

Abstract

This research examines Chinese spouses' narratives regarding their participation in a Taiwanese organization and their experience and adaptation to a new life. Fourteen spouses, members of a Taiwanese organization called Chinese Association for Relief and Ensuing Service (CARES), completed in-depth interviews. Qualitative analysis identified prominent themes in participants' responses in relation to three main subjects: community communications, participation and empowerment. Analysis revealed that the organization communication techniques can be included in the category of community communications. Nevertheless semi-horizontal and bottom-up approaches were identified. This condition is reflected also in the process of spouses' participation and empowerment. The participation of women in community communications was reached only partially. The same can be said about empowerment, which was achieved mainly at the psychological level. The debate offered a list of possible factors which could be related to the partial development of empowerment and participation. They could be traced back to cultural, organizational and personal factors. Suggestions which are based upon these findings of empowerment and participation are proposed to the organization and to Chinese spouses.

Key words: community communication; foreign spouses; Chinese spouses; cross-strait marriages; Taiwan; empowerment; participation.

Introduction

The globalization phenomenon has created an era in which the movement of people across countries has been made much easier. Therefore, marriages between people from different nations have become more common. These relationships, which are often referred to as intercultural marriage, international marriage, mixed marriage, or transnational marriage, are happening more and more frequently. In the last few decades, Taiwan has seen many of these types of relationships, especially between Taiwanese men and women from Southeast Asia and Mainland China (Ministry of Interior, 2008). Unions involving a Chinese partner are more commonly known as cross-strait marriages.

Because of this boom in cross-strait and international marriages in Taiwan, the government's concern about the issue has increased. Over the last 5 years, a few associations have started to provide services to Chinese spouses. Among these is the Chinese Association for Relief and Ensuing Service (CARES) (Zhonghua Jiuzhu Zonghui, 中華救助總會). CARES is a Taiwanese self-financed association that originally gave assistance and help to people coming from Mainland China. In 1999, CARES started to offer services to Chinese spouses due to the increase in the number of cross-strait marriages in Taiwan. Not only did the organization offer a service to spouses, but CARES also wanted to empower this category of women. To achieve this goal, CARES initiated several activities and projects in which spouses were directly involved.

This participatory orientation and the focus on a specific community of interest make CARES a good example of community communication. In contrast to the mainstream media (such as television, newspapers, and radio), community communications concentrate on reaching specific target groups through small-scale methods, such as local newsletters, journals, or community radio (Vatikiotis, 2004). In

addition, such groups significantly emphasize interpersonal communication practices, such as lectures and face-to-face communication. The significance of community communications lies in the empowerment of the individual through direct involvement and participation within the community that he or she belongs to. This method aims to establish a system of communication and information that is relevant to the group's needs and interests (Vatikiotis, 2004, p. 12).

In this investigation, I will focus on the issues of participation and empowerment to understand whether and how Chinese spouses have achieved any benefit from the use of these communication techniques by CARES. The findings will try to answer the following questions:

- How do Chinese spouses participate in the community communication practices of the organization?
- How is the process of individual, organizational, and community empowerment achieved through the community communications employed by CARES?

The originality of this study lies not only in the theme (Chinese spouses) but also in the focus of investigation (the significance of community communication for this category of women). Several journal articles have already been published regarding the issue of foreign spouses. In most of these studies, Chinese spouses were included in the group. However, they should be treated separately because they have different needs and origins, and they have to comply with different legal regulations.

The few master's and doctoral dissertations that have concentrated on this subgroup are available only in Chinese. Thus, the debate appears to be confined to Chinese scholars and researchers. In addition, these studies focused mainly on social issues, such as adaptation, marriage problems (Zhu, 2003), political socialization,

national identity construction (Chen, 2006), and social stigmas (Xu, 2005). The issue of Chinese spouses, from a communication perspective, has rarely been investigated.

Therefore, the present study focuses on the communication aspect of this issue. The study also investigates other important topics such as participation and individual empowerment. In this way, this study brings into the academic discussion aspects that have rarely been applied to the Chinese spouses issue before.

This will be of great importance, not only for the international academic field itself but also for the Taiwanese government, organizations, and associations involved in this field. A third party that may benefit is CARES, as this study will open the door to reflections on and discussions of the organization's activities and the issue of female empowerment. Last but not least, I hope to bring interesting insights to the community of Chinese spouses in Taiwan. This study would like to help them reflect upon their actions both as individuals and as a group. Participants' narratives will inspire proposals not only for CARES members but also for all spouses in Taiwan.

