

Impact of Global and Chinese Cultural Values on Young People's Perceptions of Parenthood in Hong Kong, China

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, fertility has declined almost everywhere in the world. In Hong Kong, young people's perceptions of parenthood seem to be changing rapidly in the pale of a competitive global economy. This paper addresses the views of young Chinese people in relation to parenthood in a society where East meets West. The study is a qualitative research with a cross-sectional design and a focus group approach. The aim is to explore the possible impact of global and Chinese cultural values on young people's perceptions of parenthood. Data was collected in six audiotaped focus group interviews with 40 young people aged 17 to 25. A mix of purposive and snowball sampling was used. The findings suggest that traditional cultural values such as family security and relationships, honouring of parents and elders and family loyalty are still strongly supported by many young adults. However, the sample youth was also influenced by global values such as freedom, personal goals, ambition, wealth, pleasure and a varied life. Many young people prefer to have children for reasons which seem to be linked to global values of individualism, liberalism and intrinsic rewards. Reasons of having children are less about continuing the family line but more as a means to maintain the marriage. There is also a trend of delayed parenthood. Some young people do not consider having children due to such reasons as personal development and structural factors as prolonged continuing education, long working hours, cross-border work and low salary. The insights from this study inform service providers, policy makers and interested parties who together can jointly map out appropriate youth and family interventions to assist young people in their transition to young adulthood.

Keywords: Chinese cultural value, global culture, parenthood, young people

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a global network today where information disseminates quickly and in unprecedented volumes. Some worry that the emergence of a global culture may weaken the strength of local customs and tradition. Globalisation may be a form of inevitable colonisation of world cultures in which the values, styles and outlooks of the western world are being spread aggressively to the extent that they smother local and national cultures (Falk, 1999). Non-Western countries tend to be influenced by the global culture in form of individualism, consumerism, keen competition and efficiency with the emphasis upon the new, the modern, the scientific and result-orientated (Pilkington & Johnson, 2003). Another view holds that some local cultural elements such as beliefs and values regarding social relationships and morality might resist global influence and would remain beyond the penetrative impact of globalisation. Inglehart and Baker (2000) note that multinational survey data indicate that while economic development is followed by increased global influence of values emphasising scientific rationality, individualism and secularism, local traditions that define personhood and sociality such as religion and cultural beliefs (e.g. Confucianism) can be relatively resistant to the effects of globalisation. Likewise, some scholars (Yoon, 2003; Santana, 2003) consider that input of global goods and services in East Asian countries can reinforce and reinvent traditional moral values in local communities rather than eclipse local culture.

GLOBAL CULTURE

Bond and King conducted a survey (1985) to understand Hong Kong Chinese people's responses to global culture. The survey found that about half of them indicated that they would try to preserve their Chinese identity by holding on to basic Chinese moral values such as filial piety and respect for those in legitimate authority. Hence, what we may be witnessing is not all pervasive global culture but rather, the varied fragmentation of cultural forms (Baudrillard, 1988). There is something of an adaptation process in which parts of the global culture impart their characteristics through incorporation within local culture. Old cultures of the past are changing, maintaining some of their old ways, but evolving to adapt to the technological challenges (Toffler, 1999; Leeder, 2004).

When discussing the impact of global value on parenthood, White (2003) examined the declining birth rates in Australia, as well as in many other Western industrialised countries. The decline in birth-rates is linked to young people's perception of global value of individualism expressed through prioritised personal career and financial goals and the need to establish a consolidated sense of self prior to partnering and parenting.

CHINESE CULTURAL VALUE

Apart from exploring the impact of global value on youth perception on parenthood, the paper also attempts to examine the influence of localised traditional Chinese values on young people. Hong Kong lies in

