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

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Abstract

This paper examines the views of Hong Kong community leaders on the underlying issues that affect family health, happiness and harmony (3Hs) in Hong Kong. Using a community reconnaissance method, a series of individual in-depth interviews with 26 leaders that represent neighbourhoods of diverse socio-economic status (SES) from June to August 2008 were conducted. Participants considered that changing family structure, economic situation and strong work ethic are the most salient factors that affect family 3Hs. The deprived comprehensive social security assistance recipients, single-parent families and migrant women were considered to be the most vulnerable groups to breakdown in family 3Hs and particularly, they lack family resources. Families from different SES have to overcome different challenges in order to achieve and sustain family 3Hs. Leaders from low SES neighbourhood were concerned more about providing tangible help such as child care facilities to improve family resources, whereas leaders from high SES neighbourhood focused more on preventive interventions such as education on relationship skills to achieve better family well-being. The findings offer insights in designing effective social marketing education campaigns and family-friendly workplace policy to promote social harmony through the maintenance of 3Hs families.

Introduction

Family well-being is a major indicator of a harmonious society. Several studies have showed the close relationship between family harmony and social stability. For example, Ho and Chan have developed an index to measure the perceived level of social harmony in Hong Kong and reported a rating of 5.57 in 2006 on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing a complete lack of social harmony and 10 representing the highest level. Results indicated that harmony and cohesion within a family is one of the most critical dimensions to influence social harmony [1]. Using another perspective, Estes [2] has identified a set of social indicators to illustrate the deterrent effects of family discordance on society development as a result of a rapid economic expansion in the 1990s. These social indicators include the divorce rate, the unemployment rate, rates of domestic violence and substance abuse. The above-mentioned studies have pointed to the critical role of family well-being in building a harmonious society.

When one looks over the literature to see how family well-being has been conceptualized, operationalized and researched, one finds many different constructs and variables, such as ‘subjective
well-being’, ‘family life satisfaction’, ‘sense of well-being’, and those constructs are often defined ambiguously and poorly. Furthermore, the vast majority of well-being research is individual focused, but only a few papers in the literature have provided a conceptual framework of family well-being in a Chinese context. In the Western context, Zubrick et al. [3] have identified five types of family resources as indicators of family well-being. This included time, income, human capital, psychological capital and social capital. Using semi-structured interviews with part-time professionals, Karakas et al. [4] identified six different dimensions of family well-being. They are spending high quality time with family members, being able to relax in free time, emotional well-being and health of family members, high quality communication and support, high quality child care and education and satisfaction with work and workload at home (p. 57). Three paradigms of family well-being derived from interviews are also proposed: family well-being as (i) effective parenting, (ii) love and being together and (iii) peace and harmony. In the Chinese context, a recent telephone survey by Ma et al. [5] has identified that income, time spent with family, stress coping efficacy, religion and satisfaction with the living environment are the most significant domains conducive to family well-being in Hong Kong.

While their contributions can serve as a conceptual model towards understanding family well-being, our knowledge of general functioning of Chinese families is limited because some measures used in some quantitative research studies are far from comprehensive and multi-dimensional [5] to illuminate the meaning of family well-being. The use of quantitative approach could not fully understand the underlying issues that are of prime importance to the family well-being of current Hong Kong Chinese families.

In view of the importance of family well-being, The Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust in collaboration with the School of Public Health, The University of Hong Kong, have launched a population-wide project entitled ‘FAMILY: A Jockey Club Initiative for a Harmonious Society’ in 2008 (http://www.family.org.hk/). The project focuses on family as a unit and aims to identify the sources of family problems, devise appropriate preventive measures and promote family health, happiness and harmony (3Hs) through a territory-wide household survey, intervention projects and public education. As an initial phase of the project, we sought information from different sources to inform our planning.

This study aims to explore the opinions from community leaders and advocacy groups in Hong Kong as little research has been done to explore how community leaders in particular perceive family well-being. Such key informants can provide useful information on the order of significance of family-related issues on the community agenda and its related implications for problem solution [6, 7]. Besides, greater understanding of how these community leaders perceive the family well-being could lead to new theoretical insights and practical ideas to assist individuals in making their family better. This study examines the following questions: firstly, what are the most pressing issues for families in Hong Kong? Secondly, which groups were considered to be most vulnerable to breakdown in family well-being? Thirdly, what is the perceived family 3Hs and finally, what interventions should be provided to promote family 3Hs?