This study hopes to provide a template for further investigation into this matter. Foreign women marrying and immigrating to a new country is not a peculiarity of Taiwan. This occurs in many other nations all over the world, such as Korea, Japan, and Singapore. I would like to bring to international attention all the problems and issues that surround this topic, and to encourage the intercountry dialogue between individual governments and organizations.

Literature Review

Community Communications

We have to go back to the 1970s in Canada and America if we want to pinpoint when and where the notion of community media began to be used. During this time, the

appearance of small-scale electronic media brought scholars' attention to an area previously neglected: the study of communication, under the auspices of the perspective of a community (Hollander et al., 2002, p. 19). This new field of study spread to Europe and gradually to the rest of the world (Fuller, 2007).

To clearly understand the concept of community media, the concept of community must first be addressed. Although community can provide different meanings, depending on whether it is related to a geographic locality, to a local social system, or to an interest group, a common factor can be outlined: community always implies a sense of belonging to or membership in a group. In this study, Chinese spouses were considered a community since they shared similar life conditions, interests, culture, and objectives.

The work conducted by Berrigan offered the first model of what is conceived as community media. Berrigan (1979) focused on the level of participation the individual could reach within a community. She called community communications all those “uses of communications media which include two-way communication” (Berrigan, 1979, p. 7). They have been used to identify programs designed for special interest groups and communities, such as ethnic minorities, women, or persons with disabilities. The effectiveness of this typology of media lies in how far the concepts of access and participation are implemented within the community group.

The concept of community media was further extended by Rennie (2007), who used the expression “prosumers” (p. 25) to describe them. With this term, she wanted to highlight the close relationship between the audience and the producers, and the fact that these media enable consumers to become producers.

A detailed description of community communications features was offered by Jankowski. According to the author, community or citizen media include different

typologies of mediated forms of communication such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and electronic networks whose audience is located within a specific community (defined either geographically or by interest). These small-scale media facilitate community participation and give voice to those groups who are marginalized and unrepresented (Jankowski, 2002, p. 6).

Marginalization is a focal point in community communication. Within each society, several groups coexist. A few might be more powerful, e.g., ethnic majorities; thus, they are privileged. Others might be less powerful, such as people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and women. Less powerful groups are often underrepresented within society because they are not taken into consideration by the government and traditional media institutions. Thus, inequalities and exclusion emerge. Community media aim to reestablish the balance between groups in society. Promoting the principles of access and participation, community media help unrepresented groups and minorities express themselves (Vatikiotis, 2004).

Community Communications' Significance

Community media is about “access to information,” “voice to marginalized groups,” and “people participation” (Milan, 2008, p. 26). Thus, empowerment as a process and participation as an approach give significance to all forms of community communication. That is, up to the point that “the practice of community communications will depend upon how far the notions of access and participation are accepted within particular socio-political contexts” (Berrigan, 1979, p. 18).

Participation. Participation refers to “a set of practices working for the liberation of the individual” and of the group (Riaño, 1994, p. 22). When applied to the communication field, participation stresses the importance of the active participation of

ordinary people in media and democratic institutions (Vatikiotis, 2004; Waters, 2000).

Berrigan (1979) defined the process of participation within the alternative media in terms of access (right to choose the content and interaction with the media producers), participation (involvement of the public in the production process), and self-management (participation by the public in the decision making of the media enterprise).

Empowerment. Empowerment is the transition from the state of powerlessness to the one of power. Empowerment can refer to three main spheres of action: individual (participation of the individual within the community organization), organization (shared leadership and collective decision making), and community (collective action and access to government and community resources) (Zimmerman, 1995; Perkins and Zimmerman, 1995). Empowering processes for individuals (also called psychological empowerment) might be based on three main components: interpersonal, interactional, and behavioral elements (Zimmerman, 1995). The interpersonal component is related to how people think about themselves. It includes the ability to extend control to several spheres of an individual's own life, self-efficacy, perception of competence and ability, and the capability of achieving goals. The interactional component is influenced by the understanding that people have of their community and of the related sociopolitical issues. This means critical awareness of issues, knowledge of how to reach determined goals, problem solving, and decision-making abilities. The behavioral component refers to the ability of taking action to influence a result, for example, looking for employment, managing stressful situations, and adapting to new environments (Zimmerman, 1995). The concept of empowerment, when studying female issues, has to take into consideration three additional aspects. Buzzanelli referred to this as cooperative enactment, integrative thinking, and connectedness (cited in Papa et al., 2000, p. 95).

