Perceived Social Support and Marital Satisfaction: A moderator effect on parental stress in Hong Kong
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Abstract

Objectives: The present study examined the effects of perceived social support and marital satisfaction on parental stress among Hong Kong parents.

Methods: A total of 1683 parents from primary school and integrated family service centre (404 males and 1235 females) completed a questionnaire that accesses their parenting stress, perceived social support and marital satisfaction.   Qualitative research method was also used in this study to assess the stressor in parenting of respondents. A total of 18 parents consisted of 1 male and 17 females were interviewed.

Results: Significant relationships were found between parental stress, social support and marital satisfaction. Both social support and marital satisfaction were found to be negatively correlated with parental stress.

With respect to the demographic factors, there was a significant difference on gender and parents' place of birth in parental stress. However, the variables of family income and marital status did not exert a significant difference on parental stress.

Discussion: The role of social support and marital satisfaction are very important in contribution to the parental stress. Appropriate intervention especially focusing on social support in family and coparenting could sow the seeds to alleviate parental stress.

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Parenting, is a complicated process, made especially difficult by

heterogeneity in children's' characteristics, complexity of developmental processes,

and continual demands for caregiving (Crnic & Acevedo, 1995). It is certain that

parental stress in no longer a stranger for parents, especially for the Chinese parents

in Hong Kong. A study conducted by the Hong Kong Democratic Alliance for the

Betterment in 2005 indicated over 40% of 639 local parents reported they

encountered difficulties in various issues of parenting included marital conflict in

coparenting. Though whether the child's year of study is related to parental stress is

still a remained question, the competitive education system in Hong Kong which

students have to go through series of public examinations from the Secondary

School Placement Allocation (SSPA), Hong Kong Certificate of Education Exam

(HKCEE) to Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) did induce

stressful experiences for both students and parents. Yet, the seeds of parenting stress

might be planted. As noted by Deckard (2004), parenting stress is as much about

coping as it is about distress-distress that ranges from dealing with persistent daily

hassles to facing serious difficulties that can accompany parenthood. Is there any

coping strategy on parental stress? Local researcher suggested that community

support would help to reduce the stress actually felt, and indirectly also ameliorate

anger response (Lam, 1999). Added to this, marital relationship could be one of the prescriptions on parenting stress. Fincham and Hall (2005) stated harmonious marriages tend to be associated with effective parenting, whereas troubled marriages are linked to maladaptive parenting.

As cited by Deckard (2004), in contrast, social support that is not wanted or appropriate for a particular situation is not helpful, and can be harmful if it leads to further distress (Lepore, 1997). Parents could regard the presence of support as a stressor and make matters worse. In the tradition of Chinese society, people are hesitated to talk with their own family issues towards others. In addition, they prone to present the positive aspects of their family issues selectively. As mentioned by Guo and Huang (2005) that there was very little research focusing on marital satisfaction in Chinese families simply because marriage is considered as a private matter between a husband and wife rather than an issue that can be comfortably subject to open discussions. The local researcher also emphasized that some parents become stressed because they may feel that poor performance by their children are directly linked to parental inadequacies and they may lose "face" in front of others if their children do not behave properly (Kwok & Wong, 2000). Hence, stress induced for Chinese parents engaged in social network especially when they encountered difficulties in dealing with family issues including spousal relationship.

Though there had been widespread concern regarding the relations of social support and marital satisfaction on parental stress respectively, research on its mixed effects and whether they played a stressor or moderator role on parental stress are not ubiquitous, notably in local context. There was in absence of previous studies in Hong Kong to explore the three variables in analyses. Apart from replicating the previous findings, this is an unprecedented study to examine the parental stress under influence of the perceived social support and marital satisfaction among Hong Kong parents with primary school aged children those who assumed to be experienced in a certain level of stress under the critical period of education system in preparing the SSPA for their children.

Literature Review

2.1   Definition of Parental Stress, Social Support and Marital Satisfaction

Stress, is a part of human life and has become part of our daily vocabulary. It is defined as the feeling of tension experienced by a person. It involves both the existence of external stimuli as well as a subjective appraisal of the possible threat or risk caused by the stimuli (Lam, 1999). Parental stress is a set of process that lead to aversive psychological and physiological reactions arising from attempts to adapt to the demands of parenthood (Deckard, 2004). Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) cited Abidin (1995) that parenting stress is defined as a stress resulting from parental

dysfunctional behaviors or behavioral characteristics of the child. Abidin (1992) described parenting stress is conceptually viewed as a motivational variable which energizes and encouragers parents to utilize the resources available to them to support their parenting. The richness or paucity of resources available naturally plays a key role in the ultimate parenting behavior.

The concept of social support was defined as information that leads an individual to believe that he or she is cared for and loved, valued, and a member of a network of mutual obligation (Cobb, 1976). As noted by Cochran and Walker (2005), social support focuses on the types of support provided (emotional, instrumental, informational) and the psychological state of the receiving individual (cared for and loved, valued). Hence, social support is a reciprocal process (i.e. can be given or received). Pierce et al. (1996) defined receiving support is a conscious act that requires the individual perceive that potentially supportive behavior had been provided by a network member. A person's self-reported on perceived support could be viewed as a product of cognition or beliefs upon one's perception. Indeed, perceived social support have its distinctive role in measurement. Zimet (1988) cited most authors have found perceived social support to be a better predictor of psychological status than objectively measured social support (Barrera, 1981; Brandt & Weinert, 1981; Sarason et al., 1985; Schaefer et al., 1981; Wilcox, 1981).

Rowe (2004) cited marital satisfaction refers to the amount of contentment that a couple feels about their relationship. There can be high satisfaction or high dissatisfaction and this can be viewed as the quality of the marriage. The quality of a marriage is determined by many factors and may be different for one spouse than it is for the other. Sometimes the dissatisfaction of one spouse is because of a communication difference with the other. Other factors that can play into marital satisfaction include whether or not there are children and how old those children are, what the financial status of the family is, whether or not there are religious or ethnic differences, whether or not there is use of drugs or alcohol, and of course, whether or not there is familial abuse (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000). Rosen-Grandon et al. (2004) cited the study of Kurdek (1991) that three personality variables predicted marital satisfaction were motives to be in the relationship, satisfaction with social support and psychological distress. Very often, the term "marital satisfaction" is taken as "marital adjustment". It was a subjective feeling about one's marital relationship. As cited by Hamamci (2005), the cause of disturbed marital interactions is unrealistic expectation that spouses hold not merely bout themselves and others but also the marital relationship (Ellis, 1986 & Ellis et al.,1989). Hence, if one dissatisfied in marital interaction, it implied he or she was disturbed by their irrational beliefs such as demanding, neediness, intolerance, awfulizing and damning upon their spouse in which were negatively associated with marital relationship

(Hamamci,2005).

