

“Family factor is important both for the success and failure of young people in their lives: reflections from two qualitative researches on youth delinquency in Hong Kong

成也家庭、敗也家庭：香港青少年偏差行為質性研究

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Abstract

Although it is generally believed that multiple factors combine to contribute to and shape the behaviour of adolescents over the course of their development, as the primary unit of socialization, family plays an important role for the personality and character development of each individual member. Echoing with many studies in the West and in Hong Kong, it was found in the findings of two qualitative researches on youth delinquency in Hong Kong that family factor is crucial not only contributing to young people’s tendency of having delinquent behaviour but also buffering them from the adverse effects in the living environment. No matter their problem behaviour was developed under complicated family backgrounds where were lack of proper parental care and attention or it was used as body politics resisting from harsh parental control, young people longed for love, care and concerns from their parents. In their words, parental care, understanding and support were the only things which could restrain them from engaging in risky and dangerous activities. Since family factor is important both for the success and failure of young people in their lives, youth centered family based intervention is recommended in working with young people with delinquency.

Introduction

As the primary unit of socialization, family plays an important role for the personality and character development of each individual member. Though current understanding on youth delinquency indicates that no single factor can predict who is or who is not likely to engage in delinquent behaviour, many researches in the West (Cheng, 2004; Mmari et al., 2010; Padilla-Walker et al., 2011; Wiesner & Silbereisen, 2003) and in Hong Kong (Cheung, 1997; Lau & Chan, 1997; Shek, 1997) also found that family factor can be a source of risk contributing to young people’s tendency of having delinquent behaviour as well as protection buffering young people from the adverse influences in the environment. Mmari et al. (2010) found that family disintegration

which may result in a lack of parental presence and a lack of discipline in the lives of young people is one of the main sources of risk facilitating them engage in violence and delinquency, while having a strong parental support and close relationship with parents are strong protections guarding young people against harmful and destructive behaviour. In Hong Kong, Lau & Chan (1997) also found that family relationship is a crucial factor in the growth and development of young people. High parental support and monitoring and low coercive control were the most important in preventing young people from engaging in delinquent acts and facilitating the positive development of adolescent self-concept.

A Discourse Analysis Study on the Construct of “Youth-at-Disadvantage”

Similar to the findings of the previous researches, two qualitative researches on youth delinquency in Hong Kong also found that family factor is crucial both for the success and failure in the lives of young people. The first research was a discourse analysis study conducted in the year of 2006 in the context of outreaching social work service in Hong Kong. 15 pairs of the ‘youth-at-disadvantage’, who were officially registered as active cases of the District Youth Outreaching Social Work Teams (YOT teams) in Hong Kong because of their problem behaviour or minor offences committed, and outreach youth workers coming from 10 out of the 16 YOT teams in Hong Kong were interviewed individually in the face-to-face manner. Instead of taking the problematic representation of young people as objective facts reflecting their situations in reality, this study was purposively designed to make use of Foucault’s discourse analytic approach both as a framework of conceptualization and a method of data analysis to unmask the constitutive nature of the construct of ‘youth-at-disadvantage’ and the power relations at works in the process of its constitutions. It was hoped that the interrogation and excavation of the study could cast light to re-articulate alternative understandings and practices in working with ‘youth-at-disadvantage’ in the context of outreaching social work service in Hong Kong.

Gender Differences in Talking about Their Problem Behaviour

Out of the 15 youth interviewees aged between 14 and 23, 8 of them were male and 7 of them were female. Though the sex of the youth interviewees was unintended in the research design, significant gender differences were revealed in the discourses of the males and the females to talk about and describe their problem behaviour. In recalling the reasons that initiated their first attempt of various kinds of risky activity, majority of the female youth interviewees constructed it to be peer influence, while their male

counterparts attributed it to their poor performance and low interest in study. Except for one exceptional case, the female youth interviewees revealed that they began to play and stay out overnight early at the junior secondary school when they knew a friend or a group of friends who had similar behaviour. When they began to play and associate with friends frequently, not only their school performances but also their relationship with parents was influenced. In their retrospection, one of the key reasons facilitating them to play and gather with friends was the harsh control coming from their families.