Cooperative enactment refers to women's capacity to work together to achieve individual and collective goals rather than opposing each other. Integrative thinking refers to the inclination of women to consider how a specific action and its impacts can influence all the spheres of her life, for example, her family. Connectedness is related to "the attempt to integrate the mind, body, and emotions in making sense of the world around us" (cited in Papa et al., 2000, p. 96). This means that women's actions cannot be viewed only in their absolute empowering or disempowering value, but also need to take into consideration the reasons for and the context in which the individual acted in that specific way (Papa et al., 2000).

Chinese Spouses in Taiwan

Since 1992, the number of cross-strait marriages has increased significantly, and the attention given to this category of women has been amplified accordingly. Once they enter Taiwan, Chinese spouses have to face a harsh reality. They do not have a network of friends and confidants, they do not know the local regulations, they encounter legal limitations in obtaining visa extensions, they suffer from abuse and violence at home, they lack communication with their husbands, and they are marginalized from society (Chai, 2004; Hsia, 2004; Jian, 2004; Li, 2004; Wu, 2004; Yan, 2005). This can cause demoralization, loss of hope, and a fragile emotional condition. The first 2 years are often the most difficult. Therefore, Chinese spouses need help and support from the outside world to adapt to their new lives. These spouses need to find a familiar environment that helps them escape from isolation and loneliness. CARES carries out this duty. Through the use of community communication, which stresses the active participation of the individual, CARES promotes spouses' empowerment and aids their process of raising their awareness.

Data Collection and Analysis

The findings of this study came from the qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews and participants' observations.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data can offer a richer portrayal and explanation of processes and thoughts. Such data provide vivid and meaningful descriptions rather than numbers and generalizations, whereas quantitative analysis is more effective for summarizing great amounts of data based on statistical projections (Gaskell, 2000). Following this argument and considering the fact that this study aims to explore the different representations of the issue of participation and empowerment as perceived by individuals, I employed a qualitative methodology to investigate this issue. Because this study touches upon issues of particular sensitivity and of personal experiences, in-depth interviews appeared to be more effective than group interviews. One-to-one conversations facilitate the creation of a relationship of trust and confidence between the interviewee and the interviewer. In this way, the possibilities of provoking situations of anxiety are limited (Gaskell, 2000).

I conducted the in-depth interviews in two stages. The first interview was conducted with one of the social workers employed in the organization. The following stage was conducted interviewing 14 Chinese spouses who were part or had been part of the organization. In order to clarify ambiguous issues, some participants were interviewed more than once. The first in-depth interview aim was to investigate the community communication employed by CARES. Particular interest was placed on those forms of communication that favor women's participation. The in-depth interviews with Chinese spouses aimed to investigate whether and how the activities and media employed by CARES have facilitated the process of empowering women.

The participants in this research were selected from the women who attended lectures and activities at CARES. As not all women consistently participated in classes or joined the organization permanently, I had to access possible participants through different channels. Out of a total of 14 spouses, 5 were recommended by CARES personnel, and 3 were selected directly by me from among those who were participating in classes and activities. The remaining 6 were suggested to me by the participants. The criteria for the participants' selection were to pick a group of women who were as heterogeneous as possible. These criteria were based on age, social status, husbands' work, family situation, education, and membership in the organization. To gain an idea of the characteristics of the spouses who joined CARES, I also referred to a book that was published by the organization: *Fuwu zai tai dalu pei'ou. Gongzuo zhuanji* (服務在臺大陸配偶。工作專輯) (CARES, 2007). This book included many statistics and data on the spouses who participated in the forums and activities promoted by the organization between 2006 and 2007. In addition, a collection of short stories written by the spouses and published by CARES constituted a source of precious information about the women's experiences and thoughts: *Dalu pei'ou xinqing shouzha. Xinwo xinwo. Ai zai taxiang de gushi* (大陸配偶心情手札。新窩心窩愛在他鄉的故事) (Lin et al., 2007).

It is important to mention that during the several months preceding this thesis writing, I visited the organization several times. I had to ask for explanations on the organization activities and on women's involvement. This was also a way to contact the Chinese women and build a trusting relationship with them. The visits, the long chats I had with volunteers, and the opportunity of directly observing women in the field have to be considered essential in understanding the issues covered in this thesis. Indeed, participant observation is a technique that helps researchers gain further information not

only about individuals but also about how they interact with each other and with the surrounding environment. As a consequence, I had the opportunity to triangulate different impressions and observations with the data collected from the interviews and the aforementioned books.