2.2 Perceived social support and parental stress

Substantial research has shown the close relations among social support and parenting stress. According to the ecological model of Bronfenner (1986, 1992) cited by Feldman et al. (2002), parent and child outcomes are affected by the ongoing interaction of child, parent, family and social variables. These variables include parental history and experience, health, functioning level, stigmatization and discrimination, chronic stressor and life crisis, social support, financial resources and other experience. However, what is the role played by social support on parenting stress? In fact, the two main routes of moderator and stressor role of social support upon parental stress were commonly discussed.

The widely cited stress-buffering model suggests that social support moderates the deleterious effects of high level of stress. It assumed social support is considered as a protective factor to alleviate stress. Considerable research has shown that social support can have a positive effect on parenting. As hypothesized, social support was significantly negatively correlated with parenting stress and parent's perception of supports may be more important than actual resource size in buffeting the effects of stress (Feldman et al., 2002). This finding is similar to that of other local study on physically abused mother in which the mother in the abuse group had significantly less social support as compared with mother in the non-abuse group

(Chan, 1994). Social support seems to have a positive impact on coping parental stress as Crnic and Acevedo (1995) mentioned parental social support systems offer potentially fruitful coping resources in relation to everyday stressor with children. Though it is possible social support may not directly reduce the number of stressful events experienced by the parent, but may act as a buffer, preventing the parent from being as adversely affected by a stressful event, like divorce or job loss, and making it possible for parents to maintain satisfactory childrearing routines in the face of hard times (Cochran, 2005). As mentioned by Deckard (2004), one of the most important ingredients of successful adaptation in parenting was the availability and accessibility of instrumental and emotional support from others. Study which compared married mother and single mother indicated that single mothers reported higher levels of parenting stress that would be due to they experienced less social support than married mothers (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2005). Hence, social support which maintained in higher level could play a buffer role to alleviate parental stress.

In contrast, some researchers did not find any moderating role of social support and some of the studies even had shown the negative aspects of social support towards stressful events. The study on effect of social support on chronic parenting stress conduced by Quittner et al. (1990) found both the parenting stress and social support variables were not highly correlated and buffering effects were not obtained. Consistently, Raikes and Thompson (2005) reported social support was

not reliably related to parenting stress levels. Canford (2004) found the absence of stress-buffering effect towards received support from the respondents, instead it supported the hypotheses of stress-exacerbation effect of spouse undermining on the stress process. Simons and Johnson (1996) also argued that social network support would expect to be a less potent buffer of parenting than support from a spouse. Though there is substantial evidence on social support and parental stress are negatively correlated, precisely how they affect each other is a question that remain unanswered. As noted by Deckard (2004), social support is not a panacea as there were evidences on no linkage between support and parenting stress. The effectiveness of social support depended on whether we make good of it under appropriate context.

2.3 Marital satisfaction and parental stress

The association between marital relationship and parenting was widely discussed and explored theoretically. Grych (2002) mentioned family system theory is the primary theoretical perspective underlying much of the research on links between marriages and parenting. The principles of the theory regarded family as an organized whole comprised of interdependent elements or subsystems. Besides, it also emphasized on causal relations among the elements of the system which are circular rather than linear; each element both affects and is affected by other elements. Hence, when one of the family members encountered tension relationship

in marriage, it may affect other subsystems (i.e. parent-child relationship) that led to stressful experience. With respect to family as a system of interacting role players, in which continuous and ongoing dynamic of feedback loops exists between various roles people perform, as well as between individuals and subsystems, the marital partners clearly affect one another in the way they experience parenting and marital difficulties, and each is influenced by his or her own role performance as well as that of the other partner (Lavee et al., 1996). Marital relationship and parenting stress is inversely related as Belsky (1984) stated clearly that understanding parenting and its influence on child development attention must be accorded to the marital relationship.

Commonly, marital satisfaction is considered as a protective factor to alleviate parenting stress. As suggested by Grych (2002), marital relationships may have indirect or buffering effects on parenting in addition to direct effects. An indirect effects occurs when interaction between spouses affect dome aspect of individual functioning, which then influence parenting. For instance, feeling valued by their spouse may increase parents' sense of self-worth and well-being, which in turn may help them to be empathetic and warm towards their children (Belsky, 1984). Scholars even support spouse support is more likely to produce buffering effect in the relationship between stressful events and depression than is support from friends are relatives (Simons and Johnson ,1996).Spousal support which brings

to marital satisfaction is seem to be an important ingredients in moderating parenting stress. As mentioned by Fincham and Hall (2005) about Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1986) which reviewed evidence that mother who felt supported by their husbands tended to have higher marital satisfaction and more positive attitudes towards parenting.

Does the level of marital satisfaction have impact on parenting stress accordingly? In contrast to the buffering effects, the poor the marital relationship could result the higher stress in the parenting. In Belsky's (1984) model of the determinants of effective parenting, marital relationship is considered as one of the forces to affect parenting quality. For parents who often become so consumed by marital conflicts that their parenting behaviors grows less effective and more inconsistent since marital conflict may drain parent resources to the point that it reduces parents' ability to recognize and respond to children's emotional needs (Fincham & Hall, 2005). Parent-child relationship might highly be affected and led to stressor for parents. As noted by Wilson and Gottman (1995), distressed couples (i.e. dissatisfied couples) become caught up in cycles of negatively so it is conceivable that a poor and conflicted marital relationship may cause parents to experience difficulties in their parenting role (Lavee et al., 1996). As cited by Crnic and Acevedo (1995), low marital satisfaction has been associated with more reports of parenting stress by both men and women (Webster-Stratton, 1990). Marital

satisfaction could also become a stressor for parents when it is in lower level.

The compartmentalization and compensatory model proposed an alternative perspective on the interaction of marriage and parenting. The compensatory model emphasized that parents who invested more in their relationship with their children when there are problems in the marriage or, conversely, are less focused on their children when marital satisfaction is high (Grych, 2002). Meanwhile, the compartmentalization model emphasized that parents are able to maintain the boundaries between their spousal and parenting roles. This model implies that there is no relationship between marital quality and parenting (Fincham & Hall, 2005).

