

Abstract

The proposed study will be the first to investigate the association between the loneliness of community-dwelling older adults being cared for by live-in migrant workers (MWs) (known as ‘foreign domestic helpers’ in Hong Kong) and their dyadic relationship quality. Live-in MWs are migrants employed by local families to provide domestic labour. Older adult loneliness is a major public health issue, and four developments make this research topic particularly important. First, 10% of older adults in Hong Kong suffer from high levels of loneliness which can lead to severe negative health outcomes. However, the loneliness of community-dwelling older adults is largely unexplored among the Chinese population. Second, 183,000 older adults in Hong Kong are being cared for by live-in MWs. Their dyadic relationship is under-investigated, and the influence of their relationship quality on older adult loneliness is unknown. Third, the proportion of retired couple households with live-in MWs have increased more than threefold in the past decade and the proportion of older singleton households with live-in MWs has increased fourfold over the same period. The need to understand the association between these two factors is pressing. Fourth, the Hong Kong government has a policy of ‘ageing in place as the core, institutional care as back up’. The findings of this study can provide direction for offering appropriate support to alleviate the loneliness of community-dwelling older adults, thus contributing to ageing in place.

It is well-documented that high quality social relationships can protect against loneliness, which is a significant risk factor for physical and mental health problems. The proposed study will adopt an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, using a structured questionnaire followed by in-depth interviews to explain the association between older adult loneliness and dyadic relationship quality in various situations. The quantitative and qualitative phases will intersect in the data collection, data analysis and discussion of the results. A total of 288 older adults will be recruited from district elderly community centres in Hong Kong to complete a questionnaire. The data generated from the questionnaires will provide a comprehensive picture of older adults’ levels of loneliness, dyadic relationship quality, perceived social support, and functional status. The associations between the level of loneliness and dyadic relationship quality and other independent variables will be examined by hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Thirty-six questionnaire respondents differing in levels of loneliness and dyadic relationship quality will be purposively selected for face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Using phenomenology, these interviews will be informed by the results of the survey to explain the statistical inferences by obtaining thick descriptions of the experiences of loneliness, the nature of dyadic relationships, the cultural and linguistic barriers within the dyad and the corresponding problem-solving strategies. The interview narratives will be juxtaposed with quantitative data during the thematic analysis. The phenomenological findings regarding the themes will explain the statistical inferences of the associations between older adult loneliness and dyadic relationship quality and the other independent variables.

In addition to their academic, social and policy contributions, the findings of this study will provide a greater scientific understanding of how dyadic relationship quality is associated with older adults' loneliness. The findings will thus contribute to the development of person-centred interventions and services to reduce loneliness among older adults with live-in MWs. The data gathered from this study can facilitate comparative studies between Hong Kong and other countries with live-in MWs of older adult homecare with regard to the needs of older adults, caring relationships and the effectiveness of support services for live-in migrant homecare.