To obtain high-quality, reliable data and interpretations, I followed several techniques that helped to reduce threats to validity. Firstly, I tried to build a rapport of mutual trust between the interviewees and me. Secondly, the interviews were organized in such a way that it gave space to the interviewees' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Thirdly, anonymity and confidentiality were explicitly guaranteed to each participant. Lastly, I have tried to remain as true as possible to the women's stories and expressions, as I translated from Chinese into English. I analyzed the interview data deductively, using as a base the considerations that emerged from the literature review. However, several themes were identified thanks to an inductive approach. The inductive approach was useful in interpreting issues that were not covered by the literature review.

Findings

In the following, I will discuss the three main issues of this study. They are communication practices, women's participation, and women's process of empowerment. To help readers understand the participants' background, I will also provide an overview of their demographics.

Participants' Demographics

The participants' areas of origin covered all of China, including coastal and inner regions, the capital, and provincial cities. One was from Beijing, 2 came from provincial capitals (Shanghai and Chengdu), 3 came from the main cities in their provinces (Guilin, Dali, Xinxiang), 1 was from Shenzhen, and the remaining 8 were from the provinces. As

we can see from the table, the average age of the participants was 36 years. The average age difference between couples was 8 years, with two cases in which the woman was older than her husband. Participants (11 out of 14) met their husbands mainly through relatives and friends. Three met their husbands independently. No one openly revealed that they had met their husbands through marriage brokers.

The participants had been in Taiwan for different lengths of time, ranging from 1 to 11 years. The length of the marriages ranged between 3 and 15 years (with the average length 7 years). These women married their husbands for various reasons. Half mentioned personal reasons, such as “love,” “sharing feelings,” and “sharing life and feelings.” Three women explicitly said that they were too old to get married and they needed to find a husband. They were respectively 49, 29, and 28 years old when they married. One divorced after 6 years of marriage. Two women decided to marry because they liked their husbands’ character: he was “very nice to me,” “he showed a kind and gentle character.” However, one of these women listed “filial piety to my parents and also to his parents” as one of the reasons why she married. One woman said she married mainly “to enter a new environment.” The reasons why these women moved to Taiwan were related mainly to their husbands and families: “follow my husband,” “marriage,” and “create a family.”

With the exception of 1 woman, all the other participants had held jobs in China. However, only 2 spouses were able to maintain the same job as before: 1 as administrative personnel and 1 as a yoga teacher. Almost half (6 out of 14) were housewives at the time of the interview.

Lara Momesso
Chinese Spouses Empowerment through Community Communication

Spouse code	Age	Husband's age	Area of origins	Arrival in Taiwan	Marriage date	Children	Occupation in Taiwan	Occupation in China	Husband's occupation	Reason for coming to Taiwan	Reasons for getting married	Meeting channel	Membership in CARES
001	40	60	Sichuan	1997	1993	1	Housewife	Airline personnel	Personal business	ID	Love	Independent	6 years
002	31	44	Shenzhen	2005	2005	0	Administration	Administration	Manager	Marriage	Sharing feelings	Relatives	3 years
003	43	40	Beijing	2004	2004	1	Housewife	Government official	Manager	Marriage	Love	Friends	1 year
004	30	48	Guangxi	2006	2005	2 (from previous marriage)	Housewife	Administration	Employee	Followed husband	Love	Friends	1 year
005▲	33	39	Jiangxi	1997	1997	2	Cleaner	Shop assistant	Temporary job	Marriage	No reason	Friends	3 years
006▲	36	43	Guangxi	2002	2002	0	Housewife	Medicine	Personal business	Marriage	Sharing feelings	Independent	3 years
007▲	37	43	Shandong	2005	1996	2	Family business	Medicine	Personal business	Followed husband	Good character; show filial piety	Friends	6 months
008▲	31	45	Yunnan	2007	2004	0	Yoga teacher	Yoga teacher	Personal business	Followed husband	Love	Independent	1 year
009▲	26	36	Hunan	2005	2005	0	Housewife	Unemployed	Temporary job	Marriage	Good character	Friends	7 years
010	34	37	Fujian	2004	2004	0	Shop assistant	Teacher	Employee	Marriage	Enter new environment	Friends	2 years
011▲	56	49	Fujian	2001	2001	2	Housewife	Family business	Temporary job	Marriage	Age	Friends	7 years
012▲	37	43	Henan	2000	2000	2	Restaurant	Public administration	Employee	Marriage	Age	Friends	2 years
013▲	35	45	Shanghai	1999	1994	3	Restaurant	Yoga teacher	Personal business	Followed husband	Love	Friends	6 years
014▲	37	49	Guangdong	1999	1999	2	Nurse	Administration	Employee	Marriage	Age	Relatives	1 year

