

**Mapping Chinese family systems and parental involvement  
in educational settings in Macao**

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**The family is an important unit for the vitality and wellbeing of society. The purpose of this project was to explore family systems in Macao and to gain a deeper understanding of the interaction between the family and the school environment. The researcher used a multiple-case study design with narrative inquiry and three-generation genograms to explore the stories of twelve (12) families and aspects of the family structure and functioning, family dynamics, and parental involvement in school-related activities with their child. Intergenerational transfer was evident as well as the continuation of deferential parenting and benevolence. Several need areas emerged that provide scope for further exploration and for developing school-based family counseling in the local context. These concerns involve parent-child relationships in adolescence, communication patterns and conflict management.**

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Family has great influence on the individual's feelings, thoughts and actions, as well as the structures, power struggles and behavior etiquette of society. The family is an important unit for the generation and perpetuation of economic, political and educational vitality and wellbeing in all cultures of the world. In the family, individuals exist within a social group with whom they are "tied together through their common biological, legal, cultural and emotional history and their implied future" (McGoldrick, Gerson & Shellenberger, 1999, p. 7). As a context primarily oriented towards relationship, family members solicit each other's attention, approval, and support, and respond to each other's needs, expectations and distress, thus co-creating family as uniquely interdependent and relational (Connard, 1996; Gergen, 2009; Low & Stocker, 2005). Adding to the complexity of family life and the ways in which people establish particular behavioral and relationship patterns, Georgas (2003) and others (e.g., Kagitcibasi, 2002) note the essential differences in structure and functioning of the family, and variances in belief systems, child rearing practices, and educational involvement between cultures.

Despite changes to the notion of family in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese family—also those living in Macao—still maintains a great sense of connectedness with generations past and future (Bond, 1991; Chang, McBride-Chang, Stewart & Au, 2003). Strong family values and the fundamental belief in family and kinship are implanted at an early age and present throughout childhood and adulthood (Georgas, 2003; Sun, 2008). Filial piety is reciprocated with parents' commitment to the child's wellbeing, and relationships continue into adulthood with the caretaking of ageing grandparents (Sun, 2008). Chinese families are, however, understudied in the literature on family systems, and the scant literature that exists focuses on the child, her or his academic achievement (e.g., Leung, Lau & Lam, 1998), and the social processes related to academic development of the child (e.g., Chen, Dong & Zhou, 1997) in Hong Kong. Such studies focus on the influence of caretaker psychology (Super & Harkness, 2003), the effect of a parent's punitive emotions on the child's emotion regulation and aggression in the school environment (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge & McBride-Chang, 2003), and varying degrees of social emotional adjustment, life satisfaction and self-concept based on family relations (Chang, McBride-Chang, et al., 2003). Very little has been done to explore family-school interrelationships, and accessing the family for the provision of mental health services.

The purpose of this project was to explore and map family systems in Macao in order to gain a deeper understanding of the interaction between the family and the school environment. Mapping the family system involved exploring the structure and functioning of Chinese families living and working in Macao since the handover by the Portuguese colonial administration in 1999. Such a project would expand our understanding of the ways in which family systems co-construct intergenerational transfer and relational patterns, and function in relation to the school system. The focus was on uncovering the ways in which family beliefs, practices and child-rearing patterns affected involvement in the education system. In line with the ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), social constructionist (Gergen, 2000), and family-centered (Bowen, 1978) approaches I assumed that social problems in society could be addressed by accessing the family through the school-going child. Thus, the project outcomes would aid psychologists and school counselors in developing effective interventions to optimize developmental outcomes and address psychological wellbeing issues for all members of the family.

More recently there have been initiatives by the government and local service providers in Macao to develop a psychologically healthy society (DSEC, 2009; Social Welfare Bureau, accessed at <http://www.ias.gov.mo/en/>). New and sustainable models have to be developed that will allow service providers, particularly school-based psychological counselors, ways to access the community and develop a psychologically-minded society where mental health services can be pursued (Chang, Van Schalkwyk & Tran, 2006; Mackenzie, Knox, Gekoski & Macaulay, 2004). In this regard, a secondary objective of this project was to explore the utility of the genogram (McGoldrick et al., 1999) in the local context as a training tool for intake interviews, history taking, and research purposes.

A family-centered and constructionist approach accepts the complex interconnections within the family and between the family and the social environment (Bowen, 1978; Marchetti-Mercer & Cleaver, 2000). An assumption of this approach is the notion that the complex reciprocal, intergenerational and societal relationship patterns can be both supportive and stifling to individual family members in different settings of everyday life. One's family can be beneficial and favorable to functioning, but can also pose an obstacle to

developmental outcomes, particularly when there is resistance to change. Being inextricably interconnected and interdependent within the ecological context and different settings of everyday life, the family thus has an important role to play in individual functioning in different settings, including the school setting.

