

**CHINESE ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR PARENTS' VIEWS
ON A HAPPY FAMILY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPY**

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ABSTRACT

Chinese parents ($N = 416$) and their adolescent children ($N = 412$) gave their views on the attributes of a happy family via individual interviews. Based on content analyses of their narratives, three categories of attributes emerged from the data, including those related to (a) the family as a whole, (b) the parent-child subsystem, and (c) the husband-wife subsystem. Results showed that Chinese parents and their children regarded the absence of conflict and harmony as important attributes of a happy family and they were less likely to mention emotional expressiveness and communication as positive attributes. Our findings suggest that Chinese people's views on a happy family are closely related to traditional values in the Chinese culture. Some gender and parent-adolescent differences in the participants' views on the attributes of a happy family are discussed.

The purpose of this paper is to report research findings on the views of Chinese parents and their adolescent children on the attributes of a happy family. Two questions are addressed: (a) what are the views of Chinese adolescents and their parents on a happy family? and (b) are there any gender and parent-adolescent differences in the opinions expressed?

A survey of the literature shows that different terms have been used to define "optimal," "healthy," or "normal" families (Walsh, 1993). For example, while Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, and Keitner (1993) conceptualized a normal family in terms of family health, Quatman (1997) defined an optimal family in terms of efficient family functioning. Because terms like "healthy" and "well-functioned" are somewhat technical ("healthy" is basically derived from medicine whereas the term "functioning" is derived from biology and engineering) and lay people may not usually use such terms to describe families, such terms are not easily understood by lay people; thus, the term "happy family" has

The preparation of this paper was financially supported by the Research Grants Council of the UGC (Grant CUHK155/94H and Grant CUHK4012/97H), The Chinese University of Hong Kong, and Madam Tan Jen Chiu Fund.

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you di gong" (the father is affectionate and the son is dutiful, the elder brother is friendly, and the younger brother shows respect). According to Ho (1986), children in the traditional Chinese culture were socialized to perform proper roles and to treat collective interest as more important than individual interest.

Third, because the expression of individual emotions and views would easily create interpersonal tension and conflict, expression of self and emotion was de-emphasized in the traditional Chinese culture. As a result, children were not trained or encouraged to openly express their emotions, particularly those that are negative. Children were also discouraged to argue with their parents. As Wright (1964) pointed out, family members must be "forebearing and restrained in order to avoid disturbing the peace of the group" (p. 33). Shon and Ja (1982) also pointed out that "because harmonious interpersonal relationships are so highly valued, direct confrontation is avoided whenever possible (p. 216)" In fact, the use of forbearance ("bai ban ren nai"—to use all forbearance) and self-suppression in dealing with family issues were emphasized in the traditional Chinese culture (Yang, 1981). Besides the Confucian thoughts, Buddhist and Taoist teachings, which emphasized self-suppression and balanced emotional life, also reinforced the importance of emotional inhibition in the traditional Chinese culture (e.g., Leifer, 1999).

Fourth, to avoid open conflict and to promote interpersonal harmony, "direct confrontation is avoided whenever possible... directness, which may lead to disagreement, confrontation, and loss of face for both people is often avoided. There is a reliance on sensitivity of the other people to pick up the point of conversation" (Shon & Ja, 1982, p. 216). A good example of this characteristic can be seen in the Analects that "a man may gently remonstrate with his parents. But if he sees that he has failed to change their opinion, he should maintain an attitude of deference and not oppose them" (Analects, Book 6, Chapter 8).

Finally, as pointed out by Meredith and Abbott (1995), there was strong emphasis in the traditional Chinese culture that family members in different generations should live together (i.e., patrilocal emphasis). In addition, there was strong emphasis on family solidarity (Topley, 1969), such as bringing honor to the family and not to disgrace its good name, and continuation of the family name (Cheng, 1944).

Based on the above discussion, it is possible to conjecture that traditional Chinese people would regard absence of conflict, presence of interpersonal harmony, emotional suppression, enactment of proper

role behavior by family members, and family cohesion as the characteristics of an "ideal" family. In addition, it can be conjectured that direct and open communication was de-emphasized.

However, with gradual modernization and industrialization in different Chinese societies (such as Hong Kong and mainland China), it is reasonable to expect that the views of Chinese people on the attributes of an optimal family are influenced by traditional Chinese values as well as modern Western ideas. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the views of Chinese parents and their adolescent children on the characteristics of a "well-functioned," "optimal," or "happy" family.

Another related question that can be raised is whether Chinese people's views of optimal family characteristics are related to their background characteristics, such as age, educational attainment, gender, and status in the family. With specific reference to gender differences, because women are socialized to be more relationship-oriented than are men (Thompson & Walker, 1989) and tend to place higher expectations for intimacy and emotional support in their marital relationship than do men (Bernard, 1976, Williams, 1988), it would be interesting to ask whether such differences would be reflected in their views on the attributes of a happy family.

Finally, the emerging literature indicates differences between parents and adolescents in their views on different family processes, such as parent-adolescent conflict (Smith & Forehand, 1996), parenting styles (Paulson & Sputa, 1996), and family functioning (Kirwil, 1993; Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1995). With specific focus on family functioning, studies using self-report family assessment devices have generally revealed that adolescents tend to have a more negative perception of the family than do their parents (Feldman, Wentzel, & Gehring, 1989; Noller & Callan, 1986, 1988; Noller, Seth-Smith, Bouma, & Schweitzer, 1992; Ohannessian et al., 1995). Therefore, it would be interesting to ask whether there are parent-adolescent differences in their views on the attributes of a happy family. Studies in this area are important because the related findings would enable family therapists and researchers to understand the different expectations of Chinese parents and their adolescent children.

