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Family Functioning, Filial Piety and Adolescent Psychosocial Competence in
Chinese Single-mother Families Experiencing Economic Disadvantage:
Implications for Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Based on the data collected from 432 single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantage in Hong Kong, the relationships among family functioning (mutuality, communication and harmony), filial piety and psychosocial competence (spirituality, resilience and positive future outlook) of adolescents were examined. Results showed that filial piety mediated the influence of family functioning to adolescent psychosocial competence in Chinese single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantage. The pioneer study underscores the importance of promoting family cohesion, communication and harmony which would contribute to adolescent positive development through adolescent filial piety. Implications of the findings for the development of Chinese resilience model and social work practice are discussed.

Keywords: poverty; family functioning; filial piety, psychosocial competence, Chinese adolescents

INTRODUCTION

The rise of single-parent families has become a social concern in local, national and global contexts. In the global context, the number of divorces as well as crude divorce rates (i.e. number of divorces per 1,000 population) in many countries have risen in the past three decades (United Nations, 2009). In the United States, divorce is “close to the point at which it will occur in the majority of families and will thus be thought of more and more as a normative event” (Carter and McGoldrick, 1989, p. 21). In China, the crude divorce rates have been tripled over 20 years, with 2.29 million Chinese couples divorced in 2012 (Chinese Statistics Bureau, 2013). In Hong Kong, the number of single-parent families has increased by 137% in the past two decades, from 34,538 in 1991 to 81,705 in 2011 (Census and Statistics Department 2011).

Moreover, it was found that single mothers far outnumbered single fathers in the past 10 years (Census and Statistics Department, 2013). At the same time, the economic condition of single-mother families has aroused the concern of researchers, social workers and policy makers. In view of the fact that child-rearing demand has restricted single-mothers from employment and there are employment difficulties and reduced earnings in working single-mothers, single-mother families are more vulnerable to poverty (Millar and Ridge, 2009). In fact, Hong Kong also shared this observation. There were more single fathers (74%) participated in the labour force than were single mothers (59.7%) in Hong Kong. Furthermore, while the median monthly income of single fathers was HK\$12,000, the corresponding figure for single mothers was only HK\$9,000, with the difference of 33.3% (Census and Statistical Department, 2013). In addition, female single-parent families constituted to 83.6% of the total single-parent recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) from the Government in 2011 (Census and Statistical Department, 2012, FB12). The available statistics provides support for the notion of “feminisation of poverty”

(Chant, 2007), which is characterized by a higher incidence of poverty, greater severity of poverty, and more persistence in poverty in women, and single-mothers disproportionately bearing the burden of poverty and facing more barriers to lifting themselves out of poverty. Single-mother families were regarded as the “poorest of the poor” and may transmit poverty to their children, i.e., inter-generational transmission of economic disadvantage (Chant, 2007).

Apart from the problems of poverty and deprivation, many single-parent families suffer from the consequences of loss in terms of either a partner or a relationship. The loss implies that single parents and their children have to manage the negative emotions such as depression, resentment, mourning for the loss, and recovery from marital disruption. Anderson (2003) regarded the perceived burdens of single-mothers’ failure to hold their partner and maintain a nuclear family unit as “personal and social baggage” that have long impacts to their lives. This is particularly salient in Chinese families where family solidarity is emphasised under Chinese familism and women were commonly blamed for divorce (Yeh and Yang, 1997).

Poverty and loss intensified the negative outcomes of family functioning and adolescent development in single-parent families via maternal distress and punitive parenting behaviours (Jones *et al.*, 2007; McLanahan and Sanderfur, 1994). There is empirical evidence that adolescents in single-mother families displayed more psychosocial problems, including emotional disturbance, academic underachievement, and problem behaviours such as teenage pregnancy (Amato and Keith, 1991; Lipman *et al.* 2002; Murry and Brody, 1999).

In contrast to the stereotyped view that regards single-parent families as inherently problematic and deficient, there is evidence that single parents do provide care, guidance and nurturance for their children, despite the challenges and difficulties they encounter. Anderson (2003) pointed out that “their [single-parents’] homes are not ‘broken’, their lives are not

miserable, and their children may have problems, but most eventually thrive” (p.123). In fact, this is good news for researchers and theorists in the field of resilience. In the resilience literature, strong family ties and positive family attributes (such as family cohesion, support, shared values) have been identified as protective factors for adolescent positive development in face of adversity (e.g. Garmezy, 1993). In the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) Model, Patterson (2002) identified four family protective processes that helped family members adapt and adjust to the changes, namely family cohesiveness, family flexibility, family communication and family meanings (Patterson, 2002).

