

Quality of Life in Asia 5

Daniel T.L. Shek
Rachel C.F. Sun
Cecilia M.S. Ma *Editors*

Chinese Adolescents in Hong Kong

Family Life, Psychological Well-Being
and Risk Behavior

 Springer

Chinese Adolescents in Hong Kong

Quality of Life in Asia

Volume 5

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Editors

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Preface

Most of the existing theories on the personal well-being of adolescents have been developed in the West. Similarly, most of the existing studies have been conducted in the West. One important question that social scientists should ask is whether Western theories and research findings are applicable to adolescents in non-Western cultural contexts. Obviously, the answer to this question depends on the availability of empirical evidence. Unfortunately, studies on adolescent personal well-being are grossly inadequate in the scientific literature. Using the search term “adolescents,” computer search in March 2014 using PsycINFO showed 87,601 citations. When we used “Chinese” and “adolescents,” there were only 2,102 citations. In other words, 2.4 % of the citations were related to Chinese adolescents. As the Chinese population roughly constitutes one-fifth of the world’s population, this percentage of research on adolescents is definitely out of proportion.

There are several questions one should ask as far as adolescent well-being is concerned. The first question is how well-being changes during the adolescent years. In other words, what are the developmental trajectories associated with personal well-being during adolescence? While numerous cross-sectional studies have been conducted to understand this problem, only longitudinal data can provide us with a more comprehensive picture. Unfortunately, longitudinal studies are grossly inadequate in Chinese societies. In this book, we report the developmental trajectories of personal well-being indexed by different indicators in junior secondary school students in Hong Kong.

The next question is what sociodemographic factors are related to adolescent well-being. Several sociodemographic factors have been found to be closely related to the personal well-being of adolescents. For example, compared with adolescent girls, adolescent boys are more likely to exhibit suicidal behavior. Regarding age effect, adolescent risk behavior is linearly related to age during adolescence. Some family risk factors also impair adolescent well-being. Findings from studies reveal that adolescents with economic disadvantage develop unfavorably when compared with adolescents who do not experience economic disadvantage. Compared to adolescents in intact families, adolescents in non-intact families show poorer

well-being. Again, we are not sure whether the effects of such sociodemographic factors continue during adolescence. In the chapters of this book, special emphasis is placed on the influence of economic disadvantage and family non-intactness on adolescent well-being in the junior secondary school years.

The next question is what factors can protect adolescents from poor well-being, such as risk behavior, during the adolescent years. Using an ecological perspective, factors in different systems influence adolescent well-being. Besides personality traits, developmental assets within an individual, such as emotional control, resilience, spirituality, self-confidence, and compassion for other people, definitely shape the well-being of adolescents. In other words, inner resources shape adolescent well-being. The 3-year longitudinal study covered in this book addressed the question of how positive youth development attributes are related to measures of adolescent well-being across the junior high school years.

Besides developmental assets within an individual, factors in the environment also determine adolescent well-being. Among the influences of different environmental systems, family plays a crucial role in the process of socialization. There are both systemic and dyadic family processes in the family. For systemic family processes, family functioning attributes such as communication and emotional expressiveness are important parameters. For dyadic parent-child relationship, processes such as parenting, conflicts, and relational quality have been widely examined. In the sociological literature, numerous studies have underscored the importance of family social capital in adolescent development. In the psychological literature, the role of parenting and parent-child relationship on child and adolescent development has been widely documented. In our longitudinal study spanning across 3 years, another research question addressed is how systemic and dyadic parent-child relational qualities influence adolescent well-being in the junior high school years.

How can the research findings related to positive youth development and family processes function as protective factors to help adolescent development? The obvious answer is to apply the related findings to youth enhancement programs, although the process is not easy and straightforward. As far as youth enhancement programs are concerned, while there are numerous positive youth development programs in the West, very few validated programs exist in different Chinese communities. One notable exception is the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong, which utilizes positive youth development constructs identified in the successful programs in the field. Obviously, the collection of data in the Chinese context is important as far as the development of positive youth development programs for Chinese adolescents is concerned. Regarding programs which aim at promoting the quality of family life, literature review shows that while there are many programs in the West, there are only very few validated programs in Chinese societies. Based on the findings reported in the various chapters of this book, the theoretical basis for promoting family quality of life is formed. It is hoped that such findings can facilitate helping professionals to develop family quality of life enhancement programs for Chinese adolescents.

