Hong Kong Chinese community leaders' perspectives on family health, happiness and harmony: A qualitative study

ABSTRACT

This paper highlights a formative study to examine the views of Hong Kong community leaders on the underlying issues that affect family health, happiness, and harmony (3Hs) in Hong Kong. We conducted a series of individual in-depth interviews with 26 leaders representing neighborhoods in Hong Kong of diverse socioeconomic status (SES) from June to August 2008. Participants considered that changing family structure, economic situation, and strong work ethic influenced family 3Hs. Families in different SES have to overcome different challenges to achieve and sustain family 3Hs. Leaders from low SES neighborhood were concerned more about providing tangible programs to improve family resources, whereas leaders from high SES neighborhood focused on preventive interventions to achieve better family well-being. The findings serve as a basis and offer insights in designing effective social marketing education campaigns and family-friendly workplace policy to promote societal harmony through the maintenance of healthy, happy and harmonious families.

As exemplified in Hong Kong over the past 30 years, rapid socioeconomic growth comes with new forces acting on the structure and well-being of families. The number of divorces increased substantially from 2,062 in 1981 to 17,771 in 2008 (Census and Statistics Department, 2009a). Similarly, reported spouse battering and child abuse cases in Hong Kong doubled from 3,993 in 2004 to 7,725 in 2008 (Social Welfare Department, 2009). Whether these figures reflect more social acknowledgement and emergence of pre-existing problems or intensification of family disharmony are unclear. Other social indicators including substance abuse and juvenile delinquent behaviors appear to be increasing though remain proportionately low compared to other post-industrial societies. These changes are of concern because they may indicate increased family discord, which in turn could foretell greater potential for societal instability (Lau & Chan, 1997; Needle, Su, & Doherty, 1990; Rabello & Caldas, 2007; Rabello & Caldas, 2007).

Family well-being is a major indicator of a harmonious and healthy society (Ho & Chan, 2009). However, population-wide interventions to enhance family well-being are extremely difficult to plan, implement and evaluate. The nature of the problems faced by families varies and large-scale efforts at population-wide family enhancement are limited, especially in mainland China and Hong Kong. In addition, evidence-based research on family well-being of Hong Kong Chinese families is scarce. A recent telephone survey by Ma and colleagues has pointed to the association between family well-being of Hong Kong families and the five types of family resources (family time, income, human capital, psychological capital, and social capital). Based on a random sample of 1,010 Hong Kong adult citizens, they highlighted that income, time spent with family, stress coping efficacy, religion, and satisfaction with the living environment are the most significant domains conductive to family well-being in Hong Kong (Ma, Wong, Lau, &

Shuk, 2009). While assessing these family resources is part of an assessment of family well-being, their approach is limited to certain dimensions contributing to family well-being but could not fully depict the underlying issues affecting family well-being of all Hong Kong Chinese families. As an initial step to planning population-wide interventions, we sought information from a number of sources to inform our planning. Actions of community leaders and advocacy groups may significantly influence public issues and the community agenda. Such key informants can provide useful triangulation information on the order of significance of family-related issues on the community agenda and its related implications for problem solution. (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988; Shiffman, 2009).

In 2008, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust in collaboration with the School of Public Health, The University of Hong Kong have launched a population-wide project aimed at promoting health, happiness, and harmony (3Hs) to all families in Hong Kong. Under a unitary system of government, Hong Kong consists of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories, and these three areas are subdivided into 18 geographic districts with each represented by a district council that advises the government on local matters such as public facilities, community programs, cultural activities and environmental improvements. Hong Kong residents with high socioeconomic status (SES) are mostly distributed in Hong Kong Island, while those with middle SES and low SES are mostly residing in the New Territories and Kowloon, respectively (Census and Statistics Department, 2009b). The initial step of this project was then to explore family needs and barriers to sustain family 3Hs from these three geographical areas.

This study is the first to describe the opinions from community leaders and advocacy groups in Hong Kong on issues affecting family 3Hs, the vulnerable groups in society and the gaps in

services. The study serves as a part of the formative assessment of the population-wide services or interventions and aims to solicit support from the community leaders and major stakeholders to engage in the development of appropriate interventions targeting the Hong Kong families.