2.4 Theoretical framework on parental stress

From ecological perspective, it emphasized developmental process of parental stress and the influence on multiple social systems on different aspects in the family. Meanwhile, the family system theorist focused more on the causal relations among the family systems and how they affect and is affected by other elements. Consideration of various approaches in explaining the complex systems in family which also play a role to induce parental stress through anyone of the subsystems, researchers proposed theories from different angles to explore the structure of parenting stress.

The two predominant approaches of the Parent-Child-Relationship (P-C-R) theory and Daily Hassles (DH) theory explained about the causes and

effects of parenting stress. The Parent-Child-Relationship (P-C-R) theory included three components of parent domain which cover those aspects of parenting stress that arise from within the parent; the child domain which cover those aspects of parenting stress that arise from the child's behavior and a parent-child relationship domain which cover those aspects of parenting stress that arise within the parent-child relationship. These three domains of parenting stress, in turn, cause decrease of deterioration in many aspects of quality and effectiveness of parenting behavior. In short, P-C-R theory predicts that there are bi-directional parent effects on the child, and child effects on parent (Deckard, 2004).

Given that parenting stress is considered as a chronic stress, everyday challenges encountered by parents could not be overlooked. Though parenting stress occurs nearly everyday, the effects of minor daily stressors on both parent and child can become persistent and powerful in view of ineffective coping. As noted by Crinic and Acevedo (1995), the everyday stress of parenting appears to directly impact parent's psychological well-being, as well as parents' behavior towards their children. And it is apparent that hassles, especially those related to parenting, are important contributors to various parameters of parental well-being. According to the Daily hassles theory, it complements and extends those ideas by helping to explain typical parenting stress as it occurs for most parents. It also emphasized parenting stress that occurs most frequently and that may have the

greatest impact on parenting on children's development is the broad array of daily hassles (Deckard, 2004).

Abidin's (1992) proposal on theorized path of influence regarding the determinants of parenting behavior (Figure 1) explained the structure of parental stress in alternative way. It built on the work of many others and represents a distillation of many variables either known or suspected to be related to the parenting behaviors. Parenting stress is influenced by both parenting relevant stressor such as parents' own characteristics, employment, marital relationship, daily hassles, environment, life events and children's characteristics. The parenting variable represents a set of beliefs and self-expectation serving as a moderator or buffer of more distal influences. Parents' appraisal over themselves as harm or benefits that confronts them in the parenting role and the result led to the parenting stress they experienced. Hence, parenting stress under the model is regarded as a motivational variable which energizes and encourage parents to utilize the resources available to them to support their parenting.
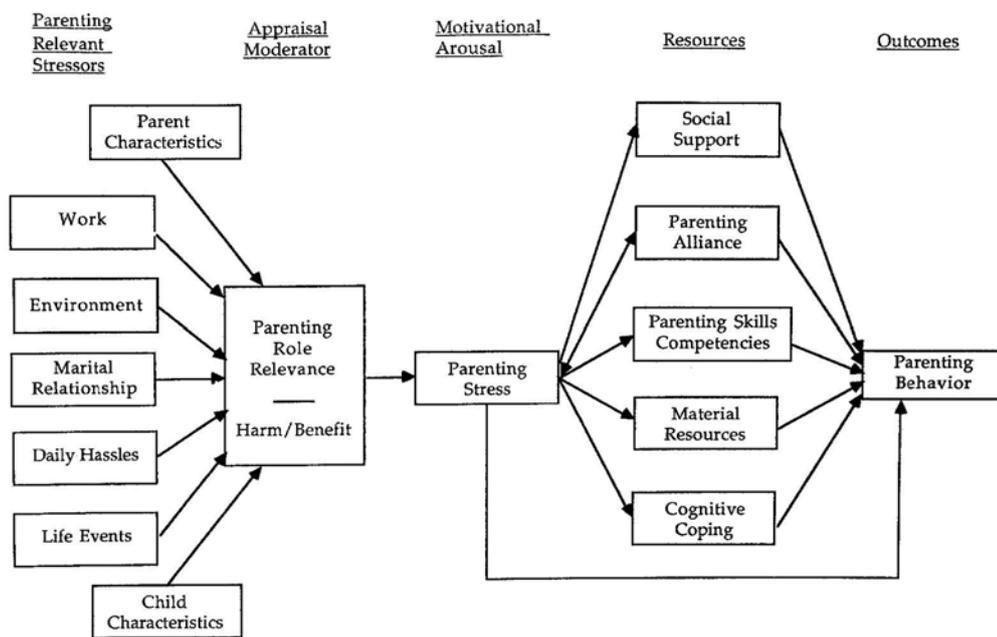
Figure 1   Theorized path of influence regarding the determinants of parenting behavior.

From "The determinants of parenting behavior" by R.R. Abidin, 1992, Journal of Clinical

Child Psychology, 21, p. 410.

2.5   Relationship between social support, marital relationship and parental stress.

Belsky (1984) pioneered theories of determinants of parenting provided a

framework on the processes of competent parental functioning (Figure 2). This model

focused on factors affecting parental behavior and how such factors affect

child-rearing, which in turn influences child development. The model presumes that

parenting is directly influenced by forces emanating from within the individual parent

(personality), within the individual child (child characteristics of individuality), and

from the broader social context in which the parent-child relationship is embedded. Specifically, marital relations, social networks, and jobs influence individual personality and general psychological well-being of parents and, thereby, parental functioning and, in turn, child development (Belsky 1984). It clearly stated that both marital relations and social network were the factors that shaped parenting indirectly.
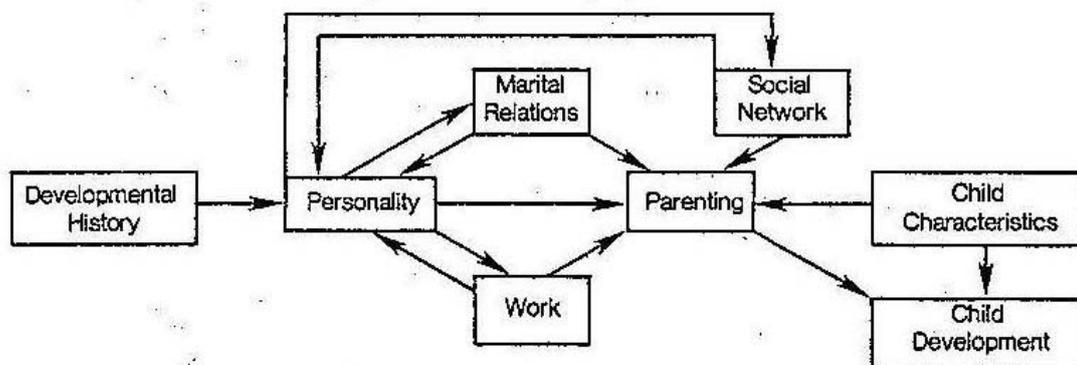
Figure 2   A process models of the determinants of parenting. From "The determinants of parenting: A process model" by J. Belsky, 1984, Child Development, 55, p. 84.

