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Experiences of Friendships among Middle-adulthood Men in Macao

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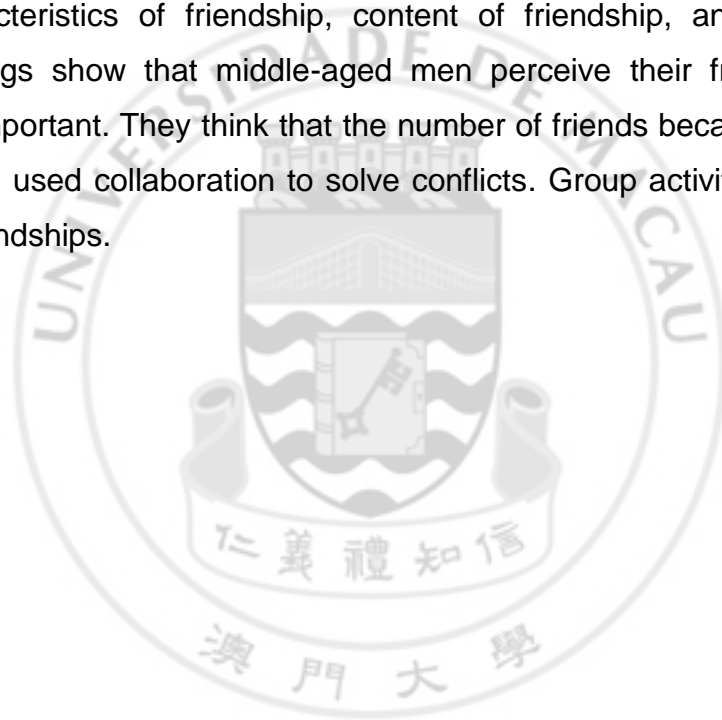
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Abstract

As men step into middle adulthood, they encounter a series of changes, including friendship. The purpose of this qualitative narrative research is to understand the role of friendship in their lives, the ways of maintaining friendship and their experiences of friendship for middle-aged men between 40 and 55 years old in Macao. Seven participants, selected by snowball sampling, collaborated to complete the convoy model of social support network and participated in a semi-structured interview to provide the textual data for this narrative inquiry in individual interviews. The narratives were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify main themes including the structure of friendship, characteristics of friendship, content of friendship, and maintenance of friendship. Findings show that middle-aged men perceive their friends as mutually supportive and important. They think that the number of friends became larger because of their work, and used collaboration to solve conflicts. Group activities are pursued to maintain their friendships.



Introduction

Having been investigated for many years, experts still find it hard to define what friendship is. Friendship has been described as trustful, altruistic, supportive, and voluntary (Blum, 1980; Duck, 1991; Epstein, 2006; Foos & Clark, 2008). Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson and Thompson (2000) also claim that it is hard to separate friendship from other relationships. For example, family can share many characteristics of friendship such as trustful and supportive. Furthermore, Sun (2008) claims regarding the influence of Confucianism on Chinese relationships, people will repress most conflicts in their family relationships in order to show family harmony to others, but not in their friendships.

Friendship is an important part of our social life. Brissette, Scheier and Carver (2002) claim friends can provide social support for dealing with stressful life events and adults will give more support to their friends than to their other associates (Nussbaum et al., 2000). Adults will try to maintain their friendships which can provide support in their late life (Bushman & Holt-Lunstad, 2009). Chi-Hou (2004) suggests that Macao people are deeply influenced by Confucianism and will pursue collective harmony, thus to maintain their social network, including friendships.

Srivastava, John, Gosling and Potter, (2003) and Foos and Clark (2008) suggest that when adults get older and enter different stages of life, they will encounter different kinds of changes, such as marriage, the birth of children, and career. When adults adapt to those changes, the structure of their relationships including their friendship will change (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). As many researchers (Lang & Carstensen, 1994; Shaw, Krause, Liang, & Bennett, 2007; Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2008) claim adults will have narrower social network with advancing age and also have fewer friends, and they will mainly focus on their romantic partners (Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006).

There are few researches regarding the ways in which Asian men define friendship and their experiences of friendship, so it will be worthy to gain a greater understanding of middle-aged Chinese men and their relationships with closest friends. The central question of this study is how middle-aged men in Macao define and maintain their friendship. The question arises as how the perceived number of friendships will change

with their age, how middle-aged men maintain their friendship, how they define the friendship, and their experiences about friendship among middle-aged men between 40 and 55 years old in Macao.