Female Youth Interviewees

Nearly all the female youth interviewees complained the harshness and nervousness of their parents in controlling their leisure time activities and behaviour. They recalled that their parents, particularly their mothers, loved them very much. Moreover, they also longed for their parents' love, care and concern. However, what made them angry were their parents' rather punitive and authoritative forms of control over their lives. They revealed that it was a vicious circle. Because of their parents' nervousness over their leisure time activities, their conflicts with parents became more apparent when they began to play and stay out overnight. In order to show their anger to the harsh parental control and avoid from further conflicts, they stayed out more frequently. In that situations, their parents would be more nervous and tried to stop their behaviour with various means, such as scolded them heavily, locked them at home, prohibited them to go out at night, nagged them day and night or called their friends one by one when they were not at home. In the discourses of the female youth interviewees, all these methods only triggered greater conflicts and quarrels between them and their parents. Eventually, when they could neither gain satisfaction in school nor support from their parents, their only way out was to seek support and comfort from their peers. Therefore, harsh parental control only pushed them to stay out overnight and associate with friends more frequently.

Male Youth Interviewees

Unlike their female counterparts, the male youth interviewees revealed that the key reason initiating their involvement in various kinds of risky activity and aggregation with friends was their poor performance and low motivation in study. Nearly all of them revealed that they were not interested in school. However, since they were boys, their parents expected them to attain higher level of education and achieve higher economic and social status in society. In their discourses, their parents' harsh demand

and high expectation were in vain when they were not interested and inadequate to catch up with the syllabus in school. Though the general public and their parents also blamed their laziness and playfulness in jobs, they argued that they also longed for stable jobs with prospect and long term commitment after dropping out from school. However, because of their young age, low education and lack of vocational training and experience, they could hardly find a job or were required to accept very mean terms of employment. Therefore, they would change or quit their jobs frequently. When dropping out from schools without jobs, they would likely go out and gather with friends. Their conflicts with parents were further deepened when they went out to play and had to rely heavily on their parents for their daily living. In the discourses of the male youth interviewees, playing and gathering with friends overnight did not mean that they could really have fun in the process. The only purpose was to escape from heavy conflicts with their parents.

Family Factor Leading to The Continuation of Their Problem Behaviour

In this study, many male and female youth interviewees came from quite complicated family backgrounds, such as, divorced family, re-marriage family living with step mother and step siblings, cohabitated family living with father and his girlfriends, intact family with extra-marital affairs, etc. In their discourses, family influence was not the initiating factor leading them begin to play and associate with peers in various kinds of risky activity. However, when their situations were not understood and the parent-adolescent relationship was further broken, it turned out to be the key reason contributing to the continuation of their problem behaviour. Many youth interviewees revealed that because of their young age, their parents always considered their ways of thinking and doing as immature and unworkable. Seldom could they have space to share calmly with their parents on what they want and what they need in lives. Unless they were willing to police themselves or follow their parents' ways of thinking and doing, the only way that they could take control of their own ways of life was to show resistance with their bodies. Thus, among the female interviewees, problem behaviour was a tool to rebel against the harsh parental control on their leisure time activities, while, for the males, it was an escape to avoid heavy conflicts with their parents on their school-to-work situations.

Although problem behaviour finally became the tools that they used to resist from their parents' harsh control or heavy conflict on their future development, they longed for their parents' love, care and respect for what they want and what they are thinking of. In their experience, they thought that curiosity to try novel matters which are fun

and exciting is normal and common among young people. Many of them might have the belief that they do not want to have regret when they are still young. Thus, they could usually not hold themselves to play and to try when they were asked to do so. At that time, when their parents tightened controls on them or they were punished hardly by their schools, they would be more rebellious and attached to friends more closely. In contrast, if their parents could communicate with them in a more equal position and understand what they were thinking of, they would be more willing to share and seek supports from their parents. The male Youth A said that:

“I think not all young people are adequate in school. To be honest, I was not interested in school even in the primary school. I couldn’t hold myself from sleeping or attempting truancy when I was promoted to Form 1 (Grade 7). ...When I dropped out from school in Form 2, I felt scared and had many uncertainties too. I hoped my parents could understand and respect my decision. However, once when I decided to drop out, my father scolded me heavily. He was afraid that I could not stand on my own without certain level of education or having special skills in work. As a result, in order to avoid from further conflicts with him, I stayed out overnight frequently and moved out finally. ...I think if my parents could understand my inadequacy in study and respect my decision by giving me guidance and support in finding my directions ahead, the picture of my life could be different.”