Methods

Participants

A community reconnaissance method was adopted for recruiting key informants and inter-organizational groups involved in decision making (Nix & Seerly, 1971). Based on jurisdictional and organizational sectors, this method allowed us to analyze the family 3Hs issues from multiple aspects of community power including education, social, and health care service. A total of 26 leaders (11 males, 15 females) from various districts representing neighborhoods of diverse SES in areas of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories were selected based on their formal authority in major community sectors such as social services, healthcare, education and district councils.

Procedures

Following University of Hong Kong Institutional Review Board approval, two research team members approached participants at their workplaces during June-August 2008. Participants gave written informed consent and information on socio-demographic characteristics and work experience in their community sector. Participants then completed a 45- to 90- minute semi-structured interview conducted by a research team member, while the second research team member took detailed field notes. Following a brief, standardized introduction on the purpose of the interview, participants followed an interview guide developed to investigate the issues related to 3Hs in Hong Kong families. Key open-ended questions included the following: (1) What do you think are the most pressing issues for families in Hong Kong at the present time? (2) In your

view, which groups are now facing the greatest challenge in sustaining family 3Hs in Hong Kong?
(3) What are your views on the existing services and assistance in promoting family 3Hs and how can the situation be improved? Probes were used to elicit detailed responses (e.g., tell me more).

Data analysis

Interviews were conducted in Chinese (Cantonese, the local dialect), audio-taped with permission and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then analyzed and coded using a thematic content analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Three coding phases were involved: (a) open coding was performed whereby each segment of the transcribed interviews was coded using a paraphrase that connoted these words; (b) axial coding was then proceeded with clustering the descriptive codes into groups of related subcategories; and (c) these categories were refined and grouped around common themes using selective coding (Krippendorff, 2004). Inter-coder reliability was assessed by two independent coders who had experience in content analysis. Resulting analysis checking with participants was performed. Edited interview excerpts, which were translated into English, were presented to validate the emerging themes while preserving participants' anonymity.

<center>.**Results**</center>

Table 1 shows that all 26 participants were married and the mode of age range was 40-49 years old, having between 10-20 years of working experience in the community. Key themes and sub-themes emerged and are summarized in Table 2.

Theme 1: Current social problems in Hong Kong families

Changes in family structure, price inflation, prevailing fast pace and workaholic culture were considered as the most pressing social problems influencing 3Hs in Hong Kong families.

Changes in family structures

During 1841-1997, Hong Kong was administered by British colonial government until sovereignty returned to China in 1997 (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, 2007). The need to maintain the 'one country, two systems', political duopoly requires the retention of a controlled border between Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and mainland China. Family structure in Hong Kong has been gradually changing for the past 30 years since China has implemented an 'open policy' enabling access into China for Hong Kong citizens. Consequently, an increasing number of Hong Kong citizens have employment or businesses interests in mainland China, while their spouse and descendants stay in Hong Kong (Chiu & Ho, 2005). This separation makes maintaining a family relationship difficult.

> *The current working environment is changing; one family member works in mainland China, resulting in a poor family relationship and delayed parenthood. (Male, a social service provider from a high SES neighborhood)*

The increasing trend of cross-border marriage (mostly Hong Kong men marrying mainland Chinese women) has resulted in a quota system to regulate a steady influx of wives and children from mainland China to Hong Kong to live with their Hong Kong husbands/fathers (Census and Statistics Department, 2007a). Because wives from mainland China usually are the last ones to reunify with their families in Hong Kong, the separated family life and the subsequent reunion challenges family well-being (Wong & Song, 2006; So, 2003).