Literature Review

Friendship is complex to define, but generally it is described in terms of certain characteristics (Blum, 1980; Duck, 1991; Epstein, 2006; Foos & Clark, 2008; Nussbaum et al., 2000). Bond and Hwang (2008) suggest friends will have common interests. Duck (1991) claims that friends are honest, open, trusting, reliable, affectionate, altruistic, and voluntary. Nussbaum et al. (2000) suggest that friends can be supportive, non-exploitive, and are chosen mutually. As a simple division, friends are those people with whom one will share experiences while not with others and those whom we perceived cannot be replaced by others (Nussbaum et al., 2000). Bowman (2008) suggests in same gender male friendship, there is also self-disclosure despite the stereotype of masculinity. Bond and Hwang (2008) suggest Chinese men will only disclose their deepen affairs to close ones, such as family and best friends, so self-disclosure can provide a clue to the identification of friendship. Moreover, Lenton and Webber (2006) and McDougall and Hymel (2007) declare that people will choose those who have similar ages and same-gender to be their friends.

Friendship is essential for people's socialization. Epstein (2006) declares "friendship is the strongest of relationships not bound by or hostage to biology" (p. 1). Moreover, friendship is more than only satisfying the needs of intimacy with someone (Duck, 1991). For example, friends provide social support when facing stressful live events (Brissette et al., 2002). Friends could actually provide lots of social support besides family for dealing with life stressors, and to decrease the influences of stressors on emotions and body, thus promoting physical and psychological well-being (Brissette et al., 2002; Bushman & Holt-Lunstad, 2009).

Friendship is mainly maintained by adults' mutual and voluntary supports (Nussbaum et al., 2000), and reciprocity is a main aspect of developing and maintaining friendship (Epstein, 2006). Bowman (2008) claims that self-disclosure can increase closeness in male's same gender friendships. Bushman and Holt-Lunstad (2009) suggest that as friendship can provide benefits to adults' physical and psychological

health, adults will try to maintain their friendship. However, they also suggest that supportive relationships, including friendships are triggered by people's internal force, such as commitment.

Chi-Hou (2004) and Sun (2008) claim that Chinese people, particularly the men, are socialized as the maintainer of social harmony because of Confucianism. Thus, men can develop more skills of maintaining social relationships, such as cooperation with their friends. Chinese men will avoid conflicts with others in order to maintain their relational and social harmony (Bond & Hwang, 2008). For friendship, it is supposed that individuals will try to discuss and solve their conflicts together.

As men get older, they will face different changes, such as their roles, their family, and also their friendship (Srivastava et al., 2003). When people enter different stages of life, adults tend to have narrower social network, including fewer friends (Lang & Carstensen, 1994; Shaw et al., 2007; Papalia et al., 2008). Carter and McGoldrick (2005) suggest that when entering adulthood, men will deepen their existing closest relationships such as friends, rather than establishing new social or intimate relationships and will have less contact with other relationships which are not close.

Shaw et al. (2007) suggest that the possible reason why people treasure their closest relationships is that when adults are getting older, they tend to maintain those relationships which can help them meet their immediate needs, such as material and information. Furthermore, Lang and Carstensen (1994) note that older adults will ensure their intimate relationships when the social network size decreases. Nussbaum et al. (2000) claim that United States (U.S.) men only develop job-related and activity-related relationships, and have fewer friendships in later life. However, little research has been conducted to understand the changes of Chinese male's friendship.

The central question of this study is how middle-aged men in Macao define and maintain their friendship. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand and describe the role of friendship, the ways of maintaining friendship and the experiences of friendship among middle-aged men between 40 and 55 years old in Macao, and also give them an opportunity to express their views and thoughts. Middle-aged men has encountered different transitions of life (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005; Papalia et al., 2008), so that they have most likely realized the changes of friendship in different

stages of their life and it is worthy to explore how they cope with the changes in their friendship. Furthermore, their concerns and values in their friendship, their needs that can be fulfilled in friendship and their viewpoints about friendship were also explored to gain more comprehensive understanding about their experiences of friendships among middle-aged men in Macao.