## **Method**

I adopted a qualitative, multiple-case study approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2007) for this project, utilizing narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; McAdams, 2001) and the genogram (Marchetti-Mercer & Cleaver, 2000; McGoldrick et al., 1999) to explore family functioning and parental involvement in the school setting. Combining the three-generation genogram with family narratives would allow the fieldworkers to elicit rich information regarding the current family context and connectedness of immediate players in the family drama, as well as the strengths and vulnerabilities of the family within the broader context. Furthermore, mapping family systems could provide information regarding the ways in which the family related to and utilized their internal ethics for decision-making regarding parental involvement in the education of their children. It also worked from the assumption that “problems and symptoms reflect a system’s adaptation to its total context at a given moment in time” (McGoldrick et al., 1999, p. 7) and served as a valuable tool to generate hypotheses and explore probabilities with regard to context-specific services needed in the community.

### *Participants*

The participants in this project were twelve (12) adults from Chinese families in Macao, solicited through a non-probability purposive sampling strategy (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In a multiple-case or collective case-study approach twelve cases are considered sufficient to explore similarities and differences within and across cases, particularly if saturation could be ensured and further cases did not reveal any new information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2003). The fieldworkers identified the central figure in twelve families (10 mothers and 2 fathers) who were willing to participate, who had adequate and in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation, and who could provide rich and vivid stories. All participants had been living in Macao for at least five years at the time of the project, and their ages ranged from 39 to 54 years, with the average age for females at 47.9 years and for males at 49.5 years. The project adhered to ethical standards for qualitative research in psychology. Participation was voluntary and prospective participants received an information leaflet explaining the purpose of the project as well as issues of anonymity for the family and next of kin. To ensure their rights and confidentiality, written consent was required from all participants. This also allowed the fieldworker to record the interview and to use the materials for research purposes.

### *Procedures*

I obtained the collaboration of third-year psychology students in a counseling program at a local university to collect the field texts. They did this as part of their course work to train them in the procedures and utilization of the genogram and semi-structured interviewing for conducting intake interviews and history taking. In two separate interviews of 30-40 minutes each with the central figure in the family, the student-fieldworkers collected the field texts for this project. They conducted the interviews in Cantonese, the native

language of participants and in the participants' home<sup>1</sup>. Conversing in one's native language is preferred when conducting narrative inquiry as participants can feel more comfortable telling their stories to an interviewer who is from a similar ethnic group (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The first interview was used to collect data for a three-generation genogram (McGoldrick et al., 1999), indicating the network of kinship relationships for the paternal and maternal grandparents, parents and their siblings, and children and cousins (see Figure 1). The second interview focused on collecting family narratives with the central question: "*How are family relationships co-constructed, and what perceptions and expectations do they have for their children's education?*" Further questions related to (i) family functioning, (ii) relationship patterns and practices of intergenerational interaction, and (iii) parental involvement in the educational context of their children. These questions prompted participants to tell rich stories about their experiences in the family and their involvement in the education system.

Finally, the student-fieldworkers transcribed and translated the audio-recorded conversations into English to generate the field texts for analysis. An independent third person checked the translations to ensure accuracy and credibility of the field texts used for the analysis. Working with the translated texts did have the limitation that some of the language features, the intrinsic nuances and meanings of language could not be captured (Haiman, 2005). Nonetheless, the transcripts, together with the genogram data, provided rich texts that were worthy of analysis. The student-fieldworkers, as native language speakers, could also refer back to the original transcripts in Chinese when interpreting the texts and writing the final report for this project.

### *Analysis*

I conducted an in-depth thematic analysis with the 12 cases focusing on generalities and differences within and between cases (Josselson, 2006; Scheib, 2003; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I examined the case materials for general themes, concepts or patterns of interaction that occurred frequently across all cases and attempted to determine why such generalities and/or deviations occurred (Neuman, 2006). The analysis involved interrogating the case materials (genograms and family narrative transcripts) to extract the emerging themes and patterns evolving across three generations and including past and present experiences, and future expectations while remaining on the trail of themes, speculations, interpretations and ideas related to three key questions (see Table 1):

- (i) What is the structure of families in Macao and how do they function?
- (ii) What family dynamics (relationship patterns) emerge across generations and between parents and children at different developmental stages?
- (iii) What are parents' perceptions and expectations of education and how do these perceptions affect parental involvement in the schooling of the child?

Finally, I interpreted the case materials using a family-centered and social constructionist approach to develop concepts and theoretical propositions. Interpretations

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to extend a special thank you to my third-year psychology students in the PSYC308 class of the spring semester 2009 who conducted the interviews, meticulously transcribed and translated the field texts.

evolved from rigorously reading the field texts, taking cognizance of the existing literature and theoretical frameworks, and reflexivity (Watt, 2007) to establish credibility, transferability and dependability of the outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A literature study allowed for verification of interpretations regarding family functioning, parental involvement, and the family projection process. Collaboration between the student-fieldworkers and me improved the credibility of the report since, as co-researchers, we independently analyzed the case materials and were able to compare our interpretations.