> *We foresee cross-border family (mainland China and Hong Kong) would become prevailing family composition, which will pose a great challenge on parents-children*

relationship and wife-husband relationship. (Female, a social service provider from a

high SES neighborhood)

Economic situation

Price inflation poses a grave financial burden to most of the Hong Kong families. For instance,

strong demand and restricted land supply has driven property prices to an unrealistic level,

resulting in a rise in the rental and purchase cost of accommodation (Liu, 1998). In addition,

affected by the global financial crisis of 2007-2009, many Hong Kong companies have been

involved in a wave of bankruptcies (Park, 2009). A male district councilor from a low SES

neighborhood highlighted the situation and stated,

> *Price inflation including a rise in prices of food and miscellaneous goods influence*
>
> *families of all socio-economic levels, especially the low SES group. The recent decline in*
>
> *stock market creates a lot of pressure on some middle-class families, causing a decrease*
>
> *in purchasing power.*

Prevailing fast pace and workaholic culture

Some leaders stated that Hong Kong's work culture drives people to a perpetual state of stress.

A recent report showed that 28.4% of 2,603,900 employees who had a fixed number of

contractual hours of work per day were required to work more than eight hours but up to 10

hours per day, while 5.8% worked more than 10 hours per day (Census and Statistics Department,

2009c). Leaders felt that under this high-pressure and competitive environment, people often

experience difficulties in achieving a balance between work and family life.

> *The financial situation would be the biggest source of stress. People tend to work long*
>
> *hours. As a result, they spend less time with the family and look for quick fixes to deal*

with their family issue, neglecting the building of family relationship. (Male, a district

councilor from a middle SES neighborhood)

A social service provider pointed out some difficulties faced by families who have lower

education levels and lack the required job skills:

The atmosphere in the workplace has sacrificed many families. For example, some

department stores are opened till 11 p.m. Families with low SES have no choice as they

do not have the ability to search for a better job. Those who live in remote but cheaper

areas have to spend much money and time to go to the workplaces. As a result, those

parents have to sacrifice their own family time because they have to work extended hours.

Many families' relationships are sacrificed in Hong Kong and the social cost will

increase eventually. (Female, a social service provider from a low SES neighborhood)

Theme 2: Groups facing the greatest challenges to sustain family 3Hs

Four population sub-groups were perceived to be vulnerable to poor family well-being. These

groups included the deprived families, Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA)

recipients, single parent families and migrant women in cross-border marriages. In Hong Kong,

the CSSA Scheme is the major income-support social security scheme to provide assistance to

financially vulnerable individuals and families. Deprived families are people in lower SES but

are not receiving CSSA. During 1996 to 2008, the number of CSSA recipients increased by

113% from 223 384 to 475 625. Most single parent families are under CSSA scheme. In 2008,

the number of female CSSA recipients in the "single parent" category was 55 463, while the

number of male recipients in this category was 33 366 (Census and Statistics Department, 2009a).

A female family service provider commented:

Families with limited resource (e.g., deprived families, CSSA recipients, and single parent families) are most vulnerable when facing changes in the external environment. Most of their family conflicts are related to financial problems, triggering many family arguments and family violence. Unfortunately, they do not know how to solve the problems and seldom seek help. (Female, a family service provider from a middle SES neighborhood)

Owing to the large number of women from mainland China coming to Hong Kong to join their families, migrant women constituted 4.1% of the population in Kowloon in 2006. This proportion was higher than that on Hong Kong Island (1.9%) and in the New Territories (3.1%). Due to the long family reunification process (as they have to apply and then wait for the limited entry quota), most of these migrant women have been separated from their spouses in Hong Kong for 10 years or more. In addition, of 83 164 migrant women living with the spouse in 2006, 88.4% were younger than their Hong Kong husbands with a median age difference of 7 years (Census and Statistics Department, 2007b). Several leaders recognized the special difficulties which migrant women face in bringing up a family:

Family reunification process affects most of the cross-border families. Migrant women, who were mainly from mainland China, usually are the last ones to reunify with the families in Hong Kong. (Migrant women) have left their homeland and relatives and come alone to a totally strange community. They face greater difficulties in accessing health and social support in the new environment. The wide age gap in marriage, long separation from family, differences in socio-cultural background, lack of the usual social support and network, and weak foundation of marriage has further intensified the hostile family relationship, potentiating a rise in family violence and child abuse. For example,

migrant women are not aware that hitting the child is not allowed in Hong Kong, as their

neighbors (in mainland China) all acted in that way, and many were puzzled why Hong

Kong has such a strict law. (Female, a social service provider from a high SES

neighborhood)

Theme 3: Perceptions on family 3Hs

Leaders were asked about their perceptions on each of the family 3Hs.