In the Confucian thought, one popular doctrine is “cultivation of oneself, regulation of one’s family, governing one’s country and creating peace and harmony for the world” (‘xiu shen, qi jia, zhi guo, ping tian xia’). Basically, it means that

Before one can create peace and harmony for the world, one must be able to govern one’s country. Before one can govern one’s country, one must be able to regulate one’s family. Before one can regulate one’s family, one must be able to cultivate one’s virtues and character.

Conceptually speaking, Confucianism emphasizes self-cultivation which is consistent with the notion of positive youth development. Both focus on the importance of “inner strengths,” particularly character and moral codes. Similarly, the notion of family regulation is in line with the Western notion of family functioning, particularly in the area of family rules and leadership. Through the findings reported in the chapters of this book, we earnestly hope that we will be able to integrate scientific theories and findings from the West in the Chinese context.

I also wish to take this opportunity to thank all the schools, parents, and students who have participated in this longitudinal study. Without their unfailing support, this groundbreaking attempt will not be possible.

Hunghom, Hong Kong

Daniel T.L. Shek

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Family Quality of Life, Personal Well-Being, and Risk Behavior in Early Adolescents in Hong Kong: Related Phenomena and Research Gaps

Daniel T.L. Shek and Catalina S.M. Ng

Abstract Family processes and positive youth development attributes are salient determinants of adolescent development. In this chapter, the influences of family factors (family functioning, parent-child relationship, parenting style, parent-child communication, parental marital problems, and economic disadvantage) and positive youth development attributes on the personal well-being of Chinese adolescents are reviewed. The review demonstrates that there are several limitations of the existing scientific literature in the Chinese context. First, in contrast to the abundance of Western studies, there is a lack of Chinese studies. Second, more emphasis should be put on understanding families from an ecological perspective. Third, few studies have examined both systemic and dyadic family processes in a single study. Fourth, positive youth development research is still in its infancy in different Chinese contexts. Fifth, there are few Chinese validated measures of personal well-being and family quality of life in the field. Sixth, there are few longitudinal studies in different Chinese societies. Finally, there are few studies in which multiple positive and negative measures of personal well-being are employed in one single study.

Keywords Family processes • Positive youth development • Personal well-being • Family quality of life • Chinese adolescents

Introduction

Local studies consistently report that risk behavior among early adolescents in Hong Kong is growing (e.g., Law & Shek, 2013; Lee & Shek, 2013; Shek, 2013). For instance, using a large sample of Hong Kong primary and secondary students ($N=26,111$), a study investigating youth risk behavior found that 18.1 % of the

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participants had experimented with smoking and 45.2 % reported lifetime alcohol consumption (Lee & Tsang, 2004). In another study utilizing three waves of longitudinal data, Yu and Shek (2013) reported that about 22.5 % of the participants could be classified as having Internet addiction. This increase in youth risk behavior has led local researchers to explore the risk and protective factors of adolescent problem behavior because getting a deeper understanding of the factors that lead to youth risk behavior can help develop effective and targeted intervention strategies.

Since numerous Western studies have reported that family plays a key role in adolescent development, it would be theoretically and practically useful to analyze how different family processes such as parenting and family functioning influence the development of adolescent risk behavior in the Chinese context. The Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development of the World Health Organization (2001) analyzed research findings on risk and protective factors for substance use from more than 50 countries and concluded that conflicts in families are risk factors for adolescent substance use in Asia, whereas having positive parent-child relationships as well as having parents who provide structure and boundaries are protective factors for substance use. Likewise, Yip and associates (2011) found that Hong Kong Chinese adolescents who took drugs were influenced by dysfunctional families, with problems such as unstable family condition, low income, long working hours of family members, and poor/ineffective communication between young people and their family, which is consistent with Shek's (1993) perspective that family plays an important role in shaping adolescent development.