The data reported in this article are based on a study that was designed to investigate the relations between the family environment and adolescent adjustment in Hong Kong. Because a large amount of data has been generated from this study (e.g., Shek, 1998a & b, 1999), the primary focus of this paper is to examine the views on a happy family among adolescents and their parents in Hong Kong and the related correlates.

Participants

The data for the present analyses were derived from the Wave 1 data of a longitudinal study investigating family factors and adolescent adjustment in Hong Kong. The adolescent participants were selected from secondary schools in Hong Kong by the stratified-cluster sampling method, with academic ability of the students as the stratifying factor. Because primary school students are allocated to secondary schools in different academic bands according to their academic ability in the Secondary School Placement Allocation exercise and to ensure that students with different academic ability participated in the study, academic ability was included as a stratifying factor in the sampling process. After a school agreed to participate in the study, invitation letters were sent to the parents of all Secondary 1 students. Among the consenting families, 429 intact families were randomly selected to participate; 217 adolescent boys and 212 adolescent girls, together with their parents, participated at Time 1. Because 13 parents and 17 adolescents did not give their views or did not participate in the interviews, the data based on 416 parents (176 fathers and 240 mothers) and 412 adolescents (210 boys and 202 girls) who gave their views on the characteristics of a happy family were included in the analyses.

All parents who participated in the study were Chinese. All participating families were intact (i.e., both parents lived with the adolescent participants). The mean age of the fathers was 43.9 and 40.1 for mothers. The mean age of the adolescents was 13. For the fathers, 8.8% had received post-secondary school education, 49.3% had completed or received some secondary school education, 22.1% had completed primary education, and 19.7% had not finished primary school or had not received any formal education. For the mothers, 4.4% had received post-secondary school education, 45.4% had completed or received some secondary school education, 27.8% had completed primary education, and 22.4% had not finished primary school or had not received any formal education. More fathers than mothers were engaged in full-time employment (fathers = 95.2% and mothers = 33.9%). The median family income was HK\$19,230 per month (one U.S. dollar equals roughly 7.8 Hong Kong dollars). This figure compared favorably with the population median household income compiled by the Hong Kong government. These education attainment and family income statistics suggest that families of different socioeconomic background participated in this study.

Procedure

During the visit(s) to a family, the adolescent concerned and the parents were requested to complete some questionnaire measures (see Shek, 1998a, 1998b, & 1999 for details). In addition, the student and one of the parents were interviewed individually by a trained interviewer based on the Adolescent Interview Schedule and Parent Interview Schedule, respectively, and their narratives were tape-recorded. The interviewers were social work students who had taken a course in interviewing skills. They had also received 20 hours of training before conducting the interviews.

The parents and the adolescent were interviewed by the same interviewer separately. The interview was conducted at a quiet place (e.g., balcony of the apartment) and every effort was made to ensure that the informant's narratives would not be heard by other members of the family. The informants were also assured that their narratives would be kept confidential. After the data collection was completed, a small souvenir was given to the family; no monetary incentive was used.

The Adolescent Interview Schedule is standardized and open-ended with a set of questions and probes. It is used to gain an in-depth understanding of an adolescent's perception of the family, his or her relationship with the parents (such as conflict and communication), and his or her views on school life. One question asked the adolescent to list the characteristics of a happy family. Two further questions would be asked if the interviewee had difficulty in understanding the main question, or the adolescent was unable to give his or her views; for example, if the respondent had difficulty in understand the meaning of "happy" ("Kuai le" in Chinese), the respondent was asked to give his or her views on the attributes of a family that is "kai xin" ("happy" in Cantonese).

The Parent Interview Schedule is a standardized open-ended interview schedule with a set of questions and probes. It is used to gain an in-depth understanding of a parent's perception of the family, his or her relationship with their adolescent child (such as conflict and communication), and his or her views on the child's school-related concerns. One question asked the parent to list the characteristics of a happy family. Two further questions would be asked if the interviewee had difficulties in understanding the question, or the parent was unable to give his or her views. The narratives of the informants were recorded and the themes extracted from the data.

Data Analysis

The content of the interview based on the Adolescent Interview Schedule was fully transcribed by the interviewer. To ensure consistency in the analyses of the protocols, one research assistant (a Ph.D. student in Educational Psychology with substantial research experience) was employed to analyze the protocols. From the transcriptions, attributes of a happy family given by adolescents were identified. Our unit of analysis was a meaningful unit instead of a statement. For example, the statement "family members in a happy family care for each other and have good communication" would be broken down into two meaningful units or attributes, namely, "family members care for each other" and "family members have good communication." Further, responses with the same meaning (e.g., "family members assist each other" and "family members help each other") were grouped into the same attribute category¹.

Eighty-seven attribute categories for adolescents were identified from the data (i.e., first-level codes). Since these codes may be grouped into pattern codes, further analyses utilizing pattern coding was carried out². Results showed that the 87 basic attribute categories could be regrouped under three domain categories and 17 subdomain categories.

To enhance the quality of the classification scheme, another psychologist with a master's degree in educational psychology who had not been involved in the scoring process was invited to comment on the proposed classification scheme and to discuss the related issues with the scorer and the researcher³.

To ascertain reliability of the coding, the research assistant recorded 20 randomly selected protocols (without knowing the original codes) at the end of the scoring process. Intrarater agreement calculated from these protocols was 94%. Finally, 20 protocols were coded by the author (without knowing the original codes); it was found that the interrater agreement was 94%.