Belsky (1984) mentioned parental functioning appears to be positively associated with social support as support and general well-being have been repeatedly linked. Added to this, Belsky (1984) emphasized the importance role of marital relations on parental functioning by noting that marital relationship is the first-order support system with inherent potential for exerting the most positive or negative effect on parental functioning. And marital relations did have impact on the general

psychological well-being of individuals indirectly and only thereby the skills they exercise in the parenting role. As noted previously, parental stress will be one of the by-products of ineffective parental functioning. To understand the relations among parental stress, social support and marital satisfaction, Belsky (1984)'s model explained clearly as parental functioning is multiple determined, sources of contextual stress and support (i.e. included social support and marital relations) can directly or indirectly affect the function of parenting.

Simons and Johnson (1996) suggested a model of the direct, indirect and moderating influences of social network and marital support on quality of parenting to explain the interrelationship among social support, marital relationship and function of parenting (Figure 3). The model emphasized that spouse support directly enable parent to perform parenting duties in a competent way under the advice and assistance by other spouse regarding to the tasks and responsibilities of parenting (arrow F). However, there would be in absence of direct influence by social support on parenting since it assumed that support from friends, relatives and neighbors was likely to be secondary to that of the marital relationship as the marital partner was available within the home to provide encouragement and assistance with the everyday tasks of parenting, whereas friends and relatives were not. Besides, both marital support and social support had influenced on parenting indirectly. Expression of warmth and caring from a spouse were strongly rewarding that influenced on partner's emotional

well-being which also affects quality of parenting. Similarly, Simons and Johnson (1996) cited support from friends and relatives could help to reduce depression (Kessler et al., 1985) that could also influence parental behavior indirectly through its impact upon emotional well-being (arrow I).

For the moderating effect of marital support and social network support on parenting, Simons and Johnson (1996) supported that spouse support may buffer parenting against the threat posed by stressful events by reducing the relationship between emotional distress and parental behavior (arrow D). Thus, spouse support might moderate parent's emotional upset by providing assistance and emotional support that prevent the emotional distress on quality of parenting. However, the moderate effect of social network support was considered as a less potent buffer of parenting than spouse support. Simons and Johnson (1996) argued that social support becomes the principal parental support system only when marital support is absent. This assumption was supported by the evidence when comparing among the married and single parents, in which social support was a more critical determinant of quality of parenting for single than for married parents. Though this model viewed social support as a secondary support system for parenting, the effects by this system on the function of parenting could not be neglected in facing the increasing number of divorce family cases in society, notably in local context.
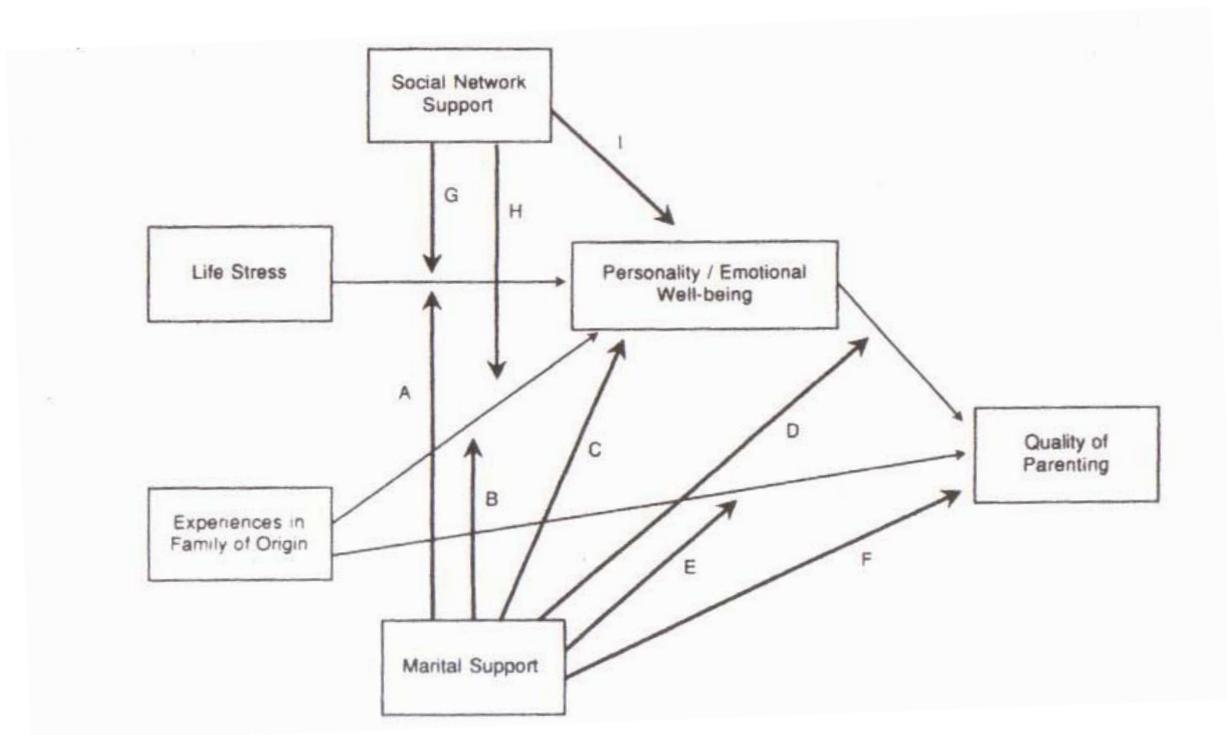
Figure 3   Model of direct, indirect, and moderating influences of social network and marital support on quality of parenting. From "The impact of marital and social network support on quality of parenting" by R.L. Simons & C. Johnson, 1996, In G. R. Pierce, et al. (Ed), Handbook of Social Support and the Family, p.274.