Based on the social capital theory of the family, Coleman (1990) suggested that family acts as the social capital that contributes to children and adolescent development. In a family system, social capital takes the form of family mutuality, communication patterns and relationships among family members, family atmosphere and family norms (Coleman, 1990). Gofen (2009) further defined that family social capital as “the ensemble of means, strategies, and the resources embodied in the family’s way of life that influences the future of their children” (p. 115). Undoubtedly, healthy family processes provide a nurturing environment for children and adolescents to develop positive developmental attributes in face of adversity.

Family functioning is a concept which is generally regarded as “the quality of family life at the systemic level, such as wellness, competence, strengths, and weaknesses of a family” (Shek, 2005, p.518). Walsh (2003) identified several indicators of healthy family functioning such as connectedness, respect for individual differences and autonomy, nurturance of family members, adaptability, open communication, a shared belief system, effective problem-solving and conflict-resolution. However, the conceptions of family functioning in Chinese and Western societies have different emphases. While affective involvement and clear boundary are emphasized as effective family functioning in the West (Beavers and Hampson, 2003; Epstein *et al.*, 2003), Chinese parents regarded the absence of conflict, interpersonal

harmony, mutuality, connectedness, and positive parent-adolescent relationships as major attributes of a happy family. Emotional expressiveness was less likely to be regarded as attribute of a happy family (Shek and Chan, 1998).

The role of the family in nurturing children's development is more salient in Chinese communities where collective Chinese familism is stressed (Yeh and Yang, 1997). Deeply influenced by Confucianism, family members are supposed to maintain family harmony and fulfill family prosperity (Yeh and Yang, 1997). There is a popular Chinese saying of "*jia he wan shi xing*" (harmony in the family is the basis for success in any undertaking), which truly reflects the importance of family functioning as perceived by Chinese people. There is ample evidence that family functioning influenced adolescent development in the Chinese communities (e.g. Shek, 2005).

Family functioning may affect adolescent development via other processes such as filial piety. Based on the interdependent principle in the Chinese familism, parents are obliged to nurture and care for their children out of benevolence and the children should reciprocally respect and repay their parents out of filial piety (Yeh, 2003). Filial piety has been the guiding principle for intergenerational conduct in the Chinese culture and conceives obligations to the intimate superior members in the Chinese ethical system (Hwang, 1999). In Confucian thoughts, there are strict demands for the children/descendants to behave towards their parents/ancestors, including providing material and psychological support of parents, performing ceremonial duties of ancestral worship, caring of one's body, continuation of the family line, bringing honors to the family, and avoiding disgrace to the family names (Ho, 1996).

In this paper, it is argued that positive family functioning such as mutuality and bonding will promote filial piety which would contribute to adolescent developmental outcomes. Adolescents perceiving parental warmth and nurture will develop a sense of indebtedness to

parents. This indebtedness will motivate adolescents to strive for achievement to gain pride for the family as a repayment to parents' nurturance. Adolescents driven by filial piety would develop positive developmental attributes (Fuligni *et al.*, 1999; Leung *et al.*, 2010).

Furthermore, family mutuality demands filial obligations of adolescents in fulfilling their duties and responsibilities in the family (Shek and Chan, 1998). By fulfilling ones' family obligations as well as repaying parents' nurture, adolescents build up their psychosocial competence and sense of self-worth (Leung *et al.*, 2010). This echoes with de Vos' (1998) suggestion that the concept of "self" in the Chinese culture is "interactional and transactional" (p.333) which is generated from harmonizing relationships with others, including the family members.

Regarding adolescent developmental outcomes, although the focus has been commonly put on psychological problems such as internalizing and externalizing issues, there is a call for the inclusion of positive adolescent developmental outcomes, such as psychosocial competence. Psychosocial competence pays emphasis on assets, abilities, and potential of the adolescents (Shek, Siu and Lee, 2007). It is suggested that psychosocial competence including resilience, spirituality, and positive future orientation is essential to give us a holistic view on adolescent psychosocial capabilities in facing adversity and poverty (Shek, Siu and Lee, 2007). Resilience is a "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar *et al.*, 2000, p. 543). Spirituality determines the sense of meaning and purpose in the life of an individual (Shek, 2012). Positive future outlook is one's optimistic orientation towards the future. This brings hope to the individuals and helps them develop future goals and options (Sun and Shek, 2012). These developmental attributes are essential for adolescents to adjust, motivate and excel in the mist of adversity, and build up a sense of hope and purpose in their walks of life.

Against this background, the study attempted to identify the familial pathways through

which adolescent filial piety mediates the influence of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence in single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantage in Hong Kong. Based on the resilience literature (e.g. Patterson, 2002; Coleman, 1990) as well as the Chinese socialization model where familism and parent-child interdependence are stressed (Yeh, 2003; Yeh and Yang, 1997), it was hypothesized that filial piety mediated the influence of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence in poor Chinese single-mother families (Figure 2).