Identical procedures were carried out to analyze the responses of the parents. First, each attribute was categorized into one of the basic categories, for a total of 93 categories. Second, further analyses were carried out to see whether these could be further regrouped. It was found that they could be regrouped under three domain categories and 17 subdomain categories. Third, another psychologist who had not been involved in the scoring process was invited to comment on the proposed classification scheme and to discuss the related issues with the scorer and the researcher. Finally, intrarater and interrater reliability analyses based on 20 randomly selected protocols were carried out (intrarater agreement = 87% and interrater agreement = 90%).

RESULTS

Adolescents' Views on a Happy Family

A total of 949 attributes were given by 412 adolescent respondents, with each giving an average of 2.3 attributes. Based on several preliminary analyses, the characteristics of a happy family listed by the adolescents were grouped into 87 raw attribute categories. Further analyses suggested that these could be grouped into three domain and 17 subdomain categories.

The first domain category could be labeled Attributes Related to the Whole Family Domain. Generally speaking, these include characteristics intrinsic to the family as a whole and personal characteristics of the family members. This domain includes the following subdomain categories: (1) Love, Concern, and Support, with four raw attribute categories; (2) Understanding and Acceptance, with five; (3) Communication and Sharing, with two; (4) Togetherness with four; (5) Conflict and Harmony, with five; (6) Roles and Responsibilities, with five; (7) Problem Solving, with two; (8) Family Composition, with four; (9) Economic and Material Conditions, with two; (10) Other Whole Family Characteristics, with twelve; and (11) Personal Characteristics of Family Members, with nine raw attribute categories. The attribute categories associated with the various subdomains can be seen in Appendix I.

The second domain is the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain which includes the following subdomains: (1) Love and Concern, with four raw categories; (2) Understanding and Acceptance, with three; (3) Communication and Sharing, with two; (4) Characteristics of Parents, with twelve; and (5) Characteristics of Children, with seven raw attribute categories. These attributes are basically related to the parent-child subsystem which include the interactional and personal qualities of the parents and children.

The third domain is the Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes Domain which includes those pertinent to the husband-wife relationship and the characteristics of husbands and wives. There are a total of five raw attributes categories in this domain. The number of responses and participants associated with these three domains and 17 subdomain categories are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. The raw attribute categories associated with the second and third domains can be seen in Appendix 2.

Several observations can be extracted from the findings based on the adolescent responses. First, in regard to responses in the different domain categories, most adolescent responses could be categorized as attributes related to the whole family (77.8% of the total responses), which were followed by attributes related to the parent-child subsys-

Table 1

Number of responses and participants in the Whole Family Attributes Domain for adolescents and their parents

| | Adolescents | | Parents | |
|--|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | No. of responses (%) (Total = 949) | No. of respondents (%) (N = 412) | No. of responses (%) (Total = 976) | No. of respondents (%) (N = 416) |
| Whole Family Attributes Domain | | | | |
| Love, concern and support | 80 (8.4%) | 67 (16.3%) | 51 (5.2%) | 46 (11.1%) |
| Understanding and acceptance | 85 (9.0%) | 71 (17.2%) | 57 (5.8%) | 49 (11.8%) |
| Communication and sharing | 43 (4.5%) | 41 (10.0%) | 64 (6.6%) | 57 (13.7%) |
| Togetherness | 100 (10.5%) | 93 (22.6%) | 43 (4.4%) | 40 (9.6%) |
| Conflict and harmony | 248 (26.1%) | 204 (49.5%) | 196 (20.1%) | 166 (39.9%) |
| Roles and responsibilities | 18 (1.9%) | 18 (4.4%) | 27 (2.8%) | 26 (6.3%) |
| Problem solving | 15 (1.6%) | 15 (3.6%) | 30 (3.1%) | 30 (7.2%) |
| Family composition | 42 (4.4%) | 34 (8.3%) | 20 (2.0%) | 16 (3.8%) |
| Economic and material conditions | 12 (1.3%) | 11 (2.7%) | 71 (7.3%) | 68 (16.3%) |
| Other whole family characteristics | 64 (6.7%) | 63 (15.3%) | 49 (5.0%) | 49 (11.8%) |
| Personal characteristics of family members | 31 (3.3%) | 28 (6.8%) | 58 (5.9%) | 57 (13.7%) |
| Total | 738 (77.8%) | 376 (91.3%) | 666 (68.2%) | 356 (85.6%) |

Table 2

Number of responses and participants in the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain and Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes Domain for adolescents and their parents

| | Adolescents | | Parents | |
|---|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | No. of responses (%) (Total = 949) | No. of respondents (%) (N = 412) | No. of responses (%) (Total = 976) | No. of respondents (%) (N = 416) |
| Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain | | | | |
| Love and concern | 64 (6.7%) | 58 (14.1%) | 14 (1.4%) | 13 (3.1%) |
| Understanding and acceptance | 28 (3.0%) | 24 (5.8%) | 13 (1.3%) | 13 (3.1%) |
| Communication and sharing | 21 (2.2%) | 20 (4.9%) | 11 (1.1%) | 11 (2.6%) |
| Qualities of parents | 66 (7.0%) | 56 (13.6%) | 12 (1.2%) | 10 (2.4%) |
| Qualities of children | 18 (1.9%) | 15 (3.6%) | 168 (17.2%) | 126 (30.3%) |
| Total | 197 (20.8%) | 130 (31.6%) | 218 (22.3%) | 154 (37.0%) |
| Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes Domain | | | | |
| Total | 14 (1.5%) | 13 (3.2%) | 92 (9.4%) | 79 (19.0%) |

tem (20.8%); and attributes related to the husband-wife subsystem (1.5%). Second, with reference to the subdomain attributes categories, the most frequently mentioned characteristics of a happy family were related to Conflict and Harmony (26.1% of the total responses), which were followed by Togetherness (10.5%), Understanding and Acceptance (9%) and Love, Concern, and Support (8.4%).