the far south of China. To grasp something of the local culture it is important to appreciate Chinese cultural values. Any discussion of Chinese social relationships soon encounters the term 'Confucianism', which is often used as a synonym for traditional Chinese culture (Ho, 1996; Stockman, 2000; Chow, 2001; Kwan *et al.*, 2003). China has often been seen as a peculiarly familial society and Confucian social theory places special emphasis on family relationships as the core of a stable and harmonious society (Baker, 1979; Lew, 1998). Marriage is considered to be a family rather than an individual matter. As for parenthood, to Confucians, offspring represent perpetuity of lineage and the ancestors' lives are consequently perceived to be immortal. Through reproduction, one not only passes along one's family name, but also one's blood, and hence life, to later generations. Therefore, anyone who severs the flow of continuity would be condemned as having committed the gravest sin, that of being unfilial (Ng, 2007). Thus, looking after one's children becomes a form of repayment to one's parents. In China, children were not cherished as individuals whose destiny was to fulfil their own unique potential, but were valued because they, and especially if they were sons, would produce sons, carry on the family name and provide for their parents in their old age and after death (Eastman, 1988).

However, these values have undergone substantial modification with industrialisation. The economic independence and formation of nuclear

families has affected how the new generation perceives and performs filial piety and childbearing. In addition, the functions of the family are diminishing in modern society. The family no longer functions as the provider of education, health care and moral and vocational training for its members. These functions have now largely been taken over by government and other institutions. Modern education tends to produce a generation which values achievement, independent thinking and behaviour and the making of decisions based on rational grounds. Increasing female participation in the labour market and the rise of women in the socioeconomic status has changed the traditional role of women both in family and in society (Aerts, 1993; Skolnick, 1993). Consequently, the new generation has substantially modified or changed how they perceive and perform Confucian values. Research has indicated that traditional values such as filial piety is on the decline or under transformation (Ng, 1991; Ho, 1996; Chow, 2001; Kwan *et al.*, 2003), which may be contingent and stem from a socio-economic structure and related attitudes and values (Lam, 2006).

PARENTHOOD

Over the past several decades, fertility has declined almost everywhere in the world. The decline in the fertility rate suggests that young adults in a time of global transition may have changed compared to the way earlier generations placed a value on parenthood. On parenthood, Ruddick

(1999) points out three broad concepts: First, parents tend to care for their children. Caring for children involves various activities such as attending to them, feeding them and protecting them. Second, parents raise their children and lastly, parents make and maintain a family. Family formation aspirations were found to be linked to experience in the family of origin, perceptions of work and gender (White, 2003). O’Laughlin and Anderson (2001) indicate that parents and those intending to have children agreed more strongly with intrinsic motivations and also endorsed more benefits for having children than did the unsure group. Taylor *et al.* (2007) found that children may be perceived as less central to marriage, but they are as important as ever to their parents. Plotnick (2007) found that adolescents with higher opportunity costs, as indicated by better grades and higher expectations for their schooling, expect and desire to marry and have children at older ages.

In Hong Kong, in past decades economic development was coupled by population growth. But now there is a downward trend. As a result of low fertility, the average household size was only 2.9 persons in 2012, declining from 3.7 persons in 1986 (Census and Statistics Department 2013(a)). The total fertility rate per woman was 1.285 in 2012 compared with 3 in the 1970s (Census and Statistics Department 2013(b)). In a study on family attitudes and values in Hong Kong, Chow and Lum (2008) found that family values and attitudes in Hong Kong have become

more heterogeneous over the last three decades. While the general public remained relatively traditional, they were becoming more receptive, both for themselves and for others, towards divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, pre-marital sex, childlessness and a less traditional gender role.

AIM OF STUDY

In the past decade or so in Hong Kong, there have been little empirical data and studies on parenthood (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 2005; Chow & Lum, 2008; Yip *et al.*, 2011). There are even fewer studies on youth perceptions of parenthood in a context of global and local influences in late modernity. This study helps by filling the gap the study is trying to address. Hence, this paper presents new data and analysis in the way today’s Hong Kong young adults perceive parenthood and manage their life transitions. The paper also presents an outline of major themes that may be of relevance to educators, social service providers and policy makers who together can jointly map out appropriate youth and family interventions to assist young people in their transition to young adulthood. As such, the study examines two research questions: First, what are the local or global values which may influence youth’s perceptions of parenthood? Second, what are the needs and problems that young people may encounter in respect of parenthood?