Method

When searching the literature, it is hard to find research about friendship among Asian men. Therefore, this qualitative narrative research on middle-aged men's friendship in Macao attempts to fill the gap in our knowledge base. Since defining friendship is complex (Blum, 1980; Duck, 1991; Nussbaum et al., 2000) and people have structural complexity and uniqueness in their life stories (McAdams, 2001), this research used a qualitative narrative approach. This approach potentially provides a more in-depth understanding about abstract experiences and interpretations, which may not be comprehensively collected by close-ended questionnaires with pre-determined categories. Therefore, in qualitative narrative research, it is necessary to involve participants' as collaborators rather than research subjects.

Josselson (2006) and Van Schalkwyk (2008a) claim that narrative research is important in providing richly-detailed information of participants' lives, their experiences and their subjective interpretation of life events. Therefore, a qualitative narrative research will provide an in-depth and coherent understanding about Chinese men's unique experiences of friendship in Macao. Combining the stories in a multiple case study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008) will also provide more information and a reliable understanding about these complexities.

Participants

The participants were males within 40 and 55 years of age, Macao citizens of Chinese ethnicity living in Macao for at least seven years, were married and with children. Participants were capable Cantonese speakers with no diagnosed disorders. Cantonese is the native language in Macao and for the researcher, so it made the interviews for both participant and interviewer. Non-proportional sampling was used to access participants, because of the limited resources in Macao. This research used snowball sampling (Trochim, 2006) as a method to find participants who met the criteria

and asked him to recommend others who also met the criteria to participate. In addition, those participants were people whom I, as the researcher and interviewer, did not know, in order to avoid bias in interviewing and interpreting.

Procedures

Two fieldworkers each collected the stories from five participants and used the same questions in the interviews. After conducting the interviews, each fieldworker exchanged any two of the five records with his co-worker, so that each researcher had seven field texts for analysis. First, the interviews were conducted in the semi-structured format based on some central questions. It is different from structured interview, which asks the questions in a concrete order and the semi-structured interview only aims to get understanding about human's life experiences about certain topics (Van Schalkwyk, 2008b). In the interviews, the participants were invited and encouraged to describe their thoughts freely.

Each participant had an interview of about forty-five minutes in Cantonese. The place for the interview was wherever they feel comfortable. Before the interviews, all participants were informed the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of information by the informational leaflet. They were asked to sign a letter of consent to admit collaborating and allow audio recording the conversation for interpretation. Their willingness to participate was respected. They were given a questionnaire for their demographic data, such as ages and occupation. In reporting on the research, participants would be given another name for anonymity to ensure the confidentiality of their identity (Van Schalkwyk, 2008b).

In the second part of the interview, participants were asked to draw a convoy model of social support network. As Levitt, Guacci-Franco, and Levitt (1933) suggest, the convoy model represents "a network of relationships that moves with a person throughout his or her lifetime" (p. 811). This convoy is a set of concentric circles including the individual in the centre and people in inner circle can be perceived as providing most support to the individual, while those who provide less support would be in outer circle (Levitt et al., 1933). Therefore, the model can show how many friends they have and how close they are with their friends.

The third part of the interviews entailed a conversation during which participants

were asked questions based on the convoy model they have drawn to lead out their sharing of friendship experiences. Further questions were also asked in order to get detailed information from participant, such as “what things you will do with friends?”

Analysis and Interpretation

Before the analysis, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed into Chinese and translated into English to create the field texts for analysis. Other colleagues were invited to check the translations of the interviews in order to ensure the accuracy and objectivity of description and translation of content of interviews, and increase the credibility of this research (Van Schalkwyk, 2008a). In transcription, participants were given pseudonyms for anonymity.

Analysis was conducted with the field texts using thematic readings. Thematic readings identify the themes or concepts emerging from textual data (Van Schalkwyk, 2008a). Through repetitive readings, the following themes were identified in textual data: (i) construction of friendship; (ii) characteristics and content of friendship; and (iii) quality of friendship. The demographic data and the convoy model were also analyzed. Birditt and Antonucci (2007) suggest that the model provides objective information regarding the numbers of relationships, and subjective information about perceived support. Therefore, with the convoy model and thematic reading, this research provided a more coherent and comprehensive interpretation about Macao middle-aged men's friendships.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Van Schalkwyk (2008a) claims that credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative researches are interchangeable with validity and reliability in quantitative researches. In order to increase credibility, the interpretation of textual data was based mainly on a comprehensive literature review on related topics, and an accurate description of interview data was gained from the cooperation with colleagues. For trustworthiness, the procedure of research was described as detailed and clearly as possible.