Although family is the basic form of social capital (Putnam, 1995), family quality of life has been a neglected topic (Shek, 2008a). As Hoffman, Marquis, Poston, Summers, and Turnbull (2006) pointed out, "research on quality of life has traditionally focused on individuals rather than families" (p. 1069), suggesting that family quality of life is under-researched. In particular, there is an urgent need to understand how different family processes influence adolescent development. Although there are several family theories (e.g., structural family theories) which assert the importance of family processes on adolescent development, ecological models have been commonly utilized to understand the development of individuals within their environments. The primary assertion of ecological models is that human behavior is influenced by different individual and environmental factors in different systems, particularly processes within the family. Therefore, ecological models are commonly used as a theoretical model to help us understand the complex nature of the interactions between an individual and its environment.

Apart from family processes, developmental assets within adolescents are also critical determinants of the personal well-being of teenagers. In the literature on positive youth development, there are views asserting that developmental assets can protect adolescents from risk behavior. For example, in a series of studies based on Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong, Sun and Shek (2010, 2012, 2013) showed that positive youth development attributes negatively predicted adolescent problem behavior via the mediating effects of life satisfaction.

Positive youth development is a promising approach in preventing youth problems as it not only thwarts problems but also strengthens adolescent developmental

assets (Catalano, Hawkins, Berglund, Pollard, & Arthur, 2002). Programs utilizing positive youth development principles can help adolescents avoid risky behavior, ensure young people become healthy adults, and promote a positive personal and psychological development. Overall, positive youth development is expected to enhance life satisfaction and reduce problem behavior.

According to Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins (2004), there are several attributes of the positive youth development approach, including (a) upholding the belief that “problem-free is not fully prepared,” (b) emphasis on integrated youth development (i.e., focusing on a range of youth developmental possibilities and problems) rather than solely handling a single youth problem, (c) emphasis of person-in-environment perspective, and (d) focus on developmental models on how young people learn, grow, and change. The underlying assumption of positive youth development programs is that adolescent risk behavior will not be easily developed through the strengthening of psychosocial competencies in adolescents. Principles and theories of positive youth development have been utilized in youth enhancement programs as well.

Ample research results point to the effectiveness of positive youth development programs which successfully led to a reduction of problem behavior, such as substance abuse and delinquency. Catalano et al. (2004) found that 25 programs in the field in North America have provided support for the effectiveness of developing youth developmental assets in reducing youth risk behavior (Tremblay, Pagani-Kurtz, Masse, Vitaro, & Pihl, 1995). In the context of Hong Kong, Shek and his associates have implemented a positive youth development program entitled the Project P.A.T.H.S., with evaluation findings showing that the Project P.A.T.H.S. was able to promote positive youth development attributes and reduce risk behavior in adolescents (Shek & Ma, 2012; Shek & Yu, 2012).

Since family processes and positive youth development attributes are salient determinants of adolescent development, the purpose of this chapter is to review how family factors (such as family functioning, parent-child relationship, parenting style, parent-child communication, parental marital disruption, and economic disadvantage) and positive youth development attributes contribute to adolescent quality of life, including risk behavior. The limitations of the existing literature and the way forward are also discussed.

Family Factors and Adolescent Well-Being

Family Functioning and Adolescent Developmental Outcome

Family functioning is often used as an indicator of family life quality (Shek & Lee, 2007). It refers to “the quality of family life at the systemic level, such as wellness, competence, strengths, and weaknesses of a family” (Shek, 2005a, p. 518).

To understand how family functioning affects adolescent development, it is therefore important to understand how family operates at the systemic level.

For example, studies on family functioning often refer to the Circumplex Model proposed by Olson, Sprenkle, and Russell (1979) and Olson, Russell, and Sprenkle (1983) to explain family systems. According to the Circumplex Model, a family system needs cohesion and adaptability to be able to cope with change. However, as the presence of an adolescent in the family system naturally causes change, parents need to adjust to the adolescent's demand for independence (Parker, 2000), which not all parents successfully do. Parental failure to adjust to the adolescent's needs results in increased levels of tension, stress, and conflicts in the family, which affect children emotionally. Deprived from family support and understanding, the adolescent may therefore start to feel alone, unloved, and unsupported to face the developmental challenges brought by adolescence, which may lead him to engage in risk behavior.