To conclude, the aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of Hong Kong Chinese young people on parenthood

in a context of global and local culture encounter with regard to parenthood. The influences in late modernity. The study following diagram shows the conceptual also sought to identify possible needs framework of the study: and problems that young people might

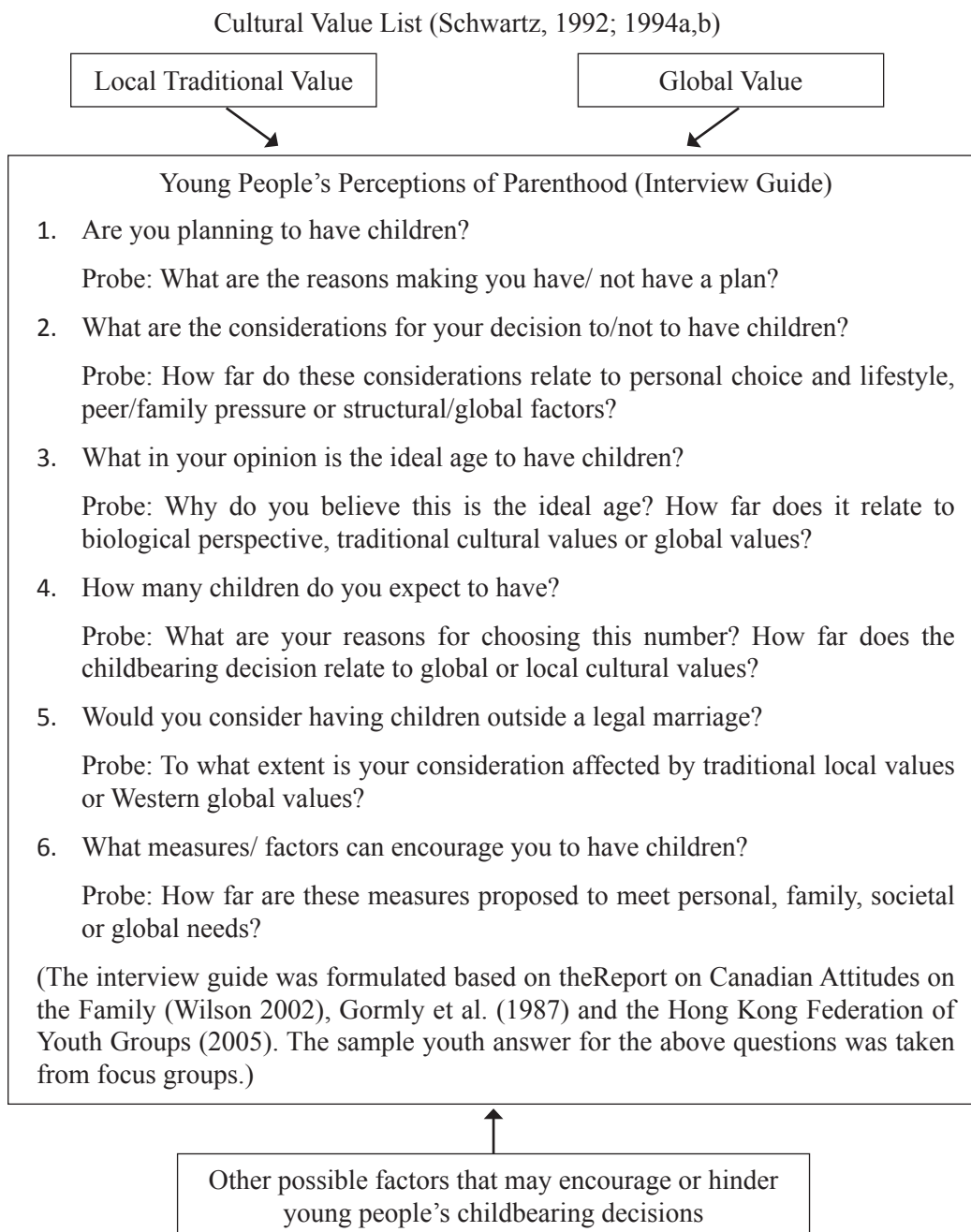


Diagram 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

In this study the researcher chose the methodology of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1989; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Sayer, 1992, 2000). Taking the position of critical realist and using focus group interviews helped illuminate the underlying value systems of young people in a global and local context with regard to parenthood.