## Methods

### Participants

A community reconnaissance method was adopted for recruiting key informants and inter-organizational groups involved in decision making [8]. Steps of the community reconnaissance method involves (i) choosing top positional leaders from jurisdictional and organization sectors and (ii) asking each respondent to nominate six or more of the most influential leaders in their community and specific community sectors. This method allowed us to analyse the family 3Hs issues from multiple aspects of community power including social services, health care, education and district councils. A total of 26 leaders (11 males, 15 females) from various
districts that represent neighbourhoods of diverse socio-economic status (SES) in areas of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories were selected based on their formal authority or the number of times being nominated.

**Procedures**

Upon the approval of the University of Hong Kong Institutional Review Board, the semi-structured interviews with community leaders took place at their workplaces from June to August 2008. Written informed consent was obtained from participants who also provide information on socio-demographic characteristics and working experience in their community sector. The first author, who was the co-investigator of the 3Hs project, conducted all individual interviews. The interviews took about 45–90 min, and the interviewer digitally recorded all interviews and took notes to keep track of the process and key issues. Following a brief standardized introduction on the purpose of the interviews, leaders were asked about the issues related to 3Hs in Hong Kong families based on an interview guide. Key open-ended questions included the following: (i) What do you think are the most pressing issues for families in Hong Kong at the present time? (ii) In your view, which groups are now facing the greatest challenge in sustaining family 3Hs in Hong Kong? (iii) What are your views on the existing services and assistance in promoting family 3Hs and how can the situation be improved? Probes were used to elicit detailed responses (e.g. tell me more). A transcriptionist prepared verbatim transcripts of each interview.

**Data analysis**

Interviews were conducted in Cantonese, audiotaped with permission and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then analysed and coded using a thematic content analysis [9]. Three coding phases were involved: (i) open coding was performed whereby each segment of the transcribed interviews was coded using a paraphrase that connoted these words; (ii) axial coding was then proceeded with clustering the descriptive codes into groups of related subcategories; and (iii) these categories were refined and grouped around common themes using selective coding [10]. Inter-coder reliability was assessed by two independent coders who had experience in content analysis. Resulting analysis checking with participants was performed. Edited interview excerpts, which were translated into English, were presented to validate the emerging themes while preserving participants’ anonymity.

**Results**

Table I provides socio-demographic information about 26 participants who participated in the present study. They were all married, between the ages of 40 and 49 years and having between 10 and 20 years of working experience in the community. Key themes and subthemes are summarized in Table II.

**Theme 1: current social problems in Hong Kong families**

Changes in family structure, price inflation and prevailing fast-paced workaholic culture were most cited as current social problems that influence family well-being in Hong Kong.

**Changes in family structure**

About half of the leaders felt that increased number of cross-border families and changes in family composition have altered both family structures and relationships. During 1841–1997, Hong Kong was administered by the British government until the handover in 1997 [11]. Family structure in Hong Kong has been gradually changing for the past 30 years since China has adopted the open door policy which greatly increased the supply of cheap labourers. In addition, the massive relocation of industrial activities across the border to the Pearl River Delta to find a supply of cheap labour and low-priced industrial sites brings a lot of Hong Kong people to work or operate business in mainland China. Consequently, their spouse and children stay in Hong Kong [12]. The lengthy stays in China makes maintaining a family relationship difficult as described by a leader:
Table I. Descriptive information of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total (n = 26), n (%)</th>
<th>Male, n = 11 (42.3%), n (%)</th>
<th>Female, n = 15 (57.7%), n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>5 (19.2)</td>
<td>2 (18.2)</td>
<td>3 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>13 (50)</td>
<td>6 (54.5)</td>
<td>7 (46.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>7 (26.9)</td>
<td>2 (18.2)</td>
<td>5 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;60</td>
<td>1 (3.8)</td>
<td>1 (9.1)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>26 (100)</td>
<td>11 (100)</td>
<td>15 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locationa</td>
<td>Hong Kong Island</td>
<td>14 (53.8)</td>
<td>8 (53.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kowloon</td>
<td>5 (19.2)</td>
<td>2 (13.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Territories</td>
<td>7 (26.9)</td>
<td>5 (33.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of working experience in the community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;10</td>
<td>1 (3.9)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–20</td>
<td>15 (57.7)</td>
<td>8 (72.7)</td>
<td>7 (46.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20+</td>
<td>10 (38.5)</td>
<td>3 (27.3)</td>
<td>7 (46.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aBased on participants’ working place.