Table 1
Participants' Current Demographics

In contrast to the common belief, none of the husbands belonged to the categories of people in need of care and veterans. Three reasons were identified as to why these women did not meet these criteria. First, most of these men live outside Taipei, and they are very difficult to reach. Second, women married to this kind of men find it difficult to join the organization because they have to spend time caring for their husbands. Third, the number of Chinese spouses married to these men have decreased in the years. It is important to note that the statistics provided by CARES (2007) showed that only a small percentage of women were married to men with physical or mental impediments.

In contrast to the common belief, most of the participants declared a family income that was above NT\$40,000. Only 2 respondents had monthly earnings that were less than the lowest average family income of Taiwanese families shown in the statistics published by the Accounting and Statistics website of the Directorate-General of Budget of the Executive Yuan.

Community Communication in CARES

According to the social assistant employed at CARES, the communication activities in CARES were organized to fulfill the following purposes: (a) to promote the organization; (b) to reach and involve Chinese spouses; (c) to influence Taiwanese people; and (d) to influence and propose recommendations to the government. The final goal of CARES activities was to improve Chinese spouses' life and to help them in the adaptation process.

The communication techniques that were employed can be divided into mediated and nonmediated forms of communication. Mediated communications included both modern (computer, Internet) and traditional technologies (telephone, printed media).

Nonmediated communication techniques included classes, lectures, and community activities.

Spouses had a broad selection of media technologies and tools available for their use: computers, DVD player, DVD library, karaoke, library with books and magazines, telephone, and a notice-board where they could display their personal thoughts. In addition, they had access to a big classroom and a community activities area (with a sofa, chairs, children's area, stove, and other cooking tools). CARES provided most of the materials that women might need for their activities, such as theater representations' costumes, food, lecture papers, and transportation for trips outside the city. Women were also able to request extra materials for their activities. All these tools were adapted to spouses' interests and needs with the aim of helping, informing, educating, and empowering the community.

CARES constituted not only a physical space where women could meet, talk, and stay together but also a trustworthy place where they could ask for counseling. "Trust" was a word used by the social assistant to describe the organization's goals. It was also echoed by several women, when they were asked the question, "Why did you join CARES?" This organization was a "safe," "peaceful," "trustworthy" and "familiar" environment where they could meet new friends, collect information, and learn new skills.

As a participant stated:

[spouses] need help, they need only to talk to someone sometimes. And the fact that they have someone available for them to talk is important. You can think that this is a small help, nothing more than a talk. But sometimes this is what a person

needs when she is far away from her home. This is a small help which can become very big for those who need it. (Interviewee 013)

CARES aimed to provide a sense of belonging and identification by offering a familiar and safe environment for the women. Women joined the organization because they could meet with other spouses from mainland China, they felt recognized, and they could share information with each other. CARES was a place where they could find relief from the pressures of their everyday lives. Another participant observed:

What they were able to create is a feeling of community and belonging. This is very important. Before I didn't have a group, a job, or any kind of social life. But I needed them! And besides belonging to a group, I needed also to have a social life, which I didn't have at all before. (Interviewee 006)

While the women requested mainly entertaining and community activities, CARES also tried to introduce educational and informative lectures. In addition, it engaged in dialogues with the public (mainly Taiwanese society and government). The organization's objective was to help women get integrated with the local society. Women recognized the importance of these projects, which were a "help to get integrated and to get to know more about a society we really don't know" (Interviewee 011).

Significance of CARES Communications

According to the participants' narratives, these communication techniques could bring several contributions to the community of spouses. First, these techniques facilitated women's participation. Spouses were involved in the production process of media projects (through delegates and volunteers) and supported the organization in its activity of mediation with the government. For example, during national forums, volunteers were invited to share their stories, problems, and thoughts with other women

and with the guests (who included representatives of government and private institutions). This benefited the mutual dialogue and exchange of information between spouses and Taiwanese institutions. During the release of the collection of short stories written by the spouses, women were invited to take part in the event and had the opportunity to speak out.