Research Method, Procedure and Analysis

The study design comprised a cross-sectional qualitative exploration of attitudes held by young people about parenthood in Hong Kong and utilised focus groups as the key research technique because this method is well-suited to stimulate new ideas and to examine the reasons and motives behind people’s perceptions (Edmunds, 2000; Hagan, 2006; Berg, 2007; Bryman, 2008). A guided checklist of themes for focus groups was adopted as the means for data collection (see Diagram 1). The researcher served as facilitator in the focus group discussion. Participants were asked to sign consent forms in which they stated their agreement to participate. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent from participants, transcribed verbatim, translated from Chinese to English and then coded to identify the main themes. The translation was verified by a university

linguistics teacher to yield transcripts agreed on by both the researcher and her university supervisor.

Providing a safe, comfortable and relaxing environment with soft drinks, the group participants worked together to share perceptions, experiences and insights over an average period of two hours, and during this period revealed much of their personal attitudes and values about the research topics. A structured approach was taken for the discussion in the first instance whereby an exercise was deployed at the outset to be discussed during the focus group session. Participants were asked to undertake an exercise to rate their opinion of value items on a 5-point scale of 1 (definitely opposed) to 5 (highly important). A 21-item cultural values schema was used and informed by the Schwartz Values Questionnaire (1992; 1994a,b). Schwartz claimed that values were an expression of and motivation for the fulfillment of basic human needs to sustain an individual’s biological, social well-being and functioning. Through extensive empirical research in 61 countries, the value items have the same meanings across cultures and are consistent and stable on the whole and in that sense, reliability is well attested. The translation of a value list was also verified by the university linguistics teacher and the university supervisor. The 21 items on the schema are shown in Table 1:-

TABLE 1
Cultural Value List (Schwartz 1992; 1994a, b)

Rating	Value description
	Pleasure (having as much fun as possible)
	Freedom (freedom of action and thought)

	Wealth (material possessions, money)
	Creativity (uniqueness, imagination)
	A spiritual life (emphasis on spiritual more than material matters)
	Meaning in life (a purpose in life)
	Respect for tradition (preservation of time-honoured customs)
	Family security & relationship (concern for family members)
	Social recognition (respect, approval by others)
	A varied life (filled with challenge, novelty and change)
	A world of cultural diversity (multicultural society)
	Independent (self-reliant, self-sufficient)
	Loyalty (faithful to family, friends, group)
	Ambition (hardworking, aspiring)
	Broadminded (tolerant to different values, ideas, beliefs)
	Honouring parents and elders (showing respect)
	Choosing and developing own goals (selecting own purpose)
	Capable (competent, effective, efficient)
	Enjoying life (enjoying life's pleasures)
	Responsible (dependable, reliable)
	Successful (achieving goals)

Participants were invited to first complete the value list (in less than 5 minutes) and to then share with the group their rating and choices with regard to the different items. Information from this exercise assisted both group members and the researcher. The exercise allowed the participants to develop a commitment to a particular set of value positions before the group discussion began. Information from this pre-group exercise helped the researcher to ensure that the event could draw out participants' stances and opinions on their value system (Wimmer & Dominick, 1987; Sussman *et al.*, 1991). Thereafter, the researcher managed the discussion based on an interview guide (see Diagram 1) to ask the young adults to discuss their approach to parenthood

in six dimensions: first, their plan to have children; second, their considerations in deciding whether to have children; third, what they believed was the ideal age at which to have children; fourth, number of children expected; fifth, if they would consider having children outside a legal marriage; and lastly, measures/factors that encouraged them to have children. These specific dimensions or themes of the interview guide were informed by the interviewing questions and definitions of the report on the Canadian Attitudes on the Family (Wilson, 2002), relevant attitude measures by Gormly *et al.* (1987) and the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2005). These interview questions are key areas concerning parenthood with probes that can facilitate young people to go into

detailed discussion and in-depth sharing on different childbearing decisions in a qualitative focus group approach. They can work together to share perceptions, experience, values and insights into these questions instead of only answering a questionnaire individually.

Thematic analysis was used in this study to seek qualitative insights into relation to the predetermined categories of discussion in a systematic and replicable manner. Overall, the thematic structure reflected the frequency of material that addressed global values, Chinese local values and parenthood.