	<b>Family functioning</b>	<b>Family dynamics</b>	<b>Education system</b>
<b>Past experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family of origin</li> <li>• Traditional roles</li> <li>• The parental sub-system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Childhood experiences</li> <li>• Sibling relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessibility</li> <li>• Parents' own education</li> </ul>
<b>Present experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family size</li> <li>• Family functioning</li> <li>• Subject positioning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spousal relationships</li> <li>• Parent-child relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents' involvement in education system               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ private sphere</li> <li>○ public sphere</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Future expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need areas:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Parenting</li> <li>○ Empowerment of women</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need areas               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Communication</li> <li>○ Conflict management</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need areas               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Importance of education</li> <li>○ Moral education</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

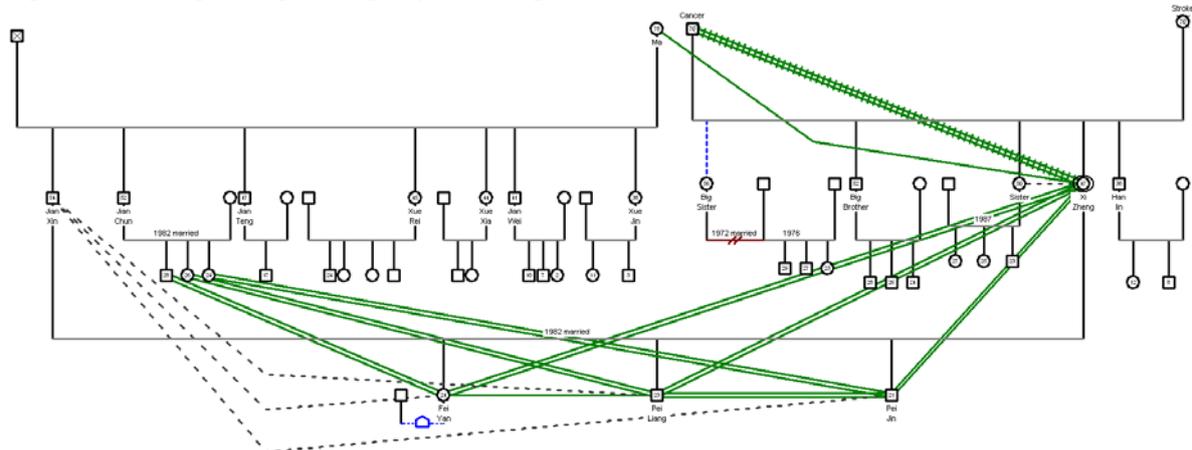
**Table 1:** Summary Grid of Three Themes in Family Narratives

### **Findings and Discussion**

In this project I used family narratives and the three-generation genogram to gain a better understanding of family life in Macao and the impact of past and present family relations on perceptions, parental engagement in educational settings, and probable need areas for school-based family counseling. Below I discuss the family structure and functioning in Macao, as well as the relationship patterns represented in the childhood experiences of the middle generation (the parents). I then discuss the parent-child relationships between the middle and younger generation with regard to parental involvement in the education of their children both at home and in the school setting. Using extracts to illustrate different aspects of family life I attempt here to reconstruct a family narrative for Chinese families in Macao. In the next section, I will pose some projective hypotheses concerning the concerns and need areas, and the development of collaborative life coaching for families in Macao.

### Family Structure and Functioning

The first theme in the Macao family narrative addresses the structure and functioning of the family as presented by the central figure in the family. Previously families were quite large with multiple offspring (children per family) similar to those in the Mainland, and even sometimes multiple spouses. Divorce and remarriage was not uncommon, particularly if the first wife could not present the family with a child (Figure 1). Nonetheless, there is not much to distinguish the Macao nuclear family from its counterpart in the West except for expectations regarding filial piety and respect for elders (Sun, 2008).



**Figure 1:** Example of a Three-Generation Genogram for a Macao family

Although the Macao government never enforced the one-child policy, the family size gradually decreased and younger families have fewer children. For example, population figures show a drop in children younger than 15 years of age from 24.6% in 1990 to 12.7% in 2009 (DSEC, 2009). There are also fewer grandparents co-habiting with the family, as was the practice in the past despite the population in general becoming older. Most of the current generation of parents in Macao grew up in the People's Republic of China (the Mainland) and migrated to Macao for better opportunities for themselves and their children. The extended family therefore lives elsewhere with grandparents mostly still residing in the Mainland and siblings in the middle generation living in Hong Kong, the Mainland, Europe, and so on.

In some cases, living conditions of Macao families reinforce closeness among generations with (boy) children sharing a bedroom with a grandmother. Parents with 2-3 children live together in close proximity, as living conditions are limited to small apartments averaging 120 to 134<sup>2</sup>m in a densely populated city with approximately 19,000 people per square kilometer (DSEC, 2009). Families thus become highly enmeshed and children (particularly adolescents in the younger generation) tend to seek to “escape” the confines of the home territory and create a “substitute family” with their friends. Van Schalkwyk (2007) notes that although there is an expected individuation process during adolescence, friends become highly entangled and parent-child relationships suffer as a result.

Son preference (Van Balen, 2005; Wang, 2005) seems to have played a greater role in the family of origin, with mothers seemingly more inclined towards favoring a son (“*My father didn't but my mother was more favorable on my brothers*”). For some women having male children is, however, still important as it legitimizes her position in the family and raises

her status (“*I gave birth to two sons and they make me very proud. I had two sons for them and I feel that I am no longer shameful*”). In Macao families, however, son preference plays a lesser role. Parents are not concerned about the gender of their offspring, and the preference is more towards gender balance—having both a son and a daughter—in order to maintain harmonious family functioning (Tin, 2009).