Table II. Summary of study themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current social problems in Hong Kong families</td>
<td>Changes in family structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prevailing fast pace and workaholic culture, resulting in lack of time for family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economic situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups facing the greatest challenges to sustain family 3Hs</td>
<td>Deprived families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single-parent families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New immigrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions on 3Hs</td>
<td>Healthy family: Cohesive unit when facing crisis and all members stay physically and mentally healthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Happy family: Spending quality time with other family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harmonious family: Absence of conflicts and effective communication among family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions to promote family 3Hs</td>
<td>Lack preventive approach in promoting family 3Hs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide family-friendly workplace policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Launch public education campaigns for promoting marriage and relationship skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establish a platform for mobilizing community resources to foster a positive family 3Hs environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The current working environment is changing: one family member works in mainland China, resulting in a poor family relationship and delayed parenthood. (Mr. K., a social service provider, high SES area).

Nowadays, many people work in China. Those people only come back to Hong Kong to join their family twice every month. Their children seem to grow up in a single-parent family. (Ms. M, a social service provider, middle SES area).

Another concern related to the change of family structure is cross-border marriages. Males of low SES are forced to seek wives in China because they are unable to find suitable women in Hong Kong. As a result, the number of cross-border families is increasing. This has resulted in a quota system to regulate a steady influx of wives and children to reunite with their Hong Kong husbands/fathers [13]. Since wives from mainland China usually are the last ones to reunite with their families in Hong Kong, the separated family life and the subsequent reunion challenges family well-being [14, 15].

We foresee cross-border families would become the prevailing family composition. This challenges parent-child relationships and spousal relationship. (Ms. J, a social service provider, high SES area).

Leaders also mentioned how changes in family living composition impacted on family well-being.

Many nuclear families are now living with their senior parents because it’s much easier for them to be assigned to a flat in a public estate. Such living composition often results in an increase in family violence which includes child abuse and elder abuse. There are also increased conflicts between in-law and out-law relationships and between cross-generational relationships. (Mr. E, a district councilor, low SES area).

On the whole, these respondents emphasized how the changes in family structure influence family relationship. Leaders were concerned that cross-border familial relations and cross-generational living composition will cause either increased alienation or conflicts among family members, which in turn adversely affect family 3Hs.

**Economic situation**

Price inflation was most frequently cited by about one-third of the leaders as the most pressing social problem in Hong Kong because it poses a grave financial burden to many local families. Several leaders highlighted the situation:

Price inflation including a rise in prices of food and miscellaneous goods affect families of all socioeconomic levels, especially the low SES group. The recent decline of stock prices creates much pressure on some middle-class families, such as a decrease in the purchasing power. (Mr. Q, a district councilor, low SES area).

Due to the rise in property prices, many families worked hard in order to earn enough money to purchase or rent an apartment, which results in a lot of stress and unhappiness. (Ms. X, an education provider, high SES area).

The high housing demand and restricted land supply have driven property prices to an unrealistic level [16]. Coupled with high inflation, many Hong Kong companies have been on the verge of bankruptcy due to the global financial crisis in 2008 [17]. Consequently, many employees had their salaries reduced in order to keep the jobs. The decline in purchasing power of family income was considered to be one of the barriers to sustain family happiness.

Those of low SES were especially hard hit by the economic hardship. Evidently, income loss, insufficient financial resources and economic strain lower family satisfaction.

Due to the advancement of information technology, teenagers know more about the updated products, and they want to have them. However, for the older generation, they feel contented when they have enough food to eat and place
to rest ... Parents of low SES cannot satisfy their children’s needs as they want expensive stuffs. Yet their parents don’t have money to buy them. This causes family conflicts …

... when children want something, they don’t understand the situation clearly. They don’t consider the family situation ... ‘Why not’ is the only question they have in mind. Those children don’t consider how little their father earns, how low their household income is. They never show any understanding. They blame their father for being incompetent, for not earning enough, for giving birth to them even when they earn so little ... (Mr. F, a social service provider, low SES area).