Third, regarding gender differences in the attributes of a happy family, analyses using the Mann-Whitney Test showed that while the number of attributes in the Conflict and Harmony Subdomain for adolescent boys was significantly higher than that for adolescent girls ($z = 2.6, p < .01$), the number of responses in the Understanding and Acceptance Subdomain of the Whole Family Attributes Domain ($z = 1.8, p < .10$), Parental Attributes Subdomain ($z = -1.8, p < .10$), and the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain ($z = -2.2, p < .05$) was higher in adolescent girls than in boys. Finally, results showed that the number of attributes of a happy family mentioned by adolescent respondents was unrelated to their age.

Parents' Views on a Happy Family

A total of 976 attributes were given by the 416 parents, with each parent giving an average of 2.35 attributes. Based on several preliminary analyses, the characteristics of a happy family listed by the parents were eventually grouped into 93 categories of raw attributes. Similar to the analyses based on the adolescent responses, further analyses suggest that these raw attribute categories could be grouped into three domains and 17 subdomain categories.

The first domain could be labeled Attributes Related to the Whole Family Domain which includes the following subdomains: (1) Love, Concern and Support, with three raw attribute categories; (2) Understanding and Acceptance, with five; (3) Communication and Sharing, with two; (4) Togetherness, with four; (5) Conflict and Harmony, with four; (6) Roles and Responsibilities, with four; (7) Problem Solving, with two; (8) Family Composition, with four; (9) Economic and Material Conditions, with three; (10) Other Whole Family Characteristics, with eleven; and (11) Personal Characteristics of Family Members, with seven. In general, the attributes in this domain include those characteristics intrinsic to the family as a whole and personal characteristics of the family members.

The second domain is the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes which includes: (1) Love and Concern, with three; (2) Understanding and Acceptance, with three; (3) Communication and Sharing, with two; (4) Characteristics of Parents, with seven; and (5) Characteristics of

Children, with nine. These attributes are basically related to the parent-child subsystem which include the interactional qualities and characteristics of the parents and children.

The third domain is the Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes which includes attributes pertinent to the husband-wife relationship and the characteristics of husbands and wives. There are a total of 20 raw attribute categories in this domain. The number of responses and participants associated with these three domains and 17 subdomain categories are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. The raw attribute categories associated with the domains and subdomains can be seen in Appendices 1 and 2.

Several observations can be extracted from the findings based on the parents' responses. First, with reference to the responses in the three domain categories, most of the responses could be categorized as attributes related to the whole family (68.2% of the total responses), which were followed by attributes in the parent-child subsystem (22.3%), and attributes in the husband-wife subsystem (9.4%). Second, with reference to the subdomain categories, the most frequently mentioned characteristics of a happy family were related to Conflict and Harmony (20.1% of the total responses), which were followed by Qualities of Children (17.2%), and Economic and Material Conditions (7.3%).

Third, regarding gender differences in views on the attributes of a happy family, analyses using the Mann-Whitney Test showed that while the number of attributes in the Economic and Material Conditions Subdomain given by fathers was significantly higher than that of mothers ($z = 3.2, p < .01$), the number of attributes in the Personal Characteristics Subdomain ($z = -2.0, p < .05$), Love and Concern Subdomain and Understanding and Acceptance Subdomain of the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain ($z = -2.0, p < .05$ and $z = -2.0, p < .05$, respectively), and the Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes Domain ($z = -2.5, p < .05$) were higher for mothers than for fathers.

Fourth, while the number of responses in the Communication and Sharing Subdomain was related to fathers' age ($r = -.23, p < .01$), mothers' age was related to the Problem Solving Subdomain ($r = .17, p < .05$), and Children Attributes Subdomain of the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain ($r = .13, p < .05$), and the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain ($r = .17, p < .05$). Concerning parental education, while only the number of responses in the Whole Family Attributes Domain was related to the educational level of the fathers ($r = .18, p < .05$), maternal educational attainment was positively related to the number of responses in the Whole Family Attributes

Domain ($r = .26, p < .0001$) and some of its subdomains, including Love, Concern, and Support Subdomain ($r = .20, p < .01$), Understanding and Acceptance Subdomain ($r = .21, p < .01$), Communication and Sharing Subdomain ($r = .18, p < .01$), and Togetherness Subdomain ($r = .18, p < .01$).

Parent-Child Differences in the Views on a Happy Family

The findings on the differences between parents and their adolescent children on their views on the attributes of a happy family are presented in Table 3 and Table 4. Because the findings based on parametric and nonparametric analyses (Wilcoxon Test) were highly similar, only findings based on the parametric tests are presented. Several multivariate analyses of variance with the use of the Wilks' criterion were carried out to examine parent-child differences using the different subdomains as the dependent variables. With all 17 areas as the dependent variables, significant parent-child difference on the combined DVs was found ($F(17/388) = 32.05, p < .0001$). Similar significant parent-adolescent differences were found when the 11 subdomains of the Whole Family Attributes Domain and the five subdomains of the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain were used as the bases of analyses ($F(11/389) = 40.75, p < .0001$ and $F(5/394) = 13.99, p < .0001$, respectively).