In the family of origin for all participants in this study, both parents adopted traditional roles with the father acting as the breadwinner and the mother the caretaker of the household (Bond, 1991). The father operated in the public sphere, often working away from home, even in a different city or country. He also pursued his own interests and was, for the most part, uninvolved in the caretaking and nurturing of children other than occasional playful interaction or discipline. Mother stayed at home in order to take care of the family, tending to the farm, and nurturing the children. The mother maintained a degree of decision-making power in the private sphere of the home, but played an almost non-existent role in conflict resolution, either with siblings or with her children. In contrast, fathers acted as the decision-maker and as disciplinarian in the family (Bond, 1991).

*“My father and brother moved to Hong Kong [to work]...we had to help her [mother] back home with the farm or doing housework.”*

*“Father worked outside. He also had his interests, watching TV and movies and reading newspapers.”*

*“Mother was doing housework and father was the one who earned money.”*

*“My mother was at home, so mother mostly was the one who made decisions.”*

The tradition of role appropriation in the parental sub-system has been transferred to the present generation of parents in Macao: the father is still considered the main breadwinner and the mother the caretaker of the household, particularly for younger children (Isik & Guven, 2007). For the most part, women also play the role of maintaining harmony in relationships with the nuclear as well as extended family (Sun, 2008). Subjected by a culture that positions women as subordinate spouse, caretaker of the family and preserver of peace, the mothers who participated in this project adopted an accommodating approach and kept silent about their own needs and expectations. She rather focuses on providing instrumental and emotional support to her spouse and other family members. Most of the Macao families we interviewed are dual-income families with both parents working in either business, government or the service industry (i.e., the gaming industry in Macao) (De Pina-Cabral, 2002; Van Schalkwyk, 2006). Women, however, work to increase the family income and to take care of the children’s financial and material needs and do not pursue a career for self-development, putting their personal strivings aside for the needs of the family and specifically to provide their children with more opportunities. They work in the public sphere, but continue to comply with the demands of housekeeping and childrearing in the private sphere.

### *Interdependence and Harmony*

The second theme emerging from family stories in Macao relates to the family dynamics and the striving for interdependence and harmonious co-existence (Kagitcibasi, 2002; Sun, 2008). Both memories about the past—i.e., childhood experiences in the family of origin—and present day experiences generated stories of reciprocity and close bondage amongst family members in the nuclear and extended family. Participants also told stories about having had good relationships with both parents.

*“Surely...we did have very close [relationships] since we grew up together. There’s no reason that brothers or sisters did not have good relationships.”*

*“...we are brothers: you treat me well so that I also treat you well.”*

Co-creation of relationships, however, was (and still is) based on proximity and time spent together, with the father often being more distant and the mother closer to the children. Being at home more than the father, the mother engages more in talking with the children and sustaining harmony within the family even if this is at a cost to her own views and/or needs (*“Yes, we [mother and us] talked a lot about everything...we talked to each other a lot. Till now, our relationship is very good”*). In the family of origin, interdependence of family members posed a demand for obedience and filial behavior, which supported good parent-child relationships, particularly between the mother and her children.

*“Because we have harmonic relationship with family and parents...we can bear living in a very small flat and get along well with family members. We have a good relationship with parents and were more obedient than the children in this generation.”*

On the other hand, poor economic conditions in the past contributed to both communion (*“the elder [children] would pick up some firewood, and the younger [children] would cook or clean the house”*) and to the children pursuing greater independence at an earlier age (*“...we were very poor in Mainland...we became independent after we left home”*).

Despite the close relationships they had as children, the middle generation seemingly do not maintain close bonds and reciprocity in adulthood. Family relationships in the Macao families we interviewed—that is, the relationship among siblings in the present generation of adults—are mostly distant. With the migration from the Mainland to Macao, connections with members of the extended family are severed or at most fragile. The middle-generation and sometimes grandparents moved away from their family home on the Mainland and rarely have contact with their place of origin. Contact between family members, between siblings and the larger kinship network, is limited to family gatherings for the celebration of traditional Chinese festivals.

*“I think my eldest brother is the best. Following is my second sister. The others are almost the same. None of them is worse. But I don’t have words to say for my fifth brother. We do not keep in touch. He is in Taipa [the second island in the Macao SAR metropolis] so that we do not meet frequently and then we do not have topics to discuss. We are all very busy so that we don’t keep in touch.”*

Although family relationships were initially smooth, patterns of interaction evolved that are tension-filled and preclude comfortable contact amongst all parties. However, hostility amongst siblings in the family of origin is mostly covert, and expressed with words such as “fine” and “good” as opposed to really talking about the quality of the relationship. Rather, adult sibling relationships are described as *“...nothing special, we are all the same. But maybe we do not meet so frequently and do not keep in touch so that the relationships between us are not so good.”* There is seemingly an emotional distance between siblings, and the lack of proximity, shared interests and time constraints further exacerbate low relationship intensity and intimacy (*“...only when we are free, we will meet. We will not contact and meet each other very often”*).