2.6   Hypotheses

How does social support and marital relations influence on parenting stress are remained to be questions. Besides, does social support and marital satisfaction help to moderate parental stress or it exacerbate stress in parenting upon their different level of performance? Based on the review of literatures and researches, the purpose of this study examined the relationship between perceived social support, marital satisfaction

and parental stress. The study tested four hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: The perceived social support and marital satisfaction are negatively correlated with parental stress.

Hypothesis 2: There is a moderator effect of perceived social support on parental stress. Hence, the higher the perceived social support would result the lower the parental stress.

Hypothesis 3: There is a moderator effect of marital satisfaction on parental stress. Hence, the higher the marital satisfaction would result the lower the parental stress.

Hypothesis 4: Level of parental stress was influenced by perceived social support and marital satisfaction.

Method

The study adopted both the quantitative and qualitative approach. Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires while qualitative data were collected by conducting focus-group and individual interview. The use of questionnaires aimed at collecting a large sample in testing the relationship between variables statistically.

A qualitative methodology was also used in this study to supplement the quantitative approach in providing spontaneous sharing of parents' feelings and how they experienced parenting stress. Data were collected by semistructured interviews and analyzed following phenomenological methodology.

Phenomenology is the science of essential structures of consciousness or experience. It is also the search for "essences" that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation and attempt to probe the lived experiences of individuals who are being investigated (Sanders, 1982). The aim of phenomenology is to produce a description of a phenomenon of everyday experience, in order to understand its essential structure (Priest, 2002). As pointed out by Morrissette et al. (1999), the words which are used during the interview dialogue do not convey information, but reflected the speakers (interviewee)'s world. The use of semi-structured interview aims at collecting information with a deeper understanding of the phenomenon rather than looking for specific answers from the interviewees.

The researcher, who carried out all the interviews, was a registered social worker with expertise in conducting both individual counseling and therapeutic group. As noted by Omizo et al. (1990), phenomenological research involves the use of counseling skills such as interviewing techniques, probing, information gathering, summarizing, clarifying and synthesizing. The interviews carried out by one researcher helps to maintain high uniformity and to avoid errors in memory as well as variation in data analysis.

3.1 Participants

Parents of five local primary schools located in diverse income levels districts and service users from an Integrated Family Service Centre (IFSC) located in a district

with lower income family were invited to participate in the main study. A total 1683 questionnaires were collected, made up of 24% male and 73% female with at least one of the child aged between 6-12 years-old. Most (75%) were aged between 31-40 with about 18% aged 21-30. 42.8% of them were born in Hong Kong and the rest of them were born in Mainland China (53.2%) and 14.5% of them resided in Hong Kong less than three years. Most (88.4%) were married and the rest (5.9%) was divorced. The respondents mainly shared two domains of occupation as full-time employment (41%) and full-time housewives (35%). Almost half of the respondents (48.5%) had a monthly family income below $10,000 but only minority (12.2%) was recipients of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA).

For the qualitative interviews, a total of 18 parents (included 1 father and 17 mothers) who had at least one child aged from 6 to 12. Three of them were service users of counseling cases from the IFSC and rest of them were participants of family-related programs in the centre. Semi-structured interviews were carried out and interviewees were asked to share their experiences including feelings in their parenting.

3.2 Procedure

The pilot study was conducted through collection of 38 questionnaires from the parents who participated in family programs in Tung Wah Groups of Hospitals Tai Kok Tsui Integrated Service Centre. With the cooperation with school teachers and school social workers, self-reported questionnaires were given out to the students to be

filled by their parents in the main study. Instead of a compulsory task, parents' participation in the study is voluntary. The total return rate of questionnaire from all the primary schools is 83%.

The qualitative study was interviewed in the activity room of IFSC. All interviewees were informed of the nature, purpose and procedure of the study. Their participation in the study was on voluntary basis. Confidentiality of the information was ensured. The interview was recorded and written consents were obtained from all the interviewees. They were invited to participate in either the focus group or individual interview. In the first part of the interview, participants were asked to fill-in the questionnaire as the one used in the quantitative approach. Secondly, a set of questions were asked by the researcher and a short debriefing was carried out to ensure that all the interviewees restored emotional stable before they left the activity room.

3.3   Instruments

3.3.1 Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was developed by Zimet D. G., Dahlem N. W., Zimet S. G. and Farely G. K. (1988) as a brief self-report measure of subjectively assessed social support. The scale consisted of 12-item rating in which made on a 7-point Likert-type scale rating from 1 = very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree   (Zimet et al., 1988). The 12-item MSPSS was designed to measure the perceived adequacy of support from the following

three sources: family (Items 3, 4, 8 and 11), friends (Items 6, 7, 9 and 12) and

significant other (Item 1, 2, 5 and 10) (Zimet et. al., 1990). The MSPSS had good

internal consistency for the scale as a whole as well as for the three subscales. For the

Significant Other, Family, and Friends subscales, the values of internal reliability

were .91, .87 and .85, respectively. The reliability of the total scale was .88. The

test-retest reliability of 275 subjects, who were retested 2 to 3 months after initially

completing the questionnaire, indicated values of .72, .85 and .75 on the three subscales.

For the whole scale, the value obtained was .85. In effect, the MSPSS demonstrated

good internal reliability and adequate stability over time period indicated (Zimet et al.,

1988). The MSPSS used in this study was translated using back translation. The pilot

study also indicated adequate reliability with Cronbach's alpha value of .77.

3.2.2 Chinese Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (C-KMS)

Participant's marital satisfaction was assessed by the 3-item Chinese

Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (C-KMS). Participants were asked to rate their

perceived marital satisfaction with their marriage, marital relationship and their spouse

on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 = extremely unsatisfactory and 7 = extremely

satisfactory. The summing individual item scores for a possible range of 3 to 21 with

higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction. The original of Kansas Marital Satisfaction

(KMS) was developed by Schumm, W.R., Paff-Bergen, L.A., Hatch, R. C., Obiorah, F.

C. , Copleand, J.M. , Meens, L. D., and Bugaighis, M. A. (1986). The KMS had

excellent internal consistency with an alpha of .93. The Chinese version of KMS was also found to have adequate validity and reliability with an alpha of .92 (Shek et al., 1993). With the author's consent, the C-KMS questionnaire was translated in Chinese with procedure of back translation. Reliability of the present C-KMS scale was found to be adequate with an alpha value .98 in the pilot study.