Further univariate F tests were carried out to examine parent-adolescent differences (see Table 3 and Table 4). Several aspects of the findings deserve attention. First, as far as the mean number of responses in the different domains, while adolescent children on average mentioned more whole family attributes, parents mentioned more attributes in the husband-wife subsystem. Second, in the Whole Family Attributes Domain, while parents mentioned more attributes in the Problem Solving, Economic and Material Conditions, Personal Characteristics of Family Members, and Roles and Responsibilities subdomains than did adolescents, the mean number of responses in the Love, Concern, and Support, Understanding and Acceptance, Togetherness, Conflict, and Harmony, and Family Composition subdomains were higher for adolescents than for parents. Finally, in the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain, while parents mentioned more child characteristics than adolescent children (Qualities of Children), the mean number of responses in other subdomains were relatively higher for adolescents than for their parents.

Table 3
Parent-adolescent differences in their views on the Whole Family Attributes

| Domains and subdomains | Mean number of responses in adolescents | Mean number of responses in parents | F value |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Whole Family Attributes | | | |
| Love, concern and support | 0.19 | 0.12 | 5.08* |
| Understanding and acceptance | 0.21 | 0.14 | 4.51* |
| Communication and sharing | 0.10 | 0.15 | 3.46a |
| Togetherness | 0.25 | 0.11 | 23.67** |
| Conflict and harmony | 0.60 | 0.47 | 9.22** |
| Roles and responsibilities | 0.04 | 0.07 | 2.97a |
| Problem solving | 0.04 | 0.07 | 4.95* |
| Family composition | 0.11 | 0.05 | 5.83* |
| Economic and material conditions | 0.03 | 0.18 | 45.51*** |
| Other whole family attributes | 0.16 | 0.12 | 2.86a |
| Personal characteristics of family members | 0.07 | 0.14 | 11.20** |
| Total | 1.79 | 1.61 | 6.01* |

*** $p < .001$
 ** $p < .01$
 * $p < .05$
 a $p < .10$
 ns non-significant

There are several limitations of this study. First, because only families in Hong Kong were recruited, generalizability to other Chinese contexts remains to be demonstrated. This point is important because Hong Kong has both Chinese and Western influences. Second, because responses of the parents and adolescents were confined to the attributes of a happy family, it is not clear whether similar findings would be found if the participants were asked to list attributes of "healthy" or "well-functioned" families. In fact, equating a happy family with an optimal family may be questionable. Finally, because either the father or mother was interviewed, the degree of convergence of the views of father or mother was interviewed, the degree of convergence of the views of fathers and mothers cannot be adequately assessed. Methodologically, it would be exciting to include both parents in a single family in future studies.

Despite these limitations, several aspects of the findings deserve attention. Before we look at these, the question that should be asked in why the number of attributes narrated by the parents and their adolescent children was not high—adolescents on average mentioned 2.31 attributes and parents mentioned 2.35. While the low number of responses may be due to the obtrusive nature of the data collection method (i.e., face-to-face interview), this possibility is remote because the interviewers were properly trained, the informants were allowed to freely narrate, and every effort was made to encourage them to give their views. Another possible explanation is that Chinese people may lack sufficient language facility to describe their families (including attributes of a happy family). In an attempt to examine the factor structure of the Chinese version of the Self-Report Family Inventory (SFI), Shek (1998b) found that the original dimensions of the SFI could not be replicated with Chinese parents and adolescents, and he conjectured that Chinese people may be relatively undifferentiated in their views on the qualities of family life. This interpretation may be relevant to the present context in explaining why the number of attributes mentioned by the informants was not high.

Actually, the relatively small number of responses in descriptions of the family is not observed in this study alone. In an attempt to examine the views on an "ideal father" and "ideal mother," Hu (1988) similarly found that the informants on average narrated two to three attributes for both.

In the present study, the 949 responses of the adolescents were placed in 87 categories of attributes, and these were further grouped

Table 4

Parent-adolescent differences in their views on the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes and Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes

| Domains and subdomains | Mean number of responses in adolescents | Mean number of responses in parents | F value |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes | | | |
| Love and concern | 0.16 | 0.04 | 28.86*** |
| Understanding and acceptance | 0.07 | 0.03 | 4.63* |
| Communication and sharing | 0.05 | 0.03 | 3.93* |
| Qualities of parents | 0.17 | 0.03 | 29.40*** |
| Qualities of Children | 0.04 | 0.40 | 102.84*** |
| Total | 0.49 | 0.52 | 0.34ns |
| Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes | | | |
| Total | 0.03 | 0.22 | 55.56*** |
| Total Number of Responses | 2.31 | 2.35 | -0.54ns |

*** $p < .001$
 ** $p < .01$
 * $p < .05$
 a $p < .10$
 ns non-significant

into three domain and 17 subdomain categories. This observation basically suggests that the attributes of a happy family perceived by Chinese adolescents center around the whole family, the parent-child relationship, and the father-mother relationship. Similar findings were obtained for the responses of the parents, where the 976 responses were grouped into 93 raw attribute categories, which were further regrouped into three domain and 17 subdomain categories.

The observation that the responses of adolescents and their parents could be categorized into three domains is consistent with the findings of Quatman (1997). When parents were asked to list characteristics that make the family "good, special, well-functioning" in the eyes of the respondents, Quatman (1997) found that the parents' responses could be categorized by different family subsystems, including the whole family, spouse-spouse, parent-child, father-child, and mother-child subsystems. However, one obvious limitation of Quatman's (1997) study is that the participants were asked to list attributes in different family subsystems supplied by the researcher (i.e., the family systems were not induced from the data). In the present study, the findings show that the responses of adolescents and their parents could be grouped in terms of different family subsystems where the attributes were induced from the data.

Regarding the relative frequency of responses in the three domains, the findings based on adolescents and their parents consistently show that most responses were in the Whole Family Attributes Domain, which were followed by responses in the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain and the Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes Domain. This observation is also consistent with the findings reported by Quatman (1997).

