Socio-cultural barriers to entry
for School-Based Family Counseling

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In Asian societies—particularly those with a Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC)—the macro-social discourse of face (i.e., Mianzi) poses barriers to entry for School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC). Face and face-work seems to position teachers and parents in an unfavorable relationship in the family-school partnership posing challenges to school counselors and SBFC practitioners performing preventive or remedial interventions. Reflecting on earlier studies pertaining family-school relationships in Macao, I explicate in this paper how face and face-work are a complex package of social skills affecting the establishment of family-school partnerships in CHC-dominated societies. Despite expecting that the school and teachers should provide their children with optimal academic achievement opportunities, parents adhering to the ideological beliefs of face and face-work are still reticent to engage interactively with the school community and build a workable family-school partnership. Face and face-work also permeate other areas of the mental health service frameworks, creating barriers for implementing SBFC practices.

Keywords: face, face work, family-school partnership, cultural sensitivity

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Introduction

The family-school partnership is an interrelated system, functioning as part of the efficient implementation of school-based child and family counseling (Bryan & Henry, 2008). The school-based family counseling (SBFC) approach has developed as a holistic and broad-based systems model assisting mental health practitioners across traditional boundaries, providing interventions that focus on both the school and the family in order to help the child overcome her/his personal problems and succeed in school and in life (Gerrard & Soriano, 2013). The approach is systemic in nature, and aims to integrate different psychosocial competences and evidence-based mental

health services to provide preventive and remedial interventions both in schools and in agencies. One of the strengths of SBFC is its claim regarding multicultural counseling. This multicultural sensitivity brings about a change in how mental health professionals approach parents/guardians in an educational setting, and how the family is viewed as a resource to assist with the child's success at school (Gerrard, 2008; Soriano, 2004). This is in contrast to the traditional Western approach to mental health, which is individualistic in nature and maintains a separation of expertise amongst counselors and therapists working with the child or the family. Rather, SBFC practitioners engage parents and families as partners in the counseling process greatly enhancing successful outcomes for the child and the family.

Researchers generally agree that the family provides an important coping resource, contributing to a child's resilience and performance within the school environment (e.g., Davis-Kean, 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001; Minke, 2010; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Seginer, 2006; Tam & Chan, 2009). Previous research regarding parental involvement in the education of their child addresses various domains of the home-school partnership, the influence of the family on the school-going child, and the principles and processes of building school-family-community partnerships in the best interest of the child (Bryan & Henry, 2008, 2012). In their model for establishing family-school partnerships, Bryan and Henry (2012) propose, for example, becoming familiar with the cultural groups served by the school when preparing to partner with parents, and presumably this involves recognition of the ideological beliefs and social cultural discourses that dictate diverse social and interpersonal practices.

In Macao, a city-state on the southeast coast of China, education has received much attention since governmental control of the territory was formally handed over to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1999. The Direccao dos Servicos de Educacao e Juventude or DSEJ (i.e., the Education and Youth Bureau of Macao), the government department responsible for education matters in the territory, designates several non-government organizations to provide school counseling and school social work at all local schools (Van Schalkwyk & Sit, 2013). The DSEJ also promotes family-school partnerships, encouraging (and subsidizing) schools throughout the territory to engage parents in associations and various family education activities. However, parents do not get involved, and family-school partnerships are still, for the most part, limited to a few, mostly expat parents, attending the workshops and seminars offered by local schools. There is seemingly a perception amongst Chinese parents positioning themselves as of lower status in society in relation to teachers, posing a poignant constraint on parents' willingness to become involved in school-organized activities.

The concept of "face" (i.e., Mianzi) in Chinese culture is a dynamic and particularistic rather than universalistic orientation that applies to both personal and social relationships (Yabuuchi, 2004). Mianzi (face) and guanxi (relationship or social networking) in the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) comprises a ritual propriety that guides individuals to act appropriately in any given context (Sun, 2008; Yu, 2003). Mianzi in Chinese culture is also used primarily for the inclusion of others and the creation of a collective identity (Sun, 2008; Yabuuchi, 2004). It refers to a complex package of social skills involving respect, pride, and dignity, ascribed to or achieved by an individual, and based on external evaluation rather than self-determination. In the day-to-day lives of people in Macao and other CHC-dominated societies this orientation also underlies the positioning of parents in their relationship with the school and teachers, as well as with mental

health service providers.