3.3.3 Chinese version of Parental Stress Scale (PSS)

The original Parental Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Berry and Jones (1995) to measure individual's subjective feelings of strains, difficulties and dissatisfaction as a parent. The scale consisted of 18 items that participants were asked to rate on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree 6 = strongly agree. In calculating total scores, some items were reversed scores. The higher the score, the higher the parental stress. The PSS demonstrated good evidence for its reliability with an alpha coefficient of .83 and a mean inter-item correlation of .23. For the Chinese version of PSS, it also indicated adequate reliability with Cronbach's alpha of .89. As there was one item had poor correlation with total scale, it was excluded and resulted in high reliability with alpha values of .89 (Cheung, 2000). Consistent to the study of Cheung (2000), an adequate alpha value of .78 was obtained in the pilot study.

3.4 Interview Questions

The interview included 8 open-ended questions and the focus of questions was as following:

1) Their feelings on the experience of parenting;

2) The source of support in their difficult time of parenting;

3) Their expectation on the source of support and according feelings;

4) Their perceived spousal support and it effects on parenting; and

5) The various factors affecting their parenting stress.

3.5   Data Analysis

The analytic method used for the quantitative study consisted of Independent sample *t*-test and one-way ANOVA to compare the difference between demographic variables such as gender, marital status, income, living district and level of parental stress. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to explore the relationship between major variables in this study. The two-way ANOVA was also used to analyze the effects of the two independent variables on the dependent variable, parental stress. For the independent variables, each of the variables (i.e. perceived social support and marital satisfaction) were divided into two different levels, that means the cut-off point was 50% from the total scores of such variables and converted into high and low level in order to differentiae how the extents of independent variables affect the dependent variable.

In qualitative study, the phenomenological analysis was adopted. Analysis was based on the identification of common themes among the interviewees. All statements that appear relevant to the concept under study are identified and selected

statements are integrated into relevant sections of the initial description (Priest, 2002).

In general, the four aspects of the number of the phenomenon or experience under investigation were described, the invariants or themes emergent in descriptions, the subjective reflections of the themes and the essence present in both the themes and subjective reflections would be reported by the researchers under the phenomenological analysis (Sanders, 1982).

Result

4.1 Reliability of Instruments

All the scales used in this study were shown to have high internal consistency as indicated by Cronbach's coefficient alpha. Notably for the Chinese Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (C-KMS), the internal reliability in Cronbach's alpha value was .97. For the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and Chinese version of Parental Stress Scale (PSS), the internal reliability in Cronbach's alpha were .87 and .82 respectively.

4.2 Demographic data

Most of the respondents (70.5%) reported they had low parental stress and only 21.8% of them had high parental stress. Regarding to the perceived social support, most (77.2%) had high social support and the rest (13.3%) obtained low social support. Consistently, more than half of the respondents (68.7%) reported high level of marital satisfaction and one-fourth (25.5%) reported low level of marital satisfaction. Mothers

had significantly higher scores in parental stress ($t = 3.3$, p < .05) than fathers. Parents who were born in Hong Kong also had significant higher parental stress than the new arrival parents, (t = 2.8, p < .05).

Though both the unmarried (M=54.2, SD=11.5) and divorced parent (M=53.52, SD=12.17) had higher parental stress than the married parent (M= 51.7, SD=10.8) but the differences of parental stress in marital status was not significant statistically, F (4, 1523) = .83, p > .05. Besides, the lowest income group did show higher parental stress (M = 53.92, SD = 11.41) but analysis on different of family's income level was not significant, F (3, 1482) = 2.58, p > .05). By comparing the CSSA and non-CSSA recipients group, there was an also not significant difference, ($t = 1.63$, p > .05) though CSSA recipients showed higher parental stress (M= 52.93, SD = 10.92) than the non-CSSA recipients (M= 51.53, SD = 10.92).

4.3   Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: The perceived social support and marital satisfaction are negatively correlated with parental stress.

Pearson's correlation analysis showed that the perceived social support and marital satisfaction were significantly and negatively correlated to the total parental stress (r = -.33, p< .01; r = -.35, p< .01). The perceived social support was positively and significantly correlated to marital satisfaction (r = .45, p < .01) (Table 1). Therefore, hypothesis 1 that the perceived social support and marital satisfaction are negatively

correlated with parental stress is supported.

Table1   Correlation between parental stress, perceived social support and marital
          satisfaction

	PS	PSS	MS
PS		-.33**	-.346**
PSS	-.33**		.45**
MS	-.346**	.45**	

Note: PS = Parental Stress, PSS = Perceived Social Support and MS = Marital
satisfaction. ** p<.01

Hypothesis 2: There is a moderator effect of perceived social support on

parental stress. Hence, the higher the perceived social support would result the lower

the parental stress.

The independent measures shown there was a significant differences on

parent's level of perceived social support (t = .921, p < .05). Parents who perceived

higher social support had lower parental stress (M = 50.59, SD = 10.47) than parents

who perceived lower social support (M = 58.23, SD = 11.2) (Table 2). Hence, there is

a moderator effect of perceived social support on parental stress and Hypothesis 2

could not be rejected.

Table 2   Mean and Standard Deviation of perceived social support on parental stress.

	N	Mean	S.D.	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
LSS	209	58.23	11.20	9.21	.000
HSS	1229	50.59	10.47		.000

Note: LSS = Low social support, HSS = High social support. p < .05.

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Hypothesis 3:   There is a moderator effect of marital satisfaction on parental stress. Hence, the higher the marital satisfaction would result the lower the parental stress.

Result showed that the difference of level of marital satisfaction on parental stress was statistically significant ($t = 10.93$, p $<.05$).   Parents with higher marital satisfaction had lower parental stress (M=49.89, SD = 10.39) than parents with lower marital satisfaction (M= 56.74, SD = 10.89) (Table 3). Hence, the hypothesis of the moderator effect in which higher marital satisfaction would result the lower the parental stress is supported.

Table 3   Mean and Standard Deviation of marital satisfaction on parental stress.

	N	*Mean*	*S.D.*	*t*	*Sig. (2-tailed)*
LMS	403	56.74	10.89	10.93	.000
HMS	1076	49.89	10.39		.000

Note: LMS = Low marital satisfaction, HMS = High marital satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4:   Level of parental stress was influenced by level of perceived social support and marital satisfaction.