Second, they could be empowered at the microlevel and in some way also at the macrolevel. When they arrived in Taiwan, the women did not have any friends, and they had difficulties finding a job (at least for the first 2 years because of rule restrictions). The fact that women could not go to work affected their family's economics, and diminished their possibility of meeting new people and making friends. This situation was described as "home confinement" by one of the spouses (interviewee 003). In the long run, this negatively affected women's psychological well-being. Participants felt dissatisfied not only because they could not work, but also because they could not access jobs related to their studies. In addition, the family situation of some women was very complicated. Two participants suffered from violent husbands and divorced after a long bureaucratic procedure. At the time of the interview, they lived in Taiwan with their children. Another woman complained about her husband's inclination to drink:

The biggest problem right now is related to my husband. He often comes back drunk, and on such occasions he is another person. He has no control over his life and actions, and this is bad. He comes back, and he messes up everything at home. I cannot say that he is bad to me, but still, I don't like when he is drunk, because he has no control. We quarrel a lot. And he wastes too much money on alcohol, and this is very bad because we don't have much money at home. I really don't like this. I said it to him, and every time he apologizes for his behavior.

Then he does it again. He should stop going out with his friends. (Interviewee 010)

Another problem that women had to face was Taiwanese society and mentality. Taiwanese society was described as hostile and unfriendly. According to a participant, Chinese spouses were negatively labeled with terms such as *dalu xinniàng* (大陸新娘) or *dalumei* (大陸妹) which respectively mean Mainland bride and Mainland beauty (Interviewee 001).

Due to this unbearable situation in Taiwan, 4 of the women said that at the beginning they wanted to return home. Without external help, they would have found it difficult to gain control over their lives. Therefore, CARES became a reference point of assistance for these spouses.

Women could escape their loneliness and apathy when they joined CARES. For example, a participant stated that CARES helped her to smile again after three years of sorrow and loneliness (Interviewee 003). They could learn new skills, and they could help other spouses and the society as a whole (through the voluntary activities). This gave them a greater feeling of social fulfillment. As a consequence, spouses could enhance their control over their own lives (Interviewees 013, 012).

The empowerment Chinese spouses achieved at the community level was related to two main areas: their image in Taiwanese society and their rights. According to the participants, their status within Taiwanese society has improved within the last few years. They have gained the respect of their neighbors, who stopped considering them as others. The government has adjusted its behavior and some of its policies according to their needs. For instance, when referring to cross-strait marriages, the government changed the wording “Chinese brides” to the more respectful “Chinese spouses.” In addition, the

government adopted new regulations. For example, previously women whose husbands had passed away and who did not have Taiwanese IDs had to return to China. As of April 2008, they could continue residing in Taiwan if their children were still here. Another example was the addition of a new criterion to the list for job permit requests. Since 2007, women with children under 18 years old have had the opportunity to work when in possession of a resident visa.

The two main methods of empowering the spouses community were the women's own personal conduct and the work carried out by CARES. Individually, each woman's own personal conduct helped to affect the way in which Taiwanese people viewed Chinese spouses. Women were aware that the way in which they interacted with local people could influence the entire society's opinion of Chinese spouses. Therefore, participants' understanding of and integration into Taiwanese society were necessary. During lectures, spouses were taught to search for dialogue rather than confrontation with locals. Spouses were also taught to try to understand Taiwanese, as this could facilitate integration and mutual understanding.

Apart from this personal involvement of the women, the greatest contribution at the community level was offered by CARES. The organization became the mouthpiece of Chinese spouses in Taiwan. Participants agreed that they were neither powerful nor influential without CARES. According to them, this was related to a lack of time, money, information, and knowledge (Interviewee 012).

Discussion

The findings showed that the communication channels employed by CARES varied from mediated to nonmediated and from traditional to modern techniques. However, it should be noted that spouses and the organization relied mainly on

nonmediated and traditional forms of communication. Telephone and face-to-face communications were preferred over computer use. This could be related both to spouses' interests and education and to the organization's orientation, which tended to be traditional. In contrast to other kinds of modern channels, CARES was a well-established organization in which each member had a specific role. It was based on a direct and personal communication rather than on an anonymous one (as in on-line chats, for example). These factors favored the creation of reliable social networks in which individuals had to account for their actions.

As we can see, CARES communications facilitated the exchange of information among spouses, and interaction between spouses and the public. Therefore, CARES constituted for them a place where they could develop a sense of belonging. This means that spouses could interact with each other and could also (a) release their everyday frustrations and share their emotions; (b) discuss projects and ideas; (c) discuss collective topics (e.g., group issues, government policies); (d) become involved in activities and projects; (e) learn new skills; (f) collect and spread information; (g) become involved in voluntary activities; and (h) participate in public activities and projects.