Spousal relationships show similar patterns of distance and covert hostility. Silverstein and Auerbach (2000) maintain that parents who sustained a positive intimate relationship and pursue traditional roles also encouraged a healthy psychological status in their children. However, in Macao and among the participants in this study there seems to be a lack of intimacy and warmth between parents. The focus is rather on maintaining a surface harmony in the family. Depending on who the central person was participating in the interview (male

or female) there is little mention of the spouse, even though they lived together (“...it’s OK...sometimes we would scold each other if there is something wrong...it’s natural that we have some arguments”). When specifically questioned about the relationship, emotional distance was expressed in the subservience of the mother to the hierarchical power structure of Chinese families (Sun, 2008). As one interviewee, a more traditional woman from the Mainland who married into a Macao family related this:

*“Of course my husband is the one who make decisions. He is the first, his father is the second, his mother is the third, the forth one is my older son, I am the fifth, and the last one is my younger son. I already have a higher level now...before I did not dare say something at home. However, I married the right person. He is very honest and good to me and I always obey him. If he asks me to go to the east, I will never go to the west. I have to listen to him.”*

Further exploration is necessary to determine more specifically what the origin of the lack of emotional involvement between parents is and how the tensions in the spousal relationship spill over to parent-child relationships (Chang, McBride-Chang, et al., 2003). Chen and Berdan (2006) pose that, when parents adopt a child-focused approach and attempt to deal with negative (personal) emotions effectively, it enables their children to handle social, emotional and physical challenges better. On the other hand, unresolved attachment with the original family tends to spill over to the newly formed family and influences the younger generation (Bowen, 1978). Tension in three-generation relationships (between grandparents and parents, and between parents and child) could keep the child dependent on the parents to make decisions, create feelings of guilt and subjection, or feelings of enragement at the lack of support in key areas of need. It is thus important to explore spousal relationships further to describe intergenerational transfer, particularly in the newly formed families in Macao.

With regard to the parent-child relationship in Macao families, the cases varied with regard to how parents interacted with their children and the expression of warmth and intimacy. Participants described the parent-child relationship as:

*“Nothing...not good but not bad, and of course they will talk to me if they need to...we do not argue much...and they will talk to me sometimes”*

*“I think it is good. My family goes out for dim sum every Sunday and we talk to each other during it...this is the time when we have communication with each other.”*

Furthermore, there was a natural reciprocity in parent-child relationships, with the child sometimes adopting a comforting role in the emotional dyad with the mother (“...when their grandma passed away, I was sad. The elder daughter said that er...she was sweet...and said ‘Mama, I seldom see you smile in this year.’ Then she sponsored a trip for us to cheer me up”). Mother-child relationships are seemingly closer and emotionally stronger than those with the father. The father, as supporter and provider for material needs, takes the role of authority figure, which invariably results in a more distant parent-child relationship (Chang, Schwartz, et al., 2003; Sun, 2008). He seldom has emotional contact with the children and is rarely involved in any of their daily activities, including their education. He merely pays the school fees. On the other hand, some fathers do adopt a more benevolent approach to parenting (Lee, Pratto & Li, 2007), take a more active role in the co-creation of the parent-child relationship, and experience greater reciprocity. As one participant, a father of two boys, explained:

*“We are both aware of the importance of family relationship and also by the teaching of church (Christianity) about the family, so [my wife] and I are intent to built a good family atmosphere... of course when they are both children...before 10, they would get*

*closer to mother more, but now they like me more. But sometimes when they have something secret they would like to talk to me more since mother may be more serious in case.”*

Nonetheless, from the parents’ perspective (the participants in this study), the parent-child relationship in Macao families seems to be good when the child is still young—pre-school or primary school. Age, gender and developmental progress of the child are key determinants in the co-creation of the relationship patterns between parents and their children. Mothers specifically mentioned that it is easier to relate to a young child than to an adolescent (“*If I told her [teenage daughter] something that she should do or should not do and she did not want to listen, I would not say anymore*”). She also finds it easier to communicate with her daughter than with her son when either of them misbehaves (“*Nothing special [with my daughter]. Sometimes, I would have some arguments with my son. I would scold him and he would scold me if he did something wrong*”). According to participants in this study, the relationship tends to deteriorate when the child reaches adolescence, with both internalizing and externalizing problems ensuing from parent-child conflict (Low & Stocker, 2005).

Although the father was traditionally the disciplinarian in the family, in Macao families the discipline of children is mostly a task assigned to the mother. She maintains discipline, using corporal punishment (“*There was physical punishment when they were small, because I believe in the efficacy of it... when they were naughty, if you did not punish them, they will easily do it again*”), or love withdrawal, with the latter being more common. Love withdrawal is combined with blaming and is used to get the child to comply with expectations, particularly with regard to school-related issues (“*When they were [young] children, I would scold them or beat them. But when they grew up I would not beat them anymore. I would tell them not to do this do that instead of beating them. If they do not listen to me, I do not bother them any further*”). When the child reaches adolescence and strives for autonomy from the parents and family, mothers have greater difficulties maintaining control. Parents accept, however, that adolescence is a “*period of trial and tribulation*”, and use withdrawal and avoidance of arguments as mechanisms to deal with a recalcitrant adolescent.

For the most part, parents avoid focusing their attention and anxieties on the child or they present an idealized view of the child - often to save face or at a cost to their own wellbeing. Face is an important value in Chinese families (Sun, 2008) and the misdemeanors of one family member are considered a reflection on the family as a whole. The focus in the family narratives is therefore on providing as many opportunities to the child for her or his development as possible and financially viable, and to maintain an appropriate face to the public audience of their stories. For example, parents (particularly the mother) seem not to resolve conflict actively, and they will let relationship problems fester for a long time, leading to emotional cut-off, distancing and relationship breakdown between mother and child (“*Once I criticized my younger son. He remembered the incident for a year and refused to call me ‘mom’ for almost a year*”).