Although the Circumplex Model is derived from research carried out in Western countries, similar observations have been made in the Chinese context. In a local study exploring the perspectives on family functioning among Chinese people, participants responded that harmony, mutuality, and the absence of conflicts are crucial attributes of a happy family (Shek, 2001a, 2001b). In addition, the Chinese culture places a strong emphasis on the concept of harmony which is captured by a popular saying "*jia he wan shi xing*" (everything will prosper if a family lives in harmony). Therefore, Chinese families experiencing a high level of conflicts are perceived as unhappy families, and unhappiness creates an environment that is certainly not optimal to the needs of a young person dealing with the challenges of adolescence. Data from longitudinal studies also reported similar findings. For instance, results from a study by Shek (2005a) showed that family functioning has an impact on early adolescent development as a lower level of perceived family functioning predicted poor adjustment in the domains of psychological distress, overall psychological health, delinquency, and well-being in female adolescents over time. Conversely, well-functioning families can positively influence adolescents, preventing them from engaging in risk behaviors. This positive influence may not only protect them from the negative outcomes of relationships with deviant friends, thereby reducing the possibility of getting involved in delinquency in the Chinese context (Gao, Yu, & Ng, 2013), but it can also prevent early adolescents from becoming Internet addicts (Yu & Shek, 2013) and buffer the negative effects of hopelessness which leads to suicidal ideation (Lai, 2007).

All of the above findings therefore suggest that family functioning can influence adolescent development. However, there are several limitations intrinsic to the existing literature on family functioning. First, existing studies on the relationship between family functioning and adolescent adjustment have been predominately conducted in the West. As Shek (1997) pointed out, "no scientific study to date has been done to examine how family functioning is related to adolescent adjustment in Chinese culture" (p. 468). This has not changed much over the past 15 years in such a way that only very few studies focusing on family functioning have been carried out in a Chinese context to date. However, since Chinese people might perceive family functioning in a different way than Westerners, it is important to explore family relationships in a Chinese context. Second, a large majority of local studies

on family functioning are cross-sectional. Longitudinal studies are relatively sparse, which makes it difficult to firmly establish whether family functioning is causally related to adolescent adjustment in the Chinese context. Third, since validated measures for family functioning are scant, it is difficult to assess family functioning in an objective manner. For instance, there are only a few indigenously developed and validated family functioning measures, such as the Chinese Family Assessment Instrument (C-FAI) (Shek, 2002). Obviously, more efforts are needed to address the methodological issues related to family functioning.

Parent-Child Relationship and Adolescent Developmental Outcomes

Parent-child relationship can affect family functioning as poor parent-child relationship can be a source of tension within the family. Family can then constitute a stressful context for adolescents which can make them feel isolated and more vulnerable to risk behavior. On the other hand, the crucial role of good parent-child relationship in healthy youth development is well documented. Studies have shown consistently that good parent-child relationship serves as a buffer preventing adolescents from engaging in risk behavior (e.g., Korkeila et al., 2004).

Unfortunately, as teenagers seek greater autonomy from parental control, adolescence is often seen as a synonym for conflict, so conflicts tend to be expected or seen as normal in many adolescent families. Research is challenging this popular view though, as studies have shown that conflicts are not a necessity during adolescence and parents may in fact be more distressed by conflicts with their adolescent child than the adolescent themselves (Steinberg, 2001). As a result, the inability for parents to cope with the challenges brought by the transition of their child into adulthood may upset parents and cause long-lasting misunderstandings and an increased number of conflicts, which in turn can adversely affect the adolescent's developmental outcomes.

In general, children who have a good relationship with their parents show higher self-esteem (Cheung & Lau, 1985), whereas children who have a hostile relationship with parents show low self-esteem and higher delinquency tendency (Leung & Lau, 1989). High levels of parent-adolescent conflict have been found to be linked to depression and suicidal ideation in adolescents of both genders (Lee, Wong, Chow, & McBride-Chang, 2006). Overall, the existing literature indicates clearly that poor family relationships have a strong influence on the development of risk behavior in early adolescents while good family relationships can prevent the development of risk behavior.

However, it is important to note that there are more research studies on the global aspects (e.g., overall assessment of the relationship) rather than specific aspects of parent-child relational qualities (e.g., trust, satisfaction with parental control). In addition, most of the existing studies were cross-sectional, and there is a lack of longitudinal studies examining the changes and causal effects of parent-child

relationships in the early adolescent years. Furthermore, there are only very few studies in which parenting and parent-child relational qualities are included in a single study.