METHODS

Research Design

A cross-sectional survey with purposive sampling of single-mother families was conducted in Hong Kong. A cross sectional survey is a research design that examines a phenomenon by taking a cross section at one point of time (Rubin and Babbie, 2014). It is commonly used in the studies of single-parent families (e.g. Lipman *et al.*, 2002; Murry and Brody, 1999).

Participants

Single-mother families with at least one child aged 10 to 17 experiencing economic disadvantage were invited to participate in the study. The concept of relative poverty was adopted, with 50% of monthly median domestic household income determined by Hong Kong Census 2011 was employed as the poverty threshold. Economic disadvantaged families were identified and recruited by children and youth service centers and community centers across Hong Kong. There were 17 service units participating in the study. Social workers of the service units assisted in identifying the respondents and collecting data. Briefings to social workers were held by the first author. Finally, 432 single-mother families experiencing

economic disadvantage participated in the study.

Data Collection

During data collection, mothers and adolescents were invited to complete a questionnaire. They were given explanations about the purpose of the research, procedures of data collection, the rights of respondents to participate and withdraw in a voluntary manner, as well as the use of the data in an anonymous manner in the study. Written informed consent of both mothers and adolescents was obtained. Mothers were requested to complete the Mother Questionnaire which contained measures of family functioning, whereas adolescents were requested to complete the Adolescent Questionnaire which contained measures of filial piety and psychosocial competence. To ensure confidentiality, the questionnaire was completed by the mother and her adolescent child separately. The questionnaire was administered in a self-administered format. In case the respondents had difficulties comprehending the questionnaires, items were read out by trained social workers in an interview format. Parents and adolescents took around 40 minutes to complete the questionnaires. Conforming to the ethics of human subject research, the study was approved and monitored by the Human Subjects Ethics Sub-committee of Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Instruments

Assessment of family functioning

The Chinese Family Assessment Instrument (CFAI). Based on the 33-item CFAI (Shek, 2002, 2010), three subscales were used to assess systemic family functioning. The 12-item *Mutuality Subscale* measures the mutual support, love, and concern among family members. An example of subscale is “Family members support each other”. The 9-item *Communication*

Subscale measures the frequency and nature of interaction among family members. An example of subscale is “Parents often talk to children”. The 6-item *Harmony and Conflict Subscale* assesses conflicts and harmonious behaviours in the family. An example of subscale is “Much friction among family members”. As the item “poor marital relationship of parents” was not applicable for single-mother families, five items were eventually used. The respondents were asked to indicate their responses from five options of “very similar,” “somewhat similar,” “neither similar nor dissimilar,” “somewhat dissimilar,” and “very dissimilar.” The reliability and validity of the CFAI have been reported in previous studies (Shek, 2002, 2010). The mean score of each subscale is an indicator of the degree of family mutuality, communication or harmony, with higher scores indicating higher levels. The scale and subscales showed acceptable reliability in the study (Family functioning: $\alpha = 0.93$; Mutuality: $\alpha = 0.94$; Communication: $\alpha = 0.87$; Harmony and conflict: $\alpha = 0.62$; Table 2).

Assessment of filial piety

The Filial Behaviour Scale (FBS). A 25-item Filial Behaviour Scale was developed in the Hong Kong context (Chen *et al.*, 2007). Examples of FBS items are “When I start to work, I contribute financially to my parents” and “I care for my family”. Responses to the item statements are reported on a 5-point Likert scale where “1” indicating “totally disagree” and “5” indicating “totally agree”. The scale showed good factorial validity and has good internal consistency in both samples of Hong Kong and Beijing (Chen *et al.*, 2007). The mean score of the items in the scale is an indicator of the degree of filial behaviours, with higher scores indicating higher levels. The scale showed excellent internal consistency in this study ($\alpha = 0.91$; Table 2).

Assessment of psychosocial competence

Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale (CPYDS). Shek, Siu and Lee (2007) developed a 90-item Chinese Positive Youth Development Scale that assesses fifteen aspects of positive youth development. Three subscales measuring the psychosocial competence of adolescents were used in this study. 1) *Spirituality Subscale (SP)*: Three items modeled after the Purpose in Life Questionnaire (Shek, 1992) were used in the study. Each item is rated on a 7-point semantic differential scale. An example of *SP* is “To me, life is ...very boring versus very exciting”. 2) *Resilience subscale (RE)*. A short form (3 items) modeled after the items of the Chinese Beliefs about Adversity Scale (Shek, 2004) was used in the study. An example of the *RE* is “When I face difficulty, I will not give up easily”. Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. 2) *Beliefs in the Future subscale (BF)*. A short form (3 items) deriving from the Chinese Hopelessness Scale (Shek, 1993) was used in the study. An example of *BF* is “I have confidence to be admitted to university”. Each item is rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. The scale and subscales showed good psychometric properties in previous validation study (Shek, Siu and Lee, 2007). The scale and three subscales showed good internal consistencies in this study (Psychosocial competence: $\alpha = 0.89$; Spirituality: $\alpha = 0.90$; Resilience: $\alpha = 0.83$; Beliefs in the future: $\alpha = 0.81$; Table 2).