Family health

Leaders believed that cohesiveness and staying physically and mentally healthy are two

important elements to engender a healthy family. They considered family health as a cohesive

unit, in which all family members are motivated to solve problems from challenges or crisis

together regardless of the family structure. Several social service providers stated,

> *No matter what tragedy strikes your family, the key for a healthy family is to make effort*
>
> *to maintain the family unity. This is a part of the learning process and every family*
>
> *member needs to make such effort as long as you consider family is important. (Male, a*
>
> *social service provider from a low SES neighborhood)*
>
> *Family health includes mental health for each family member. Facing financial hardship*
>
> *might cause emotional illness among adults. Most parents might not be able to take care*
>
> *of themselves or they even are not aware of having emotional illness when facing*
>
> *difficulties. (Female, a social service provider from a high SES neighborhood)*
>
> *Regardless of the family structures including lone-parent family, cohabitation, and cross-*
>
> *border marriage, the most important thing is everyone stays together. (Female, a social*
>
> *service provider from a low SES neighborhood)*

Family happiness

Community leaders commented that happiness is a subjective feeling, depending on priorities in one's life. A male healthcare service provider from a high SES neighborhood stated,

> *Sometimes even poor people are happy such as people in Bhutan. They are poor but still very happy as they (people in Bhutan) are in a fair and connected community. However, Hong Kong people see things in a narrow and short-sighted way; they focus on getting quick money, hence causing a lot of stress and unhappiness within families.*

Generally, leaders believed that spending time with family members and building connection with friends and relatives will lead to happiness. As described by several leaders:

> *Family happiness is engendered from family activities such as having a Chinese dim sum lunch during the holiday or shopping with families etc. (Male, a district councilor from a high SES neighborhood)*

> *If there's no harmony, it seems difficult for a family to be happy. However, absence of conflict does not imply that a family is happy. (Female, a social service provider from a high SES neighborhood)*

> *Establishing good relationships with neighbors and friends through activities such as dinners and visits would build family happiness. (Female, a social service provider from a middle SES neighborhood)*

However, a number of leaders considered that working overtime is the major barrier to pursue family happiness and felt that low SES families may suffer most from the lack of supportive networks. As two female social service providers from high SES neighborhood stated,

> *Long working hours and work stress, resulting in less happy time with families.*

Those in middle class concern more (family 3Hs)...they enjoy the benefit of five-day work week...therefore they may have more leisure time and spend more time with their family and friends. However, low SES families may not have such privilege as they need to work hard to support the basic needs of their families.

Family harmony

Community leaders perceived that both conflicts and effective communication are major components contributing to family harmony. Leaders repeatedly stated their opinion that conflict disrupts family harmony:

Harmony is no conflict; people would not physically hit one another. Conflict arises due to lack of communication, causing disharmony. (Male, a district counselor from a middle SES neighborhood)

Physical violence usually begins with verbal abuse. Women tend to remain silent and tolerate for a certain period of time to keep family harmony. (Female, a social service provider from a low SES neighborhood)

Theme 4: Suggestions to promote family 3Hs

Provision of family-friendly workplace policy, public education, and mobilizing community resources were suggested by community leaders to promote family 3Hs in Hong Kong.

Family-friendly workplace policy

Several leaders suggested that family-friendly workplace policy should be advocated to facilitate employees to achieve a healthy balance between work and family life. Two social service providers described the reasons for the need of the family-friendly workplace policy:

Working environment and culture in Hong Kong is neither family-oriented nor friendly as a whole. The current working policy creates a great obstacle to promote family-friendly

working environment. Parents with high-paying jobs are in a better position to negotiate

more flexible arrangements but there are no options for those with low-paying jobs.

(Male, a social service provider from a high SES neighborhood)

We (childcare center) often get trouble when typhoon signal no. 1 or 3 is hoisted.