The nature of face and face-work in the parent-school relationship furthermore evolves from the vertical positioning of teachers in relation to the parents, perceptions regarding the exchange of resources (Leung & Chan, 2003), and who should take the initiative in sharing information (Bond, 2010; Sun, 2008; Yabuuchi, 2004). In the educational setting, therefore, face and face-work play a pertinent role in how parents engage with the school and teachers. Although parents greatly value the child's success in school and in life, they are still reticent to partner with the school or any mental health professional, fearing stigmatization and loss of face. Of particular interest to SBFC practitioners and other mental health service providers is the use of face-saving actions and interactions to protect one's own position and the position of others in relational settings. Face and face-work are not unique to Chinese people—Westerners also use strategies to protect themselves from humiliating situations and social embarrassment. Yet, for Asian peoples the intention and function of the ideological belief regarding face-work are somewhat different (Bond, 1991; Yabuuchi, 2004), and face-saving strategies are used concomitantly to preserve and maintain social relationships, both everyday interpersonal relationships as well as the family-school relationship.

Reflections on the ideological beliefs in parents' perceptions
Earlier studies conducted in the Macao context explicate some of the social-cultural obstacles for SBFC practitioners hoping to develop a workable partnership with parents and families (Van Schalkwyk, 2014; Van Schalkwyk & Sit, 2013). These previous studies revealed that, despite Chinese parents' willingness to sacrifice time and money to ensure educational opportunities for their children, they would still act in ways that preserve face for themselves and the family and avoid involvement with the school/teachers and school counselors that could lead to the loss of face (Van Schalkwyk, 2011, 2013). Revisiting previously collected textual data from Macao families, and the literature on the topic of face and face-work (Leung & Chan, 2003; Sun, 2008; Yabuuchi, 2004; Yu, 2003), I focus in this paper on parents' ideological beliefs and how face and face-work serve as barrier to the implementation of SBFC practices. I also discuss the implications of face and face-work in constraining the potential benefits of adopting the SBFC model in school mental health services in other Asian countries where this CHC social-cultural discourse dominates the particulars of social relationships.

The textual data derived from these earlier interviews provides insight into the individual and collective experiences of parents regarding the mental health services at schools in Macao. In 2013, with the help of fieldworkers (i.e., psychology students at a local university), I collected interview data from 17 parents including 12 mothers (mean age of 46.8 years) and five fathers (mean age of 47.0 years). The parents were all of Chinese ethnicity, have lived in Macao for at least five years at the time of the interviews, and had at least one school-going child in either primary or secondary school. They represented families from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds; most were dual income families with both parents working full-time in the casino and/or related service industries. For the purpose of the current paper, I have extracted sections from the original textual data pertaining to participants' views of their relationship with the school and teachers in an attempt to build an argument regarding the barriers to mental health services posed by ideological beliefs (Murray, 2000). Noting the existing literature on SBFC (Carter & Evans, 2008; Gerrard & Soriano, 2013) and Chinese psychology (Bond, 2010; Sun,

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2008) allowed for verifying the interpretations regarding how the complex relationship between family and school unfolds, and may hamper the implementation of SBFC practices in CHC-dominated regions.

As elsewhere in Asia (Cheng, 1997; Ho, 2003; Wang, 2008), Chinese parents in Macao expect the school to provide all-round education for their children, enabling them to secure a good job in future. Macao parents have high expectations of the education system, hoping that their children will gain, through their achievement and performance in school, esteem and dignity (i.e., face) - not only for themselves but also for the family. As one parent commented: "I can only say that the world has changed and the child needs to have a proper concept of it. If they do not study, how can they survive?" Parents invest time and effort at home, helping the child and encouraging educational goal attainment but rarely, if ever, visit the school other than on Parent Day when report cards are distributed. Although parents value the opportunity to talk with teachers on Parent Day (Van Schalkwyk, 2013), many parents would not interact with the school in any other way, partly due to lack of time to engage and to build relationship (Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004). "Because I need to work, I have no time to pick her up after school; therefore, I don't know what the teacher looks like, and talk about her school". With limited time for meeting with teachers, parents communicate with the child about school-related issues at home. However, when the child expresses discontent with a teacher or when the parent would like to obtain more information from the teacher regarding the child's conduct or mental health, neither parent will take up these concerns with the teacher or with the school counselor (Van Schalkwyk, 2014). Rather, parents tend to deflect the child's emotions, pointing out that the child should subject to the teacher's demands to ensure maintaining esteem or "face" for themselves and for the family.