**Prevailing fast-paced workaholic culture**

More than half of the leaders stated that Hong Kong’s work culture drives people to a perpetual state of stress. A recent report showed that 28.4% of 2 603 900 employees who had a fixed number of contractual hours of work per day were required to work more than 8 hours but up to 10 hours day, while 5.8% worked more than 10 hours day [18]. Leaders felt that under this high-pressure and competitive environment, it is difficult for people to achieve a balanced lifestyle.

Financial situation could be the biggest source of stress. People tend to work long hours. As a result, they spend less time with their family, and look for quick fixes to deal with family issues, neglecting the importance of family relationships. (Mr. D, a district councilor, middle SES area).

A number of leaders pointed out the workaholic culture affect those people with lower skills and education most.

Sometimes I wonder the workaholic culture has sacrificed many families, for example, some shops are open till 11 in the evening. Families of low SES have no choice as they cannot find a better job. Those who live in remote and cheaper districts have to spend more money and time on going to the offices. As a result, those people have to sacrifice their family time because they have to work long hours. Many family relationships are sacrificed in Hong Kong and the social cost will increase eventually. (Ms. S, a social service provider, low SES area).

Long hours and work stress result in less happy time with families. Those from middle class concern more (family 3Hs) ... they enjoy the benefit of five-day work week ... therefore they may have more leisure time to spend with their family and friends. However, low SES families may not have such privilege as they have to work hard to support the basic needs of their families. (Ms. V, a social service provider, high SES area).

These leaders highlighted that the trade-off between work and family is the reduction of family time. This results in a lack of family communication which affects family 3Hs. In particular, they considered that working overtime is a major barrier to pursue family happiness. Low SES families may suffer most from the lack of social supportive networks.

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

Four population subgroups were perceived to be vulnerable to poor family well-being. These groups included the deprived families, Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) recipients, single-parent families and migrant women in cross-border marriages. In Hong Kong, the CSSA Scheme is the major income support social security scheme to provide assistance to financially vulnerable individuals and families. Deprived families are those with lower SES but are not CSSA recipients. During the period 1996–2008, the number of CSSA recipients has increased by 113% from 223 384 to 475 625. Most single-parent families are under CSSA Scheme. In 2008, the number of female CSSA recipients in the ‘single-parent’ category was 55 463, while the number of male recipients in this category was 33 366 [19].

Moreover, owing to the influx of a large number of women from mainland China to reunite with their families, migrant women constituted 4.1% of the population in Kowloon in 2006. This proportion
was higher than that on Hong Kong Island (1.9%) and in the New Territories (3.1%). Due to the long family reunification process which they have to apply for and then wait for the limited entry or quota permits, most of these migrant women have separated from their spouses in Hong Kong for 10 years or more. In addition, of 83,164 migrant women living with the spouse in 2006, 88.4% were younger than their Hong Kong husbands with a median age difference of 7 years [20].

Several leaders identified such vulnerable groups and described their situation:

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

Family reunification process affects most of the cross-border families. Migrant women, who were mainly from mainland China, usually are the last ones to reunite with the families in Hong Kong. (Migrant women) have left their homeland and relatives and come alone to a totally strange community. They face greater difficulties in accessing health and social support in the new environment. The wide age gap in marriage, long separation from family, differences in socio-cultural background, lack of the usual social support and network, and weak foundation of marriage have further intensified the hostile family relationship, potentiating a rise in domestic violence and child abuse. For example, migrant women are not aware that beating a child is illegal in Hong Kong, as their neighbours (in mainland China) all acted in that way, and many were puzzled why Hong Kong has such a strict law. (Ms. T, a social service provider, high SES area).

Several leaders recognized the special difficulties which the four population subgroups face in sustaining family well-being. Poverty and lack of social support affected vulnerable groups most in keeping a healthy family life.

**Theme 3: perceptions on family 3Hs**

Leaders were asked to describe their views on family well-being in terms of family 3Hs.