In this study, the measures of family functioning were completed by mothers, whereas measures of filial piety and psychosocial competence were completed by adolescents.

Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS 20.0 to test the hypothetical models. SEM estimates and controls measurement errors, facilitates model confirmation by evaluation of goodness-of-fit criteria, and permits the simultaneous estimation of direct and indirect effects of the relationships among the variables (Raykov and

Marcoulides, 2006). A two-step approach of modeling was adopted in the study (Kline, 2005). First, the measurement model was tested to verify the factor structure of each latent variable. Then, structural models of the relationships among family functioning, adolescent filial piety and psychosocial competence were examined. Several goodness-of-fit indices were used to test the models, including (i) chi-square (χ^2), with a non-significant probability value showing a closer fit of the hypothesized model to the perfect model (Bollen, 1989); (ii) Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Normal Fit Index (NFI), with values above 0.90 as indicating an acceptable model fit; and (iii) Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) with values between 0.06 and 0.08 indicating an acceptable fit, and values below 0.06 indicating a good fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

The proposed mediation effect was tested based on the steps suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, the hypothetical model of direct influence of systemic family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence (Figure 1) was tested. The regression coefficient was estimated. Then adolescent filial piety was added to the hypothetical model as a mediator (Figure 2). The goodness-of-fit indices were examined and direct and indirect effects of the influence of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence via filial piety were estimated. Finally, the mediational significance of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence via filial piety was assessed by performing Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) and bootstrapping mediation testing (Preacher and Hayes, 2008) with 5,000 bootstrapped re-samples. Bootstrapping approach of mediation test involves repeatedly sampling of the data set and estimation of indirect effect of each data set, with the purpose of ascertaining whether the findings are due to chance effect. The test is robust in small to moderate samples, and is powerful in obtaining confidence limits of an indirect effect in most conditions (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In case the Sobel test indicated a significant z-score value, as well as a “zero” value was not found between the upper and lower bounds of bias

corrected 95% confidence intervals in bootstrapping mediation testing, the hypothesized indirect effect was regarded as significant (Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of the sample

The demographic characteristics of the sample families are presented in Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the sample were generally comparable to those of single-parent families in Hong Kong (Census and Statistical Department, 2013), with the majority of single-mothers in the sample were of lower educational attainment and were divorced. A large proportion of the single-parent families in this sample received Comprehensive Social Security Assistance from the Government.

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics of the measures are listed in Table 2. Full information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation was employed to deal with missing data (Arbuckle, 2007). Maximum likelihood method was used to analyze the data.

When assessing the relationships between demographic data and family functioning, adolescent filial piety and psychosocial competence, it was found that all observed variables were not significantly related to mothers' age, educational level, types and years of single-parenthood, number of children, and sex, age and educational levels of their children under study.

Correlational analyses showed that most domains of family functioning were related to adolescent filial piety and all three domains of psychosocial competence (spirituality, resilience and beliefs in the future) (Table 3).

The measurement model

The measurement model of family functioning and psychosocial competence was assessed by confirmatory factor analysis. The two latent variables were allowed to correlate freely with each other. By doing this, the structural part of this model was saturated (i.e. the structural part of this model has zero degrees of freedom) and the tested model told us nothing about the structural paths, as none of them were constrained (Cole and Maxwell, 2003). This model tested whether the observed variables relate only to the latent variables they are representing, and the disturbance values relate to one another in the ways they are expected. The goodness-of-fit indices of the measurement model were $\chi^2 = 18.78$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.05$, CFI = 0.989, NFI = 0.981, and RMSEA = 0.056. Although a significant χ^2 was found, it was not uncommon for a well fitted model as the likelihood ratio test is sensitive to large sample size (Byrne, 2001). With both CFI and NFI more than 0.90 and RMSEA less than 0.06 (Hu and Bentler, 1999), the results indicated that the measurement model provided a good fit to the data, suggesting that the observed variables represented the corresponding latent constructs. The standardized loadings of the latent constructs are listed in Table 2.

The structural model

Regarding direct influence of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial development, goodness-of-fit indices showed that the hypothesized model yielded good fit of the data, with $\chi^2 = 18.78$, $df = 8$, $p < 0.05$; NFI and CFI were 0.981 and 0.989 respectively (above 0.90, Hu and Bentler, 1999), and RMSEA was 0.056 (below 0.06, Hu and Bentler, 1999). The hypothesized model explained 5% of the variance of psychosocial competence of adolescents in poor Chinese single-mother families. The direct influence of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence was significant ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$). The standardized solution of the tested model is presented in Figure 3.

