



## The extent of family and school social capital promoting positive subjective well-being among primary school children in Shenzhen, China

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine, *first*, the extent to which variations in family and school social capital can be explained by child's differing socioeconomic and demographic background and school characteristics; and *second*, the extent to which family and school social capital in combination might be associated with variations in child subjective well-being in Shenzhen, China. This study was a cross-sectional survey design, using stratified random sampling. A total of 1306 sixth-grade primary school children and their parents were drawn from 16 schools, and a self-administered questionnaire was used. The results suggested that gender difference, the only child status at home and *hukou* status had impacts on family and school social capital accrued among primary school children in Shenzhen. There were also links between child's perception of connectedness to their parents, peers, and teachers, and their positive child subjective well-being.

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### 1. Introduction

It is an undeniable fact that well-being of the new generation for the 21st century has experienced significant changes and the children are living in increasingly diverse society nowadays. Previous studies highlighted effects of radical socioeconomic and demographic changes on the well-being of children and young people. Empirical evidence showed associations between child poverty and well-being (Adamson, Bradshaw, Hoelscher, & Richardson, 2007; European Commission Social Protection Committee, 2008), adolescents' health behaviour and their parental socioeconomic status (Fergusson, Horwood, Boden, & Jenkin, 2007; Hanson & Chen, 2007), adolescents' health behaviour and their family and peer relationships (Currie et al., 2008; Turbin et al., 2006), family and community social capital and children's educational achievement (Hango, 2007; Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001). Hu's study also demonstrated effects of family background on the attainment of education, party membership and occupation in China (Hu, 2007).

Chinese people and families put more emphasis on market-oriented development and free competition in light of China's social and economic transformation. Given China's one-child policy, parents try their best to let their children attend learning and social activities

so as to be well-equipped for children's future development. Children nowadays shoulder various degree of parent expectation and the pressure of being his/her family's 'only hope' (Fong, 2004; Wang & Fong, 2009). Nonetheless, the opportunity cost of the competition oriented programs is that children have less time to play together and learn appropriate social skills that will facilitate building social capital through trust, communication and cooperation with others. It takes time and effort to accumulate social capital. Bian's recent study also showed the growing roles of social networks as channels for new job search and occupational mobility in transitional China (Bian, 2009). As Sun argued, "in the course of economic transformation, a sense of free competition, a core concept of market economy, has been strengthened among Chinese people and families, which is also the case with parents' investment in their children's education....To a certain extent, augmentation of educational investment has improved children's development environment and fostered their development, but it sometimes goes to extremes. For example, over-investment on intellect that forces children to attend "interest classes", with no interest at all, has made it a burden and put more pressure on children and, thus, deprived children of light-heartedness as well as time for developing other abilities" (Sun, 2005 (pp.4–5)).

Several studies highlighted relationships between family background and variation of social capital accrued, and effects of social and cultural capital on child and adolescents' well-being in China. Yan and Lam's study was echoed by both Bian (Bian, 2008) and Lin et al.'s studies (Lin, Ao, & Song, 2009) who found variation of social capital accumulated over time associated with differential in social class and

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occupational life. Their study argued that the adolescents' disadvantaged socioeconomic background in the mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong may contribute to the unequal access to the social networks and their embedded resources which affects their employment opportunities (Yan & Lam, 2009). Children's education engagement in poor area of China is not only associated with their socioeconomic status, but also cultural capital, and family and school social capital (An, 2005). In addition, the dualistic household registration (*hukou*) system<sup>1</sup> in China is directly linked to people's life chances affecting their socioeconomic status and contributing to differential access to public services (Wang, 2008; Zhao & Li, 2006). Wu and Treiman's study reaffirmed that the *hukou* system (i.e. rural–urban institutional divide) still plays a significant role shaping stratification and mobility in China's economic transformation (Wu & Treiman, 2007). In particular, Liang et al.'s studies showed effects of *hukou* status on education opportunities and health care access for migrant children in urban China (Liang & Chen, 2007; Liang, Guo, & Duan, 2008). Wong et al.'s recent study highlighted the protective functions of relationships, social support and self-esteem in the life satisfaction of children of migrants in Shanghai (Wong, Chang, He, & Wu, 2010). Lin's review also argued the issue of gender inequality in social capital contributing to gender differential in network diversity and size (Lin, 2000).

This paper aimed to enrich our understanding of the extent of family and school social capital promoting positive subjective well-being among primary school children in transitional China. More specifically, the current study contributed to the literature on social capital by focusing on the rarely studied age group between 11 and 12 years old. The study used the concept of social capital to frame the analysis of (i) the extent to which variations in family and school social capital be explained by child's differing socioeconomic and demographic background and school characteristics; and (ii) the extent to which family and school social capital in combination might be associated with variations in child subjective well-being in Shenzhen, China. All these have implications for life chance of the children and the accumulation of human and social capital in the Chinese society in the long run.