With reference to the views of adolescents and their parents on the attributes of a happy family, a number of observations are in order. First, while the present findings on conflict and harmony are consistent with the Chinese cultural beliefs, they are not consistent with empirical research findings. On the one hand, the present findings are consistent with the Chinese cultural emphases on the avoidance of interpersonal conflict and cultivation of interpersonal harmony, as revealed in the Chinese cultural sayings of "jia he wan shi xing" (if a family lives in harmony, everything will prosper) and "jia shau kou bu ting" (a family will wither if there are many quarrels). On the other hand, this aspect of the results is not consistent with the findings reported in previous literature (e.g., Ponzetti & Long, 1989; Quatman 1997) where avoidance of conflict and cultivation of interpersonal harmony have not been found to be salient attributes of well-functioned

families in the West. For example, in the study by Fisher, Gilbin, and Hoopes (1982), none of the attributes of healthy families were specifically on avoidance of conflict and cultivation of harmony.

The second observation relates to communication and sharing. In contrast to previous findings that communication was regarded as an important attribute of a high-functioning family (Ponzetti & Long, 1989; Quatman, 1997), communication and sharing, particularly in the affective domain, were not strongly emphasized by Chinese adolescents and their parents in the present study. This finding may be due to the cultural emphasis on emotional inhibition and discouragement of expression in the Chinese culture. This conjecture is consistent with the limited research findings on how Chinese people deal with their emotions. For example, in his qualitative study of emotions in a rural area of China, Potter (1988) concluded that emotions were regarded as less socially relevant than in Westerners.

The third reflection is on the meaning of "togetherness" in a family. Consistent with the findings of Quatman (1997), the present study suggests that "togetherness" (e.g., time spent together) may be an important attribute of a happy family. Chinese people place much emphasis on the importance of family togetherness. For example, it is a common expectation in Chinese culture that family reunions take place at the major festivals (such as the mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Chinese Lunar New Year, and Winter Solstice). It is also a common practice for married children to regularly visit their parents on weekends. In general, Chinese people regard the absence of family reunion activities as a sign of a family problem.

The fourth observation is on the finding that emphasis on the patrilineal attribute (i.e., family members of different generations live together) was not strong in the present study: only 4.4% of the adolescents' responses and 2% of parents' responses were related to family composition. In addition, it is interesting to note that some respondents even perceived that having no children was an attribute of a happy family. This observation is consistent with the findings of Shek (1996) that in contrast to the strong emphasis on the economic/security and posterity values of children in the traditional Chinese culture, contemporary Chinese parents in Hong Kong did not appear to emphasize such values. Perhaps because of the high cost of living and the stresses associated with parenting in Hong Kong, having too many family members is regarded as an undesirable attribute by adolescents and their parents.

In short, the present findings suggest that the views of parents and their adolescent children on the attributes of a happy family are closely related to the traditional Chinese family values. This impression is consistent with those of other researchers. Based on interviews on parent-child relationships, Hu (1988) concluded that the contemporary Chinese family "has retained many of the values associated with pre-revolutionary traditional China" (p. 132). Based on his examination of a wide range of empirical evidence on the parenting characteristics in contemporary Chinese societies, Ho (1987) also concluded that "when pieced together, they point to a picture which is strikingly continuous with that of the distant past" (p. 232).

Obviously, one could argue that the attributes highlighted in this study (e.g., emphasis on harmony, avoidance of conflict, and emotional inhibition) may not be unique to Chinese people, and such attributes may also be emphasized by those in other cultures as well. Because the present study is not cross-cultural, the degree of similarities or differences between Chinese and non-Chinese people on these attributes cannot be adequately assessed. However, it can be counter-argued that whether the emphasis on the importance of harmony or de-emphasis on emotional expression is universally the same is a question that should be answered through research findings. If we compare the present findings with that in the limited research (e.g., Fisher, Giblin, & Hoopes, 1982; Quatman, 1997), there is some indication that the degree of emphasis on conflict, harmony, and emotional expressiveness is different in Chinese and non-Chinese participants.

With reference to gender differences in the views on a happy family, the present findings suggest that men tend to place greater emphasis on the surface attributes of the family environment (conflict as well as economic conditions) whereas women tend to emphasize the deeper qualities (such as understanding and acceptance). In addition, compared with fathers, mothers also listed more attributes related to the parent-child and the husband-wife subsystems as attributes of a happy family.

Three observations can be highlighted from these findings. First, they appear to be consistent with the claim that women are more relationship-oriented with the claim that women are more relationship-oriented than men (e.g., Williams, 1988). Second, the gender differences observed may probably reflect differences that are reinforced by the larger society (e.g., men should be the bread-winners of the family). Third, in view of the existence of rigid gender-role expectations in Chinese culture (Ho, 1987), the differences observed appear to be much milder than expected. Perhaps future studies should examine this issue further.

With regard to parent-adolescent differences in the views on a happy family, several interesting observations can be highlighted. First, while adolescent children placed greater emphasis on the emotional bondedness attributes (such as love and concern, understanding and acceptance, conflict and harmony, and togetherness), parents emphasized the importance of problem solving. This finding is consistent with my observation that in general, adolescents in Hong Kong are directed by their feelings rather than reason and would do things that have "good feel."