To test the mediation effect, adolescent filial piety was then added to the hypothetical model. The tested mediational model yielded a good fit to the data. The chi square value was significant ($\chi^2 = 25.52$, $df = 12$, $p < 0.05$); NFI and CFI were 0.987 and 0.988 respectively (above 0.90; Hu and Bentler, 1999), RMSEA was 0.050 (below 0.06; Hu and Bentler, 1999). The hypothesized model explained 32% of the variance of adolescent psychosocial competence in poor Chinese single-mother families. The regression coefficient of direct path from family functioning to psychosocial competence dropped to 0.06 and was insignificant ($p > 0.05$). The standardized indirect effect of mediational path via filial piety was 0.16 ($p < 0.001$), making the standardized total effect of influence of family functioning to adolescent psychosocial competence to be 0.22 ($p < 0.01$, Table 4). Regarding the significance of mediational effect, the Sobel test indicated the z value of 5.29 ($p < 0.001$). Besides, a “zero” value was not found between the upper and lower bounds of the bias corrected 95% confidence intervals of the indirect effect of the mediational path (Preacher and Hayes, 2008). This finding suggests that adolescent filial piety acted as the mediator that mediated the influence of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence in Chinese single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantage. The hypothesis was supported. The standardized solution of the tested mediation model is presented in Figure 4.

DISCUSSION

The study attempted to examine the mediational pathway of the influence of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence via filial piety in Chinese single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantage. There are several unique features of the study. First, Chinese single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantage were recruited. This is important because this vulnerable community was expanding in Hong Kong as well as the global context, but was seldom addressed in the literature. Second, a resilience

perspective was employed in the study. Rather than focusing on the problems of the poor families as well as deficiencies of single-mothers, the study emphasized the strengths of families in cultivating positive development of adolescents. Third, the study emphasized the cultural uniqueness of Chinese socialization where collective familism and interdependent dyadic relationship were stressed. In particular, filial piety, which is a special feature of Chinese socialization, was examined as a mediator of the influence of family functioning on adolescent development, which is pioneering in the literature. Fourth, both mothers and adolescents in the single-mother families were invited to join the study. Fifth, the measurement tools used in the study were indigenously developed for Chinese people and were validated in the Chinese communities. Last but not the least, structural equation modeling was employed in the study, which makes the estimation of direct effect and indirect effect (via filial piety) of family functioning on adolescent psychosocial competence possible.

There has been ample evidence showing that single-parent families had poor family functioning that would bring detrimental effects on child and adolescent development (e.g. Amato and Keith, 1991; Jones *et al.*, 2007). Hence, single-parent families have been labeled as “deficit” family units that are “inadequate, flawed or ‘broken’” (Rice, 2001, p. xi). However, the present study presented an alternate angle of single-parent families. Despite the dual problems of the loss of marital relationship and economic hardship, single-mothers may still strive to nurture a good family environment suitable for their children’s development. The findings further suggested that family functioning influenced adolescent psychosocial competence indirectly via filial piety in the Chinese single-mother families, which support the Chinese socialization model rooted in the Confucian thoughts (Yeh, 2003). Based on the Chinese model of socialization (Yeh, 2003), adolescents who are nurtured in a cohesive and supportive family environment develop a sense of filial obligation in response to their family’s contribution, which further enhances their psychosocial competence and feelings of

self-worth (Fulgini *et al.*, 1999; Leung *et al.*, 2010). Hence, as a guiding principle for intergenerational conduct (Ho, 1996), filial piety links family functioning and adolescent positive development of single-mother families together. This is particularly important in single-mother families, as parent-child commitment to the family as well as adolescent positive development becomes an effective “medicine” in their recovery from the loss and hardship.

This study has theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the present study examined the relationships among systemic family functioning, adolescent filial piety and psychosocial competence in single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantage, which is pioneering in the social science literature. In response to the criticism of Walsh (2011) that “in mental health and child development literature, families were thought to contribute to risk, but not to resilience” (p. 149), the present study identified family functioning as a protective factor in enhancing adolescent psychosocial competence in poor single-mother families. In view of paucity of research on this vulnerable Chinese community, the study contributes to the scientific literature. Second, the study portrays the familial pathway through which family functioning influenced adolescent psychosocial competence via filial piety. This provides insights on how family functioning influences adolescents’ positive development in Chinese families living in adversity, which may be different from the Western world. The interdependence principle embedded in the Confucian culture promotes the development of adolescent filial piety in response to family cohesion and nurture (Yeh, 2003), which enhances their positive psychosocial attributes. As culture plays an “overarching role in shaping the ecology of parenting and childhood” (Bornstein and Cheah, 2006, p.3), the study of how familial pathway can enhance psychological competence in Chinese adolescents is essential to the development of models of resilience for Chinese families.