Parenting Styles and Adolescent Developmental Outcomes

Another facet of parent-child relationship is parenting style, which is an important determinant of children's emotional and behavioral development. The most commonly cited model of parenting style was proposed by Baumrind (1991) who describes four main parenting types, namely, authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and rejecting-neglecting with additional subtypes in adolescent families. In Western studies on parenting styles, the authoritative style is usually credited as the most effective in protecting adolescents from problem behaviors such as drug use, delinquent activities, and academic performance (Baumrind, 1991; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). However, the same findings may not be culturally relevant to the Chinese context (Fok & Shek, 2011). For example, a study by Kang and Moore (2011) reported that Mainland Chinese "students with authoritarian mothers scored significantly higher than those with authoritative and permissive mothers on the total of core courses (Chinese, English and Math)" (p. 136), which establishes the authoritarian parenting type as more desirable than the authoritative type in Chinese families. Furthermore, Fok and Shek observed that the Western categorization of parenting types may not be fully relevant to the Chinese context, since "in addition to authoritative and non-authoritative parenting styles, most Hong Kong parents also adopt psychologically controlling parenting styles" (p. 102).

Psychological control is a kind of parenting behavior which manipulates children through negative tactics, such as constraining verbal expression, guilt induction, personal attack, erratic emotional behavior, and love withdrawal, so that children adhere to parental standards (Boughton & Lumley, 2011). Psychological control is thought to be a parenting practice that can easily lead to family dysfunction and negative adolescent developmental outcomes. Boughton and Lumley argued that psychological control affects parent-child communication and the parents' ability to understand the child's emotional well-being. Empirically, excessive control over an adolescent's psychological world has detrimental effects on adolescent development, particularly internalizing and mood problems (e.g., Shek, 2006; Shek & Lee, 2005). Despite the fact that parenting style is a well-researched area, psychological control is still a "neglected construct," and "there is little research specifically measuring psychological control and its covariates" (Barber, 1996, p. 3313). With specific reference to Chinese culture, the topic of psychological control is under-researched (Shek, 2005b).

Alternatively, parenting practices can also be interpreted in terms of parental behavioral control which comprises five dimensions, namely, parental knowledge, expectations, monitoring, discipline, and demandingness (Shek & Lee, 2007). In a

local study analyzing parental behavioral control, paternal behavioral control was perceived to be lower than maternal behavioral control (Shek, 2005b). This finding is interesting as it suggests that the popular saying “strict fathers, kind mothers” in the Chinese context needs to be changed to “strict mothers, kind fathers” in Hong Kong. This illustrates the need for conducting further research on different types of parental control in Chinese families, such as psychological control or behavioral control, to see how they contribute to adolescent developmental outcomes and potentially yield to further culturally relevant insight.

Parent-Child Communication and Adolescent Developmental Outcomes

Positive parent-child communication contributes to positive adolescent development. In a local study, Shek (1997) found that positive communication with parents was associated with better adolescent psychological well-being and less delinquent behavior. However, a large majority of Hong Kong working parents do not have positive communication with their children. Fathers in particular spend most of the time on working which results in the contemporary phenomenon of “detached fathers, involved mothers.” A local survey even reported that about 47 % ($N=853$) communicated with their parents for less than 30 min per day and 68 % of their conversations focused on academic studies (Children Council, 2006).

Another macro factor which is not family-friendly is that in most Hong Kong families, both parents have to work to sustain the family. Therefore, it is common to employ foreign domestic helpers to alleviate household chores, which often include taking care of children. However, the excessive dependency on foreign domestic helpers undermines the development of children because children rely heavily on them. As a result, children cannot do even simple things such as tie up shoelaces and expect others to care for their every need. Some families even rely on foreign domestic helpers to educate their children. However, the role as a foreign domestic helper with low status in the family makes it almost impossible for her to teach or discipline the children. Domestic helpers playing the role of “surrogate mother” (Yip et al., 2011) result in loose parenting and adolescent behavioral problems.