The Issue of Participation

As mentioned in the literature review, the significance of community communication lies in "how far the notions of access and participation are accepted" within the community (Berrigan, 1979, p. 18). Therefore, focused on the concept of participation, community media can be distinguished by a bottom-up and horizontal flow of communication (Vatikiotis, 2004).

This case was characterized by what I will define as a semihorizontal and semi-bottom-up approach. I have used this expression to highlight the fact that participation

was not fully implemented at all levels. Indeed, the organization still played an important role in the decision making and in the definition of communication contents. In such circumstances, the third level of participation, self-management, was not fully accomplished. The main reason can be traced back to women's education and culture.

These spouses all came from mainland China. After decades of communist ideology based on the overall authority and control of the party-state, this society has been opening up to political and social changes. Even though nowadays we can see examples of people's involvement in their communities, a top-down approach is still widely imposed all over the country (Heberer, 2008). When participatory projects are implemented in cultures in which the main values oppose the principles of participation, individuals are in a "paradoxical position." This means that they are required to do something that is not part of their natural inclination (Chenney, in Papa et al., 2000). As a consequence, participants did not feel confident with the bottom-up and proactive approach typical of community communication.

The participants' statements prove this point. Only 1 interviewee affirmed that she had previously been engaged in voluntary activity in China. Two said that they had never been asked to take part in the activities' arrangements. Five said that it was not their duty to decide on activities management. These answers could be interpreted as a tendency to just accept authority. In the natural attempt of searching for patterns that were similar to those of their country of origin, the women accepted top-down approaches while in Taiwan.

This factor could also affect the way the organization dealt with women. Indeed, since CARES considered spouses not ready to become involved in the decision-making

process, the organization offered only limited areas in which spouses could organize and decide their own activities and projects.

The Issue of Empowerment

A limited development of the concept of participation causes other deficiencies in the communication system and in the community. As we see, participation and empowerment are a continuation of each other. There cannot be empowerment without participation and vice versa. Therefore, if participation is only in part accomplished, it will be difficult to fully achieve empowerment.

The results showed that empowerment at the microlevel (psychological) was fully achieved. In fact, after joining CARES, women gained control over their lives, perceived themselves as able to reach objectives, and improved their understanding of their sociopolitical environment. On reflection, the organization was also empowered. Conversely, macrolevel empowerment presented several blind spots. Indeed, women still strongly relied on CARES for issues related to community empowerment, for example, when interacting with the government or with the external society. Two main cofactors affected this lack of empowerment at the macrolevel: on one hand, spouses' personal and social condition and, on the other hand, the organization's architecture for participation.

Spouses justified their lack of social collective action by insufficient funds, links, knowledge, and time. According to the participants, the reason why the spouses came to Taiwan was to follow their husbands or to marry. Most had to take care of older relatives and their families and children, so the women were absorbed by everyday life duties. The women joined the organization mainly to extend their social relations. Because of this, a gap between the organization's goals and the spouses' goals might have emerged: spouses

focused on personal empowerment while the organization focused on community empowerment.

This was also demonstrated by the way the women conceptualized the notion of community. Often, the participants had problems understanding the questions related to organization and community empowerment. In particular, when asked, “What’s your contribution to the category of Chinese spouses?” or “Have you ever done anything for the category of Chinese spouses?,” participants tended to think in terms of the closest members in their group rather than in terms of the entire category of Chinese spouses in Taiwan.

We should also consider the fact that the women did not have the basic capabilities to empower their community by themselves. Without some basic rights (such as naturalization and education recognition), spouses found it difficult to control the spheres of their collectivity. Therefore, they had to rely on a local agent, such as CARES, which offered them the opportunity to be heard in the local community.

On the other hand, because the organization had to handle most of the mediatory activities with the government and with society, the women could have been prevented from being more active at the macrolevel. This phenomenon was called the “paradox of design” by Cheney (cited in Papa et al., 2007) and occurs mainly when the architecture for participation is created in a top-down way rather than bottom-up process (p. 116). As a consequence, this factor could have affected nonempowerment at the macrolevel. In fact, we have previously noted that participation was not completely implemented at all levels in CARES. Since self-management is the most extreme stage of participation and requires a “total form of involvement,” conditions of partial participation at the highest levels can occur in community media, too (Berrigan, 1979, p. 19).