Reflexivity

Bond and Hwang (2008) and Sun (2008) claim there is a hierarchical structure in Chinese relationships. This structure is mainly based on the notion that the older people are, the more superior they are, and males are superior to females. The structure posed

a barrier for the interview because of the age difference between interviewer and the interviewee, despite being of the same gender. Therefore, participants were informed of the importance of their valuable collaboration, thus to reduce any bias in their responses and gain a more valid and reliable understanding about their experiences.

Discussion

Seven men participated in the research and their mean age was 49.28 years at the time of interview. For the confidentiality, the participants were given false names as Alfred, Samuel, Boston, Smith, George, Ben and Anson. All of them are living with their wife and children. Five of them have a boy and a girl, Alfred has only one boy, whereas Ben has four children. Six of them are full-time workers while Anson has his own barbershop. However, George has the highest salary among the participants which is over 20,000 patacas per month (the monetary unit in Macao), while others have the salary between 10,000 and 14,999 patacas per month. In addition, George is the only one who has Christian beliefs.

When asked about their perception of friendship, they perceived their friends as supportive, nice, mutual, and altruistic. Most of their friends are male and their colleagues. Different from the literature, the middle-aged men perceived that they have more friends than before. However, they do not have many leisure activities with their friends, and their interaction mainly bases on their work. In addition, they would use group gathering, self-disclosure, chatting, and mutual support to maintain their friendship.

Construction of friendship

It seemed that age is an element in the middle-aged men's choosing friends. When choosing who they will initiate a friendship with, most participants would find people who have similar ages (McDougall & Hymel, 2007), like Samuel and Boston said:

Samuel: "Yes, they have similar ages with me."

Boston: "Also very close (ages)."

Moreover, they will have less interaction with those who are much older or younger than they are and seldom identify those people as their friends. As they said:

Smith: "Only one to two friends are elder than me."

Boston: "And I will talk less with those whose ages are too far away. Normally, we will talk to those who have close ages."

I did not ask the actual age of their friends during the interviews, so the research cannot show how old their friends actually are. However, the range of age should be within 40 to 65. According to Erikson's stage theory (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005), 40-65 year-old adults should embed in the same stage, which is generativity versus stagnation. Therefore, the middle-aged men and their friends are within the same stage and should have similar experiences, beliefs and feelings.

As shown in the participants' convoy models, most of the names that they wrote down are male names. They perceived only few females as friends, except for their wives. Lenton and Webber (2006) and McDougall and Hymel (2007) claim that people tend to have more same-sex friends than cross-sex friends. Traditionally, men will have higher hierarchy than women, so with the influence of gender stereotype in Chinese society, male and female cannot develop an equal friendship (Lenton & Webber, 2006). Moreover, conforming masculine stereotype is perceived nice and cross-gendered issues are even perceived abnormal (Keiller, 2010), so men would find male friends and avoid other things related to femininity including female friends.

As Nussbaum et al. (2000) found, all participants have been devoting their time into work and mainly focus on their relationships with their work colleagues.

Boston: "These friends are my colleagues in the past and realized in the past."

Smith: "Friends.....my previous colleagues." "Most of them are colleagues."

Anson: "Most of them are colleagues."

Alfred: "No, no other than colleagues."

Ben: "the other (friends not from colleagues) is very little...very little...there is none."

Although it is suggested that men have fewer friends in aging (Lang & Carstensen, 1994; Shaw et al., 2007; Papalia et al., 2008), most participants mentioned that they actually have more friends than before because they perceive their colleagues as their friends and they know more people with their job, like Nussbaum et al. (2000) suggest that their friendship is job-related.

Samuel: "Have more friends now. Fewer in the past and more now."

Smith: "Bigger, know more people. Know more and more people (smiling)."

Boston: "When I was younger, I didn't have so many friends."

The size of middle-aged men's social network become much bigger because when there are more people in their company, they would know and interact with more people. When shifting their job, they would know more people, as the interviewees said:

Boston: "I need to work, the range become bigger. The range becomes bigger and the company has more people..." "In the past, I had a few colleagues..."

Smith: "Yes, more and more people now, because my job mainly focuses on public."

George: "In the communion, the number of people who interact with me has increased."