Practically, the study provides insights for social workers on how adolescents living in poor single-mother families can build up their psychosocial competence. Rather than emphasizing familial deficits of poor single-mother families, social workers should promote better family functioning and cultivate adolescent filial piety. This is a fundamental paradigm shift in looking at the needs of single parents. Besides, social workers need to employ a family-based intervention approach to promote healthy family functioning and nurture filial piety of adolescents in single-mother families. To enhance family functioning in single-mother families, social workers need to build up their child-rearing competence and social capital. Supportive services such as parenting enhancement programmes, family aid programmes, as well as mutual help groups strengthening informal social and emotional support among single-mothers are essential. On the other hand, adolescents should be supported with tangible (e.g. free or low-cost tutoring) and intangible (emotional support, competence training programmes) services. Mutual understanding between mothers and adolescents could be enhanced by family life education. At the same time, social workers need to assess the stresses of mothers in performing multiple roles of childcare, family management and bread-winners of the family. Furthermore, adolescents may exhibit stresses, feelings of guilt and shame if they fail to fulfill their family responsibility (Bempechat *et al.*, 1999). Hence, individual and family counselling should be provided for the families in need.

Last but not the least, as single-mother families were easily prone to poverty due to family obligations and gender economic inequality, only linking tangible and social resources for single-mother families is not adequate. Therefore, social workers should advocate for more gender social and economic equality, which is the prime mission of social work profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2013, Code of Ethics: Preamble). Anti-discrimination legislation on family status should be enforced, and gender equality campaigns should be promoted in order to build up a discrimination-free and gender-equal society.

There were several limitations of the study. Although cross-sectional research design has been commonly used to investigate single-mother families (e.g. Lipman *et al.* 2002; Murry and Brody, 1999), it has the inherent problem of inferring cause-and-effect relationships due to the lack of time order. Hence, longitudinal research designs are recommended for future studies. Second, the limitation of purposive sampling should be realized. As families were not randomly sampled, generalizability of the findings may be limited. Third, as the assessment of family processes was based on self-reported questionnaires, it is possible that the relationships may be due to common method variance. It would be methodological superior to use multiple methods in future study. Qualitative methodologies such as in-depth interviews should be employed to gain a more comprehensive view of the issue. Last but not the least, as the findings presented in the study were based on single-mother families experiencing economic disadvantaged families in Hong Kong, there is a need to assess generalizability of the findings in different Chinese communities (e.g. mainland China) and Chinese people living in non-Chinese contexts (e.g. Chinese-Americans).

Despite the limitations, it is the first scientific study that examined the meditational pathways through which family functioning influences adolescent psychosocial competence in poor Chinese single-mother families. In view of the comment by Jones *et al.* (2007) that research on single-mother families has been “largely risk-focused” and “the ‘lens’ through which we have viewed single mother families has been far too narrow” (p. 672), this study is a positive response which expands our understanding of how family functioning and filial piety influence psychosocial competence of adolescents growing up in single-parent families.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics of sample characteristics (N = 432)

Respondent	Demographic characteristics	N	Percentage (%)
Mother	Age	Mean = 43.49 (SD = 5.79) (years)	
	Marital status		
	Unmarried	12	2.8
	Divorced	302	69.9
	Separated	27	6.2
	Widowed	77	17.8
	Spouse had disappeared	8	1.9
	Duration of single-parenthood		
	1 year and less	32	7.4
	2 - 3 years	97	22.5
	4 - 6 years	113	26.2
	7 - 10 years	100	23.1
	More than 10 years	77	17.8
	Educational background		
	Illiterate	8	1.9
	Primary 1 to 6 (Grade 1 to 6)	100	23.1
	Secondary 1 to 3 (Grade 7 to 9)	200	46.2
	Secondary 4 to 7 (Grade 10 to 13)	113	26.3
	College and university graduates	9	2.1
	Occupation		
	Unskilled workers	43	10
	Skilled workers	12	2.8
	Clerk	24	5.6
Unemployed	22	5.1	
Housewife	185	42.8	
Housewife with part-time jobs	120	27.8	
Others	17	4.0	
CSSA recipients			
Yes	315	72.9	
No	107	24.8	
Monthly household income			
HK\$3,000 and below	25	5.8	
HK\$3,001 – HK\$5,000	77	17.8	
HK\$5,001 – HK\$7,500	189	39.1	
HK\$7,501 – HK\$10,000	102	23.6	
HK\$10,001 and above	52	12.0	
No. of Children			
1	145	33.8	
2	208	47.0	
3	61	14.1	
4 and above	16	3.6	
Adolescent	Sex		
	Male	211	48.8
	Female	221	51.2
	Age	Mean = 13.7 (SD = 2.03) (years)	
	Educational Level		
Primary 6 and below (Grade 6 and below)	124	27.7	
Secondary 1 - 3 (Grade 7 - 9)	203	47.3	
Secondary 4 and above (Grade 8 and above)	105	24.3	