Conclusions

The findings and related discussion showed that most of the spouses were powerless when they arrived in Taiwan. Once the spouses joined the organization, they went through a process of empowerment and redefinition of their identity. CARES facilitated this process, by trying to promote spouses' involvement in their community and using specific communication techniques. This study offered an excursus of the communication techniques employed within the organization and of the way how they favored spouses' participation and empowerment.

The results revealed that the communication methods employed within the organization could be considered community communication. This is supported by the definition proposed by Berrigan (1979). These techniques include mediated and nonmediated forms of communication and are adapted to the interests and needs of the community. According to Berrigan (1979), community communications "are not limited to particular types of communication" or "to particular uses" because the community decides on their purpose and uses (p. 25). As we saw, CARES offered different kinds of mediated and nonmediated projects for the community of spouses. Women chose what they liked and what they needed most. In the meantime, they could propose new ideas and require new materials.

Jankowski's (2002) model could also be applied to the communication channels employed by CARES. In CARES, these techniques provided news and information relevant to the needs of the community. Nonprofessionals and volunteers were involved in the production process. Their audience was limited to the community. Projects, activities, and the organization itself were financially noncommercial. These

communications were controlled by CARES, a local association that cooperates with the government to offer a service to the community of Chinese spouses.

As argued in this paper, the communications employed in CARES facilitated the exchange of information among spouses and the interaction between spouses and the public. In fact, CARES constituted for them a place where they could create their collective identity and where they could enhance control of their personal (release their frustrations, share emotions, learn new skills, collect and spread information) and collective (discuss collective projects and ideas, discuss collective topics, become involved in activities, participate in public projects, become involved in voluntary activities) spheres.

This study provided several considerations about the issues of participation and empowerment. The findings showed that spouses' participation and empowerment were only partially developed. A mutual relationship between these two factors was noticed, since partial participation also determined incomplete empowerment at the macrolevel. The debate offered a list of possible aspects that could be related to the partial development of empowerment and participation. They could be traced back to cultural, personal, and organizational factors. These elements could be deduced from participants' narratives and found confirmation in the literature of experts and scholars.

Recommendations

The following recommendations might be helpful for improving existing projects and avoiding past errors. This could be a reference point for CARES and for other organizations with similar goals. First, the organization should use more modern technologies. This is a very challenging step for any organization, which will increase its possibilities of action and success. This is because new technologies, and especially the

Internet (it is inexpensive), are fast and can reach a wider population. It is also important to motivate the group to use other and more innovative forms of communications (e.g., community blogs, which might be a channel for women to speak out and be heard by other Chinese spouses) because these could be helpful in the dialogue with the public. CARES should also try to extend the empowerment process at the macrolevel. Therefore, CARES should motivate individuals to become directly involved in a dialogue with the government and the public, and to think independently (not only with reference to their own sphere of action but also to the area of influence of the entire community). To do this, it is necessary to create not only a sense of belonging to but also a sense of commitment to the community and its causes. CARES should also limit the control of the organization in the activities organized by the members of the community. This is related to the principle that, in community communication, process is more important than form; therefore, women need to be given the space to act independently.

A few remarks might also be directed to the group of spouses who joined CARES. The spouses should be more proactive. This means that community members should limit their passive attitude in favor of a more active one. It is important to continuously search for new stimulations because this would bring fresh ideas to the community and favor each level of empowerment. Women should think as a group rather than as a single individual to create group awareness and commitment. Each individual should develop a disposition to embrace more modern techniques. This will be fruitful for the individual, the organization, and, on reflection, for the whole community.

Future Research

This case study inspired ideas for potential future research and exploration.

It would be interesting to research the future of the organization: whether they will promote new communication techniques and how they will be accepted by the group of spouses. In addition, the issue of empowerment at the community level needs to be revised to see if there is any development in women's contribution and commitment. This study could also be integrated with quantitative studies with the aim of providing statistical data on Chinese spouses in Taiwan, their participation in community activities, and empowerment. Comparative studies could also be helpful to understand the issue of partial participation and the empowerment of Chinese spouses. Comparison with other groups of foreign spouses in Taiwan would help discover if the assumptions offered in the discussion are valid. Comparison with Chinese spouses in other countries (e.g., Singapore) could enlighten new aspects that have not been considered in this thesis. Investigations of the indirect effects of CARES on spouses who are not its members could also be an inspiring area of research.

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