**Family health**

Leaders considered family health as a cohesive unit, in which all family members are motivated to solve problems or crisis together regardless of the family structure. As commented by a leader:

No matter what tragedy strikes a family, the key for a healthy family is to make effort to maintain a family unity. This is a part of the learning process, and every family member needs to make such effort as long as they consider family is important. (Mr. F, a social service provider, low SES area).

Another leader believed that healthy family refers to family members’ overall psychological well-being.

Family health includes mental health of each family member. Facing financial hardship might cause emotional problems among adults. Most parents might not be able to take care of themselves or they even are not aware of having emotional problems when facing difficulties. (Ms. U, an education provider, high SES area).

In short, cohesiveness and staying physically and mentally healthy were perceived as two important elements that contribute to a healthy family. Their views on family health stressed the strong linkage between psychological capital, family unity and family health.

**Family happiness**

Half of the leaders described that happiness is a subjective feeling and felt that family happiness depends on priorities in one’s life.

If there’s no harmony, it seems difficult for a family to be happy. However, absence of conflicts
does not imply that a family is happy. (Ms. H, a social service provider, high SES area).

Sometimes even poor people are happy such as people in Bhutan. They are poor but still very happy as they are in a fair and cohesive community. However, Hong Kong people see things in a narrow and short-sighted way; they focus on making fast money, hence causing a lot of stress and unhappiness within families. (Mr. W, a healthcare service provider, high SES area).

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

Family happiness is engendered from family activities such as having a Chinese dim sum lunch during holidays or shopping with families etc. (Mr. B, a district councilor, high SES area).

Establishing good relationships with neighbours and friends through activities such as dinners and visits would build family happiness. (Ms. A, a social service provider, middle SES area).

Generally speaking, leaders highlighted that social capital is closely linked to family happiness. More social interaction with family and friends was perceived as a way to stimulate family happiness.

Family harmony

Leaders repeatedly reported that conflicts disrupt family harmony.

Harmony means no conflict; people should not physically hit one another. Conflict arises due to a lack of communication that causes disharmony. (Ms. I, a district counselor, middle SES area).

Physical violence usually begins with verbal abuse. Women tend to remain silent and tolerate for a certain period of time in order to maintain family harmony. (Ms. G, a social service provider, low SES area).

Leaders perceived that both absence of conflicts and effective communication were major components that contribute to family harmony. This implies that forbearance and spending time with family are important in forming a harmonious family.

Theme 4: suggestions to promote family 3Hs

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

Family-friendly workplace policy

Several leaders suggested that family-friendly policy should be implemented to assist employees to have a work-family balance. They described the reasons for the need to adopt the family-friendly policy:

Working environment and culture in Hong Kong is neither family-oriented nor friendly as a whole. The current working policy hinders the promotion of a family-friendly working environment. People with high paid jobs are in a better position to negotiate more flexible arrangements; however, there are no options for those with low-paid jobs. (Mr. N, a social service provider, high SES area).

We (childcare center) often have trouble when typhoon signal no. 1 or 3 is hoisted. Parents cannot negotiate more flexible arrangements to pick up their children because of their working environment. (Ms. P, a social service provider, low SES area).

We could suggest some innovative family-friendly policies such as providing paternity leave, birthday leave, or paid family leave for employees who need to take care of their sick children. (Ms. C, a social service provider, middle SES area).

Leaders’ suggestions on family-friendly policy were consistent with the recommendations from the Hong Kong Government. As defined by the Government, a family-friendly workplace refers to
good people management measures that help employees balance the responsibilities of their work and families [21]. Features of measures include family leave benefits, flexible work arrangements and employee support scheme, such as scholarships or education assistance for employees and their dependents to nursery services and recreational activities in which all family members can join.

Public education
In increasing the awareness of family 3Hs, leaders suggested early education for families and individuals should be introduced to increase social capital. Due to a rise in the number of divorces and cross-border families, most leaders stressed the importance of conducting courses on marriage and relationship skill education to people of all ages.

We should start from early education to provide positive role models about having a happy family life. (Ms. O, a social service provider, high SES area).

Most conflicts were due to a lack of effective communication. Workshops about relationship skills may avoid conflict in families. (Mr. Y, a social service provider, high SES area).