My second observation concerns the finding that parents listed more attributes on the economic conditions of the family than did adolescents. While Walsh (1993) proposed that "adequate resources for basic economic security" (p. 59) is one of the important family processes for healthy family functioning, this quality has seldom been incorporated in the existing models on healthy family functioning. Another related observation is that there are at least two possible interpretations of this finding. The first is that children may be relatively unaware of the importance of financial resources to a happy family. Because Chinese parents tend to be overprotective (Hu, 1988), and financial resources are normally regarded as the business of adults, children would not be taught to pay special attention to the financial resources of the family. The second possible interpretation is that parents may overemphasize the importance of financial resources in a happy family. This overemphasis may be explained by the fluctuating economic situation in Hong Kong in recent years. If this interpretation is correct, it would be interesting to determine how parents and adolescents see the role of economic resources in a happy family at different stages of the economic cycle. Because few studies have examined how members of families who live under different economic conditions view healthy families, this would be a worthwhile subject of future research.

My third observation is related to the finding that adolescent children placed relatively less emphasis than did their parents on the role of husband-wife subsystem attributes in a happy family. Again, there can be at least two possible interpretations. The first is that children may be relatively unaware of the importance of a marital relationship to the quality of family life. Because Chinese children are taught not to interfere in the business of adults, and marital life is regarded as the business of adults, such characteristic may contribute to the observed finding. The second interpretation is that as compared to children, parents may overemphasize the importance of marital quality in a happy family.

My final observation on parent-adolescent differences is on the finding that while adolescents listed more parental qualities as attributes of a happy family than did their parents, parents listed more child characteristics. This finding suggests that adolescents and parents placed less emphasis on their own role, and more emphasis on the role of the other party in maintaining family happiness. One interesting question we should ask is how such views and expectations might shape the actual interactions between parents and their adolescent children and their evaluation of the family.

While the number of attributes of a happy family was related to paternal and maternal age, the observed relationships were not strong. This finding is interesting because it would be expected that "older" and "younger" generations might define a happy family in different ways. Concerning the effect of educational attainment, results showed that parents with higher attainment tended to list more attributes of a happy family, an effect that was more pronounced for mothers than fathers. This finding suggests that parents with higher educational attainment would have higher expectations for a happy family and/or they would conceive of a happy family in a more differentiated manner (i.e., they would use more criteria to evaluate a happy family). The present finding also implies that views on the attributes of a happy family in persons with varying levels of educational attainment might differ and the related variations should be taken into account.

There are several implications of the present findings for the practice of family therapy in the Chinese culture. Based on the observation that the attributes of a happy family as perceived by Chinese parents and their adolescent children are closely related to traditional values in the Chinese culture (except that there are also some signs of change in patrilocal emphasis), family therapists should pay attention to the following: First, they should be sensitive to issues of conflict and harmony and these can be used as entry points and therapeutic goals. Second, with reference to those models of family functioning in which communication is strongly emphasized (e.g., Beavers & Hampson, 1990; Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1989), it is important to understand that emotional openness and expressiveness may not be regarded as important by clients who hold traditional values; thus, therapists should be aware of their personal assumptions about communication and sharing. This point is consistent with the view of Shon and Ja (1982) that although "verbal openness and expressiveness is certainly one of the desirable attributes of the so-called 'good therapy candidate'" (p. 216) in Western societies, direct communication and emotional expressiveness may work differently in Asian families.

Third, the present study suggests that time spent together by family members may be important for understanding family health. According to Quatman (1997), although it is relatively easy to measure the amount of time family members spend together, this has not been given much weight in family assessment. Taken together, Quatman's (1997) finding and the present finding suggest that family therapists should further explore the clinical utility of employing togetherness as an indicator of optimal family functioning.

Fourth, the present findings suggest that family therapists should be sensitive to parent-adolescent differences in their perceptions of a happy family. In fact, in conjunction with the research findings which indicate that parents and their adolescent children have different views on family functioning (e.g., Noller & Callan, 1986; Shek, 1999), the present study suggests that parent-adolescent differences are not based on views of family functioning alone, but on views of the attributes of a happy family. That is, adolescents and their parents may use different standards and criteria to evaluate their family. Such differences suggest that the entry points and focus of intervention may be different for adolescents and for their parents.

In an attempt to examine similarities and differences between the views of nonclinical family members and family therapists on the nature of healthy families, Fisher, Gilbin, and Hoopes (1982) suggested that family therapists should ask the following questions: "Are therapists giving families what they want? Are the goals of both groups (presumably healthy family functioning) compatible? Whose definition of health should be pursued in therapy?" (p. 284).

The last implication of the present findings for family therapists is in the possibility of developing family assessment tools based on the "lay" view of a happy family. It can be argued that the raw category attributes collected from the data make it possible to construct objective instruments for assessing the quality of family life in Hong Kong. For example, we may construct a scale which assesses the quality of family life by selecting the frequently noted attributes. We can then examine the psychometric properties of the scale. Another possibility is to generate items for an indigenous measure of family quality by integrating these findings with prior research findings.

Actually, we have used the findings of this study to develop an appropriate tool—the Chinese Family Assessment Instrument—to assess adolescents' perceptions of their family life in Hong Kong. With reference to the responses of the adolescent participants in this study, 33 items were developed (e.g., items on conflict and harmony, togetherness, mutuality, and quality of the parent-child subsystem). Based

on the data collected in three studies ($N = 361$ in Study 1; $N = 732$ in Study 2; $N = 3,649$ in Study 3). Shek (2000) concluded that the Chinese Family Assessment Instrument has excellent psychometric properties. I believe this is a good example of how we can use qualitative data to form the basis for further development of quantitative family assessment tools.