#### *Involvement in the Education System*

The central focus of this project was to explore the influence of parents’ perceptions and expectations of their children’s education and parental involvement in educational settings. I investigated school-family relationships and interaction based on two dimensions: (i) accessibility (previous generations, parents’ own educational background, and parental expectations regarding children’s educational attainment), and (ii) parental involvement in

the education of their children. With regard to parental involvement, I specifically looked at the themes proposed by Englund, Luckner, Whaley and Egeland (2004) in terms of the private sphere (at home):

- Parental involvement in school-related activities with their children at home, for example, helping with homework
- Parents' communication with their children regarding school issues

and in the public sphere (in school-organized activities):

- Attendance at parent meetings organized by the school and volunteering at the child's school
- Communication between parents and teachers

#### *Accessibility of education and parental expectations*

Under Portuguese rule - before the 1999 handover to the People's Republic of China (PRC) - Chinese citizens in the city were mostly excluded from obtaining jobs requiring higher education (Van Schalkwyk, Tran & Chang, 2006), and the educational system did not always function optimally (De Pina-Cabral, 2002). Jobs in the manufacturing or service industries that were available to Chinese citizens of Macao did not require higher education ("*...at that time [in Macao], if you quit the school, there were lots of jobs you can do, for example, things about clothing. Nowadays, the world has changed, if you do not study, you cannot find a job... besides there is not much clothing industry in Macao these days*"). Of the participants in this study, only one male had achieved a Bachelor degree, while others entered the job market after completing primary or junior secondary school.

Since the 60s and 70s (during the Cultural Revolution) many Chinese migrated to Macao from the Mainland in search of job opportunities and a better environment to raise their children (de Pina-Cabral, 2002). Furthermore, in the Mainland prior to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, a class system dictated access to education and the availability of resources for schooling (Davis, 2000; Sun, 2008). This system in particular precluded lower socio-economic groups (e.g., worker classes and farming families) from attaining educational goals. Most of the participants were in adolescence or young/early adulthood before and during the Culture Revolution (1966-1976) in the Mainland. There were only a small number of educational institutions in the society at the time ("*...and there was not even university in the past in China*" [referring to the area she came from in the Mainland) and few people could (or were allowed to) obtain tertiary education. Those who wanted to pursue further education often had to go elsewhere.

*"My second brother went to foreign country just for study and so he was specially sent for study... he [eldest brother] was not allowed to study [at home] at that time, he had no chance to study in university at his age that time."*

Despite a lack of access to formal education in the past, both in Macao and on the Mainland, parents expected their children to achieve academically as best they could. The parents' own educational level influenced the expectations, as one interviewee, whose father was a medical doctor, indicated: "*my father wanted us to attend college.*" Even parents with lower educational levels would support their children if it was what the child wanted.

*"My sister and I were the first level at that time [during the Cultural Revolution]. Every year we post the diploma at home" and "they also asked us to work hard on studies, but if the performance was really bad, my parents will not be very strict and*

*keep blaming [and] as long as you would like to study, they will support you to study no matter how hard it was”.*

*“My father told me it is my choice to quit the school, if I regretted it in the future, I could not blame my parents.”*

Today in Macao, all classes and both genders have equal access to the education system (DSEJ, 2007). Since the handover to the PRC, the government in Macao has put much effort into developing an integrated education system that will benefit all people in society. In 2007, the Macao government introduced a free education system to include schooling from kindergarten to senior high school (DSEJ, 2007). This policy enables many parents, even those in the lower socio-economic category, to put their children in public school for a longer time than before. Moreover, Chinese parents in Macao value education and nowadays place greater emphasis on the school achievement of their children (Ho, 2008).

*“The oldest daughter would like to have further study. As long as it is what she likes, as a parent, of course, I will support her [and] when the second daughter told me that she did not want to have further study after the bachelor program, I just allowed her to have this idea.”*

*“The society nowadays is progressing and students need to learn more. If they want to go for further studies, I will support them. They are already doing undergraduate studies and if my son does not want to go for a graduate degree, I will not force him. But if my daughter wants to get a graduate degree, I will support her. If they try their best and can get the Bachelor degree I also want them to get the degree.”*

According to Davis-Kean (2005), the child’s educational attainment depends largely on the parents’ level of education and their socio-economic status. The number of years parents received schooling positively and directly affected parents’ expectations of their child’s academic performance. However, in the present study I found that this was not always the case. Although no statistical significance could be determined, the family narratives unequivocally told of Macao parents having relatively high expectations for their children’s educational attainment despite having had limited education themselves. Parents want their children to achieve well and preferably obtain higher education levels before entering the job market (*“I can only say that the world had changed and the child needs to have a proper concept of it. If they do not study, how can they survive?”*). They perceive education as important for obtaining good employment and survival in modern society. There are more jobs requiring higher education available to Chinese citizens in Macao since the handover (Van Schalkwyk et al., 2006), which may also influence how parents perceive education for their children.