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, factor loading and internal consistency of the constructs (N = 432)

Constructs and Indicators	Mean	SD	Factor loading	Cronhach's alpha
Family Functioning				0.93
Mutuality	4.04	0.67	0.97	0.94
Communication	3.95	0.64	0.83	0.87
Harmony and Conflicts	3.82	0.73	0.44	0.62
Adolescent Filial Piety	3.66	0.50	N.A.	0.91
Adolescent Psychosocial Competence				0.89
Spirituality	5.12	1.25	0.67	0.90
Resilience	4.69	0.92	0.90	0.83
Beliefs in the Future	4.32	1.06	0.69	0.81

Table 3. Correlation matrix among the observed variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Family functioning:							
1. Mutuality	1.00						
2. Communication	.81***	1.00					
3. Harmony and conflicts	.43***	.35***	1.00				
4. Adolescent filial piety	.26***	.30***	.17***	1.00			
Adolescent psychosocial competence:							
5. Spirituality	.19***	.21**	.16**	.35***	1.00		
6. Resilience	.15**	.17***	.09*	.52***	.60***	1.00	
7. Beliefs in the future	.21***	.23***	.12*	.40***	.43***	.62***	1.00

* $p < .05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 4: The standardized direct and indirect effects of family functioning and filial piety to adolescent psychosocial competence

	Estimate	BC (95% CI)	
		Lower	Upper
Direct effect	0.06	-0.035	0.175
Indirect effect via filial piety	0.16***	0.098	0.227
Total Effect	0.22**	0.101	0.345

** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < .001$

Figure 1: The hypothetical model of direct influence of family functioning to adolescent psychosocial competence

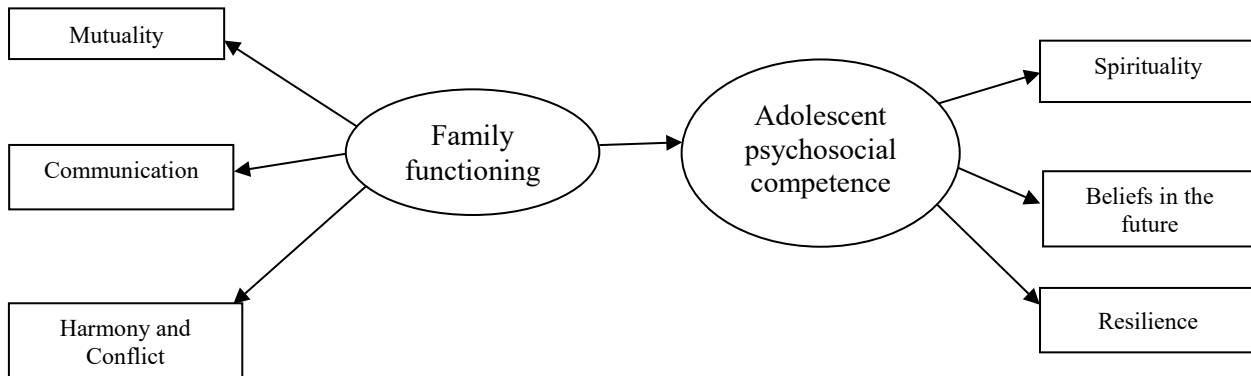


Figure 2: The hypothetical model of direct and indirect influences of family functioning to adolescent psychosocial competence via filial piety