"… [my daughter] has to understand that this world is very realistic. If the school has a bad impression of her, it could lead to grade decline… she just has to adapt to them. Overall, if the teacher does not pose unreasonable demands, or is not overly strict, I will tell my daughter to try to bear it."

Furthermore, Macao parents are particularly aware of their actions, attitudes and positioning in their relationship with the school and this seems to be more important than what words could express. Teachers are perceived as experts rather than equals, thus creating a hierarchical positioning (Ho, 2003; Wang, 2008) with parents who feel that:

"It is not possible to influence the decisions of teachers. If we told them to change, then my child may be suffering, because you do not know whether the teacher is good or bad… if her/she is bad, your child may be suffering at school... as I know from other parents that their child suffers because they gave some suggestions to the teacher…"

Chinese parents in Macao view management and leadership in school affairs as the task of teachers in which they (the parents) should not interfere (Ho, 2003). They primarily avoid embarrassment for themselves and their offspring by focusing, in their interactions with the school, only on the child's academic performance (Van Schalkwyk, 2011). Parents feel impelled to avoid criticizing teachers, or even asking for more information about their children, as this might be considered an insult to someone in a higher authority (Chan, n.d.; Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004), and might make them (the parents) appear inadequate or inefficient in the eyes of the school. Although the

parents who were interviewed seemed satisfied with the school their child was attending, there are some who need more communication and interaction with the school: "I hope the teacher can always make interaction with the parents. This situation needs to be improved." Yet, Chinese parents are not overly keen to get directly involved and initiate parent-school interaction. There is a hesitation to address issues with the teacher, probably in fear of being exposed for their own actions as parent being unworthy (Bedford, 2004; Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004). Rather, parents expect the school and teachers to take the initiative establishing a workable partnership and sharing information.

In many ways, the parents' reticence to connect with the school and teachers underlines the position ascribed to the school and teacher as superiors in a hierarchical relationship with children and parents. Emphasizing respect and dignity (Yu, 2003), the school/teachers are esteemed and attributed with expertise that renders the parents without mianzi and the ritual propriety to act in the educational setting (Leung & Chan, 2003; Sun, 2008; Yabuuchi, 2004). The school/teachers, by virtue of their expertise, "have face" while children and parents do not. This unequal positioning of parents in relation to teachers—and also to school mental health service providers—poses a barrier to the construction of a closer relationship between family and school, even if it would benefit the child in numerous ways (Ho, 2003). Parents perceive the school and teachers as the ultimate authority regarding the education of their child—and perhaps also their mental health—and consider it a loss of face if teachers or counselors were to comment on their child's behavior, academic deficiencies and problematic behavior. Teachers, on the other hand, are seemingly not keen to change their ways and relinquish their expert position reaching out to parents, perhaps in fear of losing face themselves. Despite parents' apparent openness to more communication from the school, it is still difficult for teachers and school counselors to establish a working partnership with the family based on the unequal distribution of power and dependence on external evaluation of who has face and who does not (Bond, 2010; Sun, 2008).

The macro-social discourse and ideological beliefs of having to save face for self and family seems to create a barrier to greater interaction between school and family as proposed by the SBFC model (Gerrard, 2008; Minke, 2010). The role of face and face-work in the day-to-day lives of Chinese is extremely important in the complex relationship that positions children, parents and teachers in one way and not another. Leung and Chan (2003) commented on perceptions regarding the exchange of resources in the vertical positioning of teachers in relation to parents, further emphasizing the value attributed to face and face work in the family-school relationship. Parents perceive the school and teachers as focusing on results and academic attainment and, for the most part, this could lead to a satisfactory outcome for the child. However, teachers are perceived as somewhat rigid and reluctant to change their expert positioning, leading to parents having to save face by not interfering, particularly when it comes to the child's overall development and mental health needs. In CHC-dominated societies such as Macao where face and face-work governs how relationships are established and maintained, the onus for initiating change lies with the school and teachers, and this is not easily achieved.