Although they know more friends, the sphere of friends who they know has become narrower because they mainly focus their social relationships on their colleagues, as George noticed: *"Now I become more focus, so the area has become narrower..."* This phenomenon could cause a problem that they would lose most of their friends and have a great decrease in their social network after their retirement because most of their current friends are their colleagues and they do not have any colleagues anymore after their retirement, so it may cause psychological problems such as feelings of loneliness. Therefore, the maintenance of their friendships is important in their future friendships and this possible problem should be a concern about elderly friendship in further researches.

Since adults need to devote their time into their family and work, the frequency or time of interaction with their friends is limited and Nussbaum et al. (2000) suggest that when people get older, they would have less interaction with each other. Thus, they have little interaction and few leisure activities with others outside from their families in their free time and it seems that family activities takes precedence over friend activities. As the interviewees said they actually did not have many gatherings with each other.

George: "I had gathering with friends but not much."

Anson: "Very little...because our working time exceeds 12 hours per day, it is too late after work."

Samuel: "Except from working...nothing else to do, we would go when quit work,

seldom be together.”

Moreover, because most of their friends are their colleagues, they have much interaction in their work, such as having lunch together. Nussbaum et al. (2000) also claim male friendship is job-related. *Smith: “In company, having lunch in the company.”* However, although they did not have many gatherings outside their work, they still perceived that they would always chat or share with each other. *Boston: “Up to now, we always go out and have a chat... We always keep in contact.”*

As you can see, there is a contradiction between their actual frequency and their perceived frequency of interaction. It seems that they perceive the interaction within their work environment as the interaction of their friendship and use their perceived “high” frequency of interaction to define who their friend is, so they would perceive their colleagues as their friends who have much interaction with them in the workplace. The frequency of interaction outside work may not be important to their friendship that they can still have deep friendships with a few interactions, as Nussbaum et al. (2000) suggest that a style of friendship for aging adults is independent.

Characteristics and content of friendship

In their description of their friends, most of interviewees said their friends are always kind to them. The middle-aged men perceived their friends as supportive, and that their friends could provide much support and help them solve their conflicts very easily. They would also have gatherings with their friends, such as having meals together and chatting. Moreover, they would also share many things together including their private experiences or unhappy experiences.

When being asked to describe their friends, the middle-aged men would firstly describe their friends as kind to them. Therefore, it seems that the first criterion to identify as a friend is kindness.

Alfred: “When we work together, he is very kind to me”

Boston: “If they are nice, then continue to contact with them.”

Samuel: “I was kind to them and they are kind to me.”

Nussbaum et al. (2000) and Lenton and Webber (2006) suggest that middle-aged men also perceived their friends as mutually supportive that they will help each other to solve problems:

Alfred: "When he is busy, I will help him; when I am busy, he will help me."

Smith: "Sometimes they can help me, help me solve problems. Sometimes they can help me in the work. We will help each other."

Moreover, to the middle-aged men, being altruistic is also an important characteristic of friendship (Duck, 1991), just like what Ben said: *"I already knew that I will lose for almost 5 to 6 years...but I will do it because they are my friends."* When they are free or after work, they would sometimes have a chat and have an afternoon tea with their friends. Therefore, having activities together is also perceived as a characteristic of middle-aged men's friendship.

Alfred: "When we are free, we will drink coffee together and have a chat... Have meal in holidays, it is the happiest."

Boston: "Karaoke, having meals, and other happy things, we had together, a group of people."

Smith: "Having meals and karaoke, etc... In company, having lunch in the company. Sometimes, we will play together. Yes, we also go to play and travel together (laughing)."

Chatting with friends is perceived as important to their friendship, and mutually sharing their private experiences is perceived as more important. Therefore, although Chinese men are socialized as unexpressive and non-emotional (Bowman, 2008), friendships can still provide a buffer zone for them to express themselves except from their family. When sharing their private experiences, they could communicate their inner feelings with their friends, thus to have a deeper understanding about each other.

Samuel: "When we have a chat, I will tell them, and they also tell me that (happy and unhappy experiences)."

Boston: "Also share about family. How is their family and how my family is... They will, they will also talk to us. It's the same. When there is something unhappy in working, we will also talk about that."

Smith: "Friends, talk with those familiar friends."