Cohabitation is very common nowadays. Premarriage counseling is very important and Hong Kong lags behind what is offered in Taiwan and mainland China. We should expand the idea of pre-marital assessment and follow-up. (Mr. Z, a social service provider, high SES area).

A leader suggested having collaboration between non-governmental organizations and universities in offering public education programmes.

... Perhaps it’s good to have some sort of cooperation like this: universities provide training for us, prepare teaching manuals. This is what we are facing now, for example, parent education or programs on the promotion of family health, happiness, or harmony. Then this is perfect ... In particular, it’s good if universities can develop some quality programs for us as this lessens the workload of our colleagues to develop those materials or design activities. We have the support of universities and we also know that we have good materials. (Mr. Y, a social service provider, high SES area).

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

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

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

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

Discussion
This is the first study in a Chinese context to explore the perspectives of community leaders and major stakeholders on family 3Hs using a qualitative approach. Our findings are consistent with quantitative research on the correlates of family well-being, suggesting that communication and close family interaction are core components that contribute to family 3Hs [22, 23]. What is different about this paper is the voice of community leaders,
subjects that have not been explored in the literature so far. Since leaders have a major impact on the formation of community agenda, it is imperative to understand their perspectives on family 3Hs prior to engaging communities in social marketing campaigns. However, there is a lack of data from community leaders about the existing needs and service gaps. The present study fills the gap by providing a contextual analysis with illustration of community leaders’ major concerns on family issues. From the view of community leaders, four major themes emerged in our study, which consisted of current social problems in Hong Kong families, groups facing the greatest challenges to sustain family 3Hs, perceptions on family 3Hs and suggestions to promote 3Hs. Our findings have revealed that the strength of family well-being would vary considerably depending on the availability of family resources. Based on the concept of the five types of family resources (family time, income, human capital, psychological capital and social capital) identified by Zubrick et al. [3], our findings have suggested that families with low SES have fewer resources in these domains than those with high SES. The majority of the leaders perceived that most families in Hong Kong work long hours, families with low SES have fewer options due to financial constraints, inability to recognize family problems and a lack of skills and motivation for solving problems when compared to those with high SES. Groups such as the deprived, CSSA recipients, single-parent families and migrant women are seen as particularly lacking in family resources and most vulnerable to breakdown in family 3Hs. Providing more tangible help such as free educational opportunities, sufficient child care facilities and vocational skill training might improve family resources and ultimately achieving better family well-being.

Suggestions from leaders in our study have strengthened the program planning of social marketing campaigns. For example, they highlighted the importance of family and individual health, specifically individual and family psychological well-being. Preventive approaches such as health education on healthy lifestyle, stress coping skills and mental health awareness are likely to be welcome and should have positive impact on family health. Besides, most of our leaders perceived that absence of family conflicts is a key feature of a harmonious family. They considered that tolerance of conflicts may not facilitate a positive family relationship unless family members are able to express their needs and concerns and resolve conflicts more constructively. Their perceptions were in line with previous findings of the essential role of family harmony on individual and family well-being [24, 25]. Therefore, early public education on marriage and relationship skills such as conflict management is needed to build a happy and harmonious family.

Besides, community leaders repeatedly mentioned that long working hours are a major barrier to maintaining family 3Hs and highlighted the need for implementing family-friendly policy. Similarly, evidence from the work-family literature also addressed that working late nights or working on a shift schedule was often associated with difficulties in scheduling family activities and spending time with family members [26, 27]. Together with our findings, family-friendly work arrangements should be adopted to facilitate family 3Hs. Family-friendly policies such as the 5-day working week arrangement and paternity leave might benefit Hong Kong people to achieve a better balance between work and family life.

The findings of the present study represent the situation in Hong Kong. However, the rapid growing economy and strong emphasis on competitiveness in mainland China and other developing countries are likely to cause similar problems. Further investigations should include the mass media perspective, so that perceptions on family 3Hs could be comprehensively explored. Despite the limitations, the results of this study have extended previous work to examine the perspectives of the community leaders on family well-being in a Chinese culture [3, 4]. Findings of the present study provide insights and a basis for devising key messages for public education programs to achieve family 3Hs. Furthermore, the interviews have established relationships between the project investigators and the community partners and can serve
as a mechanism to solicit support and engagement from the community leaders and major stakeholders, which plant seeds for future collaboration and partnership.

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Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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