Furthermore, in the traditional Chinese culture, Confucianism emphasized family harmony and family hierarchy (Ho, 1981). Therefore, non-confrontational communication was essential to avoid interpersonal conflicts. However, with the weakening of traditional collectivistic Chinese beliefs and growth of contemporary individualistic beliefs and youth culture in Hong Kong nowadays, there is a decline in the respect for parents and an increase in detachment between children and their parents. As a result, there are more conflicts between parents and children, and the quality of parent-adolescent communication is declining. Parent-adolescent conflict not only has detrimental effects on parent-child relationship but also makes adolescents feel distressed, emotionally distant, and stressful.

The aforementioned situation may also lead to further parent-child relationship difficulties. As parents do not feel respected by their adolescent child, they may resort to excessive parental control in an attempt to force respect. However, as adolescents need more independence, too much parental behavioral control may undermine their perceived ability to achieve independence, which may result in the adolescent feeling incompetent and may give them a sense of not being accepted, undermining their self-esteem, and potentially causing depression and other mental health issues or behavioral problems in their adolescent child. In addition, as adolescents fail to feel supported by their parents, they may develop difficulties in maintaining positive and long-term relationships with peers. All of those difficulties increase the likelihood for adolescents to engage in risk behavior (Beveridge & Berg, 2007).

Parental Marital Disruption and Adolescent Development

The number of divorce decrees granted in 2011 in Hong Kong was 18,374 (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). This number significantly soared from only 2,060 in 1981. As a result, more and more children have to grow up in single-parent or recomposed families and bear the consequence of parental marital disruption.

Marital disruption is seen as a stressor which causes parents to focus more on their problems than on their children. Family ecological theorists assert that marital disruption has negative effects on adolescent development due to changes in family processes. During adolescence, teenagers require support from families to meet their developmental needs. However, a study by Mechanic and Hansell (1989) suggests that “divorce and family conflict probably erode family member’s capacity to nurture children’s well-being by diverting time and attention from the children and by undermining the children’s perceptions of parental interest” (p. 106). As parents focus on the conflict with their spouse instead of taking care of their children, they effectively become neglectful. As a result, children lack support, supervision, and other basic emotional and/or physical needs which may translate into the development of risky behavior during early adolescence.

Empirically, family processes in non-intact families in Hong Kong are comparatively poorer than those of intact families. Consistent results from a series of studies by Shek (2007, 2008a, 2008b) found that parent-child relational qualities, perceived parental behavioral control processes, and psychological well-being were worse in non-intact families than in intact families. Moreover, parenting qualities, such as parental control and parental warmth, were found to be lower in non-intact families when compared to intact families (Shek, 2007).

All of the above studies clearly indicate that parental divorce not only causes changes in the composition of a family but also affects parenting and parent-child relationships which in turn influence adolescent emotion and behavior.

Economic Disadvantage and Adolescent Well-Being

The stress induced by economic disadvantage affects parents not only financially but also emotionally, impacting the quality of parenting, parent-child communication, and parent-child relationship and therefore resulting in family dysfunction. According to the Family Stress Model of economic hardship, financial strain has negative influence on parents' emotions, behaviors, and relationships which may affect their parenting (Conger & Conger, 2002). Poverty reduces parent's capacity for being supportive as well as involved, and economically disadvantaged parents are more likely to use coercive discipline as opposed to negotiation and reasoning (McLoyd, 1990). Specifically, poverty causes emotional distress in parents which reduces warmth in parent-child relationships and increases parent-child conflicts. Those repeated conflicts in turn influence a child's well-being, emotional state, academic performance, and cognitive functioning (Conger, 2005), which all contribute to the development of adolescent risk behavior.

The above findings support previous findings from earlier research by Shek (e.g., 2003) that demonstrated that poverty was associated with lower levels of self-esteem, substance abuse, and problem behavior in adolescents. Based on the results from a series of studies (Shek & Lee, 2007; Shek & Tsui, 2012), Shek (2013) concluded that developmental outcomes of economically disadvantaged adolescents were comparatively poorer than those without economic disadvantage. Adolescents with economic disadvantage demonstrated lower levels of positive identity, family interaction, and perceived paternal parenting. Psychological well-being, which was assessed by hopelessness, mastery, life satisfaction, and self-esteem of adolescents experiencing economic disadvantage, was weaker than those not experiencing economic disadvantage.

Positive Youth Development Attributes and Adolescent Developmental Outcomes

As discussed above, positive youth development programs are highly needed for strengthening psychosocial competencies in adolescents and reduce adolescent risk behavior.