The female Youth B also said that:

“I think it is my mother’s nagging and yelling pushes me to a dead end. Since she knew my addiction in cough medicine, we broke into quarrels every day. I felt troublesome at home and used cough medicine heavily to cover up my bad mood. ...in fact, I felt scared at the beginning when I used cough medicine and always thought of giving up. If my mother could understand and concern me more at that time, I think I could give it up.”

An Evaluation Study on the Effects of Youth Drug Prevention Groups

The second study was an evaluation study cooperating with one of the Counselling Centres for Psychotropic Substance Abusers (CCPSA) in Hong Kong to compare and evaluate the effects of an art-based relapse prevention group with the usual cognitive

behaviour based in maintaining young drug abusers in abstinence. The study is still conducting until the year of 2012. The targets of the study were active cases of the CCPSA centre aged between 15 and 30. All participants were voluntary and well informed with written consents. Eligible and agreed participants were arranged with respect to their rational choices and interests either to the art-based or the cognitive behaviour based relapse prevention group. In the design of the study, both the art-based and cognitive behaviour based relapse prevention groups included six intensive group sessions conducted by the registered social workers of the centre helping the young drug abusers identify possible high-risk situations and enhance their internal strengths and external supports to cope with the situations. Ultimately, it is hoped that their confidence to remain abstinence increases when their sense of self-efficacy in performing desired behaviour increases and the ways of living ahead are clear.

At this stage, both the art-based and cognitive behaviour based relapse prevention groups had been conducted in the summer of 2011. 6 members were recruited in each of the two groups, while 2 of them dropped out at the end of the groups. In order to compare and evaluate the effects of the two types of relapse prevention group, the members were required to complete a self-administered pre- and post-intervention questionnaire at the first and the last week of the groups. After completing the pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, focus group interviews were also conducted simultaneously. The study will finally be ended with the 2nd time post-intervention focus group interviews with the participants three months later of the two groups. Out of the 12 participants of the two groups, 7 of them were males, while 5 of them were females. Among the 7 male participants, all of them grew up in single parent families with junior secondary school level of education. Because of their low education level, 4 of them were junior chefs of fast food restaurants. The other 3 were unemployed, driver and warehouse keeper. Though only 1 female participant grew up in a single parent family, 1 female participant's parents were problem gamblers, while another one's parents were also drug abusers. It could be reflected that most of the participants also came from quite complicated family backgrounds.

In recalling the reasons which initiated them taking psychotropic drugs, many males revealed that their parents divorced when they were still young in the primary school age. Without strong parental care and guidance, they were not interested in school and dropped out early at the junior forms. Once when they dropped out from school, they needed to face with many difficulties in lives and frustrations in holding stable jobs. When they felt that lives were stressful and frustrated, they would be easily tempted by peers to try novel matters which were exciting or to have fun through dancing and

drinking with drugs. The Member A said that:

“I am 22 years old. In the past, I take many different kinds of drug. I find life is difficult and frustrated. My parents divorced when I was still very young. I live with my father. He is busy at work every day. Nobody cares what I am doing in a day. I was not interested in study and quitted when I was required to repeat at Form 2 (Grade 8). Once when I dropped out from school, I could not find jobs because of my young age. I did not know what I can do apart from wandering on streets or associating with friends at internet bars, discos or private parties... since then I can't giving up drugs. I will think of it and use seriously when I come across with any difficulties in life or frustrations in job.”

The Member B also said that:

“I live with my mother. She divorced with my father when I was in primary school. I quitted my study in Form 2... Now, I am a junior chef at a fast food restaurant. My job is hard and demanding without break. Though I get off at 3:00 p.m. every day, I need to work early at 5:00 a.m. My life is quite boring after work. Apart from sleeping, what I can do is wandering on streets or associating with my colleagues to play card games and take drugs together....to a great extent, I feel that drugs can help me cover up the unhappiness and frustrations in my daily living.”

Though the majority of the female participants came from complete families, the Member C said that:

“I am the eldest daughter in my family. I have two siblings. My parents are problem gamblers. They lend loans and overdraw with many credit cards. I was annoyed at their behaviour. However, since I am the eldest at home, I have to protect my siblings. ...I quitted my study and began to work since completing Form 2. I feel very stressful. My parents always ask me for money. In order to cover up my stress and release my emotions, I began to associate with friends and toke drugs heavily. Now, I have a daughter aged one and half years old. I am still living with my parents without marriage.”