#### *Parental involvement in the education of their children*

Participants narrated their (parental) involvement in the education of their children on two levels: in the private sphere (at home) and in the public sphere (in school-organized parent activities). With regard to the parent’s involvement in school-related activities in the private sphere (at home), the narratives mostly evolve around the mother’s help with homework. Fathers are less involved at home, partly because of being otherwise occupied (e.g., work) or because he considers the education of the children as the task of the primary caregiver (mother) (*“He didn’t ask us about our academic results or homework. He rather played with us and joined us to see the movie and TV”*).

The mother's help with schoolwork depends on her educational attainment and perceptions of her own limitations and ability to assist the child. When the children are still in primary school the mother will check whether they have done their homework even though she cannot really contribute to the outcome. When the child enters secondary school or university, the parents withdraw from any involvement, depending rather on tutors, an older sibling, or the child's own capabilities and potential. Working mothers often employ a tutor or solicit the help of a family member (an older sibling) to help with schoolwork at home. Despite their acceptance of the importance of education for their children, some parents have difficulty providing support at home. Because of her own limited education, in most cases only primary education, the mother at most provides instrumental and emotional support taking care of household duties and allowing her children to focus on their schoolwork.

*"I had a low level of education. I seldom teach them, as I am afraid of using the wrong way. But I had told them to work hard and pay more attention as I cannot help them."*

*"When she was little, in primary school, I always watched her closely. When she went to high school, especially in Form 2, we did not have to watch her because she is self-conscious and could study alone."*

*"I was lucky. My oldest daughter likes to study and when the other two younger sisters have something they cannot understand, they can ask her."*

Communication with the child regarding school issues revealed mixed stories. Mothers who maintained a good relationship with their children would listen to school-related stories even when their time is limited. However, parents' work schedules, particularly for those working in the 24-hour perpetual motion of the gaming industry, often deprived them of the opportunity to assist their children with school-related activities at home.

*"They will talk to me if they need to...and they will talk to me sometimes like when they have big assignments...but time is limited [compared to the past] and in high school time, they would stand beside me and talked about the school events while I was cooking."*

*"However, in these days, perhaps the environment changed quite a lot, most parents need to work and often ignore a lot of things."*

According to Englund et al., (2004) parents' involvement in the public sphere (school-organized parent activities) relates to attending parent meetings, communicating with teachers, or volunteering at the child's school. Participants in our study again related mixed stories. Fathers are involved in the public sphere, attending school-organized parent activities. This is, however, more evident while the child is still in primary school than in secondary school (*"In primary school, there was family sport competition... when she danced her father took photos under the stage"*). Mothers, on the other hand, are less involved. They either view themselves as incompetent to participate in these activities (*"I seldom join their activities at school because I am fearful of engaging in social activities...so I just left it all to my husband"*), or lack time and opportunity to become actively involved. Volunteering is almost non-existent, partly because the school setting does not provide for this kind of involvement (*"It seems that I have never participated in the children's school activities...or there were one or two activities...I do not remember"*), and partly because of job demands.

Nonetheless, both parents perceive it as important to communicate with teachers to get information about the child's conduct and performance. They consider teachers as knowledgeable and superior, and seldom question the teacher's ability to "know best." They would also defend the teacher's position to the child, as one participant commented regarding

her daughter's performance in a drawing competition: *"sometimes I told my daughter that different people had different perception on things, one's perception of good/bad cannot represent the other's perception."*

### **Projective Hypotheses**

Based on the findings in this project, we were able to co-construct a representation of family systems in Macao. Privileging family narratives and co-constructing three-generation genograms with the twelve families allowed us to gain in-depth knowledge regarding the family ecology in Macao and parental involvement in school-related activities with their child. Intergenerational transfer is, for example, evident in stories about the structure and functioning of families in Macao, and the continuation of deferential parenting and benevolence (Lee et al., 2007). However, surface harmony with powerful emotional undercurrents emerges - which put the family at risk of projecting tensions onto the children and jeopardizing relationships outside the family structure.

An understanding of parental involvement in the education of their children indicates, for example, transference from family dynamics to the parents' expectations of their children's education. Macao is a small community plagued by poverty, societal unrest and crime at various levels while under colonial rule. The consequences of this are still evident throughout society. An untoward increase in the gaming industry since 2004 brought economic progress with its wealth-creating prospects for all residents. It also led to a deterioration in school-family relationships. The discontinuity and transient nature of the local culture, hedonism and materialism feed into current "symptoms" of regression in these relationships. Although crime and violence are no longer a particular danger, this regression relates to non-involvement of parents in the educational settings of their children, a sense of diminishing frontiers of parental control and traditional values, and concerns about communication with the next generation.

The findings of this project also allow for the development of systematic and "projective" hypotheses that can govern efforts to provide strategic interventions and mental health care services. Several need areas and concerns emerged that provide scope for further exploration and school-based collaborative life coaching and family counseling. These concerns involve:

- (i) A need for parent guidance regarding moral education and maintaining filial values.
- (ii) A need for communication and conflict resolution strategies. The nuclear families we interviewed seem to take a less active approach to resolving conflict and sustaining compliance behavior among children, particularly when the child reaches adolescence.
- (iii) The need for empowerment of women, particularly where mothers in transition experience multiple roles and duties, which are often in conflict with one another.
- (iv) Parent relationships with adolescents seem fraught with misunderstanding, and coaching could assist parents in building a stronger interdependent relationship with their adolescents.
- (v) Coaching regarding academic and educational goal setting, especially for boys, seems in order as more boys tend to drop out of school and do not enter the higher education system. There is an apparent lack of interest among boys for further education and they seem to want to start work earlier in order to gain "easy" money, something that is possible with the employment on offer in casinos.