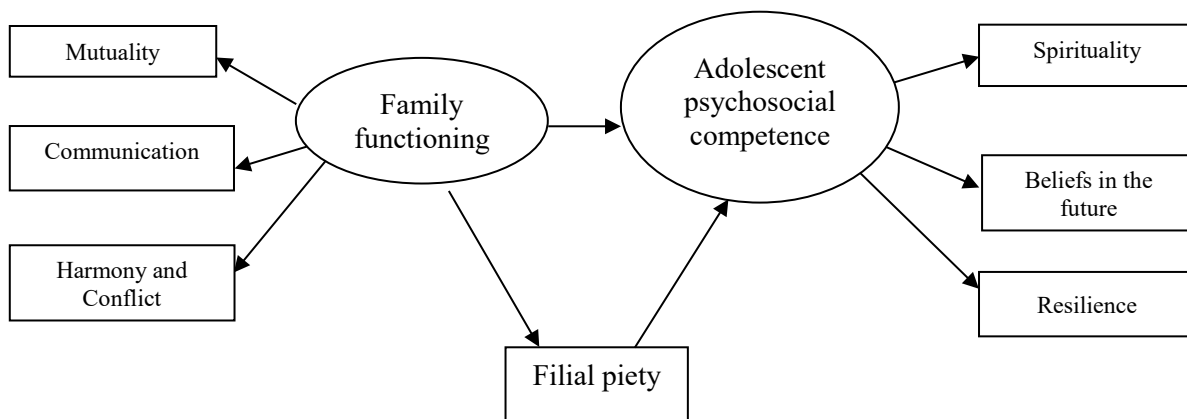
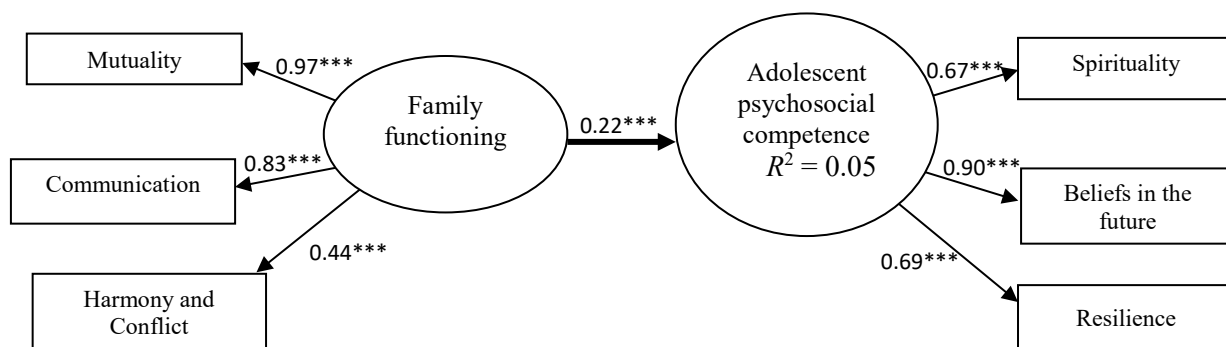


Figure 3: The path model of direct influence of family functioning to adolescent psychosocial competence

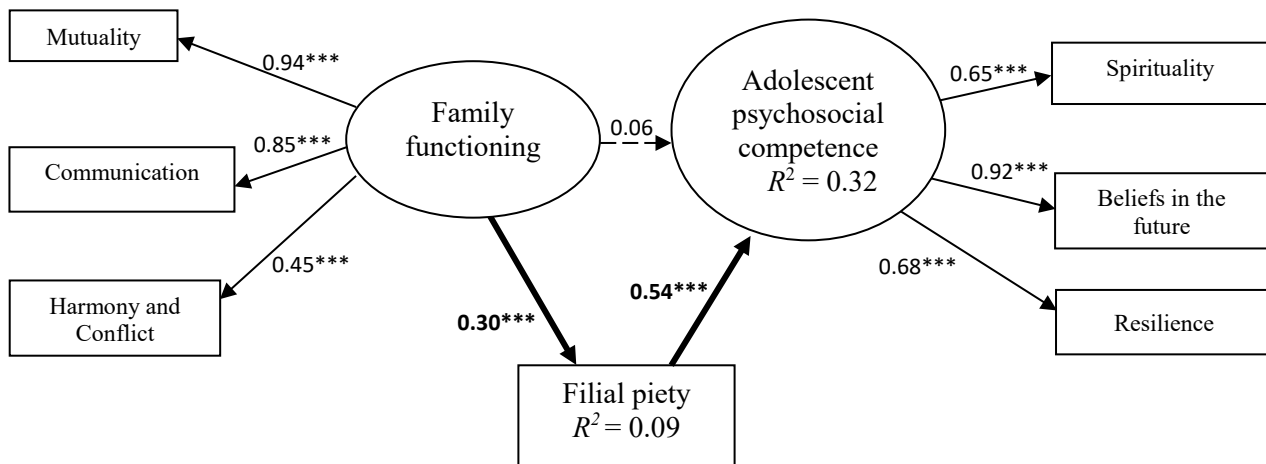


→ Significant effect of the structural model

*** $p < .001$

$\chi^2 = 18.78, df = 8, p < 0.05$
 NFI = 0.981
 CFI = 0.989
 RMSEA = 0.056

Figure 4: The path model of direct and indirect influences of family functioning to adolescent psychosocial competence via filial piety



———> Significant effect of the structural model
 - - - -> Non-significant effect of the structural model

*** $p < .001$

$\chi^2 = 25.02, df = 12, p < 0.05$
 NFI = 0.978
 CFI = 0.988
 RMSEA = 0.050