The female member D also said that:

“My father is also a drug abuser. Because of his bad habit, my mother divorced with him since I was young in the primary school. Since then, I live with my father. He takes drugs at home with his co-habited girlfriends. ...under the influence of my father, I took drugs since I quit my study after completing the primary school. ...until this moment, I never worked before. I have a son who is living with my ex-husband and a daughter with my co-habited boyfriend now. Before I was arrested, I took drugs and associated with friends every day. I never thought of having my life meaningfully and independently. Now, I am only 25 years old. Under the supervision of the Probation Officer, I join different vocational training courses and begin to think of my future.”

By the same token, although family influence is an important factor which initiates them engaging in drug problem, parental care, understanding and support are the only things which can help them make up the minds to keep away from drugs. In recalling the reasons that facilitated them joining drug related treatment activities, the Member A said that:

“It is also due to my father. I never think that my father will cry. When I was arrested in the last time because of drugs, my father cried. Although he is highly occupied by his job, he came to the police station when I was arrested. He accompanied with me to go through all the procedures. In the process, he worried very much on my situations and my ways ahead. At the moment, I never felt that he loved me so much. When I was allowed to be supervised under the Probation Order, he cried and asked me to give up drugs.although I still can't give up drugs at this moment, I will keep myself away from drugs as far as possible when I think of my father's love. I don't want to make him disappointed.”

Through the making of a collage in the art-based relapse prevention group, the Member B also said that:

“Both my mother and sister worried about me very much when they knew that I took drugs. Although they scolded me and yelled me to give

up drugs every day, they began to spare more time with me after work or in the holiday. In the last week, we paid a short trip to South China to have sightseeing there. I really enjoyed the time together and felt their love to me. I begin to love my family too. I don't want to make them disappointed because of my behaviour. I make up my mind to give up drugs as far as I can."

The female Member C also said that:

"Although I grew up in an unhappy family, I do hope to give a happy family to my daughter. Because of her, I make up my mind to give up drugs by joining drug treatment and relapse prevention activities. Now, I put all my effort and energy in nourishing her. Although I haven't got married with her father now, we will try our very best to own a happy family with our daughter."

Youth Centered Family Based Intervention is Recommended

It can be revealed from the findings of the above two qualitative studies that family factor is important both in facilitating and restraining young people from engaging in various kinds of risky activities. Since family factor is important both for the success and failure of young people in their lives, youth centered family based intervention is recommended in working with youth with delinquency. Of course, any intervention should not put young people and their families as sites of surveillance yet other structural or environmental factors remain unchanged. In order to develop a youth centered family based intervention approach in working with youth with delinquency, more practice experience accumulation is required. However, several areas are worth to be considered.

Firstly, the family based intervention does not aim at handling family or marital related problems as other kinds of family service. In contrast, all problem situations relating to parents' marital, extra-marital or spousal relationship, mental or emotional related problems should be referred out for other services' follow-up actions. Of course, in that situation, smooth referral channel and close cooperation between different services become crucially important in facilitating the success of the approach. The youth centered family based intervention should focus directly on young people's problem situations and aim at (1) mediating into conflicts and communication between young people and their parents particularly for the situations

which may initiate their involvement in various kinds of risky activity, (2) negotiating parents' cooperation in the change process to effect relevant changes to young people, and (3) refreshing family with energy as the greatest support for young people in the long run.

Secondly, in Hong Kong, many youth social workers are found to be not competent and knowledgeable enough in working with families of youth with delinquency (Tam, 2008). If youth centered family based intervention approach should be developed in youth services, corresponding professional training equipping social workers with knowledge and skills in working with families of their clients becomes necessary. Thirdly, the timing of negotiating entry into families of young people is also crucial. Before rapport is built in the engagement stage, young people may have hesitation allowing social workers have direct contacts with their parents. In that situation, too early intervention may break the relationship, whereas the intervention will be too late when their conflicts with parents have come to an irretrievable stage. Therefore, right timing with informed consent is crucial in getting entry into young people's families.

Finally, careful assessment and consideration on the natures and characteristics of young people's families are also very important. As found in the studies, in recent decade, many young people are also come from families with problems. It means that some parents are also drug addicts, alcohol abusers, triad members, divorced or re-married leaving their children unattended, etc. They are also less cooperative and low motivated in effecting changes to their children. Thus, opposite effects may result if their families also fill up with different problems. In the 21st century, when family factor becomes increasingly significant in influencing young people's growth and development, a family based intervention is indispensable in the short run to effect relevant changes to young people with delinquency and in the long run to cultivate family as their life long support ahead.

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