Parents have no scope to negotiate more flexible arrangements to pick up their children

because of their working environment. (Female, a social service provider from a low SES

neighborhood)

A female social service provider from a middle SES neighborhood suggested the following

policies:

We could suggest some innovative family-friendly workplace policy such as providing

paternity leave, birthday leave, or paid family leave for employees who need to take care

of their sick children.

Public education

In raising the awareness of family 3Hs, leaders suggested early education for families and

individuals. Due to the recent increased incidence of family crisis and violence in Hong Kong,

much resource has been allocated to crisis intervention rather than preventive and public health

interventions. There is a general lack of public education interventions and programs to promote

family 3Hs. Because of the rapid increase in the number of divorce and cross-border families,

most leaders stressed the importance of conducting marriage and relationship skill education to

people of all ages.

We should start from early education to provide positive role models about having a

happy family life. (Female, a social service provider from a high SES neighborhood)

Most conflicts were due to lack of effective communication. Workshops about relationship skills may avoid conflict within families. (Male, a social service provider from a high SES neighborhood)

Cohabitation is very common today. Pre-marriage counseling is very important and Hong Kong is far behind what is offered in Taiwan and mainland China. We should expand the idea of pre-marital assessment and check-up. (Male, a social service provider from a high SES neighborhood)

Mobilizing community resources

Some leaders from low SES neighborhood suggested the establishment of a platform for mobilizing community resources to foster a positive family 3Hs environment:

People are more emotionally disconnected than before. Perhaps a platform should be set up so that people can communicate their love and care with each other. The Leisure and Cultural Service Department should organize some family-oriented leisure projects such as family theme park or family-oriented campaigns. (Male, a social service provider from a low SES neighborhood)

A number of community leaders also commented that mobilizing physical health interventions are helpful entry points to other psycho-social interventions for maintaining family 3Hs:

A platform should involve both public and private health and social work professionals to advise on basic skills in family health assessment and provide knowledge in promoting family relationships. (Female, a healthcare service provider from a low SES neighborhood)

Discussion

This study is the first to use a qualitative approach to describe the opinions from the Hong Kong community leaders and major stakeholders on family 3Hs. Our findings are consistent with quantitative research on the correlates of family well-being, suggesting that communication and close family interaction are core components contributing to family 3Hs (Chuang, 2005; Greeff & van der Merwe, 2004). What is different about this paper is the voice of community leaders, a subject that has not been explored in the literature so far. Because leaders have a major impact on the formation of community agenda, it is imperative to understand their perceptions on family 3Hs prior to engaging communities in social marketing campaigns. However, there is a lack of data from community leaders about the existing needs and service gaps. The present study fills the gap by providing a contextual analysis with illustration of community leaders' major concerns on family issues. From the view of community leaders, four major themes emerged in our study, which consisted of current social problems in Hong Kong families, groups facing the greatest challenges to sustain family 3Hs, perception on family 3Hs and suggestions to promote 3Hs.

Our findings have revealed that the strength of family well-being would vary considerably depending on the availability of family resources. Zubrick and colleague have identified five types of family resources, which include family time, income, human capital, psychological capital, and social capital (Zubrick, Williams, Silburn, & Vimpani, 2000). Our findings have suggested that families with low SES are less resourceful in these domains than those with high SES. Though majority of the leaders perceived that most families in Hong Kong work long hours, families with low SES have fewer options due to financial constraints, inability to recognize family problems, and lack of skills and motivation for solving problems when

compared to those with high SES. Groups such as those deprived, CSSA recipients, single parent families and migrant women are seen as particularly lacking in family resources and most vulnerable to breakdown in family 3Hs. Providing more tangible help such as free educational opportunities, sufficient child care facilities, and vocational skill training might improve family resources, and ultimately achieving better family well-being. In addition, leaders in our study highlighted the importance of family and individual health, specifically individual and family psychological well-being. Preventive approaches such as health education on healthy lifestyle, stress coping skills and mental health awareness are likely to be welcome and should have positive impact on family health.