Face-work as a barrier to entry for SBFC
On a par with the vertical positioning of teachers in relation to parents are the challenges posed to mental health service providers. The ideological beliefs about face and face-work pose barriers to entry for SBFC practitioners in educational settings in CHC-dominated societies (Van Schalkwyk

& Sit, 2013). On the one hand, help-seeking behavior of any kind is still heavily stigmatized due to the role of face and face-work, and hampers the emergence of school-based child and family counseling and other mental health services (Bedford, 2004; Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004). School counselors, family counselors and other mental health service providers face similar barriers establishing a workable relationship between the family and the school in view of the child's success and positive outcomes for interventions. With both horizontal and vertical face-work prevalent in predominantly Chinese societies, mental health practitioners are challenged in gaining entry. Despite social changes and parents' (and governments') appreciation of the value of school counseling in assisting with educational and mental health interventions (Kok & Low, 2017; Low, 2015; Leeuwerke & Shi, 2010; Tam & Chan, 2009; Van Schalkwyk, 2014), there is still a reluctance among parents adhering to ideological beliefs about face and face-work to engage in any form of counseling, whether school counseling or family counseling in fear of losing face and being exposed as "bad" parents. This might not be unique to Macao or Asia more broadly, but it emphasizes the need to familiarize oneself with social-cultural discourses such as mianzi and guanxi that dictate interpersonal practices and relationships, and help-seeking behavior (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004).

On the other hand, in Macao and other Southeast Asian countries school counseling and family counseling are not recognized as a professional registration category in the mental health services (Brown, Watanabe, Lee, & McIntosh, 2016; Kok & Low, 2017; Low, 2015; Suh, Darch, Huffman, & Hansing, 2014; Van Schalkwyk & D'Amato, 2013). School counselors, despite their limited training, are keen to provide relevant services to children and families in need, and parents and teachers see the value of holistic and systemic interventions to help the child succeed in school and in life (Van Schalkwyk, 2014). Yet, without the relevant frameworks legitimizing school-based child and family counseling through professional registration—whether in schools or agencies—implementing SBFC in the region faces an uphill battle. For the most part, school counselors are not yet ascribed face and they are not included as part of the collective identity ascribed to mental health service providers (Yabuuchi, 2004; Yu, 2003). Although educational systems in some Pacific Rim countries have made great strides towards implementing school counseling services in public schools (Van Schalkwyk & D'Amato, 2013), school counselors are still not accorded respect and dignity as professionals providing mental health services to the school-going population and their families.

Furthermore, apart from clear ethical principles and legitimate registration frameworks, school counsellors lack adequate training that could equip them with the skills and practices to overcome the perceived inequities currently existing in society between those with and those without face. Mental health professionals and school counselors in Macao—and perhaps elsewhere—are not trained efficiently with existing models to adequately prepare them for developing workable relationships and partnerships with parents. In Macao and other Southeast Asian countries, training at higher education institutions still focuses on career counseling and special needs education, and school counselors do not know how to approach parents (if at all) (Van Schalkwyk & Sit, 2013). Most training models also espouse the application of Western models of mental health services, mechanistic thinking (Price-Mitchell, 2009), and individualistic therapeutic settings. These models, for the most part, lack sensitivity regarding issues of face and face work, and the dynamic and particularistic orientation of people in CHC-dominated societies and their personal and social relationships (Yabuuchi, 2004). As far as I could determine at the

time of writing, no institution in the region has yet adopted the integrative systemic and evidence-based practice of SBFC providing school-focused and family-focused preventive and remedial interventions (Carter & Evans, 2008; Gerrard & Soriano, 2013). Even though there is a recognition amongst school counselors of the need to adopt a broad-based systems model such as SBFC in order to garner a workable family-school partnership, they lack adequate training to enter the field and initiate change where most needed.

Conclusion
In this paper, I aimed to provide some insights into the social-cultural discourse and ideological beliefs that challenge the implementation of SBFC in Macao and other Southeast Asian countries. On the one hand, face and face work constrains parent-teacher partnerships, and teachers are reticent initiating change giving up their socially ascribed status. On the other hand, lack of training and frameworks for licensing and registration delegitimizes professional mental health services to the school-going population and their families (Brown et al., 2016; Bryan & Henry, 2012; D'Amato, Zafiris, McConnell, & Dean, 2011). Further research regarding home-school partnerships and strategies for overcoming the ideological beliefs of face and face-work is necessary. There is also a need for inter-disciplinary collaboration to investigate, among other issues, how mental health service providers and SBFC practitioners could overcome the help-seeking stigmatization prevalent in CHC-dominated societies, and how those most in need—that is, the families and their children (the future generations)—could gain access to resources that could help them succeed in life. The social-cultural discourse of face and face-work is but one of the many issues posing barriers to entry for SBFC practitioners working as school counselors and family counselors in Southeast Asia.

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