Participants

Six focus groups comprising 40 young people aged 17-25 drawn from the Hong Kong Administrative Region were generated by a purposive sample and were identified through a snowball method. Among these were 23 male and 17 female

interviewees. Six focus group sessions with around 5-7 respondents each were conducted in the researcher’s office. Despite some limitations such as the lack of generalisability, purposive samples could help gain insight and understanding by hearing from youth coming from some very different walks of life. As such, the sample was purposive in that the researcher sought to generate a population that was differentiated in terms of gender, age-range, marital status, working status and educational attainment and drawn from three target regions of residence i.e. Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories (see Table 2). These regions were chosen because they represent populations with varied socio-economic backgrounds and characteristics and were deemed likely to yield fresh insights. The composition of the six focus groups is set out below:

TABLE 2
Focus Group Composition

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3			Group 4			Group 5			Group 6		
Focus for comparison	Gender		Age		Marital Status			Working Status			Education Attainment			Residence		
	M	F	17-21	18-25	married	single	cohabiting	working	studying	non-w & s	secondary school	undergraduate	postgraduate	Hong Kong Island	Kowloon	New Territories
	3	4	5	2	2	2	1	2	3	2	2	4	1	2	2	3
No. of participants	7		7		5			7			7			7		

Snowball sampling was another non-probability sampling strategy used in this research. It was effective to help the researcher locate subjects with certain attributes or characteristics necessary in the study. Clearly, such a technique could not possibly claim to produce a statistically representative sample. The researcher relied on her social network, for example, friends and friends of friends, students and graduate students as well as social contacts of these individuals to trace additional respondents.

Reliability and Validity

With regard to the issue of reliability, the researcher followed the conventional contrastive procedure of taking field notes as well as audio-taping and drafting the transcripts of the focus groups and comparing both sources to help ensure the reliability of the study. Moreover, the value list and the interview schedule had pre-testing before use. The researcher also took the findings of the focus groups back to the respondents being studied. After the respondents' verification on the findings, the validity of this study was ensured.

Ethical Considerations

As the research was conducted in Hong Kong, the study was bound by the Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers, which is monitored by the Hong Kong Social Workers Registration Board. All participants were given information forms and consent forms and were made aware that their participation was voluntary

and that non-participation would have no impact on their relationship with the researcher. The respondents were also guaranteed anonymity and were informed that all value list answers and tapes would be destroyed on completion of the study. Secure storage of all data was provided throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The perceptions of parenthood among our sample from the current generation of young people in Hong Kong reflect a shift from traditional views, probably due to the changing socio-cultural environment and modernisation of Chinese society. Though traditional cultural values such as family security and relationships and family loyalty were still respected, the respondents tended to emphasise global values such as freedom, personal goals, wealth, ambition, pleasure and a varied life. At first glance, the shift from traditional views was obvious in the following themes: having children was less about continuing the family line and more about maintaining the marriage; reasons not to have children were due to issues such as personal development, long working hours and continuing education; more acceptance of out of wedlock birth under certain conditions; and the trend of delayed parenthood. Though the traditional Chinese family values, in particular, parenthood, was retained and the respondents generally anticipated having children, to a certain extent, these values were diluted by significant global and local changes. Major findings of the six focus

groups in relation to the core research topics are as follows:

Theme 1: Young People Have Diversified Preferences on Global or Cultural Values as Their Guiding Principles

Regarding global or cultural values, the participants of the six focus groups had diversified preferences. With regard to traditional cultural values, most of the respondents put emphasis on family security and relationships, respect for tradition, honouring of parents and elders and family loyalty. As for global values, they were more likely to emphasise freedom, personal goals, ambition, wealth, pleasure, life meaning, a spiritual life, a varied life, independence and responsibility. It appeared that the respondents had been influenced by both the global values of late modernity and Chinese culture as well. These results may relate to the specific socio-political background of Hong Kong. According to Kwok and Chan (2002), Hong Kong has been on the periphery of both the Chinese motherland and the British Empire for the last 150 years. Hong Kong was a place where the lines between Chinese and Western civilisations were blurred and intermingled.