In their review of the effectiveness of positive youth development programs, Catalano et al. (2004) concluded that there are 15 basic youth development constructs which are related to a reduction in adolescent problem behavior (including bonding, social competence, emotional competence, cognitive competence, behavioral competence, moral competence, self-efficacy, prosocial norms, resilience, self-determination, spirituality, clear and positive identity, beliefs in the future, prosocial involvement, and recognition for positive behavior). Research showed that adolescents who developed positively are able to utilize their potential and contribute to their

well-being (Rutter, 1987). Hence, positive developmental assets are indeed protective factors and can be conceived as personal strengths which help adolescents to become healthy individuals.

There are also theoretical propositions showing that positive youth development influences an individual's well-being. For instance, in Lent's model (2004), self-efficacy is one of the positive development attributes which influences life satisfaction. The social learning theory (Bandura, 1997) posits that self-efficacy affects positive health outcomes. In addition, based on the concepts of protective factors in resilience literature, internal resources such as psychosocial competencies and external resources such as bonding (e.g., Jessor et al., 2003) protect individuals from stresses in life.

Empirically, there are research findings showing that positive youth development qualities influence adolescent problem behavior via life satisfaction (Sun & Shek, 2013). Life satisfaction has been shown to be predicted by several positive youth development constructs, such as social and emotional competencies (Ciarrochi, Scott, Deane, and Heaven 2003), prosocial motivation and behavior (Gebauer, Riketta, Broemer, and Maio 2008), academic and social self-efficacy (Vecchio, Gerbino, Pastorelli, Del Bove, and Caprara 2007), as well as spirituality and religiosity (Laudet & White, 2008). The influence of positive youth development on problem behavior is direct during early adolescence, suggesting that promoting positive strengths to reduce problem behavior via the implementation of positive youth development programs is beneficial to early adolescents (Sun & Shek, 2013).

However, positive youth development theories and research are still in their infancy in different Chinese contexts (Shek & Sun, 2013). One possible exception is the Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong. While most positive youth development programs were developed and implemented in the West, the Project P.A.T.H.S. is a pioneering adolescent development program in Asia. Evaluation findings based on the Project P.A.T.H.S. showed that students who joined the program (experimental group) had significantly better positive outcomes in terms of psychosocial competencies, better academic performance, and higher global positive youth development and showed fewer delinquent behavior when compared to students who never participated in the program (control group) (Shek & Sun, 2010). Findings which support the effectiveness of the Project P.A.T.H.S. were consistently reported (e.g., Shek & Ma, 2011; Shek & Yu, 2011a). Overall, positive youth development programs have been shown to be effective in preventing adolescent risk behavior.

Research Gaps of the Existing Literature

There are several research gaps intrinsic to the existing studies pertaining to the influence of family quality of life (e.g., family functioning) and positive youth development attributes and individual well-being indexed by adolescent risk behavior. First, most of the existing studies on adolescent risk behavior have been predominantly conducted in Western societies. Using the search terms of "adolescence" and

“risk behavior” to search relevant research studies up to November 2013, results indicated that there were 1,533 citations in the PsycINFO, 33 citations in the Sociological Abstracts, and 5 citations in the Academic Search Premier. However, utilizing search terms of “adolescence” and “risk behavior” and “Chinese,” an identical search showed that there were only 14 citations in PsycINFO, whereas no publications were found in both Sociological Abstracts and Academic Search Premier. The dearth of relevant research data in the Chinese context would motivate one to ask whether the related phenomena are in congruence with those in the West. Furthermore, the low search figures suggest that there is an urgent need to exert more efforts to conduct adolescent risk behavior research in different Chinese communities. Since there is a lack of Chinese studies, it would be theoretically and practically crucial to investigate further the relationship between family and adolescent risk behavior in the Chinese context. Shek (2006) argued that since the Chinese population has constituted approximately one-fifth of the world’s population, “the implication of these figures is that if any theory is claimed to be universally applicable, relevant data from Chinese people must be collected” (p. 276).

