



A Study on the Heterogeneity of Social Engagement among Older Adults: An Empirical Analysis based on the 2018 Class Data

Yan Liu *

Department of Ethnology and Sociology, Minzu University, Beijing, China

ABSTRACT

Social participation, as an important part of actively responding to population aging, plays a key role in promoting the utilization of the elderly population dividend in the context of China's longevity society. This article addresses the flaw in social participation research that ignores and explores the heterogeneity of social participation among older people from the perspective of socioeconomic status. Using latent class analysis to generate a comprehensive index of socioeconomic status, and employing multilevel linear models to examine the differences in social participation outcomes among different socioeconomic status groups. The results show that the higher the socioeconomic status of the elderly group, the higher their level of social participation. The improvement of the socioeconomic level in the region has a significant positive effect on the social participation of the elderly group with lower socioeconomic status. Therefore, this article reveals the heterogeneity of social participation among older people in terms of socioeconomic dimensions, highlighting the need for policy intervention to further improve the regional socioeconomic development level to promote the social participation of older people and advance social participation research.

Keywords: Social participation; Socioeconomic status; Older adults; Heterogeneity; Inequality

DESCRIPTION

In the context of intensifying aging societies, societal perceptions of the elderly have shifted from negative to positive, placing increasing emphasis on harnessing the resources of the elderly and reaping the benefits of the "aging dividend." Furthermore, within the framework of aging demographics, the health of the elderly has gained paramount importance [1]. To avert the burden of heavy medical expenses, it is anticipated that the elderly maintain robust health. Consequently, social participation serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it contributes to the preservation of elderly individuals' health, and on the other hand, it enables them to manifest their intrinsic value [2,3]. Under the call for active aging, social participation is being vigorously advocated [4,5].

However, it is not prudent to simplistically assume that the elderly always possess choices or unfettered autonomy in their

decision-making. Numerous barriers impede the social participation of the elderly [6,7]. This paper delves into the constraints of social participation through the lens of socioeconomic status [8,9], encompassing both individual socioeconomic positions and the socio-economic milieu of specific regions. This discourse highlights the inequalities in social participation stemming from socio-economic disparities.

Main points

The central tenet of this paper is that higher socio-economic status of the elderly and regions characterized by elevated socio-economic attributes are conducive to enhanced social participation among the elderly. Policy recommendations should be attuned to addressing elderly individuals with socio-economic vulnerabilities, elevating the socio-economic developmental levels within localities, refining facilities for social participation, and mitigating obstacles to social participation among the elderly of lower socio-economic standing.

Correspondence to: Liu Yan, Department of Ethnology and Sociology, Minzu University, Beijing, China, E-mail: elleliu4688@gmail.com

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Supporting evidence

We utilized multilevel modeling to test our hypotheses, drawing on the 2018 Chinese Longitudinal Aging Social Survey with 11,402 adults aged 60+ as our analytic sample. Socioeconomic status was measured *via* a latent class analysis of income, education, and hukou. Social engagement was indicated by a composite score of participation across various activities, alongside other controls. The multilevel results reveal that at the individual level, compared to older adults of low socioeconomic status, those of middle status engaged 1.204 points more and those of high status 1.208 points more, indicating higher participation among older adults of higher socioeconomic standing. For regional socioeconomic status, we observed that as regional income increased, social engagement rose significantly for lower socioeconomic older adults but remained largely unchanged for middle and high status groups. Thus, elevating the socioeconomic level of regions appears conducive to heightening participation among older adults.

DISCUSSION

This research draws attention to the fact that opportunities for social participation are not necessarily equitable across all older adults, as social engagement manifests socioeconomic disparities that warrant acknowledgement and consideration. Social engagement among disadvantaged older adults is particularly consequential, and I advocate that policies promoting social participation be more attentive to such populations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study further explores the heterogeneity of social participation among older adults, as well as the potential regional differences in this heterogeneity. We find that low levels of social participation are more prevalent among older adults with lower socioeconomic status, indicating an opportunity to reduce socioeconomic disparities in social participation. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study conducted in the context of China's social background, which examines the social participation levels of older adults based on their individual

socioeconomic status and the socioeconomic development level of their residing communities. Our findings suggest that policy interventions targeting lower socioeconomic groups should address community factors to maximize social participation among this population and ultimately reduce socioeconomic disparities in social participation.

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