To summarise, most of the youth in these focus groups seemed to be influenced considerably by liberalism, individualism, feminism and pluralism. They wished to choose their own lifestyles with more freedom, pleasure, pursuit of personal goals and a varied life. Yet, a minority treasured more traditional cultural values that focused on family security and relationship

and honouring parents and elders. Some younger people did not agree with the pursuit of wealth while others indicated that wealth was the most important to them. Their value preference varied in terms of gender, age, marital status, working status and educational attainment. In short there was no common cluster of values that spanned all groups.

Theme 2: Having Children for Its Intrinsic Value instead of Continuing the Family Lineage

Our sample of young people generally anticipated having children. The reasons for having children were to add to the variety and enjoyment of domestic arrangements and to make a marriage more durable. This might suggest that respondents did not have much confidence in marriage *per se* in a late modern world where individual goal setting and goal seeking placed a strain on emotional and domestic relationships between dyads and hence, children might help ‘thicken’ the ties and commitments of marriage. Other reasons were to satisfy a sense of biological imperative, to fulfil the wishes of both sets of parents, and to meet a wider sense of social expectation and to provide meaning and preoccupation within the domestic environment. Thus, apart from the influence of global values such as individualism, there was the impact of Chinese cultural values and the influence of this upon the perception of young adults on parenthood.

In traditional Chinese culture, having sons and grandsons is a highly regarded status and strongly related to

male preference; it is a means of gaining pride and happiness in later life. Sons and grandsons are considered the parents' and grandparents' fortune, whereas daughters are seen as the 'possession' of other families. The former are entitled to perpetuate the ancestral lineage while the latter are not (Lew, 1998). Interestingly, some of the older age group (22-25) with achievements in higher education (undergraduate or above) were more influenced by traditional values surrounding procreation. They tended to be influenced by Chinese notions of collectivism whereby childbirth was not a private matter but involved the expectation and interests of parents as well. They were of the view that childbirth was a social responsibility and a continuation of kinship. This finding was quite similar to the research by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2005) and Chow and Lum (2008), both studies indicated that older respondents showed a stronger intention to have children.

Christopher, a 24-year old male Catholic, social work undergraduate:

I think childbirth is the continuation of kinship. It symbolises the sublimation of marital love.

Eunice, a 23-years old female undergraduate, considered childbirth a social responsibility:

I will take into account the financial resources. ... I think that it is a social responsibility. Besides, I would like to have children and grandchildren visiting me when I am old. I like the warm family atmosphere.

In contrast, the younger age group (17-21) considered that having children was less about continuing the family line but more as a means to maintain the marriage. This might suggest that the younger group had some doubts about contemporary marriage to sustain itself in a late modern world; they hoped that the triad of parents and child might sustain their commitment to marriage. Ho, a male undergraduate who was born in mainland China and who had immigrated to Hong Kong when he was a child shared this view:

I think that having children is conducive to maintain the marriage. Children can serve as a buffer whenever there are marital conflicts.

As to reasons for having children, there was not much difference between those working or studying. However, by comparison, male respondents tended to be more influenced by traditional values and aimed to fulfil the wishes of parents. Female respondents tended to be more influenced by individual life-style in that children would bring meaning and joy to their domestic world. Some respondents indicated that they hoped that their children would bring them both rewards and at some future point some support by way of filial obligation.

Bob, a 24-year old male with high school education, was a single child and worked as a beach life-guard:

The reason for having children is that they will support me when I'm old and cannot take care of myself.

Their comments generally suggested that they were on the one hand influenced by the traditional value of investing in children as a means to safeguard against an uncertain future in later years as well as by notions of individualism in that they expected children would fulfil their own private needs for stimulation, love and happiness.

Theme 3: Not Having Children due to Personal Development and Financial Difficulties

Some respondents did not wish to have children, and this was usually because they had other more pressing aims for personal development such as studying or career or earning money. Jennifer, a 20-year old undergraduate, did not intend to have children:

I don't want to have children because I have to give up my own personal time and this will hinder my further study and career path if I have a baby.

John, a 23-year old salesman, also rejected having children:

I've cross-border work and long working hours. It is difficult and incurs great responsibility to rear children. Having children has financial implications and I preferred to have pets instead.