In line with previous research, family harmony is essential to individual and family well-being (Laurent & Lew, 1990; Trinidad, Chou, Unger, Anderson Johnson, & Li, 2003). Our study further highlights that absence of conflict is perceived as a key feature of a harmonious family. However, it might not be a critical element for a happy family. Tolerance of conflicts may not facilitate a positive family relationship unless family members are able to express their needs and concerns and resolve conflicts more constructively. Therefore, early public education on marriage and relationship skills such as conflict management is needed to build a happy and harmonious family.

Besides, community leaders repeatedly mentioned that long working hours are a major barrier to maintaining family 3Hs. Similarly, evidence from the work-family literature also addressed that working late nights or working on a shift schedule was often associated with difficulties in scheduling family activities and spending time with family members (Epstein & Kalleberg, 2005; Hsueh & Yoshikawa, 2007). Together with our findings, a family-friendly culture should be fostered in workplaces to facilitate family 3Hs. Family-friendly policies such as the 5-day

working week arrangement and paternity leave might benefit Hong Kong people to achieve a better balance between work and family life.

The findings of the present study only represent the situation in Hong Kong, and generalization to other populations should be made with caution. However, the rapidly growing economy and strong emphasis on competitiveness in mainland China and other developing countires are likely to cause similar problems. Additional investigations should include the mass media perspective so that perceptions on family 3Hs may be more comprehensively explored. Despite the limitations, the results of this study have extended previous work to examine the perspective of the community leaders on family well-being in a Chinese culture (Ma et al., 2009; Karakas, Lee, & MacDermid, 2004). Findings of the present study provide insights and a basis for devising key messages for public education programs to achieve family 3Hs. Furthermore, the interviews have established relationships between the project investigators and the community partners, and can serve as a mechanism to solicit support and engagement from the community leaders and major stakeholders, planting seeds for future collaboration and partnership.

Conclusion

This study is the first to examine the views of Hong Kong community leaders on family health, happiness, and harmony (3Hs), and has provided a basis for designing appropriate community interventions to achieve family 3Hs in Hong Kong. Community leaders considered that changing family structure, economic situation, and the strong work ethic have influenced family 3Hs. Moreover, families with different resources and SES may present with different challenges in achieving and sustaining family 3Hs. Implementing effective social marketing education campaigns targeting neighborhoods of different SES and adopting a family-friendly workplace

policy may be the way forward in promoting societal harmony through healthy, happy and harmonious families.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1 Descriptive information of participants

	Total (N=26)	Male n=11 (42%)	Female n=15 (58%)
Age			
30-39	5 (19%)	2 (18%)	3 (20%)
40-49	13 (50%)	6 (55%)	7 (47%)
50-59	7 (27%)	2 (18%)	5 (33%)
Above 60	1 (4%)	1 (9%)	-
Marital status			
Married	26 (100%)	11 (100%)	15 (100%)
Location*			
Hong Kong Island	14 (54%)	6 (55%)	8 (54%)
Kowloon	5 (19%)	3 (27%)	2 (13%)
New Territories	7 (27%)	2 (18%)	5 (33%)
Years of working experience in the community			
Less than 10	1 (4%)	-	1 (6%)
10-20	15 (58%)	8 (73%)	7 (47%)
Above 20	10 (38%)	3 (27%)	7 (47%)

*based on participants' working place

Table 2 Summary of study themes

Key themes	Subthemes
Current social problems in Hong Kong families	• Changes in family structures • Prevailing fast pace and workaholic culture, resulting in lack of time for family life • Economic situation
Groups facing the greatest challenges to sustain family 3Hs	• Deprived families • Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients • Single parent families • New immigrants
Perceptions on 3Hs	• Healthy family: Cohesive unit when facing crisis and all members stay physically & mentally healthy • Happy family: Spending quality time with other family members • Harmonious family: Absence of conflict and effective communication among family members
Suggestions to promote family 3Hs	• Lack of preventive approach in promoting family 3Hs • Provide family-friendly workplace policy • Public education campaigns for promoting marriage and relationship skills • Establish a platform for mobilizing community resources to foster a positive family 3Hs environment