Second, the phenomena reviewed in this chapter underscore the importance of family in adolescent development. In contrast to individualistic explanations, such as genetic and psychological explanations, ecological models suggest that there is a need to explore how different contexts, such as family, might influence adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological models can help explain the complex interactions between individual and family. With particular reference to the recent emergence of family issues and a dearth of Chinese studies examining family processes, there is an urgent need to understand adolescent risk behavior from an ecological perspective, particularly the family ecological perspective (Shek, 2003).

Third, there are only isolated studies in which dyadic and systemic family processes are simultaneously examined in a single study. Empirically, it would be interesting if the study incorporates both dyadic and systemic processes as this would be an advance in the field. For example, economic stress has adverse effects on the psychological well-being of parents which in turn disrupts dyadic family processes, such as parent-child relationship and spousal relationship, which in turn influence adolescent adjustment.

Fourth, there is a lack of positive youth development studies and programs in Chinese communities. After reviewing the recent adolescent studies and positive youth development programs in Macau, Luk (2010) concluded that there is a lack of theoretically sound and comprehensive programs for youth development. Similarly, based on a detailed review of adolescent prevention and positive youth development programs in Asia, Shek and Yu (2011b) arrived at the following conclusions: (a) when compared with the West, the number of validated programs in different Asian communities was very low; (b) the majority of programs focused on substance abuse than mental health problems; (c) positive youth development programs were sparse when compared with evaluated prevention programs; (d) rigorously designed evaluative studies of prevention and positive youth development programs over a long period of time were few. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop positive youth development programs in different Asian communities (Shek & Yu, 2011b).

Luk (2011) asserted that positive youth development programs “can potentially help adolescents develop a positive growth and be better prepared for future challenges” (p. 35). Due to the limited number of positive youth development programs in Chinese communities, positive youth development research is in its infancy.

Fifth, some of the existing studies are methodologically inadequate. There is a lack of sound and validated psychosocial measurements and assessment tools for evaluating different aspects of positive youth development constructs in the field. Thus, some studies only utilized non-validated instruments with unclear psychometric properties. Irrespective of whether the measures of family and adolescent risk behavior are indigenously developed or imported from the West, the measures should first be validated. The use of non-validated instruments is problematic because their validity and reliability are unknown. Also, the measuring instruments may not be able to capture the essence of the Chinese culture if they are adapted from the West (Lai Kwok & Shek, 2010). In contrast, if indigenous Chinese measures are used, we can explore whether the research findings are consistent with previous research results conducted in the West. Additionally, the paucity of measures of positive youth development hampers program dissemination and widens the gap between research and practice (Ruth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Furthermore, along the line of research methodology, the sample size in some of the studies is small. For instance, Feldman, Wentzel, Weinberger, and Munson (1990) used 50 mothers and 43 fathers with 6th grade sons to investigate the relationship between marital satisfaction and family functioning. Bean, Barber, and Crane (2006) explored the relationship between psychological control and self-esteem in small samples of 75 African American and 80 European American adolescents. Chang, McBride-Chang, Stewart, and Au (2003) used 115 second graders and 74 eighth graders from Hong Kong to explore the relationships between self-concept, family relations, and life satisfaction. The major problems associated with small sample size are power (Kraemer & Thiemann, 1987) and generalizability. The use of multivariate statistical tests such as multiple regression analyses in small samples (e.g., Bean et al., 2006) increases the likelihood that the obtained data are due to chance effect. Tabachnick and Fidell (1989) warned that in multiple regression analyses, “power may be unacceptably low no matter the cases-to-IVs ratio if you have fewer than 100 cases” (pp. 128–129). Therefore, a large sample size will allow for a more precise estimation of the strength of the associations.

Sixth, with a few exceptions, a large majority of the existing research studies are primarily based on cross-sectional data. Data from longitudinal studies were scant. For instance, Shek (2001b) pointed out that “there is a severe lack of longitudinal studies” (p. 58). Although the existing cross-sectional studies can give us some ideas of the possible relationships between family functioning and adolescent risk behavior at a point of time, cross-sectional studies fail to unfold the causal relationships between family factors on adolescent development over time. For example, regarding the direction of influences between parent-child conflict and adolescent risk behavior, there are at least five possibilities: (1) parent-child conflict influences adolescent risk behavior, (2) adolescent risk behavior influences parent-child conflict, (3) parent-child conflict and adolescent risk behavior influence each other,