It suggested that some might be much more influenced by global values to do with feminism and individualism whereby personal biographies were chosen that rejected the burden and bondage of parenthood. This finding has some correspondence with White's study (2003),

which argued that underlying young people's perceptions was the global value of individualism expressed through prioritised personal career and financial goals and the need to establish a consolidated sense of self prior to partnership and parenting. Also, in keenly competitive Hong Kong society, the urge for continuing education might further delay the timing of marriage and parenthood of young adults. Furthermore, Chow and Lum (2008) noted that long working hours, a crowded environment for family and children and lack of money were reasons for not having children; such reasons were also cited by focus group participants.

It is also relevant to note that the older age group (22-25) would consider factors such as fertility age, baby well-being and financial implications before deciding on having the first baby. By contrast, the younger age group did not refer to such planning and were more concerned with their current studies and personal development. Female respondents generally referred to the aspect of physical and emotional readiness to support the normal growth of the embryo. Male respondents by contrast placed emphasis on financial circumstances and family environment by way of planning for a family. Such gender differences in orientation would seem to suggest traditional cultural assumptions at play whereby a man is expected to put his focus on the public world while a woman focuses more on the private sphere. Such roles and assumptions, by no means clear cut, were nonetheless evident across the sample.

Theme 4: Less Support for Out-of-Wedlock Childbirth

In regard to out-of-wedlock childbirth, respondents seemed more likely to adhere to more traditional values. They regarded that it was irresponsible to have children out of wedlock particularly if the parents were not mature and did not know how to take care of their children. Anthony, a 25-year old computer programmer and May, a 17-year old secondary school student living in the New Territories, had similar views of not accepting out-of-wedlock childbirth:

I (Anthony) do not accept unwed mothers. I think that many unwed moms are not psychologically mature. This may affect the healthy development of children.

As in recent news, a teenage mom left her baby alone in a flat and then went to disco in Mainland China. As such, I (May) object to having baby without marriage. However, if the unwed mom decides to get married, I think this is OK. I think that childbirth should be considered after marriage. It is better to have planning.

This result corresponded with the findings of Chow and Lum (2008) and the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2005) whereby nearly 60% of their respective respondents did not accept having children out of wedlock. This view would seem to find support in the traditional Chinese value that procreation does not come without marriage.

Theme 5: Preference for Delayed Parenthood

Some respondents indicated that they would like to have a first child at the age of 30-35 and preferred two children, specifically one boy and one girl. Respondents aged 17-21 said that they would like to have two or more children. Hung, a 20-year-old undergraduate shared his view:

Because two or more children could learn how to share and respect each other. Single child might also be easily spoiled by parents.

Respondents aged 22-25 indicated that they would like to have two children, one boy and one girl. Lin, a 24-year-old postgraduate also preferred to have two children:

Because single child are easily spoiled by parents. In Chinese culture, the combination of Chinese characters of boy and girl forms the word of 'Good'. Hence it is a blessing to have one boy and one girl.

In Chinese culture, it is widely seen as a blessing to have one boy and one girl as children as 'boy' and 'girl' form the word 'good' in Chinese. Their comments more or less reflected the trend of contemporary Hong Kong society that young adults preferred the slogan 'Two is enough' to form a nuclear family. This is different from the traditional Chinese value that 'one should have as many children as he can' to extend his family line in a once rural society. These results correspond to the findings of the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2005) study that age 28

appeared to be the suitable time for those who intended to have children, while two children was the ideal family size. It also reflects the trend of delayed parenthood among the younger generation in Hong Kong.

Theme 6: Measures Encouraging Childbirth

As for measures to encourage childbirth, respondents indicated that economic, employment and social measures and incentives such as maternity and paternal leave, tax allowance, textbook allowance, milk powder subsidy and the provision of childcare services would influence young adults in their attitudes towards childbirth. In addition, the educational system and social environment such as job opportunities and legislation on a minimum wage in Hong Kong would also be factors to take into account. Their comments reflect that decisions about having children were not just a personal preference but related to socio-economic factors as well. Respondents at the secondary school level considered that the educational system would be a factor delaying their decision to have children. Danny, 17-year-old secondary school student had the following view:

If there is no good quality tertiary education in Hong Kong, our children cannot compete with others.