Two-factor analysis of variance shown a significant main effect for both perceived social support, $F (1, 1368) = 48.16$, p$<.05$ and marital satisfaction, $F (1, 1368) = 35.31$, p$<.05$ on parental stress. The effect size of perceived social support was stronger than marital satisfaction (partial eta squared = .03). However, the interaction

effect, F (1, 1368) = .06, p>.05 did not reach statistical significant (Table 4). Result

indicated the group with both high social support and high marital satisfaction had

lower parental stress (M = 49.48, SD = 10.28) than the group with low social support

and low marital satisfaction (M =60.41, SD = 11.53). Hence, there was a significant

difference between the two groups and the hypothesis on parental stress was influenced

by perceived social support and marital satisfaction is supported.

Table 4   Effects of perceived social support and marital satisfaction on
             parental stress.

	df	F	Sig. (2-tailed)	Partial Eta Squared
PSS	1	48.16	.000	.034
MS	1	35.31	.000	.025
SS * MS	1	.06	.814	.000

Note: PSS = Perceived social support, MS = marital satisfaction.

4.4   Summary of Interviews

Theme 1: Feeling of fatigued

Feeling of fatigued in parenting was the predominant theme that emerged from

the data. The majority of interviewees claimed they felt hard, irritated and were

stressful in their parenting experiences. They frequently mentioned exasperation upon

parenting their children. Madam AU said: "I was very angry, (the child) get 60 to 70

marks is acceptable, but (the child) failed make me annoyed…" Madam NGAI said:

" I don't know how to teach, really angry, I hit him when it was not in proper,

sometimes my son was naughty, refused to study and inattentive to do homework also make me short-tempered.."

Regarding to the most stressful incident in the parenting experience, feeling of helplessness and indignation were common. Interviewees described helplessness when they did not know how to teach their children in doing homework. One of the interviewees mentioned that she was irritated in facing the academic result of the child. Madam TAM said: "I dictated English with her, but she failed in the dictation. She could do very well at home, but the teacher spoke very fast and she wrote slowly, that make me felt angry. So both the daughter and I felt very hard." Madam WONG said: "I don't know what to do, there were much homework, she asked me how to do, and I don't have any solutions." Madam CHAU also described: "The most difficult time is the son doing homework, both of us didn't know how to do make me felt helplessness and incompetent."

However, some interviewees reported the intermingling feeling of sorrow and joy in parenting. Even though they were stressful to cope with the academic issues and misbehaviors of their children, several interviewees also experienced happiness in parenting when they found their children were attentive in studying.

Theme 2: Social support helps to relax

Most of the interviewees who could gain social support reported more relaxed and consoled in parenting. One of the interviewees mentioned that her friends

provided support to her make she felt comfort. Madam ON said: "Some friends could talk to me on phone when I was unhappy, they help me to release…..I felt relaxed, if I didn't talk to my friend, I would be annoyed." Madam TAM said she would try to share with the teacher, friends and other parents also resulted in feeling of consoled. Hence, the normalizing process through communication with others who can understand is an essential aspect of adjustment in parenting. Besides, parent with sufficient instrumental social support would experience fewer and less serious daily hassles in childrearing, and would be more able to cope with the stressors that do arise because she or he was not solely responsible for caring for the children (Deckard, 2004). As Madam PANG, Madam AU, Madam WONG and Madam NG also said their husbands' support such as helping to deal with the home affairs, to take care the child and provide emotional support could also help to make them felt comfort and happy in coping the parenting tasks. On the other hand, some reported they could not receive any social support led them felt lonely, suppressed and impotent.

Theme 3: Importance of spousal relationship

All the interviewees agreed that the involvement of their spouse in parenting was very important. Some of them felt that their husbands' involvement could facilitate their parenting. Madam CHAN said: "sometimes when I was lost in parenting, it (husband's involvement) could be a reflection, a support and the advices for me." Madam WONG said: "it was important to give a consistent

message to the child in parenting." For the benefit of parent-child relationship,

Madam PANG said: "I think it was very important for a parent-child relationship,

father could play with the son and the son felt happy when going out with father. I

think this kind of parent-child relationship was very important." Financially, some of

the interviewees claimed their husband could help to release the financial stress in

parenting. However, in reality, most of the interviewees reported their spouse

could not or did not really help in parenting. As Deckard (2004) also mentioned a

parent has his or her own perception of available support from others, which may or

may not correspond with the actual support that occurs within close relationship.

Madam WONG said: "…starting from the beginning, I only teach alone." Madam

CHAU said: "practically, he did not bear his responsibility." Madam YEUNG said:

"He could not help, he confronted with me on everything, and it was opposite."

With respect to the marital relationship, some of the interviewees agreed it would

affect the parenting on positive and negative side respectively. Madam AU said: "it

(the relationship) was quite good; the most important is a harmonious family." On

the other hand, Madam LEUNG said: "he kept silent and own all the responsibilities;

it was difficult to communicate and also led to difficulties in parent-child

communication."

Theme 4: Stressors in parenting

In general, three main stressors – academic, financial and marital relationship

were attributed for the parenting stress encountered by the interviewees. Academically, interviewees perceived the education system as one of the source of stress in parenting. Madam TAM said: "studying, the situation expected all the children had good performance in academic so there was invisible stress." Madam LEUNG also mentioned: "stress from studying and teacher, when students failed the exam parents need to give explanation on it." Financially, it was also related to academic performance of their children. Madam LEE said: "financial stress, if I have money I must arrange tutorial class for the child. There are social stress that induced by the confused education system." Regarding to marital relationship, several interviewees reported their marital relationship was also source of parenting stress. Madam YEUNG said: "the most stressful was come from marriage; we always quarrel with each other that also affected the children psychologically". Mr. TSANG also mentioned the source of stress on parenting was the difficult relationship with his wife.