The areas of need we identified in this project provide a starting point for developing collaborative life coaching that will strengthen and empower families to overcome vulnerabilities, and to build a healthy society. Positive psychology underpins school-based collaborative life coaching with children and families, and it is the “scientific study of optimal functioning, focusing on aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment and flourishing” (Linley & Harrington, 2005, p. 13). With its focus on solutions and a results-oriented systemic process, life coaching serves to facilitate the enhancement of life experiences and performance in various domains, and fosters personal growth for all involved. It provides a holistic view of the family’s situation, and involves the creation of personal reflective spaces to deal with personal development in different contexts, and focuses on strengths, rather than label the family as dysfunctional (Carter & Evans, 2008; Gerrard, 2008; Van Schalkwyk & Hoelson, 2009).

Supportive and enabling interactions between school and family also have the potential of optimizing developmental outcomes for all members of the family. Furthermore, parents’ involvement with the school could provide an access point for engaging with the family and developing psychological openness (Mackenzie et al., 2004). It could also generate more openness and positive attitudes towards help-seeking behavior in the community. Such openness will enable counselors and psychologists to plan and implement school-based family counseling (Carter & Evans, 2008; Gerrard, 2008), and provide collaborative life coaching aimed at optimizing developmental outcomes and psychological wellbeing for the benefit of the whole family rather than just the individual.

### **Further Research and Needs**

Some limitations in the present project demand mention. The interviewees (students in training) were emerging adults and still being trained in the skills of interviewing and eliciting rich texts for qualitative research. Skilled interviewees would most likely have elicited more information from participants. Furthermore, the power-hierarchical, face-saving non-disclosure of Chinese people limited the participants’ expression of emotional content in their narratives. This made it difficult for the young interviewees to explore tensions and discord in family relations. Older people (the parents) do not disclose family issues, particularly negative issues to the younger generation. However, because they spoke the local language, conducting the interviews in their native language gave them the opportunity to explore psychological concepts in conversation with potential future clients.

Another limitation emerged in the translation as many words in Chinese are difficult to translate in their full meaning, or they have different meanings not easily expressed in English. Despite efforts to ensure accurate and credible translations, some of the finer nuances of the Chinese language were lost in translation (Haiman, 2005). Engaging the students in the analysis of the field texts did, however, allow for cross-referencing to the original transcripts and more trustworthy interpretations. Finally, the majority of interviewees were female, which meant that the father’s voice was mostly silent and his perceptions about family issues are still unknown. Further research should address this issue.

Despite the above limitations, the project did have benefits and provided projective hypotheses about areas requiring preventive intervention, and the potential future role of school-based family counseling in the local context. The genogram offered a satisfactory tool for intake interviews and history taking in a systematic manner, and family narratives

provided rich information for developing projective hypotheses and structuring intervention programs. Collaborative life coaching with families can thus build on the strengths of family members and empower parents to overcome the vulnerabilities disabling them in a changing and continuously modernizing environment. Counselors and psychologists could also benefit from a greater understanding of the needs and aspirations of families in Macao, and thus achieve a greater level of integration in mental health services in Macao, specifically regarding family and parenting issues. New horizons open up with incorporating collaborative coaching in school-based family counseling, creating processes of goal setting and “a culture of opportunity and possibilities, forward thinking, and taking action and accomplishing changed behavior patterns” (Van Schalkwyk & Hoelson, 2009, p. 423). Uncertainties in the coaching process evolve into resolutions and outcomes, developing from within the conversation uniquely tailored to each family’s need for growth and wellbeing. Prospective counselors in the school environment will therefore be able to evaluate appropriately their own values when engaging with children and families in future practice.

Further research regarding behavioral patterns and dysfunctions among children of all ages in Macao and their specific needs regarding potential changes in family functioning, communication and other issues is necessary. Parents are concerned about moral education and the demise of traditional values. These aspects do not form part of the regular school curriculum and have been the task of parents in their education of the child at home. Research should explore how parents can be empowered to perform such educational responsibilities in the private sphere, so as not to rely on the school for moral education of their children. Training of school-based family counselors in Macao is not yet established or in its infancy, and further research is necessary to explore training models, possibilities for further education of psychological counselors, and ways of accessing the community through the education system.

### **Conclusion**

Parental involvement in the education of their children seems largely determined by the parents’ own experiences of the education system, her or his educational attainment in earlier years, and a perpetuation of a hierarchical power relationship with the teacher as the higher authority. The family-systems approach provides an integrated framework for understanding family ecology, and this project expanded the knowledge base for families hitherto being neglected in scholarly literature. Finally, collaborative life coaching offers possibilities for enhancing the wellbeing of families in Macao and for implementation in a School-Based Family Counseling model. Introducing school-based family counseling and collaborative life coaching in Macao can tap into the strengths of families and overcome the vulnerabilities that could aggravate the situation if left unattended.

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