successful housing policy, labour policy and support, educational reform and strategic economic plans over the years. Connected to this is the participants' emphasis on the material aspects of life; employment, housing, education are the most commonly mentioned areas where they see the needs for opportunities for all, and where examples of social exclusion and discrimination can easily be given. Interestingly, the concept of social inclusion appears to be applicable to their own nation, and basically there is very little mention of the foreign/migrant workers who take up almost one-third of the population. We may conclude that their view on social inclusion is very national-centric.

There is a major theme on "ways to increase the level of social inclusion" because most of the participants felt that the level of social inclusion in Singapore is not ideal and there is room for improvement, although many recognised that it is in fact improving. Many participants gave examples of unequal access/opportunities and groups whom they think are not being socially included.

An exploratory study like this one inevitably suffers from the problem of representation. It is especially difficult to design a study with representative subjects with regard to their ethnicity, education level, gender, and community status in a society that is regarded as one of the most diverse places in Asia. While mental health workers are more able to describe situation of

discrimination and the need for opportunities and social inclusion, their view may not be similarly found among other groups. Therefore the findings are suggestive rather than conclusive about concepts of social inclusion in Singapore.. In addition, it is worth noting that the concept of social inclusion may change over time as there are different shaping forces ranging from personal and cultural value orientations, to government policies and services, and one may capture a better picture if mixed methods with some quantitative indicators over time are used.

Social inclusion can promote racial harmony, sense of belonging, civic engagement, and ultimately the actualization of citizenship and a caring community. The description of social inclusion by equality to opportunities (employment, housing, education, community participation etc) and whether one feels included lend some support to the use of the social inclusion measurement. The concepts reflected in the themes are not very different from other related studies in UK and HK. Given an economically successful and politically stable society, it appears that Singaporeans are holding very concrete and pragmatic concept of social inclusion, seeing it as opportunities in different aspect of community living. Equal opportunity in term of access is emphasised and a dual recognition is given to both individual responsibility and government taking the lead in improving the social inclusion. If these are the accurate reflection of their concepts, operational measurement should be used to yardstick the level of social inclusion among different groups (especially disadvantaged groups) in aspects such as health or mental health status (Chan et al, 2015; 2016), to identify community groups in need, chart the effectiveness of social programmes and to compare it with similar groups in other countries, in order to know how far the improvement has been realized.

Conclusion

The concepts of social inclusion are not very different from other major cities like Hong Kong. It is perceived as opportunities in basic provisions such as housing, education, employment and civic participation, and most participants are aware of the problem of discrimination and social exclusion and the need for improvement on social inclusion. What distinguished Singapore is actually the trust upon and expectation of the government to take the lead of the efforts to improve social inclusion, and the national-centric idea of social inclusion which is applicable only to their own nationals. How to give impetus to promote greater efforts from many helping hands rather than sole reliance on the government, and how to broaden the care and concern to foreign workers who are so visible in daily living remain a challenge for both government and non-government sectors.

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