The present study makes several contributions. First, in light of the paucity of research in this area, this study yields data on the views of Chinese parents and their children on the attributes of a happy family. With reference to Walsh's (1987) comment that "clinicians need to become more knowledgeable about the emerging body of research literature on average and optimal family functioning" (p. 498), the present study does make a significant contribution to the literature on optimal family functioning. Second, because there are few studies on lay views of a happy family, the findings can be a valuable complement to the expert view. Finally, because the attributes of a happy family were "induced" from the data rather than supplied by the researchers, the present findings would give family researchers a deeper understanding of the subjective views of the participants in a community sample. Such qualitative data are important because findings based on the language of the participants are rarely found in the literature on healthy families.

NOTES

¹According to Miles and Huberman (1994), analyses of qualitative data typically involve the development of a coding system. In order for the coding system to really "emerge" from the data, preliminary analyses (i.e., initial analyses of a certain proportion of the available cases) may help to develop a tentative coding system that will be modified throughout the data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the present study, the final coding system for the responses of adolescents was developed after much consideration of the raw data and several preliminary analyses. In the preliminary analyses, each attribute given by a respondent was first placed in a tentative category induced from the data (i.e., which was seen to "emerge" from the data) and the available tentative categories were then continuously refined in the process of data analysis.

One simple example is that the attributes "family members love each other" and "parents love children" were originally under the same category called "Love and Concern." When more related responses were accumulated, it appeared that there was a need to differentiate love and concern at the whole family level (i.e., systemic level) and the parent-child subsystem level (i.e., dyadic level). Eventually, the attribute "family members love each other" was categorized in the Concern and Support Subdomain under the Whole Family Attributes Domain, whereas the attribute "parents love children" was included under the Love and Concern Subdomain of the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain.

²According to Miles and Huberman (1994), pattern coding is "a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs . . . it's an analogue to the cluster-analytic and factor-analytic devices used in statistical analysis" (p. 69).

³According to Rizzo, Corsaro, and Bates (1992), this process of "peer checking" is a valuable methodological tool in qualitative research which can enhance the validity of the interpretations derived from the narratives.

APPENDIX 1

Raw attribute categories related to the Whole Family Attributes Domain

Whole Family Attributes Domain

Love, Concern and Support Subdomain: Mutual care; mutual support; mutual love; family members treat each other well (C).

Understanding and Acceptance Subdomain: Mutual understanding; mutual consideration; family members accept each other; mutual trust; mutual respect.

Communication and Sharing Subdomain: Good communication; mutual sharing.

Togetherness Subdomain: Play together; having time to get together; parents spend time at home; close relationship.

Conflict and Harmony Subdomain: Not much quarreling; living in harmony; mutual forbearance; family members get along well; no fighting among family members (C).

Roles and Responsibilities Subdomain: Division of labor; family members fulfill their family responsibilities; elder siblings serve as good models (C); younger siblings respect elder siblings (C); good relationship with relatives (C); parents serve as models (P); one parent stays at home to take care of the family (P).

Problem-Solving Subdomain: Discuss and solve problems together; older members help younger members solve problems.

Family Composition Subdomain: Intact families; old and young family members; children but not too many.

Economic and Material Conditions Subdomain: Secure economic conditions; comfortable living environment; parents have secure occupation (P).

Other Attributes Related to Whole Family Subdomain: Joyful (Kai Xin); warm; family members interact as friends; no generational gap; no family problems; family members with similar interests; "affectionate father and dutiful sons"; family members not blaming each other (C); not picking on somebody (C); "re nao" (with people and excitement around the family) (C); no family stress (C); one's secrets not disclosed (C); normal family routines (P); allows space for individual member (P); not many outsiders staying at home (P); having many family friends (P).

Personal Characteristics of Family Members Subdomain: Healthy; frank; not losing temper easily; polite; not selfish; kind (C); reasonable (C); keep one's promise (C); forgiving (C); not calculating (P); family members do not have bad habits (P).

Note: Raw attribute categories without parentheses are applicable to both parents and their adolescent children. (C): Raw attribute category for children only. (P): Raw attribute category for parents only.

APPENDIX 2

Raw attribute categories related to the Parent-Child Subsystem Attributes Domain and the Husband-Wife Subsystem Attributes Domain

Parent-child Subsystem Attributes Domain

Love and Concern Subdomain: Parents have concern and care for their children; parents treasure their children; having good parents (C); children care for their parents (C); kind parents (P).

Understanding and Acceptance Subdomain: Parents understand their children; mutual consideration between parents and children; parents accept their children.

Communication and Sharing Subdomain: Good parent-child communication; children share with their parents.

Parental Qualities Subdomain: Parents do not beat their children; do not force their children; are not too restrictive; are not fear inducing; do not lose their temper easily; are receptive to new things; respect their children's views; are not overpermissive (C); are fair (C); reason with their children (C); do not nag (C); give pocket money or gifts to children (C).

Qualities of Children Subdomain: children are filial; obey their parents; respect their parents; do not argue with their parents; have good study habits; good academic performance (P); no bad habits (P); "Guai" (not naughty) (P); do not make their parents worry (P); can meet parents' expectations (C); behavior is not extreme (C).

Husband-wife Subsystem Attributes Domain

Not much conflict; good spousal relationship; get along well; love each other; do not gamble; spouse loves and cares for family (P); have similar views and standards (P); solve problems together (P); uphold the importance of family (P); are responsible (P); mutual trust (P); mutual tolerance (P); mutual respect (P); do not quarrel in front of children (P); confide in each other (P); frank to each other (P); husband loyal to marriage (P); have a good husband (P); spouses heed one another's advice (P); husband is considerate (P).

Note: Raw attribute categories without parentheses are applicable to both parents and their adolescent children. (C): Raw attribute category for children only. (P): Raw attribute category for parents only.

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