Discussion

5.1 Discussion

The above findings supported the hypothesis that both perceived social support and marital satisfaction are negatively correlated with parental stress with a moderator effect on parental stress. This result is consistent with many previous studies (Crnic & Acevedo,1995, Cochran,1993, Copeland & Harbaugh,2005, Grych,2002, Belsky,1984 and Simons& Johnson,1996). The current study also indicated that the effect of

perceived social support was stronger than marital satisfaction on parental stress. Yet, the result is matched with Crnic and Acevedo (1995) emphasized that emotional support from friends was more important in buffering mothers from hassles than was emotional support from the spouse and friends may well be more empathetic to this everyday experience perhaps mothers may prefer that fathers offer instrumental support. Thus, perceived social support did have it distinguish role to alleviate parental stress as parents stated in the interview that they expected the importance of spousal support on parenting but, in reality, most of their spouses could not or did not really help. In line with the local study (Kwok & Wong, 2000), the present study demonstrated the gender differences on parental stress. As predicted, mothers reported higher parental stress than fathers and it may due to the ubiquitous reason of the culturally based division of labor regarding parenting that most of the burdens of child care fall on the mother, who is expected to discharge her parenting responsibilities regardless of the stressor or emotional distractions with which she may be confronted (Simons and Johnson, 1996).

In this study, contrary to expectation, the parental stress of single parent was not significantly higher than that of the married parent. This contradicts the findings of Copeland and Harbaugh (2005) and the local study that single parents consistently expressed worry and difficulties about childcare, especially in child discipline and children's academic performance (Lau, 2003). Yet, it could be explained by the diverse

proportion of marital status in which only 5.9% of single parent involved in the current study. Hence, it would be meaningful to replicate the study on whether single parent experienced higher stress than the married parent upon an even population. The local parents who encountered higher parental stress than the new arrivals parents can be explained by the fact that new arrival parents who came to Hong Kong less than three years encountered adjustment period and mainly focused on issues such as housing, finance or network in community, therefore, parenting may be a secondary issue after the tangible needs were settled. A research on the "Needs of persons from the Mainland having resided in Hong Kong for 3 years and less" (Census and Statistics Department, 2004) found that 10.5% of respondent reported they could not get along with family members in which 55.9% was due to difference in living habits, 19.1% was due to accommodation problems and the least difficulties of 7% was problems with children. Hence, in compare with the native parents, who have a more stable finance and housing status with familiar on the local living culture, parental stress induced due to the increasing daily hassles as Crnic and Acevedo (1995) proposed that daily parenting stressor are not particular to any high-risk or problematic population and parents may be stressed by the everyday tasks specifically associated with parenting (e.g., managing complicated schedules, arranging child care).

Though the present study found insignificant differences on lower income group and CSSA recipients even who had higher parental stress than that of higher

income group and non-CSSA recipients, the differences among the income groups was slightly insignificant and may be due to personal factors. As mentioned by Deckard (2004), parenting stress is higher among parents who have fewer socioeconomic resources and the effects of chronic poverty on children's developmental outcomes operate part through higher levels of parenting stress and inept, harsh parenting behavior. Hence, parent with lower income would prone to have higher parental stress. For the group of CSSA and non-CSSA recipients, the population of CSSA recipients in this study is surprisingly small in size as only 185 participants reported that they are CSSA recipients. Regarding to the statistics from the Social Welfare Department (2004), there were 117,825 CSSA recipients living in the districts (i.e. Kowloon City, Mongkok, Shamshuipo and Tuen Mun) that participants mainly came from in the present study. The contrast of reported proportion of CSSA recipients may be due to the under report of participants as most of the questionnaires were collected and administrated by school teachers, parents might felt embarrassed and shameful to admit themselves were living on CSSA that may not reflect accurately upon the actual situation of family's financial status.

5.2   Limitations

Indeed, this research did have several limitations. Firstly, the measurement of Parental Stress Scale (PSS) was mainly focused on the subjective feelings of stresses from parent-child interaction that neglected from others factors that were also

determinate on parental stress. As mentioned by Crnic and Acevedo (1995), the influence of parental characteristics (i.e. self-esteem, psychological involvement in parenting, personality and mood), parental beliefs (i.e. expectations and attribution) and the child factors (i.e. illness, defiant behaviors and temperament style) are also the potential significant of everyday stressors of parenthood that are still to be explored in further study.

In addition, limited resources on inadequate manpower to conduct qualitative interview led to role confusion of the researcher and counselor may influence the report data in qualitative interview. As mentioned by Omizo and Omizo (1990), researcher has to get rid of his or her biases that facilitate openness to the phenomenon under investigation. As some of the interviews were the service users who received intensive counseling from the Integrated Family Service Centre, it was possible that the role confusion against counselor and researcher created expectation from the interviewees to overstate their situations that led to counseling effects during the interview. Furthermore, owning to shortage of time, the methodology of focus group did create ethical issue of confidentiality for interviewees in expressing their family issues since they were strange to each others without rapport building before the interview. Certain bias may existed due to the preservation of interviewees to share such private matters in the group. In addition, the manipulation of questionnaire by school teachers would also induce confidentiality for parents to report the data

truthfully since parents might show worry upon the disclosure of data for their children.

For these reasons, it is suggested that to differentiate the role of researcher and counselor through conducting the interview by a neutral researcher. Besides, questionnaires should be administrated by a researcher that did not have authoritative figure to the respondents could also ensure the confidentiality in data reporting.

5.3   Implications

The present study found that both perceived social support and marital satisfaction have a moderator effect on parental stress, therefore, early prevention on enhancing parents' social support and improving marital relationship may helps to alleviate stress induced in parenting. As Kwok and Wong (2000) also suggested educational programs can help couples to learn to understand each others' needs as parents and partners. In local society, there is lots of working parents or even dual career family, the intervention target group extended to co-parenting is suggested so as to reduce individual's parental stress. Grych (2002) supported successful childrearing required parents to mesh their goals, styles and strategies to provide consistent and coherent expectations and consequences for their children. Though emotional support between "co-parents" does not minimize or eliminate the presence of stressor, it works to ameliorate some of the effects of stressors on the parents' functioning, by altering their emotional experience (Deckard, 2004). So educational and developmental programs for couple to involve in parenting issue (i.e. stress coping) is proposed for

local parents to enhance parental functioning as well as to establish spousal support in parenting. Social support programs for parents had been widely suggested by local researchers to reduce parental stress in community (Chan, 1994, Lam, 1999 and Ma et. al, 2002), added to this, intervention on the family as a whole is also important to promote positive parent-child relationship that could result in lower parental stress. Indeed, parental stress could be reduced by increasing the number of opportunities that the parent and child have for well-organized and enjoyable interactions. For instance, teaching parents new ways to play and interact with their children can promote satisfaction and reduce distress in the parenting role (Deckard, 2004). Hence, it is also suggested to have a broader sense in promoting support among family members and moving to a harmonious family that helps to cope with parental stress.

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