Moreover, sharing personal experiences or feelings must be based on the close friendship. As the middle-aged men said, normally they would only share their personal feelings or experiences with close friends, so self-disclosure is perceived as the

identification of close friends (Bond & Hwang, 2008). If the relationship is less close, they would rather focus on work-related topics and avoid personal issues. *“Talk about the work and mainly focus on the work if we can’t get along well”* (Smith).

The middle-age men will also seek help from their friends, such as ask for advice for their decision-making or their difficulties.

Alfred: “When I have some difficulties, he will help me.”

Samuel: “I can ask them for advice and they can solve it.”

Smith: “Sometimes they can help me, help me solve problems. Sometimes they can help me in the work. We will help each other.”

The middle-aged men focus on tangible help such as money or some even work-related benefits from their friends, like what Ben said: *“Thus the friends will introduce some projects to me.”* *“I need to rely on them to introduce me some projects or some companies.”* In addition, they still consider mutual support as a basic element to their friendship, like Duck (1991), Epstein (2006) and Nussbaum et al. (2000) suggest. Therefore, they will help their friends mutually rather than only providing or receiving support in one way. *“Sometimes they can help me in the work. We will help each other”* (Smith).

Nussbaum et al. (2000) suggest when people get older, the role of social support will become more important because they will need more support in order to compensate the physical decline with their advancing age. Therefore, whether their friends can provide instrumental support is quite important in choosing who to be their friends. Except for helping each other to solve problems, middle-aged men also described that their friends as comforting them and providing necessary emotional support to them when they have unhappy experiences. Chinese men only share their personal feelings or experiences with close others such as family and close friends (Bond & Hwang, 2008). Moreover, showing negative personal feelings is considered as losing face in Chinese culture (Sun, 2008). Therefore, it is rare that the middle-aged men will find emotional support from their friends. However, the interviewees in the study actually said they would find and receive emotional support from their closest friends, just like the interviewee said:

Samuel: “When it is happy, so we will be happy together. If it is unhappy, they will

counsel you. They will counsel you and say not to be unhappy.”

Boston: “They will try to counsel us and be open to these experiences.”

Smith: “Emotion will be a little bit low...for a period. Because I have many friends, when we chat together, we can counsel each other.” “They can help you relax yourself.”

In order to have a deep and solid friendship, self-disclosing personal feelings and experiences is necessary (Bond & Hwang, 2008). The middle-aged men said they would share their inner feelings and experiences only with the closest friends and self-disclosure must be based on trusting each other (Bond & Hwang, 2008; Lenton & Webber, 2006; Nussbaum et al., 2000). Therefore, self-disclosure is a necessary foundation of a deep friendship (Bowman, 2008).

Alfred: “I can have communication with him and can talk about everything.”

Boston: “Nothing we won’t talk about... When there is something unhappy in working, we will also talk about that.”

Smith: “(Will they also share their happy or unhappy experiences with you?) Yes, they will also. We will change the roles. When there are family problems, everyone will discuss together.”

Some of interviewees said that although they would share their personal feelings or experiences with their friends, some of their friends seldom shared their own personal feelings or experiences with them. Therefore, their sharing was not mutual, showing that their friendships were not deep enough for them to share their inner feelings or experiences and the requirement of close friendships is mutual self-disclosure of their personal experiences and inner feelings.

Alfred: “Er...nothing much, they seldom share with me.”

George: “Yes, I have, but there will be a limit.....but we are adults, so we have our limits, different limits of opening the inner world.”

Sometimes, they would also have conflicts or arguments with their friends. However, as they said, they would try to solve the arguments together and at last solve their conflicts or arguments through mutually understanding.

Alfred: “After calm down, we will see together who is wrong.”

Boston: “We will solve problems together and talk with each other.”

Smith: "There must be arguments, but we will be friends again quickly." "The best is sitting together and just like chatting."

Some interviewees said that it is unavoidable to have conflicts with their friends, but they can manage their arguments or conflicts quite well. Moreover, in solving their arguments, they would discuss the problems with their friends and try to solve them together. Therefore, it seems that solving conflicts together can not only maintain but also facilitate their friendships.

Samuel: "After calm down, we will see together who is wrong."

Boston: "When there is a problem, we must talk to each other." "We can discuss together and solve the problem."

Smith: "The best is sitting together and just like chatting. Why I would...some friends will help us explain why, why, why...who is wrong."