This was predictable given that they were still attempting to secure limited places at universities under keen competition and stressful public examinations. Education opportunities became the issue

of most concern for this coming cluster of undergraduates. Respondents currently in university were concerned more with career opportunities than with family building. Abby, a 23-year-old undergraduate had her worries on childbearing:

The Government should provide adequate job opportunities. If the unemployment rate is high, our children may not get the job. Even now in Hong Kong the youth salary is quite low. It's difficult to build up a new family and having children.

Respondents at postgraduate level considered that adequate tax allowances and child care services could encourage them to have a baby. Transition from student to independent adult parent was seen as likely in some indeterminate future for most of these respondents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hong Kong is facing the challenges of family change. Marriage and family are weakening as social institutions. Many young people are subject to the influences of both the global and local culture and values. Some respondents of this study did not wish to have children because of other aims related to personal development or because of other socioeconomic reasons such as long working hours, lack of money and a crowded environment. The measures for encouraging childbirth proposed by the respondents are also worth taking into consideration.

It is proposed that the Government should facilitate joint efforts among the public, private and non-government

sectors on ways to make Hong Kong a more family-friendly city. Good measures related to family building should be undertaken to make Hong Kong a place where childbearing and family building are supported. This study indicated that for many among those in the sample, traditional family values were not as powerful as for earlier generations. The Hong Kong government should examine the difficulties encountered by the younger generation. Family policies should be broad and flexible enough to cater for the needs of the younger generation.

Hence, the Government could promote family-friendly employment practices in the private and the public sectors in order to nurture a culture of mutual support and concern in the workplace. Indeed, the Government could set an example by implementing family-friendly employment practices such as a five-day work week, granting employees paid paternity leave, allowing employees to have home-based work, flexible work arrangements, job sharing and enhancing child-care services and facilities for employees. More generally, the adoption of benefits such as paternity leave, marriage leave, parental leave and compassionate leave could allow employees to fulfil family responsibilities. The promotion of flexible work arrangements such as a five-day work week, flexible working hours, home-based work, job sharing and a compressed work schedule would allow staff to juggle better the requirements of both family and employer.

The results of the study indicated that some young people have to work long hours or take up additional part-time work in order to make ends meet. In so doing, they stated that they would delay their plans for parenthood due to scarcity of time and money to engage in family building. The rising price of property is also a deterrent to family building as young couples cannot afford to rent or buy apartments in the city and often live with parents. The focus groups also revealed how some young people delay family plans to pursue further studies after work in order to make themselves more competitive in the labour market. There was also a tendency for some young people to work across the border in mainland China to take advantage of rapid economic development there. As such, the Government should consider promoting family-friendly measures or enacting legislation on standard working hours to ensure that employees can have time for family building and parenthood. Many young people have to find funds to pursue further study to enhance their employability. The Government could provide an education subsidy to help young people meet this financial burden and could extend the repayment period and lower the interest rate to relieve the financial burden of young graduates whose starting salaries are unlikely to be high. Moreover, the Government might consider building smaller units at affordable prices to meet young people's housing needs. Such considerations of locality and support may affect their plans to have children.

Lastly, as the focus group revealed, precarious employment and lower starting salaries have put many young people in disadvantaged positions and affected their intentions about family building and parenthood. The Government should consider initiating a comprehensive youth policy to address the problems faced by young people. In formulating this youth policy, it would be imperative to have young people directly participating as stakeholders in the discussion of policy options.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Although the findings shed light on the perceptions of parenthood among this sample of young people in Hong Kong and a shift from traditional views, the study has some limitations. Since this is a study on youth's perceptions on global values, local cultural values and parenthood, the focus group approach with a non-probability and purposive sample, which was identified through a snowball method, was used for this qualitative study. There is weak generalisation in qualitative analysis as data may be less representative. Despite its limitations, the study can provide a springboard for further research. With regard to further research, the initial findings of this research revealed that traditional values, such as those associated with the ideals of Confucianism, still have some influence among the sample in this study. However, in what precise domains of this tradition and to what degree young

adults agree with Confucian teachings need to be the subject of a random quantitative analysis in order to generate more reliable insight into its impact.

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