## 2. Conceptualization and measurement of child well-being and social capital

### 2.1. Child well-being

The concept of well-being refers to the quality of people's lives which is regarded as “a dynamic process, emerging from the way in which people interact with the world around them” (Rees, Bradshaw, Haridhan, & Keung, 2010) (p.8). It is widely acknowledged that notions of child well-being need to be understood as multi-dimensional and ecological. The dimensions include material well-being, child health, educational attainment and participation, children's relationships with their friends and family, their feelings about their own well-being (i.e. subjective well-being), their involvement with problem behaviours, and

so on (Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009; Ennett et al., 2008; Land, Lamb, Meadows, & Taylor, 2007; Lau & Bradshaw, 2010). Ben-Arieh et al. argued that individual well-being is influenced not only by personal attributes, but also by the characteristics of the contextual factors emphasizing the significance of interactions among individuals, family, peers, schools, neighbourhood, the broader community, and society at large. The structure and processes of these contexts can facilitate or hinder access to social and material resources which is vital for a child's survival, development, protection and participation (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001a (pp.103–104)).

Well-being can be measured by the use of social indicators (i.e. objective well-being) (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001c; Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009) and/or self-report measures (Cummins, 2010; Currie et al., 2008; Huebner & Diener, 2008). Subjective well-being (SWB) includes cognitive and affective components. The cognitive component refers to life satisfaction in terms of overall subjective assessment of life satisfaction and/or within specific domains. The affective component concerns the experience of positive and negative emotions (Diener, 1984; Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009). Previous studies demonstrated linkages between adolescents' perceived satisfaction with life and health-related quality of life (Zullig, Valois, Huebner, & Drane, 2005), and associations between adolescents' school engagement and their life satisfaction (Huebner & Diener, 2008; Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2010). The study of child well-being provides crucial indications of what matters in their lives and enables us to know their socioeconomic conditions, their health, and their own perceptions of their present situation and future aspirations (Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009; Ennett et al., 2008; Land et al., 2007; Zubrick, Williams, Silburn, & Vimpani, 2000). Further, subjective well-being is considered as a crucial and valuable outcome measure for better policy advocacy, planning, monitoring and evaluation (UNICEF, 2001). It is recognised that SWB measures should take into account child and young people's own conceptions of well-being and the complexities of their lives (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009). As Ben-Arieh et al. argued, regular and closer monitoring of the status of children will enable concerned authorities, including government departments, non-governmental organizations, schools and the public, to observe positive and negative child development (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001b).

### 2.2. Social capital

Researchers shared similar understanding that social capital consists of resources embedded in social relations and social structure. Social capital can be accumulated over time, and be mobilized when an individual wishes to increase the likelihood of success in a purposive action (Bian, 2008; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin et al., 2009; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 1995). Social capital can be categorized into two dimensions, including structural social capital and cognitive social capital. Structural social capital (SSC) is an *objective* and *observable* construct and thus the established roles and networks can facilitate purposive action. Cognitive social capital (CSC) is a *subjective* element and it refers to shared norms, values, trust, attitudes, and beliefs (Grootaert & Van Bastelaer, 2002; Krishna & Shrader, 2002). Previous studies have suggested that social capital includes both structural and process components. The structural component refers to the *social setting* which facilitates or inhibits interpersonal interactions, and access to resources. Within the family, family structure and number of sibling in the household are examples of the structural component. Children living in single-parent households can only accumulate their social capital with one biological parent while the quantity of time and resources that parents can be able to invest in their children tend to be diluted in families with a large number of children. Within the school, school band and school type in terms of school resources and teachers' qualification are two examples of structural attributes. The process element of family social capital refers to the *actual and interpersonal interactions* between parents and their children. It includes parents'

<sup>1</sup> China's *hukou* system was introduced in 1958. Even though the *hukou* system has experienced multifaceted changes in the past few decades, it still remains a discrimination institution against non-urban *hukou* residents (Chan, 2009). Under the dualistic *hukou* system, rural migrants are still excluded from access to public services in the cities in which entitlements exist only for those with urban *hukou*. Marginality of rural migrants in the cities also raises awareness of inequalities of opportunity transmitted across generations. Several studies address the marginality of migrant children in the urban Chinese educational system and the disadvantaged situations of left-behind children in rural China. Few private schools were opened specially for migrant children but those schools are generally equipped with facilities of poor quality, teachers with low qualification and high turnover rates, as well as school syllabus mismatching with national curriculum. Those left-behind children who are left with grandparents or relatives, they suffer from a lack of parental supervision and emotional support that contribute to less desirable educational outcomes (Liang, Guo, & Duan, 2008; Postiglione, 2006; Woronov, 2009).

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