The middle-aged men will also have different kinds of activities with their friends to maintain their friendships. Nussbaum et al. (2000) declare that men's relationships are mainly activity-related. For example, the middle-aged men will have afternoon tea with their friends after their work or go out to have a chat. Sometimes, the middle-aged men may go to karaoke or traveling together. These are what they would do together and what they use to maintain the contacts with their friends.

Alfred: "When we are free, we will drink coffee together and have a chat."

Samuel: "Have an afternoon tea after work."

Boston: "Karaoke, having meals, and other happy things, we had together, a group of people. It's very happy, we are very happy. Sometimes, go out to have a tea, have a chat, such things."

Smith: "Having meals and karaoke, etc... Yes, we also go to play and travel together (laughing)."

George: "Now, we always have contacts."

As mentioned before, although the middle-aged men perceived they have much interaction with their friends, actually they have only few actual interactions beside work. However, it can also maintain their friendships and distancing is a style or strategy of maintaining friendship (Bushman & Holt-Lunstad, 2009; Nussbaum et al., 2000). Therefore, the important aspect of maintaining or developing friendship is whether they

can have the activities together (Bushman & Holt-Lunstad, 2009; Nussbaum et al., 2000).

Quality of friendship

Although the middle-aged men perceived that their friends are very close to them, it seems that their friendships are not really as deep as they described. In the interviews, when being asked about some impressive memories about their friends, most of them mentioned that they did not have any impressive memory about their friends and they also did not have any happy or unhappy memory about their experiences with their friends.

Alfred: "Yes, nothing impressed, we haven't met yet."

Samuel: "(Do you have any unhappy memory with him?) Um...no, no with this one.....no with others too. No, don't have happy memory with them."

Boston: "Just usual, nothing specially impressive, it's ok."

Smith: "(For those closest friends, what influences do they have on your life?) ...Nothing temporarily."

Therefore, the quality of their friendships is questioned. It seems that friends act as an agent of socialization at here to the middle-aged men. Epstein (2006) suggests friendship is also important in socialization of people. . Although mutual self-disclosure is important to friendship (Bond & Hwang, 2008; Lenton & Webber, 2006; Nussbaum et al.,2000), in Macao men seemingly have little reciprocity and their friendship is not as deep as the middle-aged men perceived, just like Samuel said: *"Now don't have contact with them (previous friends)."* Moreover, Ben even suggested that his friendships are even built on money. *"When I earn some money...I will give them...then they will be satisfied."*

Therefore, it is doubted that how they define their friendships. As you can see, high frequency of interaction in friendships may not represent good quality of friendship. Beside from perceived the middle-aged men's friends as their "friends", their friends can also be considered as the socialization agents in interaction with their friends that would influence the middle-aged men's behaviors, values and beliefs.

Limitations and further researches

Since this research was done by using qualitative narratives of few participants, the

findings cannot be generalized to all Chinese middle-aged men in Macao. Moreover, except for the fact that I did not ask questions more deeply or pursue sensitive issues, it is unavoidable that I had bias or misunderstanding in interpreting the narratives. In addition, with the influence of Chinese tradition, it is possible that the participants may not totally express their experiences and feelings to those who are inferior to them and they might give a “supposedly suitable” answer to question, in order to maintain their face that they are also “normal” people in the society (Sun, 2008).

As discussed before, the middle-aged men in Macao will lose their friendship after their retirement, so it is valuable to have another research to understand how their friendships actually change after their retirement. In order to have a clearer picture of the Chinese adults' friendship, it is necessary to have a further research to explore how people's friendships will change when they are adolescent, enter the late adulthood and after their retirement through the comparisons

Conclusion and implications

After interpreting their narratives, I have gained a better understanding about the experiences of friendships for middle-aged men in Macao. This understanding can actually fill the gap in Chinese and psychology literature regarding men and their midlife experiences, because few explorations have been done about middle-aged men especially Chinese middle-aged men. Moreover, the findings of this study can be used as a foundation of future researches for a deeper understanding about male adults. Understanding about Chinese middle-aged men can help to improve psychological services for men, such as counseling services. For example, counselors or social workers can understand their experiences of social network and what possible difficulties they will encounter when stepping into old-adulthood, such as the feeling of loneliness with losing their friends. Therefore, they can help the middle-aged men to deal with the life transition in order to gain a better well-being in their lives.

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